
Christian Vocation and World in Origen and the Desert Fathers and Mothers

Vocación cristiana y mundo, en Orígenes y en los Padres y Madres del Desierto

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Resumen: Este artículo estudia ideas fundamentales de Orígenes y los Padres y Madres del Desierto con respecto a la vocación. Estos autores reflejan la convicción de los primeros cristianos acerca de la llamada general a la santidad; pero también revelan cómo, en un segundo momento, hace falta realizar un cierto discernimiento sobre si buscar la santidad en el mundo o fuera de él.

Palabras clave: Vocación, Orígenes, Padres y Madres del Desierto.

Abstract: This article studies some fundamental ideas of Origen and the Desert Fathers and Mothers regarding vocation. These authors reflect the conviction of early Christians regarding the general calling to holiness; but they also reveal how, at a second moment, a certain consideration needs to be done, as to whether to pursue the quest for holiness in the world or out of it.

Keywords: Vocation, Origen, Desert Fathers and Mothers.

I. INTRODUCTION

In comparison with biblical studies on vocation¹, less research has been done on the theological notion of vocation in the patristic era². Since the subject matter of vocation in the Church fathers is huge in scope, in this article we shall concentrate on a crucial historical moment and geographical region, primarily Egypt (secondarily, Syria and Palestine) during the 3rd-5th centuries AD. More specifically still, we shall focus on the ideas of Origen and the Desert Fathers and Mothers.

This choice is due to several reasons. Firstly, in the case of these notable figures of early Christianity, their theology of vocation remains to be explored in detail, as it has only been studied in a small number of monographs³. Secondly, these thinkers are strategically placed. Geographically and historically speaking, they are located in what we might call a liminal zone, between the early Christian period in which most Christians lived in the world as merchants, artisans, soldiers, etc., and a new era in which flight from the world was common and popular as a way of following Christ. Geographically, too, these authors were familiar with the stark contrast between the city and the desert, and the existential implications of living in one place or another. We now ask: is it possible to extract relevant elements from the works of Origen and the Desert Fathers and Mothers that will provide a picture of their thinking on vocation?

¹ For instance, see BOCCACCINI, G. et al., *Dizionario di spiritualità biblico-patristica*, 15: *Elezione, vocazione, predestinazione*, Roma: Borla, 1997; MORALES, J., «La vocación en el Antiguo Testamento», *Scripta Theologica* 19 (1987) 11-62; «La vocación en los evangelios», *Scripta Theologica* 34 (2002) 785-826; MARTINI, C. M. and VANHOYE, A., *Bibbia e vocazione*, Brescia: Morcelliana, 1982. See also the article by DE VIRGILIO, G., in this same issue of *Scripta Theologica*: «Palabra de Dios y vocación».

² See MATEO-SECO, L. F., «La vocación en la Patrística», *Ius Canonicum* 2 (1971) 340-358; MORALES, J., «La vocación cristiana en la primera patrística», *Scripta Theologica* 23 (1991) 837-889; PLACHER, W. C., «Callings to a Christian Life: Vocations in the Early Church, 100-500», in *Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation*, Grand Rapids-Cambridge: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2005, 21-103; ANATOLIOS, K., «Considering Vocation: The Witness of the Fathers», in BEZZERIDES, A. M. (ed.), *Christ at Work: Orthodox Christian Perspectives on Vocation*, Brookline (Massachusetts): Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2006, 107-128.

³ On Origen's theology of vocation: VÖLKER, W., *Das Vollkommenheitsideal des Origenes*, Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1931; ALVIAR, J. J., *Klesis. The Theology of the Christian Vocation according to Origen*, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1993. On the theology of vocation in the Desert Fathers and Mothers: PRICE, R., «Did the Early Monastic Tradition Have a Concept of Vocation?», in JAMISON, C. (ed.), *The Disciples' Call: Theologies of Vocation from Scripture to the Present Day*, London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014, 29-42; MOLINIER, J.L., *Solitude et communion (IV^e-VI^e siècle)*, vols. I-II, Paris: Cerf, 2014.

II. ORIGEN'S THEOLOGY OF VOCATION

Origen (c. 184-c. 253) lived the first part of his career in Alexandria and the second part in Caesarea, though he also traveled widely. He has sometimes been called the first systematic Christian theologian⁴, and at other times characterized as a mystic⁵. This double (theoretical / practical) aspect is typical of many Christian thinkers of the early centuries, when life and thought were tightly intertwined, and holiness considered crucial to doing real theology or reflection on the faith. In Origen this twofold character is especially marked, and will be useful for our understanding of his theological positions.

It is convenient to point out another aspect of our author. He was a pioneer in many senses. He lived at a time in which the body of Christian doctrine had not yet been fully articulated, and was obliged to supply answers, however provisional, to certain doctrinal questions. This obliges us to take his theological ideas in the same vein that he propounded them – sometimes firmly, sometimes tentatively. Secondly, Origen lived out most of his life in places (especially Alexandria and Caesarea) that were points of confluence of the Hellenistic, Jewish, and Christian cultures. This is inevitably reflected in his theology. Thirdly, Origen lived at a moment just before Christians began migrating, first individually, then *en masse*, to desert areas surrounding Alexandria and similar regions in Syria and Palestine. He is thus a thinker situated at the jumping-point of the monastic movement, and in some of his writings we can almost feel an intimation of the spiritual tidal wave that was to come.

In order to avoid approaching Origen's thought anachronistically, we shall have to look not only at the *letter* but also at the *spirit* of his texts. He generally uses *καλέω* / *κλήσις* (or *vocare* / *vocatio*, in cases where only the Latin translation is extant) to refer to the divine calling, as addressed to groups (Jews / Gentiles) or to individuals with specific missions (prophets, apostles, etc.)⁶. (To put it succinctly, for Origen all mankind, created according to the divine image, is expected to achieve a fuller state of divine likeness to, and maximum

⁴ KERR, H. Th., *The First Systematic Theologian: Origen of Alexandria*, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1958.

⁵ See VÖLKER, W., *Das Vollkommenheitsideal*, 117-144; CROUZEL, H., *Origène et la «connaissance mystique»*, Bruges: Desclée de Brouwer, 1961, 527-530.

⁶ In his *Commentary on Romans* I, 2, Origen says: «This term, i.e., “called” (Rom 1,1) may be taken as a general one, since it refers to all those who believe in Christ; but each one, according to what God foresaw and chose, is called Apostle, or prophet, or teacher, or unmarried, or espoused». For more details, see ALVIAR, J. J., *Klésis*, 52-87.

intimacy with, God and his Logos. In the actual divine economy –due to the entrance of sin into the history of free creatures– this summons to perfection reaches mankind first through Abraham and the Jews, then through Jesus and the Church). But aside from these punctual terminological moments Origen offers a more general and highly dramatic theology wherein the ideas of divine summons, spiritual exodus and pilgrimage play central roles. It is this general vocational scheme, even when Origen does not use words directly related to calling / vocation, which we consider of special theological interest.

A. *Creation, Anthropology and Eschatology:*
Origen's Theology of Divine Likeness

Origen extracts from the creation account of Genesis 1,26-27 an essential definition of the human person:

«“God made man, according to the image of God he made him” (Gen 1,27)... what other “image of God” is there according to the likeness of whose image man is made, except our Savior who is “the First-Born of every creature” (Col 1,15), about whom it is written that He is “the brightness of the eternal light and the express figure of God’s substance” (Heb 1,3), who also says about Himself: “I am in the Father and the Father in me” (Jn 14,10), and “He who has seen me has also seen the Father” (Jn 14,9)? Man, therefore, is made according to the likeness of His Image»⁷.

Now, this is a Logos- or Christ-centered definition of man. Christ is the primordial «image of God»; the human creature, endowed with rationality, is a participant in the divine Logos⁸.

Yet the creationally imprinted divine image is just the starting point for the human person. Origen, looking more closely at the Genesis 1 account, attributes great importance to the difference between verses 26 and 27:

⁷ *Homilies on Genesis* I, 13. In another homily Origen expresses a similar idea: «My soul is not properly the image of God, but is rather made according to the likeness of the First Image» (*Homilies on Luke* VIII, 2). Here we note Origen’s platonic bent, as he limits the divine image to the spiritual (in Origen’s view original) portion of the human person.

⁸ In one homily Origen states: «“He was the true light which illuminates all men who come to this world” (Jn 1,9): the Son of God is the true light which illuminates all men who come to this world, and whoever is rational participates in the true light; for all men are rational. All men, therefore, participate in the Word» (*Homilies on Jeremiah* XIV, 10).

Moses, recording the first creation of man says, «And God said, Let us make man in our own image and likeness» (Gen 1,26). Then he adds afterwards, «And God made man; in the image of God He made him; male and female He made them, and He blessed them» (Gen 1,27). Now the fact that he said, «He made him in the image of God», and was silent about the likeness, points to nothing else but this, that man received the honor of God's image in his first creation, whereas the perfection of God's likeness was reserved for him at the consummation⁹.

This passage is perhaps the most explicit formulation of Origen's general vocational theology based on the distinction between image and likeness¹⁰.

For Origen, we may say, the very nature of man (his rational essence) receives its fullest explanation in the light of the final end conceived for him by the Creator. If the human being is a unique creature, superior to others thanks to his divine affinity, it is because he is expected (= called) by his Creator to put this nature into operation, and acquire an even more complete sharing in the divine qualities.

As a consequence, Origen makes the following comment regarding the peculiar wording of Num 30,3 in the Septuagint version:

Moses begins in a strange way: «The man-man (ἄνθρωπος-ἄνθρωπος in the LXX version) who has vowed a vow to the Lord» (Num 30,3). For what reason does he repeat the word? Was it not sufficient to say: the man who has vowed a vow to the Lord? Why does he now say «the man-man»; what does the repetition of the word «man» mean? This is a question which, in my view, ought not to be neglected... If one does not cultivate the inner man, if one does not take care, if one does not decorate oneself with virtues, if one does not provide oneself with a good way of life, if one does not lend oneself to the divine pedagogy, if does not seek the Wisdom of God, if one does not apply oneself to the science of the Scriptures, then one cannot be called «man-man», but rather, simply «man» or «animal man», since «the inner man» (2 Cor 4,16), by which the title of man acquires a more authentic and noble meaning, is made to

⁹ *Peri Archon* III, VI, 1.

¹⁰ Although he expresses this idea in other ways. He compares growth in divine likeness to the development of seeds (cfr. *Peri Archon* I, III, 6), maturation (cfr. *Homilies on Luke* XX, 7), or magnification (cfr. *Homilies on Luke* VIII, 2).

sleep in him by the vices of the body, made to fade by the worries and preoccupations of the world; and one thus becomes undeserving of such a name¹¹.

According to this text, human existence is all about becoming «human» in the fullest sense. The most elemental vocation, in Origen's view, is for the human being to fulfill its authentic self as full-blown «image of God» (= «likeness»). His God-given nature, so full of promise, achieves fulfillment when it attains likeness to the Logos through acquired virtues and sanctity.

Thus the human creature appears as the recipient of a gift and a task/mision. (The reader can hardly miss the paradox here, as Origen maintains that the full realization of humanity –full humanization– actually consists in divinization/deification [!]). In this sense, we could talk about the *vocational structure* of the human person.

B. *The Quest for Holiness in the Body and in the World*

Let us now examine a second aspect of Origen's vocational theology, where a certain tension in his thinking may be found.

As we have seen, Origen's theology of the «likeness» to God is framed in dramatic terms – as a journey from sin to virtue, and from virtue to ever-higher perfection. We may now ask, how easily does Origen think this can be accomplished, in actual circumstances? (With his Platonic formation, does Origen think man's spiritual progress to be hindered or even rendered impossible by life in the body and in a material cosmos?)

1. *The «world» according to Origen*

Two fundamental ways of considering the «world» (κόσμος) may be distinguished in Origen¹²:

(1) The world as objective created reality (the totality of all created beings, or the totality of humanity) is *morally neutral*;

(2) The world considered in its relation to God and to man is *ambivalent*. On the one hand, as a milieu in the service of God's providence for

¹¹ *Homilies on Numbers* XXIV, 2.

¹² See RUIZ JURADO, M., «Le concept de "Monde" chez Origène», *BLE* 75 (1974) 3-24.

recovering fallen spiritual creatures, it has a *positive value*; on the other hand, as an alluring locus of sin, it has a *negative value*. Thus, in a theological-anthropological light the world has both a positive and a negative dimension.

a) *The world as neutral*

Origen links evil (in the full sense) not to metaphysics but to ethics; he sees its roots to lie not in a divine source but in creatural freedom. It would be ingenuous, according to him, to qualify the material world as evil:

In our view it is not true that the matter which dwells among mortals is responsible for evils. Each person's mind is responsible for the evil which exists in him, and this is what evil is. Evils are the actions which result from it. In our view nothing else is strictly speaking evil¹³.

Similarly, Origen rejects Celsus' use of the adjective «abominable» in referring to the body:

This word (i.e., abominable) would not have been used by a philosopher (in referring to the body). For what is properly speaking abominable is of the nature of evil. But the nature of the body is not abominable; for in itself bodily nature is not involved in evil which is the originating cause of what is abominable¹⁴.

b) *The ambivalent value of the world*

When viewing the world as a reality coming from a good Creator, Origen thinks it has a basic *positive* value:

According to the nature or manner of being of the creature, everything is pure, since all that exists has been made by God; there is nothing that is impure, or, as one says, «common» (Acts 10,14-15)¹⁵.

¹³ *Contra Celsum* IV, 66.

¹⁴ *Contra Celsum* III, 42.

¹⁵ *Commentary on Romans* X, 3. Furthermore, matter serves God's salvific design: «... matter, which is so great and wonderful as to be sufficient for all the bodies in the world, which God willed to exist, and to be at the call and service of the Creator in all things for the fashioning of whatever forms and species He wished, receiving into itself the qualities which He had willed to bestow upon it...» (*Peri Archon* II, I, 4).

In this and similar passages the world does not appear as an intrinsically evil or hateful medium. However, more often we find in Origen's texts intimations of shadows present the actual world. In the first place, earthly goods tend to provoke immoderate desires in the human being. Thus the present world –even its licit goods– could *distract* man from heavenly pursuits:

Let us see what it means to «turn to the Lord». And that we might be able to know more clearly what «turned to» means, we must first say what «turned away» means. Everyone who is occupied with common stories when the words of the Law are read is «turned away». Everyone who is concerned about affairs of the world, about money, about profits «when Moses is read» is «turned away». Everyone who is tied up with concerns for possessions and distracted by the desire for riches, who is zealous for the glory of the age and honors of the world, is «turned away»¹⁶.

Even worse, the world understood as an environment infected by sin –the meaning of world that Origen finds in John and Paul– is hateful, as it fosters immoral activities that lead away from God:

John gives us the same warning when he makes the trumpet of his Epistle resound: «Do not love the world, nor that which is in the world» (1 Jn 2,15). And Paul tells us the same: «Do not conform yourself to the present world» (Rom 12,2). For to act in that way would be to admit one who is under the condemnation of anathema. For example, to celebrate the feasts of the pagans, when one is a Christian, is to introduce anathema in the churches. To seek the secret of life and of men's actions in the course of stars, to read the crow's flight and to give up oneself to divinations of the same kind as one used to practice in the world, is to transport the anathema from Jericho to the Church¹⁷.

Conversion and baptism lead a person away from a world of mundane spectacles¹⁸, wanton drinking¹⁹, demonic works²⁰, and so forth.

¹⁶ *Homilies on Exodus* XII, 2. Cfr. also *Homilies on Genesis* X, 1-3; XI, 3.

¹⁷ *Contra Celsum* VIII, 21.

¹⁸ *Homilies on Leviticus* XI, 1.

¹⁹ *Homilies on Genesis* V, 3.

²⁰ *Homilies on Numbers* XII, 4.

As a Platonically inclined thinker, Origen further sees an ontological inferiority of material earthly reality as compared to spiritual reality. In a homily on Exodus he affirms:

When we are drawn away by reason of the needs of the body we are not allowed leisure for things that are divine and profitable for eternity; just as on the other hand when a soul has leisure for divine and spiritual things and is united with the Spirit of God it is said to war against the flesh, for it does not allow itself to become relaxed through indulgences and to be tossed about by the pleasures in which it takes a natural delight²¹.

Origen here mentions the «needs of the body», which inevitably occupy a part of man's attention and energy, and consequently deprive him of leisure for higher pursuits. «Body» and «flesh» are in this passage employed by Origen in an ambiguous way, as both the literal sense and the spiritual sense insinuate themselves²². Could it be that our author is speaking with *both* a Platonic and a moral meaning in mind? If that were so, we may have some indication of an unresolved tension between Origen's Christian viewpoint and his Platonically-inspired thinking²³.

According to one Origenistic text, the highest ideal for the Christian even while on earth consists in a preferential dedication to intellectual and spiritual pursuits:

Most of us who approach the teachings of Christ, since we spend much time for the activities of life and offer few actions to God, would

²¹ *Peri Archon* III, IV, 4. Origen even calls this a form of bondage: «See if the affairs of the world and the acts of the flesh are not “the house of bondage” (Ex 20,2), just as, on the contrary, to leave worldly matters and to live according to God is the house of freedom... In comparison to the heavenly Jerusalem, which, so to speak, is the mother of freedom, the entire world and all it contains is a house of bondage» (*Homilies on Exodus* VIII, 1).

²² For passages in which a similar ambiguity of meaning may be found, see *Peri Archon* I, I, 5; I, VII, 5; *Homilies on Exodus* II, 1; *Commentary on Romans* I, 1; VII, 4. See BLANC, C., «L'attitude d'Origène à l'égard du corps et de la chair», *StPatr* 17 (1982) 843-858.

²³ CROUZEL, H., *Théologie de l'image de Dieu chez Origène*, Paris 1956, 222, suggests that traces of an unsolved dilemma may be found in Origen's doctrines, as various currents of thought met in the Alexandrian's mind. (In the matter that concerns us, the Alexandrian's theory of preexistence decisively colors his conception of human activity. However cautiously Origen maintains his protological hypothesis, this worldview ever tempts him to conceive of man as a spiritual being whose proper occupation is also spiritual. The body is an extrinsic addition, which carries with it necessities of an inferior order, needs that distract a primordially simpler being from divine contemplation.)

perhaps be symbolized by those among the tribes who enjoy a little fellowship with the priests and support the service of God in a few things. But those who devote themselves to the divine Word and truly exist by the service of God alone will properly be said to be Levites and priests, in accordance with *the excellence of their activities* in this work²⁴.

The «excellence of their activities»: Origen insinuates his personal view of a hierarchy of human activities. He expounds this idea more explicitly in a homily on Leviticus, when he distinguishes among divine «offerings»:

To the «soul» the Scripture assigns *inferior offerings*. The «soul» in question does not have a young bull, nor sheep, nor kid to offer to God; she does not find anything but a pair of turtledoves or two fledgling pigeons. She only possesses the «fine flour» with which she offers «unleavened bread baked in the oven», a cake fried in the «pan» or «upon a grill, basted with oil» (Lev 2,4). From all this I think that that which is called «soul» should be taken as that which Paul calls «the animal man» (1 Cor 2,14), who, though he is not guilty of sins nor inclined towards vices, nevertheless does not have anything spiritual in himself, and who is symbolized by the body of the Word of God... That which is called «soul» may not offer everything, for it may not judge everything; it simply offers «fine flour and unleavened bread», that is to say, this *ordinary life, dedicated for instance to work in the fields, to navigation, to the occupations of ordinary life*. This offering it also presents to God, though it is said to offer only «fine flour mixed with oil»²⁵.

Two ideas are worth underlining here. First, Origen recognizes the value of ordinary activities (e.g., agricultural work and navigation), as he states that these also may be offered to God. Second, Origen at the same time appears to relegate such tasks to an inferior rank. The offering of activities of this nature corresponds to the «soul» or «animal man», i.e., an individual belonging to a lower spiritual level. More advanced souls, it would seem, are capable of offering better occupations to God.

Our author's speculative tension may be formulated in the following syllogism:

- (1) All men are called to likeness to God;

²⁴ *Commentary on John* I, II, 10, italics mine. Cfr. also *Homilies on Numbers* XXI, 1.

²⁵ *Homilies on Leviticus* II, 2, italics mine.

(2) Now, on the level of activity, one resembles God more closely in the measure in which one's affairs remain within the spiritual domain;

(3) Should not, therefore, the ideal way of life consist in exclusive dedication to study and prayer?

2. *The Christian's attitude towards the world*

What should the Christian's attitude be towards the world and earthly activities? We can identify two basic positions in Origen's texts:

(1) Origen, finding inspiration in the biblical notions of «interior priesthood» (1 Pet 2,9) and «praying without ceasing» (1 Thess 5,16), understands the exercise of a spiritual priesthood to be feasible for Christians in any earthly scenario²⁶, and the practice of «perpetual prayer» possible even in the midst of ordinary affairs of the world²⁷. In this way he avoids the wholesale condemnation of the world and its affairs.

(2) On the other hand, Origen seems reticent of the world taken in its aspect of potentially or actually hindering the Christian's quest for perfection. In this sense, the Christian must «depart» or «flee» from the «world» – abandon all sinful ways of life²⁸; practice detachment from sensible attractions («crucifixion» and «death» to the «world»²⁹); not remain with a superficial vision of sensible realities but discover the higher truths behind them («passing beyond» the world to grasp the spiritual meanings contained behind visible images and Scripture's letter³⁰). In all these instances some form of «exodic» logic may be detected. We may affirm that Origen is here presenting us with a highly dynamic theology.

Can a Christian, then, really stay in the world and attain holiness, or must he look for some form of escape?

A first answer may be drawn from Origen's own biography. We know for a fact that he did not abandon the world in the physical sense, but rather

²⁶ «It is not in a place where one ought to seek the sanctuary, but in one's actions, life, and behavior. If these are according to God, if they are accomplished according to His precept, it matters little if you are in your house, or in the forum; it matters little, likewise, if you are in the theatre; if you obey the Word of God, without doubt you are in the sanctuary» (*Homilies on Leviticus* XII, 4; cfr. also XI, 1).

²⁷ See *Homilies on Samuel* I, 9; *On Prayer* XII, 2; *Contra Celsum* VIII, 21.

²⁸ See *Commentary on John* XX, X, 67.

²⁹ See *Commentary on Matthew* XII, 24; *Commentary on Song of Songs* III (IV), 14.

³⁰ See *Commentary on Song of Songs* III (IV), 15.

lived a life giving catechesis, preaching, and debating on the Christian faith. In practice –despite his ambivalent attitude towards earthly life and activity– Origen did not consider it absolutely needful to isolate himself. His efforts focused rather on cultivating interior attitudes, such as prayerfulness and detachment of the heart, that permitted persistent contact with God³¹.

A second answer may be drawn from Origen's texts, where he tends to use terms entailing «flight» in a *spiritual* sense³². For instance, in a homily on Jeremiah Origen explicitly contrasts the literal interpretation of «departing» from the world with the spiritual interpretation. He declares that the former meaning is of lesser importance; the profounder meaning of «departure» must be extracted:

«I sat in solitude» (Jer 15,17)..., if you examine the words: «I sat in solitude» in a deeper way, it may be that you will find a meaning worthy of the prophetic depth. When I imitate the life of the majority in such a way that my life is not retired apart, nor superior and exceptional in relation to the majority, I may not say: «I sat in solitude», but rather: I have sat with many people. If, on the contrary, my life becomes difficult to imitate, to the point that no one resembles me for my comportment and doctrine, for my acts and wisdom, I may now say in fact that I am unique and that no one imitates me: «I sat in solitude»³³.

This is quite a spiritual definition of the *μοναχός*.

Likewise, when speaking of «departing from Egypt», the Alexandrian prefers a non-literal interpretation:

Therefore, we must go forth from Egypt. We must leave the world behind if we wish «to serve the Lord» (Ex 5,1). I mean, however, that we must leave the world behind not in space, but in the soul; not by setting out on a journey, but by advancing in faith³⁴.

³¹ We find similar examples in Syria (St. Ephrem and the Sons and Daughters of the Covenant).

³² A procedure quite typical of Origen, as scholars have pointed out: TORJESEN, K. J., *Hermeneutical Procedure and Theological Method in Origen's Exegesis*, Berlin-New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1986, 70-107; DANIELOU, J., «Les sources bibliques de la mystique d'Origène», *RAM* 23 (1947) 126-141; ALCAIN, J. A., *Cautiverio y redención del hombre en Orígenes*, Bilbao: Universidad de Deusto-Mensajero, 1973, 41-88; VÖLKER, W., *Das Vollkommenheitsideal*, 62-75.

³³ *Homilies on Jeremiah*, XIV, 16.

³⁴ *Homilies on Exodus* III, 3.

Egypt is the biblical symbol of the soul's slavery; the act of departure is a figure of conversion; the journey is a symbol of progress in virtue.

We are thus led to the conclusion that Origen preferentially uses place and motion as elements of his depiction of the man's spiritual voyage towards God. The absolute terminus *ad quem* of this journey is likeness to God, while the terminus *a quo* is the «world» in all of its negative aspects. From it the Christian must «depart», insofar as it is:

- a place of sin;
- a universe of activities and goods which, though licit, pose the danger of inordinate attachment;
- an ontologically opaque reality that distracts man's attention away from invisible truths.

The «leaving» behind of the «world» under all these aspects becomes the indispensable starting point for the voyage towards perfection.

Let us take a look at some more of Origen's texts. In a homily on Numbers he declares:

When the soul has travelled through all the virtues and attained the summit of perfection, it passes beyond this world and separates itself from it, as is written of Enoch: «And he was no longer to be found, for God had taken him» (Gen 5,24). Although a man of this sort may still appear to be present in the world and to live in the body, he is «no longer to be found». Where is he no longer to be found? In the actions of the world, in carnal things, in vain entertainments – behold where he is no longer to be found. For God «has taken him» far from all this, and has placed him in a land of virtue³⁵.

According to this passage, the Christian must keep watch against the tendency to relegate spiritual pursuits to a secondary plane. Man's heart is disordered; it gravitates towards «earth» (= all things below God). In this sense the Christian needs to «flee», away from the gravity exerted by worldly goods. He must practice detachment; otherwise, the parable of the thorns that choked out the seeds will be fulfilled:

In everyone who is engaged in the cares of the present life, «the heart is hardened» (Is 6,9-10); likewise, in those who live among worldly

³⁵ *Homilies on Numbers* XXVII, 12.

affairs, the heart is hardened as though suffocated by thorns. In this way the heart becomes filled up and may not accept even the lightest of spiritual notions. Let us therefore flee from such cares... Let us flee from earthly business³⁶.

The above passage contains a clearly moral meaning, and may not be taken as a literal formulation of the ideal of the *fuga saeculi* by Origen. He does not condemn earthly activities *per se*, but only advises against them in the measure in which they produce an inordinate attachment. Correspondingly, the «flight» he advocates does not consist so much in a physical movement as in an interior one: a freeing of the heart from earthly concerns.

«Exit» from the «world» thus appears as *an Origenistic figure of man's response to the divine summons*:

It is necessary to allegorize all the history of Abraham, in order to accomplish each one of his actions spiritually, beginning with this: «Leave your country, your kinsfolk and your father's house, for the land which I will show you» (Gen 12,1), for this is said not only to Abraham but also to whomever would become his infant.

In effect, each of us possesses his country, his kinsfolk, his father's house, which, previous to the divine revelation, was not good, and which was the house of our father before the word of God came to us – all the things that we must surpass... That is how, after having abandoned our land, we shall come to that which God will show us, a land truly good and really vast (cfr. Ex 3,8), which the Lord God deigns to give to men who execute the command affirmed in the words «Leave your country».

Since we have abandoned a father's house which was not good, we have become a great people, greater than is possible for men; and, because we have despised the house of a father who was not honorable, we have become blessed, and our name has been magnified...

Now the Word may say of us, too: «He departed», as it is said of Abraham: «Abraham departed, as the Lord had told him» (Gen 12,4)³⁷.

Each Christian is therefore called to «depart», to abandon a «land» of distraction, temptation and sin, and to set out on a noble voyage, summoned

³⁶ *Homilies on Isaiab IX* (GCS 33, 289).

³⁷ *Commentary on John XX, X*, 67.

by God and comforted by His promise. Outwardly immersed in common activities like the rest of his fellow men, a person who has responded to God's calling has in fact turned into a secret pilgrim. A remarkable passage from a homily on Genesis will serve as a summary of this intriguing Origenistic portrait of the Christian way:

«Rebecca departed to inquire of the Lord» (Gen 25,22). «She departed». Where did she go? Did she depart from that place where the Lord was not, to that place where He was?... Is not the Lord everywhere? Did He not say Himself: «I fill heaven and earth, says the Lord» (Jer 23,24)? Where, then, did Rebecca go? I think that she did not depart from one place to another, but she passed over from one life to another, from one deed to another, from good things to better; she proceeded from profitable things to more profitable; she hastened from holy things to holier³⁸.

III. THE THEOLOGY OF VOCATION OF THE DESERT FATHERS AND MOTHERS³⁹

Desert asceticism was a unique movement that began in Egypt towards the end of the 3rd century and soon spread to Syria, Palestine, and Asia Minor, etc. Even as the persecution of Christians began petering out and being a Christian became less and less perilous, a growing number of individuals spontaneously began abandoning towns and cities⁴⁰ to lead secluded lives, focused on prayer and asceticism. (This separation from common society distinguishes the phenomenon from that embodied, for example, by the Sons and Daughters of the Covenant, who led lives devoted to prayer, celibacy, and service, in cities of Mesopotamia and Persia). The desert ascetics first acted as isolated individuals, but some of them later formed communities. This spontaneous movement may be called an «exodus» in both the material and spiritual senses, as it involved physically abandoning the world and its affairs, and settling in isolated zones with a view to working on spiritual progress. As

³⁸ *Homilies on Genesis* XII, 2.

³⁹ My thanks to Professor José Morales (University of Navarra) for providing me with an unpublished manuscript on the theology of vocation in the Desert Fathers and Mothers, which proved very useful for this part of the article.

⁴⁰ It seems that, towards the end of the 3rd century AD and the beginning of the 4th, Christianity was concentrated in urban areas: see STARK, R., *Cities of God*, San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006; *The Rise of Christianity*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996, 29-47.

the movement took on a more mature form in the 4th century it became one of the most significant spiritual episodes of the early Christian centuries. It signified a novel way of seeking holiness; a way heretofore unessayed, of fleshing out the relationship between Gospel ideals and the world⁴¹.

Of these impressive ascetics only a partial but unique record has been conserved, dating to the 4th century onward, in the form of pithy sayings, probably transmitted first orally and from memory, and later consigned to writing and eventually compiled in anthologies now widely known as the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers*. Due to the directness and antiquity of these sayings we shall focus our study preferentially on them, though we shall occasionally refer to other ancient sources (of a different genre) on the Desert Fathers and Mothers⁴².

The sayings of the desert ascetics, as gathered in different collections (Greek, Latin, Syriac, Ethiopic, etc.), have a unique style. In unadorned language, they convey first-hand experiences and convictions of persons living intensely prayerful and ascetical lives. There is scarcely any show of elaborate, speculative thought – only the transmission of myriad spiritual experiences and teachings on Christian living. This results in a corpus of sentences which is fragmentary and heterogeneous, at times even contradictory. It resembles a kaleidoscope more than a classical work of art. Yet, somehow, the aggregate of sayings conveys a substantial picture of a particular way of living out of the Gospel ideals.

Any attempt to present in a systematic fashion the Desert Fathers and Mothers' thinking on divine calling (or any topic for that matter) –in view of the absence of any pretension on the part of the original authors to muster their views into an organic whole– is a difficult and rather artificial enterprise. Nevertheless, it remains feasible, and in our opinion theologically worthwhile, to try to identify and link certain fundamental ideas on divine calling that are

⁴¹ This «exodic movement» seems to have been the result of a unique confluence of spiritual, doctrinal, socioeconomic, and political factors. For an evaluation of the diverse theories, see BURTON-CHRISTIE, D., *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism*, New York-Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, 33-48; HARMLESS, W., *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism*, Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, 417-458.

⁴² Of special note: St. Athanasius' *Life of Anthony*; the *Life of Pachomius*; the *History of the Monks in Egypt*; Evagrius Ponticus' *Practical Treatise*; Palladius' *Lausiatic History*; Cassian's *Conferences*. Though some of these works have a composition date prior to the compilation of the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers*, the *Sayings* have older, oral origins and, more importantly, show desert asceticism from within rather than from the viewpoint of external observers.

recurrently expounded by the desert ascetics. The systematization we now attempt will inevitably be debatable – much like an edifice constructed with a combination of varied building elements, and which finally stands erect, but could stand upright as well if the same building elements were arranged in some other coherent fashion.

A. *The Notion of Vocation*

Since the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers* reflect an early stage of Christian reflection, we can hardly expect to find in them a deliberate and formal use of the theological category of calling / vocation⁴³. However, these authors do talk repeatedly about three ideas: (1) the quest for salvation/perfection which is at the heart of Christian existence; (2) the advantages inherent in seeking perfection far from the city/world/neighbors, following a lifestyle free from ordinary earthly concerns; (3) biblical support for the option of renouncing the world.

1. *The quest for salvation/perfection*

Let us first consider three sayings⁴⁴ that insist on seeking salvation or intimate union with God as an essential part of living according to the Gospel.

⁴³ A more formal use of the notion of divine calling may be found outside the collections of *Sayings*, in vocational narratives written in the same period, e.g. the accounts of the callings of St. Anthony and St. Pachomius. In the case of St. Anthony the beginnings of his monastic way of life date, according to St. Athanasius' *Life of Anthony*, to the day, when young Anthony entered a church and heard the gospel of the rich man being read (Mt 19:21). He reacted thus: «Anthony, as though God had put him in mind of the Saints, and the passage had been read on his account» (*Life of Anthony*, 2), gave away the property he had inherited to his village neighbors and began his progressive withdrawal from the world. In this account Anthony is shown as feeling that a divine invitation had been addressed to him through the ordinary vehicle of liturgical reading in church. An analogous narration of divine prompting may be found in the different ancient (Coptic and Greek), biographies of St. Pachomius, which situate the beginnings of his coenobitic project to a voice that he heard one day, telling him: «Struggle, dwell in this place and build a monastery; for many will come to you to become monks with you, and they will profit their souls» (*Bohairic Life*, 7). According to this account, St. Pachomius took this to be a divine message, and decidedly set out to work on the establishment of desert communities.

⁴⁴ In this article we shall cite the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers* according to the standard numeration of the Alphabetical Collection and, in cases of provenance from other collections, according to the numeration (with page reference) of REGNAULT, L. (ed.), *Les sentences des pères du désert: nouveau recueil, apophtegmes inédits ou peu connus*, Solesmes: Abbaye Saint-Pierre, 1970 (hereafter abbreviated as «Regnault»).

Here are the seven sentences that Abba Moses taught to Abba Poemen; if anyone observes them, live he in community, in solitude or in the world, he may be saved: 1) In the first place, as it is written, he must love God with all his soul and all his spirit. 2) He must love his neighbor as himself. 3) He must make die in himself all evil. 4) He should not judge his brother on any occasion whatsoever. 5) He must not do harm to others. 6) He must, before going out of his body, be cleansed from all defilement of the flesh and the spirit. 7) He must always have a contrite and humiliated heart. This is possible for one who always looks at his sins and not those of his neighbor's⁴⁵.

In this passage the question is about attaining salvation. Significantly, the list of things that Abba Moses enumerates in order to reach this goal are of a general character (with special stress on inner dispositions). The place of residence or activity –«in the world» or out of it, «in solitude» or «in community»– is not decisive for the task of salvation. From this perspective, remaining in the world and carrying out ordinary livelihood activities do not appear as intrinsically objectionable.

The next saying, attributed to Abba Nisterus, likewise affirms that the quest for union with God does not necessarily exclude life in the world, as long as a fundamental condition is fulfilled – conformity of personal desires with God's will. From this radically intentional perspective, union with God may be seen as not hinging upon one's external environment:

... I have heard it said that one of the Fathers asked Abba Nisterus the Great, the friend of Abba Anthony, and said to him, «What good work is there that I could do?» He said to him, «*Are not all actions equal?* Scripture says that Abraham was hospitable and God was with him. David was humble, and God was with him. Elijah loved interior peace and God was with him. So, *do whatever you see your soul desires according to God and guard your heart*»⁴⁶.

The biblical examples cited by Nisterus –Abraham, David, Elijah– are those of non-eremitic (or only partially eremitic) individuals. Nisterus attributes a fundamental equal goodness to their actions, independently of what

⁴⁵ M 109 (Regnault 217).

⁴⁶ Nisterus 2, italics mine.

these specifically were, based on the criterion that «God was with» the active subjects, or these acted «according to God». (This is somewhat reminiscent of the Pauline injunction to «do all things to the glory of God» [1 Cor 10,31]).

A third saying, attributed to St. Anthony himself, is likewise significant:

It was revealed to Abba Anthony in the desert that there was someone who was his equal in the city. He was a doctor by profession. Whatever he had beyond his needs, he would give to the poor; and every day he sang hymns with the angels⁴⁷.

This passage once more shows that, at least in line of principle, the desert ascetics do not think life in the world to be absolutely incompatible with holiness.

From this general consideration, we may now pass on to consider the ideas of the Desert Fathers and Mothers regarding their own specific way of life – that which consists of materially abandoning the world and seeking union with God in the physical desert.

2. *World vs. desert*

A first observation that needs to be made is that the desert ascetics refer to the world (κόσμος / αἰών in the Greek sayings; *mundus* / *aeon* in the Latin versions) in varied ways. On the most elemental level, by «world» some Desert Fathers and Mothers mean the totality of reality created by God:

A brother asked Abba Sisoës: «How can I be saved?» And the elder said to him, «If you want to please God, come out of the world, detach yourself from the earth, leave creatures and approach your Creator; by prayer and tears, unite yourself to God, and you will find repose in the present age as well as in the future age»⁴⁸.

We may note the «bipolar» scheme in this passage, distinguishing between created and uncreated realities. This is the most fundamental division possible of existent beings. Sisoës then proposes a «migration» dynamic, asserting that the human being is –paradoxically– not supposed to remain immersed among his fellow creatures, but must journey towards his Creator and

⁴⁷ Anthony 24.

⁴⁸ PE IV 10,15 (Regnault 194).

seek union with Him. «World» here simply seems to mean all reality distinct from the divine Maker, and understood as a temporary place of residence, inasmuch as the real home of the human creature is God. Sisoës thereby defines man as a *pilgrim being*.

In another saying a similar distinction between the world and God appears, though couched in different terms. Here, rather than differentiating creatures from the Creator, the author distinguishes between the «sweetness of the world» and the «sweetness of God»:

One of the saints said that it is impossible for a man to experience the sweetness of God as long as he is experiencing the sweetness of the world. But if, on the other hand, he tastes the sweetness of God, he will detest all aspects of this world, as it is written in the Gospels: «No man can serve two masters» (Mt 6,24). We too are unable to enjoy the sweetness of God as long as we wish human company and bodily relaxation⁴⁹.

It worthwhile noting that when this passage gives examples of elements comprising the «sweetness of the world», it names goods of normal earthly living such as «human company» and «bodily relaxation». These are connatural with the human condition and not intrinsically evil; yet the author judges infeasible any overlap between enjoying such goods and delighting in God⁵⁰. Even without explicitly mentioning the presence of sin, the author regards the world warily, mindful of Christ's warning against serving «two masters». Thus, while Sisoës' saying defined the human person as a *pilgrim being*, the present saying defines him as a *dilemmatic being*, faced with a choice between two «attractive» realities.

Other passages give a more detailed picture of why the world, even when taken as a simple created reality, has a negative aspect. Insofar as it proffers to man riches and wealth, pleasures and food, glory and rest, it has the potential of centering a person's attention on goods that are secondary (though legitimate), thus preventing the person from concentrating all his/her efforts on attaining the eternal God. The world proffers «vain»⁵¹ goods which so trap the human being's heart that it makes it impossible for him to live «according to God»⁵².

⁴⁹ N 464 (Regnault 73).

⁵⁰ Similar ideas may be found in Euprepius 3 and N 406 (Regnault 52).

⁵¹ Syncretica 4.

⁵² Isidore the Priest 3.

By contrast, the desert ascetic is one who has abandoned «the distraction and toil of a useless life that kills the soul»⁵³ or «the distractions and worries of this sad life (involving the trade of commerce)»⁵⁴.

Other sayings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers reveal a keen added awareness that the world in its real state is a milieu actually infected by sin, and therefore rife with temptations and capable of arousing evil desires and actions. In this sense, which we might call more intensely *moral* than metaphysical, more formally anti-divine than simply distracting, the world is even more dangerous. Interestingly, in the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers* this second, negative dimension of the world often appears mentioned alongside the world's simply distracting character:

The blessed Anthony gave this advice to his disciple: «Detest your stomach and worldly needs, evil desires, and honors, as if you were no longer of this world, and you will have peace»⁵⁵.

We may note how, in this passage, the normal legitimate needs of the body as well as honors are placed in the same group as «evil desires» stirred up by the world. The Desert Fathers and Mothers understand man in his actual (fallen) state to possess a nearly infinite gradation of provokable desires, ranging from what we might call natural and legitimate yearnings (related to survival), all the way to vain or strictly immoral desires. The world in its present condition is capable of arousing an entire gamut of longings in the human creature. For the Desert Fathers and Mothers it matters little whether a longing for something offered by the «world» is natural or sinful, if the end result is the same – restlessness in the human heart, that leads to a vain, energy-wasting pursuit of passing goods⁵⁶.

Summing up, we may say that the theological category of world is used by the Desert Fathers and Mothers in a non-uniform way, but more often than not with a negative connotation – at times referring to creatures' potential to distract or deviate the human being from the Creator; at other times to the evil morass of temptation and sinful activity. The desert ascetics, preferring a pragmatic approach over speculation, hardly consider it worthwhile to

⁵³ PE I 22,15 (Regnault 167).

⁵⁴ PE I 24,4 (Regnault 168-169).

⁵⁵ Pa 26,4 (Regnault 210).

⁵⁶ See also Evagrius 1.

distinguish these two aspects, so inseparably mingled and united in the real world. We might call this the simplistic realism of the Desert Fathers and Mothers. They seem to be saying, «It's what there is, right now» – this is the milieu that day after day challenges any person called by God to perfection.

B. *The Christian Attitude towards the World: Fight or Flight?*

What then should person's attitude be towards the «world»? The statements of the Desert Fathers and Mothers are quite explicit:

Do we not hear the Apostle John say, «Do not love the world or what is in the world; if anyone loves the world the love of God is not in him?» (I Jn 2,15). And the brother of the Lord: «If anyone thinks he is a friend of the world, is he the enemy of God?» (Jas 4,4). Indeed *love for the world is an enemy of God*. Brothers, let's *flee the world as one flees a snake*⁵⁷.

The use of the notion of *enmity* radically expresses the idea of incompatibility between living in the world (in all its different senses combined) and seeking God. This antagonistic mindset is not exceptional but rather typical among the Desert Fathers and Mothers:

The man who flees and lives in solitude is like a bunch of grapes ripened by the sun, but he who remains among men is like an unripe grape⁵⁸.

Just as it is impossible to be at the same moment both a plant and a seed, so it is impossible for us to be surrounded by worldly honor and at the same time to bear heavenly fruit⁵⁹.

The desert ascetics even come to speak of *hating* the world:

«(Abba Anthony said)... “Hate the world and all that is in it. Hate all peace that comes from the flesh. Renounce this life, so that you may be alive to God”»⁶⁰.

⁵⁷ PE I 22,12b (Regnault 166-167), italics mine.

⁵⁸ Moses 7.

⁵⁹ Syncretica 22.

⁶⁰ Anthony 33. Despite the harsh tone of this and other *Sayings* earlier cited, we should not understand the invitation of the Desert Fathers and Mothers to flight as something principally born of hate or fear, but rather as the first half of a positive quest for God. Flight means moving *away* (both spiritually and materially) from the world and *towards* God; an *escape*, in order to *find*:

Thus the Desert Fathers and Mothers see clear inconveniences in continuing to live in a milieu fraught with spiritual peril, especially for a person desirous of attaining everlasting life. In this sense, departure from the world and flight to the desert appears as a logical option, and perhaps the best one⁶¹. In the wilderness one is so much freer from distraction and temptation; the environ's bare simplicity facilitates concentration on the essentials⁶². The dilemma is now clear – fight or flight.

Are those who choose flight superior to those who choose to stay in the world? Who is actually stronger or more perfect – the monk engaged in other-worldly struggles, against temptations and demons in the desert, or the secular who resists the assaults of the «world»? On this point the Desert Fathers and Mothers are divided. Some refer to the desert as an arena for spiritual combat; in this light the desert option appears as the superior «narrow way»⁶³, open only to the strong disposed to undertake heroic deeds just like the martyrs in times of persecution – the athletes of God⁶⁴.

On the other hand, we also find a number of sayings that paradoxically refer to the desert option as an easier way of life – materially harsh, it is true, but greatly facilitating spiritual struggle. From this second perspective, the desert is for those who, in humility, consider themselves weak and unable to withstand the continuous pressure of temptation and distraction in the world's bosom:

A brother posed this question to an elder: «What shall I do about a thought that fights against me? It says, *It is better and also nobler to go into the world, to preach and be connected with many people, and thus be similar to the Apostles*». The elder said to him, «*If in your conscience there is nothing remiss regarding any commandment, if also you feel that you have arrived at the port of impassibility, and if you do not in conscience have any passion for any-*

«The soul of the monk always looks to God. For the soul of the monk who has renounced the world has become engaged to Christ, despising what is earthly» (Hyperechios, *Counsels to Ascetics*, 155 [TIROT, P., VAN PARYS, M. and REGNAULT, L., *Enseignements des Pères du désert*, Bégrolles-en-Mauge: Abbaye de Bellefontaine, 1991, 49]).

⁶¹ Cfr. Eth. Coll. 13,64 (Regnault 303-304); N 588 (PE I 13,4) (Regnault 113); Sarmatas 5; PE I 22,12a (Regnault 164-166); PE I 29,8 (Regnault 170-171).

⁶² «It is profitable for us to fight a single fight and not to have an innumerable multitude of struggles» (PE I 22,12b (Regnault 166-167). Cfr. also N 588 (PE I 13,4) (Regnault 113); Anthony 10; 11.

⁶³ Poemen 112. Cfr. also Macarius the Great 2.

⁶⁴ N 51 (Regnault 33).

thing, then go. But if you do not have all these things at once, then (that temptation) is the action of the Evil One who suggests it in order to make you fall from the firm place where you stand»⁶⁵.

The elder told us again: «When I was young, my guide liked to go to more distant deserts and live as a hermit». One day I said to him: «Abba, why are you fleeing to the deserts? For *the one who lives close to the world, seeing it and scorning it for God, has more merit*». And the old man said to me, «Believe me, child, *until a man has arrived at the measure of Moses and become almost a son of God, he does not draw any profit from the world*. As for me, I am Adam's son and, like my father, when I see the fruit of sin, as soon as I desire it, I will take it, eat it, and die. That is why our fathers have fled to deserts where, not finding the food that feeds the passions, they have overcome greed»⁶⁶.

According to the above passages, only one who has arrived at perfect dominion of the passions (or the «measure of Moses») is capable of remaining in the world without detriment to his/her soul. Only one who is spiritually strong and sufficiently perfect can successfully engage so many foes at once and still emerge victorious. Any person who sincerely feels that he or she is still weak and prone to fall before the attractions and temptations proffered by the world would be better off seeking God and salvation in the peaceful isolation of the desert.

C. *The Desert Option – Divine Vocation or Human Initiative?*

As we have just seen, the radical «desert option» adopted by so many men and women of the time is most often mentioned in the *Sayings* as an empirical fact, something that simply occurred among Christians of the epoch and which required no detailed theological introspection. No attempt is made by the Desert Fathers and Mothers to define a universal mechanism of divine summons / human response. In most sentences of the desert ascetics we find, rather than references to an explicit divine voice summoning an individual to the desert, intimations of a *personal conclusion drawn from serious reflection of the Gospel message*.

⁶⁵ Bu II 130 (Regnault 232), italics mine.

⁶⁶ N 538 (PE 1 13,18) (Regnault 97), italics mine.

We may say that primitive monasticism was a phenomenon whose primary motivations came from no other sources than the ones proper to the Christian vocation, particularly Sacred Scripture⁶⁷. This may be observed even on a terminological level. The most common word for ascetics in Egypt was ἀποτακτικός (= «renouncer»), a word derived from the command of Jesus that those who wished to follow him should renounce all possessions (ἀποτάσσομαι: Lk 14,33)⁶⁸. Likewise, the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers* we have examined above, referring to the «world» in a negative sense and suggesting some form of flight, are very close to, and probably dependent upon, ambivalent biblical passages referring to the world (κόσμος), such as James 4,4⁶⁹; Matthew 6,24⁷⁰ (or Luke 16,13); 1 John 2,15-17⁷¹.

As may be gleaned from the *Sayings* cited above, despite the fact that so many people were opting for life in the desert, such a choice was never explicitly defined as binding for believers. It was, rather, an option open to individual conscience, a private concretion of the general Christian calling to perfection.

Still, this must not be taken to mean that the notion of a divine design is wholly absent from the thinking of the desert ascetics. Although the choice in favor of the desert might appear as spontaneously personal, there are numerous sayings to the effect that once a person has taken the exodic option, that person must remain firm in his/her decision, remaining faithful to his/her resolve⁷². This insistence on perseverance suggests that the decision to depart from the world is not exclusively due to a spontaneous human initiative, but has something of a divine motivation behind it, leading to a lifelong commitment.

⁶⁷ See BOUYER, L., *The Spirituality of the New Testament and the Fathers*, I, London: Burns & Oates, 1963, 331.

⁶⁸ See JUDGE, E. A., «Fourth-Century Monasticism in the Papyri», in BAGNALL, R. S. et al. (eds.), *Proceedings of the Sixteenth International Congress of Papyrology (New York, 24-31 July 1980)*, Chico (California): Scholars Press, 1981, 613-620; BURTON-CHRISTIE, D., *The Word*, 63.

⁶⁹ «Do you not know that to be a lover of the world means enmity with God? Therefore, whoever wants to be a lover of the world makes himself an enemy of God».

⁷⁰ «No one can serve two masters. He will either hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon».

⁷¹ «Do not love the world or the things of the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, sensual lust, enticement for the eyes, and a pretentious life, is not from the Father but is from the world. Yet the world and its enticement are passing away. But whoever does the will of God remains forever».

⁷² One of the most frequent temptations mentioned by the Desert Fathers and Mothers, in fact, is that of turning back, hankering to return to a more comfortable life in the world: cfr. Eth. Coll. 14,40 (Regnault 324); Theodore of Pherme 8; PE I 29,12 (Regnault 171-172); N 438 (Regnault 62); N 34 (Regnault 23-24); PE I 29,12 (Regnault 171); Sarah 2; N 82 (Regnault 41).

As a conclusion to this section, we may say that the Desert Fathers and Mothers provide us not only a feel for the nerve of the Christian vocation to perfection, but also a valuable insight into a second, derived question – that of seeking perfection *in a concrete milieu* (in the world or away from it?) In expressing their views on this matter the desert ascetics show their realism, as they use a framework cognizant of the facts of creation / sin / redemption. The historical reality of sin and its effects on man and the world make the Desert Fathers and Mothers cautious and critical of the earthly milieu and suspicious of man's powers to resist its attractions. This leads them to see the desert option as a very desirable one in practice.

Desert and world thus come to form a powerful contrast in the minds of the Desert Fathers and Mothers. These authors no longer take them in a metaphorical/spiritual sense (as Origen tended to do) but rather in a material sense. The desert becomes the physical scenario where the drama of sanctification is conveniently played out by many fervent believers.

IV. CONCLUSION

The works of Origen and of the Desert Fathers and Mothers provide us with a window on early Christian thinking regarding vocation. As a whole, the theological reflection on vocation at the historical stage in which our authors are situated has a rather «unformed» character. (For instance, no detailed mechanism of the divine calling is described, and no deliberate attempt made to define the specificity of varied vocations). Reflection on such matters would come in later centuries, especially with the maturation of the theology of monasticism. However, the same unformed character of the theology of vocation in early Christian authors may be subject to another interpretation. Perhaps we find such limited characterization because Origen and the Desert Fathers and Mothers were first-hand witnesses of the reality of a highly variegated spiritual phenomenon –early Christians thinking and living out Gospel as they saw best or were led by the Spirit– which resisted confinement to definitions and systems.

In any case, Origen and the Desert Fathers and Mothers do show us elements crucial for the theology of vocation, such as (1) the creational/eschatological design of man by God (vocation as a summons to move from creational

to eschatological reality) (Origen); (2) the enormous dynamism of the human person's story (dramatic nature of the human creature) (Origen); (3); the development of personal identity through otherness (relational or «ex-static» notion of person) (Origen); (4) the general vocation of every human person to holiness, and –after sin– salvation (Origen and the Desert Fathers and Mothers); (5) the complexity of the question of the milieu in which the drama of salvation/divinization must unfold (Origen and the Desert Fathers and Mothers); (6) the ambivalent character of the world, created by God but affected by sin and capable of exerting a perilous attraction on fallen man (Origen and the Desert Fathers and Mothers).

These ideas of Origen and the desert ascetics suggest that the notions of divine calling and human response are most conveniently considered first in the widest framework possible, namely the general plan of God for free creatures and His summons to salvation and union with Himself. Indeed, this is the prime concern we find in Origen and the Desert Fathers and Mothers.

Utterly, the complex question arises of the *mise en scène* of the story of the individual's quest for God. Here Origen and the desert ascetics show themselves cognizant of the need for some concretion of the path to holiness or salvation. Whereas renunciation and ascetical living are perennial principles of Christian living, monasticism and coenobitism are but two concrete forms among innumerable ways of practicing the Gospel ideals, taking into account personal circumstances.

The Desert Fathers and Mothers have the merit of having tested out a new road embodying a human response to the divine summons to perfection. They provide a living historical example of the varied ways in which the striving for holiness may be realized. In their particular case –in contrast to Origen– they point to material departure from the world as an option facilitating personal response to the call to holiness.

Vocation, we may conclude, is *the definition of the human person*. From the perspective of faith we perceive a general divine design for humanity, which explains why every human person is endowed by God with a dialogical nature in the first place. At the same time, the factic concreteness of earthly existence requires some ulterior specification of every pilgrim's walk towards everlasting communion with God. The deliberate choice taken among different options, made by an individual conscience in dialogue with God, is also an essential part of the process of human definition.

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