

Getting Away to it All: The Place of Withdrawal in Fourth-Century Monasticism and Postmodern Christianity

Introduction -

When we go on a vacation to the country we often say, "I'm getting away from it all for a while." What we mean when we say this is that our withdrawal into solitude functions as a means of escaping--or simply relieving ourselves temporarily--from activities, responsibilities, relationships or other unwanted experience ("it all"). The word *from* is important here. The "away-ness" of our movement is governed not so much by the destination as by the point of departure. From this viewpoint, solitude is a place of rest, of relaxation *from* a life we wish to avoid (at least temporarily).

This is often also the way we look at Christian retreats. Indeed "retreat" itself is a military term used to describe a temporary pull back from the heat of battle in order to regroup and perhaps to prepare for another advance. Christian retreats are advertised as opportunities to leave the busy-ness of life behind so that we can rest in an environment of Christian friends, Christian worship, Christian teaching, and beautiful scenery.

I affirm the place of retreat in our lives. I think it is a valuable and wonderful thing to step aside from the clutter of daily life in order to make space for God. This was Jesus' regular pattern of life on earth. And yet, I also have concerns about looking at withdrawal merely as a "getting away from it all." I wonder if we aren't missing something.

For example, as a student of early monasticism, I think that the "away from" way of looking at withdrawal is one reason we misunderstand the phenomenon of movement to the desert in early

monasticism. We can't seem to understand monastic withdrawal except as a withdrawal *from* something: taxes, persecution, or the shallow Christianity after Constantine. But when I read the actual literature of early monasticism--or even the reflections that flow from contemporary solitaries--I catch something different. Among solitaries, withdrawal is not primarily a movement *from*, but rather a movement *to*. This change of words may seem like a small matter, but I think it is important. How we view our withdrawals shapes the way we look at our "real life" and even our relationship with God.

I wish, in this essay, to correct some of the misunderstandings with particular regard to our interpretation of fourth-century monasticism and then to consider what we might learn from this for our own practice of withdrawal today. After describing the basic features of fourth-century monastic withdrawal, I will review the various motives that have been named as causes of early monastic withdrawal. Then I will turn to the documents of this period to explore, from the stories of the founders and followers of fourth-century monasticism, how the early monks and nuns themselves understood their own decision to retreat into the desert. I can only summarize a few figures and a few themes, but I hope these will serve to demonstrate the range of attitudes toward withdrawal common among early monastics. Having clarified our understanding of withdrawal in fourth-century monasticism, I will then turn, in conclusion, to consider how a clearer understanding of fourth-century withdrawal might inform our practice of withdrawal, retreat, and solitude today.

Withdrawal in Fourth Century Monasticism

A. The Location of Early Christian Monasticism

The first step in clarifying the attitudes toward withdrawal in fourth-century monasticism is to clear up a few misunderstandings with regard to fourth-century monasticism in general. It has been popularly communicated (1) that monasticism originated in the deserts of Egypt, and (2) that private isolation was the mode of living characteristic of early monasticism (or was at least a primary and ideal

mode of living). Careful studies of the archaeology of, and the literature both of and surrounding, early monasticism have revealed the diversity of geography and lifestyle of the monks and nuns of the third- and fourth-centuries. Thus, William Harmless, after discussing monastic origins in Syria, Palestine, Cappadocia, and elsewhere asks, "Did monasticism come from Egypt? The answer should now be clear: no, Egypt was not *the* birthplace, but *a* birthplace. . . . Scholars now believe that varied ascetical undercurrents were at work in various locales in the third century. Once Christianity was legalized in the early fourth century, various independent monasticisms surfaced simultaneously."¹

B. The Isolation(?) of Early Christian Monasticism

Similarly, the identification of early monasticism with relocation into private isolation in the desert--common to interpretations of monasticism from the Middle Ages on--has been corrected by contemporary research. A careful reading of Athanasius' *Life of Antony* itself should provide a few clues on this matter. Antony (AD 251-356), the "father" and model of anchoritic monasticism, did a fair amount of withdrawing *and returning*. He starts his monastic life near a village (ch. 3), and moves to the tombs (ch. 8). After becoming famous he retreats further to a deserted fortress (ch. 11). After twenty years of solitude, people tear down his door and he serves them and teaches them (chs. 14-44). He makes another withdrawal (ch. 45), but then travels to Alexandria to serve the martyrs (ch. 46). He retreats again into solitude (ch. 47) and further into the inner mountain (ch. 49), but returns to oversee the monks for a time (ch. 54). He leaves his solitude to provide help in the Arian controversy (ch. 69) and then retreats again to the inner mountain (ch. 82). He makes customary visits to other monks (ch. 89; we know from other literature that these periodic visits often included a regular ministry of spiritual direction to those who came for his guidance). He conducts a final visit (ch. 89) and then retreats back

¹ William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 434-35. See also the presentations of monasticism in Marilyn Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism: From the Desert Fathers to the Early Middle Ages* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2000); James E. Goehring, *Ascetics, Society, and the Desert: Studies in Early Egyptian Monasticism* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999); and Laura Swan, *The Forgotten Desert Mothers: Sayings, Lives, and Stories of Early Christian Women* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001).

to inner mountain to die with a few friends.² This is not the image of perpetual isolation we sometimes hear with regard to the life of a desert monk.

The monasteries founded by Pachomius (c.292-348) were established neither in the desert nor as environments of personal isolation. Indeed they originated as communities and required Pachomius to withdraw *from* the near desert of his monastic training to the villages of the Nile river valley. Thus James Goehring concludes in an article about Pachomian origins,

While isolated monasteries flourished in Egypt as a result of the discovery of the desert, Egyptian monasticism was neither in its origins a product of that discovery nor in its subsequent expansion a result of an ensuing flight from the inhabited world to the newly found isolation of the desert.³

Students of monastic origins are now well aware of the Sons and Daughters of the Covenant in third-century Syria, believers who remained within their towns and congregations in a special form of consecrated life. Marcella founded, in the fourth-century, a compound of monastic communities on the Aventine hill, a wealthy neighborhood of Rome. Some third- and fourth-century Christians chose to live consecrated lives within the confines of their own homes wherever they lived. These examples demonstrate that withdrawal into desert isolation was not necessarily normative of fourth-century monasticism.

C. The Practice of Withdrawal in Fourth-century Monasticism

We are now in place to describe how the early nuns and monks did practice and understand withdrawal. It is true that some relocated their dwellings into remote areas. Furthermore many of those who did so saw their physical withdrawal into relative isolation as central to their pursuit of God.

² See Athanasius, *The Life of Antony* and *The Letter to Marcellinus* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 30-99.

³ James E. Goehring, "Withdrawing from the Desert," in *Ascetics*, 89-90. William Harmless writes of the Pachomian institutions, "Usually Pachomius is spoken of in the same breath with Antony and numbered among the desert fathers. This ignores the obvious: Pachomius and his disciples did not live in the desert; they lived near the Nile. They did not make the desert a city; they turned deserted villages into thriving communities." See Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 141.

Antony is recorded as saying that "just as fish die if they stay too long out of water, so the monks who loiter outside their cells or pass their time with the men of the world lose the intensity of their inner peace. So, like a fish going towards the sea, we must hurry to reach our cell, for fear that if we delay outside we will lose our interior watchfulness."⁴ Thus, stories abound of monks who spent many years in relative isolation, as did that follower of Abba Paphnutius, who, at Paphnutius' suggestion, "went up into the mountain and having shut himself up in the cave where his two predecessors had died, he persevered with prayer to God."⁵

Yet when we consider the intentional communities of monks, some of whom lived near or even within villages and cities, we discover a different kind of withdrawal, a withdrawal that was "more social than geographical."⁶ Fourth-century withdrawal was understood and experienced with a certain degree of ambiguity. The Greek term "monachos," from which we get our word "monk," itself communicates some of this ambiguity. Does it mean "alone"? Does it mean "single" (as opposed to married)? Does it refer to those who renounce the world for a single minded focus on God? All of these meanings are present in fourth-century uses of the word. What the evidence indicates is that abstinence from sexual relations, dispossession of personal property, disassociation from ordinary secular occupations, and the adoption of a lifestyle of austerity and prayer were common (though not universal) features of the life of an early "monachos". All of these elements embody a withdrawal *from* "secular" life and *to* a distinctive life of Gospel imitation. At times this Gospel-life was practiced in an environment of physical isolation from others. At other times, it was pursued in close proximity to other people and yet still perceived as a real "withdrawal" from the world and worldly life. When we look at the breadth of early monasticism in this way we find that while only some monks and nuns withdrew to solitude (geographically), all withdrew (from the world). All saw themselves as monks

4 Benedicta Ward, translator, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1975), "Anthony the Great" #10, p. 3.

5 Norman Russell, translator, *The Lives of the Desert Fathers: The Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1980), 97.

6 Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 283.

(and nuns). It is quite possible that as people began to write about the early nuns and monks, the images of the desert and geographic withdrawal became literary symbols of an ideal which captured the imagination of many. While technically misrepresenting the actual conditions of monastic origins, the image of desert withdrawal communicated an essential characteristic of the consecrated life and inspired many Christians in their own withdrawals of various kinds.⁷

D. Historical Influences and Personal Motives for Withdrawal in Fourth-century Monasticism

This image of desert withdrawal has also captured the imagination of historians (usually historians unfamiliar with the careful study of early monasticism) who endeavor to explain the "causes" of monasticism in late antiquity or who offer accounts of the "motives" for monastic withdrawal. This brings us to a review of the factors or motives that have been named as causes of early monastic withdrawal. First, I will briefly discuss a few influences commonly found in historical surveys. I see these varied social and economic influences as factors which, as Douglas Burton-Christie articulated, "accelerated the process of withdrawal and can be seen as contributing to the atmosphere which stimulated the anchoritic movement."⁸ But while I recognize that social factors had their influence, I find the chief motives and influences in the rise of early monasticism--particularly when one examines the texts themselves--to be spiritual. And so in the second part of this section I will turn to the documents and figures of early monasticism to explore their own portraits of the factors and motives that gave rise to a movement of withdrawal, however that withdrawal was practiced.

1. Flight from Taxation and Conscription -

The term *anachoresis* (withdrawal), from which we get our term "anchorite" to refer to solitary monks and nuns, was a term used for those who fled the harsh taxation of the Roman officials. The

⁷ On the literary function of desert withdrawal in the history of monastic literature, see James E. Goehring, "The Encroaching Desert: Literary Production and Ascetic Space in Early Christian Egypt" in *Ascetics*, 73-88.

⁸ Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 41.

need for taxes to support the Roman army led to a restructuring of the citizenship of the empire: after 212 all residents of the empire were considered citizens (and taxpayers), and Roman officials became ever more efficient at collecting taxes. Peter Brown summarizes this situation in his account of Roman society in the fourth century:

The land-tax had trebled within living memory by 350. It reached more than one-third of a farmer's gross produce. It was inflexible and thoroughly ill-distributed. . . . Tax assessments were conscientious; but in a huge society they could never be either complete or frequent enough. Hence, the only way to alleviate one's burden was to evade it.⁹

Some did evade the burden of taxation--or the burden of conscription into military service or service in obligatory public works projects--by flight. Those who fled were registered by their families as missing persons ("those who fled", literally - *anakechorekotes*). Scholars are uncertain of the destinations of the ones who fled. It is just as likely that they fled to nearby villages as that they fled to the desert. It is true that after becoming emperor, Constantine offered a tax exemption for Christian clergy, the same exemption Rome had always offered to pagan priests. Yet this benefit was for priests and not the Christian populace in general. At the same time Constantine instituted a much despised tax on business and trades. Consequently, it is likely that the potential for tax exemption influenced the increase of Christian clergy in the empire generally, but is not an adequate reason to explain the rise of lay monastic movements particularly, other than in a few unique cases.¹⁰

2. Perpetuation of Earlier Ascetical Institutions

Some have argued that Christian monasticism should be understood primarily as a development

⁹ Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity: AD 150-750* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1971), 36. William Harmless, however, describes the taxation of Roman Egypt in the fourth century as "modest," estimating assessments at around 10 percent of agricultural yield (see Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 10).

¹⁰ See Peter J. Leithart, *Defending Constantine: The Twilight of an Empire and the Dawn of Christianity* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 126, 132, 201, 305; Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 10; Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert*, 41; and Dunn, *Emergence*, 2. For a delightful story of a kind brigand-turned-flautist who pays the tax debt of a poor woman see Russell, *Lives of the Desert Fathers*, 95.

of earlier forms of religious life; a development of the practices of the Essenes, Therapeutae, Manichees, Gnostics or some other group. Certainly the ideals of the disciplined life or the ordered community were not a unique preserve of Christianity. Nearly all histories of Christian monasticism survey some of these progenitors of Christian monasticism.¹¹ It is striking, however, that few references to sources and influences outside Christianity are to be found in the literature of fourth-century monasticism. It is more likely that ideas and practices spread from one Christian group to another, particularly within the development of Christianity itself. Widows, virgins, and village hermits passed their ways and their wisdom on to a few who listened (like Antony and Pachomius¹²), who then experimented with monastic practice on their own, and in this manner tradition was transmitted and transformed.

3. Fleeing Persecution and the Influence of Martyrdom

Other scholars suggest that the rise of monasticism was due to an influx of people seeking to flee the horrors of persecution. Sozomen, an early Church historian, writes of some who fled persecution into the deserts of Egypt, who then tasted "the sweetness of the solitude" among early monastic communities or alone, and chose to stay either until the Peace of the Church or beyond.¹³ While this impulse might explain some who withdrew to the desert, the predominant spirit communicated in the literature of monastic people is not the desire to flee *from* persecution, but rather a desire to imitate the courageous and whole-hearted commitment *of* the martyrs. Thus, for example, during conflicts between factions of Christians, Abba Gelasius was taken and ordered to recant his position at the cost of death. As the account reads,

11 See, for example, Doley Moss, *Of Cell and Cloister: Catholic Religious Orders through the Ages* (Milwaukee, WI: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1957), 3-9; Juan María Laboa, editor, *The Historical Atlas of Eastern and Western Monasticism* English Language edition (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2003), 10-21.

12 For Antony's training, see Athanasius, *Life of Antony* #3, p. 32. For Pachomius see "The Boharic Life of Pachomius" in Armand Veilleux, translator, *Pachomian Koinonia Volume One: The Life of Saint Pachomius and His Disciples* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1980), #10-11, pp. 29-34.

13 See Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert*, 42-43; Derwas Chitty, *The Desert a City: An Introduction to the Study of Egyptian and Palestinian Monasticism under the Christian Empire* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999), 6-7.

The schismatics took him and put faggots round him, threatening to burn him. But seeing that even that did not make him give in nor frighten him and fearing a popular rising . . . they sent our martyr, who had offered himself as a holocaust to Christ, safe and sound away.¹⁴

It was this dedication to the self-sacrifice of the Christian life that inspired many nuns and monks to persevere in heroic efforts of self-discipline. As the life of Pachomius describes the origins of monasticism, "Many martyrs offered themselves to various tortures unto death and received the crown, the last of them being the courageous Peter, patriarch of Alexandria. The faith increased greatly in the holy churches in every land, and monasteries and places for ascetics began to appear, for those who were the first monks had seen the endurance of the martyrs."¹⁵ The desire for whole-hearted self-sacrifice to Christ caused the name "white martyrdom" to be associated with those who, without shedding blood (red martyrdom) gave themselves up to the monastic life.

4. Distance from a Shallow, Post-Constantinian Christianity

Juan María Laboa suggests that "The edict granting religious freedom in 313, followed by a rapid and massive conversion of the empire to Christianity, led inevitably to a widespread falloff in the religious spirit and to a relaxation of the ascetical and religious demands made on Christians. . . . In this perspective, we can better interpret and understand the lives of the Desert Fathers as the instinctive reaction of a deep Christian sense against a treacherous reconciliation with the world, which the conversion of the empire seemed to justify."¹⁶ While this explanation makes logical sense, and while one can easily document, for example, the sudden increase of the wealth of the Christian churches (due in part to Constantine's role in building Christian basilicas, offering tax exemption for Christian priests, and passing on to Christian priests and bishops some of the responsibilities and authority earlier given to secular officials), I am struck again by the lack of complaint about shallow Christian practice found

14 Ward, *Sayings*, "Gelasius" #4, p. 49.

15 Veilleux, "The Boharic Life" #1, pp. 23-24.

16 Laboa, *Historical Atlas*, 36.

in the primary sources. Certainly the monastics renunciation of careers, and their commitments to celibacy, voluntary poverty, and the use of various ascetical practices, mark the monastic life as a life set apart from a shallow Christianity. Yet these elements were already in place long before the Peace of the Church. If anything, I suspect it is fair to say that Constantine's generosity toward Christianity brought advantages and comfort to the Church that sharpened the image of whole-hearted, sacrificial devotion to Christ.

In Conclusion:

I have tried to show that while social and economic forces likely shaped the emergence and development of fourth-century monasticism, an "explanation" of the rise of monasticism must also consider the religious motives of the nuns and monks themselves. Church historian Margaret Miles writes,

Historians have characterized the men and women who “stampeded” to the Egyptian desert in the fourth and fifth centuries as fleeing from social pressures, economic difficulties, a church diluted by minimally Christianized pagans or disappointing personal situations. All of these motivations may have played a part in the tremendous attraction they felt for the solitary life. Yet none can completely account for the fascination the desert held for rich and poor, women and men alike.¹⁷

Likewise, Douglas Burton-Christie states:

An appreciation of the strong social forces at work behind the practice of *anachoresis* helps one to see the limitations of a purely spiritual interpretation of desert monasticism. Whatever the spiritual motives of the first anchorites may have been, they should not be distinguished too sharply from the social and economic conditions just described [taxes, village/state relations,

¹⁷ Margaret Miles, *Fullness of Life: Historical Foundations for a New Asceticism* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2000), 136.

persecution . . .]. At the same time, while these social and economic tensions provide a context in which the meaning of *anachoresis* can be understood more clearly, the withdrawal into the desert cannot be reduced to these factors. There were other, genuinely religious, motives behind the withdrawal into the desert by the first anchorites which should not be discounted.¹⁸

It is to those genuinely religious motives I turn now.

5. Obedience to Scripture or the Call of God

Antony was about twenty years old when his parents died, and the transition their death engendered was difficult. He had lived in relative affluence all his life, and now he was alone, responsible for the care of his young sister. One Sunday he went to church as usual, on his way thinking about the early followers of Jesus, how many of them had sold everything they owned and placed the proceeds at the apostles' feet to distribute to those who had need. That morning the Gospel reading was from Luke 18. "If you wish to be perfect," Antony heard, "go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven." It was as if by God's design that he had been thinking about these early followers of Jesus just prior to this passage was read. It was as if God were reading the passage just for him. And he couldn't ignore it. He immediately went out and sold nearly all of his possessions, keeping a few things for his sister, and donating the rest to the poor. But that was not enough. Again in church the Gospel was read, saying "do not be anxious for tomorrow." Antony could not remain as a listener any longer, but going out he gave his remaining possessions to the needy. He placed his sister in the care of a convent of women and dedicated himself to training in the spiritual life, to learning to become a follower of Jesus. He gleaned from a number of more mature believers, but eventually made his way into the wilderness to pursue God alone.¹⁹ Why did this "father" of Western monasticism withdraw to the desert? Because he heard a call from God. He wanted to obey the

¹⁸ Burton-Christie, *Word in the Desert*, 42.

¹⁹ See Athanasius, *Life of Antony*, #2-3, pp. 31-32.

Scripture. He wanted to respond to the invitation of Jesus that the rich young ruler failed to obey. This desire to respond wholeheartedly to the expensive invitations of Jesus is characteristic of the monastic impulse.

Consider also Amoun, founder of the monastic settlement in Nitria (c. 290-c. 347). As an orphan he was pressed into marriage by his uncle, but after the wedding he privately instructed his new wife concerning the virtues of virginity. One biographical account of his life states that Amoun, drawing from his bosom a little book, he read to the girl, who could not read at all, in the words of the apostle and the Savior, and to most of what he read he added all that was in his mind and explained the principles of virginity and chastity.²⁰

She was convinced by Amoun's persuasive lecture and they lived in virginity together for a number of years. In time, however, they decided to separate for the sake of God's service and Amoun left, ultimately to found the monastic settlement at Nitria, while his wife reformed her home into a house-monastery. Here we have examples of the development of two separate forms of monastic life (the settlement of the hermitages of Nitria and the house-monastery of his wife), both of which were in response to the expensive invitations of Christ and the apostle (probably 1 Corinthians 7).

A third example must suffice, and here we turn to Augustine (354-430), one of the greatest theologians of the Patristic period and the author of the first Western monastic Rule. Augustine's *Ordo Monasterii* begins, "Before all else, dearest brothers, let God be loved and then your neighbor, because these are the chief commandments which have been given us. We now set down how we ought to pray . . ." Similarly his *Praeceptum* starts by proclaiming, "You that are settled in the monastery, these are the things that we advise you to observe. In the first place--and this is the very reason for your being gathered in one-- you should live in the *house in unity of spirit* (Ps 67:7[68:6]) and you should have *one soul and one heart* (Acts 4:32) centered on God."²¹

20 Palladius, *The Lausaic History of Palladius* (Willits, California: Eastern Orthodox Books, n.d.), 34.

21 Augustine of Hippo, "Ordo Monasterii" 1-2a, and "Praeceptum" I.1 and I.2 of *The Monastic Rules* translated by Sister Agatha Mary and Gerald Bonner (Hyde Park, New York: New City Press, 2004), 106, 110. Debates rage regarding the precise authorship of the various documents associated with the Augustinian Rules. Nonetheless, the use of Scripture at

My point in these examples is to illustrate the fact that one of the motives leading to the formation of Christian monasticism--and perhaps the most significant motive--is the simple response to Scripture and the call of God. As Douglas Burton-Christie writes, "The monastic literature also testifies in a number of places that the movement into the desert was above all a response to a call from God mediated through Scripture."²² The founders of Christian monasticism were compelled to obey what they had read and heard, no matter the cost. Withdrawal was the form of that response.

6. Sincere Pursuit of God

Monastic withdrawal in the fourth century was not only a *response* to God. It was also a means of *pursuing* relationship with God. It was not just a matter of withdrawing *from* distractions or responsibilities, but rather a matter of forming a way of life that best facilitated a full openness to seek and respond *to* God. Lucian Regnault, in his superb survey of fourth-century Egyptian monasticism, summarizes the "evangelical renunciation" of the early monks by saying that "They left the world in order to carry out, in a better way, the renunciation they've embraced." Discussing the meanings of the word "monk," he writes that, "after giving the word 'alone' the meaning of 'single', it [the word "monk"] also expressed the desire to unify one's heart and life by getting rid of everything that distracts and divides, that is to say, all earthly goods and human concerns. It is, finally, this desire to remove oneself completely from the world's grasp so as to fully belong to God that led the monk to the solitude of the faraway desert."²³ Notice: *getting rid of* in order to fully belong *to God*. Athanasius describes Antony as summarizing the commitment to the monastic life--particularly in light of the potential motive of acquiring charismatic gifts--in the following words: "And not for the purpose of gaining foreknowledge are we to train ourselves and labor--but rather in order that we may please God in the way we lead our

the onset of both these documents illustrates my point. Obedience to Scripture was central to the monastic impulse at its inception.

²² Burton-Christie, *Word in the Desert*, 43; see also his conclusion on 299-300.

²³ Lucian Regnault, *The Day-to-Day Life of the Desert Fathers in Fourth-Century Egypt*, translated by Étienne Poirier, Jr. (Petersham, Massachusetts: St. Bede's Publications, 1999), 7-8.

lives."²⁴

Similarly, Abba John of Lycopolis (c. 305- c. 394) withdrew in order to focus his "single eye" on devotion to God. John's views are summarized in a classic discourse in the *Lives of the Desert Fathers*. Benedicta Ward, in her introduction to the *Lives*, writes that

"John of Lycopolis uses these stories and the rest of the discourse to direct his visitors away from unreality towards the true values that come with the attention of the heart to God. He tells them to 'cultivate stillness and train yourselves for contemplation'; the monk who does this, he says, 'stands unimpeded in the presence of God, without any anxiety holding him back; for such a man spends his life with God'."²⁵

The step of withdrawal into monastic life (whether geographic or social) is a matter of seeking and responding to Christ and the Scriptures. As a final illustration of this point and as a transition into our next point--and moving from the fourth century to the twelfth--I quote from the Prologue of the 1221 Rule of Francis of Assisi:

Here then is the rule and the [way of] life of these brothers: to live in obedience, in chastity, and without property; and to follow the doctrine and the footsteps of our Lord Jesus Christ who said: *If you wish to be perfect, go and sell all that you have and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, and then come follow me* (Matt 19:21).²⁶

7. Imitation of Christ or the Gospel Message

Thus we arrive at the monastics' desire for the imitation of Christ. It should be clear by now that it is virtually impossible truly to separate these motives from each other. They all blend together into a single drive toward whole-hearted devotion to God. We have already seen the desire of Amoun and

²⁴ Athanasius, *Life of Antony*, #34, p. 57.

²⁵ Benedicta Ward, "Introduction: The Ideals and Insights of Monasticism" in Norman Russell, translator, *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*, 32.

²⁶ Francis of Assisi, "The Rule of 1221" chapter 1.1-3 in Marion Habig, editor, *St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and early Biographies: English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis* (Chicago, Illinois: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983), 31.

Francis to imitate the chastity and poverty of the Lord. Yet this desire for imitation was, in fourth-century monastic origins, not merely a drive toward a personal imitation of Jesus' life or virtues. This desire also manifests itself in an interest in imitating the virtue and character of the early Church. Thus William Harmless writes of Pachomius' adoption of *koinonia*, "They saw themselves not simply as pioneers of monasticism, but as pioneers in the art of Christian living, called to resurrect the New Testament's most radical vision of human community."²⁷

Again, we have already seen Augustine's use of Acts 4 in the prologues of his Rules. The portraits of the model Christian community recorded in Acts 2 and 4 were repeated again and again in early Christian monastic literature.²⁸ As the article on "religious life" in the Catholic Encyclopedia states, "the main cause which begot monachism was simply the desire to fulfill Christ's law literally, to imitate Him in all simplicity, following in His footsteps whose "kingdom is not of this world"."²⁹ Whether the imitation of Christ and the Gospel was understood as a literal dispossession of goods or as a commitment to celibacy or as the establishment of community ownership of property--or whether these were comprehended figuratively--the drive to live one's life out individually or corporately in harmony with the life lived by Jesus and the early church was a driving force behind the early development of Christian monasticism.

8. The Pursuit of Perfection, the Remaking of the Self

Another motive for monastic withdrawal was the pursuit of perfection, the drive toward as high a degree of Christian maturity as was capable here on earth. The connection between this motive and the previous ones can be seen by examining the Prologue to the Long Rule of Basil the Great (330-379), a Rule which would become the model Rule of Eastern Christianity:

²⁷ Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 116.

²⁸ See, for example, throughout Basil's "Long Rules" in *St. Basil: Ascetical Works*, The Fathers of the Church, vol. 9 translated by Sister M. Monica Wagner (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1962).

²⁹ See "Religious Life" at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12748b.htm>, accessed 6/13/07.

Since by God's grace, we have gathered together in the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ-- we who have set before ourselves one and the same goal, the devout life--and since you have plainly manifested your eagerness to hear . . . I implore you, then, by the charity of our Lord Jesus Christ who gave himself for our sins, let us at length apply ourselves to the affairs of our souls and grieve for the vanity of our past life. . . . How long shall we defer our obedience to Christ, who has called us to His heavenly Kingdom? Shall we not arouse ourselves unto sobriety? Why will we not recall ourselves from our accustomed way of life to the strict observance of the Gospel? . . . Since, then, they cannot be saved who do not their works according to the command of God and since no precept may be safely overlooked (for it is great presumption to set ourselves up as critics of the Lawgiver by approving some of His laws and rejecting others), let us who are striving to live the devout life, who value the life of retirement and freedom from worldly distractions as an aid to the observance of evangelical doctrine, let us make it our common concern and resolve not to allow any precept whatsoever to elude our vigilance."³⁰

The doctrine of "perfection" is complicated and beyond our exploration here. Nonetheless, it is fair to say that the term *telos* (mature, complete, perfect), common in Scripture (see Mark 10:17-31, Matthew 5:48 9, and Leviticus 19:2), was pursued intentionally by the nuns and monks of the fourth-century through practices such as solitude, spiritual guidance, watchfulness, fasting and other disciplines. At times the pursuit of the greatest maturity possible was simply reduced to the word "salvation." Indeed our being-made-whole in Christ, as suggested by the Biblical words *sodzo* and *shalom* and as understood by fourth century monastics, was--and I would suggest, *is*-- often realized as an ongoing and ever more comprehensive conformity to Christ and the Gospel.

30 *St. Basil: Ascetical Works*, 223-231.

The pursuit of perfection also involved a re-configuration of the self. I am convinced that ultimately monastic withdrawal (or perhaps monastic "renunciation," whether geographic or social) was experienced in terms of one's personal or corporate *identity*, involving a Spirit-led reorientation of our basic values and interests, a new sense of what is important and meaningful in life, a new core of affective and volitional drives, and a distinctive sense of one's relationship to society and the mores of one's society.³¹ This reconstruction of the self lies, in my opinion, at the root of the distinction which develops in the third and fourth centuries between "secular" and "monastic" or "religious" life. Perhaps one way of glimpsing the language for this is to see how Palladius describes the monastic life in his *Lausaic History*:

Together with the holy fathers who took upon themselves the yoke of the solitary life . . . we commemorate also the marvelous women who led their lives in the Divine Spirit and who waxed exceedingly old, and who with a brave mind brought to an end the strife of the labors of spiritual excellence, according to the Divine manifestation and love, *for they wished to lay hold upon their souls*, and to bind upon their heads the crown of impassibility and holiness.³²

It is important to remember that this drive toward perfection is a drive toward the perfection realistically available to the believer at any given point in time. A story about Abba Macarius the Great illustrates this. Young Macarius travels to an island and discovers two naked monks there. He asks them how they endure the cold and heat and ultimately inquires of them, "How can I become a monk?" The monastics reply that it is necessary to give up all that is in the world. Macarius responds by confessing his weakness. What they ask is simply too much. They reply, "If you cannot become like us, sit in your cell and weep for your sins."³³ This was Macarius' introduction to the monastic life and thereafter we read in his "sayings" the phrase, "sit in your cell and weep for your sins" again and again.

31 For a survey of some interesting thoughts about this issue, with particular relationship to things monastic, see the essays in Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis, editors, *Asceticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

32 cited in Miles, *Fullness of Life*, 136. Italics in Miles.

33 Ward, *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, "Macarius the Great" #2, p. 126.

As monks we strive for perfection, for the degree of perfection which confronts us.

9. Preparation for the Eschatological

Another kind of language used in the fourth century to describe the ideal of monastic practice was to see it as an "angelic life."³⁴ There was an impulse in early monasticism *backward* to "the likeness of the glory of Adam,"³⁵ *present* to the life of the angels who are not disturbed by the passions and inclinations of the flesh, and *forward* to the life of eternity. Evangelical spiritual writer Dallas Willard speaks of this in terms of "training for reigning." An example of this kind of thinking was the way in which Pachomius encouraged his followers to meditate on their bodies in light of eternity as they prepare for sleep each night:

"Let the soul, then, brothers, teach wisdom to this thick body every day when we come to our bed at evening, and say to each member of the body, . . . To the hands, let it say, "The hour comes when you will be loosed and motionless, bound to each other and having no motion whatever; then before you fall into that hour, do not cease stretching yourselves out to the Lord". And to the whole body let the soul say, "O body, before we are separated and removed away from each other, . . . stand boldly, worship the Lord. Bear me as I eagerly confess God . . . For there will be a time when that most heavy sleep is going to overtake you. If you listen to me, we shall together enjoy the blessed inheritance."³⁶

Another way this theme was expressed was in the way they spoke about the economy of life. Again and again they spoke of the "good things in heaven" they were pursuing and the needless "things on earth" they were leaving behind. Thus Pachomius exhorts his followers, "as long as you have breath

34 See, for example in Russell, *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*, "Prologue" #5, p. 49.

35 Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (NY: Columbia UP, 1988), 213-224.

36 Armand Veilleux, translator, "Paralipomena" in *Pachomian Koinonia Volume. II: Pachomian Chronicles and Rules* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1981), #20, pp. 43-44. See also Brown, *The Body and Society*, 223 on early approaches to the spiritualization of the body.

in your bodies," to "strive for your salvation" and to "practice virtue eagerly." He says, "for I tell you that if you knew what good things are in heaven, what promise is laid up for the saints . . . then you would endure every pain in order to be made perfect in the virtue which is according to Christ."³⁷

Similarly Amma Syncletica, an early desert nun, said,

Whatever we do or gain in this world, let us consider it insignificant in comparison to the eternal wealth that is to come. We are on this earth as if in a second maternal womb. . . . Just as, then, when we were in that inner chamber, we did without many of the things of this world, so also in the present world we are impoverished in comparison with the kingdom of heaven. We have sampled the nourishment of here; let us reach for the Divine! We have enjoyed the light in this world; let us long for the sun of righteousness! Let us regard the heavenly Jerusalem as our homeland.³⁸

The theme of the "riches to shun" and "riches to seek" runs strong in this literature.³⁹ This theme, along with those described above and others, serve to illustrate that the monks and nuns of the fourth century saw their withdrawal in terms of a shift of focus *toward* the heavenly kingdom.

10. Functional Withdrawal

I mention "functional withdrawal" not so much to identify another particular motive, but to suggest another way of looking at the whole movement of desert withdrawal. Donald Gelpi writes about what he calls "functional asceticism," where our approach to spiritual disciplines is not governed so much by some ideal or call, but rather by what works best to enable us to live or serve God well. Thus, "with increasing frequency, he [the talented young aspirant to monastic life] is asking himself,

37 Veilleux, "Paralipomena," #19, pp. 41-42.

38 Cited in Swan, *Desert Mothers*, 20. see also p. 51 and Elizabeth A. Castelli, translator, "Pseudo-Athanasius: The Life and Activity of the Holy and Blessed Teacher Syncletica" in Vincent Wimbush, editor, *Ascetic Behavior in Graeco-roman Antiquity: A Sourcebook* (Minneapolis: fortress Press, 1990), 302.

39 For a broader review of this and other themes of the AnteNicene writings with regard to economics see Evan B. Howard, "A Descriptive Analysis of the Motivational Exhortations of the Ante-Nicene Fathers concerning the Value and Use of Property and Wealth" Unpublished paper, 1980.

not whether he has the generosity to live the religious life, but whether he as a completely generous person will have a better opportunity to use his talents for Christ and his Church as a layman than as a religious."⁴⁰ When one reads the fourth-century literature one notices again and again that for these early monks and nuns, withdrawal appears as the clearest, most obvious way to give themselves completely to God in prayer, discipline, community, or service, although it is not always consciously perceived in terms of functionality. Pachomius, for example, was called by God through a vision to found a monastery. In this vision God tells him to found it, for "many will come to you and become monks with you, and they will profit their souls."⁴¹ Pachomius' flight from the desert to found a monastery was--as explained by the divine vision--a functional means for the realization of God's will.

Even those who lived outside the monasteries viewed monastic communities as important features of their society. Ancient peoples placed significance on the presence of holy persons, and the Christian monastics were holy people. To the eyes of many locals, the existence of these communities of "withdrawers," was vital to the safety and prosperity of their culture. Thus the author of the *Historia Monachorum* writes that "There is no town or village in Egypt and the Thebaid which is not surrounded by hermitages as if by walls. And the people depend on the prayers of these monks as if on God himself."⁴² Later Celtic monks, Dominicans, Jesuits, and Methodist circuit riders would consciously perceive their own withdrawals (geographic or social) in terms of their usefulness toward the aim of living or serving God more fully. I suspect that we can also understand the monastic impulse in some sense as an effort to carve out of a way of life that best enables the fullest service of God.

In Conclusion

My point is this: namely that the primary motives of fourth-century withdrawal were not oriented around a "flight" from cultural elements, but more significantly emphasized a conscious

40 Donald Gelpi, *Functional Asceticism: A Guideline for American Religious* (NY: Sheed and Ward, 1966), 30.

41 Veilleux, "Boharic Life," 39.

42 Russell, *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*, "Prologue" #10, p. 50.

choice to adopt a life that enabled a whole-hearted, undistracted pursuit of God and whole-gospel living. Laura Swan writes of the desert mothers, "Self denial was cultivated in order to deepen one's relationship to God, to deepen in compassion, and to build bridges to others."⁴³ Similarly, Lucian Regnault concludes, "Historians have put forth all kinds of reasons to explain this withdrawal to the desert: economic, political, sociological . . . and while it is possible that, in the long run, these reasons did influence the vocations of certain men, in the case of the three great pioneers we're talking about [Antony, Amoun, Macarius], nothing leads us to suppose that such motives prompted them to completely and definitively leave the world."⁴⁴ What, for them, was monastic withdrawal *about*? The meaning of their withdrawal, at least for those who either participated in the withdrawal or who documented this withdrawal through their writings,⁴⁵ was not just about reactions to cultural trends, though these may have been present to one extent or another. When we look at the texts themselves we find that the move toward withdrawal spring from the deepest spiritual longings of human life and work. The chief motive driving what some call the monastic or religious impulse toward withdrawal and the monastic life was simply the heartfelt desire to consecrate oneself wholly to God.

Withdrawal Today

So what does all this review of fourth-century monasticism have to do with our approach to withdrawal, retreat, and solitude today? I would like to suggest that we would be well-served to approach our own Christian withdrawals today--and also that some trends in contemporary Christian "withdrawal" can be helpfully interpreted--in terms of three basic categories: *away from it all, away,*

43 Swan, *Desert Mothers*, 41.

44 Regnault, *Day-to-Day Life*, 7.

45 It is possible to argue that little early monastic literature was actually written *by* those who were there and that, consequently, we might assume that the authors of these--at times highly hagiographic--documents merely spiritualized the motives of the participants, which after all, were more likely ordinary secular reactions to cultural forces. To argue this, however, would require a complete reworking of both the history and the character of the texts, for these motives and impulses are portrayed as absolutely central to the texts. It is better, in my opinion simply to expect that there may be some exaggeration of stories here or there, but that the repetition of the themes presented above in all the documents and that the location of these themes in critical locations in the texts attests to their historicity and importance to monastic origins.

and away to it all.

1. Away From it All

First, I want to go on record as affirming the value of "getting away from it all." Jesus made a practice of regularly seeking solitude with God, away from the crowds. Fourth-century monks and nuns likewise saw the value of extricating themselves from the distractions and responsibilities of ordinary life for a given season, and some of those seasons were quite lengthy. Francis of Assisi, well-known for his life of active preaching and compassionate service, spent many days and even months in private "Lents," hidden away in the caves of Italy. We need "retreats." I am glad for the rise of interest in Christian retreats since the 1980s. My hope is that an ever greater number of individuals and communities would make a conscious and deliberate commitment to regularly "getting away from" their ordinary pattern of living in order to make some open space for creative presence with God.

And yet I am aware that there is a danger here. By looking at time with God as simply "getting away from it all," as a time merely to "relax" and "rest" before entering the "real world" again, I think we miss something. Solitude is not just about refueling ourselves; it is also about God. It is about setting forth God's praise, hearing God's word, asking prayers to God on behalf of others. Solitude is about facing our demons and those of the world around us. It is about remaking our mind and heart (and about *God* remaking our mind and heart) and about continuing an intimate relationship with the one Trinitarian community that knows us the best. Solitude is not merely a flight *from* real life, it is the *realest* life of all.

2. Away

Another perspective toward withdrawal and solitude that has been helpful for me is to see it as simply "away." Not away *from*. Not away *to*. Just *away*, in a place of its own. No further description. And that is the point. There is something about withdrawal that is best understood as neither *from* nor

to, but just *is*.

I must confess that this aspect of withdrawal is not prominent in the writings of the fourth century. But I can smell this mere "away" when I read their writings. I can sense it waiting nearby when Abba Moses commands the eager inquirer to "sit in your cell and let your cell teach you."⁴⁶ I suspect it lies behind the preoccupation of the desert dwellers with the spirit of *acedia*, a restless, bored, discouraged inclination that is loathe to face head on the profound emptiness of oneself or of God. I catch a glimpse of it when I read Evagrius' description of prayer that withdraws even from thought.⁴⁷

It is not prominent in Scripture either.⁴⁸ But I find hints of "away" there as well: in the silences we exhibit before God (see Psalm 62; Revelation 8:1), in God's name as 'I Am', and in God's character as "holy" (which simply means "set apart," - away).

I come across this perspective when I read the writings of contemporary solitaries, people like Cistercian monk Thomas Merton (1915-1968). Merton asserts that "the most important ascetic practice" of monastic life "is solitude itself, and "sitting" alone in the silence of the cell." He says, "The patient subjection to loneliness, emptiness, exile from the world of other men, and direct confrontation with the baffling mystery of God sets the tone, so to speak, for all the other actions of the solitary."⁴⁹ The contemporary interest in centering prayer and the rise of "new solitaries" seem to me also to be scratching at this dimension of withdrawal.⁵⁰

There is a difference, I think, between "solitude" and "solitary confinement." Prisoners and monks know the meaning of the latter. At times withdrawal is neither away *from* nor away *to*. It is simply *away*.

46 Ward, *Sayings*, "Moses" #6, 139.

47 On *acedia* see <http://www.hermitary.com/solitude/acedia.html>. For samples of Evagrius's notion of prayer withdrawing from even thought see Evagrius of Ponticus, "Chapters on Prayer" #s 61, 66, 119, 120 in *The Praktikos and Chapters on Prayer*, translated by John Eudes, Bamberger (Kalamazoo, Michigan: CistercianPublications, 1981), 65, 66, 75.

48 So, be careful, Evan. Are you just trying to impose some trendy ideas upon your reading of Scripture and history?

49 Thomas Merton, "The Cell" in *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971/1965), 253.

50 For a sample treatment of centering prayer see Thomas Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart: The Contemplative dimension of the Gospel*, revised edition (New York: Continuum, 2006). For summaries of the lives of the new solitaries see Eve Baker, *Paths in Solitude* (Middlegreen, Slough, UK: St. Pauls, 1995); Paul A Fredette and Karen Karper Fredette, *Consider the Ravens: On Contemporary Hermit Life* (New York: iUniverse, inc., 2008).

3. Away to it all

But while I want to affirm the place of withdrawal as both "getting away from it all" and withdrawal as simply "away," my main focus in this essay is on withdrawal as "getting away *to* it all." I think it is vitally important for us to see withdrawal as a practice and a place of positive life. Solitude is not the place where we flee from life, but where we go to confront life at a profoundly deep level. Solitude is not the place merely to retreat from the harsh oppressive world around us, but also to face the roots of that oppression within us and in creative dialogue with the Maker and Redeemer of the world. To cite the motives discussed above, we withdraw from the distractions and responsibilities of the world to respond to the Spirit's and the Scripture's call, to seek God more fully, to imitate Christ more truly, to pursue the greatest degree of perfection available to us, and to set ourselves toward the eschatological realities of the Gospel. As I see it, the style, degree, frequency and character of Christian withdrawal, solitude, and retreat is best developed as we engage the positive religious motives outlined above in dialogue with the realities of our own lives.

Withdrawal and Service

One issue that many of us face as we take our first steps of withdrawal is the feeling that by withdrawing we are not giving ourselves to the service of God. What contribution am I making to the Church or the world through spending long periods of time alone?

To aid Christian in appropriating a healthy practice of withdrawal I would like briefly to review five different functions which withdrawal or solitude serves for the Christian individual and community. By paying attention to these functions we can better navigate our sincere concerns about withdrawal, discover our own motives for solitude and find solitude even more deeply as a place of "getting away to it all."

- Personal Transformation

Solitaries leave not to flee troubles, but to face them head on. There are comments in the desert writings about not really having the freedom to face one's demons until one enters the desert. For some--or in certain seasons of life--we feel that "I need to go there, I must go there." For others withdrawal is a matter of personal discipline that opens a door for God to enter and transform us. Gordon Mursell, summarizing this aspect of the theology of medieval monk Guigo I, writes, "Hence the importance of interior transformation above all else--not in order to ignore other people, but precisely in order to be well equipped to help them. People who have little or no knowledge about themselves are highly unlikely to be very much use to anyone else"⁵¹ Elsewhere, Mursell writes,

The solitary life, then, far from being simply an escape from the world, is in reality the place where God may be seen face to face, his truths revealed and pondered, and his love experienced. . . . Self-knowledge is thus both the precondition and the fruit of solitude: the precondition, because without it a person cannot perceive its true greatness; and the fruit, because by means of this self-indwelling men may 'fill themselves happily with the fruits of paradise', as St. Bruno says, and those who are masters of themselves may 'serve as a soldier under Christ in tranquility', as Guigo put it.⁵²

This personal transformation in withdrawal influences not merely the solitary, but others as well. Indeed, perhaps the very presence of this kind of withdrawal has a leavening effect on the world in a mysterious way. Orthodox Bishop Kallistos Ware writes,

Such, then, is the service which the solitary ascetic renders to society around him. He helps others not through active works of charity, not through writings and scholarly research, nor yet primarily through giving spiritual counsel, but simply through his continual prayer. His

51 A. Gordon Mursell, "Introduction" in Gordon Mursell, translator, *The Meditations of Guigo I, Prior of the Charterhouse* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1995), 34.

52 A. Gordon Mursell, *The Theology of the Carthusian Life in the Writings of St. Bruno and Guigo I*, *Analecta Cartusiana* 127, editor James Hogg, (Salzburg, Austria: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, 1988), 212, 213.

anachoresis is in itself a way of serving others, because the motive behind his withdrawal is to seek union with God; and this prayerful union supports and strengthens his fellow humans, even though he knows nothing about them; and they, on their part, are unaware of his very existence.”⁵³

- Temporary Withdrawal for the Sake of Later Return

Some solitaries are so only for a time. Antony returned from his twenty year withdrawal to embark on a hugely powerful and successful healing and deliverance ministry. Some withdraw and then return with a greater ministry than they ever could have had without the time of retreat. We do not presume to be able to know where our lives will go. For most of us, our “solitariness” is only partial. Yet it is wise to ask, “How does my time alone serve my time with others? What is the relationship between my times of “withdrawal” and my times of “return””? There are groups, like the Little Sisters of Jesus and the Community of the Beatitudes, that make a rhythm of withdrawal to God and return to society (or a turn to God in private adoration and then a turn to God in the face of the poor) a vital part of their regular schedule.⁵⁴ Solitude and service are just two different ways of being with Christ (and being with others).

- Intercession

Clearly one of the most important ministries of a solitary is intercessory prayer. Not only do we carry others with us in private reflection, but much more do we carry others--just as the friends carried the paralytic to Jesus--in intercessory prayer. Perhaps reflection and intercessory prayer go hand in hand, at least for me. Withdrawal gives us the opportunity to bring the cares and needs of the world,

⁵³ Kallistos Ware, “The Way of Ascetics: Negative or Affirmative,” In *Asceticism*, ed. by Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (NY: Oxford, 1995), 6-7.

⁵⁴ For the Little Sisters of Jesus see <http://www.rc.net/org/littlesisters/>. For the Community of the Beatitudes see <http://www.beatitudes.us/>.

and of those we love, in a special way into God's presence. Andre Louf speaks of intercessory prayer as a dialogue of love on behalf of others. He writes, "In this dialogue of love, the most effective word is the one pronounced before God by the father[mother] about the son[daughter] he has borne to life in prayer. Intercession is the abba's task *par excellence*."⁵⁵ I see the rise of the 24/7 prayer movement and communities of "boiler rooms" as positive signs of a new interest in this aspect of withdrawal among evangelical Christians.⁵⁶

- Making Space for Research and Development

Hermits have greater freedom of time and money than others. Because of this they can focus in certain ways, model certain things, and explore aspects of the Christian life (disciplines, experiences, ways of thinking, and so on) that others cannot. For this reason, the role of withdrawal for the body of Christ can be understood much as the open freedom of pure "research and development" is understood in the sciences. Withdrawal is a getting away *to* an opportunity for complete freedom in partnership with the Living God. It is an in-between space, what some call a "liminal place," to explore personal and social identity. What might it look like if we entered into following Christ like *this*? I think of it as "playing with " the Christian life. Withdrawal is a place to experiment with following Jesus, individually (Antony) or corporately (Pachomius). Jonathan Wilson, a philosophy professor in California, was one of the first to promote the term "new monasticism" in a book exploring the potentials for a lived Christian ethics. He writes,

If my critique of the life of the church in Western culture has validity, then the only way for the church to recover faithful living is for the church to disentangle its life from culture." . . . "At such a time, the church must withdraw into a new monasticism, not in order to avoid a "bad" society, but in order to recover faithful living and a renewed understanding of the church's

⁵⁵ André Louf, "Spiritual Fatherhood in the Literature of the Desert," in *Abba: Guides to Wholeness East and West*, ed. by John Sommerfeldt (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1982), 57.

⁵⁶ On the phenomena of "boiler rooms" see Andy Freeman, *Punk Monk: New Monasticism and the Ancient Art of Breathing* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2007).

mission.”⁵⁷

New monastic communities are doing just this as they seek live out a call to withdrawal to the "abandoned places of empire."⁵⁸ Similarly Gordon Mursell writes of Guigo I, “For Guigo, the Carthusian vocation was not so much a flight *from* the world as a flight *for* it: the contemplative monk who addressed himself to secular concerns from his monastic solitude saw himself not as someone interfering in matters that did not concern him, but as someone who had the advantage of a clearer and surer perspective from which to view them.”⁵⁹

- Obedient Fool, Alternative Lifestyle

Ultimately, in light of the above, solitaries may look like something of a “fool.” The solitary has always been an enigmatic figure in society (ridiculed and respected at the same time). Consider the Beatles song, “Fool on the Hill”. In that song the emphasis seems to be on a knowledge of reality that others don’t have. Yet there is not only the aspect of knowledge, but of life itself. A solitary lives another life in part to say, “The way the world lives is not necessarily the only way.” But this is true of both solitary and communal monasticism. We live an alternative life for the sake of ourselves and for the sake of the world: to say it can be done. It is all for the kingdom of God really, to live as an expression of the life of the King. We are obedient fools.

Of course, we must realize that literal, outward, withdrawal is not itself the end, but only a means to a greater withdrawal of heart and mind to God. Thus, Russian monk Theophan the Recluse (1815-1894) wrote of this inner withdrawal,

Seek this kind of seclusion, and do not worry about the other. Even behind closed doors one can wander the whole world or let the whole world into one’s room. Or one can be a recluse while

57 Jonathan Wilson, *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997) 71, 70.

58 See Sister Margaret M. Mckenna, "Relocation to Abandoned Places of Empire" in Rutba House, editors, *12 Marks*, 10-25.

59 A. Gordon Mursell, "Introduction," 14.

one is living in the world. Anyone seeking the Lord must withdraw from the world, from everything passionate, vain, or sinful which has come into family life and made itself a custom or a rule. To withdraw from the world does not mean to run away from family or society, but to give up whatever customs, rules, habits or claims go against the spirit of Christ which is growing within us.⁶⁰

Conclusion -

What was the "cause" of the fourth-century movement of monastic withdrawal? Was it fear of persecution or taxes? Was it a reaction to a shallow Christianity after Constantine? While these and other social-economic factors may have played some role in the shaping of the movement, I think that the evidence indicates that the positive spiritual forces involved deserve more credit than they usually receive. People flocked to the desert (and elsewhere) to seek God and to obey God. I would go so far as to call the rise of monasticism in the fourth century a revival.⁶¹ Fourth-century monasticism was overwhelmingly a getting away *to* it all - to the fullness of Christ and life in Christ.

How are we to look at our own withdrawal today? I think we would do well to take a similar perspective today. We must honor the place of the *from-ness* and the mere *away-ness* of withdrawal. And yet we follow the strength of early monastic life when we abandon ourselves whole-heartedly *to* a new life in Christ. We are, perhaps, at our best when we seek Christ and obey Christ without regard to the costs. We become a powerful force for the Gospel when we seek to imitate Christ and the Gospel message, trying to live the angelic life and to achieve the greatest resemblance to Christ and the community of Christ possible. When our withdrawals are driven not by the need simply for a "break" from the chaos of life, but rather are driven by a compulsion to pursue personal transformation, preparation for return, sincere intercession, and alternative modes of being, we will become a people

⁶⁰ Theophan the Recluse, *The Heart of Salvation: The Life and Teachings of Saint Theophan the Recluse*, translated by Esther Williams (Newbury, MA: Praxis Institute Press, n.d.), 62.

⁶¹ See Evan B. Howard, *The Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2008), 410 in my chapter on "Renewal" where I specifically discuss Pachomius.

who live not a life of mere "retreat" but who also advance into culture and with regard to whom the gates of hell shall not prevail.