Desert Spirituality: *Amma*, a Spiritual Directress

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> „Like going near a bright window, seek encounters with holy men and women, in order that by their help you may be able to see clearly also your own heart as it were a closely-written book, being able by comparison to discern your own slackness or neglect"[1].

Pour celui qui cherche la voie du salut, la rencontre avec les bienheureux, hommes ou femmes, vivant au désert, était plus qu'une fenêtre lumineuse ; elle était l'ouverture vers les profondeurs de l'âme et la possibilité d'y voir clair les faiblesses et l'insouciance. Le désert était l'espace d'une recherche douloureuse, pleine de courage, d'audace et de souffrance pour briser les liens avec le monde du dehors et pénétrer cet ailleurs qui est le cœur.
Le monde des bienheureuses du désert est celui de la vocation, de la simplicité et de l'ascèse, la vie de ces femmes étant une expérience impressionante, une recherche fervente de Dieu.
Le désert était aussi l'expérience de la prière, de la prière de l'être tout entier, la prière de la délivrance de l'homme de ses passions et de lui-même.
L'expérience de ces vénérables femmes est initiation et formation ; c'est une échelle qui conduit au salut. Le désert n'est rien autre que le passage par la mort vers une nouvelle naissance.

Mots clés: ascétisme, *désert*, *les bienheureux*, *amma*.

1. Introduction

There are but scarce records documenting the lives and teachings of the nuns struggling in this desert of painful renunciation and deep silence. The desert was the locus where these wonderful women attempted to establish a fervent connection to God, where they learned how to listen to their own souls, „and the apparent wasteland turned into fruitful simplicity ... Their inner transfiguration resulted in the simplicity of the soul..., the fertile soil stemming forth the true self"[2]. This simplicity is in harmony with people and nature; it is a simplicity opposite to the „idle

[1] Palladius, 2007. *Lavsaicon – The Lausiac History*, translation, introduction and notes by Father Prof. Dr. Dumitru Staniloae, The Biblical and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, p. 18.

[2] Laura Swan, *The forgotten desert mothers, sayings, lives and stories of early Christian women*, Bucureşti, Σοφια, 2004, p. 6.

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curiosity" mentioned by Saint Ephraim the Syrian. This is simple, God-given wealth, completely different from the material riches.

Most of these blessed women began their spiritual life in the convent, and later chose the desert for retirement. Others chose the desert in the first place, starting their spiritual life there and accepting female disciples.

Life in the monastic community is summed up by the advice offered by abba Anthony to blessed Theodora: „We shall strive to be at peace, to keep silent, to be hungry and thirsty, to keep vigils, to be deprived of clothing, to weep and fast, to repent sincerely, to put ourselves to test and see whether we have become worthy of God, whether we love suffering in order to achieve God, whether we have despised our bodies in order to save our souls" [*Materikon*, p. 55][3].

2. Amma: the female experience of the desert

2.1. An *amma* was an experienced person leading an ascetic life, reputed for her wisdom. Her expertise in directing others stemmed from a lifelong, harsh dwelling in the desert, her struggle against passions, her knowledge and acceptance of her own condition and weakness, her humility. She would teach her female disciples by her own example, rather than her words. She addressed openly and boldly not only her discples, but also monks, pilgrims, clergymen and lay rulers alike. With unsurpassed courage, Amma Sarah scolded two hermits of Pilusius who had attempted to humiliate her: „Indeed, I am a woman by my nature, but not by my mind" [*The Egyptian Paterikon*, p. 265][4].

An amma's authority was mainly based on her wisdom and austere life.

2.2. *The amma and her disciples.* A special connection was created between an amma and her disciple. They would live simply, pray side by side, struggle and work together making baskets or ropes and weaving, or offered alms. The amma, however, maintained the necessary detachment enabling her to analyze the problems of her disciple and provide her with the best advice.

Ammas asked their discipes to be watchful, and constantly warned them against the dangers threatening human soul. Syncletica also said: „We are not safe in this world; the Apostle told us: «If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall» (1 Co 10, 12). We sail dangerously, and the psalmist says: There are both calm and dangerous spots at sea. We (monastics) apparently sail on calm sea, while laypeople roam dangerous places. Moreover we sail in daytime, guided by the sun of righteousness; the others are driven by ignorance in the darkness of night. However, it often happens that these people living in the world, travelling in storms and darkness, save their ship by keeping watch and crying out to God for fear of danger. But we, who are at peace, fail because of neglect, by abandoning the rudder of righteousness" [*Les sentences,* p. 176-177][5].

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[3] *Materikon. A collection of teachings for nuns,* collection compiled by monk Ignatius, Anastasia, Bucharest, 1995, p. 55.

[4] *The Egyptian Paterikon*, Sophia, Bucharest / Cartea Ortodoxă, Alexandria, 201, p. 265.

[5] *Les sentences des pères du désert,* Abbaye Saint-Pierre de Solesmes, Sarthe, 1966, p. 176-177.

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„To the amma and her disciple, life in the desert entailed hard work, and constant struggle to direct every part of their body, mind and soul towards God"[6].

Under the guidance of the amma, by virtue of ascetical practices passed down from ammas to their disciples, a peculiar spirituality of the desert developed within these women's communities. Amma Syncletica used to say: „Whatever we do or acquire in this world, let us deem it very little in comparison to the eternal riches in heaven... We have tasted the earthly food; let us rather seek the heavenly one! We have enjoyed the light here, let us long for the sun of righteousness! Let us aspire for the heavenly Jerusalem, our homeland… Let us lead a wise life, so that we may acquire the eternal one"[7].

2.3. *Life in the moastic community: requiring and taking the advice of the wisest.* The younger nuns sought the advice of the elder ones [*Materikon*, p. 45], while the elder and experienced ones asked for the advice of male anchorites, wishing to gain from these lovers of God what they themselves lacked, as Palladius says in his *Lausiac History* [Palladius, p. 17]. They welcomed, and even required the encounters with the most spiritualized monks, from whom they received teachings: „the most pious Eleutherius went to the blessed woman (namely Spolia, the daughter of a high official, who had become a nun and whose example was followed by other virgins wishing to please God) to visit her and give her words of wisdom" [*Grigory Dialogos*, p. 158].

Father Benedict's sister, Scholastica, a saintly and righteous virgin, who had embraced life in chastity since early age, used to meet him once a year in a house near the monastery's gates, where they discussed and he explained the Holy Scripture to her [*Grigory Dialogos* 2007, p. 106].

Blessed Theodora consulted the Great Anthony, who taught her: „I tell you that not only women but men also, unless they are freed from all earthly cares and self-impose silence, cannot please God or achieve salvation" [*Materikon*, p. 55]. Encounters with monks observed certain restrictions, for, according to blessed Theodora, „a nun who befriends laypeople or monks renounces the friendship with God and sides with devils. This is why *monasticism* comes from *monos*, because monastics love God and aspire towards Him" [*Materikon* 1995, 53].

2.4. *Cell life.* Monks and nuns had to stay in their cells as long as possible; only solitude allowed the necessary freedom and boldness to address God.

The cell was the place of their struggles, their spiritual fight; it was the locus of «meditating » on the Word of God[8] and experiencing this Word.

The cell was austere: it was furnished with coarse matting, a sheep skin, an earthen lamp or rushlight holder, vessels for water and oil. Lack of confort and isolation allowed self-introspection. If the ascetic was unable to find God within the cell, then he or she was unable to find Him anywhere else. One blessed abbess said:

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[6] Laura Swan, *The forgotten desert mothers...*, p. 19.

[7] *Ibidem*, 28.

[8] Luigi D'Ayala Valva, « Dans le miroir des Ecritures. La Bible dans l'expérience spirituelle des Pères du désert », in *Proche-Orient Chrétien*, 61/3-4, 2011, p. 234.

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„I, the poor one, came to this cell in fear and trembling, sweating with shame, and I have not left it for thirty-three years, by the grace of Christ. So, my sisters, I advise you, not according to my mind but according to the great saints' teachings: love silence and peace – the mother of all virtues" [*Materikon*, p. 7].

One was able to comprehend one's own human nature within the cell, where the monk or nun, alone with Christ, sought their own ways to reach perfection.

The cell was the place of private prayer. Blessed Sara counselled a nun: „find peace in your cell, always remember God and death and you shall be saved" [*Materikon*, p. 58]. Saint Syncletica used to say: „she who stays in her cell, like a hidden treasure, is not afraid she might be stolen, for such a soul is safeguarded by sweet Jesus Christ, our God" [*Materikon* 1995, 57]. When Theodora asked him how a woman can be saved, Saint Anthony answered: „not only women but men also, unless they are freed from all earthly cares and self-impose silence, cannot please God or achieve salvation. Therefore if you are willing to obey, stay in your cell, do not allow your thoughts to wander, remember the day of your death, contemplate the death of your body, accept pain, despise worldly vanity, keep fasting and vigil, and pray incessantly so that you may present yourself before Christ with many good deeds" [*Materikon*, p. 55]. Awareness and knowledge of one's own human nature could only be gained in the cell, where the monk or nun faced Christ alone, and sought their own path to perfection. Solitude was appreciated and cultivated in ascetic milieus, as it allowed monastics to comprehend that progress towards full, deep union with God was an inner process[9]. "The ones attracted to spiritual depths unwaveringly followed their course, aware that solitude, even isolation, preceded communion. They knew they had to follow this path alone, before encountering their fellows again, before freeing themselves from false notions [...] They had to become new people, opt for new lives"[10].

The penchant for solitude and quietness, estrangement from the outer world (*xeniteia)*, allowed the monastic to follow Christ who had also been a stranger in this world (Matthew 8, 20). *Xeniteia* was the way to achieve *hesychia*[11]. Renouncing the world was not a strictly spiritual attitude, but it had to be manifest in a physical

[9] A monastic's withdrawal inside the cell was also deemed extremely important to the Western monasticism, as the Rule of St. Benedict instituted the notion of *stabilitas* as a fundamental principle of monastic life.

[10] Marie-Madeleine Davy, *Le désert intérieur,* Albin Michel, Paris, 1985, p. 15.

[11] It is not an inner peace achieved by the monk in solitude, but rather the result of long inner struggle, a fight against his own thoughts: "He who lives in the desert in *hesychia* is free from three kinds of temptations: those coming from what he hears, those coming from idle talking, and those coming from what he sees ; and has to fight only against his own heart " Saint Anthony said [in Antoine Guillaumont, *The origins of monastic life. A phenomenology of monasticism,* Anastasia, Bucharest, 1998, p. 113]. This combat against earthly thoughts aimed to achieve the " monastic mind", as abba Evagrius termed it, that is, have a single thought, namely the remembrance of God.

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separation and estrangement. „With eremitic life, the withdrawal from the world, begins what we currently name monasticism"[12].

Reconsidering the importance of things resulted in the Christians' ability to opt for true freedom.

3. The practice of virtues, a condition of desert living

3.1. Life within a monastic community presupposed strict observance of very harsh rules, as the practice of virtues was part of the daily life and was recommended by the amma to all her disciples as well as the lay women wishing to achieve spiritual progress. Generous, self-effacing, open-minded, the amma and her followers were decided to ascend the ladder to perfection, and reach God. They lived the Gospel calling, and always endeavored to make His presence manifest.

The practice of virtues was the essence of desert mothers' life, as the only path leading to salvation; it was the experience of a life spent in the companionship of persons familiar with the practices that *improved self-knowledge* in order to deepen union with God. Under these circumstances, *unconditional obedience to the amma* was mandatory. Blessed Syncletica said: „Those living in a community are required to be obedient, even more than practice asceticism" (*Les sentences...,* p. 201). Discernment in life was just as important: „We must direct our souls and conduct our lives skilfully," stated the same amma [*Materikon,* p. 72].

3.2. Communication occured first and foremost at spiritual level, as *silence* was greatly treasured in ascetic life. The blessed desert women cherished silence, because it enabled them to receive the life-giving Word, meditate on its deep significance, enjoy it and benefit from it, and also „disclose to their disciples the voice of the living God". „Watchfulness, silence, peace of mind, and private study engender fear of God and chastity", blessed Theodosia used to say [*Materikon*, p. 51]. However, they never declined to answer the questions of their disciples.

Silence and *prayer* in solitude were part of the spiritual life in the desert.

This silence was pervaded with God's presence, allowing monastics, monks and nuns, to listen to the Word of God. It was a „purifying, fruitful silence sustaining spiritual activity"[13]. It was deep stillness, as truth can only be contemplated in silence. Silence changes the character of those observing it; the blessed women would struggle in silence and thus they learned how to listen. No idle talking was allowed to come out of their mouth [*Grigory Dialogos*, p. 95].

The hermits deplored the uncleanliness of their souls in silence: „woe to you, oh my soul... incessant weeping and contrition is your due. Woe to you, oh my soul, for so many times God wanted to correct you in His mercy, but you have always resisted", lamented blessed Theodora [*Materikon*, p. 71]. And blessed Pelageia said: „Whoever wants to be delivered from sins, my sister, can achieve this by means of hesychia, silence, and weeping. She also said: weeping, silence and hesychia are the way indicated by the Fathers and the Holy Scripture. Therefore, lament for your sins

[12] Antoine Guillaumont, *The origins of monastic life. A phenomenology of monasticism,* Anastasia, Bucharest, 1998, p. 300.

[13] Laura Swan, *The forgotten desert mothers...*, p. 40.

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in silence, for there is no other way" [*Materikon*, p. 45-46]. Speaking wisely and only when necessary, appeasing the soul troubled by life's hardships, entailed a permanent struggle requiring great effort and much pain. Keeping silent was gathering a treasure; conversely, idle talking was tantamount to spending it, as blessed Theodora put it [*Materikon*, p. 46].

Whatever the hurdles, silence overcomes them. „A nun's patience is manifest in silence and stillness. But the one who endures to the end will be saved", said blessed Matrona [*Materikon*, p. 52].

3.3. The characteristic of desert life was *prayer.* Prayer was the voice of the heart longing for God, it was the immortal nourishment [*Materikon,* p. 73], „it was the Holy Spirit resting in the spirit of the ascetic and returning to God to convey the ascetic's longing for union with God"[14]. Monks and nuns would pray day and night, so prayer became their second nature. The word of God pervaded and imbued the ascetic self, becoming life. Blessed Theodora told her disciples: „If you wish to serve God in your body, like the incorporeal ones, then have ceaseless prayer in your heart. Love silence and quiet with all your heart, and before your death, your soul will be like an angel of God" [*Materikon*, p. 71-72].

Prayer was intertwined with heartfelt tears. „And of her weeping and tears, who is able to tell them? Not only at night, but in the daytime also she would constantly shed tears, beating her breast and struggling in every possible way." [*Materikon,* p. 79]

The Holy Apostle Paul said: „for those who are led by the Spirit of God, are children of God" (Ro 8, 14). Man knows not how to pray, but „the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words" (Ro 8, 26). Divine filiation according to God's grace depended on the prayer of the heart. Understanding this truth, the nuns guided by their amma practiced Jesus' prayer in its different versions: „Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me! Son of God, help me!" In order for the prayer to be efficient, it had to be concise, brief, coming form pure heart and mind, where silence and peace reign: „knowledge is the incessant prayer of mind." [*Materikon,* p. 51]

3.4. *Humility* or *obedience* and overcoming one's own will are acquired gradually. Following the example set by our Saviour („I am humble...) or the Holy Virgin („Be it unto me according to your word"), the amma knew that being humble is not lack of self-esteem, that man's spiritual progress closely depends on humility: the more one lowers oneself through humility, the more one actually rises towards perfection [*Les sentences*, p. 231]. Blessed Syncletica, worthy of remembrance, said: „It is impossible to be saved without humility" [*Les sentences,* p. 223]. *Humility* had to be always manifest. „Struggle, vigil, all kinds of efforts are unable to save; only genuine humility can bring about salvation", only humble thoughts are able to „defeat the devils", amma Theodora taught [*The Egyptian Paterikon,* p. 113].

[14] *Ibidem*, p. 38.

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„O holy obedience, foundation of monastic life, bring forth in the hearts the fruit of righteous life, according to the model of the life of Christ”[15]. The desert tradition prescribed several types of *obedience* within the monastic community. It meant „grasping the encounter between man's heart, with its desires and dreams, and the great, ineffable mystery of God”[16], opening one's heart to receive the Word of God. There was obedience and respect to the *amma*, accepting her advice and decisions. Syncletica said: „As far as community life is concerned, I prefer obedience to ascesis, because ascesis engenders pride, while obedience entails humility” [*Les sentences* p. 201].

3.5. Monastery dwellers slept very little, to have more time for prayer. Blessed Matrona told her disciples: „My Lord told me: «Do my work and I shall feed you; do no task how»” [*Materikon*, p. 14]. Food was acquired mainly by one's own effort. We know of wild animals or birds that brought the ascetics the food necessary to survive.

3.6. Desert dwellers usually ate once a day, vegetables o fruit. They often renounced food for days: „And this was her self-imposed regime: in five days, she would eat only six ounces of bread, and drink one ounce of water” (Materikon, p. 79). Syncletica said that blessed Theodora „for forty days she confined herself to eating seven ounces of peas and drinking one pitcherful of water.” [*Materikon*, p. 46].

3.7. *Fasting* renders monastics more responsive to the Spirit of God. Fasting was mandatory in monastic life and was always associated with prayer and careful monitoring of thoughts. Fasting was one of the ways to perfection. Fasting was not, and is not, mere refraining from food, drink or pleasures; it is mainly „breaking the chain of evil thoughts, insidious temptations, bad deeds, devilish plans that so often attack us when we fast”[17].

All nuns who were asked for guidance recommended fasting together with the practice of other virtues. Thus, blessed Syncletica urged her disciples to fast because „fasting cleanses the body, vigil purifies the mind, while prayer unites one with God” [*Materikon*, p. 72]. Impious thoughts can only be driven away by fasting and praying in silence; gluttony is the mother of licentiousness, so fasting frees the soul from the abyss of passions, amma Theodora told her disciples [*Materikon*, p. 48]. However, fasting that resulted in illness was discouraged.

3.8. Beside fasting and prayer, *the study of the Holy Scriptures* was part of the nuns' education. Readings from the Holy Scripture[18], as well as other holy texts, helped them to acquire better self-awareness. Saint Syncletica explained certain

[15] Pr. Prof. Ioan G. Coman, « Importanţa şi sensul desăvârşirii în monahism », in *Studii Teologice,* anul VII, 1955, nr. 3-4, p. 219.

[16] Wendy Wright, „Desert Listening” in *Weavings* 9:3, May-june 1994, p. 10 apud Laura Swan, *The forgotten desert mothers...,* p. 43.

[17] Pr. Prof. Ioan G. Coman, « Importanţa şi sensul desăvârşirii..., p. 219.

[18] Some nuns, such as Juliana and Melania, were renowned for their book collections; reading, especially the Holy Scripture, nourished their souls.

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fragments to her disciples, also providing them with the necessary advice [*Les sentences*, p. 266]. She used to tell them: „Imitate the publican, so that you are not condemned with the pharisee. Choose the meekness of Moses, and you will find your heart which is like a rock, changed into a spring of living water" [*The Egyptian Paterikon* 2011, 269]. Learning the Psalms was greatly useful in their advancement towards perfection.

Blessed Theodora told the story of a woman who as a child had been sold by her mother to the devil, in order to serve him. But learning from the amma how Lord Jesus Christ had saved the sinful woman of the Gospel, she was humbled and wished to be saved also. She sold her assets, returned to the convent and confined herself to a cell: „For the sake of the Lord, let no one know about me until the end of my life. Then she worked to earn her food, without ever speaking to anyone and without even seeing another woman's face ... Not only at night, but also during the day, she shed tears incessantly, beating her chest and undertaking all kinds of mortifications. After she had spent 15 years in her cell, she reposed in the Lord. At the time of her death, she worked many miracles" [*Materikon*, p. 126-127].

Monasticism is not a profession like any other, but „a lifelong occupation. Twenty-four hours a day, the anchorites have to live the Gospel with body and soul, in other words, they have to dismiss all regrets, reject the evil spirits and the thoughts suggested by them, renounce themselves, give up all worldly joys and pleasures and instead dedicate themselves exclusively to seeking God, and imitating Christ"[19]. Their aim was to achieve that peace of mind when man's attention is no longer distracted and he feels the presence of God – that is, *hesychia.* This was the proper state for prayer, for the „dialogue with God".

3.9. *The progress towards the dispassionate state,* that movement towards inner freedom that disciplined the negative feelings, allowed the hermit to approach God. Delivered from earthly cares, watching over both their inner world and the surrounding one, anchorites were able to tend to spiritual life. Purity of heart abolished passions, and the blessed women learned that one should not forge any worldly bonds that prevent advancement along the path to God. Inner freedom was crucial for a deep experience of their union with God. Everything that dominated human mind and heart had to be removed, all bonds and constraints had to be healed and reconciled. Their relationship with people was not possessive, but rather people were free to choose whether they wanted to follow the advice offered by these nuns. „They loved the others by setting them free"[20].

3.10. Desert life entailed *constant struggle with bodily afflictions*, as well as thoughts. When Blessed Theodora asked Saint Sarah how she could triumph in her fight against thoughts, the latte taught her to fight against one thought – the most insidious and hardest one – in the name of Christ, and all the others would disappear by themselves. „And the fight against this head of bad thoughts consists of: silence,

[19] Lucien Regnault, *Viaţa cotidiană a Părinţilor deşertului în Egiptul secolului IV*, Deisis, Sibiu, 1997, p. 144.

[20] Laura Swan, *The forgotten desert mothers...*, p. 29.

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fasting, sleeping on the floor, thirst, vigil, denying sleep, heartfelt tears, prostrations, chest beating, humility. This is your fight, and your weapons against the chief thought. With these you shall conquer thoughts, with God's grace, and not otherwise." [*Materikon*, p. 61] Resisting demons was difficult and necessitated constant vigilance against temptation. *Watchful and vigilant,* at any time and with all their strength, monks and nuns struggled so that their inner life could be acceptable to God. Thus they overcame obstacles. „We shoul always be afraid of what might trouble our souls, by means of memory or imagination, of what might tarnish our conscience. This is why we have retreated in the peace of our cells – my good sister, struggle with your body, soul and mind, so that you endire patiently in your cell" abba Isaiah advised Theodora [*Materikon,* p. 104].

The nuns were assailed by many temptations. They struggled against lust (blessed Sarah oposed it for fifteen years, and blessed Theodora for seven years, day and night [*Materikon,* p. 50]), against criticizing their fellows [*Materikon*, p. 50], idle talk, gluttony [*Materikon*, p. 48] by means of abstinence, silence, fasting, and prayer (Materikon, 47-49). The great Anthony told Theodora: „I tell you, not only women but men as well, unless they renounce all worldly desire and struggle to keep silent, cannot please God or be saved" [*Materikon*, p. 55].

The struggle to overcome all the obstacles preventing union with God (wrong thoughts and attitudes, as well as earthly bonds) was a difficult and harsh one. The nuns aspired to simplicity, a simplicity based on *material deprivation* and the *abundance* of God's presence. Amma Syncletica used to say: „Just as one negative attitude entails another (for instance, envy follows meanness, and so do deceit, perjury, anger and vengeance), similarly the qualities opposing these vices are engendered by love, which of course means meekness and tolerance, patience and endurance, and most of all – the holy poverty. Nobody can acquire this virtue (that is, love), without the holy poverty, for our Lord has not commanded us to love only one person, but all people. Therefore, whoever has some wealth must not ignore the destitute. Indeed, the work of love is manifest in our deeds"[21].

3.11. *Discernment*, *abstinence and patience* had to be applied in all respects. „I have seen ones who annihilated their bodies by struggling, but because of their lack of discernment, they remained estranged from God" said abba Anthony the Great. Blessed Syncletica offered this advice: „Let us be vigilant; for by means of our senses, thieves break in. How could a house whose windows are open, while smoke surrounds it, how could it not become black with soot?" or „Let us be armed against devils. They come both from the inside and the outside. And the soul, like a ship, sinks either because of the waves hitting it, or because of the water accumulated within it. We also perish because of the sins attacking us from the outside, or other times because of our own thoughts within us. We must then beware both of the outer evil influence, and the storm of our thoughts within us." [*The Egyptian Paterikon,* p.

[21] *Ibidem*, p. 32.

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269] „A nun's endurance proves itself in silence and solitude" taught blessed Matrona [*Materikon,* p. 52].

3.12. Illness was considered a test for virtue and holiness, the result of brave and generous acceptance of ascesis requirements. „Those who keep death in their minds, thinking that it is bound to come, do not fall into great sins. They will not alter the teachings and will not despise simplicity and lack of pretence of words" [*Palladius,* p. 14]. Amma Sarah was reminded of death every time she climbed the steps of a ladder, maintaining this awareness under all circumstances[22].

3.13. Although they broke every worldly bonds [*Materikon*, p. 106], rejecting „earthly cares" [*Materikon,* p. 107], the nuns offeres assistance and love to those outside their community. Compassion, pure love, deep care for the poor engendered humility; every encounter with a poor man was an encounter with God. Merciful kindness led them to understand people. They would not judge or criticize as they understood human weakness and regarded people „with the eyes and heart of Christ". All those who knocked at their door were received in silence, each of them was received as Christ Himself.

Discernment had to be applied in all respects: „We must tend to our souls with discernment. Within the community, we must not seek our own advantage, nor become the slaves of our own will, but rather commit ourselves to our Father according to faith. For we are sentenced to exile and strangers in this world. Let us keep nothing that pertains to the land we are leaving. There is glory, here – abjection; there we enjoy abundant food, here we lack even the bread", Syncletica said [*Les sentences*, p. 201].

4. From desert to the promised land: man's suffering and God's love

„The human condition is not tantamount to rest, peace and quiet, but to tension and struggle, because it is an existential condition and awareness"[23]. This view of existence as constant fight, raises the issue of the relationship between humility and initiative. „If one's essence and fulfilment is humility, if this is how God wants man to be, then how is this humility reconciled with initiative? This seeming contradiction is solved by Saint Symeon the New Theologian, who states that fear of God engenders love, and love for God drives fear away from soul and replaces it there, dwelling in it alone, as it is holy, divine spirit... Love for God is reached through fear of Him, that is, through awareness of Him being the Absolute. You cannot comprehend God, cannot reach Him and cannot love Him, unless you gain full awareness and consciousness, that is, unless you worship Him in complete awe"[24]. Desert dwellers understood this. Progress along the way to salvation cannot be achieved without suffering, without constant effort; this, however, is the path to freedom and the dispassionate condition, to spiritual maturity and humility, it is the way enabling one to reach inner freedom and ardent love full of wisdom.

[22] Lucien Regnault, *Everyday Life...,* p. 229.

[23] Rev. Prof. Dr. George Remete, *The suffering of man and the love of God*, The Biblical and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 2005, p. 50.

[24] Idem, p. 51.

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Jesus Christ becomes essentially, intimately close to us and sacrificial, identifying Himself with human suffering and sacrificing Himself for it; desert spirituality is a spirituality of the Incarnation, that is, Christ was seen as dwelling in each one's soul. „In the beginning there are a great many battles and a good deal of suffering for those who are advancing towards God and afterwards, ineffable joy. It is like those who wish to light a fire; at first they are choked by the smoke and their eyes water, and by this means obtain what they seek ... so we must also kindle the divine fire in ourselves through tears and hard work" amma Syncletica said [*The Egyptian Paterikon*, p. 266-267]. Or, by quoting a psalm: „I am afflicted and in pain; may your strength, O God, support me" (Ps 68, 33).

Amma Sarah, „never forsaking fear of God and spiritual progress", tells the demon when the latter admits his defeat by her strength: „It is not I that have defeated you, but my Lord Christ." [*The Egyptian Paterikon*, p. 265]. Such self-awareness allows one to face one's own suffering and anger; „it reveals our idols – those fake images of God, that serve only ourselves and deny the true God"[25].

5. Conclusions

The world of desert mothers was a world of vocation, simplicity and ascesis. Their life was an impressive experience of the fervent search for God. An *amma* was known and admired for her maturity, discernment and wisdom. She knew how to diagnose and heal the ailing human soul, while she was aware that it was God who acted and saved the siners. She knew how to receive the life-giving Word, how to enjoy it and how to share it with others. Thus the desert provided the experience of prayer, prayer of the entire being, prayer for freedom from one's passions and oneself. „The apostles' call for deep repentance, and ceaseless praying, for keeping Christ's commandments and expecting His second coming, for seeking divine citizenship etc., demonstrate that monasticism is the plenitude of Christian life"[26].

These struggles initiated and educated the ascetics; this experience was a ladder they climbed towards salvation. „I have a secret goal, and God knows my heart", said elder Nathanael in the *Lavsaicon* [*Palladius,* p. 38].

The force to follow the path of inner desert was closely linked to total detachment from material world – the outer desert: the male or female desert dwellers „understood that the desert was nothing but a passage through death, allowing a rebirth. Inner desert was a *Genesis*"[27]. „By going deeper in the desert, they (the monastics) go deeper in solitude, deeper in themselves, and at the same time deeper in the communion with their fellow people and God, the source of life, and thus they come closer to the source of our inner life because the depth of our selves, to each of

[25] Laura Swan, *The forgotten desert mothers...,* p. 33.

[26] Ierotei Vlahos, Mitropolit de Nafpatkos, *Monahismul ortodox ca viaţă profetică, apostolică şi martirică,* Editura Mitropoliei Olteniei, 2003, p. 113.

[27] Marie-Madeleine Davy, *Le désert intérieur,* Éditions Albin Michel, Paris, 1985, p. 18.

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us, is just as strange and unknown, yet just as tormentingly familiar, as the solitude of the desert"[28].

The desert dwellers, monks and nuns, become citizens of the heavenly city. They have fought the good fight, and received the crown of victory.

„Perfection! Wonderful, lofty word!" [...] „Holy perfection! How harsh our ascension is, how great the obstacles that hinder our journey, how bitter your taste can be at times, but sweeter than honey and more fragrant than roses your fruits are!"[29]

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[28] Paphnutius, *Histories of Monks of Upper Egypt and the Life of Onnophrius*, trans. Tim Vivian, Kalamazon, Cistercian Studies, 1993, 10 in Laura Swan, *The Forgotten desert mothers...,* p. 40.

[29] Pr. Prof. Ioan G. Coman, « Importanţa şi sensul desăvârşirii..., p. 219.

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