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Competitive Asceticism:
The Gendered Other as a Source of Self-Revelation in Palladius' Lausiac History

Rachel Wheeler

Abstract - Early Christian ascetic literature often featured competition and comparison as ways by which ascetics register self-awareness, increase self-knowledge, and finally, stimulate change. This paper examines three stories in Palladius' Lausiac History to show how the author regarded competition and comparison as useful strategies to catalyze transformation. These stories highlight and subvert differences between solitude and community, men and women, and quantity and quality of ascetic practice. In focusing on exchanges which result in altered consciousness of self, the Lausiac History also implicitly – and sometimes explicitly – invites its reader to likewise examine its contents so as to be challenged by comparing oneself to and competing with the text's figures in order that the reader's spiritual growth might be effected.

Authors of early Christian literature exhibit a marked fascination with ascetic lives. Not surprisingly, men figure much more prominently than women in such literature for a variety of reasons, not least of which was the common association of asceticism, both etymologi-
cally and metaphorically, with athleticism. Indeed, it has taken a long time for women to be recognized as able competitors alongside men, as shown by the relatively recent (1970s) legislation passed in the United States as Title IX. Palladius, however, encountered scores of female ascetics as he journeyed through Egypt, Palestine, and Syria in the late fourth century. These women offered challenges to men, including ostensibly to Palladius himself, and to each other just as they, in turn, were challenged by men. Every ascetic’s individual journey of faith was illuminated by its relationship with what the ascetic learned of another, including those within a network of specialized ascetic practice comprised of one’s neighboring disciples and abba or amma, and those without such a network who visited the ascetics to marvel at their fasting and vigils.

Palladius’ *Lausiac History* upholds the potential that mutual edification ascetics offered each other, gender notwithstanding. In upholding such potential, he uncovers the activities of comparison and competition as activities to which Christian ascetics were prone and which positively contributed to increased self-understanding and subsequent transformation. Not only did the ascetic exercise discernment in seeking an amma or abba, but the ascetic also repeatedly engaged in comparison and competition with the amma or abba in order to gauge his or her progress in the spiritual life.

But *The Lausiac History* also contains stories of ascetics who compare themselves to and compete with one another, and these activities frequently result in serious undermining of personal identity. However, these stories demonstrate that an accumulation of self-knowledge oc-
urred in the process. For this reason, Palladius endorses the process as beneficial both to the ascetic undergoing such a process and to whomever might witness it, including readers of his text. In his Prologue, Palladius offers sensible advice: readers should avoid those “who can be no help to you” and to meet, in his book, “holy men and women so that you may see clearly your own heart...The comparison will enable you to see your own sluggishness or indifference.”

Undermining of selfhood by comparison, though potentially permanent in its effect, might be painful only temporarily; thus, Palladius defends it as a positive good. Comparison entailed scrutiny of the other’s practice, not gender, and for this reason it was natural that Palladius includes women’s stories in his History. However, to show that women might challenge men was not Palladius’ only reason for their inclusion. He also affirms women’s ability to experience the same self-revelation and transformation men experienced.

That Palladius attributed value to acts of comparison and competition in the spiritual life may be demonstrated by examining his use of language of rivalry in the History. Comparison and competition, though admittedly not the same thing, work in symbiotic fashion in Palladius’ text: recognition of differences between oneself and another created occasions for competitive behavior, either with the other or with the self one imagined one was no longer, or still hoped one might become. Palladius’ past shaped his understanding of how comparison and competition might be construed as positive tools in spiritual formation. That he was devoted to the Apostle Paul, Origen, and a disciple of Evagrius, disclose ways of understanding how he viewed interacting with others as educative and transformative. Third, close read-
ings of three stories from *The Lausiac History* illustrate the nature of competitive behavior between male and female ascetics and the devastation and transformation that results from such behavior.

**The Context of Early Christian Asceticism**

It was inevitable that Christians in fourth-century Egypt notice one another. One of the initial impetuses to desert spirituality was the fact that, due to a period of permisiveness granted Christianity by Constantine, piety grew lax. No longer was it necessary for an earnest Christian to endure martyrdom to prove his or her mettle; comparing one’s aspirations to do so meant looking askance at other Christians complacently accepting social tolerance. This constituted a judgment ascetics made on the lives of less committed Christians, driving some to places where stricter ways of life were possible. The very background of early asceticism, then, is framed within a context of comparisons made between those remaining “in” the world and those observing within themselves an ability and desire to perform more severe acts of renunciation.

Georgia Frank illuminates the shift in late antique pilgrimage from biblical sites of interest to sites where living ascetics practiced. She writes that the mere face of the ascetic “constituted the meeting ground of the biblical past and the pilgrim’s present. With a parallax vision capable of perceiving both ascetic achievement and biblical presence, the pilgrim could gaze at and through the face, a textured window onto the biblical past.” The importance of visual
experience is demonstrated by a story of one of Antony’s guests who, when asked why he did not ask the abba anything, replied: “It is enough for me to see you, Father.” 4

As Christian ascetics attracted attention for behavior increasingly foreign to “ordinary” Christians, such as Antony’s entombing himself,5 which ascetics copy in Palladius’ History (5.1, 45.2, and 49.1), the belief arose that the less attached one was to human life, the more privileged one’s place in a gradation of holiness increasingly reserved for ascetics. Palladius, too, was fascinated by ascetics and, compared with other early Christian literature, his examples are by no means unusual.

Much of early literature of formation, however, diverts its focus from what an outsider might see to what the ascetic experienced. Such a focus necessarily had to deal with evaluation of the other as recognizably “worse” than oneself, a comparison which seems, if not justified, at least expected given the visitors with whom ascetics came into contact.6 From the ascetics’ point of view, it would have been natural to see a contrast between their behavior, the ascetic’s lifestyle commonly acknowledged as superior. Though “superior” and “inferior” are generic categories, they indicate a gradation of values extant among early ascetics and their public to which Palladius himself adheres. In a brief account of two ascetics, Palladius advances three variations of what constitutes an ideal: living the “best life,” progressing to the “highest love of God,” and “practicing the perfect life” (61). Superlatives of this sort reinforce the notion that the type of life to which the ascetic aspired was juxtaposed to lesser stages. The “high” or “highest” form of life is repeatedly espoused by Palladius when he mentions “high degrees”
of sanctity (57.1), self-control (59.1), and virtue (66.2) as benchmarks for his readers. Indeed, it is significant that the latter two of these qualities just named were attached to women and the first to a married couple, because such associations show that reaching a superior “degree” of being was not determined by one’s being male or unmarried. It was determined, however, by one’s asceticism. Palladius’ vision of asceticism is inclusive, expansive, and illustrative of his understanding that each person’s practices were chosen with particular temperaments and needs in mind. Similarly, the “word” requested from an elder was customized to the disciple’s situation, resulting in his or her mulling over of the received word in order to be changed.

Alongside the “highest” sort of life to which the ascetic aspired was the cultivation of humility. Because asceticism attracted the notice of so many in the Mediterranean cultures where it thrived, the ascetic was constantly in danger of pride. Stories abound in the desert literature that warn disciples against letting pride get the better of them. The root of the problem was the presumption that should one compare oneself with another, one would inevitably regard oneself as better. Comparing oneself with others was thus prohibited in desert tradition, for it resulted in passing judgment which endangered an ascetic’s humility. Accordingly, refusing to assess the behavior of others as either good or bad demonstrated an accurate view of oneself. Matoes, for instance, explains the need to become aware of one’s own faults, so that one set oneself below others.7 Another desert father advised, “If you want to find rest here below, and hereafter, in all circumstances say, Who am I? and do not judge anyone.”8 And yet another dealt with temptations to
think highly of himself by asking, “Am I to be compared with Abba Antony; am I become like Abba Pambo, or like the other Fathers who pleased God?” Comparisons of oneself with exemplars revealed acute self-knowledge and undermined the possibility of offering counsel to others, even to those or “behind” one on the path to spiritual perfection. Though such admissions of humility became a trope of monastic literature, they did not ultimately dissuade a would-be disciple from pressing the elder for advice. If anything, they paradoxically reinforced the idea that such an abba/amma was the best person from whom advice might be sought.

**Palladius’ Language of Rivalry**

The language of rivalry is pervasive in *The Lausiac History* and derives from multiple sources. That Palladius deeply admired the Apostle Paul is evident in references to the Pauline letters and in his modeling his own journeys to visit desert ascetics on Paul’s circulating among the first Christian churches. Palladius also inherited from Paul and the general context of early monasticism a vocabulary of combat, linked to martyrdom, to describe spiritual warfare. Palladius extends this vocabulary, however, to describe not just the tempting thoughts against which the self fought, but also to describe how the ascetics regarded one another as potential rivals conditioning their competitive behavior and to explain what was meant by such rivalry.

Palladius compares himself to Paul in calling him “so much [my] superior in way of life and in knowledge.” Palladius also amplifies his desire to travel, in contrast to
Paul’s desire for first-hand experience, by saying that he journeyed to meet the ascetic and write of their lives, “not so much to do them a good turn as to help myself!” (6). Though perhaps a typical statement of humility, Palladius reveals a need and later cryptically refers to himself in the third person, like Paul in 2 Cor 12:2-5, when Palladius speaks of “the brother who has been with me from youth until this very day” (71.1). Distancing himself from himself to avoid soliciting admiration reinforces the conclusion to which his work has been drawing: It is not merely the other against whom one competes. It is also against a version of oneself that one finally competes.

But it was not just from Pauline theology that Palladius inherited his use of language of combat associated with Christian asceticism and spiritual progress. In the early third-century *Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas*, for instance, Perpetua describes a vision, saying: “At the foot of the ladder lay a dragon of enormous size, and it would attack those who tried to climb up and try to terrify them from doing so... Slowly, as though he were afraid of me, the dragon stuck his head out from underneath the ladder. Then, using it as my first step, I trod on his head and went up.” Perpetua envisages how the beast’s “head” proved part of the ladder by which she ascended to “higher” life. Later, the account also tells how a mad heifer had been chosen for the young women, “that their sex might be matched with that of the beast.” The practice of matching competitors well is also mentioned by Origen. His father having been martyrdom in 201, Origen’s use of imagery of the contests is especially poignant. He writes that
Thus, “in the eyes of God, each particular human spirit had been allotted a particular physical constitution as its appropriate sparring partner. Each person’s flesh and blood was particular to that person, and had been exquisitely calibrated by God...to challenge the potentially mighty spirit of each to stretch beyond itself.”13 Origen’s understanding of Christian asceticism is that each person is equipped with his or her own struggles that are perfectly mediated by and fought in the flesh. Evagrius uses similar imagery, associating tempting thoughts (logismoi) with the demonic: “Wrestlers are not the only ones whose occupation it is to throw others down and to be thrown in turn; the demons too wrestle – with us. Sometimes they throw us and at other times it is we who throw them.”14 The desert tradition is full of allusions to language of the arena: Syncletica, too, says “Those who are great athletes must contend against stronger enemies.”15

Palladius, too, is deliberate about his use of “contest” and “arena” when reporting, “I went to the contests in the arena” (4) and recording “only a few of their lesser contests” (5). Yet the language extends beyond the demons to whom the passionate thoughts were attached and sounds as if it were a matter of contending with others. This happens in two stages. First, Palladius designates the enemies of two of his heroines, Melania the Elder and Melania the Younger,
as “beasts” (54.5) and “the mouth of the lion” (61.5). Those so identified are members of Roman society opposed to the women’s giving away of property, acts which countered the sensibilities of those for whom civilization and ownership of property and goods defined culture and its stabilization. But it is interesting that Palladius places the two women in some comparative relation to one another, saying of Melania the Younger that her virtue “excelled that of even elderly women far advanced in holiness” (61.1), possibly including her grandmother. Further, Melania the Younger was “continually stung by the stories about her grandmother” (ibid.) to such an extent that she emulated her and ended up “excelling” even as a young woman over those who were her seniors.

This is fairly tame language of comparison and competition but Palladius goes further, recording deliberate attempts by ascetics to rival others. After Pior’s death, for instance, “a good many monks strove to rival him by staying in his cell, but they could not finish out a year, for the place [was] terrible and without one redeeming feature” (39.3). Another’s asceticism was so severe that “no one dared to rival him” (43.1). Further, Palladius reports of this ascetic, “Because of his excessive self-control and all-night vigils he was actually suspected of being a monster” (ibid.). The extremity of this ascetic’s practice established him even beyond human nature, so that he became a terror to his fellow monks. But Palladius does not limit such feats to men. As his advice to Lausus states that both holy men and women enable revelations concerning the state of one’s heart, so Palladius notes that he “must also commemorate in this book the courageous women whom God granted struggles equal to those of men, so that no one could plead as an excuse
that women are too weak to practice virtue successfully” (41.1). It is, in fact, in his stories of both men and women that revelation of character happens most explicitly, so that not just men are edified by woman but that women, too, are made aware of their own authentic condition in relation to others, self, and God through their interactions with men.

Just as attention was given to the experience of judging others, accounting them worse than oneself, less attention was given to the opposite experience. What happened when ascetics made the acquaintance of others more advanced on the spiritual path than themselves, as surely should happen quite regularly? This happened often enough when relating to a recognized elder and must, too, have been the case for Palladius and his readers. For them, Palladius built into his History a series of stories that affirmed comparing, at least when it led to self-betterment and not despair. Demetrios S. Katos writes that although Palladius addressed his work to Lausus, the imperial chamberlain, he “wrote with an eye towards the whole imperial court, which at the time was ruled by the powerful older sister of Theodosius II, Aelia Pulcheria...Her political power was cresting just as Palladius addressed his work to Lausus in 420, and she (whom Lausus may have served personally) was certainly one of his intended readers.”

Palladius’ intention is explicit in the Prologue: “seek for meetings with holy men and women so that you may see clearly your own heart...The comparison will enable you to see your own sluggishness” (15). Further, having seen one’s own sluggishness, Palladius believes change is possible. Even among aristocratic readers, situated in environments much different than most of what is described in the History,
edification might occur. For just as Antony himself, though the foremost ascetic of fourth-century Egypt, was told of an individual more advanced than he, living a secular life in the city, demonstrates that no one was immune from the possibility of being shown up by one “better” than oneself, so aristocrats might consider their own unique circumstances which permitted their reading Palladius’ text as capable of occasioning their own transformation. Though Antony’s reaction to another’s superiority was not recorded, the fact that the story circulated meant that it did not impair the prestige in which he was held. It, in fact, confirmed his very humanity to discover that, in relation to others, he could always learn more.

**Revelation of Inferiority as a Positive Good:**

**Three Stories**

In *The Lausiac History*, accounts of confrontation between female and male ascetics usually make of gender a means to deepen the impact of the male ascetics’ surprise over the accomplishment of women. Though this may be unsettling to some degree – gender being relegated to a mere tool – it is hard to overlook the unique character of Palladius’ attitude toward women in general. He was, after all, an admirer of the famed Melania the Elder, devoting two chapters to her (46, 54) and highlighting her role in Evagrius’ conversion to monastic life (38.8-9). That the women in the stories considered below were not mere props, intended to reveal opportunities for men to be transformed, is emphasized by the inclusion, in two of them, of the women’s own epiphanies that rate as experiences just as profound as the men’s.
Each of the stories refers to specific activities such as prayer, dietary restrictions, and renunciation of social ties. Each story also explores the ramifications of renouncing particular ideas of the self in order to mature spiritually and, in this way, Palladius deconstructs expectations for what constitutes “ideal” ascetic behavior, locating it not exclusively in prayer, diet, or seclusion, but expecting his reader to note which stories within his text most particularly speak to the reader’s heart with a challenge that the reader might improve. The stories examined below fall into categories of experience of challenge and defeat, self-acceptance, and self-criticism as defining the ascetics’ response toward each other and themselves.

*Challenge and Defeat:* Palladius seems particularly to have enjoyed finding ascetics whose roving lifestyles he might approve, being prone to wandering himself. This was the case with Sarapion, an ascetic who could not remain in a cell. Palladius excuses this “fault” in Sarapion by concluding his introduction of him, “It was not that he was distracted by material things; he wandered about the world and successfully perfected this virtue, for that was his nature. For there are differences in natures, but not in substance” (37.1). The point is that the “substance” of all ascetics was their tending toward perfection by means of practice, but the individual activities by which they reached perfection vary.

Sarapion learns of a particularly worthy virgin and he visits her in Rome. She had, apparently, remained enclosed in her dwelling for 25 years (37.14). Sarapion seems to pick up on some kind of arrogance in her about her seclusion which provokes his challenge to her: leave her home. She does by going to church, but this is not enough for
Sarapion. He provokes her further, saying, “[I]f you wish really to convince me you are dead and no longer alive, pleasing men, do as I do and I will know that you are dead. Disrobe yourself and place your clothing on your shoulders and go through the middle of the city with me in the lead in this way” (37.15). The woman resists, thinking such an action would scandalize others and the terms in which her objection arises are telling: others would think her “insane and demon-ridden” (ibid.). It is arguable that Sarapion’s challenge is an offense to her and others’ modesty, but Sarapion seems to think she is equivocating. “And so far as you are concerned,” he asks, “what does it matter?” (ibid.) Palladius reports that she was humbled and her pride broken by this encounter (37.16).

In this story, the reaction to news of an ascetic more advanced than himself resulted in Sarapion’s needing to validate the news by seeing her for himself. His ability to see through what others thought exemplary and to offer a challenge to the virgin underscores his superiority; not only is he able to operate in ways that challenge Roman society – parading the streets naked – but he is also able to see through its cherished notions of what constituted exemplary behavior: a virgin remaining sequestered in her home for 25 years. Sarapion goes to the heart of the problem, confronting the virgin herself and providing the means by which she is made aware of the fallibility of her own idea of herself as dead to the world. Rather than just leaving her humbled and broken, Sarapion offered her an opportunity to revision herself and to grow in a way more consistent with the asceticism she espoused and the seclusion in which she lived. The material means by which one reaches perfection are shown by this story to be not fully adequate; spiritual maturity, which seclusion
might have offered this woman had she not been so focused on the externals of the behavior, determines such perfection.

*Self-acceptance:* In another story, Piteroum is visited by an angel who chides him for thinking so well of himself for his piety and solitude (34.3). As in the conversation between Sarapion and the Roman virgin, when the two discuss what is meant by “journeying to God” (37.13) and whether such a journey entails movement in the flesh or spirit, Palladius seems to want to dismantle the assumption that solitary life is superior to communal. Earlier in his text, he had told of the appeal of a community to Pambo when a “rivalry developed among the brethren” (14.4) in regard to two deceased brothers whose ascetic lives had varied considerably. Pambo insists, “Both were perfect. One showed the work of Abraham; the other, that of Elias” (ibid.). In this way, Palladius showed rivalry between action (represented by Abraham’s hospitality) and contemplation (represented by Elias’ seclusion in the wilderness) as inappropriate.

The angelic visitor challenges Piteroum: “Why do you think so much of yourself for being pious and residing in a place such as this?” (34.3). Further, the angel asks, “Do you want to see someone more pious than yourself, a woman?...She is better than you are” (ibid). As in the case of Sarapion, it is not enough for Piteroum to be told of the woman’s existence, he, too, must verify with his eyes what he has heard with his ears. He travels to the woman’s community, is admitted on account of his age and reputation (34.4), and reveals the status of its lowliest server, a woman who has been feigning madness – its own curious element in the story which allows Palladius to play with the juxtaposition of wisdom and folly described by the Apostle Paul.
(1 Cor 3:18) – by calling her amma, a revelation which, unwittingly disrupts the internal dynamics of the community in two ways. First, the other women are aghast at having formerly treated the seemingly insignificant woman so badly (34.7) and second, the lowly woman, unable to bear the accolades of Piteroum and the community, leaves.

Piteroum’s reaction to the woman, however, is exemplary. Rather than take the angel’s words as confirming his own complacency, Piteroum’s humility in the face of another’s superiority results in his achieving greater self-knowledge. He is open to a truth about himself which he could not have experienced on his own. Although Palladius elsewhere speaks of an ascetic as having his own conscience as “an excellent natural teacher” (4.2), Piteroum needed angelic prompting to move him out of himself and engage him with the possibility of others who modeled holiness to him. Witnessing an exemplar, he is willing to see the value of communal life in contrast to his own, in that communal life afforded this woman opportunities to imitate Christ.

Just as early ascetic literature affirmed opportunities for transformation at the hands of the other by uncovering the fallacy of trying to avoid people in order to avoid sin or by rhetorically asking the solitary whose feet he washed, so Palladius adds his voice: What counts is whether one’s experience makes one too entrenched to be changed. Against the tendency to privilege solitude, Palladius articulates the value of the “other” in order that his reader not forget an important function of his or her reading. Palladius’ voice echoes the angle’s, reminding the reader, especially Lausus and his friends, members of the royal court obviously in social contact with others: you might envy those with the tem-
permanent and inclination to live alone but consider the value of your own place in life and make the best of it.

*Self-criticism:* In the case of the ascetic Paul, an actual meeting with an exemplary female ascetic is not detailed. Instead, the mere report of the woman’s ascetic practices was enough to dismay him. He hastens to Macarius to confess, “I am dejected...In a certain village there lives a virgin who has practiced asceticism for thirty years. They say that she eats nothing except on Saturday and Sunday. But in the whole period of five days she spends between eating, she says seven hundred prayers. And I felt sorry for myself when I learned of that, because I cannot say more than three hundred” (20.2). This report is worth relating in full for two reasons. First, it conveys a specific program of asceticism, including details of diet, prayer, and second, it explicitly expresses what about the woman’s regimen caused Paul’s distress: the number of prayers the woman regularly prayed compared to the number he manages seems to have undermined his sense of his own value as an ascetic. Though his appeal to Macarius is not specific, it results in Macarius’ well-balanced reply. Like many elders of the desert, Macarius offers advice through the prism of his own experience and it is specifically crafted to meet the needs of the one who hears it. First, Macarius is open about his own practice as it edifies Paul, admitting that it takes him a full week, not just five weekdays as in the case of this woman, to accomplish seven hundred prayers, and he does other things besides, supporting himself and making time to counsel others (20.3). Second, he highlights reason as the means by which to determine whether information about another ascetic’s behavior should distress him, saying “my reason tells me that I am not negligent” (ibid.). He reasons that God is content with his practice and tells
Paul that “if you say three hundred prayers and your reason bothers you, it is clear that you do not say them with simplicity of heart, or else you could say more and do not” (ibid.).

Macarius’ advice to the worried Paul was to temper his expectations of himself with what God expected of him. Clearly the report of the woman’s abilities revealed what he felt was the paltry nature of his own abilities compared to his expectations of himself, but this revelation issued in a possibility of transformation. Though it feels a bit too contemporary to deem Macarius’ advice a simple “accept yourself,” there is something ancient in its corollary of “know thyself” espoused by Greek philosophers and by Origen, as well, who had a profound influence on Evagrius and thence on Palladius. Knowledge of why such knowledge of the other disturbed Paul resulted in increased self-knowledge. As one desert father said, “Not understanding what has happened prevents us from going on to something better,” and this shows very well the significance of stopping to pay attention to what about a situation has bothered a person and how one’s interacting in the situation either reveals something about one’s tendencies or even uncovers things about oneself that previously was unknown, in order that by reflecting on them they become known. Palladius was aware of the importance of acquiring knowledge, of others and oneself, in the process of maturing spiritually. In the case of Paul’s story, the moral of the story could be that one’s truest rival is oneself, emphasized by the failure of the rival to actually appear in the story itself. But it is important to point out that Paul did not, possibly could not, have reached this conclusion by himself. He needed the sounding board of another against whom he might admit distress and acknowledge his weakness,
and then from whom to receive advice. This sort of relationship and exchange seems an incipient form of institutionalized confession or spiritual direction, where space is made between the self and other, in which one's true self may be acknowledged through admission of sin and the encouragement to look deeply into what truly is the source of one's weakness.

**Conclusion**

In all of these stories, another person made possible the revelation of self. Even as in the case of Paul, the rumor of an accomplished person could result in self-revelation, pointing to the possibility that the *History* might occasion its readers' transformation. Palladius expected readers to discover, in his book, others more advanced along the spiritual path who might help them. His description of a range of behaviors includes something for everyone. That Palladius' particular fascination with food proves self-implicating only reveals a human tendency to attend to those things most relevant to oneself and trains the reader to seek accordingly in the text. Indeed, nowhere is Palladius' account of himself quite so endearing as when he allays his intimidation by a great ascetic by joking that he already is a bishop: "In the kitchen and shops, over the tables and pots. I examine them, and if there is any sour wine I excommunicate it, but I drink the good. Likewise I inspect the pots, too, and if any salt or other spices are lacking, I throw these in and thus season them and eat them. This is my diocese, for Gluttony has ordained me for her child" (35.10). The great ascetic is not offended by such irreverence and confirms that Palladius will
one day be bishop. As such, his interactions with people and realization of the need for edifying literature enabled his crafting a significant contribution to early Christian literature which is also a profound testament for readers in the twenty-first century of how spiritual progress takes place in everyday associations. That he took seriously a real aspect of human experience is evident in his nuanced view of how comparison and competition aid a believer’s forming a more accurate self-understanding. As Jay Newman argues,

Religious competition is not itself a problem; but unless we understand it and fully appreciate its importance in social life, we shall have only a cloudy and incomplete vision of the sources of destructive religious conflict. Destructive religious conflict is often the result of religious competition having gone awry, and those who would fight against religious violence and persecution must reflect on how religious competition can be regulated so that it will result in spiritual progress rather than misery and despair.22

Though seemingly “perfect” ascetics were depicted in early Christian literature, these portraits are idealized. The typical encounter that a person had, and continues to have, is with people of varying degrees of good and bad. Early literature would have its readers believe that attainment of perfection, of the best sort of life or the highest sort of life (all terms which Palladius uses interchangeably), is possible if one only travels long enough, but human experience offers an important reminder that there will always be somebody behind, and ahead, of one on the journey.
Notes:


6 That the “city” was not the abode of sinners only is evident, however, in a *Saying* that relates a revelation to Antony that he had an “equal” in the city: “a doctor by profession and whatever he had beyond his needs he gave to the poor, and every day he sang the Sanctus with the angels” (Ward, *Sayings*, 6).


11 Ibid., 129.


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17 Known as Isidora the Fool, this “nun who feigned madness” is recognized as a saint by both the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches, with her feast day falling on May 1. See Michael Walsh, *A New Dictionary of Saints: East and West* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2007), 285.

18 Helen Waddell, trans., *The Desert Fathers* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 94-95. Saying 33 describes an unnamed brother living in community whose anger drives him to solitude where he finds other opportunities to vent his feelings (against inanimate objects), the moral of the story being to highlight the fallacy of thinking that removal from the company of others will dispel temptation to sin.


20 See Origen’s *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, Book II, 5, where he says, “It seems to me, that the soul ought to acquire self-knowledge of a twofold kind: she should know both what she is in herself, and how she is actuated; that is to say, she ought to know what she is like essentially, and what she is like according to her dispositions.”
