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19. ABBA PAULA, THE FIRST HERMIT

Born in the province of Tiba (Luxor, Upper Egypt) in the year 229 A.D., Paula was the second son of a very rich man. When the father died, the two sons wanted to share the inheritance, so Peter, being the eldest, took the majority and gave what was left over to his brother Paula. This action caused great friction between the two brothers, and because they could not come to an agreement, they decided to settle the matter in court.

Along the way, they noticed a coffin being carried, and a great multitude mourning the loss. Paula approached one of the men to find out who had died, and the man responded, "Son, this man who died today, delighted in luxuries and lived the life of indulgence, possessed large amounts of gold and silver, and always dressed in expensive attire. Today he left the world and all his riches behind. Take heed my son that we not follow his example, but rather persist in enduring spiritual struggles, for blessed is the man who lives in this world, but does not belong to this world, for the Lord will reward him richly in His Heavenly Kingdom."

Paula heard these words and felt as if he was spiritually awakened, and suddenly the world before him seemed as nought. He turned to his brother and said, "Brother, let us return." As they were returning home, Paula walked slowly behind his brother, then quickly escaped from his sight. Peter searched for days, and when he could not find his brother, he cried bitterly, "Why did I quarrel with my brother on worldly riches?!"

Having left the town, Paula found an empty tomb, and so he remained within it for three days and three nights, in continuous meditation and prayer. On the fourth day, an angel of the Lord appeared to him and led him into the inner Eastern Wilderness. The angel directed him into a deserted

Abba Paula the First Hermit

cave, which was located near a spring of water and a fruitful palm tree. He dressed himself in a tunic he weaved from palms, and diligently prayed,

"My Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, save me from the traps of the enemy, be merciful to me so that I may accomplish Your will and rest safely between Your hands, for to You my King, is all glory and power forever, amen!"

He began his ascetic life in the Eastern Wilderness in the year 250 A.D., and remained there for 80 years.

Abba Anthony meets Abba Paula:

One day, Abba Anthony thought to himself proudly, "I am the first person to ever venture into and live in the inner wilderness!" but the Lord revealed to him that, "within this wilderness lives a person whom the whole world is not worthy of his footstep." Immediately Abba Anthony took his rod and began searching for this saintly ascetic. He walked for an entire day, then fell on his knees to pray. He remained praying throughout the night, and in the morning he got up and continued his journey.

As the sun was setting, he noticed a cave nearby. When he approached it, he found the door closed, so he knelt on the ground and said, "My saintly father, you know who I am and where I am from, and I will not leave this place before seeing you! You who would not refuse the entry of an animal, I ask you, do not refuse me!" Abba Paula then replied from within the cave, "No one asks for charity by scolding, but rather by weeping."

Abba Anthony remained kneeling at the entrance of the cave for a long while, before finally Abba Paula opened the door for him. The two fathers embraced, then prayed together.

As they spoke about the many wonders of God, a raven flew passed and dropped a loaf of bread before them. Abba

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Paula held the loaf of bread reverently, and turned to Abba Anthony saying, "Blessed is the Lord my God; for eighty years He has provided for me half a loaf of bread daily, but today because of your presence, He has given us a full loaf! Blessed is the Lord, who satisfies the needs of my body!" Together they once again stood to pray before eating.

They spent the entire night praising God, until the morning sun dawned. Abba Anthony then said to Abba Paula, "Blessed is the hour in which God made me worthy of seeing you my father." Abba Paula replied, "Anthony, return now to your cave and come back to me with the gown Pope Athanasius will give you, for with it you must wrap my body for burial; so go quickly, for the hour of my departure has come!" Abba Paula blessed and prayed for Abba Anthony, and then they embraced each other before departing.

Abba Anthony returned to his monastery after a two day journey through the wilderness. His disciples who were very worried about him being gone so long, rejoiced when they saw him. They ran towards him asking, "Father, where were you?" to which he replied, "I am a sinner and unworthy, for indeed the Lord has revealed to me someone much greater than I."

Taking the gown given to him by Pope Athanasius, Abba Anthony returned to the saintly father's cave. On arrival he saw a host of angels carrying the soul of the blessed saint Abba Paula. Abba Anthony entered his cave and found the saint lying on the ground with his hands outstretched like a cross. He wept bitterly. He then carefully wrapped the pure saint's body within the gown, and prayed over him with heartfelt tears.

As he was wondering how he was going to dig a grave for the saint's blessed body, two lions entered the cave, knelt down beside Abba Paula's body and kissed him. They then turned and began licking the feet of Abba Anthony as if to say,

Abba Paula the First Hermit

'where shall we dig?' Abba Anthony drew the sign of the cross on the ground inside the cave, and immediately the lions began digging. After Abba Anthony placed Abba Paula's body within the grave, he took his garment made from weaved palm, and went back to the Patriarch Abba Athanasius and told him all that he had seen and experienced of the life of the great Abba Paula. The Patriarch took Abba Paula's garment as a blessing and only wore it three times a year : on the feast of Epiphany, Easter and the Ascension of our gracious Saviour.

Pope Athanasius had the thought of bringing back from the wilderness the body of Abba Paula so that he may rest beside the body of Pope Ananious. So Abba Anthony, together with some priests went in search for Abba Paula's cave. After two days of wandering through the wilderness, they became disoriented and were unable to find the saint's cave. Abba Paula then appeared to Abba Athanasius in a vision saying, "Send word for the fathers to return from their search, because it is God's will that no one find my body." Immediately the Patriarch sent forth Abba Olgious that he might convey Abba Paula's message to the fathers, so that they may return from the wilderness.

Pope Athanasius wrote the life story of Abba Paula and placed it in the church of Alexandria, so that it may be a blessing and inspiration to all those seeking monasticism.

There was once a boy called Aladnos from Alexandria who fell terribly sick and died. Pope Athanasius said, "I took the garment which Abba Paula used to wear and placed it over the boy's body; immediately he arose, and I personally witnessed this."

Abba Paula lived to be over one hundred and ten years old, during which time he spent more than eighty years as an ascetic dwelling in the Eastern Wilderness.

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The monastery of Abba Paula in the Eastern Wilderness was built in the 4th century, and to this day is the home for a community of monks. It is situated to the south east of the monastery of Abba Anthony. Both these monasteries are located in the centre of Boash, which is a town proceeding the province of Bani-Suweif.

Abba Anthony and Abba Paula are inseparable friends. They are found standing together in icons, mentioned together in Doxologies, and in the Liturgy's commemoration :
"...our righteous father Abba Anthony the great, the upright Abba Paula..."

The church celebrates the feast of Abba Paula each year on the 2nd day of the blessed Coptic month Amsheer.

"Hail to our father Anthony the light of monasticism, hail to our father Pavli beloved of Christ..."

(From the Verse of the Cymbals)



24. ST MARY THE HERMIT

In the 4th century lived an ascetic monk priest by the name of Father Zocima who was from a monastery in Palestine. The monastery's location was not far from the wilderness where our Lord Jesus Christ fasted for forty days and nights. It is a monastic custom that each year the monks would spend the spiritual days of Lent in solitude outside of the monastery.

It was the first Sunday of the Great Lent, when Abba Zocima ventured into the wilderness to spend the forty days in spiritual retreat. After these holy days were over, Abba Zocima was walking back to the monastery when he noticed a human form quickly pass him by. He made the sign of the cross and carefully approached the figure...he then heard a voice saying, "Give me your cape so that I may cover my nakedness, for I am a woman." She knelt before Abba Zocima and said, "Bless me Abba Zocima, for you are a priest of God." After he prayed for her, he asked that she reveal her story...

"I was born in Egypt in the year 344. When I was twelve years old, I disobeyed my father's wish and travelled to Alexandria; I am ashamed to think how I first lost my virginity there, and how I was set on fire with the endless desire for pleasure. I was exposed to many harmful things, that at such an early age, destroyed the purity of my mind. I then became curious to experience many things, and so I willingly surrendered myself to lusts and bodily desires. As a result, I lost my virginity at the age of seventeen.

While I was living in this way, one summer I saw a great crowd of men going down toward the sea. I stopped one of them and asked him where they were going, and he said, "We are all going to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of the Holy Cross." Drawn by curiosity, I joined the pilgrims going by

St Mary the Hermit

ship to Jerusalem. On the way I seduced many of my companions, and I continued to live in this way in Jerusalem.

As the feast day of the Holy Cross approached, I wanted to enter the church like everyone else, but this mysterious force prevented me. The more I persisted in trying to enter, the more it would throw me back. Giving up, I sat in a lonely place not far from the church and wondered about this strange experience. I then thought to myself, 'it must be because I am a sinner and unworthy of entering such a place, for what relation is there between an evil one such as myself, and the cross of the Lord Jesus?' Suddenly guilt filled my heart and I began to cry bitterly while beating on my chest. I then carefully approached the icon of St. Mary and said, "Was not your Son incarnated for the salvation of sinners? If this is so, please help me! O faithful pleader, ask your Son to make me worthy of entering His church so that I may throw myself before His Holy Cross. Save me from this power that resists my entry, and I promise never to return to my worldly and sinful life, with all its desires and pleasures, and I shall go wherever the Lord leads me!"

After finishing my prayers of repentance, the Lord permitted that I enter into His holy church. I felt so shameful and unworthy before His greatness and majesty, that slowly I approached His Holy Cross and fell to the ground before it weeping bitterly.

I lost track of time during my prayers, and when I lifted my head, I found it was midday. I left the church glorifying the Lord saying, "Glory be to you my Lord, God and Saviour, who accepted the pleadings of Your mother on my behalf, for You have accepted me, just as You accept all sinners who return to You. I cannot comprehend the compassion and unlimited love and the new life You grant to those who repent! And as for you blessed Virgin Mother, pray to your Son for me, that He may lead me along the paths of righteousness, and now my Master and Lord, into Your hands do I surrender

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my life." I then heard a voice saying, "Cross the River Jordan and there you will find the place of your salvation." On the way a man gave me three pieces of silver with which to buy bread. I bought three loaves and took them with me on my journey. I was then twenty nine years old, and now it has been forty five years since I left the holy city Jerusalem.

I reached the church of St. John the Baptist which is located near the Jordan. The memory of my many sins still haunted me, so I washed my face in the river before entering the holy place and confessing my sins to the priest. When the father absolved me, I felt an incredible relief; it was as though a burden had been lifted! I then completed my joy by receiving the Holy Sacraments.

I left the church and fed on a little of the bread I had with me. I continued walking for two days without eating. I then stopped a while to rest before sailing by boat to the other side of the Jordan River...

The trials and satanic wars I faced were severe, and to this day I remember them and tremble. For seventeen years the devil stirred within me disturbing and lustful desires. Many times I hungered and thirsted, which brought about memories of my past, and I craved to taste the sweet liquors I was once so accustomed to drinking...Many secular songs filled my mind, and then I would beat on my chest remembering the day of my repentance, and once again surrender myself with tears of repentance before the Lord, asking for the pleadings of His Virgin Mother St. Mary.

After relentless spiritual struggles and many tears, a bright light would surround me and immediately the devil would flee. I would then live in the comfort and security of God's glory...

When I had eaten the three loaves of bread I had with me, I began eating from the grass of the wilderness...my clothes wore out and my body was burnt many times from the

St Mary the Hermit

extreme heat of the sun, and trembled greatly from the cold desert nights, but God in His infinite love preserved me so that my heart rejoiced exceedingly. Father, you are the first person I have seen since crossing the Jordan River many years ago, so I ask you to pray for me." She knelt before Abba Zocima to take his blessings, and he lifted up his hands towards heaven saying, "Blessed are You O God in the highest, who is the performer of great miracles. Blessed is Your holy name, for You have revealed to me the many treasures of Your grace."

St. Mary said to him, "Father, please do not tell anyone about me before my death. Now, you must return to your monastery in peace. The following year you will not be able to come to me during the days of Lent, for this is God's will, but come and meet me on the shores of the Jordan on Holy Thursday, and bring for me the Holy Body and Blood of my Lord Jesus Christ. Abba Zocima, I ask you to tell Abba John the abbot of your monastery to keep close watch over his flock, for they are in need of care and discipline. And finally, do not forget to pray for me."

Abba Zocima returned to his monastery on Palm Sunday, and kept in his heart all that he had seen and heard, just as St. Mary requested of him. The following year, he was unable to leave the monastery during Lent because he was struck by a severe fever. He then remembered St. Mary's words, and realised that his illness was the will of God.

After the Holy Mass on Holy Thursday, Abba Zocima carefully carried the Holy Sacraments, and took with him some vegetables and went out seeking the blessed saint Mary. When he reached the shores of the Jordan River, he saw the saint in the distance making the sign of the cross on the water, then walked upon it until she stood before him. She knelt before the Holy Body and Blood of Christ in complete reverence and prayed the Orthodox Creed and the Lord's Prayer before receiving the Holy Sacraments.

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She then said to Abba Zocima, "By the will of God, come to me next year, and meet me at the cave where you first saw me." He prayed for her before she once again made the sign of the cross on the water and crossed over, returning to her cave.

The following year, the saintly father Zocima went to the cave of St. Mary and found her kneeling towards the east; she had already passed away. Abba Zocima fell to the ground crying, then as he got up to pray, he noticed a message engraved beside her: "Abba Zocima, bury the body of Mary the Repentant in this place and leave this body of sin for the dust." Abba Zocima was comforted by this message and marvelled when he saw a lion sitting by guarding her body. When he became worried as to how to dig a grave for her, the lion which sat guarding the body began digging. Abba Zocima then prayed over the body of St. Mary the hermit, before burying her and placing the sign of the cross on her cave.

Abba Zocima returned to his monastery praising and glorifying God's holy name. He gathered together all the monks of the monastery and told them the beautiful story of the repentance of the pure saint Mary the hermit. Her aromatic story is a comforting and encouraging meditation on God's mercies for all those who struggle in the life of purity and virtues. Abba Zocima kept returning to her cave each year during the days of Holy Lent, until he rested in peace at the age of one hundred. As for St. Mary the hermit, her pure body was discovered during the leadership of Pope John, Patriarch of Jerusalem. Through her, many miracles have occurred. She died in the year 421AD at the age of seventy six. Our church celebrates her feast each year on the 6th day of the blessed Coptic month Baramudah.

May her blessings be with us all, and glory be to God forever, amen.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT THE HERMIT FATHERS

QUESTION: ARE THE HERMIT FATHERS INFALLIBLE?

Answer: No man is infallible as long as he is living on earth, only God is infallible. The life stories of the hermits tell us about the falling of some of the hermit fathers. Abba Moussa the hermit lived in ascetism for thirty years during which time even the wild beasts became friendly with him. Yet the time came when he was deceived by the devil more than once. Abba Moussa repented and the Lord sent to him Abba Samuel the Confessor, to whom he confessed to and received the sacrament of Holy Communion before passing away. Likewise Abba Timothy the hermit sinned at the beginning of his ascetic life and wept and cried for his sins until an ulcer formed in his liver. The Lord heard his prayer of repentance and sent an angel to heal him, and thus he spent the rest of his life in holiness.

QUESTION: ARE THE HERMIT FATHERS JUST SPIRITS WHO FLY FROM PLACE TO PLACE AND ENTER CHURCHES WHEN THEY ARE CLOSED WITHOUT ANYONE SEEING THEM?

Answer: The hermit fathers are humans just like us who eat, drink and sleep, but they live in complete discipline and self denial of all bodily pleasures and comfort. For example Abba Paula the First Hermit used to eat half a loaf of bread each day, delivered by a raven. Abba Noufer the hermit lived near a palm tree and used to feed from its dates, and Abba Bejimi and Abba Moussa used to eat the grass of the wilderness. All these hermits would drink from the fresh springs of mountains and rocks which God produced for them. These hermit fathers had bodies like ours that would fall sick and feel pain. As we just mentioned, Abba Timothy suffered from an ulcer in his liver, which the Lord permitted an angel to heal. At the end of Abba Noufer's life, he was struck with a terrible fever and his body turned red. Therefore, we cannot say hermits are spirits.

QUESTION: DO HERMITS WEAR CLOTHES, BECAUSE IN TIME THEIR CLOTHES WOULD WEAR OUT?

Answer: We read in the life of Abba Macarius the Great, that he saw two naked hermits wandering in the inner wilderness, just east of Libya. But this is not usual. Abba Paula the hermit clothed himself in weaved palm, Abba Noufer covered his nakedness with his long hair. One day the devil approached Abba Bejimi and persuaded him to live naked as a sign of poverty, but he wisely answered, "It is not good for me to live naked, for God provided Adam and Eve with covering for their bodies, and angels with wings to cover their feet."

From these examples we see that either God keeps their clothes from wearing out, or provides hair and animal

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skin/weaved palms to cover their bodies. Those who remain naked, God protects them from being seen by other humans. For example, we read in the story of St. Mary the Egyptian that she hid behind a rock when Abba Zocima approached her in the wilderness to take her blessings, and she therefore asked him to throw his garment to cover her nakedness.

QUESTION: ARE THERE A LIMITED NUMBER OF HERMITS, AND AS ONE DIES, THEY ARE REPLACED?

Answer: There is no proof to suggest that there is a limited number of hermits, as their number is unknown due to being scattered throughout the wilderness. Besides, numbering hermits indicates a community life rather than a life of solitude.

QUESTION: WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A SOLITAIRE AND A HERMIT?

Answer: A solitaire has a known cave where people may come and visit for the sake of taking their blessings. But no one knows the place of a hermit - either how to reach him, or how to return. Living in the inner wilderness, in uninhabited places, a hermit may wander for several years without seeing the face of a fellow human.

Referring to the life and progression to hermitage, Abba Issac said: "Usually a hermit begins as a monk living in a monastic community, progressing to the life of solitude (in his cell). He stays alone and keeps silent all week, only coming out of his cell on Sundays to attend the Holy Mass and meet with his fellow brothers. Then he leaves the monastic community, taking shelter as a solitaire in a cave, and lastly leaves the cave to be a lover of solitude, venturing into the inner wilderness."