



One of the Abba's many "children"

SPIRITUAL FATHERHOOD IN EASTERN MONASTICISM

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I. Introduction

The tradition of the monastic spiritual father, a Spirit-filled guide for souls seeking evangelical perfection, reaches far back in time and deep into the desert. There, men of God—made of much sterner stuff than modern men—braved the harshness of the desert and the spiritual arena of the human heart. Others saw their light and longed to gather around them, to take up the cross of asceticism and obedience in order to rise to the contemplation of the invisible God. Such contemplation takes place in the solitude of the heart, whether one is an anchorite or a cenobite. "Unless a man can say, 'I alone and God are here,' he will not find the prayer of quiet."¹

The roots of spiritual fatherhood can be traced much farther back than Egyptian and Palestinian deserts. Documents of both Old and New Testaments, especially the Wisdom literature, contain elements of the later monastic tradition.² But I am concerned here with spiritual fatherhood in its concrete monastic applications, using the desert tradition as a paradigm, with frequent reference to later monastic sayings and "elders" (Greek, *geron*; Russian, *staretz*).³ The 19th century was a particularly rich time because of the flourishing of the Russian *startzy*. In them the monks of today have a more contemporary application of the wisdom of the Desert Fathers, having the advantage of the context of well-developed theological, spiritual, and liturgical traditions.

¹ *The Wisdom of the Desert Fathers* (trans. Benedicta Ward; Fairacres Publication 48; Oxford: SLG Press, 1975) xvii.

² See Felix Donahue, OCSO. "The Spiritual Father in the Scriptures." *Abba* (Cistercian Studies 38; Kalamazoo, Cistercian Publications, 1982) 3-36.

³ In the anonymous series of the *Apophthegmata Patrum* the sayings are uttered by "an old man."

I will examine some of the basic characteristics of the spiritual father and his ministry, and reflect on the future of this charism in the Church. I will not deal with its historical genesis and development in Eastern monasticism, but rather discuss the "abba" as such, based on the documented experiences of such men in the context of actual monastic life. Although we are concerned here with the monastic milieu in which the charism of spiritual fatherhood flourished, this spiritual gift is not limited to monks. Secular priests and laypeople have been endowed with this gift, and genuine spiritual direction can be and is given outside of monasteries. But one must not assume that all that passes for spiritual direction today (especially that which is based on the principles of certain schools of psychology) is an expression of true spiritual fatherhood. Nor can one presume to learn by academic courses how to give Spirit-filled direction.

II. The *Abba*

Just who is the *abba*, the *staretz*? According to Dom Pierre Salmon, OSB:

The *abba* is essentially a man of experience, a perfect monk who has fully realized in himself the calling of monastic life, and who can serve as a model for others. Through contact with him and by the effect of his personal influence, one will become a monk. Ascetic perfection does not suffice to create an *abba*; one must also be filled with the Spirit, endowed with discernment...⁴

This description was offered as an introduction to the development of the office of the monastic abbot, but the definition of spiritual fatherhood is much broader. The monastic *staretz* need not be the abbot of a monastery, nor even a priest, although it seems that confession of sins, revealing of thoughts, and reception of counsel may be fruitfully accomplished in a sacramental context. But it is not primarily absolution that is sought from the spiritual father, but a life-giving word, a lamp for one's feet (cf. Ps.118:105) on the narrow and often treacherous path to sanctity and salvation.

Every form of fatherhood participates in some way in the fatherhood of God, "from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named" (Eph.3:15). God the Father is the Source not only of the grace needed to fulfill the ministry of the *staretz*, but also of the meaning of fatherhood and of the relationship of elder to disciple. A father is one who gives life, who provides and protects, who trains and disciplines, who leads his child to maturity and prepares him to attain the end for

⁴ *The Abbot in Monastic Tradition* (Cistercian Studies 14; Washington, D.C.: Cistercian Publications, 1972) 4.

which he was created. The monastic *abba* is concerned with the divine life engendered in the soul through faith and baptism, so that the interior life of the monk may grow from a smoldering wick to being, as it were, totally transformed into fire. For this work the *abba* must be transparent to God, ministering only the divine Word and the counsels of the holy Fathers, and not his own pet theories or opinions.

St. Basil the Great says that the *abba* (here identified with the monastic Superior) should be characterized by "habitual mildness of manner" and "humility of heart." He should be patient with the inexperienced (though not failing to reprove and correct their sins), modest in instruction and admonition, competent in dealing with problems but never contemptuous or scolding. And he is not to take this office upon himself, but is to be chosen by others.⁵ St. Theodore the Studite often lays stress on the value of obedience, even though he, their abbot and spiritual father, is an unworthy sinner. He enjoins them to obey, not only for the sake of *their* salvation, but for the sake of *his* as well, for he was sure that he would have to account for each of them on judgment day.⁶ His begging of their obedience for his salvation shows how seriously he took this task, and also the great burden which accompanies the great gift of spiritual fatherhood.

The *staretz* is the *pneumatikos* (spiritual man) *par excellence*. He is filled with the Spirit and led by the Spirit. Some Fathers emphasize the distinction between the *pneumatikos* and *psychikos*, the "natural man" of 1 Cor.2:14: "The natural man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God...and he is not able to understand them...." But the spiritual man is "not taught by human wisdom, but by the Spirit..." (1 Cor.2:13). As Thomas Merton says, the *psychikos* "is the well-meaning but literal-minded monk who seeks to gain much merit by his good works, and estimates everything by the yardstick of human respect.... He is unable to give genuine spiritual guidance, for all he knows about are the externals of asceticism and cult..."⁷ But the *pneumatikos*, the divinely anointed elder, gives the word of life. He sees the heart, penetrates beyond the externals, and is recognized by all as a man who lives only from love of God and humanity, and therefore who will speak the truth in season and out.

How does one become a *staretz*? Should one aspire to this charism and ministry? In the desert tradition, one never sought to be a guide for others. A monk was simply to seek God through prayer, repentance, humility and obedience. But the obvious sanctity of various

⁵ *Long Rules* Q. 43.

⁶ *Rule* no. 64.

⁷ Thomas Merton. *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1973) 303-304.