

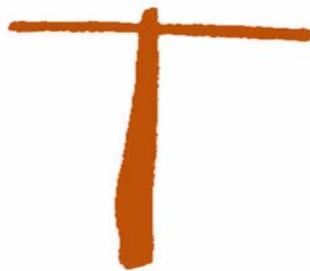
Carceri

The Gazette for the TSSF Contemplatives Network

To encourage Deeper Prayer

A Prayer for all our Franciscan Brothers and Sisters

O God,
Your love led Francis and Clare
To establish our three Orders.
Draw us into your love, that,
In its perfection,
We may grow in love towards all
With whom we have to do;
For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ,
Who gives himself in love to all.



EDITORIAL

Welcome to our October 2019 Gazette. I am pleased to introduce 'The Desert Fathers and Mothers'. The other articles are by friends who value the hermetical life. Brother Austin Davis SSF, who lives as a solitary in Canterbury. Father John Allen Green OFM, a Johannesburg Hermit, and correspondent Robert J. Wicks, from Philadelphia, who contacted me after I wrote a similar article.



'The Quest for the lost art of Silence and Solitude to be found in the Desert Fathers and Mothers.'

'One of the Desert Fathers said; Just as it is impossible to see your face in troubled water, so also, the soul, unless it is clear of alien thoughts, is not able to pray to God in contemplation.'

'This is a saying from the first Christian hermits who took to the desert to seek truth at first hand away from the conventional organisation of civilisation and society which they found inadequate.' (Merton, Thomas. excerpt).

Pachomius is credited as being the first Desert Father to be recognised for gathering into the community those Christians who fled the World for the isolation of the desert. In his earlier life, he was conscripted into the Roman Army. Military life built and enhanced his organisational skills. Interestingly, his Rule is still in use in the Orthodox Church.

In contrast, Anthony the Great is likewise recognised and followed as being the first solitary, who even when popular among the people, continued to live alone in austerity in the Egyptian desert. His rule and life continued to be inspirational and were documented by Athanasius of Alexandria at an early date.

In the library at Hilfield Friary, the mother house of the Society of St. Francis, I came across an illustrated book on *Desert Wisdom* by Yushi Nomura with an introduction by Henri Nouwen. I read it eagerly, which I soon purchased a copy when I arrived back home. Nomura's Japanese Zen-like caricatures, together with selected quotations, capture the essence of these early Christian pilgrims and monks who sought God through the experience of silence. They fled to the desert in droves to escape the pressures that their contemporary lifestyle then imposed. They practised self-control and abstinence to help regulate that inner spiritual quality while seeking visitation from the Divine. I believe, that within their Wisdom, available to us also now in our day, the hand and Presence of God is evident.

'Having sailed secretly from Rome to Alexandria and having withdrawn to the solitary life [in the desert] Arsenius prayed again: 'Lord, lead me in the way of salvation' and again he heard a voice saying 'Arsenius, flee, be silent, always pray, for these are the source of sinlessness.' The words flee, be silent and to pray summarise the spirituality of the desert.' (Nouwen, H. excerpt)

Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed. (Luke 5:16).

In my quest to find this personal 'desert', I have sought assistance from the wisdom of the Desert Fathers and Mothers who have become a light to my path. It is through the medium

of silence and during the practice of contemplation that I seek to find that 'hermitage within' experience. To do so, I shut out all intrusion from modernity. This escape from the miasmas of the world echoes the experience of those who fled to the desert all these centuries ago. It enables me to seek grace patiently from the Father.

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'The desert photographs were kindly supplied by the Canterbury Solitude Group.'

Robert Brown TSSF

Collect for St Antony of Egypt, Hermit

Most gracious God, who called your servant Antony to sell all that he had and to serve you in the solitude of the desert: by his example may we learn to deny ourselves and to love you before all things; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.



Meeting God: The Desert Fathers and Mothers Way of Contemplation

We cannot be love until we have become love, just as we cannot be peace, truth or mercy until we have become these things. But we already are these things at the core of our being for we have been made in the image and likeness of God who is Love, Peace, Truth and Mercy. There are however illusions and idols that diffuse and dim the light of the soul so that we look without seeing, listen without hearing and remember without recalling. To cleanse the Hebrews of these illusions and idols, Moses was instructed to lead the people into and through the desert.

Jesus also constantly withdrew into the desert for silence and solitude. From the beginning of his ministry to every important decision. It was in solitude and silence that Jesus dealt with painful emotions like grief and the constant demands of his ministry; silence and solitude was how Jesus cared for his own

soul and how he taught his disciples, and finally how he prepared for his own death on the cross.

In the tradition of Moses and Jesus, the desert fathers and desert mothers also left the city to enter into the desert. This was no escape from evil of the city, but rather the journey of purification and encounter. It was in the desert, a wild, fierce, unknown place where they would encounter both "demons" and "angels", (Mark 1:13) their own shadowy selves that contained both good and evil, both gold and lead.

St. John Climacus is honoured by the Church as a great ascetic and as the author of a remarkable work entitled, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, and therefore he has been named "Climacus," or "of the Ladder." He was a desert father who inspired many people to follow the way of contemplation and the mystic life. For him entering into silence meant setting aside thoughts about things, whether of the senses or of the mind, "let the memory of Jesus combine with your breath, then you will know the profit of silence". He however had a stern warning for 'experience seekers or triflers', "let no man addicted to irrational and conceit, hypocrisy and rancour ever dare to touch even the fringe of silence, lest he be driven out of his mind". (Climacus, 2012)

These men and women of the desert known as abbas and ammas, fathers and mothers who became respected spiritual teachers and directors all practised and taught that only humility can lead us into contemplation. Amma Theodora wrote that neither asceticism, nor vigils, nor any kind of suffering is able to save. Only true humility can do that. (Chryssavgis, 2008, p. 30)

In the tradition of the abbas and ammas, the Beguines noted that it was only once we had freed ourselves of every illusion

and idol, having no ground of false self to stand upon, that we could cry out with the groaning spirit “my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” This is where God comes to meet us, the encounter of the Desert. (Swan, 2014)

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Father John Allen Green OFM (Johannesburg)



'A Piece of Desert Wisdom for Modern Life'

As many know from their church history, in the fourth century when Constantine declared Christianity to no longer be an outlaw religion, it upset certain people. They were worried that with this move, the church would no longer be a countercultural force. Instead, it would become simply another secular institution with no real prophetic voice.

As a result, a number of women and men fled to the desert which as we know is a physically dry, barren desolate area, usually covered with sand, waterless, and without vegetation. Some of the people who went didn't fare well because they did it as an "ego-trip" and were there only to be alone with themselves and listen to their own voice.

Others, however, who became known as desert AMMAS (mothers) and ABBAS (fathers), were there to be alone with God and the silence and solitude were present so they could hear the voice of God more clearly. In books on these saintly figures by such writers as Benedicta Ward, Thomas Merton, Henri Nouwen, and Douglas Christie as well as my own little work (CROSSING THE DESERT), we can see holiness reflected in their sayings.

Today, we may disregard such individuals as being saintly and too far from the realm that we live in. However, as a minimalist poet, Robert Lax, noted in a letter to one of his friends, "The saints are examples of attainable virtue, not a show of divine freaks." The Ammas and Abbas moved to the desert, so they might be free of not only what would keep them from an intimate relationship with God but also a gentle understanding and embrace of others.

For instance, earlier in my life, I spent more time on being judgmental: "She's on her knees at daily Mass but then leaves and is nasty to others...He says he is 'religious' but doesn't offer money to those in need...She visits the food pantry for meals but spends what she has on alcohol and cigarettes." Now, as I see death coming closer, I feel that it is good that the person on her knees is at least trying and is nasty out of fear...The person who is 'religious' but gives little of their wealth is ignorant of all of God's calling...and the person who drinks, smokes, and then seeks governmental or local handouts, has probably had a truly hard life and the drink and smoke are the only friends he or she has." Desert wisdom has

us take a step back from being quick to judge others and to lean back to ask forgiveness of our own sins instead.

This point is a key part of desert wisdom. But how did they come to this realisation? How can WE come to this point? One of the key ways they did it is by developing their own "rule of prayer" which freed them from being dominated by CHRONOS, secular values. Instead, the rule of prayer which they had opened them up to live more gently and compassionately by embracing KAIROS, God's values. The rule of prayer was made up of many things but often included: LITURGY where they could meet God in the Word, the Eucharist, and each other; FORMAL PRAYER like the psalms; CONVERSATIONS WITH GOD; REFLECTIONS DURING THE DAY because someone said that life is something that often happens while we are doing something else; SPIRITUAL READING—ESPECIALLY SACRED SCRIPTURES where our identity is on the line in how we read them (Karl Barth once noted that when we read the bible and ask, What is this book saying? it should respond: Who is this that is asking); FAITH SHARING; ACTS OF COMPASSION; and CONTEMPLATION/MEDITATION.

If you already have these elements of prayer in your life, the question is how we can emphasise areas of it that to which we give little attention? We can also ask, "How can we deepen an aspect of our rule of prayer that we love?" For instance, if we love to meditate in church, we might consider reading something more recent about the theology of the Eucharist. If we find our relationship with Mary is important to us, we need to ask whether we have read anything new about Marian theology and spirituality. Otherwise, rather than aspects of our prayer life being dynamic, encouraging, and challenging, they run the risk of turning into idols.

Today, more than ever, we need to embrace the desert of contemporary society and live in it in a way that our relationship becomes deeper and our compassion more

understanding. Otherwise, religion will take its place alongside a culture, politics, and economics only interested in preserving our little world while we ignore the greater spiritual world's calls to spend the brief time we have left on this earth by embracing inner peace and joy and being compassionate enough to understand the plight of others enough to be kinder.

By Robert J Wicks (USA).



Francis' Cell at the Carceri, near Assisi – photo by Tony Ross

Desert Spirituality assisted my 'Carceri' experience.

If in your travels, you have been able to visit the Carceri on the side of Mount Subasio you will know it is not in a desert, but in a cleft in the steep hill with trees all around and a wonderful view down the valley. And today a small and much-visited hermitage that had been used by Francis many years ago.

Not exactly a desert, but perhaps the nearest Francis came to one unless near Damiatta in the sands of Egypt in the ill-fated crusade. Nevertheless, a place of prayer and withdrawal from the busyness of the world.

If you come to Canterbury, you will find directly fronting the busiest road in town (18000+ vehicles per day from a City survey) a small house with a little ceramic plate above the door telling all who pass by this is the 'Carceri'. No, not a joke but a 'work in progress'.

Over the years I have come to realise that 'Desert Spirituality' may well have roots centuries ago in those inspired women and men who left us not only their thoughts and sayings, and who still inspire us today; but were early founders of the Religious Life. For many centuries this meant convents and monasteries with just occasionally a brother or sister living in their own 'desert'. Today we have come to realise that prayerful contemplation is not only for monks and nuns but for everyone. I lived for a few years in a Franciscan hermitage using Francis' 'Rule for those who would live in Hermitages', a productive time that years later has moved me to move to be a solitary with the Community's permission. What finally triggered the decision was prayer and a long mulling over the book 'Franciscan Solitude' a collection of essays edited by André Cirino OFM and Josef Raischl. This is a book covering the theme of solitariness from the desert Mothers and Fathers to contemporary expressions of the life, and particularly those in modern-day urban environments. Even one in a cramped garden in the Bronx, New York. It makes my little house on a busy street seem palatial!

In Peter France's book 'Hermits, the Insights of Solitude' he considers that one of Thomas Merton's most important insights into the solitary life is, that it can only be judged by the inner experience and not by the external surroundings. From this I get great encouragement. For me, and I expect for many, any

'desert experience' you look for has got to be where you are. Wherever you are you can form your own special place – your 'desert', a prayer corner in your room, a little prayer room somewhere in your home – even a converted garage. If you can have man sheds in the garden, why not woman sheds! So, for me, my little chapel in an urban setting has become my desert, the place where I work, not physical work but working on my 'inner experience' as Merton puts it. And often I find that the several books that I have at hand on the thoughts and sayings of those forebears of ours in the desert; those Desert Mothers and Fathers are useful resources on my journey.

Brother Austin SSF

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Carceri, is brought to you by the Steering Group

Paul Alexander TSSF - Chairman

Lesley Cunningham TSSF - Postal Secretary

Robert Brown, TSSF – Co-Editor

Bruce Driver, TSSF – New Member

Carol Selby TSSF - Chapter Link/Representative

Tony Ross TSSF – Co-Editor and Membership Secretary

e-mail: tonyrosstssf468@gmail.com; tel. 01285851410

address: Rowan Tree Cottage, Ampney Crucis, Cirencester,
Glos. GL7 5RY

The theme for the Easter 2020 will be under the general heading of the Contribution of Contemplation to Formation. The Steering Group welcome feedback, articles (particularly the part contemplation has played in your formation), and suggestions for future themes, which should be sent to Tony Ross.