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## Instruments of the Soul: Oikonomia and Bodily Asceticism

Aiden Putnam

*College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, [obsculta@csbsju.edu](mailto:obsculta@csbsju.edu)*

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“INSTRUMENTS OF THE SOUL”  
OIKONOMIA AND BODILY ASCETICISM

Br. Aidan Putnam, OSB

One strength of the monastic model as presented in the early desert literature is the pastoral responsiveness to individual needs, while one weakness of this model is the apparent divide between body and spirit. I say *apparent* because the current image many of today’s casual readers might have of the monastic desert is of wizened, brittle hermits continuously at war with their bodies in an attempt to subjugate the flesh. Rather, I would propose that the early monks can offer us a refreshing view of psychosomatic integrity, one that can speak to current discussions of pastoral accompaniment. While *hospitality* may be a term over-used today to the point of insignificance, the ancient texts reveal a demanding, disciplined economy of attentiveness and adjustment to the other. While the literature may not detail explicitly how to administer such dispensations, since the point of the practice itself is grounded in discernment of unique particularities, the ascetic practices of the body may offer ways to develop the discipline of *oikonomia*, or spiritual stewardship.

For an initial overview of the field, we will consider the variety of vocations and charisms Basil the Great addresses in “the house of God.”<sup>1</sup> As a primary instance of pastoral response to such variety, Paul of Tarsus encourages Timothy to adopt a range of rhetorical approaches (4:2). Likewise, the Cappadocian bishop Gregory of Nazianzus later recognized the need to identify which

type of care a particular audience might require:

Some are led by doctrine, others are brought to bear by example; some need incentives, others need restraint; some are sluggish and hard to rouse to the good...others are immoderately fervent in spirit, and it is difficult for them to control their impulses.<sup>2</sup>

This early Christian approach to rhetoric drew on centuries of Stoic and Peripatetic philosophy<sup>3</sup>, and would in turn contribute to the Rule of Saint Benedict (e.g. Chapter 2, “What Kind of Person the Abbot Ought to Be”). But this is not an exact science, with a checklist of deductive choices to make. What are some of the intuitive requirements, challenges, and goals of this “stewardship of spirits”? The desert tradition can elucidate.

One purpose of recognizing individual strengths and characteristic inclinations is to give people what they actually need. Hospitality, in this sense, becomes the skill of dealing with people on their terms, and not on my own private agenda<sup>4</sup>. The overarching goal of this practice is to promote purity of heart: “[t]rue physicians of souls destroy [...] maladies of the heart just as they are about to emerge, [...] disclosing to them both the causes of the passions that threaten them and the means for acquiring health.<sup>5</sup>” While the scope of this objective is considerable, the methods to be employed may be even more varied. The “disclosure” of causes of passions and means for their purification might need to take multiple forms.

Defusing destructive passions isn’t the only goal of spiritual stewardship, however. In the interest of purifying hearts, Cassian also describes constructive strategies, as when he advises: “pour out abundantly the joy of spiritual knowledge, like wine that ‘rejoices the heart of man,’ for those who are cast down with bitterness and sorrow.<sup>6</sup>” The variety of approaches he goes on to detail sounds very like the modern maxim to “comfort the afflicted

and afflict the comfortable.” The challenge is to appropriately ascertain who belongs to what category, at what moment, and for what reason.

Another inherent challenge is to consider what exactly might be the required response. Sometimes, the best response is not the proper response. “Borrowing the distinction between *akriveia* and *oikonomia* (or between strictness and condescension) from the monastic community, Gregory notes that the shepherd must be willing to bend the rules of normal behavior if he is to heal those under his care: ‘[i]n some cases we must appear angry even if we are not.’”<sup>7</sup> There is a fine line, here, between clear communication and emotional manipulation. The litmus test seems to concern the question of intention.

Here we find, for example, the correspondence of Barsanuphius and John. More than a century after Basil, Gregory, and Cassian, these two hermits exemplify pastoral practice. John, particularly, upholds the overarching purpose of ascetic disciplines, leaving the individual to discern which approach best suits one’s own character or situation: “Being in the company of others for the sake of God is a good thing; and not being in the company of others for the sake of God is also a good thing;”<sup>8</sup> and also: “One who speaks for God is doing a good thing; and one who is silent for God is also doing a good thing.”<sup>9</sup> Barsanuphius, for his part, could be read as taking a more theoretical tack, while still remaining concrete in his reflections: “those who are really thirsty and discover a source of refreshing water, are not curious about the source of the well itself.”<sup>10</sup> The point he makes serves to distinguish between needed resources and supplementary reflection. At the same time, he advances a pastoral willingness to provide for these real needs.

All the same, this doesn’t mean that every pastor, minister, or spiritual friend is capable of addressing every

desirable good! The desert literature of the early monastic model offers both guidelines for and perimeters around the practice of pastoral accompaniment. Primarily, the tradition warns against presumptuousness, both with explicit warnings and implicit cautions. For instance, Evagrius advises that only “[i]f the knower at the time of interpretation is free from anger and hatred and sadness, and suffering of the body and care, let him interpret.”<sup>11</sup> To these passions of anger or despair, we might add vainglory and pride. We could also take caution from implied suggestions in the lives and stories of the desert monastics. Many vignettes depict a spiritual elder who does not directly question, challenge, or inform the seeker, but instead allows the novice or junior to come to their own conclusions. “The elder’s qualities of availability and patience are further indicators that the role is not one of controlled ‘directing’ but of ‘being present to or accompanying.’”<sup>12</sup> These stories suggest a need to examine oneself in order to assess one’s capacity to respond well to others.

In addition to cautions against anger or pride, the literature gives examples of figures who can model a successful practice of spiritual guidance. Antony of the Desert, in particular, is depicted as aptly recognizing and cultivating the strengths of others:

[E]veryone marveled at the grace given to Antony by the Lord for the discerning of spirits. And so their monastery was in the mountains, like a tabernacle filled with holy men who sang psalms, loved reading, fasted, prayed, rejoiced in the hope of things to come, labored for the benefit of the poor, and preserved love and harmony with one another.<sup>13</sup>

This image of the monastery “like a tabernacle” in the mountain is not an accidental conglomeration of various types. Rather, Antony is portrayed as one who deliberately responds to the real people around him: “being himself perfect, he was able to adapt his teaching to the need of every one, so that by all means he might

save some of them.”<sup>14</sup>

Perfection is a high demand. But perhaps we can find some encouragement in the promise of shared responsibility incumbent upon community members. Humility, in terms of pastoral accompaniment, might mean joining self-awareness to perception of another’s character: “At the very moment when we hide our brother’s fault,” says Abba Poemen, “God hides our own and at the moment when we reveal our brother’s fault, God reveals ours too.”<sup>15</sup> We need to know our faults. Rather than exhorting spiritual guides to practice denial and obfuscation, perhaps this perplexing ‘word’ can be a call for compassion and prudence.

In a similar manner, Gregory the Great challenges pastoral workers to question their own motivations and intentions when practicing *oikonomia*. While discernment of spirits is a virtuous ministry, to accompany others with skill and humility requires caution: “[I]t is important that the spiritual director be vigilant that he is not assailed by a desire to please others.”<sup>16</sup> This caution was not original to the desert tradition. Again, we can see roots of it in the Stoic and Epicurean philosophy of learning virtue through living examples.<sup>17</sup> What ancient monasticism contributes, however, is a radical orientation towards salvation history, rooted in cosmology and tending towards an eschaton.

Because of this salvific orientation, terms like “creator,” “truth,” and “love” take on decisive import. Shared assumptions on these values thereby shape the presumptions about what constitutes valid criterion for discernment. Because of specifically Christian claims of community in the Body of Christ, the practice of *oikonomia* develops nuances (and forbearances) that the earlier philosophies might not have allowed.<sup>18</sup> Basil, Cassian, the desert monks and especially Gregory of Nazianzus show a willingness to sustain silence as a means to elicit repentance. The critical question then becomes how to develop a discernment adept

enough to both set aside one's own preoccupations and to respond appropriately to another's needs.

For such a means, we could turn to the ancient monastic practice of chastity.

It is impossible to possess spiritual knowledge without integral chastity, because there are different gifts and because there is not one grace of the Holy Spirit that is given to everyone, but rather that which each person is worthy and capable of, thanks to his own effort and toil.<sup>19</sup>

Considering the difficulty of ascertaining another's gifts and liabilities – let alone maintaining control of one's own – the ongoing observation of self through the lens of bodily passions proves very appropriate for cultivating the discernment required for *oikonomia*. “This is the most perfect goal of abstinence,” insists Gregory of Nyssa, “not to focus on the sufferings of the body, but on the facility of the instruments of the soul.”<sup>20</sup>

So, how is a person to know what they themselves are “capable of,” as Cassian considers above? To conclude, I will briefly sketch a general overview of the desert tradition's approach to the body in order to set questions of discernment through ascetic practices in context.

“The monk's body is multivalent like the biblical text.”<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the scope of considerations regarding the body in ancient desert monasticism encompassed disposition, diet, group identity, commitment,<sup>22</sup> psychological health and fantasies, let alone characteristic behaviors and bodily activities.<sup>23</sup> In such a schema, the body is not a threat nor a locus of sin, but a field for transformation where the priority is purity of heart. “Each person's *flesh and blood* was particular to that person, and had been exquisitely calibrated by God, ‘who alone is the searcher of hearts,’ to challenge the potentially mighty spirit of each to stretch beyond

itself.”<sup>24</sup>

This particularity of the body, wherein God gives each person a specific set of challenges and resources, echoes the practice of *oikonomia* discussed above. Again, the task of both the spiritual seeker or guide is to identify the hallmark characteristics. The practice of self-observation rooted in the body and accompanying emotions goes back to the second-century text *The Shepherd of Hermas*, which valorizes “distinguishing the presence of good or evil powers through analysis of their emotional effects.”<sup>25</sup> From there, the practice went on to include the Pythagorean theory of musical harmony and its effect on the body,<sup>26</sup> the Hippocratic theory of bodily humors,<sup>27</sup> and adoption of various physical postures for prayer (including standing, *orans*, genuflections, and prostrations).<sup>28</sup> “Watch even how you sit,” writes Barsanuphius. “Say to yourself: ‘Why am I sitting like this? What have I gained from this sitting?’”<sup>29</sup> These are just some examples of the range of questions the literature gives to experiences of the body.

Today, one common understanding of monastic asceticism is to reduce it to the practice of celibacy, partly because of the decline of the practices of fasting, renunciation of possessions, and separation from society. While chastity certainly served as a privileged locus for considerations of the interplay between nature and grace,<sup>30</sup> intention and will,<sup>31</sup> and the interplay of physical disciplines with “the spiritual ones of reading, *meditatio*, and unceasing prayer,”<sup>32</sup> this one discipline operates within a wider nexus of ancient understandings of the body and spirit. I argue that we need to recover or match such a broader, integrative view. The literature of the desert tradition offers us an avenue into more nuanced appreciations of individual charisms, especially through pastoral interactions of discernment, accompaniment, and advice. The complexities of these practices and theories are not



designed to simplify the process, but rather – as Origen, Evagrius, and Cassian proposed – to encourage us to “move toward keener awareness of the vastness and intricacies of God’s work in creation, and thereby toward knowledge of God.”<sup>33</sup>

This short study has focused on the practical and theoretical works of bodily asceticism and spiritual accompaniment, but in so doing has not thoroughly approached considerations of prayer or grace. I would hope that such questions could be assumed throughout, as each of our writers would assert the primacy of divine agency in any habit of virtue. Further research along the lines of somatic prayer might also benefit from the work of Diadochus of Photike regarding compunction of heart and imageless prayer, emphasizing “invocation of the name.”<sup>34</sup> More study of *The Book of Pastoral Rule*, Evagrius’ letter to Eulogios on disclosure of thoughts, and Cicero on oratory are also in order.

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*Notes*

- 1 Basil of Caesarea, *Give Heed to Thyself* p. 437
- 2 Demacopoulos, George: *Five Models of Spiritual Direction in the Early Church*, University of Notre Dame Press, 2006. p. 69, cf. Gregory Nazianzen, *Or.* 2.30
- 3 Demacopoulos, 196; cf. Cicero: “One single style of oratory is not suited to every case, nor to every audience” (*De optimo genere oratorum*); also cf: Aristotle *Rhetoric* 1408a; Plutarch *On the Delays of the Divine Vengeance* 549-550
- 4 Lecture notes October 24 2017
- 5 Cassian, *Inst.*, XI.xvii.2
- 6 Cassian, *Conl.* XIV.xvii.3-4
- 7 Nazianzen, *Or.* 2.32, in Demacopoulos, 70
- 8 John, Letter 205
- 9 John, Letter 287
- 10 Barsanuphius, Letter 125
- 11 Evagrius, *Gnostikos* 10
- 12 Stewart 1991, p. 23
- 13 Athanasius *Vita Antonii*, quoted in Demacopoulos, p. 31
- 14 *Ibid*, 33
- 15 Apothegmata 147
- 16 Gregory the Great, *The Book of Pastoral Rule* [Popular Patristics Series], II.8
- 17 “[T]eaching and life must not diverge from each other” (I. Hadot, 448)
- 18 Lecture notes November 28 re: Poeman 173/64
- 19 Cassian, *Inst.*, VI.xviii
- 20 Gregory of Nyssa, *De verg* 22.2, quoted in Shaw, p. 95
- 21 Stewart, *Cassian*, 63
- 22 Lecture notes October 10; re: Basil on humors theory & Cassian on dietary regulations as sign of group identity and to preserve one’s commitment.
- 23 Lecture notes 10.24
- 24 Brown, Peter. *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*. Columbia University Press, New York. 1988. p. 165, cf.

Origen: *You have coals of fire, you will sit upon them, and they will be of help to you.*

- 25 Stewart, 2005 p. 8
- 26 Evagrius of Ponticus, *Antirrhethikos* IV.22: “[T]he melody that accompanies the Psalms alters the condition of the body [...]”
- 27 Evagrius, *Antirrhethikos* II.22: “[I]rascibility comes from fire by nature, but unclean thoughts are born of water.”
- 28 Lecture notes 10.10, considering to what extent, if at all, early Christians practiced silent prayer.
- 29 Barsanuphius Letter 49
- 30 “[...] chastity subsists not – as you think – thanks to a rigorous defense but rather by love of itself and by delight in its own purity” (Cassian, *Cont.* XII.x.1).
- 31 Stewart, *Cassian* 70 re: “the moral arena of the heart”.
- 32 Ibid, 73.
- 33 Stewart 2001 p. 181
- 34 Lecture notes, 10.10