

Sayings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers



Of patience, or fortitude

- “A brother asked one of the fathers: “if by chance I oversleep, and am late for the hour of prayer, I am ashamed that others will hear me praying so late, and so I become reluctant to keep the rule of prayer.’ And the old man said: ‘If ever you oversleep the dawn, rise when you wake, shut the door and the windows, and say your office. For it is written, ‘The day is thine and the night is thine.’ God is glorified whatever time it is” (X.99.128).
- “A brother was restless in the community and often moved to anger. So he said: ‘I will go, and live somewhere by myself. And since I shall be able to talk or listen to no one, I shall be tranquil, and my passionate anger will cease.’ He went out and lived alone in a cave. But one day he filled his jug with water and put it on the ground. It happened suddenly to fall over. He filled it again, and again it fell. And this happened a third time. And in a rage he snatched up the jug and broke it. Returning to his right mind, he knew that the demon of anger had mocked him, and he said: ‘Here am I by myself, and he has beaten me. I will return to the community. Wherever you live, you need effort and patience and above all God’s help.’ And he rose up, and went back” (VII.33.92).



Of patience, or fortitude

- “A brother asked an old man: ‘What am I to do, father? I do nothing like a monk. I eat, drink and sleep as I like, I am much troubled by vile thoughts, I shift from task to task, and my mind wanders everywhere.’ The old man answered: ‘Stay in your cell, and do what you can without trouble of mind. It is only a little that you do now, yet it is even as when Abba Antony did mighty things in the desert. I trust God that whoever stays in his cell for God’s sake, and guards his conscience, will be found where Antony is” (VII.34.92).
- “For nine years a brother was assailed by temptations to leave his community. Every day he picked up his cloak to go, the cloak in which he wrapped himself at night. At evening he would say: ‘I will go away tomorrow.’ And at dawn he would think: ‘I ought to bear this torment and stay here just today for the Lord’s sake.’ He did this every day for nine years, until the Lord took away temptation” (VII.39.93).



Of patience, or fortitude

- “A brother said to Abba Arsenius: ‘What am I to do, Abba? My thought troubles me, telling me ‘You cannot fast, nor work, nor visit the sick, because even these things are selfish.’ The old man saw that the devil had sown the thought and said: ‘Go, eat and drink and sleep, only do not leave your cell; remember that staying in the cell is what keeps a monk on his proper path.’ He did it for three days and then suffered from *accidie*. So he found a few palm leaves and split them; the next day he began to make a plait from them. When he grew hungry, he said to himself: ‘Here are a few more palm-leaves. I shall lay them out before I eat.’ And after he had finished, he said: ‘I shall read a little before I eat.’ And after he had finished, he said: ‘I shall say a few psalms, and then I shall eat with an untroubled mind.’ So step by step he made progress with God’s help, until he came back to the right way. And when he had received confidence against evil thoughts, he overcame them” (VII.27.91).



That We Should Judge No Person

- “In Scete a brother was once found guilty. They assembled the elders, and sent a message to Abba Moses telling him to come. Then the presbyter sent, saying: ‘Come, for a meeting of monks is waiting for you.’ Moses rose up and went. He took with him an old basket which he filled with sand and carried on his back. The people who went to meet him said: ‘What is this, father?’ The old man said to them: ‘My sins are chasing me, and I do not see them—have I come today to judge the sins of someone else?’ They listened to him, and said nothing to the erring brother, but pardoned him” (IX.4.102-103).
- “Abba Joseph asked Abba Poemen: ‘Tell me how to become a monk.’ The old man said: ‘If you want to find rest in this life and the next, say at every turn “Who am I?” and judge no man” (IX.5.103).



Remember that Christ is with us,
both as an encouragement and
healthy admonition:

- “Another old man said: ‘We suffer this through negligence. If we remember that God dwells in us, we shall never bring into ourselves a vessel that is not his. The Lord Christ abides in us and with us, and watches our life. And because we bear him with us and contemplate him, we ought not to be negligent but ought to make ourselves holy as he is holy. If we stand upon a rock, the wicked one will be broken. Do not be afraid, and he will do nothing against you. And pray with courage this psalm: ‘They that trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion; they that dwell in Jerusalem shall stand fast forever’ (V.17.64).”



The danger of projection:

- “A brother, being tempted by a demon, went to an old man and said: ‘Those two monks over there who live together, live wickedly.’ But the old man knew that a demon was playing with him, and he sent and called them to him. And at evening he put a mat for them, and covered them with a single blanket, and said: ‘They are sons of God, and holy persons.’ But he said to his disciple: ‘Shut this slandering brother up in a cell by himself: he is suffering from the passions of which he accuses them’ (V.29.68-69).



On Discretion

- “A hunter happened to come through the brush and saw Abba Antony talking gladly with the brothers, and was displeased. The old man wanted to show him how we should sometimes be less austere for the sake of the brothers, and said to him: ‘Put an arrow in your bow, and draw it.’ He did so. And he said: ‘Draw it further:’ and he drew it. The hunter said to him: ‘If I draw it too far, the bow will snap.’ Abba Antony answered: ‘So it is with God’s work. If we go to excess, the brothers quickly become exhausted. It is sometimes best not to be rigid’” (X.2.105-106).
- “Abba Mark asked Abba Arsenius: ‘Is it good not to have any comfort in one’s cell? I saw a brother who had a few cabbages, and he was rooting them out.’ And Abba Arsenius said: ‘It is good. But each man should do what is right for his own discipline. If he has not strength to endure that, he will plant them again’” (X.7.106).



Of Lust

- “Abba Cassian said: ‘Abba Moses told us: ‘It is good not to hide the thoughts but to disclose them to discreet and devout old men; but not to men who are old merely in years, for many have found final despair instead of comfort by confessing to men whom they saw to be aged, but who in fact were inexperienced’ (Part V, 3, p. 60).
- “On this same temptation, another old man said: ‘You should be like a man walking along the street past an inn, and sniffing the smell of meat frying or roasting. Anyone who likes goes in and eats. People who do not want it, pass by and only sniff the smell. So you ought to put the smell away from you; rise, and pray, ‘Lord, Son of God, help me.’ Do this against other temptations. We cannot make temptations vanish, but we can struggle against them’ (V.16.64). Note that it is very difficult to do this on our own.



Of Lust

- “Another brother was goaded by lust. He rose up in the night and went to tell his temptations to an old man, and the old man consoled him. So he returned, comforted to his cell. But again the spirit of lust tempted him. And a second time he went to the old man. This happened several times. The old man did not reproach him, but spoke words to his profit: ‘Yield not to the devil, and guard your soul. Whenever the demon troubles you, come to me, and rebuke him, and so he will go away. Nothing troubles the demon of lust more than disclosure of his pricks. Nothing pleases him more than the concealment of the temptation. Eleven times the brother went to the old man, and blamed himself for his imaginings. And then the brother said to the old man: ‘Of thy charity, Abba, speak to me a word.’ The old man said to him: ‘Believe me, my son, if God allowed the imaginings which goad me to be passed to you, you would not bear them but would be utterly destroyed.’ And so by his words and deep humility, that brother found rest from the goad of lust” (V.13.63).



The importance of a disciplined mind:

- “A brother, held in the grip of lust, went to a great old man and asked him: ‘Of your charity, pray for me: for I am troubled by lust.’ The old man prayed to the Lord. And he came a second time to the old man and said the same: and again the old man was careful to beseech the Lord on his behalf, and said: ‘Lord, show me why the devil is doing this work in that brother. I prayed to you, but he has not yet found rest.’ And the Lord revealed to him what was happening to that brother. And he saw the brother sitting down, and the spirit of lust near him and, so to speak, playing with him: and an angel was standing near to help him and was frowning upon that brother because he did not throw himself upon God, but took a pleasure in his thoughts, and turned his mind towards them. And the old man saw that the chief cause was in the brother himself. And he said to him: ‘You are dallying with your thought.’ And he taught him how to resist thoughts like this. And the brother’s soul revived under the old man’s teaching and prayer, and he found rest from his temptation” (V.19.65; cf. #33).



The importance of a disciplined mind:

- “... your endurance will conquer the enemy. Sailors beginning a voyage set the sails and look for a favorable wind – and later they meet a contrary wind. Just because the wind has turned, they do not throw the cargo overboard or abandon ship: they wait a little and battle against the storm until they can again set a direct course. And when we run into headwinds, let us put up the cross for our sail, and we shall voyage through the world in safety” (VII.18.87)
- “Abba Hyperichius said: ‘Keep praising God with hymnody, and meditate continually, and so lift the burden of the temptations that come upon you. A traveler carrying a heavy burden stops from time to time to take deep breaths, and so makes the journey easier and the burden lighter” (VII.20.87)
- “An old man said: ‘We do not make progress because we do not know what we can do; we lose heart in the work we have begun; and we want to be good without trying to be good” (VII.23.88)

