
You Can Be a Desert Father/Mother

Just because I live in the Udairi Desert and I am a Ukrainian Catholic priest, that does not make me a “Desert’ Father”. The term arises from those hermits who settled in the Egyptian desert in the fourth century. The first recorded was Paul of Thebes. The most famous was St Antony of Egypt who guided colonies of hermits. His fame comes from the fact that St. Athanasius wrote a biography of him. Antony, six months after his father died, was reflecting on how the Apostles gave up everything to follow our Lord. As he thought about this example, he went into the Church where the Gospel of Matthew (19:21) was

being proclaimed: “Jesus said to him, “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to [the] poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow Me.”

This answered the question for Antony of a path to salvation, since the persecution of Christians was over and martyrdom was no longer available. Perfection now could be found in giving up everything, giving to the poor and then following our Lord. And so Antony and thousands of others did.

This path of perfection is still open to us today. We have two

continued on page 7

from page 6

options in following this example. The first is to be literal and sell and go and follow. Become a hermit and join with other hermits in a spiritual friendship and dialogue so that you can have support and correction. This is not for everyone. St John Chrysostom tried it and did such damage to his health that he had to return to the city, which was truly a blessing to the Church because of the work he undertook in the world. The second way is to be a Desert Person in the world. This is similar to in our tradition of saying being a “monk in the world.” The difference lies in time. Desert People did not always make this a permanent way of life. They would go into the desert take the time necessary and then return to the world.

For those who want to follow this latter example in our contemporary world, the simplest way is to make a retreat. Each priest and deacon in the eparchy makes at least one retreat each year. They go off into a spiritual desert to pray, to learn and to support each other.

A retreat is an opportunity first to follow the example of Jesus and to follow His instruction. Our Lord would “withdraw to deserted places to pray. (Luke 5:16)” The most famous of is the time that He withdrew to the desert and was tempted by the tempter. A good reminder that even in withdrawal, one can still find temptations and many of the Fathers did.

Our Lord withdrew to rest and knew that this was good for others. When the Apostles were tired from their ministries (just like your priest or deacon). (Mark 6: 30-32) “The apostles gathered together with Jesus and reported all they had done and taught. He said to them, ‘Come away by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while.’ People were coming and going in great numbers, and they had no opportunity even to eat. So they went off in the boat by themselves to a deserted place.” There is no rejuvenation without rest. It is a time to put down the burdens of life. It is as we sing in the Divine Liturgy of “laying aside all earthly cares.”

The Apostles were active in commerce

in their every day lives but there came a time to lay aside these concerns and follow the Lord. As we enter Church for the Divine Services, we leave at the door our

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worldly concerns and focus on being present with the Lord. When we leave the world, or rather retreat from those concerns, we rest in and with the Lord. To do this we need to cultivate silence.

The book of Proverbs (10:19) counsels, “Where words are many, sin is not wanting; but those who restrain their lips do well.” The first sin we avoid in silence is that of gossiping. We in humility can change our focus by shutting out the talk and distractions from ourselves to the Lord and sit and listen. The Lord does not sound as a raging river, like the Euphrates, which all can hear but rather like a gentle stream, where we have to focus our attention. As the prophet Isaiah notes “the waters of Shiloah that flow gently.”

In that silence, God speaks. One of the ways in which we become familiar with the teachings of God is to spend time reading the Sacred Scriptures both the New and Old Testament. We read them not like students preparing for a test or one who has a challenge to finish reading the whole of scriptures (not bad to do but not the goal), but as one reads about the one that they love. We also reflect upon the wisdom of other lovers of God who can teach us. We read the Fathers of the Church. Their wisdom permeates the centuries of our tradition. They dealt with the same questions of life that we do and so instead of trying to create new answers we can look to those who found them.

As said earlier, doing this as a way of life is not for everyone. What is important is that we in our journey of theosis take the time necessary.

“The one who renounces the passion representations [of sex, wealth, vanity, etc.]? makes a monk of the inner person—the mind. Anybody can make a monk of

the outer person if he really wishes to, but it is no small struggle to make a monk of the inner man” (St. Maximos the Confessor, *The 400 Chapters on Love*, Fourth Cen-

tury, 50) How do we change the inner person in our hectic world.

First, we have to look for our desert place. It can be as simple as sitting in our backyard or our commute to and from work. Here we put aside the cares of the world. We turn off our iPhones and other electronic devices and discover the silence. We may read the Sacred Scriptures or writings of the Fathers (for those commuting it is okay to use your phones as long as you ignore emails, Facebook postings, etc.) Prayer can come spontaneously or praying the words with which we are familiar. There are people who have discovered that certain of our liturgical hymns are good for pacing power-walking.

The Syrian Symeon the Stylite (the one who lived in a hut on the top of a pillar) gave the appearance of withdrawing

from the world. But one of the pieces of his ministry was writing letters. For our desert persons in the world, we all know people who are starving for their faith to be inspired and guided. In the times of silence, one can pray for those in need and in the love of Christ write them letters.

For the Desert Persons (Fathers and Mothers), they withdrew from the temptations of the world and its concerns, but always responded to the needs of those in spiritual trouble.

All of us can be “desert persons” in the world by laying aside all earthly cares, opening ourselves in silence to the word of God and bringing divine grace to those in need, either full time or on our daily commute to work.

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