

Preface

The purpose of the book is to analyze the ancient and contemporary practices of *silence* (*hesychia*, in Greek); second, to convey something of the personal religious experiences of monks and nuns using the practices today: through text, spoken direction, and instruction by example.

Some part of religious experience will always remain internal and impossible to convey in any medium. However, much about *silence* can be approached as an observable phenomenon through its different components: words and actions, images and sounds, textures and rituals, history and doctrine. Emotions and experiences cannot directly be seen or heard by others but may be secondarily represented by words, symbols, sounds, and images. Facial expressions, body positions, clothing, colors, textures, and so forth, may all help to express what words cannot fully describe, and they are important. The abstract ideas behind the experiences may be described in words and their associated meanings.

Silence or *Hesychia*,¹ a method of controlling the body and focusing the mind's attention with quietude and prayer in petition to Jesus Christ, is an ancient Orthodox Christian ascetic practice that can provide an opportunity for peace and a transcendent spiritual experience of God. According to some practitioners of *hesychia*, specifically the Athonites from the eleventh century on, the experience of God as transcendent "uncreated Light" has been likened to that of Christ's apostles witnessing his transfiguration on Mt. Tabor.²

1. Greek for "quietness" or "silence and stillness," originally signifying a state of withdrawal by ascetics for the purpose of contemplation; later a specific practice of prayer by Athonite monks, now a word that connotes a practice that is in use worldwide by Orthodox Christians and others.

2. As described in Saint Symeon the New Theologian, *The Practical and Theological Chapters & the Three Theological Discourses* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 1982), 23.

With this book the internal, individual practice of *hesychia* has been documented and analyzed. Orthodox Christian monks and nuns in three original locations of *hesychia*—Egypt, Greece, and Romania—have intentionally chosen to offer commentary, descriptions, and demonstrations of their practices of *hesychia* to nonascetic Orthodox and secular audiences.

Hesychia originated when early Christians retreated to the solitude of the Egyptian desert in the second century. In the sixth century it was developed by monks at the monastery at Mt. Sinai Church of the Transfiguration, now also named “St. Catherine’s Monastery.” *The practice* became widely used in Christian Orthodox monasticism after the fourteenth century, particularly on Mt. Athos, and later spread to Eastern Europe and beyond among subsequent generations of monastic men and women. *Hesychia* became the primary element of eremitic³ asceticism. It later found its way to coenobitic⁴ and idiorrhythmic⁵ communal practice, and it is still a primary contemplative method in monasteries in these locations and in monasteries throughout the world.

The goals of this book are to document and analyze: (1) the believed positive values of the practice of *hesychia* from the point of view of the practitioners, in antiquity and in the present, and (2) how the practice has historically been conveyed to others.

There have been numerous instructional texts and commentaries written on this subject.⁶ There have been many films, too, on the

3. Solitary, individual ascetic practice, away from others.

4. Groups of two or more ascetics, assembled for the purpose of sharing meals, prayers, liturgy, etc.

5. Monks in community, but not necessarily sharing in group worship, prayer, work, or meals at the same time.

6. Many volumes exist in the form of primary source theological commentaries and dogma relevant to *hesychia*, cf. Origen (185–c. 254) *On First Principles*, *The Philokalia*, Macarius of Egypt (c. 300–391), *Homilies*, Evagrius (b. 399), *Gnostic Centuries* and *The Praktikos*, Diadochus (fifth century), *Gnostic Chapters*, John Climacus (525–606), *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Maximus the Confessor (580–662), *The Ascetic Life: The Four Centuries on Charity*, Symeon the New Theologian (949–1022), *On the Mystical Life: The Ethical Discourses*, Gregory of Sinai (1255–1346), *On Prayer*, Gregory Palamas (1296–1359), and notable analysis and commentary by Athanasius, Bradshaw, Brown, Chrystavgis, Florovsky, Harmless,

general topics of monasteries and monastic life, notably *Inside Mt. Athos* (BBC, 1970), *Frontline: The Early Christians* (WGBH/PBS, 2000), *Mt. Athos: Mountain of Silence* (Ministry of Hellenic Culture, 1989), *Into Great Silence* (feature film, 2006) and a CBS “60 Minutes” report on Mt. Athos (2011). As an additional component of my research, I made a feature documentary film, *Mysteries of the Jesus Prayer*, output from an ethnographic field study film, also titled “Be Still and Know,” that features many of the practitioners in this book. It is widely available as a DVD and digital download, as well as a condensed one-hour version released on public television in the United States, and on SnagFilms.com. I have also had published a companion book to the feature film, on the making of the film and my personal experiences of *hesychia*.⁷

In this volume I will analyze the practice of silence, *hesychia*, its contemporary use and its historical origins, through research of selected ancient and contemporary texts,⁸ secondary source criticism and analysis,⁹ and utilization of modern techniques of interview, observation, and recording in high-definition digital film.¹⁰

To illustrate the use of *hesychia* in historical and contemporary contexts, I have visited each of the three locations where *hesychia* began and flourished: Egypt and the Sinai, Greece and Romania, using ancient texts, historical criticism, and personal interviews with contemporary *hesychasts* both in spoken/written words and in statements and actions.

Krivocheine, Lossky, Markides, McClellan, McGuckin, Merrill, Merton, Meyendorff, Migne, Papademetrio, Seraphim, Sherrard, Sophroni, Taft, Thunberg, Vasileios, Vivian, Waddell, Ward, Wybrew, et al.

7. For more information on the ethnographic film, feature documentary, and trade book, please visit www.JesusPrayerMovie.com.

8. Selected primary texts from ancient sources, biographies, doctrine, Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, prayers, and pedagogical narratives will be utilized. See above, footnote 6.

9. See footnote 6 and Bibliography.

10. I have used a combination of ethnographic filming of intimate conversations with hermits, monks, and nuns, and documentary film exposition of the stated locations, churches, Byzantine works of art, voices, natural sounds, and prayer and liturgical services, both private and public.

Research into ancient texts is useful for analyzing both the history and the core of ascetic praxes, placing them into context in the eras in which they were written in order to understand the etymologies and to discern how *hesychia* was utilized in the past. The texts discussed in this book are well known, even legendary; they are the bases for ascetic praxes as well as the development of the church as well. The selected texts herein are all available in the English language; some are in multiple editions of translation, offering the possibility of further research and personal practice of concentrated prayer and *hesychia*.

In general, the texts are instruction manuals intended as spiritual and lifestyle guidance for monks and nuns. Their wisdom is not confined to the eras in which they are written, and their use beyond monasteries and convents may be fruitful.

The wisdom found in the ancient texts, and the rules for living prescribed by both ancient and contemporary practitioners, have stood the test of time for ample reason. They are intended as methods of seeking and communing with God, and as rules for living a life in dedication and obedience to God. These teachings have been useful, even salvific, for those who have followed them through the ages.

Yet, all of the teachings include recommendations for practicing *hesychia* and continual prayer under the guidance of a spiritual father or mother. None of them were intended for individual use without qualified guidance. Further, it is important to understand that the ancient texts are for tonsured monastics, not laypersons. It is possible to integrate prayer and silent contemplation into one's life, but it is expressly not a good idea to attempt actual ascetic practices on one's own without proper guidance. Further, praxes of *hesychia* are always used in combination with the Holy Liturgy, ascetic rule, and specifically regular communion with God in the form of the Holy Mysteries: the Body and Blood of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, known as the Holy Eucharist.

Finally, I've employed historical-critical analyses in all instances of ancient and contemporary asceticism throughout this book, attempting to contextualize the past with the present. It is of the essence to be aware of basic events in the eras in which the texts were conceived and recorded, as well as to draw contextual parallels to contemporary

thinking and praxes. I encourage you to employ these methods in your further research and, if you so desire, to utilize what you discover in your own spiritual and religious praxes, and to seek qualified spiritual guidance.