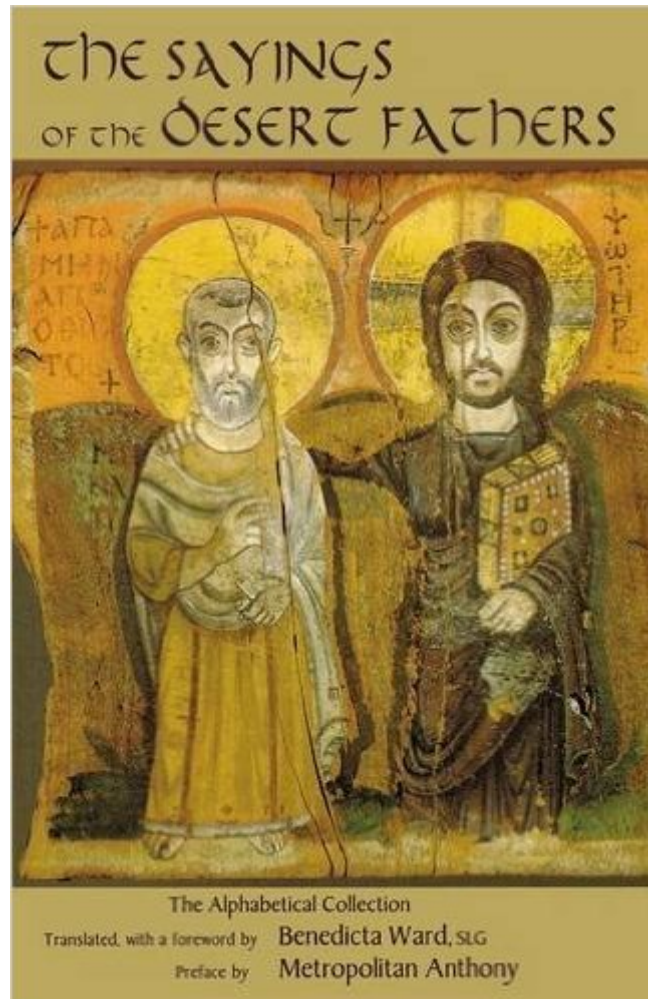


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The Sayings Of The Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection



Synopsis

The fourth-century ascetic flight to the desert indelibly marked Christianity. The faithful who did not embrace the austerity of the desert admired those who did and sought them out for counsel and consolation. The 'words' the monks gave were collected and passed around among those too far away or too feeble to make the trek themselves - or lived generations later. Previously available only in fragments, these Sayings of the Desert Fathers are now accessible in its entirety in English for the first time. We have a great deal to learn from their integrity and their unrelenting courage, from their vision of God - so Holy, so great, possessed of such a love, that nothing less than one's whole being could respond to it. These were men and women who had reached a humility of which we have no idea, because it is not rooted in an hypocritical or contrived depreciation of self, but in the vision of God, and a humbling experience of being so loved. They were ascetics, ruthless to themselves, yet so human, so immensely compassionate not only to the needs of men but also to their frailty and their sins; men and women wrapped in a depth of inner silence of which we have no idea and who taught by 'Being', not by speech: 'If a man cannot understand my silence, he will never understand my words.' If we wish to understand the sayings of the Fathers, let us approach them with veneration, silencing our judgments and our own thoughts in order to meet them on their own ground and perhaps to partake ultimately - if we prove able to emulate their earnestness in the search, their ruthless determination, their infinite compassion "in their own silent communion with God.

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Customer Reviews

For thirty years now Sister Benedicta Ward's translation of the sayings of 131 of the earliest monastics has served as an indispensable text for English speakers. In addition to her brief foreword and short biographical introductions (when they are known), the book includes simple maps on the inside front and back covers, a short glossary of terms, a chronological table of key events in the development of desert monasticism, a bibliography that is all too short and badly dated, and then two indices of key concepts, people and places. The sayings themselves stand alone without commentary. For contemporary extrapolations one can turn to the fine books by Archbishop Rowan Williams (*Where God Happens*, 2005) and John Chryssavgis (*In the Heart of the Desert*, 2003). For more complete primary resources, see the two works by John Cassian (360-435), *Institutes and Conferences* (900-plus pages), in which Cassian relates what he learned from and about the earliest monastics. Beginning in the third century, three monastic experiments emerged in Egypt. St. Anthony (251-356), an uneducated Copt, is generally hailed as the father of the hermit monasticism centered in lower Egypt. Thanks to *The Life of Saint Anthony* by Athanasius, we know as much or more about Anthony than any other of the early ascetics. Other monks cooperated and collaborated in "cenobitic" monasticism. Pachomius (290-347) is generally credited with instigating this communal form of flight to the desert. Finally, in Nitria and Scetis small groups of monks lived near one another under the direction of an elder or "abba." In addition to Egypt, desert monasticism flourished in Syria, Asia Minor and in Palestine. It's easy to dismiss the eccentricities of a Simon the Stylite (d. 459), who sat atop a fifty-foot pole outside of Antioch for forty years, or the ascetic excesses of food and sleep deprivation, but we honor these saints for their unique experimental spirituality that explored just what the words of Jesus might mean: "Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me." They stopped at nothing in "their lifetime of striving to re-direct every aspect of body, mind, and soul to God, and that is what they talked about" (Ward) in these "sayings." In these sayings we are taught to "expect temptation until your last breath." That means doing battle with one's inner appetites, drives, thoughts, attachments (for example, to wealth) and desires. It also means the further you travel on the Christian journey the more you realize the breadth and depth of the struggle. Consequently, these monastics were above all things modest, non-judgmental, and deeply tender in regard to our human weaknesses. They were reluctant to take Christian office, made the certainty of their death a force for good in life, modest in what they thought they might know about Scripture, eager to keep silent, and appreciative of the diverse ways that each monk worked out his salvation. Ultimately, and in contrast to so much Christian spirituality of today, these desert monastics recommend a "hidden" form of discipleship, the focus of which is the interior geography of the human heart regardless of where they body finds itself. I have found

these ancient saints to be wise guides for our contemporary world.

I first became interested in the writings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers after reading some of the writings of Kathleen Norris. As a Benedictine Oblate, she discovered this rich and varied writing and incorporated parts of their wisdom into her own writings. When I came across THE SAYINGS OF THE DESERT FATHERS, translated by an Anglican nun, Sr. Benedicta Ward, I read it and saw why the writings intrigued people such as Norris and others such as Thomas Merton. The writings included in this work were written by people who fled to the desert to become examples of holiness. Some of their writings were recorded and reveal much about the human condition. Their joys and struggles in such an austere life are the foundation of this book. Other writings can be somewhat difficult to understand in our day and age, but these writings still prove interesting. The book is organized by individual "Abbas" in alphabetical order (Greek alphabetical order, that is). The sayings are numbered and readers should probably read the sayings individually rather than as a biography. I have found that reading them in conjunction with prayer is helpful. I will usually read the various passages until one sticks with me and leads to reflection. The words can have a certain power to them that can both challenge and encourage a reader. Some sayings may say nothing to a reader, but eventually one will stumble upon something that captures one's attention. Modern readers will find the wisdom of these ancient Christians thought provoking. Readers get little tidbits about early Christianity and see how many of the challenges to the spiritual life are anything but new. Readers will want to keep certain things in mind when reading this volume. The writers were not writing for a twenty-first century audience. Some of the writings can be brutal, cruel, and in some cases misogynistic. Reading with a historical frame of mind is essential, and by doing so, this ancient wisdom can be very relevant to our day and age.

If you enjoy religious mysticism but don't feel a great need to sweat in order to understand it, if you are looking for a piece of beauty and simplicity in this world, if you want to know in a straightforward manner, how to rise above: this is the book for you. Accessible, succinct, sublime.

Having read this book when it was first published, I find I continue to return to it over and over again for my own prayer and reading and as a book I suggest to others. The simple stories and sayings have a wonderful depth and we can see these ancients committed to simplicity, prayer, and a life of being non-judgmental, hospitable and loving. Excellent.

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