

Lives of Desert Fathers

The Life of Onuphrius

by Abba Paphnutius

Prologue

by the anonymous translator

QUITE recently in looking through some Greek writings I came across this Life of Onuphrius. I already knew about it from what I was told by Gregory, that venerable and most prudent man. Having found it, I translated it by the grace of God into Latin, so that his commendable life, as far as my own powers might allow, should be better known, and provide an object of admiration and imitation for the reader. I beg you to overlook my untutored style, and exercise some forbearance as you ponder how great a labor the man of God patiently and generously took upon himself, as he spurned all the glory of worldly vanity, and by the straightness of his living gained for himself the inheritance of the kingdom of heaven.

Chapter I

ONE day as I, Paphnutius, was meditating in solitude and silence, it came into my mind that I should make a visit to all the places in the desert where there were holy monks, to shed light on how they habitually lived their lives of devotion, and learn to understand the way in which they served God. So it was that I quietly began my journey, eager to make this pleasurable venture into the desert. I carried some bread and water with me to sustain me in the labor of my journey, but by the end of the fourth day it had all gone. My limbs were beginning to lose their strength for lack of sustenance. However by the light of divine grace my imminent death was staved off, and gathering up my strength I resumed my journey, carrying on for another four days, eating nothing. At the end of this I was completely exhausted, and lay prostrate on the ground as if dead. And suddenly I was gladdened by help from heaven, for I saw a man in front of me who was unbelievably glorious, splendidly terrifying, impressively beautiful, colossally tall, illustrious of appearance. I was powerfully overcome at the sight, but with untroubled countenance he came close to me, and touched first my hands and then my lips. My strength flowed back strongly into me, and I rose to my feet immediately.

By God's good favor I kept on going through the desert for 17 days, to arrive at whatsoever place the Lord wished to show me, unworthy servant though I am, until such time as I might cease from my labor.

Chapter II

As I was wearily resting, and thinking of how I had struggled to arrive at where I was, I saw in the distance a man terrible to behold. He was covered all over in hair like a wild beast. His hair was so thick that it completely concealed the whole of his body. His only clothing was a loincloth of leaves and grasses. The very sight of him filled me with awe, whether from fear or wonder I was not quite sure. I had never before set eyes on such an extraordinary sight in human shape. I didn't know what to do, but as I valued my life I took refuge in flight, and clambered hastily up a nearby cliff face. In trembling haste I hid myself under some thick leafy plants, breathing heavily. Age and abstinence had nearly become the death of me. The man saw me on the cliff and cried out to me in a loud voice. "Come down from the mountainside, you man of God. Don't be afraid. I am just a frail mortal man like you."

Reassured by these words I recovered my wits and came down, and going up to the holy man, hesitantly prostrated myself at his feet.

"Get up, get up," he said. "You mustn't kneel before me. You too are a servant of God and your name is Paphnutius, beloved of the Saints." I got up at once, and although I was very tired it was with great joy that I sat down in front of him, with a keen desire to know who he was, and what sort of a life he lived. "God who has guided me through the desert has fulfilled my heart's desire," I said. "My limbs and joints which were almost disintegrating already begin to feel refreshed. But my mind still thirsts for enlightenment. Tell me, reverend sir, with a fervent heart I beg you, I appeal to you in the name of Him, for the sake of whose love you inhabit the lonely wastes of this desert, whence did you come, what is your name, how long have you been here. I beg you, tell me plainly." He could obviously see how keenly I wanted to know about the purpose of his life, and he gave me his answer.

Chapter III

"I can see how earnestly you wish to know about the tribulations of my long life, beloved brother. Have no fear, I shall tell you everything, right from the beginning. I am called Onuphrius, an unworthy sinner, and I have been living my laborious life in this desert for nearly seventy years. I have the wild beasts for company, my regular food is fruit and herbs, I lay my miserable body down to sleep in

mountainsides, in caves, and in valleys. Throughout all these years I have seen no one except you, and I have not been supplied with food by any human being.

"I was brought up in the monastery of Hermopolis in the Thebaid, where there were about a hundred monks. Their life was such that they lived equably with each other in will and in deed. They were of one heart and one spirit, bowing their heads under the yoke and discipline of a holy rule, unworried by the ups and downs of life in the world. What pleased one pleased all. They walked before God with holy minds, pure faith, and perfect charity. Night and day they never ceased serving him with meekness and patience. They had such a love of silence, as part of their abstinence, that no one dared say a word, except by way of asking a necessary question or giving an apposite answer. I too received there the food of holy doctrine in my youth, there I learned from the brothers the model of a regular life. I was secure in the love they had for me, and they diligently instructed me how I ought to serve the commandments of God.

Chapter IV

"Above all I frequently heard the venerable brothers praising the life of our holy father Elias, who disciplined himself in the desert with such abstinence and prayer that the Lord found him worthy to be given exceedingly great virtues. As he was carried away in a chariot of fire, he imparted his gifts of the holy Spirit to his disciple, and in his old age he did not see death (2 Kings 2.12). Then they would go on to the example of the blessed John Baptist who shines brightly through the pages of the New Testament. Throughout a period of many years he had been called aside for a special divine purpose, disciplining his body until such time as he was counted worthy to baptize the Redeemer of the world, when he pointed up to the heavens and declared him to be the Lamb of God.

Chapter V

"As I listened to them talking of such things, I found I had questions to ask. "'Why do you stand in such awe of their life and miracles, good sirs,' I asked, 'and why do you rehearse their deeds so zealously? Are you not as strong as they were, living in the desert as you do? Or are you of less account than them?' "'My son', they replied, 'those who live without the help of any other human being are much stronger than we are. Each one of us is constantly being observed by everyone else, we all share in the celebration of the divine office, our food is ready for us at meal time, if anyone of us is ill or suffers from any other kind of human disability, the brothers are

there to care for us with all kindness. We live in spacious buildings which shelter us from the summer heat and from the rain in winter. We are protected from the turbulence of wind and tempest. But the monks in the desert have no comfort except in God. If at any time they are suffering trials and tribulations, or if they begin to wage war with the devil, that ancient enemy of the human race, who is there for them? Who can help them? But when human help is lacking, divine help is always present. And if they are hungry, who will feed them? If thirsty, who will give them water, where there is no food or water? It is beyond all doubt that desert places demand the maximum amount of labor, for the necessities of life are not readily available. The first essential for anyone deciding to live in solitude, therefore, is to be certain of standing firmly in the fear of God. They crucify their bodies in hunger and thirst, in labor and suffering. They fight manfully against the wiles of the devil, and against the fiery darts of the wicked they conquer with the sword of the spirit. That ancient enemy, the fount of all evil, strives always to bring them to ruin and enroll them in the company of the wicked, by undermining the good will with which they set out, by ensnaring their minds in thoughts of worldly pleasures, and making them weary of persevering in the work they have begun.

"But the Almighty God never abandons those who put their trust in him, for he surrounds them with the armor of his power, and the attacks of Satan have no power against them, for they are protected by divine mercy from on high. They are constantly under the protection of the Angels of God who habitually bring them everything they need. They drink water from the stony rock (Psalms 78.15), which, being interpreted, is Christ. For it is written: "The holy ones who trust in the Lord will be strong, they shall rise up with wings as eagles, they shall fly and shall not fall, they shall run and not be weary" (Isaiah 40.31). And again: "Those who thirst shall be refreshed by heavenly fountains, and green leaves shall melt in their mouths like honey." (cf. Exodus 16.31).

"Whenever the devil gathers his forces against them, they arise and lift up their hands to God, faithfully pouring out their prayers before the divine majesty. Help from heaven is there for them immediately, and the crafty arrows of the enemy are straightway destroyed. Have you not understood, my son, what is written in the Psalms? "He forgets not the suffering of the poor without end; the longsuffering of the poor will not last for ever." (Psalms 9.12). And again: "The Lord will hear them in the time of trouble, and will deliver them in the narrow places." (Psalms 107.19). "Truly each one shall receive his

reward according to his labor" (1 Corinthians 3.8). "Blessed is the man who is always fearful" (Proverbs 28.14), who seeks the will of God in this present life, and takes care of the weak. Rest assured, my son, that the Angels of God are always round about the righteous, and are ever enlightening their bodies and souls with power from above.'

Chapter VI

"This was the instruction carefully given me in the monastery by the holy Fathers, and I began to picture silently the glorious bliss enjoyed in heaven, by those who for the love of God have endured great trials here on earth. My heart burned within me, my mind began to be set on spurning worldly joys completely, and seeking my heavenly Father with all my might, as the psalmist says: 'It is good for me to cleave unto God, and put my hope in the Lord my God.' (Psalms 73.28)

Chapter VII

As a result of carefully thinking these things over I was moved to get up quietly in the middle of the night, take some bread and enough pulse to last me for a few days, and I set off, trusting in the guidance and goodness of God to show me a place where I might live. As I went from that monastery in the mountains into the desert where I intended to remain, I suddenly saw a shining light in front of me on the way, which filled me with fear to such an extent that I thought I had better go back to the monastery whence I had come. Then suddenly I saw a man of most beautiful appearance come towards me out of that ray of shining light.

"Fear not,' he said, 'I am your guardian Angel, whom God has assigned to you right from the beginning, to be with you by God's command and to lead you into the desert. Be perfected, walk humbly with God, labor joyfully, keep guard over your heart at all times, live uncomplainingly, persevere in good works. Rest assured I shall never leave you until such time as I shall bear you up into the presence of his Majesty most high.' "Thus spoke the Angel, who became my companion at the beginning of my journey.

Chapter VIII

"We went on for about six or seven miles until we came to a rather insignificant looking cave. I went closer to see if there were anyone inside, and as is the custom of monks I humbly called out to ask a blessing. I suddenly saw a most holy man emerge, and I prostrated myself on the ground before him. But he stretched out his hands, lifted me up and offered me the kiss of peace.

"Come inside, my son,' he said. 'You are my brother in the life of the desert. God grant that you remain always in his fear, and that all

your doings may be pleasing in his sight.' "I went in and stayed with him for many days, eager to know what he did, wanting to find out about his solitary life. He knew what it was I wanted to know, and in words of most loving kindness gave me some wonderful advice about how to counter the snares of the devil.

"Arise, my son,' he urged me, after I had spent some days with him. 'Depart from me now. It is time for you to go into the inner desert, and there dwell alone in some other cave. Fight bravely, and you will overcome all the temptations of the devil. It is God's will that you be tested in this desert, to see whether you can fulfill all his commandments. "For his commandments are faithful and will endure for ever, grounded in truth and justice." (Psalms 111.7-8)

"Having said this, the holy man arose and came with me, and traveled with me for four days into the inner desert. On the fifth day we came to a place in Calidiomea, where there were some palm trees.

"See, brother,' said the man of God, 'here is the place which God has prepared for you.' "And he stayed with me for a further thirty days, teaching me how to serve the teachings of God's commandments with watchful diligence. At last he commended me to God in his holy prayers, and went back to his own place. He continued to visit me once a year, and never ceased to admonish me with his godly words about how to live in simplicity and diligence.

Chapter IX

"There came a time when he visited me as usual and fell down to the ground as he greeted me. He had given up his soul to the Lord and had fallen asleep. I was overcome with grief, and flung myself down, weeping floods of tears which rose up from within me. And then I took up his body and committed it to the earth of Calidiomea."

Chapter X

"Holy father," I said, in reply to all that the most holy Onuphrius had said to me, "I sense that you must have persevered through some rather difficult adversities in this desert in the name of Christ."

"Believe me, beloved brother," the holy man replied, "I have endured such things in this desert that I have often thought I was very near death. There have been so many times in my life when hope has failed me and I have scarcely had any breath left in my body. Scorched by day in the heat and burning fire of the sun, exposed to dew and hoar frost by night, fainting from hunger and thirst - O how many such things have I suffered! I cannot tell you how many wounds and hard knocks must be suffered by anyone who is willing to die for the love of God, nor would it be right to do so. But the Lord

rewards the labors of his saints (Wisdom 10.17), for his riches are beyond telling, nor can they be diminished. Through all the manifold pains and torments that I have suffered, cold and heat, hunger and thirst, his power has strengthened me with the heavenly riches of the company of Angels. By spurning food for the body I have been found worthy to receive the bread of heaven. My holy Angel has daily brought me bread, and water in due measure, to refresh my body lest it faint, that I might continue in the praise of God. The palm trees have this property, that the dates ripen twelve times a year. I picked them daily and ate them together with green herbs, and they were in my mouth as the honey and the honeycomb. In the Gospel it is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God' (Matthew 4.4).

Brother Paphnutius, if you wish to fulfill the will of God, everything necessary is ready for you. For the Truth himself counsels you, 'Take no thought for what you shall eat, or what you shall drink, or what you shall wear, for your heavenly Father knows that you have need of all these things. Wherefore seek first the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added unto you'" (Matthew 6 31-33).

Chapter XI

I was lost in admiration for what this blessed man Onuphrius was telling me about his deeds and labors. "Tell me, good Father," I asked, "do you receive Communion from anyone on the Sabbath, or Day of the Lord?"

"I find every Sabbath or Day of the Lord, that the Angel of the Lord has prepared the most holy Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring me. With his own hand he gives me these precious gifts, for the everlasting salvation of my life. Indeed all the monks who lead a spiritual life in the desert share in this joy. If perchance any holy hermit living in solitude has a desire to see another human being, he is carried up hence by an Angel into heaven where he can contemplate the vision of the souls of the righteous, shining like the sun in the kingdom of the Father. There, in the company of Angels, they see their own souls joined together with the souls of the blessed. And all who struggle in the battle with their whole mind, their whole heart and all their strength, abound in good works in order that they may be found worthy to share in the glory of that heavenly country with Christ and all his Saints."

As I listened to all these things that the venerable Onuphrius was telling me at the top of his little mountain where he met me, I was filled with such great joy that every hardship which I had suffered on my journey was banished into oblivion.

Chapter XII

"Father," I said, "I count myself to be numbered among the blessed for having been found worthy to meet you, and to hear of all your wonderful works. What you have told me is so beautiful, so honey-sweet, and my heart is so pierced to the core, that I can truly say with the Psalmist, 'How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey and the honeycomb in my mouth.'" (Psalms 119.103).

"Come with me, my son," he said. "Come and see where I live. No more words for the moment."

He got up immediately, moved away, and I followed him. He led me on for about three miles until we arrived at his spiritual home in Calidiomea, a pleasing spot among the palm trees. We first poured out prayers to God, then sat and conversed together on spiritual themes. At the precise moment of sunset I noticed some bread and a little water. The man of God could see how wearied I was. "Come now, my son," he said, "I can see that you are almost about to faint, unless you take some food. So come and eat."

"As the Lord liveth, (1 Kings 17.12) and as the Lord my God is blessed in whose sight we live," I said, "I will neither eat nor drink unless we both eat together in perfect charity."

I was only just able to persuade him to do as I asked. But when he saw I was serious, he broke the bread and shared it with me, and we ate and were satisfied; in fact there were some fragments left over from our meal. We passed almost the whole night without sleep, as we offered up divine praise.

Chapter XIII

After we had observed the hours of prayer next morning, I noticed that he had gone very pale. "Is there something the matter with you?" I asked.

"Don't be over alarmed, brother Paphnutius," he said, "but I think that the omnipotent God has directed your footsteps into this desert that you may give me an honorable burial, and commit my body to the earth. For this is the hour when my soul is to be released from its earthly chains and carried away to its Creator in the kingdom of heaven. I know what you intend to do, my beloved brother, so when you go back to Egypt, tell all your brothers and all the worshipers of Christ about me. I have made a request to God which he has granted me: If anyone offers the holy sacrifice for the love of my name in the sight of our Lord Jesus Christ, and gives himself wholly to the praise of God, he will be able to resist all the temptations of the devil and will be freed from all the chains of human wickedness, and will be

able to enjoy the inheritance of the kingdom of heaven with the holy Angels for ever. And anyone who is not authorized to make the offering or who cannot afford to pay for it, let him give an alms to the poor in the name of the Lord and in his honor, and I will pray for him in the sight of God, that he may be found worthy to enjoy the life above in the heavenly realms.

"If there is anyone who cannot offer the sacrifice or give alms, let him offer sweet smelling incense to the Lord our God for love of me, and I will ask that he enjoy perpetual bliss. If has no incense, and no money to offer to God, how should he call upon you so that he will not suffer from the lack of your blessing?"

"If there is any poor person in the desert or in any other place who cannot offer the sacrifice, or give alms or incense, let him arise and stretch out his hands before the Lord and say the *Paternoster*, the Lord's prayer, three times, keeping me firmly in his mind, and let him sing a psalm in the name of the holy Trinity. And I will truly pray for him to the Lord, that he may be found worthy to partake in the life of heaven with all the Saints of God."

Chapter XIV

I had a further request to make to him. "If you think I am worthy, and if you could find it in your heart to make me a gift, let me have this place to live in after your death."

"No, that cannot be granted you," he said. "God did not guide your journey through this desert, in order for you to find a place to live in, but that you should enjoy the company of the righteous in the desert, and then take pains to tell the world about what you have learnt in the desert. Go back to Egypt. Live there for the rest of your life. Be perfect in good works, and you will enjoy the crown of perpetual glory."

Chapter XV

In response to what the man of God was saying, I fell down at his feet. "Beloved father," I said, "I know that whatever you ask of God, the Lord will grant you, because of the immense labor of the long struggle that you have endured by disciplining your body for seventy years in the name of the Lord. Grant me the gift of your holy blessing, that I may be like you in virtue, and that my spirit may always be guided by your intercessions, and that I may be found worthy to share with you in the life to come."

"Paphnutius," he replied, "do not worry. The Lord will grant that your desire will stand firm. Stand in faith, act manfully (1 Cor. 16.13), keep your eyes and your mind always on God, keep the commandments, do not be weary in well-doing, grasp hold of eternal life. May

the Angels of God protect you, and keep you from every working of wickedness, that you may be found pure and spotless before God in the day of judgment."

Weeping, he prayed to the Lord, bent his knees and said, "Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit." As he said this, a brilliant light surrounded him, and his holy soul left his body in a flash of blinding light. [Probable date, c.400]

Chapter XVI

And I suddenly heard the voice of a multitude of Angels praising God, as the most holy soul of Saint Onuphrius departed, and that angelic song resounded with ineffable joy among all the stars of the universe, while the heavenly armies carried the soul of this distinguished warrior up to heaven. I wept profusely, I groaned inwardly, rivers of tears flowed down, I beat my breast over and over again. I complained in sadness that hardly had I met him, than I was no longer able to enjoy his company.

I tore my tunic in half, keeping half to cover my body and using half in which to wrap his blessed body. I buried him in the natural tomb of a cave in the solid rock. I was alone, I wept afresh. Still weeping, I made as if to enter the cave where he had lived, but as I stood in front of it, it collapsed with a mighty roar, and the palm trees were torn up by the roots and lay prostrate. And then I knew that it was not God's will that I, Paphnutius, should live in that place. I returned to Egypt, and there I told the Church all that I had seen and heard.

The holy Onuphrius died on the eleventh day of June, that is the third day before the Ides. His blessings are with us to this present day, to the praise and glory of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be all honor and power unto the ages of ages. Amen.

The Life of Antony

by Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria

ANTONY you must know was by descent an Egyptian: his parents were of good family and possessed considerable wealth, and as they were Christians he also was reared in the same Faith. In infancy he was brought up with his parents, knowing nought else but them and his home. But when he was grown and arrived at boyhood, and was advancing in years, he could not endure to learn letters, not caring to associate with other boys; but all his desire was, as it is written of Jacob, to live a plain man at home. With his parents he used to attend the Lord's House, and neither as a child was he idle nor

when older did he despise them; but was both obedient to his father and mother and attentive to what was read, keeping in his heart what was profitable in what he heard. And though as a child brought up in moderate affluence, he did not trouble his parents for varied or luxurious fare, nor was this a source of pleasure to him; but was content simply with what he found, nor sought anything further.

2. After the death of his father and mother he was left alone with one little sister: his age was about 18 or 20, and on him the care both of home and sister rested. Now it was not six months after the death of his parents, and going according to custom into the Lord's House, he communed with himself and reflected as he walked how the Apostles left all and followed the Savior; and how they in the Acts sold their possessions and brought and laid them at the Apostles' feet for distribution to the needy, and what and how great a hope was laid up for them in heaven. Pondering over these things he entered the church, and it happened the Gospel was being read, and he heard the Lord saying to the rich man, 'If thou wouldst be perfect, go and sell that thou hast and give to the poor; and come follow Me, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven.' Antony, as though God had put him in mind of the Saints, and the passage had been read on his account, went out immediately from the church, and gave the possessions of his forefathers to the villagers--they were 300 acres, productive and very fair --that they should be no more a clog upon himself and his sister. And all the rest that was movable he sold, and having got together much money he gave it to the poor, reserving a little however for his sister's sake.

3. And again as he went into the church, hearing the Lord say in the Gospel, 'Be not anxious for the morrow,' he could stay no longer, but went out and gave those things also to the poor. Having committed his sister to known and faithful virgins, and put her into a convent to be brought up, he henceforth devoted himself outside his house to discipline, taking heed to himself and training himself with patience.

For there were not yet so many monasteries in Egypt, and no monk at all knew of the distant desert; but all who wished to give heed to themselves practiced the discipline in solitude near their own village. Now there was then in the next village an old man who had lived the life of a hermit from his youth up. Antony, after he had seen this man, imitated him in piety. And at first he began to abide in places outside the village: then if he heard of a good man anywhere, like the prudent bee, he went forth and sought him, nor turned back to his own place until he had seen him; and he returned, having got from the good man as it were supplies for his journey in the way of virtue. So dwelling

there at first, he confirmed his purpose not to return to the abode of his fathers nor to the remembrance of his kinsfolk; but to keep all his desire and energy for perfecting his discipline. He worked, however, with his hands, having heard, 'He who is idle, let him not eat,' and part he spent on bread, and part he gave to the needy. And he was constant in prayer, knowing that a man ought to pray in secret unceasingly. For he had given such heed to what was read, that none of the things that were written fell from him to the ground, but he remembered all, and afterwards his memory served him for books.

4. Thus conducting himself, Antony was beloved by all. He subjected himself in sincerity to the good men whom he visited, and learned thoroughly where each surpassed him in zeal and discipline. He observed the graciousness of one; the unceasing prayer of another; he took knowledge of another's freedom from anger and another's loving-kindness; he gave heed to one as he watched, to another as he studied; one he admired for his endurance, another for his fasting and sleeping on the ground; the meekness of one and the long-suffering of another he watched with care, while he took note of the piety towards Christ and the mutual love which animated all. Thus filled, he returned to his own place of discipline, and henceforth would strive to unite the qualities of each, and was eager to show in himself the virtues of all. With others of the same age he had no rivalry; save this only, that he should not be second to them in higher things. And this he did so as to hurt the feelings of nobody, but made them rejoice over him. So all they of that village and the good men in whose intimacy he was, when they saw that he was a man of this sort, used to call him God-beloved. And some welcomed him as a son, others as a brother.

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The Desert Fathers were Christians who lived mainly in the Scetes desert of Egypt in the third century AD. The most well known was Antony the Great (died 356). So many Christians moved to the desert that Athanasius wrote: "The desert had become a city." This movement was the first Christian revival. The Desert Fathers had a major influence on the development of Christianity.

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