

**“LUCIAN BLAGA” UNIVERSITY, SIBIU
“ANDREI ȘAGUNA” FACULTY OF THEOLOGY, SIBIU**

**THEOLOGY OF DESERT FATHERS.
APOPHTEGMATA PATRUM AND ITS ROLE
IN THE CHRISTIAN EAST**

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AND POST-PATRISTIC LITERATURE DEPARTMENT**

***COORDINATOR:*
ARCHIMANDRITE PROFESSOR DR. CONSTANTIN VOICU**

***ELABORATED BY:*
PH.D. STUDENT PRIEST POPA IOAN-MARIUS**

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CONTENTS

Introduction:	3
I. Origins of Egyptian monasticism	12
a. Beginnings of Christianity in Egypt.....	13
b. Egypt and early monasticism.....	18
1. “Edict of Milan” and its immediate results.....	19
2. Saint Anthony’s the Great Exodus.....	21
3. The first monastic communities in Egypt.....	25
3.1. Ammun – the initiator of community in Nitria.....	25
3.2. From Nitria towards Kellia	28
3.3. Sketis and Abba Macarius of Egypt.....	33
3.4. Other monastic centres	36
II. Brief divagation in contemporary theological research concerning <i>Apophtegma Patrum</i>	39
a. The first text collections	39
b. Time of writings publication.....	43
c. Oral character of apothegms	45
d. Apothegms settling down in writing	48
e. <i>Apophtegma Patrum</i> and relationship with contemporary monastic writings...	53
III. Speaking about God	58
a. Scripture in desert	58
1. Call to Scripture.....	59
2. Using Scripture.....	62
3. Authority of Scripture and Fathers’ authority	65
b. Theology of writings	66
1. Consignment of doctrinaire disputes in the desert in <i>Apophtegma Patrum</i>	66
1.1. Arianism	67

1.2. Anthropomorphism.....	70
1.3. Monophysitism.....	72
1.4. Mesalian disputes.....	74
2. God: One in Being and threefold in Persons	75
3. Angelology of desert.....	77
4. Anthropology of Desert Fathers.....	79
4.1. Man – created by God	79
4.2. Sin – breaking the communion with God.....	80
5. Christology and its implications in the time doctrinaire disputes	81
5.1. Jesus Christ's redemptive sacrifice	81
5.2. <i>Apophategmata Patrum</i> and Christological disputes	82
6. Role of Sacraments in Fathers' lives	83
7. Eschatology.	86
7.1. Thought of death	86
7.2. Private judgement.....	88
 IV. Speaking with God	 91
a. Abandoning the world	91
1. Ancient roots of abandoning the world.....	92
2. Biblical fundaments of retirement from the world.....	93
3. Stages of abandoning Abba Anthony the Great	95
4. Abandoning the Desert Fathers	97
4.1. Total abandoning	98
4.2. Voluntary poverty.....	100
4.3. Abandoning the world: a step on the way of salvation	102
b. Passions release	105
1. Monastic ideal and passions release.....	106
2. Mechanism of passions apparition	107
3. Starting the fight with passions and its importance	111
4. Passions exhibition and remedies against them	115
5. Signs and clues of passions healing	137

6. Purpose or target of passions healing.....	139
c. Clean prayer– the way towards union with God.....	140
1. Content of prayer in general	141
2. Practice of prayer in <i>Apophtegma Patrum</i>	143
2.1. A few definitions of prayer	144
2.2. Prayer and work of hands in the desert	146
2.3. <i>Apophtegma Patrum</i> and the Mesalians.....	148
2.4. Prayer and psalmody	150
2.5. Prayer and tears.....	151
2.6. Forms of the prayer practised in the desert.....	153
3. Desert Fathers’ practice of Jesus’s prayer	154
d. Union with God in love.....	157
 V. Spiritual paternity in <i>Apophtegma Patrum</i>	162
a. Abba – an <i>anthropos pneumatikos</i>	162
b. Abba – a vehicle of charisma	165
c. Spiritual father’s charisms.....	168
1. Clairvoyance and discernment	168
2. Capacity of loving the others and making his others’ sufferings	170
3. Power of transfiguring the human environment.....	171
 VI. Receptarea <i>Apophtegma Patrum</i> în Răsăritul creștin	173
a. From Egypt to Palestine	173
b. <i>Spiritual letters</i> between Saints Varsanuphius and John of Gaza	176
c. Abba’s Dorothy of Gaza’s <i>teachings</i>	181
d. <i>Ladder of divine climbing</i> of Saint John of the Ladder.....	184
Conclusions	188
List of abbreviations	202
Bibliography	203
Curriculum vitae	225
Statement	227

Keywords: **Apostegmata Patrum, Desert Fathers, Desert Fathers Doctrine, Ecclesiology, Eshatology, Egyptian Spirituality.**

Withdrawal into the desert and development of the first monastic communities in Egypt, starting with the 4th century, represented one of the main moments of early Christianity. Deliberately renouncing this world's goods, either men or women, ignorant or educated people pulled themselves away from human settlements in the heart of the desert, where they built true "oasis of spirituality" to intensely live the wish of Christ's Gospel. Within these communities, there was formed a living spirituality, whose main testimony is the Apophthegmata Patrum or, as it is known in the people's language, Paterikon. Starting from these brief explanations, the paper proposes a foray into theology of apothegms, trying to establish both the time and space of their occurrence and their links to some contemporary monastic writings.

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In the first part, the paper focuses on the origins and beginnings of the monastic movement in Egypt, which are related by the vast majority of researchers to the years 270 or 271, when on a Sunday, during the service he was attending, a young man named Anthony heard the word of Gospel (*Mt* 19, 21) which required giving up the goods of this world. Previously to this date, in Egypt there had already been Christian communities. The first testimony concerning this fact is offered by the text in Acts of the Apostles 2 (in the context of Pentecost event) and *I Pt* 5, 13. But the first reliable data about the Christianization of this territory are mentioned by Eusebius of Caesarea in Ecclesiastical History (II, XVI, 1), being connected to Mark the Evangelist: About this Mark it is said to have been the first sent to preach the Gospel in Egypt as he wrote it, and he also founded the first churches there", along with a list of 12 bishops who subsequently worked in Alexandria.

Returning to the early Egyptian monasticism and Saint Anthony the Great - the most emblematic figure of it -, according to his biographer, Saint Athanasius the Great, he was born around the year 251, during the persecution of Decius (249-251) in a Christian family in a village on the Nile bank. After his parents' death, he left alone with his sister, and around the age of 18-19 years, he decided to retire and practice asceticism, following the example of an "elderly man" in a neighbouring village, who had been living a lonely life since his youth. Besides some consultations with a "diligent ascetic" (spoudaios), Saint Anthony's daily

activity consisted in work of hands, wake, fasting, guarding the thoughts and unceasing prayer. However, soon, Saint Anthony began to have an open war with the devil, unhappy with his struggles, out of which the saint triumphed. After a vision he had, Saint Anthony crossed the Nile and, for about 20 years, he settled in an abandoned building at the edge of the desert receiving bread only twice a year and constantly fighting with the devil. During this stage he switched from the hermit life to the anchoritic one. During the persecution of Maximinus Daia (270-313), in 311, Saint Anthony left the monastery and went to Alexandria, wanting to become a martyr. Around 313, as the number of those who were seeking him increased, Saint Anthony decided to withdraw at Upper Thebaid. After crossing the Nile, a voice from the sky suggested that he should "climb up to the inner wilderness" where, after three days and three nights away, he "reached a very high mountain". He remained here until his death, where he was visited by the brothers from the monasteries in the area and surrounded by subsidiary caring of two apprentices. His monastic system was composed of a series of rules, both for beginners and for anchorites: there was a "father" who had control over the entire community and to whom there were subordinated other "fathers" who guided the newcomers.

Going back to the Egyptian asceticism, we can say that it is mainly related to the three major monastic centres in the desert, namely *Nitria*, *Kellia* and *Sketis*, which are correlated with the names of some famous monks. Beside avva Anthony, we can mention avva Ammun the Egyptian (Ammun Nitriot) or Macarius the Great, also known as Macarius of Egypt.

The foundation of the monastic community in Nitria is connected to Abba Amun, who after the year 330 settled down near the village Pernoudj, about 9 miles south-west of the city Damamhur (the site being identified through the Arabic name of El-Barnugi). The monastic colony established by Amun began to develop as time went by. Being set more as "monastic", it consisted of ascetics who lived alone, in twos or even in very large communities which sometimes exceeded hundreds of people. During the week, the ascetics remained in their own cells, dealing with work and prayer. Besides braiding ropes, a favourite occupation consisted in processing flax and making linen as this community was near the Nile. On Saturdays and Sundays the whole community gathered for Mass and for having the meal together. In Nitria it is mentioned the existence of eight priests, of which only an "older" one had the right to celebrate the Sacrament of the Eucharist and to preach. The evening was dedicated to prayer,

so that they could hear the monks' chant from their cells, that, according to Palladius, "you would think you are in paradise".

In the year 338 there was a meeting between Abba Anthony and Abba Amun when Anthony the Great went to Alexandria to support the cause of Saint Athanasius the Great, who had been back from exile a short time ago. Following the increase of the number of brothers and also due to the desire of some monks to withdraw further into the desert to live in quietness, the monastic centre of *Kellia* was settled down. It later appears as an appendix of Nitria where the ascetics withdrew to live more intensely their solitary life, but still continuing to stay in touch with the other monastic centre. Thus, according to *History of monks in Egypt*, Kellia "is a barren wasteland, and the cells are at a distance from each other, so as not to see and hear from one another. They [the anachorites] live alone in their cells and there is a profound silence and a deep quietness among them; only on Saturdays and Sundays they meet together in church [...]. If any of them happened to be absent from the communion, it is known that this was due to a problem of the body, and all go to visit him, not in the same time but one by one, [...]. Many of them travel a distance of four or five miles to meet in the church". Viewed strictly from the point of view of the existing monastic life here, the ascetics of Kellia do not appear as some hermits in the modern sense of the word, but rather as an association of already trained monks urged by the monastic ideal of perfection. Kellia was more of a community of groups of monks gathered around an "Abba". A good example is Evagrius of Pontus who spent his life in this community and took the advice received from Macarius of Alexandria. The flourishing monasticism from Nitria and Kellia was shattered by what Christian literature called "origenistic disputes" which led to the destruction of these monastic centres.

Another important monastic centre is Sketis, located about 40 miles far from Kellia and 50 miles far from Nitria towards south, its name being linked to Abba Macarius of Egypt. The way in which the community was initially formed is not known exactly, but in analogy with Saint Anthony the Great it is very possible that in the beginning there should have existed a core group of "brothers" gathered around Abba Macarius, attracted by his life and also its harisms. Sketis became a monastic community in 356, being more a hermits colony, with monks living in individual cells spread in a sea area. The community will develop continuously, coming to hold four fortified tower "churches" where the ascetics could

withdraw during the barbarians' invasions. From Monday till Friday, they spent the day in their cells, dealing with prayer and manual work. On Saturday and Sunday they gathered to participate in the Holy Mass, which was celebrated on Saturday mornings as well. In Sketis small groups of ascetics were found gathered around an "old man" who would spend their daily life in close connection with him. It is what might be called "spiritual paternity" and it will become an essential feature of community here. After its being devastated by the barbarians, the monks withdrew in Palestine.

The second part – having the title **Brief divagation in contemporary theological research concerning Apophthegmata Patrum** – establishes the spatial-temporal frames of the occurrence of the ascetic writings collection. After presenting the text collections in which the work (alphabetical and systematic) has been preserved, the different versions that have circulated (Sahidic, Syrian, Georgian, Arabic and Ethiopic), and the various hypotheses launched by scientists on the issue (like Wilhelm Bousset and Jean-Claude Guy), the paper focuses on the time when Apophthegmata Patrum was written. Thus, the most patristic writers and theologians who were concerned by its study tend to believe that the time interval of collection occurrence was the first half of the 6th century, most of the evidence leading to Palestine, and especially to Gaza region. The dispersion of a large number of monks from Egypt to Palestine and the permanent loss of that world, appeared on the background of the Egyptian Monophysitism monks' separation from the Orthodox monks, the increased presence of literate monks who could benefit by reading their predecessors' words and the perception of ancient fervour reduction were the basic motivation of some Palestinian monks to gather disparate words, that were circulating within the oral tradition, in one great collection. Moreover, there is some evidence that in the late 4th century collections comprising small writings were spread among the monks of Egypt, namely the ones who said them in Coptic.

Despite its use as part of the title of a single collection of writings (*Apophthegmata Patrum*), the word apophthegmata is neither the oldest nor the most commonly used to refer to the teaching of the Fathers of the desert. *Logos*, *logion*, and above all, *rhēma* are the most often used words to convey what is claimed and received by those who came to the desert with their questions. Thus, a phrase which is often used is "Abba, say a word to me [*rhēma*]", having the meaning of a "word of salvation". At this point, *rhēma* expresses both the close relationship

between life and the action that characterizes these words and between the weight and authority they hold, as well. Moreover, with regard to these words, there can be identified two more things: its close relationship with the source of inspiration: God, and the fact that it is uttered only when and only to a person who expressed the availability of asking it and listening to it.

Being transmitted from generation to generation, from father to apprentice, apophthegmata knew a fairly comprehensive transformation process, being able to talk inclusively about "a certain polishing and refinement of tradition" in time, which happened when they were defined in writing. John Chryssavgis distinguishes three main stages that synthesize to the greatest extent the way in which apophthegmata have been transmitted and preserved up to our days. Thus, the first step is "to transmit" these short words to different people who visited the Fathers in the desert. In this stage, apophthegmata assigned "a spontaneous word designating an old person's impressive act, kept in order to build up" and remembered from generation to generation. The second stage would consist in transition from oral tradition to the written one. Within this stage, apophthegmata lose their spontaneous and personal character, becoming more static.

The transition from oral circulation to written words took place relatively close to the early tradition of the Fathers of the desert, as it was relieved by the characteristic features of the two earlier collections in which whole series of words were collected by the same person who either heard himself or gathered by first-hand testimony of several witnesses. By switching from oral character to writing defining there were made some subtle changes, without affecting the message though. These changes can be seen in the terminology of apophthegmata. Thus, the meaning of the term apophthegmata is specifically linked to the transcription of written sentences. The influence of *Apophthegmata Patrum* must be seen in another perspective as well. The Fathers' words were taken in anthologies and were absorbed in the big early treatises of history and monastic spirituality. In the process of using apophthegmata, they "remoulded" them according to their own purposes. The alterations were of various types: changes in the author's perspective, a finer "polishing" of the material, changes of form, a greater emphasis on philosophical speculation.

Starting with the third chapter - **Talking about God** – there is the proper entering into treating the theological content of *Apophthegmata Patrum*. Besides personal experience, the

principal source of apophthegmata is offered by the text of Scripture. The importance of Scripture in the Parents' lives is illustrated by an apophthegmata which was attributed to Abba Anthony, who considered it absolutely necessary to the perfection of a monk: "wherever you go, keep God in front of your eyes; whatever you do, follow the testimony of the Holy Scriptures; any place you settle in, do not leave it soon" (Abba Anthony 3, PG 65, col. 76C). Desert Fathers often responded to some questions directly by the scriptural text or making allusions to it.

The ascetics who could not read had access to the text revealed by participating at Sunday synaxas that were taking place within the cult, where they heard biblical pericopes they meditated on throughout the entire week, or by word of mouth from the elderly people around whom they completed their apprenticeship. In addition, the monks were encouraged to prolong the encounter with the text revealed by memorizing, continual recitation, meditation and its reflection. Most times, when he was alone in his cell, the anchorite recited passages of Scripture aloud, so that he could be heard by those who intended to visit him. Based on an urge of Abba Anthony the Great, the monks recited biblical texts both before and after sleep.

The purpose of reading the revealed text was for the Fathers of desert to make God's word enter the heart and become a prayer inside there. Thus, besides its teaching function, Scripture has an ascetic role, being a stage in the process of freedom from passions and union with God.

Among the most used Bible books there are Psalms and the Gospel of Matthew. Quoting Psaltery should not surprise us, taking into account its liturgical function even since the early Christian centuries. It proved to have a therapeutic value for the Fathers of desert as well. Thus Abba Serapion, after reading the Psaltery in its entirety, along with the prayer made after each psalm, succeeded in converting a woman. The appeal to Gospel of Matthew should be viewed in the context of the Sermon on the Mount, towards which the Fathers of the desert showed a particular inclination, out of which they extracted arguments about humility and purity of heart.

Regarding the theology of *Apophthegmata Patrum*, we must specify that within the teachings of the Fathers of the desert there is not found a systematic treatment of the truths on faith of Church. Concerning their spiritual teachings, we can state that it is fully in line with the divine

immutable principles of God, existing inclusively strong reactions against deviations from faith, such as Arianism, Anthropomorphism, Monophysitism or Messalian disputes.

In view of the Fathers of desert, God is One in Being, but threefold in Persons. The call to the classic example through which there is explained Trinitarian relations is found in an apophtegm kept in an Armenian collection. The sun appears as a symbol of the Father, the sun ray for the Son and east for the Holy Spirit. Unlike the doctrine of the Trinity, angelology is much more developed. Apophegms present numerous stories related to meetings of ascetics with angels or demons. We could say that angels, either good or bad, are part of everyday life and of the desert monks' universe. In the humility that characterizes them, the Desert Fathers speak much less about good angels and their appearances than about the ascetic struggles they had with demons. The role of the good angels is first of all to counter the activities of demons and to protect the monk from them, and the interaction between good angels and monks goes up to the point where the latter are healed by angels. An important role of the meeting between angels and monks is given by the end of the anchorites' earthly life.

But near angels in the desert, in the Fathers' apophegms demons are also mentioned. The desert becomes, to some extent, the demons' domain, and the withdrawal of monks in this area aims to fight just with the evil spirits right on their land. Demons act on monks preferably through thoughts, using the illusions of senses. Moreover, they are in the form of characters apparently shining with light or giving a monk some advice which, though apparently good, will later lead him to perdition.

At an anthropological level, the foundation of all doctrine is the text of Fc. 1,26. There has not been a few times when the improved ascetics' lives are compared to that of Adam's in Paradise, and the sin led to the termination of the relationship with God. The evil appears as an unusual power through the being, trying to sneak into our person from the outside, and once allowed in, to alienate us from ourselves and implicitly from God. Thus, the monk's fight with demons, the representatives of evil, ultimately means the struggle for self-integrity against any alienation through passions and sins. The Desert Fathers' *Christology* highlights the updating and permanent representation of Saviour Sacrifice on the Cross, in the light of resurrection contemplated by Fathers and also the anticipation of Last Judgement. There are two important elements of Christology, the first central one which is completed and the second one which is in progress.

Desert Fathers did not develop an elaborated ecclesiology, the aspects concerning Church being presented occasionally and in stories with a spiritual character. Within Church there is a restoration of man, as a result of repentance for the committed sins. Lucien Regnault speaks about a double weekly celebration of Eucharist, respectively on Saturday and Sunday, followed by a community lunch or a fraternal agape. Initially the agape took place even in the church, and subsequently a refectory was developed as well. We find a number of issues related to some miracles that were committed during the Eucharistic celebration. Closely related to Eucharist, there appears Sacrament of Repentance, considered by Abba Anthony "the greatest work of man", through which he assumes sins in front of God. There can also be identified all the three steps of priesthood: deacon, priest and bishop. On the same level, some apophthegms present the example of some monks who tried to escape from receiving the Sacrament. At the basis of this decision there is not the contempt for Priesthood, but a feeling of unworthiness, just through the awareness of the greatness and importance of Sacrament. Most times, the "old man" who was recognised for his holiness and virtues was ordained a priest. Besides his liturgical function, he also had the role of a primate in community, respectively he chaired "the old people's" council and made important decisions, including those related to the members' acceptance or removal in or from the monastic community.

At the eschatological level, we can notice that most of the Desert Fathers have a certain fear for the final judgment and for the way their souls will be found by Christ. Although prepared, they constantly will appeal to the need of further periods of repentance. It is the case of Abba Sisoës who, even in his time of death, was still asking time for repentance.

Chapter four - **Talking to God** – outlines the route the monk must go through in order to unite with God, respectively giving up the world, getting free from passions to achieve the lack of passion state and union with God in prayer.

Surrender or run away from the world characterizes all forms of monasticism, being a remoteness above all, a withdrawal from the world and a total dedication to God. For the Christian ascetics, leaving the world appears as a necessary consequence of the love of God and in the same time it is the means through which they can become imitators of Christ, presuming a moral situation caused by sin and not involving a dualistic structure of things. Surrender and detachment from the world strictly involves breaking the ties with certain common life styles, including some places as well, and withdrawing in favour of a marginal

existence in the desert. At this point, the text of Mt. 19,21 is considered the main impetus for this way of life. By giving up the world, the desert ascetics sought to achieve the total freedom from the things of this world, about which the Saviour speaks in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 6,25-26). In the call to give up all the goods of this world in the name of the Gospel, to follow Christ and to become free from any restrictions, the monks did not see anything which is mechanic, but an ideal that can be achieved even in this life. Carrying out this call was done in several stages, by practicing poverty and detaching from material things at deeper levels of detachment from all selfish desires and thoughts they faced. Surrender was part of a larger project of holiness, it was a means to achieve freedom and detachment from the cares of this world. In the desert, giving up material wealth was based not only on the desire to follow the Gospel, but also on its practical achievement, based on experience, according to which the immeasurable concern for material goods could lead to the soul injury. Withdrawal from the world had a double purpose: release all the worries caused by links with their native environment and living "lack of worries" in order to be totally available for what would be their only goal: seeking God . Surrender had to be complete without the slightest attachment to certain goods, sometimes being the same with the willing poverty.

For the Desert Fathers, passions are diseases of the soul and obstacles in the way that he wants to travel in order to achieve the state of holiness and spiritual perfection. That is why one of the reasons and also one of the main purposes of the monk's withdrawal from the world and his living in the desert is the very soul healing from these diseases. Thus, most of the spiritual struggle of the monk and a constant of this struggle of his lies in identifying his own passions and his constant endeavour to free himself from them. The fallen and corruptible character of the human nature leads to an obvious fragility facing the passions. Taking into account this ontological component, the monk deliberately assumes "crushing" his inner ego, interpreted as the human engine that triggers and grows passions. First of all, the Egyptian ascetics thought that passions separated us from God, which is synonymous to the meaning emptiness of their own existence. The fight against passions which the monk raises at the rank of existential programme with an eschatological finality can be interpreted as a continuous reaffirmation of the special ontological constitution and human vocation as a candidate for divinity or the resemblance with God.

In short, we can say that passions arise on the land of body movement or work, through the soul accept and often through demonic influences from the outside. Accepting the passionate thoughts is up to the free choice of each of us and is in direct contrast with the practice of virtues. At the level of the anchorite's mind, there takes place a fight with them. Abba Pimen even sets a ranking and several stages of the fight with passions: the heart, eyes, tongue, deed itself: "this passion has four forms: first, from the heart; the second, from the eye; the third, from the tongue; the fourth, do not do evil for evil. If you can clean your heart, it does not reach the eyes, if it reaches the eye, make sure you do not talk, if you talk, prevent you from doing evil for evil" (Abba Pimen 34, PG 65, col. 332A). Based on his ascetic experience and direct observation of monks' lives, Evagrius of Pontus compiled a list of the main passions or evil thoughts which a monk has to face and which are at the origin of all the other sins: belly greed (gastrimargia), fornication (porneia), love of money (philargyria), anger (orge), sorrow (lype), boredom (akedia), vanity (kenodoxia), pride (hyperephaneia). On The exact references to the passions that we can identify in *Apophthegmata Patrum* fully concord with the approach Evagrius adopted and they fit in the same spiritual fight with which the desert monks identify.

Healing or passions release was also accompanied by some supernatural signs, thus discovering the special state of the monks who had managed to achieve this ascetic-spiritual feat. Where evil is not present any longer, the work of God strength may be felt and visible. One day Abba Arsenius, known for its hot desire to devote as much time as possible to prayer and contemplation, was seen in his cell completely transfigured physically, "all just fire" and some monks, even in this life, in advance tasted some of the good things of the future life, their lives becoming like angels'. The target of passions release is to achieve the state of lack of passions (apatheia). The lack of passions can be understood as the victory or defeat of all passions and as acquisition of virtues. It is the peak where all the ascetic effort and the steps of all virtues lead, because the entire asceticism aims purification of body and of soul from passions. But for the hermit the lack of passions state is just a prerequisite for what he truly seeks: the union of his mind with God through the clean prayer or his inner eyes were focused exclusively on God.

Within the process of union with God, an important role is assigned to *prayer*. For the Desert Fathers, the prayer was a current practice that gave meaning to their existence in the

desert, concentrating the whole spiritual life of anchorites. Secondly, the prayer appears as the result of collaboration between the divine grace and the monk's zeal, being the result of a long process of ascetic labour. There were many definitions of prayer. Thus, it appears as the "offspring of kindness and mildness", "cure of sadness and discouragement", "fruit of what you will endure with wisdom". Abba Pimen considers it among the three basic things, placing it between the fear of God and well-doing to your neighbour. The perfect prayer appears when the mind has reached the ability to easily banish any evil thought that might disturb it, when the soul is "undisturbed" by anything from the outside. In this state, the Desert Fathers narrate some miracles that had happened.

In daily life, some of the texts from *Apophthegmata Patrum* refer to the practice of the union of manual labour with reciting excerpts from Scripture, in response to the doctrine professed by the Messalians. The Egyptian ascetics solved the dilemma of unceasing prayer without sacrificing the work or prayer. They pray while working with their hands, reciting the Scripture, especially the Psalms. We cannot find in *Apophthegmata Patrum* a clearly outlined programme of the manner in which the monks performed their daily prayers. Saint Epiphanius transmits a prayer programme that sends to the important moments of the day: "The Prophet Paul prayed at any time; he was awake at midnight; before dawn he cried; at dawn he stood; in the morning he prayed; in the evening and at lunch he knelt. Therefore he says: I spoke to you seven times in the same day" (Saint Epiphanius, Bishop of Cyprus 7, PG 65, col. 165A). Maintaining a fixed schedule of prayer, which also means self-discipline, aims to create bridges through which the mind can cross the flow of time and be free from evil thoughts. An important role also plays the psalmody that is "a reading from the Scripture" which opens the way to prayer, through which the anchorite sets an intimate dialogue with God, while the mind reaches the state of unity. On the same level, *Apophthegmata Patrum* comprises some associations of prayer with the gift of tears, which is a sign of man's approach to God.

The existence of a primary practice of prayer of Jesus to the monks of Egypt is highlighted by a Coptic inscription discovered at Kellia, which illustrates the existence of a strong tradition concerning this manner. This fact demonstrates that the prayer of Jesus, "the most privileged form of prayer which the heart must incessantly whisper to God the One in Trinity" was known and practiced by the ascetics of Egypt. The prayer of Jesus becomes a

"supreme art" and those who managed to master it reached the peaks of perfection and holiness, achieving union with God.

The fourth chapter is devoted to the problem of the apophthegms paternity. The great ascetics whom we find in *Apophthegmata Patrum* were trained under the protection of an Abba, whom they listened to and lived around him, and thus they succeeded in receiving some of his experience and wisdom. The personal relationship between an Abba and his disciple was the nucleus around which there was formed and developed the practice of spiritual guidance, being a basic condition of the disciple's fixation in the right teaching. "I know monks who, after many labours, fell and came to freak out, because they had had hope in their work and had not taken into account the following command: *Ask your father and he will lead you*", Abba Anthony the Great warned. At this point, Lucien Regnault's statement is decisive: The Desert Fathers "are the only ones exercising a special paternity, which makes them be called "Abba". In other words, what is defining for a spiritual father is just this spiritual experience gained from a long process of asceticism and fight with sufferings, which he gives his disciple through his lifestyle itself. Abba is defined as an *anthropos peumatikos*, respectively a man who, through a long spiritual experience in the desert, learnt the secrets of this living, and who, from this gained experience, may guide the others. Through spiritual paternity, Abba had the duty to tacitly pass on a way of life to his disciple, through his example. At the basis of this relationship there must be the disciple's total trust in his spiritual father. The Abba's prayer apprentice permanently accompanied the disciple, protecting him from a series of temptations and dangers that could come over him, and the common life of the two could sometimes take long years, being "a rough school of patience".

In reality, though this picture is presented to us, at first sight, as a bilateral one, it appears to be triangular, because in the equation, besides the two, there is a third member: God. The "old man" is not an infallible judge, but a fellow-servant of the Living God, he is not a dictator, but a guide, a travel companion, because the only true "spiritual guide" is the Holy Spirit.

Kallistos Ware grasps three charisms that distinguish the spiritual father. It is the insight and discernment, the ability to love the others and to make his the sufferings of others' and the power to transform the human environment. Discernment, within the desert spirituality, reveals especially through the practice of thoughts discovery. Thus, Abba can discern the

hidden dangers, exposing the evil thoughts before committing sins and anticipating some of the disciples' reactions. We can see that in this case discernment appears as a preventive side in the fight against the evil thoughts. Moreover, one of the Abba's duties was connected to his taking over the disciples' sorrows and sins, their guilt, and to his responding for them before God. He is the one who bears the burden of the disciple, who answers for it in front of God. In the same time, due to their detachment from material life and their deeper and deeper search for Christ through prayer and continual asceticism, some Desert Fathers have already received their "angelic face" during this life.

The last chapter is dedicated to the way in which *Apophthegmata Patrum* was received in the Christian East. The two important historical and doctrinal crises experienced by the monastic communities in Egypt at the end of 4th century and the first half of the 5th century generated a migration of the monks towards Palestine. Many monks, attracted by the desire to live their ascetic lives further on, headed to Palestine, settling down especially in Gaza, where they were able to find conditions similar to those in Egypt and where there had already been a monastic tradition founded by Hilarion. An example is offered by Abba Silvanus, who, around the year 380, left Egypt and initially settled in Sinai, and then moved the community in the Gaza area, namely the valley of Gerar, where they erected a monastery as well. Here, Abba Silvanus and his disciples led an ascetic life similar to that of Egypt: withdrawn in cells during the week, where they dealt with various forms of prayer and manual work, on Saturdays and Sundays the entire community participated at the sacramental communion. Abba Silvanus had the habit to visit his disciples in their cells only in the two days of the weekend. Among the disciples Zenon was noted. Another monk of Sketis, who came to Palestine, was Abba Isaiah, the author of the famous *Ascetikon*.

Against this background, the Palestinian monks constantly appealed to *Apophthegmata Patrum* as to an authority, three reasons being identified in the alternative. First, the prestige enjoyed by the Egyptian monasticism in the Palestinian monks' eyes. Secondly the monks felt the need to have models that will call for some situations. And last but not least, a certain restraint in the interpretation of Scripture, given the difficulty and potential risks - in the context of the Christological and Origenistical disputes which the time held.

In this respect, an important role is provided by *The Spiritual Letters* between the ascetics Varsanuphius and John of Gaza, in which several iconic figures of Egyptian

monasticism, such as Abba Anthony, Arsenius, Isaiah, John the Dwarf, Joseph of Panefisi, Theodor from Ferme, Macarius the Great, Nisteroos, Pimen, Sisoes and amma Sara are cited explicitly. Others, like Abba Agathon, Alonios, Amun, Vissarion, Daniel, Moses, Peter Pionitus, Sisoes, are mentioned in an allusive way. In other situations, Abba Varsanuphius and Abba John of Gaza Varsanufie go further and even explain some apothegms - called "The Old People's Books" (*biblia geronton*) - and in some cases there may be noticed the diversion of an apophthegm from its original meaning and its application under different circumstances.

A similar example can be also found in the *Teachings* of Abba Dorotheus of Gaza, who relates to apothegms as to a spring with the same value as the scriptural text. Moreover, Abba Dorotheus calls, when the argumentation needs, to a collage of apothegms of the Desert Fathers in order to argue its doctrine points, but to their interpretation as well when the argumentation requests.

A similar way of reporting we identify in the Ladder of Divine Ascent of Saint John Climacus, for whom, along with the Scripture, the examples offered by the Desert Fathers' apophthegms are decisive in his argumentation, even though most often the Desert Fathers are not referred to by name.

Key words: *Apophthegmata Patrum*, monasticism, Egypt, Palestine, Saint Anthony the Great, Nitria, Kellia, Skethis, Desert Fathers, asceticism, passions release, prayer, paternity.