

*The Sayings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers (Apophthegmata)*

While still living in the palace, Abba Arsenius prayed to God in these words, ‘Lord, lead me in the way of salvation.’ And a voice came saying to him, ‘Arsenius, flee from men and you will be saved.’ Having withdrawn to the solitary life he made the same prayer again and he heard a voice saying to him, ‘Arsenius, flee, be silent, pray always, for these are the sources of sinlessness.’

Abba Andrew said, ‘These three things are appropriate for a monk: exile, poverty, and endurance in silence.’

Abba Alonius said, ‘If a man does not say in his heart, in the world there is only myself and God, he will not gain peace.’

Abba John gave this advice, ‘Watching means to sit in the cell and be always mindful of God. This is what is meant by, “I was on the watch and God came to me”’ (Matt. 25:36).

Abba Anthony also said, ‘Always have the fear of God before your eyes. Remember him who gives life and death. Hate the world and all that is in it. Hate all peace that comes from the flesh. Renounce this life so that you may be alive to God. Remember what you have promised God, for it will be required of you on the day of judgment. Suffer hunger, thirst, nakedness; be watchful and sorrowful; weep and groan in your heart; test yourselves, to see if you are worthy of God; despise the flesh, so that you may preserve your soul.’

Amma Syncletica said, ‘In the beginning, there are a great many battles and a good deal of suffering for those who are advancing towards God and afterwards ineffable joy. It is like those who wish to light a fire, at first they are choked by the smoke and cry, and by this means obtain what they seek (as it is said, “Our God is a consuming fire” [Heb. 12:24]; so we also must kindle the divine fire in ourselves through tears and hard work.’

Abba Arsenius also said, ‘If we seek God he will show himself to us, and if we keep him, he will remain close to us.’

Abba Theonas said, ‘When we turn our spirit from the contemplation of God, we become the slaves of carnal passion.’

Abba Macarius said, ‘If we keep remembering the wrongs which other [people] have done to us, we destroy the power of the remembrance of God.’

Abba Poemen said, ‘If the soul keeps far away from all discourse in words, from all disorder and human disturbance, the Spirit of God will come into her and she who was barren will be fruitful.’

Abba Poemen said of Abba Pambo that Abba Anthony used to say of him, ‘Through fearing God, he caused the Spirit of God to dwell in him.’

Abba Mateos said, ‘The nearer a man draws to God, the more he sees himself a sinner. It was when Isaiah the prophet saw God, that he declared himself “a man of unclean lips”’ (Is. 6:5).

Abbot Palladius said: ‘The soul that wishes to live according to the will of Christ should either learn faithfully what it does not yet know, or teach openly what it does know. But if, when it can, it desires to do neither of these things, it is afflicted with madness. For the first step away from God is a distaste for learning, and a lack of appetite for those things for which the soul hungers when it seeks God.’

A certain Philosopher asked Anthony: ‘Father, how can you be so happy when you are deprived of the consolation of books?’ Anthony replied: ‘My book, O philosopher, is the nature of created things, and any time I want to read the words of God, the book is before me.’

Two brethren went to an elder who lived alone in Scete. And the first one said: ‘Father, I have learned all of the Old and New Testaments by heart.’ The elder said to him: ‘You have filled the air with words.’ The other one said: ‘I have copied out the Old and New Testaments and have them in my cell.’ And to this one the elder replied: ‘You have filled your window with parchment. But do you not know Him who said: “The kingdom of God is not in words, but in power?” And again: “Not those who hear the Law will be justified before God but those who carry it out.”’ They asked him, therefore, what was the way of salvation, and he said to them: ‘The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord and humility with patience.’

One day some old men came to see Abba Anthony. In the midst of them was Abba Joseph. Wanting to test them, the old man suggested a text from the Scriptures, and, beginning with the youngest, he asked them what it meant. Each gave his opinion as he was able. But to each the old man said, ‘You have not understood it.’ Last of all he said to Abba Joseph, ‘How would you explain this saying?’ and he replied, ‘I do not know.’ Then Abba Anthony said, ‘Indeed, Abba Joseph has found the way, for he has said, “I do not know.”’

When Abba Anthony thought about the depths of the judgments of God, he asked, ‘Lord, how is it that some die when they are young, while others drag on to extreme old age? Why are there those who are poor and those who are rich? Why do wicked men prosper and why are the just in need?’ He heard a voice answering him, ‘Anthony, keep your attention on yourself: these things are according to the judgment of God, and it is not to your advantage to know anything about them.’

Amma Theodora also said that neither asceticism, nor vigils, nor any kind of suffering are able to save, only true humility can do that.

Amma Sarah also said, ‘I put out my foot to ascend the ladder, and I place death before my eyes before going up it.’

A brother said to Abba Sisoës, ‘I am aware that the remembrance of God stays with me.’ The old man said to him, ‘It is no great thing to be with God in your thoughts, but it is a great thing to see yourself as inferior to all creatures. It is this, coupled with hard work, that leads to humility.’

Abba Poemen also said, ‘To throw yourself before God, not to measure your progress, to leave behind all self-will, these are the instruments for the work of the soul.’ He also said, ‘The victory over all the afflictions that befall you, is to keep silence.’