

How a Monk Ought to Relate to his Neighbor

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THE *APOPTHHEGMATA PATRUM*, the tales and sayings of the earliest Christian monks who withdrew into the Egyptian deserts in the fourth to seventh centuries of this era, reveal more than a little about the kind of life they hoped to live there, especially about how they felt they ought to behave towards each other. This might appear somewhat surprising since the word *monk* itself implies alone-ness and the solitary state was considered the *acme* of monastic discipline (“Unless a person say in his heart: ‘I alone and God are in the world’ he will not experience repose,” Alonios 1 133A/11.13).¹ In fact the apophthegmatic literature has more than a little to say on this topic and that for a very good reason. I have explained elsewhere² why the practice of altruistic hospitality was held to be an obligation for every monk; here I will endeavor to identify the general principles governing a monk’s interaction with his neighbor.

In the Gospels the ground-work is spelled out very clearly by

¹ References to *APalph* are to Jean-Baptiste Cotelier, *Monumenta Ecclesiae Graecae* I (Paris 1647, repr. PG 65.71–440), and to supplementary items [S--] in Jean-Claude Guy, *Recherches sur la tradition grecque des Apophthegmata Patrum* (Brussels 1962, rpt. 1984 with corrections); to *APanon* (N--) to John Wortley, *The Anonymous Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Cambridge 2013); to *APSys* (00.00) to Jean-Claude Guy, *Les Apophthegmes des Pères: collection systématique* (SC 387 [1993], 474 [2003], 498 [2005]), transl. John Wortley, *The Book of the Elders, Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Systematic Collection* (Trappist/Collegeville 2012).

² “Crossroads in the Desert,” in E. B. Aitken and J. M. Fossey (eds.), *The Levant – Crossroads of Late Antiquity* (Montreal 2013) 289–299.

the Lord's addition to the *shema*: “[Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord and] you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Dt 6:4–5). “This is the first and great commandment,” he says, then continues: “and a second is like unto it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (ἀγαπήσας τὸν πλησίον ὡς ἑαυτόν, Lev 19:18). In another place, Jesus has told a rich young man, who asked what good thing he should do in order to have eternal life, that he should keep the commandments. “Which ones?” he retorted and Jesus tells him (in addition to some familiar injunctions of the Decalogue): “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt 19:19). This he utters as though this commandment (found in the Torah at Lev 19:18, but definitely not one of the Ten) were already well known and commanding respect. Then, having (as it were) listed the greater and the lesser commandments, he goes on to assert: “On these two commandments hang (κρέμαται) the whole Law and the Prophets” (Mt 22:37–39). Elsewhere he is reported to have claimed: “There is no other commandment greater than these” (μείζων τούτων ἐντολὴ οὐκ ἔστιν, Mk 12:31). Paul goes even further when he says: “The whole Law is fulfilled in one word, even this: you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Gal 5:14), and “Owe nobody anything but to love one another; for he that loves his neighbor has fulfilled the Law” (Rom 13:8).

Much though the apophthegmatic literature has to say about a monk's relations with his neighbor, few traces of the quotations cited above are to be found there. Only twice to my knowledge, both times in sayings recorded only in Ge'ez, is the Dominical charge to love one's neighbor mentioned:³

A brother said to me: “When Abba John of the Cells lay dying I said to him: ‘Abba, my father, will you not tell me a saying by which I might save myself?’ He said to me: ‘Yes, I will tell you a

³ Lucien Regnault, *Les Sentences des Pères du Désert, nouveau recueil* (Solesmes 1977) 310; my translation of Dom Lucien's translation of Victor Arras' Latin translation from the Ge'ez.

saying and, once it is told, it will suffice for you to be saved.’ ‘My father, what is it?’ I said to him and he said to me: ‘Go and love your neighbor like yourself (Lev 19:18) and all your enemies will fall at your feet.’” (*Eth.Coll.* 13.85)

Abba Sisoës of Petra (a disciple of Antony the Great) is credited with telling an enquirer the following saying:⁴

Go and maintain these three practices and you will live: tolerate insult as though it were praise, indigence as though it were riches, love your neighbor as yourself and the Lord will be with you; he will keep you strong against your enemies (*Eth.Coll.* 14.64).

There may also be an echo of Gal 5:14 at the end of *APsys* 14.7 (not known elsewhere): “He who has charity has fulfilled all the commandments of God”—but very little otherwise. This is not by any means the only case of what today would be considered a key text being rarely or never cited. It is certainly not that such texts were unknown: witness the reference to Mt 25:32–33 in N 307/15.84; it is meaningless unless the reader know the passage and can recognize the reference to “the goats.” It may be that such texts were so well known that they were literally taken for granted—or simply referred to obliquely. For instance: Antony the Great almost certainly had the “love your neighbor” commandment in mind when he said: “Life and death depend on our neighbor: for if we win over (κερδαίνειν)⁵ our brother, we win over God, but if we offend our brother, we sin against Christ” (Antony 9 77B/17.2). The same commandment is definitely being referred to in this saying:

Abba John the Dwarf said: “It is impossible to build the house from top to bottom, but from the foundation up.” When they said to him: “What is this saying?” the elder replied: “The

⁴ Regnault, *Les Sentences* 330.

⁵ The same verb is used in the same sense in Paphnutius 2 where the elder *wins over* a whole band of brigands, ἐκέρδησεν ὅλον τὸν κολήγιον (380A/17.18).

foundation is one's neighbor to be won over (κερδαίνειν) and he ought to come first; for on him hang (κρέμονται) all the commandments of Christ" (John Colobos 39/217A, ref. Mt 22:40).

Both sayings are also echoing another Dominical injunction: "If your brother sin against you go show him his fault between you and him; and if he hear you, you have gained (κερδαίνειν) your brother" (Mt 18:15; the same verb is used in 1 Cor 9:19–22 and 1 Pet 3:1). An appropriate modern translation would be "to win over," rather implying that a brother-neighbor might tend to be inimical rather than the reverse, which could well have been the case where people were striving to be alone.

There is a certain paradox here,⁶ for, even in the early stages of his career, in a *coenobion* or as a member of a group around an elder, a monk would not be in frequent contact with his neighbor—that is, if he obeyed the oft-repeated injunction to stay quietly alone in his cell most of the time. Hence one distinguished father says: "The person who learns the sweetness of the cell does not dishonour his neighbor in avoiding him" (Theodore of Pherme 14/189D). For the monk who advanced to a more remote and solitary state, a neighbor would be even less frequently encountered. Some solitaries might even have been tempted to be averse to their neighbors:

A brother asked an elder: "Is it good to have an aversion (ἔξις) towards one's neighbor?" The elder said to him: "Such aversions do not have the power to break a muzzle (κλᾶσαι κινόν). You have an aversion towards your brother? If you want to have an aversion, have it rather towards the passions" (N 129).

⁶ There is a massive paradox in that, while Jesus preached a supremely social gospel, the monastic movement was precisely a rejection of society and a turning away from it. This was probably due to the unfortunate use of the verb μισεῖν/*odisse*/hate in Lk 14:26 to translate whatever the Lord actually said. Now the commentators assure us: "*Hair* est un hébraïsme: il faut préférer le Christ à tout autre" (*Bible de Jérusalem*) and "*odiare* nel senso biblico di amar meno: qui non mi preferisce a suo padre" etc. (*Versione ufficiale*). But Gregory, Ambrose, Cyril, et al. did not understand this and struggled with the expression to no avail: see *Catena Aurea* ad loc.

But no matter how rarely a neighbor might be encountered, certain general principles are laid down concerning how a monk ought to behave on such occasions. In those principles the word *conscience* (συνείδησις) frequently recurs. Now this is not a word that appears very often in the apophthegmata; yet when it does appear it nearly always has to do with how one ought to interact with his neighbor.⁷ Above all he should keep (τηρεῖν) his conscience clear with respect to his neighbor. E.g.: “Deeds (πράξεις) are good, but if you keep your conscience [clear] with respect to your neighbor, in that way you are being saved” (τὴν δὲ συνείδησιν τηρῶν μετὰ τοῦ πλησίον σου οὕτως σώζει, at the end of Pambo 2 369A/10.94, cf. Pallad. *HL* 14). When a group of elders was asked⁸ how the brothers ought to be living, those elders replied: “In great asceticism and guarding (τηρεῖν) their conscience with respect to their neighbor” (Pambo 11 372A/4.86). Abba Joseph appears to have given a similar answer when a brother asked him: “What am I to do, for I can neither endure hardship nor work to provide charity?” The elder’s reply was: “If you cannot do even one of these things, keep (τηρεῖν) your conscience clear from thinking any evil of your neighbor and you will be saved” (Joseph of Panepho 4 229AB/10.40).⁹ This is also prescribed as a means of acquiring the longed-for repose:¹⁰ an unnamed elder says: “Keep a watch on/protect (φύλαξον) your conscience with respect to your neighbor and you shall have repose” (21.60).

⁷ “I believe that, remaining in your own cell for the name of God and keeping watch over (τηρῶν) your own conscience, you are yourself in the situation of Abba Antony” (N 202/7.41) may be an exception; see also 10.189 line 13.

⁸ Abba Pambo, Abba Bessarion, Isaiah, Abba Paësios and Abba Athré in *APsys* 4.86.

⁹ There is some textual confusion about the final sentence; 10.40 ends: κὰν τήρησον τὴν συνείδησίν σου ἀπὸ τοῦ πλησίον καὶ ἄπεχε ἀπὸ παντὸς κακοῦ καὶ σώζει, for God is looking for the sinless soul.

¹⁰ See J. Wortley, “The Significance of ‘Repose’ in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*,” *GRBS* 51 (2011) 323–339.

High on the list of things that might give one a bad conscience with respect to his neighbor are passing judgment on him and/or belittling him. Isaiah of Scete advises how these are to be avoided: “If a *logismos*¹¹ comes to you to pass judgment on your neighbor for some sin, first bear in mind that you are more of a sinner than he is. Do not believe the good you think you are doing pleased God and you will not dare to pass judgment on your neighbor.” Also: “In not passing judgment on one’s neighbor and in belittling oneself (ἐξουθενεῖν ἑαυτὸν)—that is where repose of the conscience is located” (9.3 and 4, from Isaiah of Scete, *Discourses* 25.27).¹² Abba Peter, the disciple of Abba Isaiah, said:

My father used to say that he who tolerates himself being censured and lays aside his own will [in deference] to his neighbor for the sake of God in order not to allow the enemy to come between [them] reveals that person to be a toiler (ἐργότης). If his mind be alert, he is at the feet of the Lord Jesus in knowledge. For if he be vigilant and attentive, he is making an effort to retrench his own will in order not to be separated from the love of the Lord. For he who retains his own will will not be at peace even with the faithful; because wrath, contempt, and irritation with a brother are the concomitants of the heart that thinks it has knowledge (11.27, from *Discourses* 25.14a).

Belittle oneself, yes, but he who belittles another (especially one’s inferior) is in grave danger. One father warns: “Be on your guard against the brothers who praise you, against *logismoi*, and against those who belittle their neighbors, for nobody knows anything” (Xanthias 1 313AB/11.113, cf. Poemen 100/343CD 10.70). For he who belittles his neighbor is in contempt of the Lord’s injunction, “Judge not that you be not judged” (Mt 7:1). “Abba Poemen said to Abba Joseph: ‘Tell me how I might become a monk’. Said the elder to him: ‘If you want to

¹¹ *Logismos* indicates any activity of the mind, good or bad (e.g. a temptation) or even the mental process itself. The meaning has to be construed from the context.

¹² J. Chryssavgis, *Abba Isaiah of Scetis: Ascetic Discourses* (Kalamazoo 2002).

find repose both here and there, say in every situation: “I, who am I?” and do not pass judgment on anybody” (Joseph of Panepho 2 228C/9.8).

Further, “Abba Theodotus said: ‘Do not judge the one who indulges in *porneia*¹³ if you are chaste, for in that way you transgress the law—because he who says: Do not indulge in *porneia* (Mt 5:27) also says: Do not judge” (Mt 7:1) (N 11/9.15/Theodotus S1). “A brother asked an elder: ‘How does the fear of God come to the soul?’ ‘If a man have humility, be indifferent to material goods, and refrain from judging, the fear of God shall come to him’, the elder said” (Euprepios 5 172CD/N 137/1.29).¹⁴

The concatenation of the offences against one’s neighbor is precisely identified in the following anonymous saying:

The *logismos* of blasphemy comes upon us subsequent to slandering and belittling and passing judgment (ἐκ τοῦ καταλαλεῖν καὶ ἐξουδενοῦν καὶ ἐκ τοῦ κατακρίνειν)¹⁵ and especially arrogance; from somebody doing his own will, neglecting his prayer, being angry and enraged—all of which are a mark of pride. It is pride that predisposes us to fall into the aforementioned passions of slandering, belittling, and passing judgment, whence the *logismos* of blasphemy is generated. If it remain for some time in [a man’s] soul, the demon of blasphemy hands him over to the demon of *porneia* and to mental aberration. Moreover, unless a man come to his senses again, he is lost (N 730).

The antidote to these evils is clearly identified too: “An elder said: ‘It is not so much the one who belittles himself who is

¹³ *Porneia*, meaning any illicit sexual activity of mind, body, or spirit, was considered so grave a sin that some fathers (not all) considered it unforgivable.

¹⁴ These are two of the very few cases of a saying occurring both in *APalph* and also in *APanon*. For an excellent anecdote (with important theological implications) on not judging see the unique piece attributed to Mark the Egyptian, 304AC/9.6—in which Mt 7:1 (“Judge not...”) is cited.

¹⁵ Cf. N 225/1.32: “An elder said: “This is the life of the monk: work, obedience, meditation, not judging, not slandering (μὴ καταλαλεῖν), not grumbling’.”

humble-minded but the one who gladly accepts insults and disrespect from his neighbor'” (N 505); and “He who allows himself to be hurt and insulted yet pardons his neighbor: he partakes of the nature of Christ,” another remarks (Rufinus *Verba Seniorum* 76, *PL* 73.774A).

The word translated *slandering* (καταλαλεῖν, καταλαλιά) is by far the most frequently mentioned offence against one's neighbor. To rail, slander, insult, malign, detract, recriminate, *calumniari*, *maudire*, and similar words are all comprehended in this one. When Abba Isaiah¹⁶ was asked: “What is καταλαλιά?” he answered: “It is to be ignorant of God and of his glory; it is to be envious of one's neighbor” (ὁ φθόνος ὁ πρὸς τὸν πλησίον, Isaiah 10 184A/21.2). “To slander is death to the soul,” says a nameless elder (θάνατος γάρ ἐστι τῆς ψυχῆς ἢ καταλαλιά, N 592.19); and Abba Poemen: “A person must not mention these two *logismoi* or think of them in his heart: *porneia* and *slandering* (καταλαλεῖν τὸν πλησίον in 5.8). If he wish to give them any consideration whatsoever in his heart, he will reap no benefit; but if he be made angry by them he will experience repose” (Poemen 154 360BC/5.8). Another elder asserted that *slandering* is a two-edged sword: “By whispering, the serpent expelled Eve from Paradise and he who slanders his neighbor is like it, for he ruins the soul of him who hears and does not keep his own safe” (Hyperechios 5 429C/4.60). When a brother asked Abba John Colobos: “How is it that my soul, wounded though it be, is not ashamed to slander (καταλαλεῖν) my neighbor?” he was told the infamous Parable of the Man with Two Wives.¹⁷

¹⁶ This is not Isaiah of Scete, whose words do not appear in *APalph* at all.

¹⁷ John Colobos 15 208D–209B/9.12: “There was a man who was poor and he had a wife. Seeing another [woman] who could be persuaded, he took her too; both were naked. Now there was a fair somewhere and they begged him, saying: ‘Take us with you’. He took them both, put them into a barrel, got into a boat and came to the fairground. When it became hot and people were resting, one of the women peeped out and, seeing nobody, ran to the rubbish dump, gathered together some old rags and made herself a skirt; then she boldly paraded around. But the other woman, staying naked

Abba Ammon of the Cells makes a surprisingly frank confession when he says:¹⁸

I have performed all the mortifications my ear has heard of but, among those, I have found none so grievous as these two: to get up from table when you are still hungry and to restrain yourself from speaking an offensive word to your brother (*Eth.Coll.* 14.17).

A good defence against speaking ill of (or to) one's neighbor is to abase oneself. "To abase oneself is a rampart," said one elder (τὸ ἑαυτὸν ἐξουθενεῖν περίτειχός ἐστιν, 21.58). "If you slander (ἐὰν καταλαλήσης) your brother and your conscience troubles you, go, prostrate yourself before him and say to him: 'I slandered you' (κατελάλησά σου) and make sure you are not led astray again" (592.19). Isaiah of Scete says: "Humility is thinking that you are more sinful than all other folk and belittling (ἐξουθενεῖν) yourself as one who does no good thing in the sight of God" (15.26; from *Discourses* 4.1). Poemen says:

There is no greater love to be found than for somebody to lay down his life for his neighbor (cf. Jn 15:13). For if somebody hears a bad word, one that wounds him, that is, and is capable of uttering something like it himself but struggles not to say it, or if someone is being browbeaten and bears it without paying [his adversary] back, such a person is laying down his life for his neighbor" (Poemen 116 352BC/17.13).¹⁹

"If you bear grudges against your brother and exalt yourself, that is the heavy burden. As for the light burden it is to take accusations [against your brother] upon yourself and to exalt the

inside [the barrel] said: 'Just look at that whore! She has no shame to walk around naked!' Her husband was annoyed; he said: 'Heavens above! At least she covers her unseemliness; are you, totally naked, not ashamed, speaking like that?' It is like that with slandering."

¹⁸ Regnault, *Les Sentences* 317.

¹⁹ Cf. "If you see someone committing sin, pray to the Lord saying: 'Pardon me for I have sinned'. In this way that verse which says *Greater love has no man... will be realized in you*" (*Eth.Coll.* 13.40; Regnault, *Les Sentences* 298).

brothers,” he also says (*Eth. Coll.* 14.58),²⁰ and elsewhere: “A person living with his neighbor ought to be like a pillar of stone: insulted but not getting angry, revered without becoming haughty” (Poemen S 11 Guy 30,²¹ cf. Anoub 1 129AC/15.12). He also states that when a brother asked Abba Moses: “In what way does a person make himself dead with respect to his neighbor?” the elder said to him: “Unless a person put it in his heart that he has already been three days²² in a tomb, he cannot attain to this saying” (Moses 12 285D/10.92).

Prima facie this would appear to rule out all human intercourse between monks but clearly it did not, for visitors and visiting are frequently mentioned throughout the apophthegmatic texts, and the very fact that the fathers give directions governing such encounters proves that these did take place, but probably not as frequently as the texts suggest. Tales and sayings are nearly always the products of such encounters; disproportionately few of alone-ness, of which there must have been a very great deal. Moreover, in the rare instances where a monk’s experience in isolation is recorded (*e.g.* Antony 1 76AB/7.1), that monk must have recounted it to another for it to have entered the record.

First, here is Abba Poemen recalling how the elders used to interact with each other, a passage remarkable for its apparent preference of the Sayings of the Elders over Holy Scripture:

They used to say of Abba Amoun (he who lived two months on a measure of barley) that he visited Abba Poemen and said to him: “If I go to my neighbor’s cell or he visits me for some need, we are afraid to speak with each other in case some alien discourse raises its head.” “Well done,” the elder said to him, “Youth needs vigilance.” Abba Amoun said to him: “So what did the elders used to do?” and he said to him: “The elders who were advanced had nothing else in mind or any alien matter in

²⁰ Regnault, *Les Sentences* 329. The reference is to Mt 11:30: “My yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

²¹ Jean-Claude Guy, *Recherches sur la tradition grecque des Apophthegmata Patrum*² (Brussels 1984).

²² Three years in some MSS.

their mouth that they might speak it.” Abba Amoun said to him: “So if a necessity arises to speak with my neighbor, do you want me to speak of the Scriptures or of the sayings of the elders?” Said the elder: “If you cannot keep silent, it is better to speak of the sayings of the elders and not of the Scriptures, for *there* is no small danger” (κίνδυνος γὰρ ἐστὶν οὐ μικρός, Amoun 2 128CD/11.56).

There was however always the danger that a visiting brother might speak inappropriately; here are two elders’ solutions:

A brother asked an elder: “If a brother brings me reports from outside, do you want me to tell him not to bring me them, abba?” “No,” said the elder to him and the brother said: “Why?” and the elder said: “Because we could not keep that [rule] ourselves and lest while telling our neighbor not to do it, afterwards we be discovered doing it ourselves.” The brother said: “What then must I do?” and the elder said: “If we are willing to keep silent, that will suffice for the neighbor” (N 303/15.77).

If a one brother speaks ill (καταλαλήση) of another in your presence, see that you do not turn yourself away from him saying: “Yes, it is so.” But either keep silent or say to him: “Brother, I myself am a condemned man and cannot judge another.” Thus you are saving both yourself and the other person (N 592.40).

Abba Poemen says: “A brother asked Abba Pambo if it is a good thing to praise one’s neighbor, and he said to him, ‘It is better to keep silent’ ” (Poemen 47 333A/4.37). As for the neighbor’s shortcomings, Amma Syncletica says these should be passed over in silence, but it is good to lament them: “Useful sorrow is to groan both for one’s own sins and also for the weakness (ἀρρωστία) of [one’s] neighbors; [it is] not to fall short of the intended goal, in order to attain the ultimate goodness” (Syncletica S 10/Guy 35/10.102). But one should be very careful indeed about trying to rectify a neighbor’s weakness, as Poemen warns: “To teach one’s neighbor is [the work] of a healthy person, free of passions; for what is the point of building a house for somebody else and destroying one’s own?” (Poemen 127 353D 10.55). When he was asked “What is a hypocrite?” the

same elder said: “A hypocrite is one who teaches his neighbor something to which he has not attained himself, for it is written: ‘Why do you notice the speck in your brother’s eye when here there is a joist in yours?’”²³ (Poemen 117 352C, ref. to Mt 7:3–4). On the other hand:

One of the saints said that there is [nothing] better than this commandment not to belittle (τὸ μὴ ἐξουθενεῖν) any of the brothers, for it is written: “With rebuke you shall rebuke your neighbor without incurring sin on his account” (Lev 19:17). So if you see your brother committing sin and you do not speak up to make him aware of his own fault, his blood will be on your hands. But if he is rebuked and persists, he will die in his sin. So it is good for you to rebuke with love: not to deride or belittle him as an enemy would (N 478).

“To the best of your ability deliver your neighbor from sins without disgrace” advises Abba Hyperechios, “for God does not reject those who turn to him. Let no expression of evil or of craftiness dwell in your heart against your brother, so you can say: ‘Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us’” (Hyperechios 17.16, ref. Mt 6:12). Elsewhere there is an excellent example of an elder ‘delivering his brother from sin without disgrace’:

A brother went to draw water from the river; there he found a woman who was washing clothes and it transpired that he fell with her [... Then] he went into his cell and dwelt in *hesychia* as yesterday and before. But the Lord revealed to an elder who was his neighbor that brother so-and-so, though falling, had triumphed. So the elder came to him and said to him: “... God revealed to me that, though you had fallen, you triumphed,” whereupon the brother narrated all that had happened to him. The elder said: “Indeed, your discernment (διάκρισις) shattered the power of the enemy, brother” (N 50/5.47).

It was said of Abba Isidore that, when he spoke to the brothers

²³ Cf. “He also said: ‘How can a man teach his neighbor that which he has seen but against which he set no guard?’” (Poemen S 10/Guy 30).

in church, this was the only thing he said: “Brothers, it is written: ‘Forgive your neighbor that you might receive forgiveness’.” (Isidore S1 Guy 24–25; ref. Mt 6:14). An unnamed father said: “He who is gratuitously done an injustice and forgives his neighbor is of the nature of Jesus” (N 760). *Per contra*:

Somebody else who loves money and pleasure but who “shuts up his bowels of compassion” against his brother (cf. 1 Jo 3:17) and is not merciful to his neighbor, he has denied Jesus too and serves idols, for he has the effigy of Hermes within himself, worshipping the creature rather than the Creator, “For the love of money is the root of all evil” (N 600; ref. 1 Tim 6:10).

Some of the fathers said of one great elder that if anybody came to ask him for a saying, he would solemnly say to him: “Look, I am taking upon me the person of God and am seated on the throne of judgment; what do you want me to do for you? If you say: ‘Have mercy on me’, God says to you: ‘If you want me to have mercy on you, do you then have mercy on your brother. If you want me to forgive you, do you too forgive your neighbor’. Is there injustice with God? Certainly not! But it is up to us if we want to be saved” (N 226/10.148).

Question: How can a person know whether his prayer is accepted? Answer: When someone is on his guard not to wrong his neighbor, he can be confident in his mind that his prayer was acceptable to God. But if he wrongs his neighbor, then his prayer is an abomination and unacceptable, for the groaning of the one who is wronged will not allow the prayer of him who wronged him to come before God (N 508).

Not to wrong his neighbor; but what if one did? The solution to that problem is supplied by an unnamed elder whose saying has survived only in Ge’ez:²⁴

He who neither mistreats nor afflicts nor speaks ill of a person performs an angelic practice; but he who mistreats and is angry with his brother but then straight away seeks to be reconciled with him, repenting of what he has done, that one really does perform the task of a fighter. But on the other hand he who

²⁴ Regnault, *Les Sentences* 332.

saddens others and keeps resentment in his heart, that one is Satan's brother and cannot ask God to pardon his fault. Even if he ask for pardon he receives it not—since he himself neither forgot nor forgave with respect to his brother (*Eth.Pat.* 145).

So much for theory; how did it all work out in practice? Of this the evidence is not plentiful, but there are a few revealing glimpses, such as the following outstanding example of neighborly forgiveness:

The elders recounted of another elder that he had a youth living with him whom he saw doing something inappropriate for him. He told him once: “Do not do that,” but he heeded him not. Since he disobeyed him the elder put him out of his mind, leaving him to his own discretion (τὸ ἴδιον κρίμα). But the young fellow closed the door of the cell in which the loaves were kept and left the elder fasting for thirteen days. But the elder did not say to him: “Where are you?” or: “Where are you going out there?” Now the elder had a neighbor; when he noticed that the young man was late he would cook him a little food and pass it through the wall, inviting him to eat. If he said to him: “Why was the brother late?” the elder would say: “He will come if he has the time” (N 341 16.24).

Theft appears to have been a recurrent problem, both by other monks and by brigands, hence cells were normally kept locked. Theft from a good but misguided intention was not unknown:

There were two brothers who were neighbors (γειτνιῶντες) to each other; one of them would secrete whatever he might have (whether small change or crusts of bread) and thrust it among his neighbor's things. Unaware of this, the other was amazed that his possessions were increasing. Then one day he suddenly came upon his neighbor doing this and took issue with him, saying: “By your carnal [gifts] you stripped me of the spiritual [ones].” He demanded the other's word that he would not do that any more and thus he forgave him (N 6).

Although good deeds towards one's neighbor were advocated, they were not always performed:

A brother asked Abba Pambo: “Why do the spirits hinder me from being good to my neighbor?” The elder said to him: “Do

not speak like that or you call God a liar. Say rather: ‘I have no wish at all to show mercy’, for in anticipation God said: ‘I have given you power to tread on serpents and scorpions and over all the power of the enemy’” (N 383/10.95; ref. Lk 10:19).

Nevertheless here is a fine example of brotherly love:

They used to say of a brother that, having made some baskets, he had put handles on them when he heard his neighbor saying: “What am I to do, for market day is near and I have no handles to put on my baskets!” [The first brother] went and detached the handles from his own baskets, brought them to the other brother and said: “Look, I have these left over; take them for your baskets.” He saw to it that the brother’s task succeeded to the detriment of his own (N 347/17.20).

Still, there was a feeling abroad that things were not as they used to be:

A brother asked an elder: “How is it that nowadays there are some who labor away in the [various] ways of life but do not receive grace the way those of old time did?” “Then there was love,” the elder told him, “and each one promoted his neighbor. But now love has grown cold and each one is demoting his brother; that is why we do not receive grace” (N 349/17.23).

One of the fathers said: “There is no nation [*ethnos*] under heaven like the Christian nation and again no order like the order [*tagma*] of monks, but this is the only thing that does them damage: the devil leads them into bearing grudges (*μνησικακίαν*) against their brothers, saying: ‘He told me...’ and: ‘I told him...’ ‘He has impurities before him and doesn’t look at them, but at his neighbor’s’—and from this they are damaged” (N 397/10.187).

In a word, “getting it right with one’s neighbor” was the key to it all, for he who could or did not love his neighbor “as himself” certainly did not love God with his whole being. Thus Macarius (the Great?):

Abba Menas told us: “Once when I was staying in my cell a brother came to me from afar, begging me and saying: ‘Take me to Abba Macarius’. I got up and went to the elder with him. When he had offered a prayer for us we sat down and the brother said to the elder: ‘Father, I have spent thirty years not

eating meat and still have a fight not to do so'. The elder said to him: 'Do not tell me that you have spent thirty years not eating meat but inform me about this, my son, and tell me the truth: how many days have you lived when you did not speak against your brother, did not condemn your neighbor, and when no vain word came out of your mouth?' The brother prostrated himself, saying: 'Pray for me, father, that I might make a start'" (N 746).

Finally a word of Evagrius Ponticus (†399): "It is impossible to love all the brothers equally; but it is possible to encounter them dispassionately (*ἀπαθῶς συντυγχάνειν*), unfettered by re-
crimination and hatred" (*Pract.* 100).

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