

HEROES OF THE DESERT

The Desert and the City

The Sign of the Desert

- At the beginning of the fifth century, various authors collected the lives and sayings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, including:
 - *The History of the Monks in Egypt*
 - *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*
 - Bishop Palladius of Hellenopolis, *The Lausiac History*
 - Saint John Cassian, *The Institutes of the Renunciants*, *The Conferences*
- These deal with some of the extraordinary miracles and amazing asceticism of the monks.
- More often they relate the wisdom the monks acquired, in order to edify others by their example and their teaching.
- This role of providing a provocative witness and challenge to holiness still belongs to some members of the Church, namely, consecrated religious.

The Consecrated Life

- a closer imitation of Christ
 - from the very beginning of the Church
 - based on a practice of the evangelical counsels
 - poverty
 - chastity
 - obedience
- one way of experiencing a “more intimate” consecration
 - rooted in Baptism
 - dedicated totally to God
 - a sign to the Church and to the world
- various types of consecrated life
 - hermits and consecrated virgins
 - institutes of consecrated life
 - societies of apostolic life
 - secular institutes
- for the good of the Church
 - a sign of the love of God in the language of modern society
 - points towards the Kingdom of God, which will be fulfilled in Heaven
 - works for the sanctification of the world
 - part of the Church’s work of evangelization, that is, spreading the Gospel

Translating the Desert Experience

- The extreme approach of the Desert Fathers is not for everyone
- St John Cassian intentionally set out to “translate” the desert experience for the conditions of fifth-century “urban” Marseilles.
 - adjusted to the customs and needs of the place, even the weather
 - provide reasonable alternatives, so everyone can feel called to it
 - the works are not for themselves, but lead to purity of heart
- St Philip Neri also made this adaptation
 - felt himself called to imitate the Desert Fathers
 - understood his vocation as living in the city as if he were in the desert
 - very ascetical with himself
 - not interested in imposing external works on others
 - worried there was too much opportunity for pride
 - the important thing was to mortify the reason
 - stressed the necessity of obedience and humility
 - the devil can trick us by tempting us to take on too much
- Adaptation of desert practices demonstrates what is essential in each of them:
 - Fasting and Abstinence: “We always fast until evening, eating daily during the summer, while in the winter every other or every third day.”
 - wait for the “lawful moment” to eat with others
 - do not eat between meals
 - be satisfied with simple food
 - Renouncing the World: “They went off to quite secluded places . . .”
 - pay no attention to the praise of others
 - never speak in praise of yourself
 - do not be saddened by correction or accusation
 - Constant Prayer: “Sixty prayers during the day and fifty during the night”
 - acknowledge your difficulties in praying
 - pray for perseverance
 - surrender to God’s will
 - use small prayers throughout the day
 - Prayer and Work: “We always spend half the night . . . doing manual work”
 - be on the lookout for opportunities to do good
 - submit your own judgment to that of your director
 - Obedience to the Abba: “They are taught to reveal their thoughts to their abba.”
 - frequent confession with a regular confessor
 - regular examination of conscience
 - keep nothing hidden from the spiritual father
 - Detachment from Possessions: “They have nothing in their cells . . .”
 - guard against avarice
 - nothing must become a greater priority than our relationship with Christ
 - simplicity in clothing, possessions
 - almsgiving is more important than fasting
- This “translation” and application of desert lessons is the task of every Christian.
- Personal efforts to grow in holiness give witness to the Church and to the world concerning the power of God’s love. They are part of the work of evangelization.