

HEROES OF THE DESERT

Alone with God Alone

The Desert

- The desert is intimately connected with the history of Israel
 - the wandering of the Israelites in the desert is part of their identity as a people
 - this is interpreted as a time of testing and growth
- Through the prophets, God invites his people back to the desert to get to know him again (Hosea 2)
- John the Baptist and Jesus begin their public ministry with periods of preparation in the desert

The Desert Monk in the Fourth Century

- Late 3rd and early 4th century marked by persecution
 - many people fled to the desert to escape the persecutors
 - some voluntarily stayed there even when the persecutions ended
- Edict of Milan legitimizes Christianity in 313; persecutions mostly cease
- A new kind of battle—the spiritual battle against the passions—becomes a new kind of martyrdom
 - human history is a story of combat between good and evil
 - passions are not immoral in themselves, but often lead to evil thoughts and acts
 - the spiritual “athlete” fights against the passions before they can do him harm
- the battle involves
 - *ascesis*: training in holiness through self-discipline
 - *mortification*: putting the desires of the flesh to death through sacrifice
- the spiritual battle takes the form of flight from the world
 - silence and distance allow the monk to live with God alone
 - the word “monk” (*monos*) means solitary
 - it is a death to the world and to the things of the world
 - it is a small sacrifice in comparison to the eternal reward

Three Types of Monastic Vocation

- the *hermit*, who lives in complete solitude
 - at first these lived close to towns and villages
 - later moved to the deep desert
 - some (esp. in Syria) lived near towns on the tops of tall pillars (Stylites)

- monks who lived in *lauras*, small collections of cells somewhat distant from each other
 - gathered near the spiritual father in order to consult with him
 - lived in individual cells spread out to provide silence and privacy
- the *cenobium*, a monastery in the modern sense
 - had dormitories, a church, a refectory
 - often walled to protect from robbers and barbarians
 - provided the most exposure to the mortification that comes from the common life
 - sometimes as many as 1,200 to 1,600 brothers in one *cenobium*

Daily Life in the Cenobium

- monks lived in dormitories/houses according to their crafts
 - each had daily manual labor which supported the monastery
 - each house was under a master, who assigned tasks and distributed necessities
- new monks not automatically received
 - demonstrated perseverance by being made to wait a few days
 - instructed in what it means to renounce possessions, family and self
 - this is necessary for living in the world
 - detachment helps us to keep our focus fixed on God
 - stripped of their own clothes and given the monastic habit
 - nothing of their own in their cells
- all had to learn to renounce their own wills
 - never did any activity in or out of the monastery without permission
 - taught to reveal their thoughts and temptations to the spiritual father (*abba*)
 - this was a deep relationship based on honesty and openness
 - the best way to overcome the devil is to submit in humility to the *abba*
- worked quietly at manual labor, including plaiting leaves to make baskets and mats
- did not speak in the cell, but meditated on the words of the *abbas* and superiors
- gathered at regular hours for prayer
 - everyone had to be able to read, so as to be able to pray with Scripture
 - the *synaxis* was the common liturgical prayer on Saturday and Sunday
 - continued prayers throughout the night, doing work to keep awake until dawn
- lived in watchful expectation of Christ's coming
 - constant prayer and watchfulness was joined with abstinence
 - no one ate until 3:00 p.m., and usually only once a day
 - some might take a second meal
 - others only ate every few days
- this strict asceticism was not for its own sake
 - the rule of fasting gave way to the rule of hospitality
 - external penances had a deeper meaning
 - everything was done for the sake of purity of heart
 - this is the necessary condition for seeing and loving God
- As amazing as the monks' asceticism was, even more edifying is their deep love of God, and the gifts they received from him because of their purity of heart.