Silence (*Hesychia*): A Method for Experiencing God

The practice of silence of the Greek, *hesychia*, the withdrawal from the external world with focus on inward stillness, contemplation, and prayer, and *hesychasm*, the later Athonite movement of prayer and bodily positioning in Orthodox monasticism, is a method of experiencing God predicated on the belief that a direct spiritual experience and union with God is possible. Long lines of *hesychasts*, from the second century to the present day, spoke and wrote about the fruits of their experiences.

Orthodox Christianity, by definition, preserves ancient beliefs and practices and is mostly unchanging. The Orthodox ascetic belief that communion with God may be achieved through the practices of individual retreat to silence and stillness and through continual prayer, individually or in community, in petition to Jesus Christ, is generally unchanged since its origins in the second century, but the method of how those beliefs and practices are conveyed to others has changed. This book argues and demonstrates how the transmission of *hesychia* has experienced change and innovation.

Implicit in the state and practices of *hesychia* is the importance of cessation of worldly conversation and activity in favor of a retreat into silence, stillness, and isolation. While within the practices of *hesychia* the relational experience of God-to-human being was held as paramount, the relationships of human-to-human are purposefully mitigated or avoided by monks: *hesychasts*, by tradition and as a rule, want to be left alone, preserve their state of *hesychia*, and/or only associate with other monks avoiding outside influences and disruptions. This attitude is particularly noticeable in the earliest

known saints and practitioners. Today, there is a very strong insistence upon a relationship with a father/mother/elder, and the practice is considered nonviable if isolated from the Eucharistic life of the church, necessarily undertaken where "two or more are gathered" in the Holy Name of Jesus Christ.

The term *monk* or *monachos* itself means "one who is alone." This flight to solitude from the outer world was also a fleeing from other monks. But solitude and *hesychia* were not synonymous. The true goal was not just physical removal from stimuli or community pressures. It was what Harmless calls "a graced depth of inner stillness."[1] St. Joseph the Hesychast, a contemporary Athonite, wrote, "The aim was *hesychia*, quiet, the calm through the whole man that is like a still pool of water, capable of reflecting the sun. To be in true relationship with God, standing before him in every situation—that was the angelic life, the spiritual life, the monastic life, the aim and the way of the monk."[2] As Abba Alonius said, "Unless a man can say 'I alone and God are here,' he will not find the prayer of quiet."[3]

While *hesychia* has been taught through the ages by spiritual masters, it has historically been communicated on a one-to-one basis in monasteries only, either through a kind of mentor-protégé system or through the instructional texts of monastic manuals. So private is this practice that many nonascetic Orthodox remain entirely unaware of *hesychia*. Thus it is all the more unusual that a nonascetic, non-Orthodox scholar and ethnographer has been able to record both the praxes and instruction on text and on film to introduce them to a wider audience of both Orthodox and secular recipients.

The communications and experiences of the modern-day *hesychasts* through interviews and on film cannot be divorced from their historical, theological, and methodological contexts. Because the nature of these direct and mystical experiences of God is central to

1. William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 228.

2. Benedicta Ward, *The Wisdom of the Desert Fathers: The Apophthegmata Patrum (the Anonymous Series)*, Fairacres Publication (Oxford: S. L. G., 1975), xvii.

3. Benedicta Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection* (London: Mowbrays, 1975), Saying Number 1.

this research and essay, I will introduce the subject in Part One by analyzing and comparing the reports of actual experiences of God from the point of view of the key ancient practitioners. Part Two will present, analyze, and compare the stories, methodology, and pedagogy of contemporary and living spiritual masters, church officials, and practitioners of *hesychia*.

Experiences of God

The question of whether it is truly possible to have a direct experience of God or a union with God or to see God is a central question of theology. It has been argued pro and con in the Bible and by ancient practitioners and modern scholars; yet in actuality it remains a timeless mystery. Eastern Orthodox ascetic doctrine today, as it has been filtered and interpreted over centuries of theory and practice, holds that God can indeed be known and experienced; the methodology of *hesychia* has developed and evolved to that end.

Hesychia and the word's associated derivatives—*hesychast* (a practitioner of *hesychia*) and *hesychasm* (the system and methodology *hesychasts* employ)—define and encompass several areas: a core idea and inner state; the practitioners who seek to attain that inner state; and the tradition of practices that has grown up around this desire. *Hesychia* describes a state of consciousness, one of peace and focus on God, the result of grace, practices of devoted prayer (mainly but not exclusively the Jesus Prayer), and partaking of the Holy Mysteries (the Eucharist) as well as management of physical, psychological, and intellectual aspects of the individual. *Hesychia* is not only silence and stillness as its description implies, but also an "attitude of listening to God and of openness towards Him" as described by Palmer, Sherrard, and Ware, the English-language editors of *The Philokalia*,[4] a later collection of mainly Athonite texts on the subject.

My survey of the history of *hesychia*, as revealed in primary and secondary sources, includes key theorists and practitioners who exemplified the experience of God and the attainment of *hesychia*

4. Nicodemus and Makarios, *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*, trans. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware (London: Faber & Faber, 1979), 364.

through *hesychasm*. Conversations and formal ethnographic interviews and observation of living monks and *hesychasts* further reveal contemporary figures who, like their predecessors, stand out as ascetics who are filled with God's presence and possess high intellect—and who were also willing to leave seclusion for a moment to share their private experiences. I will begin by highlighting key attitudes and statements of ancient *hesychasts*. This purpose is twofold: first, to demonstrate the importance they assign to maintaining stillness, silence, and isolation from the world; second, to highlight some of the benefits of *hesychia*.

I also include admonishments and cautionary advice from master *hesychasts* for monks[5] to avoid or minimize contact with others (especially nonascetics and non-Orthodox) and to retain silence and stillness for the sake of preserving the traditions and practices, both individually and collectively. The departures from this silence and isolation that this thesis describes are only one of many paradoxes to be found in the analysis and conveyance of *hesychia* and *hesychasm*. It will be readily apparent to the reader how the values of *hesychasts* differ from those in the "outside" world: inner experiences are valued over external events, goals are spiritual not simply material, attention to one's own physical comfort is minimized in favor of obedience and service to God and other human beings. Awareness of those values will be important in understanding and putting into context the motivation of the monastics to consider the departure from "the world," and later the departure from tradition that the new transmission method described herein represents.

A Brief Historic Background to *Hesychia*

As *hesychia* is an ancient Orthodox Christian ascetic methodology that claims to provide an opportunity for peace and a transcendent spiritual experience of God in various forms and situations, it is assumed by practitioners that God can indeed be experienced.

5. The term "monk" in contemporary use in monasteries in Egypt, Greece, and Romania means a male renunciant. "Monastery" connotes a place for either male or female coenobitic ascetics.

According to Vladimir Lossky, the question of the experience of God in Orthodox practices of *hesychia* appears to have posed two variations: Is God's presence to be realized in some sort of life after death (in an eschatological or salvific sense), or may God be known in present, human life, in some sort of ecstatic or transcendent experience?[6] If the former is possible, is this vision or experience of God possible prior to death or at death itself? Or do we commune with God only after death and resurrection? In either case, is the union with God direct and personal or through an intermediary?

St. John wrote, "No one has seen the Father, except him who is with God; he has seen the Father,"[7] referring to Jesus Christ. The Synoptic Gospels recast the issue as not vision, but knowledge: "No one knows the Son, except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and him to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."[8] In other words, divine knowledge can be given or shown to created humans by God the Father's Son, Jesus Christ.

The First Epistle of St. John[9] and St. Paul's Letter to the Corinthians[10] convey the promise of a vision of God associated with being sons of God, given by grace through love of the Father. This grace is not yet with us, as we of the world do not yet know God, because what we will be has not yet come. The fruit of his manifestation has not arrived. When he comes, we will be like him, and we will "see Him as He is." First and foremost, this revealing is for the followers of God, "the sons of God," or "children of God." Then, there is the element of eschatology, the final moment when God manifests, in the parousia, "when He will appear." Then, we will become "likenesses" of God, a product of God's divine grace and love. To Lossky, this is a causal relationship: "We shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is," a consequence of the vision of God. "The fact that we see God as He is shows that we are likenesses of Him."[11]

6. Vladimir Lossky, *The Vision of God*, trans. Ashleigh Moorhouse (London: Faith Press, 1963), 9–20.

7. John 6:46.

8. Cf. Matt. 11:27; Luke 10:22.

9. 3:1-2.

10. 13:12.

11. Lossky, *The Vision of God*, 25.

What do the early church fathers have to say on this matter? Specifically, how do they answer the question whether any vision of or union with God (however removed) can take place only after death or in the end time, or whether God may be known in the context of human life as we know it?

W. H. C. Frend asserts that Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–c. 215) also believed that we could become "likenesses" of God, not in an eschatological moment but through a process of lifelong purification, as the Platonists taught. Clement shared his philosophy with the Stoic and Christian law of purification and the superiority of virtue over reason; of us "making ready the way for him who is perfected in Christ . . . to prepare the way for the teaching that is royal in the highest sense of the word, by making men self-controlled, by molding character and making them ready to receive the truth."[12] Union with God, to become like God, was to become "free of the passions that hindered the soul's ascent to perfection and deification."[13] Attaining the likeness of God through gnosis (knowledge) was for a select few, but Clement wrote that God was accessible to those made ready by purification and the process of virtue. Through gnosis, the result of purification, we could experience "unity but beyond unity, transcending the monad," not through his creation, but through the Son or Word (Logos)—"his image, mind and reason, inseparable from Himself."[14] In other words, what we are able to commune with is not God but a reflection or incarnation of God rather than God's direct essence. Frend summarizes, "He (Christ) reflected God rather than contrasted with God, while the Spirit was light issuing from Him, to illuminate the faithful (through the prophets and philosophers) pervading the world and drawing him towards God."[15]

12. Clement, *Stromateis*, trans. John Ferguson, vol. 1–3, Fathers of the Church (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1991), I.16.80.6.

13. W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 370.

14. Clement, *Miscellanies*, trans. Fenton John Anthony Hort and Joseph B. Mayor, vol. 7 (New York: Garland, 1987). Frend also points out that Clement states he is also "wisdom, and knowledge and truth."

15. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, 370.

Moving beyond Scripture yet influenced by it, second-century authors St. Theophilus of Antioch and St. Irenaeus also speak of visions of God. Theophilus wrote an apology in three books directed to an educated pagan, *Autolycus*, c. 178–182. The latter asks how Christians see God. "Through creation," Theophilus replies. "Everything has been created from nothing, so that the majesty of God might be known and grasped by the mind through his works." God can be known through his handiworks and beneficence. "Thus God, who created all things by the Word and by Wisdom, can be known in His providence and in his works."[16] This relates to Paul's Epistle to the Romans, where "the invisible nature of God becomes visible in creation."

First, preparation is needed. The "spiritual eyes" must be opened. Theophilus writes that a person must first establish that man/woman has eyes to see and ears to hear; then it is the "eyes of the soul" being opened through which we may see God.

Faith in and fear of God must be established, to understand that God established his wisdom on earth, through his care. This may be experienced through a life of justice and purity, and only then, after death and resurrection, via "disposal of your corruptible nature, and clothed in incorruptibility, you will see God, in so far as you are worthy."[17] Theophilus does not mean that God is knowable only after death. "Disposal of your corruptible nature" means that we must be freed from the constraints of the human body, while still alive, no longer susceptible to the passions and sin, yet utilizing our body and its faculties to apprehend God.

Theophilus says knowing God through his works is hard through "carnal eyes," and inexpressible through words. Lossky explains:

> . . . as all is created from nothing, all there is, is what is created, or through His majesty, available to see God. If He is intelligent then God is known through prudence; power shows His energy; providence demonstrates His goodness;

16. Theophilus and Gustave Bardy, *Trois Livres à Autolycus*, Sources Chrétiennes (Paris: Cerf, 1948), Book 1, Chapters 1–7, p. 6.

17. Lossky, *The Vision of God*, 29.

> Father means that God is everything; fire conveys the notion of wrath.

This is an elaboration on specific tangible elements of creation as tied to attributes of the human being, and their analogies to God, as sensed and perceived through us. "Like the human soul which, while it remains invisible, makes itself known by the movements of the body which it animates, thus God, who created all things by the Word and by Wisdom, can be known in his providence and in his works."[18]

An eschatological framework of seeing and knowing God—after resurrection, predicated upon the requirement of existing in a perfected or incorruptible state upon death—may be found in the work of St. Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 175–185).[19] Such a state of purity, to Irenaeus, is the pinnacle of human endeavor. Knowledge of God is given to us through the Word (the Logos), a revelation from the Father through love, from which all things are created.

The Word becomes incarnated when humans are born. Before the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, humans were made in the image of God, but this could not be proven, because the Word—the One in whose image humans were made—was not visible. The Incarnation made the Word visible, and the image and likeness of God as human being demonstrated our own similarity to the Father. Irenaeus sees the Holy Spirit as the conduit for humans to acquire the likeness of God. It is through the Son and the Holy Spirit that we ascend to the life of God, he taught. God cannot be known through nature or creation; rather, he makes himself known by revealing himself via love, through our love for him and his love for us. Such knowledge does not come to us in our lifetime but after death.[20] To Irenaeus, there are three "visions" of God: first through the Holy Spirit, then through a "likeness" (similar to what Moses saw or experienced on Mt. Sinai), then through the Son, the Word made into flesh.

18. Also a reference to Romans ("the invisible nature of God becomes visible in creation") and of Dionysius, who formed names from acts of providence and from Scripture. Ibid.

19. Cf. St. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies: False Gnosis Unmasked and Refuted*, written between 180 and 190.

20. Irenaeus, *Five Books of S. Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, against Heresies* (Oxford: J. Parker, 1872), IV 6, 3–6.

The concept of the light of God, made manifest through the uncreated Light, which shone from Jesus at the transfiguration on Mt. Tabor, is an important one in desert Christian and Byzantine theology. It is central to the doctrine of *hesychia* and would be the subject of the central dispute about the possibility of direct communion with God in the fourteenth-century Athonite controversies between St. Gregory Palamas and Barlaam. This "uncreated Light" is beyond creation; beyond the human senses, into the realm of the indescribable and invisible—the Father himself.

This vision of God in likeness is also a vision of life to come: the vision of Christ in his glory, the vision through which we are enabled to participate in the light of God, the Invisible. "To see the light," wrote St. Irenaeus, "is to be in the light and to participate in his life-giving splendor. Therefore, those who see God, participate in life."[21]

St. Irenaeus's vision of God is that of incorruptibility, as a source for eternal life and of all existence. Experiencing this vision of God entails participation. Through vision we participate in God, akin to light—to see it is to be in it. The invisible God is revealed by Christ transfigured by the light of the Father; the same light in which we may attain incorruptibility in a state of eternal life. To have a glimpse of light while on earth as human beings is possible only through the Incarnated Word, which is cast onto an eschatological plane, for the righteous.

It is important to realize that Irenaeus doesn't imagine any practical possibility of "seeing God." His theology's eschatological relevance to *hesychia*—or, more important, to the daily practice of *hesychasts*—is limited, as the revelation is yet to come. However, the possibility of participating fully in life with the possibility of seeing or communing with God in the hereafter is the hope of the life to come, essential for Christian faith.

The Vision or Experience of God in Silence

The idea of the possibility of communion with God through contemplation began to develop from Hellenistic ideas, in Egypt, with

21. Ibid., V 20, 1035.

the decline of eschatological notions and a shift toward a more soteriological and present-time modality of communion. Alexandria was a locus of the shift, particularly in the writings of Clement and Origen and then of his disciple, St. Dionysius of Alexandria. The Alexandrian theological school does not believe that unity with God is possible only through the agency of resurrection or through a departure from the material world. Rather, we can unite with God in a material, corporeal existence, they believed, through use of knowledge. Here was a rejection of the idea of the future salvation after death in favor of a movement toward a method in this lifetime, open to all Christians, for attaining a new kind of perfection through devotion to God. The method to attain this perfection was through contemplation.

According to Festugière, Christians after third-century Alexandria also merged elements of pagan wisdom with the teachings of Jesus. He sees the origins of this school in the Alexandrian masters Clement and Origen, whom he calls the founders of "philosophical spirituality," that is, a kind of intellectual or superintellectual mystical practice. Festugière says, "Perfection is equated to contemplation, and to contemplate is to see God in an immediate vision." Festugière sees all subsequent Christian mysticism as a result of a symbiosis between Athens and Jerusalem. "The links in the chain are readily discerned. They are all teachers of contemplation: Evagrius, Gregory of Nyssa, Diadochus of Photice, the Pseudo-Dionysius in the East; Augustine and Gregory the Great in the West.[22]

The idea of the necessity of cleansing or purification took hold. Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–215), in his *Protrepikos* or *Exhortation to the Greeks*, finds that the Greek mysteries begin with purification. Christian confession, like Hellenic confession and pagan rituals, begins with the "lesser mysteries" and ascends to "great mysteries" of purification where we simply contemplate realities instead of acting on them, thereby learning from them.

The highest degree of contemplation of God, in Clement, is the end result of analysis and intellectual process. The process begins with *apatheia*, suppression of the body and its physical aspects for the purpose

22. André-Jean Festugière, "Asceticism and Contemplation," in *The Child of Agrigento* (Paris, 1941), 131–46.

of liberating the mind's capacity to attain contemplation or knowledge. If we suppress the physical dimensions of mass and space—depth, size, length—we can see ourselves as a single point in space. There, at that locus, we detect a "certain unity, an intellectual monad." If we then suppress all that is human in ourselves, both bodily and ethereal, what is left is the majesty of Christ. From there, we can then move on to experience knowledge of God, who "contains all." This is a particular kind of knowledge, "not of what is [as He is invisible] but what He is not."[23] This is an apophatic way, or a process of negation.[24]

The apophatic process helps us to know God, but not through our own devices. We know God when we put ourselves aside. Monks "negate" themselves, experiencing a kind of self-demise. They grieve for their sins and the sins of the world but at the same time receive the intimate and infinite joy of regeneration, forgiveness, and the spiritual joy of Christ's resurrection. The individual monk "dies" in order to live for God. He forgets himself in order to discover God. He surrenders and sacrifices worldly concerns and connections in order to attain true and real spiritual connection with God. This combination of renunciation, sorrow for one's sins, but joy in living for and with Christ is known as *harmolypi* (joyful sadness). This word expresses two emotions at once: sorrow and happiness. When one contemplates God through prayer and practice, and begins to deeply appreciate the many interventions and compassions of grace offered, the eyes are sometimes filled with tears, both of joy and of melancholy.

The contemplation of God takes us beyond the point of the One, beyond unity, into a realm that is beyond description. All experiences and ideas of this are by nature unformed, as God exists beyond form, type, difference, genus, or class. He is infinite, lacking any mass or dimension. No name can fully describe him: as Clement wrote, if we call him the One, the Good, Spirit, Being Itself, Father, God, Creator, Lord, we do so improperly; instead of pronouncing his name we are only using the most excellent names we can find among things that are known, in order to fix our wandering and disoriented thought.[25]

23. *Stromateis* V, 11.

24. Reminiscent of Plotinus, in his sixth *Ennead*. Cf. Glossary.

25. *Stromateis* V, 12.

Hellenic philosophers also influenced Clement, particularly Plato who wrote in the *Timaeus*, "It is difficult to know God, it is impossible to express him." This statement makes it clear, to Clement at least, that Plato had read the Bible, borrowing the notion of the unnamable and unspeakable for God. He puts God into a region of ideas, the most difficult pinnacle of human reason to attain. For Clement, Plato learned from Moses' experience on Mt. Sinai that God contains all things in their entirety, but that we can only see him through a mirror, distantly, and not directly face-to-face. It is through our thoughts that we are able to see this dim light of divinity. Therefore, to Clement, Plato and Scripture are in accord.

Building on those practitioners who believed in and acted on the possibility of communing with God and in moving toward the specific history and methodology of *hesychia*, I see some emerging common patterns in the *hesychastic* tradition. Although Scripture often contradicts the possibility of communing with God, the desert ascetics believed it possible through likeness or image through the Logos, the Son of God, and later, the Holy Trinity, either in life or in the afterlife, through knowledge. They believed, too, that some form of purification is necessary.

The early desert *hesychasts* tell us that we can, indeed, see and know God. Clement explains that it's possible to become "likenesses" of God through the process of purification (as the Platonists and Stoics say) and by prioritizing knowledge, via the "transcendence of the Monad," the living Logos, the Son, Jesus Christ. Theophilus agrees that it is with the mind and intellect that we can know him, but in contrast to Clement, holds that it is through his provenance and works—creation.

Irenaeus takes an opposite stand: we cannot in this lifetime know God at all. It is only after death and resurrection that God may be realized in the afterlife.

Although it's impossible to summarize in one essay all of ancient Christian ascetic history on the subject of knowing God, it is evident that the theology, doctrine, and praxes of *hesychia* are based on the necessity of a hierarchical superiority of the mind (intellect) over the body in a Platonic sense, and that if God can be personally known

or experienced, it is only by grace. A process of bodily and mental purification is necessary, sacrificing the pleasures and passions of the physical body and material world and the distractions of the mind, calling on the Holy Spirit through the Logos in the form of Jesus Christ to open the door for God's grace to enter.

The perfect place to put aside the physical demands of the body and the mental distractions inherent in civilized culture, for the purpose of being alone with God, was the desert.

Alone with God in the Desert

The word "desert" has its origins in Latin: *desertum*, "something left waste," from *deserere*, to "leave, forsake."[26] The Greeks have a word for desert, *eremos*, which means "abandonment." The word *hermit* is a derivation.

Yet the isolated, inhospitable desert holds attraction as a place to find deep spiritual wisdom, as also evidenced by the desert history of Judaism and Christianity. The Israelites wandered in the desert for forty years, fleeing perils and searching for God's word and salvation. Moses, while tending his father-in-law Jethro's flocks of sheep, climbed the desert boulders of Mt. Sinai to answer God shining down from the clouds, and in the nonconsuming flames of a burning bush.

Joseph and the Virgin Mary carrying the Christ-child, the Holy Family, fled to the deserts of Egypt to avoid King Herod's massacre of male children in Bethlehem (Matt. 2:16). Bishop Youannes comments,

> Egypt is the only land visited by our Lord Jesus Christ. The holy family came from Israel to Egypt and spent here more than three years and a half. . . . The holy family visited many, many places, and all of these places now became monasteries and ancient churches, so we consider Egypt as the holy land.[27]

26. *Compact Oxford English Dictionary of Current English*, ed. Catherine Soanes and Sara Hawker (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

27. HD Master Reel 22. Recorded January 19, 2007.

John the Baptist preached of salvation in the arrival of the messiah, Jesus Christ, while teaching crowds in the desert. Christ began his testimony of total reliance on God while fighting demons in the desert for forty days and nights (Matt. 4:1-4):

> Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"[28]

God drew desperate people to the desert and appeared to them, assuring salvation from the limitations of human existence and worldly problems. The desert is a mystery: it is vast and void of life, because no human being can exist on sand and rock alone with little or no water, in the inhuman heat of day and the freezing cold of night. Yet the desert offers sacred visions and the presence of God, once one has surrendered their own understandings and experiences of worldly comforts and symbols of false gods, or has been brought to the edge of life and death.

How are we to find the desert in today's busy world?

John Chryssavgis writes, "The desert is an attraction beyond oneself; it is an invitation to transfiguration. It was neither a better way, nor an easier way. The desert elders were not out to prove a point: they were there to prove themselves."[29] Outwardly, it may appear that the early Christians experienced great suffering and trials in the desert; having to constantly worry about water and food, weather and harsh conditions. Externally, it may well have appeared that these people were dancing with insanity, wrestling with mental demons and casting away visions of the devil with constant prayer and meditation. However, some of the writings of the desert fathers and mothers paint

28. NRSV. Oremus Bible Browser. http://bible.oremus.org/?passage=Matthew 4.1-4.

29. John Chryssavgis and Zosimas, *In the Heart of the Desert: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers: With a Translation of Abba Zosimas' Reflections*, Treasures of the World's Religions (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2003), 34.

a far more peaceful and joyous picture of desert life. The reasons they left civilization and their families behind were to find peace, joy, and love with God, through the Holy Spirit and the Second Person Jesus Christ. They were in desperate need to free themselves from a multitude of useless thoughts (*logismoi*) and self-destructive actions dictated by uncontrolled desires. They wrestled with demons to win the victory of catharsis through grace. They endured suffering in order to discipline and cleanse their bodies and minds through total immersion into Christ. They surrendered their lives to the practices of stillness, watchfulness, and attentiveness in pure silence in order to see and hear the words and beauty of God himself. They looked for peace and found it in the complete isolation of the desert.

In the words of Bishop Youannes, General Bishop and General Secretary to His Holiness the late Pope Shenouda III, the former patriarch of the Coptic Church in Cairo:

> Of course, every person in the world needs the calmness of the desert, not only the monks or the nuns. . . . Because in the crowdedness of the world we don't see ourselves, and we don't see God. But when we [are] in a calmness, especially in the holy places, we begin to look to ourselves, to look to our shortages, to look to our defaults, to look to the deepness of our relation with God. To feel God, to hear God.[30]

Andrew Louth writes that the desert is not so much a place escape to; rather, it is a place to begin. The monks and nuns established relationships, with God and with their inner selves. These nomadic wanderers later grew to become communities of Christians: refining themselves and finding the revelation of God. The desert was a land of testing and preparation. It was the beginning and extension of a mission to know God and to serve God.[31]

To some practitioners, the desert was a place of retreat, stillness (eremia), or quiet (hesychia) where one could have the perfect condition for mental and physical withdrawal. To others, the desert

30. HD Master Reel 22. Recorded January 19, 2007.

31. Andrew Louth, *The Wilderness of God* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1991), 1.

was a place of life-and-death struggle, battling with the negative aspects of self and of sin. Louth says "a notable early example [of the latter] is St. Antony . . . where the desert seems to be a noisy, clamorous place, worse than the world, not a place of quiet or stillness at all."[32]

32. Ibid., 2.