FLOWERS FROM THE DESERT

Sayings on Humility, Obedience, Repentance, and Love from the Christian Hermits of Ancient Times

Translated from the Greek,
compiled, and arranged by

Archbishop Chrysostomos of Etna

FLOWERS FROM THE DESERT

Sayings on Humility, Obedience,
Repentance, and Love from
the Christian Hermits
of Ancient Times

Translated from the Greek,
compiled, and arranged by

Archbishop Chrysostomos of Etna

Etna, California
2003

Contents

Introduction

For nearly thirty years now, after becoming a monk rather late in life and after having lived a normal "life in the world," as the Desert Fathers might have expressed it, I have been reading and translating from Greek the writings of these practitioners—who lived and flourished in the first few centuries of the Christian era—of a philosophical and spiritual life that remains to this day a blossom in the wilderness of the demons of human deceit and vanity. In the early 1980s, when I was a Visiting Scholar to the Harvard Divinity School, I began a series of books on the psychology of the Desert Fathers, drawing from their aphorisms and from stories of their monastic struggles a profile of the elements by which, in the language of the Eastern Orthodox spiritual tradition, one ascends the ladder of Divine ascent, purifying the emotions and passions and becoming one with the Energies of God: perfected within the imperfection of this world. In the mid- and late-1980s, at Oxford University in England, under the sponsorship of the Marsden Foundation, and then while teaching as a Visiting Professor at the Theological Institute of Uppsala University in Sweden, I subsequently wrote four small volumes on these elements: humility, obedience, repentance, and love.

The unifying theme of these books is that the struggle for human perfection within the imperfections of the world and the human psyche begins, according to the teachings of the Desert Fathers, by a humble acknowledgement of the depths of human depravity *face à face* with the human potential for divinization (in Greek, θέωσις, or union with the energies—though not the essence—of God) and perfection. Having beheld the higher spiritual ideals and principles of human life, a spiritual aspirant must then develop a profound commitment to such things. In this commitment, he learns to obey and to submit to the good, to the Divine, as well as to those things and persons that represent, and guide one towards, the higher life: consciously following in obedience and with fidelity the quiet invitation of the heart to partake

of the good things (τὰ ἀγαθά, in Greek) of the inner life of the soul. Seeing, at last, how far short he falls of the standard of perfection, an aspirant is overcome, not by self-denigrating guilt, but by a deep, ineluctable regret before all that separates the human from the holy. In keeping with the true meaning of the Greek word for repentance, μετάνοια, the aspirant undergoes a complete realignment of the thoughts, turning the mind naturally and spontaneously to the good. Sorrow for sin, strangely joined to an ineffable joy, creates a condition in which—pierced to the heart by contrition and seemingly overwhelmed by a sense of unworthiness and an intense fear of certain perdition—the repentant struggler draws nearer to God in his burning awareness of what it is that separates him from what is so close. The gap between God and the sinner, in this repentant state, is closed, not by self-affirmations about salvation and holiness, but by a sure Grace that operates within joyous sorrow.

Finally, having ascended through lowliness to the loftiness of obedience, and having cultivated the desire for God which repentance brings, the spiritual seeker is drawn to God by love, reaching the highest rung on the spiritual ladder that leads up to virtue and perfection. Not by compulsion, but by the energy and action of God, he is united to the Divine, transformed thereby in love. Subject to sin but drawn by love to perfection, *amor gignit amorem*: love engenders love. So great is this love of God, that the aspirant comes to see Him in his fellow man, making the whole of life one of concern for others. He places even before self-discipline the sacred duty of loving service to one's neighbor; for, as one holy man succinctly says, the love of one's brother is evidence of one's love for God—the former verifies the latter. With a self-effacing and humble love, one who is joined to God exalts the very existence of others above his own, concealing his own virtues and spiritual feats, lest he appear to be more than those whom he is called to serve. He comes to that mastership which is true servitude, in the imitation of God's inimitable love. In the offering and gracious acceptance of gentle hospitality, in the giving of alms, in

the forbearance of the shortcomings of others, and in the practical, tangible display of sincere care and affection for all, this servitude is made manifest and comes to fruition.

In conceiving the idea of a psychology of human transformation, a Patristic psychology drawn from the practical experience of the Desert Fathers, I had occasion to collect virtual volumes of aphorisms and anecdotes from these monks and nuns of the wilderness (and, indeed, the term "Fathers" is an inclusive one; the desert *Abba*, or Father, has his counterpart in the desert *Amma*, or Mother). I have become involved, as a direct result of this, in a project which has been slowly producing, since 1988, the first full text in English of the standard Greek collection of the sayings of the Desert Fathers, the *Evergetinos*, which in the Greek is contained in four books. To date, eight English volumes have been published from the first two books of the Greek text. It is from my earlier research on the psychology of the Fathers and this present translation work that I have drawn and selected the sayings contained in this book. Many of them, since almost all of the extant translations of aphorisms and anecdotes from the desert hermits are from Latin sources, appear here for the first time in their original form; indeed, some of the specific aphorisms of the Elders (originally collected in what was called the *Gerontikon*, from the Greek word γέρων, or Elder) are absent from the Latin collection. This Latin collection of aphorisms from the Desert Fathers dates to the sixth century and was likely first compiled by the Latin Deacon Pelagius, later Pope of Rome. It draws from various strata of earlier Greek manuscripts, probably written in the latter half of the fourth century and no doubt partly based on Coptic texts or oral traditions. These Greek manuscripts, many of which have not survived, were gathered into one single text in the eleventh century by the Byzantine Monk Paul, founder of the Mone Hyperagias Theotokou Evergetidos (the Monastery of the Mother of God the Benefactress); hence, the appellation given to this collection: the *Evergetinos*. It is the anthology which traditionally constituted the primary source of sayings from the Desert Fathers for the Orthodox Christian world.

In the eighteenth century, the *Evergetinos* was revised, edited, and published by Saint Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain, who, along with Saint Makarios of Corinth, was also responsible for the compilation of the monumental *Philokalia*, a collection of spiritual texts drawn from the Byzantine mystics. Saint Nikodemos' text of the *Evergetinos*, which is arranged around certain "hypotheses" or "themes" concerning the monastic estate and spiritual life in general, is written in a style of Greek that is often cryptic, laconic, and rich with irony. In many instances, the aphorisms of the Fathers and the anecdotes which they tell are in the form of a classical riddle or a play on words or thoughts. The manner in which they are written, therefore, demands concentration and a moment of reflection, to be properly understood. These traits tremendously enhance the impact of the sayings of the Desert Fathers in Greek. However, because this enhancement is accomplished by the use of rhetorical traditions and devices that are common to antiquity but rare in modern languages, the sayings at times lose much in translation. This is to some extent also true in modern Greek, though to a much lesser degree than in other languages. The several translations of the original Greek of the *Evergetinos* into modern Greek have, in fact, helped to flesh out the skeletal form of the original, while still retaining many of the idioms and linguistic peculiarities of the older Greek. These texts, available to the general reader with a reasonable proficiency in modern Greek, though not perfect, surpass, in my mind, anything to be found in translations from Latin sources into modern languages.

Therefore, I have worked here, as in my other translations of texts from the Desert Fathers, with both the original Greek edition of the *Evergetinos* edited by Saint Nikodemos in the eighteenth century and with modern Greek renditions of his edition. At times, I have chosen to retain the terse expressions of the original Greek; at other times, without violating the style or content of the ancient text, I have directly translated from the modern Greek. The result is, I think, the closest possible approximation

of the tone, spirit, and meaning of the original texts that can be found in a contemporary language, other than modern Greek, and one which easily and adequately translates into other modern languages. Hence, I believe that my translation offers a genuine encounter with the wisdom of the Desert Fathers that eludes translations made from the Latin source texts.

As a final note, the reader will see that I have not used the Latin forms of names and place-names, but have left them in their original Greek form. This is important, not only because one retains, with such a device, certain qualities of the original text, but because some of the names in Greek are renderings of Coptic and Syriac names that have otherwise been lost in the historical past. It is probably better to retain these names as they exist in the extant manuscript tradition, thus bearing testimony—if imperfectly and by derivation—to the origins of many of the spiritual traditions which have formed Greek and other Orthodox spiritual traditions and that have, of course, impacted on the spiritual development of Western Christianity, too.

Archbishop Chrysostomos
Bucharest, Romania
January, 2001

CENTER FOR TRADITIONALIST ORTHODOX STUDIES
ISBN 0-911165-54-1