Letters from the Desert: 
between ancient and modern

(Continued)

This is a continuation of this Thesis written by the 
Reverend Father George Nakhil from Australia. Here 
he delves into the writings of our late spiritual father: 
Father Matta El-Meskeen, to present a new clear 
vision of his thoughts and themes. Enjoy!

The Role of the Holy Spirit

The fathers share the same view on the role of the Holy Spirit in the ascetic practice; 
that is to provide repentance, purification and knowledge. The Holy Spirit, to Antony, 
teaches man how to repent and brings joy in doing so and gives the gift of self control 
over the body and soul.\(^1\) Antony sees that the Spirit works hand-in-hand with the ‘mind’ 
to achieve purification. And while the Spirit provides the grace and power; equally, the 
body and the soul need to strive against the fruits of the flesh to gain repentance.\(^2\) Also, 
Matthew envisions that the submission to the conviction of the Holy Spirit brings 
obedience to the soul and subjection of the body.\(^3\)

Ammonas sees that the acquisition of the Holy Spirit is essential in the journey of the 
soul. Contrast to that of Antony and Matthew’s views, Ammonas sees the subjection of 
the body as essential for the ascetic in presenting the soul to the work of the Holy Spirit. 
The Holy Spirit only dwells in the souls that are ‘perfectly cleansed from their passions 
for it is holy, and cannot enter into unclean soul’.\(^4\) The struggle of the body and 
soul in terms of fasting, prayer and rejecting vainglory attracts the Spirit of Penitence 
which washes them from all uncleanliness.\(^5\)

For Macarius, no matter how much man toils by his own strength, he cannot produce 
‘fruits worthy of the Lord without the Holy Spirit’.\(^6\) Macarius attributes every virtue

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1 Letters of Antony, letter 1.17-22.
2 Ibid., 1.23-26.
3 Letters of Matthew the, letter 9, p. 51-52.
5 Ibid.
6 Macarius Homily 26.20.
in man to the work of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, the struggle of the will of man is essential; he writes: ‘if it were possible to succeed without effort there will be no faith and belief’. 

Matthew embraces the teaching of Macarius in his allegorical interpretation of Ezekiel’s vision. Macarius sees that man received the honour to be a throne for the Holy Spirit similar to the Cherubim’s chariot. Macarius contemplates in his first homily: ‘The mystery which He beheld was that of the soul, that was to receive her Lord and to become a throne of glory for Him. For the soul that is privileged to be in communion with the Spirit of His light, becomes all light’. Matthew embraces this analysis in a number of his letters. In letter nine, he writes to the monks: ‘You are God’s Cherubim on earth, so carry Him in your hearts and minds. Make the zeal of love burn in you so you may become fiery thrones. And through this love make you befitting to bear the divinity that burns with fire and love’.

**Spiritual Warfare**

To Antony, man is surrounded by angels and demons. Angels work for his help and intercede for him while demons oppose man’s spiritual struggle seeking his perdition. The letters of Antony emphasise the snares of the devil. In the first letter he states that the devil is responsible for the third type of movement in the body which is related to those who attempt to sanctify themselves. In the sixth letter, Antony reveals the continuous satanic warfare against mankind to lead them into hell, the place of all the devils. Antony warns his children that if discernment is not acquired in their struggles, they will fall into the hands of the devil and darkness will overtake them.

Ammonas teaches his disciples that when the ascetic cultivates solitude, renounces self denial, and engages himself in constant prayer, he will gain the capacity to visualise spiritual beings.

According to Macarius, God permits satanic warfare to test the sincerity and steadfastness of man’s will. This is manifested in the story of Job.

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7 Ibid., 26.19.
8 Ibid., 27.21.
9 Ezek 1.
10 Macarius Homily 1.1.
11 Letters of Matthew, letter 9, p.51.
12 Letters of Antony, letter I.41.
15 Letters of Ammonas, letter 10.
17 Ibid., 26.8.
Matthew repeatedly warns his disciples of unseen satanic warfare. He acknowledges the envy of the devil to mislead the monks in their difficult way, and he asks the monks to be vigilant by putting on the whole armour of God,\(^{18}\) and most importantly the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God. In letter three, written to the monks from a cave in the Syrian Monastery in December 1955, he writes: ‘Be steadfast now. The road is long and arduous, and the enemy is lurking to catch. Fill in your quiver\(^{19}\) with ‘your’ verses which are like sharp arrows. Since the road is full of doubts, pitfalls and traps which the enemy has placed, fill in your quiver with verses from the Psalms and the Bible. Take from them sufficiency for the road so as not to be ashamed when your enemies speak to you at the gate.\(^{20}\) Shoot an arrow for an arrow and do not turn back till you devour them. Be courageous because those who are with you are more than those who are with them.\(^{21}\) So be steadfast and a mighty man of valor\(^{22}\) who runs his race.\(^{23}\)

If the enemy attacks you with the thought of greatness, choose the arrow that kills him: ‘learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart’.\(^{24}\) If he brings to you the thought of condemnation, return the arrow in his heart: ‘Judge not, that you be not judged’.\(^{25}\) If he welds around you with an evil thought against someone or a certain task, bring out what suits him: ‘Judge nothing before the time’.\(^{26}\) This is very similar to Macarius’ teachings using the Scripture as a means to be saved from the evil one: ‘When Satan seeks to depress us by reminding us of our sins, we are to answer, I have the testimonies of the Lord in writing, that is, “I desire not the death of the sinner, but his repentance, and that he should turn from his wickedness and live”.\(^{27}\)’

Matthew carries the same teaching of Antony about how the soul needs to remain vigilant so not to be devoured by the devil. He writes: ‘The enemy of good is the enemy of salvation, which is mentally walking about and roaring with lust to scare the soul and weaken her till she feels that she is fallen in front of him then he cunningly devours her’.\(^{29}\)

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18 Eph 6:12.
19 Ps 127:5.
20 Ps 127:5.
21 2Kings 6:16.
22 Judges 6:12.
23 Ps 19:5.
24 Matt 11:29.
25 Matt 7:1.
26 1Cor 4:5.
27 Ezek 33:11.
28 Macarius Homily 11.15.
29 1Pet 5:8.
Conclusion

The literary of the desert fathers’ letters intended to affect the habits and dispositions of the readers. They formed a means of communication between master and his disciple, allowing the master to carefully choose and reflect on his words and tone in order to clearly convey his message. In contrast to a spoken homily, the disciple is able to maintain a physical copy of the letter. Therefore this form of literature serves as a constant and accessible teaching that the monk can refer back to at anytime; often finding new messages and meanings each time he reads it.

Both the writings of the early desert fathers (Antony, Macarius, Besa etc.), and that of its contemporary counterpart (Matthew), draw heavily upon Biblical reference, and maintain similar structure and style. Differences in the way the master conveys his message to his disciple is not due to the writing being written from and for a differing era, but rather because of personal differences between one master and another. This is true in the example of Besa and Matthew. While Besa is firm in his approach to persuade running monks to return to their order, Matthew on the other hand is gentle, writing words full of hope and love. The writings of the desert fathers maintain a common voice although separated by time, and their purpose remains one and the same; the master guiding his disciple in ascetic life.

The spontaneous nature of letters reveals timely thoughts, hopes and concerns. These letters illustrate how desert fathers and contemporary monks share identical struggles and maintain the same purpose in life. The study of the letters of Matthew reflects an authentic spiritual economy similar to the early desert fathers. Despite being distant by more than 1500 years and vast changes in living circumstances, the common goals between them dictate similar ascetic practices and similar needs of spiritual economy. They all had very few possessions and wanted to have as little as possible, choosing the way of the desert in order to be free for God.

Matthew’s writing reveals his discipleship to the early desert fathers’ sayings and the great emphasis of Biblical quotations. In 1948, when Matthew started reading from the sayings and letters of the fathers, he wrote: ‘I did not believe my eyes when I began reading of experiences that most strongly told of my own. They expressed my hope and the joy of my life. So I decided to pray in the words of these sayings. I sat down to read each of them many times until they became impressed in my mind. I would stand up and turn them into prayer, and sit down to read again, and so on. While reciting the sayings of this or that father, I would visualise him standing before me. I would beseech him to clarify further to me the meaning of his words, and God would answer my plea. I would thus emerge every night with a new
friendship with the spirit of these saints together with a knowledge and illumination that grew day after day'.

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30 Matthew the Poor, *Orthodox Prayer Life*: pp.10-11
Bibliography

Primary Sources

5. K.H. Kuhn, *Letters and sermons of Besa*, The University of Virginia, 1956
8. Tim Vivian, *Saint Macarius the Spiritbearer*, SVS, NY 2004

Secondary Sources

Situated in the Atacama desert in Chile, along the Pan-American Highway, an enormous hand rises 36 feet out of the sand. It looks like something from Game of Thrones, but La Mano del Desierto, the Hand of the Desert, was commissioned by the isolated city of Antofagasta more than 25 years ago. The hand is the work of Santiago sculptor Mario Mario Irarrázabal, and it’s a monument dedicated to the emptiness of its Atacama Desert location, and symbolises human vulnerability. It's a frequent target for vandals, according to Condé Nast Traveler, but twice a year, volunteers from the city scru...