

HST 460 Christian Mystics: Desert Spirituality

3 credit hours

January 5-16, 2009, Monday 1:00-4:00 PM and

Tuesday through Friday 8:00 AM-12:00 noon

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This class will study the emergence and development of monastic practice and spirituality in the early church. Rejecting aspects of ancient Mediterranean social structures they found unjust, oppressive and incompatible with Christian values and worship, many men and women experimented with a variety of alternative lifestyles. They lived alone, in small groups or in larger more structured communities and devoted themselves to prayer, work, transformation through divine grace, and service to others. The pioneers passed on the fruits of their life experience and the wisdom they had gained through their struggles to their younger brothers and sisters in the form of sayings, stories, sermons and essays.

These writings have been treasured resources ever since in the Eastern and Western churches and can be invaluable aids to prayer, reflection and practical Christian living. John Wesley was greatly influenced by them and recommended them to the early Methodists.

Early monasticism is best known as it developed in Egypt but actually emerged simultaneously in other cultures around the Mediterranean world. Recent scholarship has uncovered evidence of rich diversity and regional variations in the theory and practice of desert spirituality that had been hidden in rare manuscripts and archeological remains for centuries. We will examine the classic story of its growth in Egypt and trace continuities and differences in Palestine, Syria and the Latin West.

Required Readings

Roberta Bondi, *To Love as God Loves: Conversations with the Early Church*. Fortress Press, 1987. A brief, refreshing and illuminating introduction to desert spirituality and its relevance to contemporary issues and pastoral problems

William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism*. Oxford University Press, 2004. Written by a master teacher, this contemporary textbook outlines the history of early Christian monasticism and introduces the major figures and texts to students today. It contains useful time lines and tables and short well-chosen excerpts from ancient writings.

Benedicta Ward, *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks*. Penguin Books, 2003. A new translation of the ancient Latin collection of Egyptian desert sayings and stories. Includes sayings by mothers, too.

John Cassian, *Conferences*. Paulist Press, 1985. Cassian lived as a monk in Egypt for many years in the circle surrounding the monastic theologian and spiritual guide Evagrius Ponticus. Then he moved to France and became a founder of Western community monasticism. His writings transmitted and adapted the insights and stories he learned in Egypt to the West and remained enormously influential throughout the Middle Ages because St. Benedict put them on a short list of recommended readings.

Dorotheos of Gaza, *Discourses and Sayings*. Cistercian Publications, 1977. A Palestinian abbot shares wisdom about living together relevant to all kinds of communities. Recommended reading for beginners in Eastern Christian monastic life throughout the centuries. Read at least half of Dorotheos's discourses.

Pseudo-Macarius, *The Fifty Spiritual Homilies and the Great Letter*. Paulist Press, 1992. Although they were traditionally ascribed to Macarius the Great, a famous Egyptian desert father, the author of these writings was actually an anonymous Syrian spiritual writer. They abound in vivid Biblical imagery and focus on a life of sanctification through fervent prayer and the grace of the Holy Spirit. When John Wesley published a library of Christian classics for his followers, he chose the *Fifty Spiritual Homilies* as the first volume in the series. Read the Preface by Kallistos Ware and at least 100 pages of the *Fifty Homilies*. Maloney's introduction contains useful historical information but is outdated and unreliable in places.

These 6 books will be available in the bookstore.

The primary sources – writings of the desert fathers and mothers, John Cassian, Dorotheos of Gaza and Macarius -- are meant to be read slowly a little bit at a time in the context of prayer and quiet reflection. Although they abound in theological insights, they focus on the practice of Christian life rather than academic theology. Their style often echoes the wisdom sayings and parables of the Gospels. The words are intended to be savored over and over so that they sink in to the inmost core of your being. They were traditionally learned by heart, so that one could repeat them in one's mind during daily work, reflect on them and internalize them. If you try to read them all at once in a hurry you will risk missing their real meaning and impact.

It is **strongly recommended** that you begin these readings as early in the fall semester as possible. Read a few pages of the primary sources, or even a paragraph or two, every day, in the context of your daily prayers. And, if at all possible, read Bondi first to give you some orientation. Her book is short and very accessible.

It is also essential to bear in mind the diversity of these sayings. They contain the echoes of a multitude of voices. They preserve wisdom and practical advice from a wide variety of authors and perspectives and come from cultures vastly different from ours. Pay attention to how they offer different advice to different people. So while some things you read may speak immediately to today's personal or pastoral crisis, some may be completely inapplicable today because of differences in culture, vocation, personality type or lifestyle.

If you are looking for guidance in your own life, don't feel obligated to take all their advice literally! These texts often make important points indirectly. Remember moderation and common sense. Find the sayings that speak to you. You can learn other things from the ones that do not address your situation personally.

Written Assignments

The following assignments are due at the beginning of the first class on January 3, 2005.

1. A 3 page meditation or sermon based on one or more of the ancient stories told in the assigned readings. Find something that has applications to faith communities today. Be prepared to offer a presentation to the class based on this paper. (10% of grade)
2. A 5 page essay analyzing one of the *Fifty Homilies* of Pseudo-Macarius. Analyze how the author uses Scripture, vivid metaphorical language and examples from daily life to teach about at least three of the following: what it is to be human, the process of sanctification, the grace of the Holy Spirit, the believer's relationship with God, and the glorious life to come. (20% the grade)
3. A 5 to 7 page essay on one of the following topics taken from chapter titles in *The Desert Fathers*: self control, fortitude, possessing nothing, nothing done for show, non-judgment, discretion, sober living, hospitality, humility, patience and charity. These represent some of the key virtues the desert fathers and mothers considered essential in the process of sanctification. Answer the following questions. What do the desert Christians understand this virtue to be? Do different ones have different views of how to learn and practice this virtue, and what are the differences? Are some of their insights applicable to our lives today, are some inapplicable, and why? You will find material in all the assigned books that will help you in this paper. Draw on as many of them as you can. (25% of grade)

On January 16 a take home exam will be handed out. It will contain essay questions about the historical topics covered in the assigned readings and classroom work. You will have some choice in which questions to answer. It will be due in my mailbox by noon on January 28 (45% of grade).