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“Shining Face and White Body”: Holy Flesh and Holiness in the Spirituality of the Desert

Abstract

This paper explores the nature of the holiness as it appears in the spirituality of the desert. The desire to scrutinize the ascetic body, and particularly the face, is a recurrent theme in the early Egyptian monasticism. First of all, the holy face of the monk is a sign of the holiness, and Desert Fathers become icons for it. The distinctive ascetic face was an external manifestation of the spiritual life of the monk, a proof of the holy life. This topos appears in the sentences that describes the visages of the elders as “full of light”, and shining like stars. The ascetic physiognomy was seen as a mirroring of the divine light, so that



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holy faces are means to seeing this uncreated light.

Keywords

asceticism, holiness, Desert Fathers, early monasticism, sainthood, uncreated light

1 Introduction

It is crucial for the comprehension of holiness to understand that it has two elements: God and the World. Generally, the world is associated to the passions, so that the withdrawal into the wilderness, so prominent in the desert monasticism, has retained its full significance up to the present day in Orthodox monasticism. This point is briefly expressed in one of the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*: „When Abba Arsenius was still in the palace, he prayed to God saying: ‚Lord, guide me as to how I can be saved‘, and there came to him a voice saying: ‚Arsenius, flee from people, and you shall be saved‘”¹.

From this perspective, withdrawing from the world is associated with the spiritual life, so that it is part of holiness, briefly an "oasis of wisdom"². In the spirituality of the desert, a rightly disciplined body could attain sainthood, because as H. Hunt has remarked, „the human person is capable of angelic ascent”³. Desert Monasticism understands the body as the

¹ Arsenius 1 (trans. Wortley, *The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, St Vladimir’s Seminary Press: 2014), p. 40.

² Cf. David G. R. Keller, *Oasis of Wisdom. The Worlds of the Desert Fathers and Mothers* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2005).

³ Hannah Hunt, *Clothed in the Body. Asceticism, the Body and the Spiritual in the Late Antique Era* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), p. 5.

arena for spiritual combat⁴ so that the mortification of the flesh means the control of the body⁵. Therefore, the monastic body has become the ascetical environment for the training of the soul. The body contains passions that are to be purified, and the end of the process of purification is a state of holiness.

As we shall see below, in the late fourth-century body was an integral part of the holiness. Those who came to this holiness or deification (*theosis*)⁶ were those who, like Desert Fathers, practiced ascetic life. In this paper, we point out how the radiant face of the monk could have been read as evidence of his holiness.

⁴ For more details, see David Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk. Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

⁵ Cf. Hannah Hunt, Desert Teachings on the Body and Asceticism, in H. Hunt, *Clothed in the Body. Asceticism, the Body and the Spiritual in the Late Antique Era*, pp. 47-62.

⁶ In this paper, we use the terms holiness and deification interchangeably. Recent academic publications on the topic of deification include, N. Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford University Press, 2004); Stephen Finlan, Vladimir Kharlamov (eds), *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology* (Wipf and Stock, 2006); Michael J. Christensen, Jeffery A. Wittung (eds), *Partakers of the Divine Nature. The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions* (Michigan: Grand Rapids, 2008); Stephen Thomas, *Deification in the Eastern Orthodox Tradition: A Biblical Perspective* (Gorgias Press, 2008); Paul M. Blowers, *Drama of the Divine Economy: Creator and Creation in Early Christian Theology and Piety* (Oxford University Press, 2012); Patricia Cox Miller, *The Corporeal Imagination. Signifying the Holy in Late Ancient Christianity* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); Robert Kirschner, The Vocation of Holiness in Late Antiquity, *VC* vol. 38, no. 2 (1984), pp. 105-124.

2 Practicing Sainthood in the Desert: A Brief Survey

In the spirituality of the desert, there is a close relationship between the control of the body and the spiritual progress. Through the control of the body we not understand an extreme asceticism, but a spiritual combat against the passions. This typical conception for Desert Fathers is recorded in a sentence expressed by Abba Poemen: „Abba Isaac visited Abba Poemen and saw him pouring a little water over his feet. As he was quite familiar with him, he said to him: ‚How is it that some used severity and treated their bodies harshly?‘ Abba Poemen said to him: ‚We were not taught to slay the body but to slay the passions’”⁷.

Extreme asceticism was contested in the spirituality of the desert, so that Egyptian ascetics advocate the middle way of moderation in the spiritual life⁸. According to this approach, Desert Fathers saw themselves fundamentally as teachers: „In the matter of identity, that was what asceticism was for: to prepare oneself to teach, and to fulfill the task effectively. We have to distinguish between teaching that took place within ascetic groups and teaching that was directed beyond them; but, while the first was regarded as primary, the second was a natural, even if dependent extension”⁹.

⁷ Poemen 183 (trans. Wortley, *The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, pp. 257-258).

⁸ The excessive violence to the body is rejected in the early ascetic tradition. For more details, see John Pinsent, *Ascetic Moods in Greek and Latin Literature*, in W. Wimbush (ed.), *Asceticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 211-219, here p. 211. See also: H. Hunt, *Clothed in the Body. Asceticism, the Body and the Spiritual in the Late Antique Era* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012); Nathan G. Jennings, *Theology as Ascetic Act. Disciplining Christian Discourse* (Peter Lang, 2010).

⁹ Philip Rousseau, *The Identity of the Ascetic Master in the Historia Religiosa of Theodoret of Cyrrhus: A New Paideia?* In: G. Clarke (ed.), *Identities in the Eastern Mediterranean in Antiquity. Mediterranean Archaeology* 11 (University of Sydney, 1998), p. 231. For more details,

From this perspective, the metaphor of a coach training his athletes and a teacher instructing his disciples is correct. The importance of the spiritual guidance in the *Apophthegmata* has been widely recognized in the early ascetic tradition¹⁰. The elder or old man (*géron*)¹¹ is fundamentally a „charismatic“ monk because he gives advice, not a confession.

First of all, in the desert, as G. Gould has noted, „teaching takes place in the context of a personal relationship, which makes great demands on both parties involved. The first responsibility of the abba or ‚old man‘ (*géron*) is to teach his disciple how to live the monastic life and to face up to the problems and temptations to which any monk is exposed. For the disciple, the

see Ph. Rousseau, *Ascetics, Authority and the Church in the Age of Jerome and Cassian* (Clarendon: Oxford University Press, 1978).

¹⁰ For a general survey of spiritual guidance in early asceticism, see: I. Hausherr, *Spiritual Direction in the Early Christian East* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Studies, 1990); Graham Gould, *The Desert Fathers on Monastic Community* (Clarendon: Oxford University Press, 1993); Philip Rousseau, *Ascetics, Authority, and the Church in the Age of Jerome and Cassian* (Oxford University Press, 1978); John Chryssavgis, *In the Heart of the Desert. The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers* (World Wisdom, 2008); H. Dörries, The Place of Confession in Ancient Monasticism, *SP* no. 5 (1962), pp. 287-290; A. Louf, Spiritual Fatherhood in the Literature of the Desert, in John R. Sommerfeldt (ed.), *Abba. Guides to Wholeness and Holiness East and West* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1982), pp. 37-63; Thomas Merton, The Spiritual Father in the Desert Tradition, in Th. Merton, J. Leclercq (eds), *Contemplation in a World of Action* (London: Doubleday 1971), pp. 269-293; B. Ward, Spiritual Direction in the Desert Fathers, *The Way* 24, 1984, pp. 61-70, and K. Ware, The Spiritual Father in Orthodox Christianity, *Cross Currents*, 1974 republished sub title The Spiritual Guide in Orthodox Christianity, in K. Ware, *The Inner Kingdom* (Crestwood: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), pp. 127-152.

¹¹ According to G. Gould, „the title and form of address ‘Abba’, suggesting the regard of a disciple for an experienced and authoritative father and teacher, is itself indicative of the importance of spiritual direction in the *Sayings*“ (G. Gauld, *The Desert Fathers on Monastic Community*, p. 26).

process of learning requires self-disclosure, endurance, and obedience"¹².

We can see that spiritual guidance has always depended on a proper „disclosure of thought“. Thoughts – *logismoi* in the classic terminology of the desert – designated not merely the mental activities, but „images, sensible phantasms, which, when dwelt upon, make one draw toward that object existing outside the individual"¹³. It is important to say that the *apatheia* of which Greek ascetic texts speak is not a state of passive indifference and insensibility. In other words, „dispassion“ does not mean that someone feels no passions, but that he does not accept any of them. On the contrary, the passions remain alive¹⁴, so that the monk must fight with them „until his last breath"¹⁵.

In a sentence, Abba John Colobos offers a short manual of the virtues expected of the ascetic: Once he spoke of a king who laid siege to his enemy's city. The king cut off the water and blockaded all the entrances to starve his enemies into submission¹⁶. Then John noted, "So it is with the passions of the flesh too: if a person exists with fasting and hunger, the enemy wastes away from his soul"¹⁷.

According to Desert Fathers, the soul and the body have passions from which the monk must seek deliverance to find communion with God. From this perspective, Egyptian monasti-

¹² G. Gould, *The Desert Fathers on Monastic Community*, pp. 26-27.

¹³ George Maloney, *The Elder of the Christian East as Spiritual Father*, in *Studies in Formative Spirituality*, 1982, p. 83.

¹⁴ "The passions are alive", states Abba Abraham 1, "only they are held in check by the holy ones" (Abba Abraham 1, trans. Wortley, *The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*), p. 70.

¹⁵ Antony the Great 4 (trans. Wortley, *The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*), p. 32.

¹⁶ Cf. W. Harmless, *Desert Christians. An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 201.

¹⁷ John Colobos 3 (trans. Wortley, *The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*), p. 132.

cism was seen as the successor to martyrdom. Desert teaching points out the need to control the passions to achieve a spiritual progress. Desert Fathers was associated this spiritual progress with the wilderness, so that the Egyptian monasticism is exemplified by withdrawal: “The model for their renunciation of physical pleasure is spiritually derived from their desert forebears’ abstinence and renunciation, and it is here, too, that the first attempts at communal monastic living took place, which produced much further teaching on asceticism”¹⁸.

In other words, for the Desert Fathers, passions are diseases of the soul and obstacles in the way that he wants to travel to achieve the state of holiness. That is why one of the reasons and also one of the principal purpose of the monk’s withdrawal from the world and his living in the desert is the death for the world and spiritual progress.

The fight against passions can be interpreted as a „daily death”, so that „body and soul were to be embraced, with equal compassion and discipline. The Desert Fathers were, at one level, unambiguous about the need to flee from the body, through continual remembrance of death”¹⁹.

For instance, Evagrius considers that the „flight” is not just from society but from oneself so that the soul and the body must be yoked together: „To separate the body from the soul is the

¹⁸ H. Hunt, *Clothed in the Body. Asceticism, the Body and the Spiritual in the Late Antique Era*, p. 50. Desert teaching paves the way for Orthodox monasticism as a successor to martyrdom. From this perspective, Sebastian Brock considers the monk as “in many ways the successor of the martyr” (S. Brock, *Early Syrian Asceticism*, *Numen* vol. 20, no. 1, 1973, pp. 1-19, here p. 2. For a close relationship between martyr and monk, see Robert A. Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 72; Robert Kirschner, *The Vocation of Holiness in Late Antiquity*, *VC*, no. 38 (1984), Edward E. Malone, *The Monk and the Martyr: The Monk as the Successor of the Martyr* (The Catholic University of America Press, 2011).

¹⁹ H. Hunt, *Clothed in the Body. Asceticism, the Body and the Spiritual in the Late Antique Era*, p. 50.

privilege only of the one who has joined them together. However, to separate the soul from the body lies as well in the power of the man who pursues virtue. For our Fathers gave to the meditation of death and the flight from the body a special name - anachoresis"²⁰.

Also, as we know, Antony the Great counseled his disciples to live as though each day were their last. This theme also appears in the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*²¹ and Cassian's monastic writings²².

In the spirituality of the desert, there is a close parallel between the dead to the world of the monk and the metaphor of the cell as a tomb. The following story in the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* insists clearly upon this need for "dead to the world": „A brother asked Abba Moses: ‚I see something before me and am not able to grasp it'. The elder said to him: ‚Unless you become dead like those in graves you will not be able to grasp it'"²³.

Therefore, the desert and the tomb especially is considered a place of spiritual combat. The point is briefly expressed in one of the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*: „A brother asked Abba Poemen: ‚What am I to do?' And the elder said to him: ‚When Abraham entered the Promised Land, he bought himself a sepulcher, and through the tomb he inherited the land' (Gen 23.4-10). The brother said to him: ‚What is a grave?' and the

²⁰ Evagrius Ponticus, *Praktikos*, 52 (trans. Bamberger), p. 30.

²¹ On death in the spirituality of the desert, the best book is: Jonathan L. Zecher, *The Role of Death in the Ladder of Divine Ascent and the Greek Ascetic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). See especially ch. 2 („The Life of Antony: Embracing Death on the Ascent to God", and „The Desert Fathers: ‚Like a body whose soul has departed'"), pp. 80-142.

²² See, Steven D. Driver, *John Cassian and the Readings of Egyptian Monastic Culture* (Routledge, 2002).

²³ Abba Moses 11 (trans. Wortley, *The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*), p. 196.

elder said to him: „A place of weeping and sorrow”²⁴. In other words, the cell of the monk has seen the place where the ascetic achieve a state of inner purity. As K. Innemée has remarked, “the cell combines the aspects of living quarters with these of a tomb and/or funerary chapel. The monk thus lives and prays in a cell that is at the same time a tomb, reminding him of the fact that he is dead to the world”²⁵.

The cell as a grave can be seen as a metaphor²⁶, but in some apophthegms we can see how certain ascetics took it literally. For instance two monks constructed their tombs a little distant from each other and, each day, sitting on them from early morning, each of them wept for his soul as though it were dead. If ever his disciples fell asleep at dawn after the psalms, the elder would shout at him, saying: „Up, brother, for those people has put in an hour at the tombs and their task”²⁷.

Another story develops the same idea: “Closing your tomb,” one of the Egyptian ascetics is reported to have advised his fellow-

²⁴ Abba Poemen 50 (trans. Wortley, *The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*), p. 235.

²⁵ Karel Innemée, Funerary Aspects in the Paintings from the Apollo Monastery at Bawit, in G. Gabra (ed.), *Christianity and Monasticism in Middle Egypt* (The American University in Cairo Press, 2015), p. 252. The conception of the desert, as reflected in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, is primarily that of a place of sterility and death (cf. S. Elm, “Virgins of God”. *The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity*, Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 260.

²⁶ Cf. Moses 6 (trans. Wortley, p. 195).

²⁷ *The Anonymous Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Anonymous, N. 592, 1, trans. Wortley, p. 401). For more details on this subject, see Darlene L. Brooks Hedstrom, The Geography of the Monastic Cell in Early Egyptian Monastic Literature, in *Church History*, no. 4, 2009, pp. 756-791; Karel Innemée, Funerary Aspects in the Paintings from the Apollo Monastery at Bawit, in G. Gabra (ed.), *Christianity and Monasticism in Middle Egypt* (The American University in Cairo Press, 2015), pp. 241-253; Elisabeth R. O’Connell, *Tombs for the Living: Monastic Reuse of Monumental Funerary Architecture in Late Antique Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

monks, "as though you were already dead so that all the time you are thinking your death is at hand"²⁸.

The monks live as though dying daily, so that all living is a kind of daily experience of dying²⁹. In fact the Egyptian monks reiterates the Pauline word: "I die daily" (1 Cor 15:31). In this context we point out that through ascetic practice of dying the monk acquires the „natural state" of the Edenic health.

This idea reminds us of the description of Antony's emergence from the desert fortress. In this scene Athanasius emphasizes a model ascetic in which, through rigorous ascetic exercise, the monk acquires an incorruptible body³⁰. In fact the effort preserves the body of the monk, do not destroy it, so that the ascetics are amazed to find „his body had maintained its former condition, neither fat from lack of exercise, nor emaciated from fasting and combat with demons, but was just as they had known him before his withdrawal"³¹.

What is remarkable in this passage is that, as W. Harmless has remarked, „not only did Antony emerge physically unchanged; he now possessed a mysterious inner tranquility, visible in his

²⁸ John the Dwarf 34 (trans. Wortley, *The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*), p. 139.

²⁹ For this practice to the Desert Fathers, see Jonathan L. Zecher, *The Role of Death in the Ladder of Divine Ascent and the Greek Ascetic Tradition*, pp. 80-142.

³⁰ On this theme of early monasticism, see Teresa M. Shaw, *The Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), pp. 161-219, and Yonatan Moss, *Incorruptible Body: Christology, Society, and Authority in Late Antiquity* (University of California Press, 2016).

³¹ *The Life of Antony* 14 (trans. Robert Gregg), p. 42. The bodily health is a central element of Athanasius's ascetic theology. And indeed, Athanasius promotes a model of Christian holiness in which ascetic practice leads to the prelapsarian health. For more details, see Andrew Crislip, *Thorns in the Flesh: Illness and Sanctity in Late Ancient Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), pp. 60-66.

face”³². In the spiritual sphere, the human rules of ordinary logic do not apply. As K. Ware has remarked:

“we would do well to reflect carefully on the way in which we present our Orthodoxy. There is a tendency to draw attention to only one aspect. We speak about the glory of the divine light at Christ’s Transfiguration, about the sense of Resurrection triumph at Easter midnight; we talk about the joy of the Kingdom, of the spiritual beauty of icons, of the Divine Liturgy as an inauguration of the Age to come. Moreover, we are right to emphasize these things. However, let us take care not to be one-sided. The Transfiguration and the Resurrection are integrally linked with the Crucifixion. Therefore, cosmic transfiguration can only be realized through self-denial and ascetic fasting”³³.

This statement reminds us of Abba Joseph in the *Apophtegmata*: Some brothers were once gathered around Abba Joseph, and he rejoiced as they sat there, asking him questions. He was fervently saying to them: „Today I am a ruler for I have overruled the passions”³⁴.

For Desert Fathers, the body is both the source of temptation and the means by which it can be overcome. Briefly, the spiritual exercises of the monk is a paradigmatic component of ascetic life. Briefly, in the spirituality of the desert the holiness

³² W. Harmless, *Desert Christians. An Introduction to the Literature of Early Asceticism*, p. 64.

³³ Bishop Kallistos Ware, *The Inner Kingdom* (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), pp. 44-45.

³⁴ Joseph of Panepho 10 (trans. Wortley, *The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, pp. 152-153). For more details, see Dimitris J. Kyrtatas, *Living in Tombs: The Secret of an Early Christian Mystical Experience*, in Christian H. Bull, Liv Ingeborg Lied, John D. Turner (eds), *Mystery and Secrecy in the Nag Hammadi Collection and Other Ancient Literature: Ideas and Practice* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), pp. 245-258. Hans J.W. Drijvers, *The Saint as Symbol: Conceptions of the Person in Late Antiquity*, in Hans G. Kippenberg et al. (eds.), *Concepts of Person in Religion and Thought* (Berlin, 1990), pp. 137-157, here p. 144.

demands serious efforts, so that Desert Fathers understood their struggle in athletic metaphors. In other words for Egyptian monks some of the essential ingredients of the ascetic life are harsh discipline and rigorous training. The same idea is found in *Fifty Spiritual Homilies* in which this ascetic axiom asserts that a monk only through many efforts and temptations „receives spiritual growth and increase, reaching even to the perfect level of freedom from passions so that, courageously and with great effort enduring every temptation with which evil forces attack it, he attains the greatest honors and spiritual gifts and heavenly riches”³⁵.

The ascetic body, and particularly the holy face of the monk, is a recurrent theme in the spirituality of the desert. First of all, the ascetic face manifests the proofs of the spiritual life, so that the experience of holiness is reflected principally on the holy face of the monk. From this perspective, the holy face of the monk, as understood by Desert Fathers, is a kind of matrix for the whole of Christian theology.

Indeed, the radiant face of Desert Fathers is a regular feature in the spirituality of the desert: „A brother went to the cell of Abba Arsenius at Scete and, looking through the window, saw the elder as though he were all fire”³⁶. Also, when Abba Sisoës, who took up residence on the Inner Mountain after Antony's death, was asked when he would reach his predecessor's stature, he replied, “If I had one of the *logismoi* of Abba Antony, I would have become all on fire”³⁷. Abba Pambo was said to have the appearance of Moses “when his face was glorified” (referencing the fact that Moses’ „face shine like lightning”). Pambo’s face „shine like lightning, and he was like an emperor sitting on his

³⁵ Macarius the Egyptian, *The Fifty Spiritual Homilies* 10.5 (trans. George A. Maloney), p. 90.

³⁶ Arsenius 27 (trans. Wortley, *The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*), p.45.

³⁷ Sisoës 9 (trans. Wortley, *The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*), p. 283.

throne. Abba Silvanus and Abba Sisoës were similarly distinguished”.³⁸ Abba Daniel describes the appearance of Abba Arsenius as „angelic”³⁹ due to his „the body noble but slender”⁴⁰. Finally, in a sentence „one of the fathers said that somebody once met Abba Silvanus and, having seen his face and body shining like angels”⁴¹.

In this passage Abba Silvanus highlights the need for permanent transfiguration of the monk, soul and body. This foundational element of the spirituality of the desert is expressed by Georgia Frank in the following terms: “Angelic faces became a shorthand for any monk who lived in perfect imitation of angels. (...) Radiance and Light were typically thought to be features of divinized bodies for ascetics. Rather than present a body broken by ascetic practice, the pilgrims could use references to light and angels to show asceticism’s

³⁸ Pambo 12 (trans. Wortley, *The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 263).

³⁹ In similar terms, in the Syriac *Life of Antony* we find the scene in which Antony emerges from the desert fortress: “When he came out like a man who rises from the depths of the earth, they saw his face as that of an angel of light.” Cf. VA 14 (SC 400:172; trans. W. Harmless); *Life of Antony* Syriac 14 (CSCO 417, p. 34). Timothy D. Barnes, *Angel of Light or Mystic Initiate: The Problem of the Life of Antony*, in *JTS* no. 37, 1986, p. 360.

⁴⁰ Abba Arsenius 42 (trans. Wortley, *The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 52). In the spirituality of the desert, the body becomes a perfect instrument of his soul. For example, Athanasius the Great stresses that Antony’s “face had a great and marvelous grace”: “His face had a great and marvelous grace, and this spiritual favor he had from the Savior (...). It was not his physical dimensions that distinguished him from the rest, but the stability of character and the purity of the soul. His soul being free of confusion, he held his outer senses also undisturbed, so that from the soul’s joy his face was cheerful as well, and from the movements of the body it was possible to sense and perceive the stable condition of the soul” (*The Life of Antony* 67, trans. Robert C. Gregg), p. 81.

⁴¹ Silvanus 12 (trans. Wortley, *The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*), p. 295. For additional examples, see: Graham Gould, *The Desert Fathers on Monastic Community*, pp. 181–82.

highest achievement, the reversal of the body's decay and its transformation into the glorified body of the resurrection"⁴².

Also, Abba Or is seen „just like an angel” before attention is drawn specifically to the „snowy white beard down to his chest” and his radiant face⁴³.

In each case, as Kristi Upson-Saia has remarked, „the radiance of the ascetic often communicated something of their holiness and their superhuman status”.⁴⁴ In the words of W. Harmless, „becoming flame” refers to the quest for transfiguration. The Desert Fathers sought to recover the “glory of Adam”: „They used to say of Abba Pambo that, as Moses received the likeness of the glory of Adam when his face was glorified, so too did the face of Abba Pambo shine like lightning, and he was like an emperor sitting on his throne”⁴⁵.

Finally, in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, we find that Abba Lot went to see Abba Joseph and said to him, “Abba, to the best of my ability I do my little *synaxis*, my little fasting; praying, meditating, and maintaining *hesychia*; and I purge my *logismoi* to the best of my ability. What else then can I do? The elder stood up and stretched out his hands toward heaven; his fingers

⁴² Georgia Frank, *Pilgrims to Living Saints in Christian Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 161. For additional references, see Patricia Cox Miller, Desert Asceticism and ‘The Body from Nowhere’, in *J ECS*, no. 2, 1994, pp. 141-142 (pp. 137-153).

⁴³ *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* 2.1; trans. N. Russell and Benedicta Ward, *The Lives of the Desert Fathers* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1981), p. 63. Angelic faces or luminous faces are frequent in the *Historia Monachorum*. For more details, see Andrew Cain, *The Greek Historia Monachorum in Aegypto. Monastic Hagiography in the Late Fourth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁴⁴ Kristi Upson-Saia, Hairiness and Holiness in the Early Christian Desert, in: Kristi Upson-Saia, Carly Daniel-Hughes, Alicia J. Batten (eds.), *Dressing Judeans and Christians in Antiquity* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), pp. 155-174.

⁴⁵ Pambo 12 (trans. Wortley, *The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*), p. 263.

became like ten lamps of fire. He said to him: „If you are willing, become altogether like fire”⁴⁶.

3 Conclusion

Undoubtedly, the importance of the holy face is underlined in the spirituality of the desert. These apophthegms above show us that the Desert Fathers possessed an inner light⁴⁷, visible in their face. This is the way Egyptian monks imagines the holiness made possible by Christ⁴⁸. Perhaps the passage from the ascetic literature that best sums the deification in the desert is expressed by Macarius the Great:

„The face of the soul is unveiled and it gazes with fixed eyes upon the heavenly Bridegroom, face to face, in a spiritual and ineffable light (...). Such a person believes that will obtain liberation from his sins and dark passions through the Spirit, so that, purified by the Spirit in soul and body, the person become a pure vessel to receive the heavenly unction and become a worthy habitation for the heavenly and true King, Christ. Moreover, then such a

⁴⁶ Joseph of Panephis 7 (trans. Wortley, *The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 152).

⁴⁷ On this *topos* in early ascetic tradition, see Andrew Louth, *Light, Vision, and Religious Experience in Byzantium*, in Matthew T. Kapstein (ed.), *The Presence of Light. Divine Radiance and Religious Experience* (The University of Chicago Press, 2004), pp. 85-104.

⁴⁸ For the meaning of holiness in the Egyptian monastic tradition, see especially Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert. Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). Also, this point is expressed by Georgia Frank in her book: *Pilgrims to Living Saints in Christian Late Antiquity* (University of California Press, 2000). Also, see Patricia Cox Miller, *Visceral Seeing: The Holy Body in Late Ancient Christianity*, in *J ECS*, no. 4, 2004, pp. 391-411.

person is considered worthy of heavenly life, having become a pure dwelling place for the Holy Spirit"⁴⁹.

This divine life is realized within the church as suggest the following sentence with which we entitled our paper: Abba Paul the Simple, the disciple of Abba Antony, was reputed to have the gift of "see the state of each person's soul as we see one another's faces". In a day, he was watching the brothers going into the church. He saw the ascetics entering "with shining faces and a sparkling look. (...) One monk who appeared 'dark,' accompanied by demons, while his guardian angel followed behind at a distance, downcast and grieving. However, when the monks emerged from the liturgy, again Paul examined each one, for he wanted to know in what state they were coming out. He saw that man who formerly had a body all shady and black coming out of the church with a *shining face and a white body*"⁵⁰.

⁴⁹ Macarius the Egyptian, *The Fifty Spiritual Homilies* 10: 4 (trans. George A. Maloney), pp. 89-90.

⁵⁰ Paul the Simple (trans. Wortley, *The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*), pp. 272-273.