

T W E L V E

Solitude and Charity

Such, then, is the methodology with which we should appreciate some of the more difficult aspects of life in the desert. One of the first questions that arises as we read the *Apophthegmata* and consider these elders is the elitism of their experience? Is it, for example, selfish to withdraw into the desert when there appears to be so much suffering in the world? Are the Desert Fathers and Mothers anti-social figures of fourth-century Egypt? Certainly, there are abundant passages in the *Sayings* to affirm this description of them.

Abba Sisoës was sitting in his cell one day, when his disciple knocked on the door to ask the old man something. Abba Sisoës shouted out to him saying: “Go away, Abraham, do not come in. From now on, I have no time for the things of this world.”¹

At the same time, however, it is in these very *Sayings* that one encounters the illuminating words of Abba Antony:

Abba Antony said: “Our life and our death is with our neighbor. If we gain our brother, then we have gained God; but if we scandalize our brother, then we have sinned against Christ.”²

How can someone affirm this after spending most of his life in solitude?

The simple answer, then, to the question that we posed concerning elitism is that the way of the desert is not a selfish way, so long as everyone else is also traveling the same journey. If each of us, as contemporary readers of these ancient *Sayings* in the twenty-first century, has embarked upon the stage of the desert, then we will appreciate the un-selfishness of the elders that lived there in the fourth century.

1. Sisoës 27.

2. Antony 9.

Nevertheless, if we remain outside of the desert process, then their way will surely appear selfish. Remember that everyone is called to go through the desert. Nonetheless, no one needs to stay in the desert forever. Even Antony came outside the desert on two occasions in his life: the first time, in order to support the martyrs; and the second time in order to support his friend Athanasius in his fourth-century theological argumentation against Arius. In fact, perhaps more importantly, Antony also moved out of his desert spiritually as well as geographically, by allowing other disciples to gather around him and look to him as their spiritual director. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to say that Antony never really left the desert, even when he set foot outside of the desert. For, Antony is always speaking *from the desert*; his every word and action are coming *from the desert*.

In any case, there is something sincerely presumptuous and spiritually misleading about imagining that the silence of the desert somehow transcends service in the world. Moreover, Antony and his colleagues never deny the world; instead, they are very understanding toward the world.

A hunter in the desert once saw Abba Antony enjoying himself with the brothers, and he was shocked. Wanting to show him that it was necessary sometimes to meet the needs of the brothers, the old man said to the hunter: "Put an arrow in your bow and shoot it." So he did. The old man then said: "Shoot another arrow." And he did so. Then the old man said: "Shoot yet again." But the hunter replied: "If I bend my bow so much I will break it." Then Antony said to him: "It is the same with the work of God. If we stretch the brothers beyond their measure, they will soon break. Sometimes it is necessary to come down to meet their needs."³

Yet, there is another perspective from which to consider this question about selfishness. It may be that we are in fact called to be more selfish in the spiritual life. This may sound strange, but perhaps we ought to set aside a time and a place where we do nothing else at all but address the passions of the soul and meditate on God. It may be that we should *take time out for ourselves and for God* in the same way as we do—quite naturally, and without ever considering that this is in any way selfish—to eat and rest and be entertained.

3. Antony 13.