



# HERMITS: THE CHRISTIAN YOGIS

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After a long and expensive journey, a Western man arrived at a Zen temple in a remote Japanese village. Exhausted, he parked his huge backpack, passed through the entrance of the temple and, in broken English, asked the monk guardian for an audience with the master.

After a while, the guardian led him to an immense and almost empty meditation hall. On the waxed wooden floor, there was only an altar with a statue of Buddha, and, in one corner, a rustic wooden throne, where a skeletal old man with a shaven skull and black robe sat in the lotus posture. Following the guardian's instructions, the Westerner gave the gassho—ritual salute with joined hands—in front of the altar, walked around the entire room and prostrated while on his knees—back on his heels and insteps on the floor—before the master's throne.

The conversation, which took place in English and Japanese, and thanks to the translation work of the guardian, went like this:

"Speak," whispered the master, piercing the Westerner with his vacant gaze.

"You see, I come from far away and I would like to practice Zen with you," muttered the Westerner, overwhelmed by the luminous energy of the master and pained by the uncomfortable posture.

"I see, soul of a fool. Have you really traveled so many miles to come here? Don't you have any temples in your own country?" The master asked in a firm voice, still smiling.

"Well, I'm not one to go to Mass, sit with grandmothers, listen to the priest's sermons while mumbling, 'Amen.' I've tried that, but it doesn't work. I'm looking for something else. A body-mind practice, asceticism, superhumanism, enlightenment. There is none of that in Christianity."

"Yes, there is. Go to the desert."

## **The Call of the Desert**

In *The Way of a Pilgrim*, an anonymous Orthodox Christian text, it says that "those who truly practice interior prayer flee from human contact and take refuge in unknown places." But the strange force that between the end of the 3rd and the beginning of the 4th century pushed thousands of men to leave their towns and cities to devote themselves to solitary contemplation in the deserts of Egypt, Palestine, Arabia and Persia, remains a mystery.

The most plausible hypothesis holds that these men intended to flee from the mediocrity of the Christian communities of their time. At that time, the Roman Empire had decreed freedom of worship; and, being free from persecution, Christians rested on their laurels. There seemed to be more of the faithful than ever, but most were lazy and conformist.

The hermit went to the desert in search of that pure and ascetic spirituality associated with hot climates. And he would settle in solitude, in a sort of anarchic monasticism, to get away from the herd of the flock and the disturbances of the senses. His maxim was *fuge, tace, quiesce*: flee, be quiet and remain calm.

Thus, since after the Constantinian peace, blood martyrdom, the highest expression of faith in Christ, was no longer possible, the hermit opted for another type of martyrdom: bloodless martyrdom. An ascetic path that, with its privations, mortifications and body-mind disciplines, is linked to the practices of the yogis or Zen monks. In his empty cave, the hermit faces the mother of all battles: to sit in solitude and fight against himself. Overcoming his ego, the solitary walks towards an ambitious evolutionary horizon—to transcend the human condition and transmute into a new species: the saint.

## **"Sell What You Have. Give it to the Poor. Come and Follow Me"**

This imperative Gospel sentence (Mark 10:21) triggered a real metanoia in Anthony, a 20-year-old man who, after the death of his parents, had inherited a large fortune. It was the third century when Anthony donated all his possessions and went to live in an abandoned tomb, where he ate only one meal a day and devoted the rest of the day to contemplation. In his retreat he suffered attacks of lust, gluttony, anger, boredom and that kind of spiritual anguish called "acedia." After a time, he began to receive visits from people asking him for miracles, and was forced to flee to the Egyptian desert, where he occupied

a ruined fortress, around which he built a high wall to keep out the curious. Hermits like him abhorred fame because they knew that it was accompanied by an ego boost, with the consequent spiritual setback. Therefore, they fled at the slightest gesture of veneration, and some even arranged for the concealment of their graves to avoid posthumous honors.

Immersed in desert solitude, Anthony had to survive extreme temperatures, wild beasts, vermin and hurricanes, as well as continuing to battle delusions and temptations; but eventually he experienced a sovereign peace. His face shone in the night and his solitude was like that described by Dionysius the Areopagite: "Superlatively abstracted from every habit, movement, life, imagination, opinion, name, word, thought, intelligence, substance, state, foundation, union, end, immensity; finally, from everything that exists." Anthony's brilliance attracted other men who also wanted to be saints. Thus, Christian monasticism was born.

### **Nudus nudum Christum sequi**

The case of Anthony the Great is similar to that of many other solitaries who filled the deserts at the same time. In Scete alone there was a stable population of 40,000 hermits. It was, then, a multitude who, after distributing their goods among the needy, followed Christ into the desert, assuming the sequela Christi in the tradition of the nudus nudum Christum sequi, that is, to follow naked the One who goes naked. The hermit lived with the bare necessities: at most, a tunic, a staff, a crucifix and a skull. As Euprepus said, "belongings are nothing but obstacles."

At first, the hermits were entirely independent, but in time they began to form small group, far enough away from each other so as not to disturb each other and close enough to help each other or celebrate Eucharist. There were no hierarchies in the desert either, until a few elders whose wisdom was based on their long experience began to stand out, and, much to their regret, they were set up as teachers. Most of the eremitic colonies were so discreet that there are not even traces of their existence. The most famous ones were established in the north, not far from Alexandria, in Nitria, Scete and Celsus, and in them lived anchorites like Ammon, the two Macarius, Arsenius, Sisoës or Paul the Simple.

Among the hermits there were also women. They tended to be of aristocratic origin and their number is difficult to determine, as many of them pretended to be men to avoid trouble. With time, female colonies arose, and steely old women who, like Sarra, gave hard advice to their disciples: "Be as if you were dead, without having any concern for the things of the world, practice hesychasm in the cell and

remember only God and death."

## **How to Practice Hesychasm**

Christianity succeeds where paganism failed—in making man immortal. In the words of St. Augustine, "God became man so that man might become God." Just as God took on a human body, man can verify God in his own flesh. The practices of the Desert Fathers go in this direction.

As in yoga or Zen, the basis of hesychasm—spiritual practice of the hermits—lies in breathing: what Nicephorus calls "breathing God." Rather than mantras or sutras, the hermit pronounces prayers—short and deep, holding his breath as long as possible until he pronounces them—or exaltations of the divine name such as "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me." The Pilgrim repeated this prayer 3,000 times a day, then 6,000, and later 12,000—until he no longer needed to repeat it, for he prayed with the beating of his heart. Ephrem the Syrian said that "a good word is silver, but silence is pure gold." And thus, in silence, Hesychasm reached its apotheosis.

The posture of Hesychasm does not need to envy the asanas of the yogis or the full lotus of Zen. It is as simple—and as difficult—as sitting motionless on the floor with your legs crossed, your back slightly bent and your chin on your chest. This posture allows you to keep your attention on your heartbeat; your gaze on the center of your belly, your breath flowing in circles. If he persists in this practice, man achieves a state of perfect inaction.

## **This is How the Elders Spoke**

The first men who left the city to go to the desert were true pioneers. They had no precedents or models to imitate, except for the remote example—through Scripture—of prophets, such as St. John the Baptist, Elijah, Elisha, or the primordial example of Christ, who was led into the desert by the Spirit of God to fast, meditate and fight the Evil One. Christ spent 40 days and 40 nights in the desert; then he returned to civilization. The hermits never returned.

When there were elders, the Apothegms of the Holy Desert Fathers were born, ranging from brief advice from teachers to disciples, to long collective exhortations. For a long time, the apothegms were transmitted by word of mouth, but some solitary scribes began to compile them, giving rise to a unique

sub-genre of monastic literature.

Since "for God there are only individuals"—Gómez Dávila dixit—the apothegms bring together very diverse individual doctrines, sometimes even contradictory, and rarely set collective norms that turn spiritual practice into a template. What they have in common is that, in them, the Desert Fathers distilled charity—correcting one's own defects and ignoring those of others—humility—escaping all vainglory and hiding one's good deeds—and vigilance—of one's own mind, so as not to fall into dispersion.

The apothegms have reached our day after a long journey through codices, parchments and manuscripts, to be finally arranged in large collections by various Church historians. Since they are accessible to the general public, they are part of the perennial wisdom that, beyond creeds, helps the human species to live.

Let us see, as a sample, a handful of selected apothegms:

"In his blindness, the human being has tried to replace the vision of the spirit by the vision of thought, by abstract constructions of the mind, by ideologies, without these having led him to any result, as all the metaphysical theories of the philosophers prove" (Theophanes the Recluse).

"Being in prayer, he went into ecstasy, and had a vision. He saw the whole world as if it were an immense ball of tangled threads. Then he said: 'Who will be able to untangle this?' Suddenly, he heard a voice answering his question: 'Humility'" (Antonio of the Desert).

"We learned in connection with a spiritual brother, that a viper bit him on the foot while he was praying. But he did not give up. He did not lower his arms before he finished nor did he move. And yet he was delivered from the poison because he had loved God more than himself" (Evagrius Ponticus).

"It seemed to me that every herb, every flower, every ear of grain whispered to me mysterious words about a divine essence very close to every man, to every animal, to each thing: herbs, flowers, trees, earth, sun, stars, to the whole universe" (Spiridon).

"They said to the old man: 'What do you do so that you never show discouragement?' 'I wait for death every day,'" he answered (Anonymous).

## **Blood and Sand**

One could call it a "miracle" that more than two millennia later, the echo of the Desert Fathers still resounds. Undoubtedly, hesychasm and apothegms can be very useful for the men of today who, by sheer definition and however "traditionalist" they believe themselves to be, are—we are—absolutely modern. But in the same way that the wine that is too much of a wine is diluted with mountain water, our absolute modernity—our absolute stupidity—is diluted, thanks to the practice of hesychasm and the reading of apothegms.

In addition to the teachers of the Church—Catholic and, above all, Orthodox—who transmit these practices, there are countless books that explain them. Among them, it is worth mentioning *Eremitas* (Palmyra, 2007) by Isidro-Juan Palacios, a powerful manual on the history of Hesychasm, its implementation and its connection with Eastern doctrines, which also includes a remarkable selection of apothegms. But the true hesicasta bible is *Apotegmas de los Padres del Desierto* (Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 2017), with introduction, translation and notes by David González Gude, who—although lacking the heroic and Mishimian verb of Palacios—did an excellent job of selecting apothegms, as well as the most complete eremitic history ever written in Spanish.

But we must remember that many hermits were illiterate. A spiritual path is not a matter of enlightenment, but of disposition. And all those who wish, here and now, to take action and abandon the "political city"—source of superficial conflicts—to devote themselves to the purest contemplation, have deserts everywhere: in Castile there have always been drylands suitable for these pursuits, and there are the testaments of Teresa of Avila or John of the Cross to prove it. Today, in that area they call "Empty Spain," the population is scarce and abandoned buildings abound, in whose ruins the modern hermit can find the solitude necessary to embark on the only revolution that, in times of dissolution, makes sense—the inner revolution.

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Luis Landeira Caro writes from Spain. This article appears through the kind courtesy of [\*La Gaceta de la\*](#)

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Featured: *Saint Anthony shunning Gold*, by Fra Angelico; painted ca. 1435-1440.

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