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## **Syncletica: Urban Ascetic and Desert Mother**

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**Syncletica: Urban Ascetic and Desert Mother**

by

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A Paper Submitted to the Faculty of the School of Theology of Saint John's University,  
Collegeville, Minnesota, in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Degree of  
Master of Arts in Theology.

SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY  
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Columba Stewart, O.S.B.

### **Syncletica: Urban Ascetic and Desert Mother**

This paper provides evidence and understanding of how Syncletica, a fourth and fifth-century Alexandrian ascetical woman, developed her ascetical life; first within the movement of consecrated virgins which was evident in the Christian world of her time, and later in life as an anchorite, where she became renowned within the category of a desert mother. This paper stresses the value of using modern historical method to discuss Syncletica, as well the need to understand her within the spiritual uniqueness of the eastern Christian desert tradition, of which is claimed as representative.

This paper may be duplicated

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### **Syncletica: Urban Ascetic and Desert Mother**

There is no way to know if Syncletica ever existed, although we have a hagiographical life and she was included in the influential *Apophthegmata Patrum*. This paper will explore Syncletica as a representative spiritual figure of the ideals of eastern Christian women's asceticism, starting with her initiation in the urban virgins' movement in Alexandria and becoming fully expressed in what is known as the desert tradition. Analysis of Syncletica's life, *The Life and Regimen of the Holy and Blessed Syncletica*, whether the story of a real woman or rather a symbolic figure, is central to this discussion. From the *Life* one is able to place Syncletica in the historical spiritual movements of her time. It is the thesis of this paper that Syncletica, from now on discussed by this name with it understood that she may have been either a prototype or an actual historical figure, was not from a strict ascetical family but was from a devout Christian family. Syncletica developed into a desert mother or *amma* within the context

of the spiritual life of the virgins and widows movement of Alexandria and she understood and developed into a desert ascetic by modeling her life after men and women recorded in the literary genres that were known to her in her lifetime, based on the rich oral traditions that preceded them. This paper proposes that by placing Syncletica within these two groups we add to the historical reality of Syncletica herself and better understand the development of ascetical life in early Christianity. In the process of this research it is my intention that Syncletica's life becomes more well-known for its historical value as well as for its spiritual quality.

### **Issues of the Placement of Syncletica in Late Antiquity**

#### **No independent historical evidence**

Syncletica is known from her hagiographical life, which although inaccurately attributed to Athanasius, was written by an unknown biographer.<sup>1</sup> There is no other verifying source to attest to Syncletica's actual historical existence. Syncletica is included in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, one of four women in that important literary work, but of the twenty seven sayings, only one is not found in the *Life* (saying 11 in the Greek edition).<sup>2</sup> According to Annabelle Parker, a scholar from Amsterdam who is producing a critical edition of the *Vita Syncletica*, this saying is attributed to Hyperechius, in the sixth-century *Adhortatio ad monachos*.<sup>3</sup> Odile Bénédicte Bernard's French translation of

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<sup>1</sup>Pseudo-Athanasius, *The Life of the Blessed & Holy Syncletica, Part Two: A Study of the Life*, by Mary Schaffer (Toronto: Peregrina Publishing Co., 2001), 11-12. Discussing the issue of the influence of Evagrius which is evident in the life, Schaffer says that "If Syncletica's life and teachings were recorded before 373, it would preclude the possibility of Evagrius Ponticus' writings having any influence on the Vita." Schaffer goes on to say that she sees differences between the *Life* of Antony and Syncletica's which warrant different authorship.

<sup>2</sup> A.S.E. Parker, "The *Vita Syncleticae*: Its Manuscripts, Ascetical Teachings and its Use in Monastic Sources," *Studia Patristica* 30 (1997): 231-234.

<sup>3</sup> Parker, *Vita* in Monastic Sources, 231, 234. In researching the sources for Hyperechius' *Adhortatio ad monachos* it was not possible to determine the source of the saying she is referring to in her study.

the life presents a useful chart that summarizes the relationship between the *Life* and the *Apophthegmata*, and notes what Parker states about saying 11.<sup>4</sup> As none of the material in the *Sayings* is of independent origin, they are not an independent source of verification that Syncretica existed. Parker brings up two important points: that it is possible that the *Sayings* preceded the writing of the *Life*,<sup>5</sup> and secondly, that there is research being conducted that is looking for a common source that underlies both the *Vita* and the *Apophthegmata*.<sup>6</sup>

Hagiographical literature, such as the *Lives of the Saints*, are studied critically and interpreted carefully so that the biases and the agendas of the authors are not missed. Critical analysis calls for attention to literary genres and the use of symbols and stories which carry forward stylized concepts of meaning, but do not necessarily depict historic reality. Hagiography is meant to edify and celebrate and must be considered within that context.<sup>7</sup> When viewing the *Life of Syncretica*, all of these considerations need to be applied. Whoever wrote this hagiographical text either had the intention of promoting some agenda in reporting the life of this holy woman, or was responsible for inventing her in order to provide an ideal example of selected characteristics of eastern ascetical life for women. This paper will be sensitive to bias and agenda and will propose certain influences, such as Evagrius and Athanasius, which are evident in the shaping of the life.

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<sup>4</sup> *Vie de Sainte Synclétique et Discours de salut d'une vierge*, Spiritualité Orientale 9, trans. Odile Bénédictine Bernard and J. Bouvet (Abbaye Notre-Dame de Bellefontaine, 1972), 119.

<sup>5</sup> Parker, *Vita* in *Monastic Sources*, 234.

<sup>6</sup> Anabelle Parker, "The *Vita Syncreticae* in the *Synagoge*: The Citations of Synkletike of Alexandria Used by Paul of Evergetis," in *Work and Worship at the Theotokos Evergetis, 1050-1200*, ed. Margaret Mullett and Anthony Kirby (Belfast Byzantine Texts and Translations, 6.2, 1997), 144. She references a conversation in 1995 at the Oxford International Patristics Conference with Dr. Chiara Faraggiana.

<sup>7</sup> Alison Goddard Elliott, *Roads to Paradise: Reading the Lives of the Early Saints* (Hanover and London: Published for Brown University Press by University Press of New England, 1987), 2-3. Elliott says that hagiography is not meant to be historically accurate, or can not be held to anachronistic standards of "historical" accuracy.



### Extrapolation from hagiographical and modern sources

Synecletica gained renown as a desert ascetic and anchorite and is noted as a saint by Butler<sup>8</sup> and others. Although Synecletica is mentioned in other literary documents, such as the *Synagoge* by Paul of Evergetis (11<sup>th</sup> century),<sup>9</sup> and the *Ancren Riwle*,<sup>10</sup> these references depend on the *Life* or the *Sayings*. There is no currently known source outside of the *Life of Synecletica* for the verification of her existence. Given this fact, it is necessary to state that Synecletica may not have had historical existence as an individual woman, and that her life cannot be known with historical accuracy. Given this situation, it is still possible to extrapolate from her *Life* and placement in the *Sayings* some reasonable descriptions of ascetical eastern Christian historical development. It seems certain that an oral tradition flourished in early Christianity, and that Synecletica, and others who are even less known than she, could have existed and served as models for others. These figures are the historically unnamed figures in the background of what might later be written together as a single, holy or saintly life. It is known that the *Apophthegmata Patrum* originated in the oral tradition, and in its many editions was written down in order to protect the spirituality of the desert ascetics from extinction.<sup>11</sup> As a literary genre there were many collections of *Apophthegmata* in existence and since they were edited, it is likely that what we now have in translation represents some

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<sup>8</sup> *Butler's Lives of the Saints*, Herbert Thurston, SJ and Donald Attwater, eds., vol. 1 (New York: P.J. Kennedy & Sons, 1956), 33-34. Butler discusses how her *Life* was used in the *Sayings* and lists her commemorative date as January 5.

<sup>9</sup> Parker, *Vita* in *Synagoge*, 143. Here the *Vita* is used in twenty-five topics by Paul of Evergetis.

<sup>10</sup> *The Nun's Rule: The Ancren Riwle*, Modernised by James Morton with introduction by Abbot Gasquet (London: Chatto & Windus, M.CM.XXVI), 9, 122. It is written that: "Paul, the first anchorite, Antony and Arsenius, Macharius, and the rest, were they not religious persons and of St. James's order? And St. Sara, Synecletica, and many other such men and women with their coarse mattresses and their hard hair-cloths, were not they of good order?"

<sup>11</sup> Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 87.

refinement or modification of the original teachings of the ascetical figures themselves. Modern historical scholarship questions ancient documents in helpful ways, so that a more nuanced understanding of history is possible. Reading the *Life of Syncletica* carefully and critically allows us to extrapolate information, and at the same time, not to require or expect that it be a literal expression of historical reality.

### **Her renown**

As Schaffer points out, since Syncletica was chosen to be in the influential *Apophthegmata*, she was esteemed within the spiritual circle of her day, and until it is proven that she did not exist, one can study valuably study her life.<sup>12</sup> It is the position of this paper that the *Life* has value whether Syncletica existed or not. The *Life* is a useful tool to understand the ascetical development of females in late antiquity in the area around Alexandria, Egypt. Combined with other sources, it is possible to gain an increasingly clear historical understanding of the development and practices of this time period. New methods in historical analysis use multiple sources and ideas drawn from many scientific or literary traditions, and from this new scholarship have come relevant new interpretations of Christian monastic history.<sup>13</sup> It is within this critical framework that this paper proceeds to discuss the development and nature of Syncletica's ascetical life.

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<sup>12</sup> Schaffer, 16.

<sup>13</sup> Harmless, Preface, viii; James E. Goehring, *Ascetics, Society and the Desert: Studies in Early Egyptian Monasticism* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999); David Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995); Susanna Elm, 'Virgins of God': *The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity*, Oxford Classical Monographs (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994). This paper will employ the critical methods of these and other scholars. See Elm, 1-22, for a description of the variety of tools and methods, including: papyri; artifacts; documents; sources from various fields of study; methods of literary analysis and other diverse sources of information. Elm, 13-18 focuses on the "suspension, as far as possible, of a number of prior assumptions and categorizations" and cautions against using "dyads such as Orthodox/heretical; asceticism/monasticism; normative writings/other writing; public/private" and such. Elm looks for underlying political and institutional motives evident within genres such as hagiographical sources materials, canons and such.

## Synecletica and the Virgins' Movement in Alexandria

### Modern scholarship and Synecletica

The *Life of Synecletica* portrays the spiritual development of a young woman of Macedonian heritage within an eastern Christian family in the city of Alexandria, Egypt. There are no statements in the life by which one can determine the exact time that she grew up within what is portrayed as a wealthy and prestigious family,<sup>14</sup> but it is known from modern historical scholarship that since the third century there was an ascetical movement of committed and consecrated virgins and widows.<sup>15</sup> The development of monasticism was rooted in the urban ascetical movement in the Mediterranean basin, and this includes the city of Alexandria, which was a center of eastern Christian theology and intellectual life.<sup>16</sup>

Susanna Elm provides the most elaborate discussion of the importance, role and definition of the well developed ascetical practice of consecrated virginity in her book, *Virgins of God* (1999). Elm's work confirms and develops the theme that modern monastic historians have agreed upon: that monasticism reflects a complex process. It first was exhibited in the ascetical lives of apostolic and post-apostolic Christians by the renunciations and separations from the commitments of the secular culture and did not primarily develop in the desert manner, as depicted in the *Life of Antony*.<sup>17</sup> Elm outlines

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<sup>14</sup>Pseudo-Athanasius, *The Life of the Blessed & Holy Synecletica, Part One*, trans. Elizabeth Bryson Bongie (Toronto: Peregrina, 2001), 10, citing section 5 which says: "Distinguished in lineage."

<sup>15</sup> Elm, 233.

<sup>16</sup> Harmless, 4-7. Here Harmless discusses the intellectual and business center that Alexandria was, likens it to New York City, and says "it is no surprise that Alexandria emerged as the center of Christian intellectualism....The Alexandrian theological tradition they established would become one of the most significant in the history of Christianity."

<sup>17</sup> Elm, 227-234. In this section a variety of virgins and widows expressions of ascetical life is discussed.

the characteristics of a variety of expressions of consecrated virginity that developed within the general category of the urban ascetical movements. Profound urban ascetical lifestyles of men and women, called virgins or widows in relation to women, were the first monastic lifestyles. Residence in the desert was not necessary for the development of deeply monastic, solitary lifestyles, and women ascetics are now finding their place within a more accurate historical record.<sup>18</sup> It is possible to locate Synclitica within the category of a consecrated, ascetical, virgin in Alexandria and to trace her development towards the ascetical life of the desert, where she apparently lived for the largest part of her life. She probably lived with some loosely formed community of women around her.<sup>19</sup> From this newer historical viewpoint, the desert is not seen as a prerequisite for the development of monastic life or of ascetical spiritual practice itself. The following section of this paper will compare statements from the *Life of Synclitica* with the characteristics of the ascetical movement of, first, virgins, and then the desert anchorites, or desert mothers.

Synclitica's lifespan is thought to be within a range that runs from the mid-fourth century to the mid-fifth century.<sup>20</sup> If Synclitica lived to be eighty-four years old as stated in her *Life*,<sup>21</sup> then we might think of her lifespan as approximately from 380 AD to 464 AD. Elm relates Synclitica to the virginal ascetical movement at this time:

Around the beginning of the fourth century, before the official toleration of

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<sup>18</sup> Elm, 14-15.

<sup>19</sup> Mary Forman, OSB, *Praying with the Desert Mothers* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2005), 48-49.

<sup>20</sup> Schaffer, 10; *Life of Synclitica*, Bongie, Intro., 5. The issue of her lifespan's dates is important and there are varied opinions, with placement by Butler and other traditional sources earlier than Schaffer's estimate. This is an area that needs further investigation but can not be handled within the scope of this paper. The issue of the influence of Evagrius is important in this matter.

<sup>21</sup> *Life of Synclitica*, Bongie, 64, §106.

Christianity, a phenomenon had appeared in Christian congregations as far apart as Iberia and Asia Minor, and required the attention of two local synods. Men, but most of all women, declared publicly that they henceforth intended to lead a life of ‘virginity.’ Their number was quite significant and they enjoyed considerable standing within the congregation: those who reneged on their promises suffered official retribution.<sup>22</sup>

The life of consecrated virginity in Late Antiquity, both for women and men, displayed these primary characteristics: promise of virginity; lives of prayer and fasting; and separation from the secular society by various renunciations and the living of ascetical lives (either within the urban culture, or within the family, a community, or in a solitary manner). Elm says this occurred within the city or village or on the edge of the city, or into the more distinct desert itself.<sup>23</sup> Elm writes, quoting the *Canons of Hippolytus*, that “Widows and virgins together are ‘to be a light for the congregation’ through fasting, praying and continence.”<sup>24</sup> In another place, Elm says that virgins are called in Greek, “*parthenoi*,”<sup>25</sup> which simply means “virgins,” and that they were known as such not because of their physical condition, but because of the way of life that they were taking on.

Elm adds other details in her extensively researched book, such as: virgins were both men and women; they were held in esteem by congregations and often remunerated; if they lived with their families they had a distinct lifestyle of fasting; cooking and church attendance; they could not be servants; they freely made their vows; some lived in convents; had a public vow or promise; had a distinctive dress or habit from early on, and could be seen to live in a variety of ways which included retaining property rights and

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<sup>22</sup> Elm, 29.

<sup>23</sup> Elm, 227-234.

<sup>24</sup> Elm, 231.

<sup>25</sup> Elm, 228.

having recourse to legal action.<sup>26</sup> There were three main canons of the Church which were designed to regulate their lives: *Canons of Hippolytus, the Pseudo-Basilian and Pseudo-Athanasian Canons* (fourth and fifth century).<sup>27</sup> Elm devotes an entire chapter in her book to Athanasius and his political agendas regarding the shaping of women's religious life towards commitment to the Alexandrian church and away from the teachings of those he regarded as heretics: Hieracas, Melitius, and Arius.<sup>28</sup>

### **How the *Life* portrays Syncretica's early ascetical development**

Syncretica, as understood from her *Life*, qualifies as an ascetical virgin from the very early period of her life:

But the wise and noble-spirited woman did not at all arrange things according to these counsels of her parents; hearing worldly marriage, she imagined divine marriage; and overlooking many suitors, she possessed the inclination for the divine Bridegroom alone.<sup>29</sup>

Syncretica freely chose the virginal ascetical life, and this personal decision is one of the tenets of the pseudo-Basilian Canon but not of the pseudo-Athanasian Canon.<sup>30</sup>

Syncretica is said to have: "maintained her intention and did not change her resolution," even though her parents were upset.<sup>31</sup> Syncretica is said to have chosen the ascetical life early, and her admiring hagiographer says: "while she was still in her father's arms, she first began to train her soul in the love of God."<sup>32</sup> The parents did not appear to be as deeply involved in asceticism as she since they wanted her to marry, protecting their

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<sup>26</sup> Elm, 228-246.

<sup>27</sup> Elm, 228. She reports that they are difficult to date and they varied slightly in emphasis.

<sup>28</sup> Elm, 331-353. The focus and length of this paper does not allow further exploration of Elm's work or of this important issue. It is certainly evident that Athanasius used his influence, literary ability and any other quality he possessed to influence the Alexandrian Christians, including virgins.

<sup>29</sup> Pseudo-Athanasius, *The Life and Activity of the Holy and Blessed Teacher Syncretica*, intro., and trans., Elizabeth A. Castelli, in *Ascetic Behavior in Greco-Roman Antiquity* by Vincent L. Wimbush, ed., *Studies in Antiquity & Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 268, citing section 7.

<sup>30</sup> Elm, 231.

<sup>31</sup> *Life of Syncretica*, Bongie, 12, §9.

<sup>32</sup> *Life of Syncretica*, Bongie, 11, §6.

family properties and rights.<sup>33</sup> They had not accepted the suggestions of the Athanasius who urged that every family would cultivate at least one virgin within the family.<sup>34</sup> The compiler of *Syncretica*'s life mentions few of the regulations which became part of developing an ecclesiastically managed virgin's lifestyle as stressed in Athanasius's canon and letters. Habit, special places to sit in the church, special diets and eating times, and other rules to regulate the virgin's life are not mentioned.<sup>35</sup> Instead, *Syncretica* is said to have "performed no cares of the body, as she carefully observed the impulses of her nature."<sup>36</sup> *Syncretica* is said to have "a love for fasting in which no one of those around her was her equal" and also that she "closed up her senses like a window."<sup>37</sup> There is no mention of rules of behavior. *Syncretica* is motivated by her devotion, by scripture, and by the "blessed Thecla as she followed her in the same teachings." The hagiographer says: "for them both Paul was himself the 'leader of the bride.'"<sup>38</sup> *Syncretica* renounces the social expectations of her family towards marriage, avoided men and publicity for her austerity and "not only avoided encounters with any male, but she also often rejected females."<sup>39</sup> She fasts and prays and renounces conventional social roles, and focuses her life on her ascetical practices and prayer. All of these practices are related to the spirituality of Athanasius and seem to influence her early ascetical formation; however,

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<sup>33</sup> *Life of Syncretica*, Bongie, 10, §5 regarding her two brothers and her sister; §11, §7 on parent's desire for her marriage.

<sup>34</sup> Elm, 231.

<sup>35</sup> Elm, 228-234. Here Elm reviews and discusses the three canons that are mentioned above, and notes that they were not necessarily applied as hoped for. *Syncretica* seems to fall more easily under the less regulated Canon of Hippolytus, but Elm says it was created with a rural population in mind, and at the time that these applied, *Syncretica* would have been in urban Alexandria. The pseudo-Basilian Canon allows for free choice of entry into the lifestyle, and this is related to *Syncretica*. Over all, there is mostly evidence of influences of these canons on her ascetical lifestyle, and it cannot be seen that she was under the rule or regulation of any one of these. She most closely models the portraits of the other desert ascetics that are known in the *Sayings* and the *Life of Antony*.

<sup>36</sup> *Life of Syncretica*, Castelli, 268, §6.

<sup>37</sup> *Life of Syncretica*, Castelli, 268, §10 on fasting, and §9 on closing her senses.

<sup>38</sup> *Life of Syncretica*, Bongie, 11, §8.

<sup>39</sup> *Life of Syncretica*, Bongie, 15, §16.

she does not enter into the more regulated lifestyle that develops in Alexandria under his influence.<sup>40</sup> She makes no mention of a vow, but she practices poverty and renounces money.<sup>41</sup> These are the practices of the consecrated virgins of her time, and she alludes to a calling and a special designation when she says, “I have been judged worthy of a great title.”<sup>42</sup> No mention of habit is recorded in her *Life*, but she alludes to it in the sentence in the same section: “Once she had clothed herself with humility by means of these words, she entered upon a solitary life.”<sup>43</sup> Cutting her own hair, in the presence of a priest, she departed into her new life.<sup>44</sup>

Syncletica is aware of various types of ascetical practices of her time, of city and desert. She knows the distinction between having an inner asceticism vs. an outer appearance of asceticism.<sup>45</sup> She validates the worth of the urban ascetic and does not make physical withdrawal central to a truly ascetical life. References to ascetical practice abound, and the injunction to “keeping her good works private and secret” increased the value of her virtuous asceticism and prayer.<sup>46</sup> Going on, the *Life* says, “And thus, in private, she fulfilled the demands of her calling.”<sup>47</sup> “Through fasting and prayer she trimmed the thorny offshoots of her thought.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Brakke, 17-44. Brakke provides many of the details which Elm’s work reports, and both accounts are important sources for understanding the development of Syncletica’s spirituality.

<sup>41</sup> *Life of Syncletica*, Bongie, 13, §11; also §14, §12. See Elm, 231-233, discussing that Athanasius wanted the virgins to live in a simple manner, and not be oriented towards money. Syncletica takes that perhaps further, gives up her inheritance and lives at the outskirts of Alexandria, in a family tomb.

<sup>42</sup> *Life of Syncletica*, Bongie, 14, §12. Here she may be referring to herself as a “bride of Christ” or as a “virgin.” But which ever it is, she is setting her life apart for God and consecrating herself.

<sup>43</sup> *Life of Syncletica*, Bongie, §12.

<sup>44</sup> *Life of Syncletica*, Bongie, §11.

<sup>45</sup> *Life of Syncletica*, Bongie, 59, §97, which says: “Many people, then, have found salvation in a city, while imagining the conditions of a desert. And many, though on a mountain, have been lost by living the life of townspeople.”

<sup>46</sup> *Life of Syncletica*, Bongie, 15, §15.

<sup>47</sup> *Life of Syncletica*, Bongie, 15, §15.

<sup>48</sup> *Life of Syncletica*, Bongie, §17. Evagrius’s influence can be seen in this reference to the ascetical treatment in relation to thoughts. Later sections of this paper will reference Evagrius again.



In some sections, the *Life* shows the hagiographer's ecclesiastically oriented purpose. Situating the spiritual marriage of Syncletica within the church the compiler says: "And I think that the bridal chamber was not different for them; for the church was the one bridal chamber for them, and the same David sang for them both holy and divine hymns."<sup>49</sup> This has an Athanasian tone to it, as he wanted virgins to live their lives related and connected to the Church.<sup>50</sup> One of the other church-related sections of the *Life* makes reference to "baptism"<sup>51</sup> and another section contains mention of doctrinal orthodoxy: "he [the devil] makes negligent souls ready to journey downward by false doctrine."<sup>52</sup> The biographer makes reference to her spiritual life as a tower by saying: "she built up her house upon the rock from which the tower was splendid."<sup>53</sup> This image was used by Athanasius and might reflect the hagiographer's beliefs, or it might reflect Syncletica's general acceptance of the dominant influence of Athanasius in her spiritual milieu. It is due to references like these that her life was accepted within the orthodoxy of this time period, while divergent opinions were dropped from history and are not part of the historical record.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> *Life of Syncletica*, Castelli, 268-269, §8. Here the reference is to the way that Thecla and Paul, the apostle, were part of the church and the church was the "guide to the Bridegroom."

<sup>50</sup> Brakke, 21. Brakke presents in this section a concise and useful summary of the basics of Athanasius' attempts to regulate and direct the virgins' movement and, especially to keep them in the Church, as he understood it.

<sup>51</sup> *Life of Syncletica*, Castelli, 269, §8, quoting Gal. 3:27, regarding being "baptized in Christ" and perhaps references the sacrament of the church, as it was conceived in that time period.

<sup>52</sup> *Life of Syncletica*, Bongie, 52, §85, discusses false doctrines.

<sup>53</sup> *Life of Syncletica*, Castelli, 272, §13. See Brakke, 35, where he discusses that Athanasius discusses Athanasius use of the tower image to describe the virginal life: "the virgin as a person set apart and enclosed: a tower, a temple and an undivided mind."

<sup>54</sup> Goehring, 30-32. Here he discusses heterodox groups that have been forgotten, but which underlay the later ascetical practices. He discusses the political dimension in operation, and the difficulty in controlling these expressive ascetics; Elm, Intro., 9-13. Here she discusses the nature of institutions and their relationship to history.

Cutting her hair and teaching would have been regarded by the Council of Gangra as unacceptable for a women, but there is evidence that Synclética did both.<sup>55</sup> Despite these departures from accepted behavior, Synclética is not overtly anti-ecclesial and is acceptable to the Church as a model of virginity and women's asceticism. Her instruction that ascetics should remain rooted in one monastery and not physically wander about is possibly related to the teaching of Evagrius.<sup>56</sup> Elm states that those persons included in the *Sayings* were people who were not necessarily "part of the ecclesial hierarchy."<sup>57</sup> This seems true for Synclética, for Synclética exhibits a sort of middle of the road position regarding the control of the Church in her life; not overly controlled, but not unresponsive either. She is within the parameters of the Orthodoxy of her time, especially when she mentions the importance of the church, and speaks against heresy.

In conclusion, Synclética represents a variety of the urban ascetical life-style which is marked by the brilliance with which she carried out the spiritual commitments and lifestyle of the virgins' group or movement of her time. She eventually moved out from this expression towards the anchoritic and solitary life of the near desert. She is not living under the canons of regulation that developed in the later tradition of virgins, but she reflects the Athanasian influence in general. As she moves out from the town to the desert her *Life* reflects the hagiographical life of Antony in many ways. She becomes more

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<sup>55</sup> *Vie de Sainte Synclétique et Discours de salut d'une vierge*, Spiritualité Orientale 9, trans. Odile Bénédicté Bernard and J. Bouvet (Abbaye Notre-Dame de Bellefontaine, 1972), 25. She translates: "Elle abandonne tout son patrimoine, le distribue aux pauvres et, ayant mandé un prêtre, elle coupa ses propres tresses." [She gave up all her inheritance, distributing it to the poor and having called a priest there, she cut her own braids (hair)]; *Life of Synclética*, Bongie, 18, §21, where Synclética begins to accept her role as teacher. She does this with hesitation, and may know the injunctions against it for women which were part of her culture in the fourth century from the *Canons of Gangra*. See "Canons from the Council of Gangra," in *Ascetic Behavior in Late Antiquity*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 448-455.

<sup>56</sup> Elm, 279-280.

<sup>57</sup> Elm, 281.

solitary and eventually begins to share her experientially gained and renowned ascetical wisdom with those who seek her out, and perhaps live around her in some sort of community.<sup>58</sup> It appears that this genre of hagiography, as stimulated by the *Life of Antony*, was a significant model used by Syncletica's hagiographer to depict her spirituality.<sup>59</sup> When she left for the tomb of her relatives with her blind sister,<sup>60</sup> she began to take up the solitary ascetical life, eventually to become a renowned desert mother as known to us through the *Sayings*.

### **Syncletica: The Desert Mother**

#### **Syncletica's renown as a saint and desert mother**

In the book, *Contemporary Coptic Nuns* (1995) by Pieternella van Doorn-Harder, who turned her Ph.D. studies into this unusual book, the non-Coptic student writes: "From historical sources regarding the spiritual mother one can deduce that they possessed an unquestioned spiritual authority built on a life of asceticism and prayers."<sup>61</sup> Van Doorn-Harder mentions in her study that Syncletica was an *amma* who had reached a high level of development and who is known for her spiritual practice of maintaining the "ideal of hiding their intense spirituality."<sup>62</sup> And on the other extreme, it is difficult for Lucien Regnault to imagine that a woman could handle the rigors of what he terms "the great

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<sup>58</sup> *The Life of Syncletica*, Bongie, 18, §21. Here it says: "Thus, then, going apart on her own, she continued perfecting her good works. And as time progressed and her virtues were blossoming, the sweet scent of her widely renowned austerities spread to many....therefore, some women began to come by."

<sup>59</sup> Forman, 48; Parker, *Vita in Monastic Sources*, 231; *Life of Syncletica*, Bongie, 34-35, §50 where compiler shows knowledge of lives of saints: "the most renowned lives of the Saints should be presented for comment;" *ibid.*, 69, when compiler says "the Fathers whose lives I have collected."

<sup>60</sup> *Life of Syncletica*, Bongie, 13, §11.

<sup>61</sup> Pieternella van Doorn-Harder, *Contemporary Coptic Nuns* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), 137.

<sup>62</sup> van Doorn-Harder, 132. She reports, "The story of St. Syncletica is known among the Copts."

desert.”<sup>63</sup> Regnault says, “When one considers the insecurity that reigned there, we can see that a woman, be she ever so valiant, could never live by herself without taking tremendous risks, as much for her honor as for her life.”<sup>64</sup> Regnault’s comment is a striking example of how difficult it is to imagine that a woman could enter the desert and undergo all its rigors and purifications. Nonetheless, women did live in the desert, though perhaps not in what is known as the far desert.<sup>65</sup> Clearly, from Syncletica’s placement in the renowned and important *Lives of the Desert Fathers*, and from the various references to her as an anchorite in other literature, documented by Mary Schaffer in her study of Syncletica,<sup>66</sup> if Syncletica existed at all, she was placed in the desert along with other men and women. From the details of her *Life* one can place Syncletica within the spirituality of the desert; historically she was renowned as a desert mother.

### **Characteristics of the desert tradition in Syncletica’s *Life***

Syncletica’s *Life* provides evidence to place her in the near desert: “[she] departed from her paternal home. She led herself down to the tomb of a relative, which was remote from the city;”<sup>67</sup> “She went to the tomb of a relative of hers which stood at a distance from the city;”<sup>68</sup> “leaving her paternal home in order to go to the tomb of a family member which was remote from the city.”<sup>69</sup> There is no mention of her ever moving from this tomb area, and so one is free to speculate that she stayed there.

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<sup>63</sup> Regnault, 24, where he discusses that none of those women of the desert mentioned by Palladius ever lived in the “great desert.”

<sup>64</sup> Regnault, 24.

<sup>65</sup> Elm, 262, where she discusses that women “ventured into the desert and here became true desert Fathers,” also see Elm, 270-271, 359, where she says the “the deep desert itself, it seems, was truly out of bounds for women.”

<sup>66</sup> Schaffer, 31-32. This is an excellent and helpful reference source for literary recognition of Syncletica.

<sup>67</sup> *Life of Syncletica*, Castelli, 271, §11.

<sup>68</sup> *Life of Syncletica*, Bongie, 13, §11.

<sup>69</sup> *Vie de Sainte Synclétique*, Bernard, 25, §11. It reads: “quitte la maison paternelle pour gagner le tombeau d’un membre de sa famille, à l’écart de la ville.” Translation mine.

Harmless points out that the area of inarable land outside the city limits of Alexandria is desert and not habitable or desirable for human life.<sup>70</sup> Where Syncletica lived qualifies as desert. Elm says that some women went to the fringes of the city and became desert ascetics.<sup>71</sup> In order to qualify as a desert, a place does not need to be located in the deep desert — deserts such as Syncletica’s, which were nearer human habitation, also qualify.

While there seems to be no doubt about the placing of her within the tradition of the desert fathers and mothers due to her recognition in the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*,<sup>72</sup> it becomes important to articulate and understand Syncletica within that unique historical-spiritual phenomenon and not to attribute to her characteristics which do not apply to her or to the desert tradition. Elm, using papyri from the second or third century in Egypt, describes the etiology of the term *amma*. Elm says it meant mother and “more specifically ‘foster-mother’ or ‘nurse.’”<sup>73</sup> By the fourth-century, Elm tells us that the name *amma* begins to appear in the papyrus in the sense of ‘spiritual mother,’ as is more familiar in contemporary scholarship.<sup>74</sup> The use of papyrus sources validates that women held the role of *amma* in history and helps set the dates when this role developed and became recognized in early Christian society. This is important validation for the value of Syncletica’s life and for understanding the value of her life, or the type of life that her hagiography represents.

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<sup>70</sup> Goehring, 80-81, “The term *desert* itself thus represents a continuum of possible ascetic locations defined in terms of distance from the settled social world of Egyptian society; while it is always inarable land, it need not be land beyond the fertile zone.”

<sup>71</sup> Elm, 358. Elm says that Amma Sarah lived in the desert near the town of Pelusium, and that the Father described by Bessarion “appears to have lived somewhere in between the deep desert and the inhabited lands.” Her remark about Syncletica and the women around her is that “they had...left the city itself behind.”

<sup>72</sup> *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*, trans. Benedicta Ward, SLG, preface by Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh, Cistercian Studies 59 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1975), 230-235.

<sup>73</sup> Elm, 245.

<sup>74</sup> Elm, 246. Here Elm also reports that the terms “amma” and “abba” are rare in papyri before the fourth-century.

Extrapolating from the modern theological and spiritual sources available to western scholarship on the nature of the desert *amma* or spiritual mother one can use four characteristics that reflect the spiritual qualities of this role as a desert ascetic: simplicity,<sup>75</sup> profound humility before God; belief that all are made equally in the image of God, and that relationship with the *amma* or *abba*, modeling the trinitarian theological model which is often employed in modern theology, is salvific. The relationship of disciple to master in love is, over-all, one of the most significant aspects of the desert tradition and is used as a model for later monastic formation. Irénée Hausherr, in his classic book on Eastern spirituality, captures the sense of the importance of these characteristics. Tomáš Špidlík's work is also of great value for this paper, and is based on his studies with Hausherr and refers to him.<sup>76</sup>

One way that Synclética reflects a profound simplicity is her reliance upon scripture and upon the grace of God. She is not proposing elaborate theories in her sayings, but says: “all of us --- male and female --- know about being saved, but through our own negligence we stray from the path of salvation.”<sup>77</sup> She goes on in another section to summarize in a simple scriptural manner what is needed for salvation, and says: “Salvation, then, is exactly this – the two-fold love of God and of our neighbor.”<sup>78</sup> In the *Life* there are many references to scripture, and Synclética shares what she has learned

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<sup>75</sup>*The World of the Desert Fathers*, trans. and intro. Columba Stewart, OSB, forward by Sister Benedicta Ward, SLG (Fairacres/Oxford: SLG Press, 1986); Mary Forman, OSB, *Praying with the Desert Mothers* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2005), Intro., xiv, where she discusses the simplicity of the spirituality of the desert; Ward, *Sayings*, Foreword, xxiii-xiv, xxv, where she describes the simplicity of the life in the desert and our need to view those in that spirituality from within their simplicity, and not from our own frames of reference.

<sup>76</sup>Irénée Hausherr, *Spiritual Direction in the Early Christian East*, foreword by Bishop Kallistos and trans. Anthony P. Gythiel, Cistercian Studies Series 116 (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1990); Tomáš Špidlík, *The Spirituality of the Christian East*, Cistercian Studies 79, trans. Anthony P. Gythiel (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1986), 2.

<sup>77</sup>*Life of Synclética*, Bongie, 19, §22.

<sup>78</sup>*Life of Synclética*, Bongie, 20, §22.

about the practices of asceticism and prayer from her experience with her disciples. She bases her spirituality on the gift of grace in love given by God, which is found in the scriptures and in the human soul. She teaches ascetical practices that she has learned through experience and from others and sums up this straight forward approach by saying: “Well, what do we need for the present conflict? Obviously, austere asceticism and pure prayer.”<sup>79</sup> In a few simple words and many ascetical and meditative actions Syncretica expressed her eastern Christian spirituality.

Hausherr’s book claims unequivocally that holy women were “spiritual mothers,” alongside the “spiritual fathers”<sup>80</sup> of the eastern Christian spiritual traditions, and he presents the name “*ammās*”<sup>81</sup> as interchangeable with name “*abbas*” when he discusses the roles and attributes of this title. References to manliness in women of this tradition often get at this idea that sex is no longer a barrier to profound knowledge of God within ascetical life. In Syncretica’s *Life* the hagiographer recognizes this with statements such as: “she did not want the people who were with her to be heralds of her manly deeds” and “seeing a woman, he [evil one] looked down on her, for he was blind and not able to observe her virile mind.”<sup>82</sup> It appears that Syncretica had a radiance about her that reflects her deep spirituality and knowledge of God as noted in this saying: “For just as those who wish to gaze at the sun damage their vision, so also those who try and mirror

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<sup>79</sup> *Life of Syncretica*, Bongie, 23, §29.

<sup>80</sup> Hausherr, Foreword, vii, x, xi, where Bishop Kallistos says that: “The tradition of spiritual fatherhood or motherhood--for this is a ministry also exercised by women.” In this section Kallistos references the *Sayings*, extensively, where Syncretica has 27 citations. She is clearly regarded as a “spiritual mother” and all that applies to the tradition, applies to her: the nature and qualities of a true “spiritual father/mother.”

<sup>81</sup> Hausherr, 4, where he writes, “First and above all, as ‘spiritual father,’ or just ‘father’ or *abbas* (fem. *ammās*),” and he includes women from the onset in his discussion; 286, where he discusses Syncretica as being equal to males spiritually and where he acclaims the value of her *Life* and regards it as: “a parallel life to that of Saint Antony.” There is no question that ascetical women are seen as equal to men in ascetical ability and practice, with only minor adaptations due to gender.

<sup>82</sup> *Life of Syncretica*, Castelli, 272, §15 using the masculine term of virility; 310, citing section 112 about Syncretica’s physical suffering before her death and her manliness.

the radiance of her life fall victim to confusion of mind, dazzled, overcome, and unstrung by the magnitude of her achievements.”<sup>83</sup> The compiler says that Syncletica’s ascetical practices were as well developed as any of those who choose the solitary life.<sup>84</sup> This reflects the picture presented by Palladius, the fifth-century historian of asceticism in Egypt, that desert ascetical practice does not differ in relation to gender, and women led the same ascetical lives as men.<sup>85</sup> Syncletica’s life is replete with references to profound asceticism and her ability to live in the rigors of the desert does not have to be questioned. Tomáš Špidlík writes that an Alexandrian Christian would understand that sexual distinctions no longer matter in the desert and did not matter to the anchorites that were there: in the realm of the spirit, there is no sex, but only angels.<sup>86</sup> Syncletica’s very name gives reference to her relationship to gatherings like those of the angels in heaven<sup>87</sup> and her hagiographer refers to “her journey to the heights.”<sup>88</sup> In the Egyptian desert they believed, according to Alexandrian theology, that a woman’s soul was the image of God just as was a man’s.<sup>89</sup> Perhaps it was always, therefore, a possibility in Syncletica’s mind that she could become a desert ascetic as a female, and certainly her hagiographer and the compilers of the *Sayings* claim that she did just that.

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<sup>83</sup> *Life of Syncletica*, Bongie, 9-10, §2.

<sup>84</sup> *Life of Syncletica*, Bongie, 15, §14 saying, “she surpassed even those who were accustomed to the solitary life.”

<sup>85</sup> Palladius, *The Lausiatic History*, in *Ancient Christian Writers* 34 (New York, NY/Ramsey, NJ: Newman Press: 1964), Prologue, 23-29. See Špidlík, 112, where he says they there were some modifications but essentially the same rule for men and women; Hausherr, 283.

<sup>86</sup> Špidlík, 112. Here he discusses the many “spiritual mothers” who went “beyond sex in order to achieve the state of angels (Mt 22:34).”

<sup>87</sup> *Life of Syncletica*, Bongie, 10, §4, says: “Named for the heavenly assembly.”

<sup>88</sup> *Life of Syncletica*, Bongie, 46-47, §75, writes that: “for others he decreed holiness through chastity of life, making them like angels;” 14, §13 about her spiritual perfection.

<sup>89</sup> Špidlík, 112. He writes: “the image of God is equal in men and women.” He points out that this is different from the Antiochene spirituality, where women are the image of God through the men.



Synecletica's tears upon being asked to talk to the disciples who came to her reveal her profound humility before God.<sup>90</sup> It is said of the desert *ammās* that just seeing them was enough. Seeing her tears in the story of her *Life* provides that same type of experience. Her tears were the lesson itself. Synecletica teaches about humility that: "Let this fairest of all virtues, humility, bind you together and contain your virtues," and also, that "just as it is impossible for a ship to be built without nails, so it is impossible to be saved without humility."<sup>91</sup> This is the type of humility that is part of the reason why the "words" of a desert ascetic were thought of as salvation itself.<sup>92</sup> In the *Life* it says: "The women present received this response gladly as if they had tasted of honey and honeycomb" and that "they were celebrating from the cups of wisdom—and pouring the divine draught and water was the blessed Synecletica."<sup>93</sup> Her *Life* shows her to be one who did not want to be known, and who kept her spirituality hidden.<sup>94</sup> This may be another factor that helps explain Synecletica's obscurity and is a fine example of profound humility. Both van Doorn-Harder and Hausherr mention this quality of hiddenness in women's ascetical spirituality.<sup>95</sup>

Perhaps the most important aspect of Synecletica's role as a "spiritual mother" is profitably discussed by applying the penetrating descriptions of the trinitarian nature of the relationship and role that a "desert mother" or "father" had with their disciples as outlined by Irénée Hausherr. Beyond helping the disciple to know God by teaching,

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<sup>90</sup> *Life of Synecletica*, Bongie, 18, §21 where it is written, "And with a deep groan and a flood of tears, she would withdraw into herself and would again observe silence as if her tears were answer enough."

<sup>91</sup> *Life of Synecletica*, Bongie, 37-38, §56.

<sup>92</sup> Burton-Christie, 19, 76-79; *The Life of Synecletica*, Bongie, 18, §21; Ward, Foreword, xxii, on the 'word' and on the great simplicity of the lives.

<sup>93</sup> *Life of Synecletica*, Bongie, 18-19, §21; 24, §30. These citations depict the salvation and wisdom of Synecletica's words.

<sup>94</sup> *Life of Synecletica*, Bongie, 15, §15, where the hagiographer discusses how her ascetical life was hidden in order to avoid other's approval of her practices.

<sup>95</sup> van Doorn-Harder, 132; Hausherr, 277, where he says that women hide their spiritual achievements.

counseling or by supporting in any other human way, the “spiritual mother” is able, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, to have a relationship which is truly in the way and image of God. She is a source of life for the disciple, she creates life within the relationship of love, and she redeems life--all at the same time. The disciple feels and knows the “salvation” that is offered.<sup>96</sup> Hausherr writes, “The spiritual father is not a rabbi who explains or applies Torah,”<sup>97</sup> expressing the idea that the father or mother is more than a teacher. Hausherr writes that within the *Apophthegmata Patrum* one sees in the “amma/abba,” “the radiance of their spiritual fatherhood.”<sup>98</sup> The disciple is to be supported in an essential way within this relationship of fatherhood/motherhood. In trinitarian language Hausherr says, “This concept of continued generation establishes the possibility of an eternal participation in the fatherhood of God.”<sup>99</sup> This is an essential point about Syncletica. In the *Life* Syncletica is drawn from her solitude to share the wisdom of her prayer and ascesis, and reluctantly it reports: “she was deeply moved and knew, moreover, that what she had said did not bring praise for herself but sowed helpful ideas among those present, she began to speak.”<sup>100</sup> Later she addresses her disciples as “My children”<sup>101</sup> and displays the role of the parent-creator in trinitarian style, as God the Father is parent to Jesus the Son (and begets the son). She is a spiritual mother to them, offering the relationship of salvation and life. This is a central dimension of the spirituality

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<sup>96</sup> Hausherr, 9-50, where he writes a comprehensive description of the “desert mother.” An entire paper could be dedicated to applying his understanding to Syncletica and this particular aspect of the trinitarian nature of the relationship of the disciple with the *amma/abba*. On pages 12-14, the trinitarian relationship is discussed.

<sup>97</sup> Hausherr, 9.

<sup>98</sup> Hausherr, 19.

<sup>99</sup> Hausherr, 23.

<sup>100</sup> *Life of Syncletica*, Bongie, 19, §21.

<sup>101</sup> *Life of Syncletica*, Bongie, 19, §22.

of the disciple-master relationship of love that is lived out in the eastern Christian tradition of the desert.<sup>102</sup>

There is probably no better way to end this discussion of her identity within eastern Christian spirituality than by reading what appears to be Syncletica's theological statement. It contains elements of simplicity, humility, and reflects a female trust in God and freedom to enter the way of life of the desert ascetics. It reads:

After distributing all her substance to the poor, she said: 'I have been judged worthy of a great title. What worthy return shall I make to the giver? I do not have anything. If in the outside world, for the sake of a transitory distinction, people throw away their whole substance, how much more necessary is it for me who have been granted so great a grace to offer my body along with what are regarded as possessions? But why do I talk about giving possessions or body when all that is belongs to him? *For the Lord's is the earth and its fullness*' (Ps 24:1 (LXX23:1). Once she had *clothed herself with humility* (cf. 1 Pet 5:5) by means of these words, she entered upon a solitary life.<sup>103</sup>

### **Importance of understanding Syncletica within the eastern Christian tradition**

In the above citation, Syncletica is acknowledged to have a title, a role, and purpose; this is an honorable gift of God's grace. In her lifetime titles have been variously: daughter; Christian; virgin; and desert mother. It is essential in understanding Syncletica properly to keep the language and interpretation used about her firmly within both of these traditions and within the spiritual intents of each one. She developed within the unique spirituality of her time and place: the urban ascetical movement and the desert expression of asceticism. Asceticism and renunciation were categories for them that we might not be able to fully appreciate in our modern world. The spirituality of the desert

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<sup>102</sup> Hausherr. Foreword, viii-ix. Here he articulates the deep dimension of the father/mother spiritual role, telling us they: "take responsibility" for others; they beget others as Jesus Christ was by his father; they "bear their burdens." One must understand Syncletica to be in this deep relationship with others, and in this trinitarian life with her disciples.

<sup>103</sup> *The Life of Syncletica*, Bongie, 14, §12.

tradition made these renunciations visible and physical in a slightly different way than they were expressed in the deeply ascetical urban movement, but both were radical commitments by relatively large numbers of Christians. These renouncers were a significant spiritual movement; they were supported and encouraged and, in some cases, venerated. The desert ascetics were thought of as sources of salvation. It is unlikely that most modern persons find that same sense of enlightenment and witness in religious life today, and certainly there are far fewer lay expressions of this magnitude and depth. It is vital that we always keep these unique historical-spiritual figures within the context of the spirituality of their times or we will miss their meaning and relevance. The desert tradition was a spirituality that believed in and trusted that ascetical process and deep Christian commitment to the radical and literal Christian gospel could lead to salvation. The literary tradition of the desert, of which Syncletica was a part, was a vehicle for expressing and storing up this unique spirituality. One must be careful that words like teacher or mentor or guide are not used in the modern sense in relation to this spirituality. This is a spirituality that is charismatic, salvific; extreme in ways that words can barely describe. They were teachers who taught from the deepest resources of love, in the way that Jesus Christ did in the gospels. They did not have wisdom, they were wisdom itself: where they were, there was God's love. Syncletica's hagiographer captures this genre of the eastern Christian desert spirituality and accomplishes an enduring and beautiful testimony of this remarkable historical period. One cannot read Syncletica profitably outside of these parameters and this matter needs to be underscored in modern scholarship.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this paper shows that the hagiographical *Life of Syncletica* displays the characteristics of a literary genre which describes both the characteristics of an urban ascetical virgin and also the non-urban desert tradition of holy men and women: the desert fathers and mothers. The teachings used for the compilation of the Sayings in the *Apophthegmata* collect and maintain the spirituality of this desert ascetical expression. Syncletica represents both of these groups in her spiritual life. Combined with the use of non-hagiographical and new methods of analysis it has been possible to locate Syncletica more accurately in history, and this paper shows that it is reasonable to place her within the backdrop of the ascetical movements of virgins in the fourth and fifth century in Alexandria, as well as within the desert tradition unique to this time period.

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