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## The Practice of Silence for Achieving Spiritual Perfection

Hendi

Prodi Teologi STT Soteria Purwokerto

*hendi@sttsoteria.ac.id*

### Abstract

The most important things about this paper are that Christians find perfection in the spiritual world, by being saved immediately and for all time through Christ. The exercise of silence and *hesychia* is the way to achieve perfection, and it can be applied to us nowadays. The goal of this article is to discover *Apophthegmata Patrum* in terms of the answers given in the sayings of the Desert Fathers. Silence and hesychia are crucial elements of monastic life, as are the elements of spiritual perfection such as the purification of sins, or logismoi, the renunciation of the world, or repose, listening to and loving God, and discovering the Kingdom of God within the heart. The practice of silence for us living nowadays is to build our spiritual cell in the silence and repose of this busy world. The cell is the first step toward silence, followed by the hesychia.

**Kata Kunci:** Desert fathers; spiritual perfection; silence; *hesychia*; cell; repose; salvation

## INTRODUCTION

Every one pursues the perfection in every aspect of his life. At the end, according to the Christian dogma, the perfection is in the spiritual realm. We will become like Christ (1 Jhn. 3:2) or will be perfect men attaining the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4:13; see also 2 Pet. 1:4). In this article, I argue that the exercise of silence and *hesychia* is the way to attain the perfection and it can be applied for us nowadays. The object of this present article is to discover, insofar as the answers given in the sayings of the desert fathers, the *Apophthegmata Patrum*,<sup>1</sup> might permit one to do so, what exactly those early monks meant by *hesychia* in this context. But *hesychia* may well be the most difficult word in the monastic vocabulary to define; that is why it is left untranslated. The word has already appeared above in its primary meaning, no more than silence. But in its monastic context it quickly came to mean more than, and probably something quite different from, mere absence of speaking.

The asceticism of the desert fathers that would seem strange to most Indonesian Christians today if they knew anything about it (which very few do), strange because of the severity of the ascetic disciplin-

es that they practiced. So peculiar was their behaviour that it is hard to view them as anything other than mere historical curiosities—if, that is, we take their asceticism at face value. But if we evaluate their asceticism in the light of the complex and sophisticated psychology of sin and salvation reflected in their writings, we will discover not only how accessible they are but also how cogent and relevant, too. The desert fathers understood life to be a lifelong struggle against the world, the flesh, and the devil. The struggle is fierce because sin runs deep in human nature, which makes us vulnerable to temptations of every kind, not only to those that affect outward conduct but also to those that affect inward disposition. Victory in this struggle requires the practice of ascetic discipline, to be sure, as the desert fathers and mothers demonstrated. Yet while asceticism is essential to victory, it is not sufficient in itself. The power of grace and the proper setting are also necessary if lasting victory is to be achieved. However far removed from our experience, this tradition has tremendous value, especially today, because it exposes the bankruptcy of our consumer culture and confronts the modern quest for pleasure and prosperity, which constitutes what many people would

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<sup>1</sup> John Wortley, "What the Desert Fathers Meant by 'Being Saved,'" *Zeitschrift Fur Antikes Christentum* 12, no. 2 (November 1, 2008): 286–307, [https://](https://doi.org/10.1515/ZAC.2008.019/MACHINEREADABLECITATION/RIS)

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consider the essence of “the good life.”<sup>2</sup> That is why we need *hesychia* as a way out of this problem.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This research is based on the readings of the tradition of the Desert Father writings. I describe the several points of the topic from the theological and spiritual matters in order to give some spiritual insights of monastic spirituality. In this article, I first discuss concisely the spiritual perfection. Secondly, I discuss the silence and hesychia in the sayings of the desert fathers. Finally, I will propose the idea to be the way to attain the perfection for nowadays living.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Spiritual Perfection

Perfection. Paul wrote that the believers will be perfect men attaining the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4:13). More obviously, “.... we shall be like Christ for we shall see Him as He is” (1 Jhon. 3:2), and Paul also briefly wrote that, “For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.” (Rom. 8:29; see al-

so 2 Cor. 3:18; 1 Cor. 13:12; 15:49). We participate or share in the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4) because we have put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness (Eph. 4:24). And at the resurrection of the dead, Christ will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power which enables him even to subject all things to himself (Phil. 3:21). It is the deification of man both in spirit and body.<sup>3</sup> Maximus the Confessor speaks of the body’s participation in deification; when the soul becomes god by co-participating in divine grace, the body is deified along with the soul.<sup>4</sup> Maximus confirmed that, “People wholly participate in the whole God, so that by the form of the soul and the body’s union, God makes accessible the soul’s participation in him, and by means of the soul and body so that the soul might receive constancy, but the body, immortality, and so that man is wholly made god, deified by God’s grace, who had been made man, all—body and soul—remained man in nature, and all—soul and body—becomes god by grace.”<sup>5</sup> It is the perfection of our whole beings in the age to come.

<sup>2</sup> Gerald L. Sittser, “The Battle without and Within: The Psychology of Sin and Salvation in the Desert Fathers and Mothers,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 2, no. 1 (2009): 44–66, <https://doi.org/10.1177/193979090900200103>.

<sup>3</sup> In the Eastern Christian tradition salvation is perceived not only as the correction of the consequences of the Fall, as freedom from the power

of the devil, but above all as the realization of that goal to which man was called by being formed in the image and likeness of God. See “The Eastern Fathers Used the Term ‘Deification’ to Describe This Goal and the Means.”

<sup>4</sup> “Chapters on Theology and Oikonomia,” n.d.

<sup>5</sup> “Ambigua,” n.d.

As Christ said at the Last Supper, “The glory which thou hast given to me I have given to them, that they may be one, as we are one: I in them and thou in me, may they be perfectly united into one” (John 17:22-23). Christ encourages one to share the eternal love of God. He is the bond and meeting point: He is one with us because He is man; because He is Heaven, He is one with the Lord. Therefore, we are one with God through Him and the greatness of the Lord becomes our greatness. The embodiment of God opens the door for the deification of men. Being perfect or deified means, more precisely, being “christified” (i.e. Christ's likeness is the heavenly image we are supposed to attain). It is by Jesus the God-man that we men are made “ingodded,” “divinized,” “sharers of the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1:4).<sup>6</sup> Maximus takes as the basis of his understanding of deification the formula of Irenaeus and Athanasius, which he practically repeats: “God the Word, the Son of the God and Father, became man and the Son of Man, so that people might be made gods and sons of God.” Stressing the interrelationship between man's deification and God's incarnation, Maximus also uses Gregory the Theologian's formula of *tantum-quantum* (“insofar as”): The hard and true foundation of hope of deification for man's

nature is God's incarnation, through which man is made god, in which God himself is made man. For it is manifest that being made man without sin He can deify [human] nature without transforming the divinity, for which reason He called man into himself, for which reason He humbled himself for man's sake.<sup>7</sup> By assuming our humanity, Christ who is Son of God by nature has made us sons of God by grace. In Him we are “adopted” by God the Father, becoming sons-in-the-Son.<sup>8</sup>

Synergy. Nevertheless, in this present existence, this deifying union with God has to be completed more and more by changing our corruptible and depraved essence and by applying it to eternal life. Where God has provided us all the objective requirements in the church as well as the means that we need to achieve this goal, we must create, for our part, the necessary underlying conditions: for the deification or christification is achieved in this synergy, in this partnership of the human being with God. This relational part of our unity with God is the path for Christian life to become united. Therefore, the Christian life is the life to reach out the deification by synergy.

The Christian life is the life of synergy in transforming of our corruptible and working on the virtues or good works are

<sup>6</sup> Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (Crestwood, New York: Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1986), 98.

<sup>7</sup> “Ambigua.”

<sup>8</sup> Ware, *The Orthodox Way*.

the ways to achieve perfection. Vladimir Lossky also confirms that as for fasts, vigils, prayers, alms, and other good works done in the name of Christ—these are the means whereby we acquire the Holy Spirit. Note well that the fruits of the Holy Spirit are given by just these good deeds done in Christ's name. Other deeds, including good ones, which have not been performed in Christ's name, can not give us a reward in the life of the age to come, nor gain us God's grace in this present life. That is why Jesus has said, "He that gathereth not with me, scattereth" (Matt. 12:30).<sup>9</sup> To put it another way, there is no such thing as an independent good for the Christian: a job is good in so far as it fosters our relationship with God in so far as it renders salvation ours. The virtues are not the end, but the ways, or rather, the signs, the external symbols of Christian life, the only end of which is the attainment of grace. Consequently, the end of our Christian life is definitely not in itself the prayer, fasting, and vigil but it is the primary means of attaining that goal. While absolutely fine, it is certainly not the end of our Christian life. And monasticism is simply the highest degree of this attitude of will. In the next part I will explain the

most important means of the monastic tradition in their way to attain the perfection.

### ***Hesychia* in the Desert Fathers**

*Hesychia* is probably the toughest word to evaluate in the monastic language, and it is often left untranslated. The word has already appeared in its primary meaning, no more than "silence." But it soon became very distinct from the simple absence of speaking in its monastic sense.<sup>11</sup> There is a long way to achieve the state of *hesychia* which I will explicate in this part: the cell, silence, *hesychia*, and repose.

### ***The Cell***

How will one attain repose in this age then? The first, silence and the second *hesychia* seem to be the two requisite preliminaries to repose. Silence and *hesychia* are the crucial elements of the monastic life. Without silence and *hesychia* the fathers can do nothing so that they will effort everything to reach their cells and remain there. Abba Antony emphasised the importance of the cell, "Just as fish die if they are on dry land for some time, so do monks who loiter outside their cells or waste time with worldlings release themselves from the tension of *hesychia*. So, we should hasten back to the

<sup>9</sup> Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (California: James Clarke & Co., Ltd, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., Ltd, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> John Wortley, *An Introduction to the Desert Fathers* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 49.

cell (like the fish to the sea) lest while loitering outside we forget to keep a watch on the inner [self].”

Remaining in the cell and then they will repose anything from the world. Abba Sisoës said, “Remain in your cell with vigilance and commit yourself to God with many tears and you will experience repose.” Another elder, “Remaining in your cell, keep God in mind all the time and the fear of God will encircle you. Cast everything that is sinful and all evil out of your soul in order to find repose.” An anonymous elder said, “If a person remains in his cell under the discipline of silence, dedicating himself wholeheartedly to prayer and work, he can be saved in this age.”<sup>12</sup> Isaiah of Scete warns, “Hate everything in the world and repose of the body, for these made you an enemy of God. As a man who has an enemy fight with him, so we ought also to fight against the body to allow it no repose.”

The positive benefits of remaining within the cell are confirmed. Arsenius was aware that remaining patiently in one’s cell is what brings a monk into line. Abba Moses told a brother that remaining in his cell would teach him everything. While another elder said that the cell furnishes the monk with a plethora of good things. “Stay

in your cell and God will give you relief,” a distressed brother was told, and Poemen was of the opinion that one acquired the fear of God from remaining in one’s cell.

How is one meant to live in a cell?

Abba Poemen explained,

The visible components of staying in one’s cell are: doing manual work, eating once a day, silence and meditation; but secretly to make progress in one’s cell is to tolerate laying the blame on oneself in every place where you go and not to be neglectful of the times for *synaxeis* or for secret [prayers]. If a slack-time occur in manual work, go into the *synaxis* and discharge it with an untroubled mind. Finally, keep good company too and eschew bad company.<sup>13</sup>

Resting in one’s cell was not easy:

A brother said to an elder: ‘What am I to do, for my *logismoi* are afflicting me, saying: “You can neither fast nor labour; at least go visit the sick, for that is [a labour of] love.. With the help of God, he made progress, little by little, in this way, until he came up to what he should be and, gaining confidence against his *logismoi*, he overcame them.”

And another elder said, “I once saw a brother in a *coenobion* meditating in a cell. A demon came and stood outside the door of the cell. He was unable to enter

<sup>12</sup> John Wortley, *The Anonymous Sayings of The Desert Fathers: A Select Edition and Complete English Translation (Anonymus)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>13</sup> Poemen 168, “Alphabetikon/ Systematikon 10.93.,” n.d.

while the brother was meditating; but when he stopped meditating, then the demon went into the cell.” Thus, it was important to learn how to survive in the cell for “What is the point in anyone taking up a trade without learning it?” Abba Ammonas said, “There is a person who spends a hundred years in his cell and does not learn how one should live in a cell.” An unnamed elder, informed [a brother] how one should stay in his cell. Abba John told a brother: “Do not offer a prayer at all; just reside in your cell,” and when a brother begged a saying of Abba Hierax, he replied, “Remain in your cell. Eat if you are hungry, drink if you are thirsty; speak ill of nobody and you will be saved.” But as John Colobos said, “it was not quite so simple as that: If a person has something of God in his soul, he can remain in his cell even though he has nothing of this world. And if a person has something of this world and nothing of God, he too can remain in his cell having something of this world. But he who has nothing either of God or of this world cannot remain in his cell at all.” “My son, if you want to receive benefit, remain in your cell, paying attention to yourself and to your handwork, said Abba Serapion, for coming out does not procure you such benefit as staying [inside].”

## *Silence*

Fullness. Silence is avoided at any expense to certain individuals. Vacuity and forbearance were for them peace. Their quiet is hollow as they’re alone inside. They face their own vacuity and are thus rather difficult. They can do whatever they can to fill up the vacuum with employment, sports, and even more. They are frightened by silence, as with death. It is silence to death, too. Death reveals the full futility of meaningless existence as utter silence.

The substance of silence is not the sort of quiet. It is the silence not of emptiness but of fullness. The *hesychast* stands in God’s presence and hopes that God will fill him with His power. The silence is, however, never empty but still complete. It is packed with hopes that God will arrive, standing before Him with complete focus and watchfulness (*nepsis*).<sup>14</sup> It is a stillness not just of the mind and heart but of the whole body as well. For example, through our eyes, we become still, restricting them from unclean looks that provoke impure thoughts. With our ears we become deaf as we run from the bad words and rumors. John Klimakos explicitly says that to attain the state of silence entails, first, total detachment; second, resolute prayer—this

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<sup>14</sup> Anthony M. Coniaris, *Philokalia: The Bible of Orthodox Spirituality* (Minneapolis: Light & Life Publishing Company, 1998).

means standing and psalmodizing; and third, unbroken labor of the heart, that is to say, sitting down to pray in stillness.<sup>15</sup> Silence was (and remains) a crucial element of the monastic life: “Silence at the appropriate time is a good thing, being nothing other than the mother of wisest thoughts,” said Diadochos of Photice.

Loose talk. Silence did not imply a complete prohibition on communicating to monks, but it implied a substantial restriction on speaking. Love silence more than speaking, because silence concentrates the mind, but speaking scatters and destroys, counselled Abba Isaiah.<sup>16</sup> There was a certain restriction that the monk had to put on himself; others went to extreme lengths. “They used to say of Abba Agathon that he kept a stone in his mouth for three years until he had learnt to keep silence.”<sup>17</sup> Another elder said: “Loose talk and laughter are like a consuming fire in a reed-bed.”

Kallistos Ware speaks of silence as active listening, “Silence is not merely negative—a pause between words, a temporary cessation of speech—but, properly understood, it is highly positive: an attitude of attentive alertness, of vigilance, and above all of listening.”<sup>18</sup> Anthony Bloom describ-

es a woman who discovers a presence as she is practicing prayerful stillness. She says, “I perceived that this silence was not simply an absence... of something but the presence of something... All of a sudden, I perceived that the silence was a presence. At the heart of the silence there was (the One) who is all stillness, all peace, all poise.”<sup>19</sup> The goal of silence, inner stillness, is not mystical silence but *nepsis* or listening to the voice of God.

But monastic silence does not necessarily mean stopping any air-wave disruption. Evagrius suggest that if you find yourself growing strongly attached to your cell, leave it, do not cling to it, be ruthless. Do everything possible to attain stillness and freedom from distraction, and struggle to live according to God’s will, battling against invisible enemies. If you cannot attain stillness where you now live, consider living in exile, and try to make up your mind and go. Be like an astute businessman: make stillness your criterion for testing the value of everything, and choose always what contributes to it.<sup>20</sup>

Perfection. Silence is the content of hesychia as a path to perfection or salvation. “Let us hate all physical repose so that our

<sup>15</sup> Gregory of Sinai, *The Philokalia IV* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995).

<sup>16</sup> Wortley, *An Introduction to the Desert Fathers*.

<sup>17</sup> Agathon 15, “Alphabetikon/Systematikon 4.7.,” n.d.

<sup>18</sup> Kallistos Ware, *The Power of The Name* (Oxford, England: SLF Press, 1981).

<sup>19</sup> Anthony Bloom, *Beginning to Pray* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, n.d.).

<sup>20</sup> Evagrius the Solitary, “On Asceticism and Stillness,” in *The Philokalia I* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984).

soul can be saved,” said Antony. When Abba Arsenius was still in the palace, he prayed to God, saying, “Lord, show me the way to be saved,” and there came to him a voice saying, “Arsenius, flee from people and you shall be saved.” “If you wish to be saved, pursue poverty and silence, for on these two virtues depends the entire monastic life.” “Flee from men and remain silent – and you shall be saved.” An elder said, “There is a person who keeps silence not out of godliness but in the desire to acquire distinction for himself. If one keeps silence in godliness, that is truly a virtue, and he receives the grace [to do it] from God and the Holy Spirit.”

Abba Theophilus the archbishop once visited Scete. When the brothers were assembled, they said to Abba Pambo, “Utter one saying for the pope so he might reap benefit in this place.” Said the elder to them, “If he reaps no benefit from my silence, neither will he benefit from my word.” When paired with other practices, silence may often in itself grant goodness: “Taking no thought [Matt. 6:25–34], keeping silent and silent meditation bring forth purity.” This is what makes Isaac of Syria said that if you love repentance, love silence. For outside of silence repentance does not reach perfection.<sup>21</sup> Henri Nouwen writes, “We have to

fashion our own desert where we can withdraw every day, shake off our compulsions and dwell in the gentle, healing presence of our Lord. Without such a desert, we will lose our own soul while preaching the gospel to others.”<sup>22</sup> An elder said, “Practice silence; be anxious about nothing; at lying down and getting up, apply yourself to your meditation with fear of God, and you will not fear the assaults of the ungodly.” In silence we come to know ourselves and attain the purity of the heart, producing a “profound calm and great peace within,” that is to say the *hesychia*.

### ***Hesychia***

The state of mind before God. The next most intensely silence state is the *hesychia*. On the outward level, it implies a human residing as a single person; on a deeper level, it is not simply an isolation from noise and talking to other individuals, but the ownership of peace and quiet inside. It implies protecting the mind more precisely, the daily remembrance of God and the presence of inner prayer. Less often *hesychia* is said to be pursued in order to be attained, or simply said to be a state in which one is. This is the condition of mind unique to silence, for example the father who secluded himself in *hesychia* at a cell

<sup>21</sup> Coniaris, *Philokalia: The Bible of Orthodox Spirituality*.

<sup>22</sup> Henri Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart* (New York: Seabury Press, 1981), 30.

outside the lavra.<sup>23</sup> “Two brothers once agreed together and became monks; having achieved that, they thought it best to build two cells at some distance apart and each one withdrew on his own for *hesychia*.” It is believed that they do not exercise *hesychia* when living together. Everyone wanted their own cell, that is to say anywhere for the mature: not the right thing for juniors at all. This explains why “Our fathers would not tolerate young men staying in cells or places of *hesychia*, but in coenobia.”

*Hesychia* is the state of mind before God. It is not simply silence, but an attitude of listening to God and of an openness to God. It is a state of inner tranquility or mental quietude and concentration.<sup>24</sup> Nikitas Stithatos has emphasized that *hesychia* is an undisturbed state of the intellect, the calm of a free and joyful soul, the tranquil unwavering stability of the heart in God, the contemplation of light, the knowledge of the mysteries of God, consciousness of wisdom by virtue of a pure mind, the abyss of divine intellections, the rapture of the intellect, intercourse with God, an unsleeping watchfulness, spiritual prayer, untroubled repose in the midst of great hardship, and, finally, solidarity and union with God.<sup>25</sup> A

brother asked Abba Rufus, “What is *hesychia* and what is its benefit? The elder said to him: *Hesychia* is remaining in a cell with fear and consciousness of God, refraining from rancour and arrogance. That kind of *hesychia* is the mother of all virtues and protects the monk from the fiery darts of the enemy, not allowing him to be wounded by them.”<sup>26</sup>

The object of *hesychia* is to fall into the heart with the mind and stand in God’s presence, to discover there the Kingdom of God. The heart is the Lord’s reception room. Meet Him there. “The Kingdom of God is within you,” said Jesus. It is not only a time of quiet, not to talk, but to listen to God Who dwells in the soul’s inner temple and stands in His presence. John Meyendorff emphasized that,

Since the incarnation, our bodies have become “temples of the Holy Spirit who dwells in us” (1 Cor. 6:19); it is there, within our own bodies that we must seek the Spirit, within our own bodies sanctified by the sacraments and grafted by the Eucharist into the Body of Christ. God is now to be found within; He is no longer exterior to us. Therefore, we find the light of Mt. Tabor within ourselves.<sup>27</sup>

*Hesychia* is the inner warmth of God’s presence. This inner heat is the life of the Holy Spirit in us. Thus, *hesychia* is the discipline

<sup>23</sup> Phocas 1, “Alphabetikon,” n.d.

<sup>24</sup> Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, 1986, 163.

<sup>25</sup> Nikitas Stithatos, “On Spiritual Knowledge,” in *The Philokalia IV: The Complete Text*, n.d., 64.

<sup>26</sup> Rufus 1, “Alphabetikon/Systematikon 2.35.,” n.d.

<sup>27</sup> John Meyendorff and Gregory Palamas, *Orthodox Spirituality* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Press, 1974), 131.

by which the inner fire of God is tended and kept alive in us.

The purification of sins. “That we should pursue *hesychia* and grief for sin.” An unnamed elder said, “Fasting humbles the body; watching by night purifies the mind; *hesychia* produces sorrow, baptises the man and makes him sinless.” Abba Poemen said, “The beginning of evils is distraction.” The exercise of *hesychia* is the effort to recollect the mind to purify the heart from the sins. So, *hesychia* is the way to attain the repose of the world or sins. Abba Arsenius emphasized that when the same [elder] had retired into the solitary life, he offered the same prayer again, and he heard a voice saying to him, “Arsenius, take flight, keep silent, and maintain *hesychia*, for these are the roots of sinlessness.”

A brother asked an elder: “How am I to be saved?” Taking off his levitôn, girding his loins and holding his own hands up to heaven [the elder] said: “This is how the monk ought to be: stripped of the material things of life and crucified. The athlete boxes in contests; the monk, contending with *logismoi*, stretches out his hands to heaven in the shape of the cross, calling on God. The athlete stands stripped when wrestling in a contest; the monk is stripped and devoid of material things. [The athlete is] anointed with oil and taught by an instructor how he

must wrestle; so [are we taught by] God who awards us the victory. Abba Antony also said, “He who stays in the desert in *hesychia* is released from fighting on three fronts: hearing, speaking, and seeing. He has only one to contend with: the heart.” As for its benefits *hesychia* produces grief for sin, baptises the man and makes him sinless, for “The monk who loves *hesychia* remains unwounded by the darts of the enemy, but he who is involved with multitudes is continually getting wounded.”

*Hesychia* is the way to throw the enemies of the soul and attain the purity of the heart. Abba Poemen said,

To flee from the things of the body is a good thing; for the person who is close to the war against the body is like somebody standing above a very deep pit. Whenever it seems fit to the enemy, he easily throws the person down. But if he is some distance from bodily matters, he is like one far removed from the pit, so that even if the enemy drags him along to throw him down, even while he is dragging and coercing him, God sends him help.

*Hesychia* is the spiritual exercise for attainment of the repose and perfection.

Love. *Hesychia*, in love, reaches its peak. Because spiritual stillness is filled with an expectant waiting for the living God who is love, it includes love of God and neighborly affection. It means sacrificing ourselves to be able to locate ourselves in God and in our community. When we hit

the stage of deep love for God when we see Him in our neighbor, so we have achieved the real sense and intent of silence.<sup>28</sup>

Efforts & *Logismoi*. We need to achieve and maintain the state of hesychasm. Abba Isaiah teaches us that, “A person living in *hesychia* must investigate himself all the time as to whether he has evaded those in the air who would detain him and whether he has become free of them while still going about in the body. For if he is in subjection to those, he cannot be in *hesychia* yet.” Furthermore, Isaiah explains briefly, “A brother asked him, “What does one living in *hesychia* need to do?” And he said, “One living in *hesychia* needs these three things: to fear God without ceasing, to intercede with patient endurance, and not to release his heart from being mindful of God.” We fall into the heart everyday with the soul, there to stand in the presence of God. This is the fruit of hesychasm, of our silence: to bring Heaven into the world. And we need to keep the hesychasm steady. One can absolutely shut his mouth (and live-in absolute silence) but still have the inner man seething with *logismoi*. Not infrequently an elder is asked in the *apothegms* what a brother is to do with his *logismoi*, which typically means how he can withstand this or that challenge.

But the question may just as well mean how to keep his mind churning and this provokes a range of reactions. Those for which all of those solutions succeeded, i.e., those who learned to control their own *logismoi*, are the ones that can be considered to have attained *hesychia*.<sup>29</sup>

### **Repose**

Hesychia is the forerunner of repose. Repose seems to be the reward for those who have renounced the world. It is the advance state of spiritual perfection. It is a reality that repose can be achieved (at least partly) both in this world and in the next for all who obey the precepts of fathers.<sup>30</sup> Thus, one anonymous elder says, “Even if the saints toiled here below, they were already receiving a portion of repose.” Abba Sisoës said, “Be of no significance, cast your will behind you, do not worry yourself [see Matt. 6:25] about the concerns of the world, and you shall have repose.” A brother asked an unnamed elder, “How is it that my *logismoi* afflict me? I frequently rebuke them after they have captivated me, and they do not retreat but stand their ground.” In reply the elder said to him, “Unless you say to them when you are famished, ‘Go from me,’ they will not go away but remain; for as long as they have

<sup>28</sup> Coniaris, *Philokalia: The Bible of Orthodox Spirituality*.

<sup>29</sup> Wortley, *An Introduction to the Desert Fathers*.

<sup>30</sup> Wortley, 54.

repose, they will not go away.” Repose in this world is the part of the next repose on advancing toward perfection. Repose by achieving *hesychia* is the condition of perfection.

The fathers exhort on advancing toward perfection by repose. An elder said, “Remaining in your cell, keep God in mind all the time, and the fear of God will encircle you. Cast everything that is sinful and all evil out of your soul in order to find repose.” An elder also said, “Keep a watch on your conscience with respect to your neighbor, and you will have repose.” An elder said, “Curtail your solicitude and your belly, and you will have repose.” Abba Isaiah said, “Hate everything in the world and repose of the body, for these made you an enemy of God. As a person who has an enemy fight with him, so we ought also to fight against the body to allow it no repose.” Abba Poemen also said, “If a monk hates two things, he can become free of the world.” “What are they?” said the brother to him, and the elder said, “Repose of the flesh and vainglory.” Again Poemen said, “He who lives in a *coenobion* ought to see all the brothers as one, keeping a rein on his mouth and eyes; thus he is able to find repose.” He also said, “A person ought not to concede anything whatsoever to these two *logismoi*: *porneia* and backbiting against [his] neighbor. He ought not to speak anything of them or to think of them in his heart. By turning

away from them he will have repose and reap great benefit.” Abba Peter, the disciple of Abba Isaiah, said, “I visited him when he was sick and found him suffering badly. When he saw me sorrowing, he said to me, ‘What affliction is it when I have an expectation of repose? Yet fear of that darkest hour grips me, when I am cast away from the face of God and there will be neither anybody to answer for me nor any expectation of repose.’” These are some exhortations of repose on advancing toward perfection.

By achieving repose, we can be saved in this age. One of the saints said,

It is impossible for a man to experience the sweetness of God as long as he is experiencing the sweetness of the world. But if, on the other hand, he tastes the sweetness of God, he will hate the world, as it is written, “No man can serve two masters” [Matt. 6:24]. We too are unable to enjoy the sweetness of God as long as we long for human company and bodily repose.

By reposing we can live for God and could be saved in this age and *hesychia* is the precursor of repose. “Become as nothing; cast your will behind you and take no thought for the disquieting things of this world and you shall have rest.”

### ***Hesychia*, Spiritual Perfection, and Practical Matters**

The most questions asked by the desert fathers is “how can I be saved?” This

clearly indicates that in the context of the sayings of “salvation” means something other than one’s eternal destiny, for entry into the Kingdom was by no means guaranteed to monks. There are sayings which strongly suggest that what the Fathers meant by “saving one’s soul” was no more than “living the ascetic life” and, in truth, the two expressions sometimes used as though they were synonymous and interchangeable. Salvation in the commonly accepted sense of the word: attainable (through faith in Christ) in the world to come. This he designates the hoped of glory or for *telos /finis* or end of every human life. Then he goes on to speak of the *skopos/destinatio*, the “goal” which is the destiny of those who have embraced the monastic life, meaning something to be aimed at in this present life. So, the ultimate goal or salvation is to enter the Kingdom of Heaven; the immediate salvation is, simply put, to be a successful monk; to live the monastic life correctly, attaining the repose of the world, neither despairing of success and returning to “the world” nor falling into the slough of uncaring, lack of zeal and lukewarm faith.

*Hesychia* is the way of the immediate salvation to attain the ultimate salvation. It is the way of monastic life in this present life in order achieve the spiritual

perfection in the age to come. Sisoës clearly states: “If you wish to please God, exit the world, detach yourself from the earth, leave the creature and approach the Creator; unite yourself with God by prayer and tears and you shall find rest in the present age and in the age to come.” There are several anonymous sayings that discern silence and *hesychia* as a path to perfection, e.g. “If you wish to be saved, pursue poverty and silence, for on these two virtues depends the entire monastic life.” “Flee from men and remain silent – and you shall be saved.” An elder said: “Even if the saints toiled here below, they were already receiving a portion of rest. He said this because they were freed from the cares of this world.” It is stillness, full of wisdom and benediction, that leads us to this holy and godlike state of perfection—when, that is, it is practiced and pursued genuinely. If an apparent hesychast has not obtained this eminence and perfection, his stillness is still not yet this noetic and perfect stillness. Indeed, until he has obtained this eminence, he will not have even stilled the inner turbulence of the anarchic passions.<sup>31</sup>

No wonder we live amid masses of hurrying, moving humans in a noisy world. Pressure is stronger. The speed is faster than that. The echo gets louder than that. We owe

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<sup>31</sup> Stithatos, “On Spiritual Knowledge.”

it to ourselves to set up a silence zone every day. As the desert fathers speak of silence and *hesychia*, it stresses the need for a break, a silence zone every day. We need to go into our room, shut the door, and pray to our Father in secret. We need it physically; we need it mentally; we need it spiritually.

Building our spiritual cell is the first step to remove the noisy world and to move to the spiritual perfection. The cell is as Lossky states that the beginning of the spiritual life is conversion an attitude of the will turning towards God and renouncing the world.<sup>32</sup> We ought to set aside a day and a place to be alone with God, in order to have uninterrupted time with God. It could be early in the morning, late in the evening, or midnight. Building the cell is the spiritual synergy with Him. Silence in mind is an incredibly complex job. It is difficult to keep the mind from dreaming, thinking, and generating thoughts in a never-ending stream for ever. The desert fathers showed us how to control *logismoi*. It is about using one thought to strip oneself of those mind-crowding thoughts. That one thought is Jesus Prayer. By fastening the mind on Jesus' name, we are allowed to keep the mind open to God's word, keeping all other voices that tend to intrude at bay.

The practice of *hesychia* is not just for the monk or hermit. It is meant to be practiced by all. St. Nicholas Cabasilas was a layman who lived in the 14th century. Yet he lived the same hesychastic life in the world as the monastics did in the monasteries. He described this as follows: And everyone should keep his art or profession. The general should continue to command; the farmer to till the land; the artisan to practice his craft. And I will tell you why. It is not necessary to retire into the desert, to take unpalatable food, to alter one's dress, to compromise one's health, or to do anything unwise, because it is quite possible to remain in one's own home without giving up all one's possessions, and yet to practice continued meditation.<sup>33</sup>

For many people silence is to be avoided at all costs. For them silence is emptiness and boredom. Since they are empty inside, their silence is empty. It confronts them with their inner emptiness and is thus very painful. Feeling restless, they will do anything to fill the void with busyness, entertainment, etc. As with death, they are terrified by silence. For death, too, is silent. As absolute emptiness, death exposes the utter futility of one's empty life. This is not the kind of silence that constitutes the content of hesychasm, Christian stillness. On

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<sup>32</sup> Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 2005.

<sup>33</sup> Coniaris, *Philokalia: The Bible of Orthodox Spirituality*.

the contrary, Christian stillness is a silence not of emptiness but of fullness. The hesychast places himself in the presence of God and waits for God to fill him with His presence. Thus, the stillness of hesychasm is never empty but always full. It is filled with expectation for God to come, standing before Him with full attention and vigilance (*nepsis*).<sup>34</sup>

It is a stillness not only of the mind and heart but also of the entire body. We become silent, for example, with our eyes, restraining them from impure glances that incite impure thoughts. We become silent with our ears as we flee from foul language and gossip. We seek to fill the inner silence and emptiness with God through sacred readings and the Jesus Prayer. St. Augustine spoke of three kinds of silences that bring us in touch with God: first, the silence of the body; second, the silence of the tongue; third, the silence of the soul. Abraham of Nathpar, a Syrian Father, wrote that thus there is a silence of the tongue, there is a silence of the whole body, there is the silence of the soul, there is the silence of the mind, and there is the silence of the spirit. The silence of the tongue is merely when it is not incited to evil and cruel speech, or to utter something full of anger, or liable to stir up trouble, or some calumny or accusation.

The silence of the entire body is when all its senses are not occupied by a propensity to evil deeds or improper actions; or when the body is in a sort of death, unoccupied by anything. The silence of the soul is when there are no ugly thoughts bursting forth within it, hindering anything good.

## CONCLUSION

So far, I believe, I have pointed out that the *hesychia* is the most important means taught by desert fathers in their monastic life to attain the spiritual perfectness. We see that in *hesychasm* the elements of spiritual perfection are being attained like the purification of sins or *logismoi*, renouncing of the world or reposing, listening and loving God, and discovering the Kingdom of God or God's presence within our heart. The desert fathers have proved their monastic life as an immediate salvation to attain the ultimate salvation. Building the cell (entering our room) is the beginning of the spiritual step to achieve the silence (shutting the door), and then we arrive at the *hesychia* (praying to God), and finally we achieve the repose.

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