

THE SPIRITUAL FATHER IN THE PACHOMIAN TRADITION

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Sources

The spiritual traditions of the desert are not dead and buried, subjects appropriate only for historians and archaeologists, but rather a living deposit of faith which is not irrelevant to our own age. The recent publication of fine English translations¹ of two primary sources concerning this tradition help us to paint – in broad strokes – an “icon” of the spiritual father as understood in these formative years of cenobitic monasticism.

Derwas J. Chitty has firmly established the literary priority of the *Vita Prima Graeca* and the *Letter of Bishop Ammoun* over the surviving Coptic sources for the life and career of Pachomios, the “father” of cenobitic monasticism.² The *Vita Prima Graeca* purports to be the work of a writer or writers who had entered the community after the death of Pachomios, but who had known “the ancient fathers” (cf. chapters 10, 46, 98-99) i.e., those monks who had been in direct contact with Pachomios himself. Chitty dates the work sometime near 390 A.D. – “when Theodore’s surviving contemporaries would be anxious to ensure the recording for posterity of the lives of the two saints.”³ The writer(s) of the *Vita Prima Graeca* clearly state their desire to preserve the memory of these two men and compare their endeavor to the festal letters of bishops and even more significantly, to Athanasios’ *Life of Anthony* (cf. chapter 99). The *Letter of Bishop Ammoun* describes the bishop’s memories of three years spent as a monk at Pabau under Theodore and is written several decades after the fact.

The fundamental historical credibility of these sources is the primary reason for using them to delineate the contours of the role and person of the spiritual father in the Pachomian community. However, it must be stated at the outset that this study is not intended to be a purely historical enterprise. Like the Gospels, the *Vita Prima Graeca* and the *Letter of Bishop Ammoun* are not simply historical documents, but iconography in the full Orthodox sense of that word. These documents are iconic insofar as they portray the transfiguring power of God in history and insofar as they are signs – in the full Johannine sense of that word – of the eruption of the Kingdom into the lives of the otherwise unexceptional men and women of the fourth century. Thus, because the primary concern of this paper is not history per se, the historical context of the lives of Pachomios and Theodore, as well as the political and theological circumstances surrounding the founding of the Pachomian community, will be to a large extent presupposed in order to focus more clearly on the icon of the spiritual life as it is presented in these early records of fledgling monasticism. In fact, it is precisely this icon of

spirituality painted in the words of the *Vita Prima Graeca* and the *Letter of Bishop Ammoun* that constitutes their *raison d'être*, as their authors themselves tell us.



The following categories will be used as the broad strokes necessary to paint the verbal “icon” of the spiritual father which the literature surrounding Pachomios offers in a less systematic way: the spiritual father as:

- 1.) a man of tradition
- 2.) a man of Scripture
- 3.) a man of prayer
- 4.) a man of humility
- 5.) a man of ministry and
- 6.) a man of miracles and visions.

It must, of course, be borne in mind that these categories are distinctions of convenience, not reality. As shall be seen, no one of these aspects can be taken in isolation, just as an iconographer cannot paint an icon with only one or two brush strokes. For the writers of the *Vita Prima Graeca*, all of these characteristics are interrelated and interdependent: a man without tradition will not know how to pray; a man without prayer cannot discern the depths of the Scriptures; a man without humility cannot truly

minister in the name of Jesus Christ. This wholeness of the spiritual life is a reality essential to the documents with which we are dealing.

Throughout the *Vita Prima Graeca*, Pachomios is addressed as “father” (both *pater* and *abba*), as “our father,” as “the man of God” and as “holy.”⁴ The monks of the community are referred to as “brothers,” implying that they are the spiritual children of Pachomios.⁵ This fatherhood, in which a charismatic or prophetic figure brings the divine life to birth in a person and then trains him to grow and mature in the Spirit, has been part of the life of the Church since its inception. Paul, for example, will describe himself as being a “father” to the Christian community at Corinth because, as he says, “it was I who begot you in Christ Jesus by preaching the Good News (1 Corinthians 4:15).” On a more personal level, Paul refers to his most outstanding disciples such as Timothy or Titus as his “true child in the faith (1 Timothy 1:2 and Titus 1:4)” or as his “dear child (2 Timothy 1:2)” and “dear son (2 Timothy 2:1).”⁶ The apostle John will use a very

similar vocabulary, addressing the communities to which he writes as “teknia” or “my little children (1 John 2:1; 3:7; 4:4; 5:21).”



Pachomios, as the *Vita Prima Graeca* tells us, was born in the Thebaid (modern Egypt) of pagan parents (cf. chapters 2, 4-6). Forcibly inducted into the imperial army at the age of twenty, his first encounter with Christians took place during his incarceration as a young conscript at Thebes. Impressed by their kindness

to strangers, Pachomios made a covenant with the God of the Christians to “minister to your will all the days of my life and loving all men, I shall serve them according to your commandment.”⁷ After his release from military service, Pachomios became a catechumen and was eventually baptized in the small town of Chenoboskia, in the upper Thebaid. A zealous convert, Pachomios committed himself totally to his new found faith and sought to become a monk under the tutelage of the revered anchorite, Palamon.

The Man of Tradition

The spiritual father is first and foremost a man who hands on the tradition which he has received from the hands and lips of his elders. This is made abundantly clear in Palamon’s relationship with Pachomios and still later in the narrative, in Pachomios’ relationship with Theodore and the entire community. When Pachomios asks Palamon to make him a monk, Palamon initially refuses, because “this work of God is not simple (and)...many were unable to endure it.”⁸ When Pachomios persists, Palamon describes in detail the harshness of his monastic regimen in an effort to dissuade Pachomios. What is important to note in this conversation between the two is that Palamon ends his description by declaring that he lives the monastic life “as I was taught.”⁹ Palamon sees himself as living the tradition handed on to him and it is this tradition that he will, in turn, pass on to Pachomios. Chitty remarks that “his (Pachomios’) training with Palamon is essentially that of a solitary...the aim is the Antonian aim.”¹⁰

Thus, Pachomios’ training is that of a hermit, an anchorite or “one who withdraws.” And yet, in spite of his training as a solitary, Pachomios hands on the tradition that he has received in a new way – in terms of the cenobitic way of life. His initial experience of Christians and their faith, expressed in mercy and

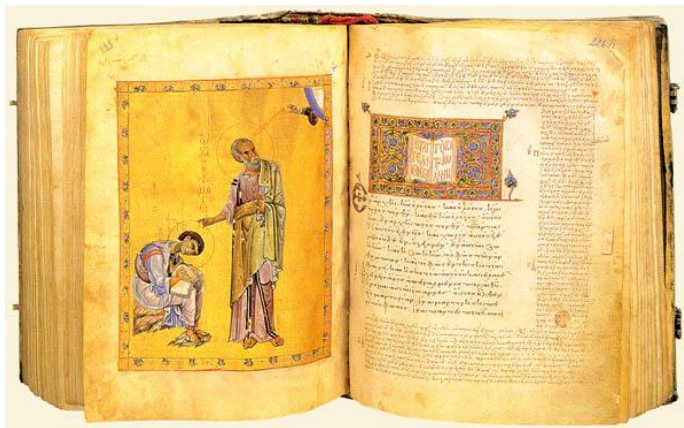
service to others, deeply influenced his entire outlook and came to characterize the expression of his own spirituality, offering a new, more social dimension to monasticism.

Tradition is thus not seen in this document as consisting merely in outward forms, to be passed on in a static, mechanical fashion. Rather, tradition must express not only the necessary historical continuity, but the personal experience of the spiritual father as well. Without this living content based on personal experience, the living tradition becomes a dead formula. The spiritual father, as a man of tradition, is not a legislator of immutable structures and unchanging regimen but one who expresses the tradition in a concrete way to meet the needs and nurture the maturity of his spiritual children.

The Man of Scripture

The Scriptures play a large role in the development of Pachomian spirituality. The place of the Scriptures in his approach to the Christian life may be seen from the following passage which describes his early formation as a monk under Palamon:

When he (Pachomios) started reading or recited God's words by heart, he did not do it in the fashion of many other people, but he strove to comprehend it himself, each and every thing through humility, gentleness and truth, according to the Lord's word, "Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart (*Matthew 11:29*)."¹¹



It is clear from this passage that Pachomios not only read the Scriptures, but he also knew portions of the Bible "by heart" and could recite them from memory. This is not an altogether unusual achievement in fourth century Egypt, Bishop Aphou of Oxyrhynchos, an eremitic bishop who was a contemporary of Pope Theophilus of Alexandria (385-412 A.D.), required of each candidate for ordination to the diaconate a minimum knowledge of Scripture comprised of twenty-five Psalms, two of Paul's letters and part of a Gospel – all by heart.

What is unusual in this passage is the way in which Pachomios reads the Scriptures: he seeks to interiorize them, to make them a part of his being. He approaches the sacred texts as a way of life i.e., only one who lives the content of the Scriptures - "humility, gentleness and truth" - can understand their meaning. For him, "the holy Scriptures pointed the way to eternal life with terseness of expression"; they "are signs for us" and

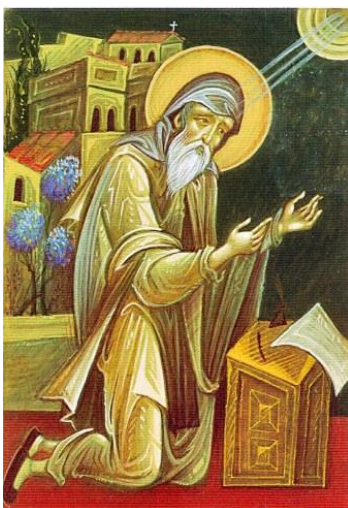
it is through the benefit of these signs that we have come to know that the fathers of our time are their (the Apostles) children and imitators, so that it may become known to us and to the coming generation, to the end of time, that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever.¹²

The Scriptures, in their "terseness of expression," delineate the contours of continuity in the tradition and it is precisely the interiorization of the Scriptures which makes the spiritual father an embodiment of the true tradition.

In an excellent article on the subject, Armand Veilleux has pointed out that Scripture was to become the rule par excellence for the Pachomian community. Everything in the community was regulated with direct reference to the Scriptures, down to the most insignificant detail. The *Vita Prima Graeca* records that Pachomios "drew up a simple rule" for the community

and according to the Scripture he prescribed for them the proper measurement of dress, equality in food portions and decent sleeping arrangements.¹³

The Man of Prayer



The spiritual father must be a man of prayer. The *Vita Prima Graeca* describes Pachomios as a man constantly praying. Prayer is, in effect, the substance of his life and ministry. In addition to the formal services of prayer which Pachomios legislated for the entire community (cf. chapter 60), it was not unusual for him to pray from sunset to daybreak, rapt in prayer to his God (cf. chapters 15 and 88). One of his prayers, an urgent plea, has been preserved in the text (cf. chapter 15), as well as some of the physical disciplines that he used during these all-night vigils. The *Vita Prima Graeca* tells us that during one such lonely vigil, the ground at his feet turned to mud as a result of the sweat that poured from his body and that in order to remain alert throughout the night, Pachomios

was...in the habit of stretching his arms out in prayer, without folding them soon again into a resting position, but rather keeping them stretched out, as if on a cross, in order to force the body to labor and stay awake in prayer.¹⁴

Prayer, in order to be worship in spirit and truth (John 4:23), must also be intercessory prayer. The spiritual father, as a man of prayer, must be a man of prayer for others. The *Vita Prima Graeca* tells us that

it was his (Pachomios') habit to pray standing in the desert and to ask God to save him and everyone else from the deceit of the enemy. Thus, he was greatly beloved of God.¹⁵

Prayer for others is thus a form of ministry in the Pachomian tradition which, if it is indeed true prayer, blossoms into concrete forms of service. For example, Pachomios, at the request of the Bishop of Tentyra,

saw to it...that a church be built in a deserted village for the shepherds of the surrounding region, who were ordinary people, so that they might gather...to hear God's word...and he spent time for their needs and the needs of strangers who came around.¹⁶

Pachomios, keeping his initial covenant with God to love and serve all of humanity, met the needs of others with a characteristic humility born of true prayer.

The Man of Humility

Pachomios learned early in his monastic training that humility is the touchstone of the spiritual life. An incident recorded in the opening pages of the *Vita Prima Graeca* tells the story of a visiting monk whose ascetic efforts led to madness and ultimately, suicide (cf. chapter 8). This event had a profound influence upon Pachomios, who became even more apprehensive than before about the quality and progress of his own spiritual life (cf. chapter 9). Palamon, within the context of the narrative, clearly points out to Pachomios that this nameless monk who had committed suicide by burning himself to death in a bath house had been the victim of arrogance.

The result of the crisis which this event engendered in Pachomios was a complete refusal to be placed in any position of power that could possibly lead to such suicidal arrogance. Among such positions was the priesthood. Although Serapion, the bishop of Tentyra, encouraged the great Athanasios of Alexandria

to ordain Pachomios “father and priest over all the monks” of his Episcopal territory, Pachomios refused and hid himself in order to avoid ordination (cf. chapter 30). Pachomios believed that “it was not good to ask for office and glory” and, wary of ecclesiastical politics, felt that “a clerical office is the beginning of contemplation of the lust for power” (cf. chapter 27). Pachomios extended his refusal to all of the monks of his community. Both Pachomios and his chief disciple and eventual successor, Theodore, were never ordained. It is, therefore, holiness of life and openness to the Spirit of God and not merely ordination to the priesthood that forms the fundamental requirement of spiritual paternity. A layman can be – and often is – a true spiritual father.

This refusal of power over others extended throughout all of Pachomios’ relationships. He was first and foremost a servant, taking literally and fulfilling such Scriptural exhortations to service as Mark 10:42-45. As the *Vita Prima Graeca* informs us, the few monks of the early days of the Pachomian community

marveled at him exceedingly, because they saw him toiling...through his assumption of nearly all the care of the monastery. For he prepared the table for them at mealtime...he sowed and watered the vegetables...he answered the door every time someone would knock at it...if any one of them were sick, Pachomios himself took care of him and ministered to him during the night...he freed them of all care.¹⁷

In addition to his own ascetic regimen, Pachomios assumed all of the responsibility for the management and maintenance of the monastery in those early days before the community grew to number in the thousands. He did this in order to free his monastic charges to study the Scripture and engage in the spiritual struggle (cf. chapter 24). This Christological motif of humility and service to others runs throughout the life of Pachomios and forms the “heart” of the icon which the authors of the *Vita Prima Graeca* are attempting to paint in words.

Perhaps one of the most touching stories characteristic of this Pachomian spirituality tells of the time that Pachomios, in his humility, was able to learn from a small peasant boy visiting the monastery in order to attend its liturgical services:

One day Pachomios was weaving a rush mat in Tabennesis and a boy came to the weekly service in the monastery. When the boy saw him weaving, he told him, ‘Not so father! Do not turn the thread this way. Father Theodore showed us another style of weaving.’ Pachomios rose and said to the boy, ‘Yes, teach me this style.’ After the boy taught him, he sat to work gladly, having even in this matter anticipated the spirit of

arrogance. If his way were the way of the flesh, he would not have cared but would even have reprimanded the child for having spoken out of turn.¹⁸

Pachomios' war against the "spirit of arrogance" freed him from all insecurity and fear, consequently freeing him from the desire to dominate and control others. This is extremely important – in fact, of the essence of spiritual paternity – because the spiritual father is not one who is interested in building his own little kingdom, but rather, one who brings to birth God's kingdom in those entrusted to his care.

The Man of Ministry

The relationship between prayer and humility, humility and ministry, and ultimately, prayer and ministry in the life of the spiritual father should be obvious: prayer and its fruit, humility, blossom into ministry. It was while Pachomios was in the desert

alone, praying to be taught God's perfect...(that) an angel sent by the Lord appeared to him...and (said) 'The Lord's will is to minister to the race of men and to reconcile them to him.' It was after he thought about the voice which he had heard and realized its meaning (that) he started to receive those who came to him.¹⁹

Two important points are raised in this passage concerning prayer and ministry: 1) that the grace of spiritual fatherhood is always a vocation in the deepest sense of that word i.e., a call by God in prayerful solitude and 2) the ministry of the spiritual father takes him out of his solitude to begin the task of reconciliation between humanity and God and consequently, man with man.



The *Vita Prima Graeca* abounds with stories of Pachomios' ministry. He took particular joy in caring for the helpless: the elderly, the sick and children (cf. chapter 28). Not only did he serve the needs surrounding countryside (cf. chapter 24), the needs of the shepherds in the surrounding countryside (cf. chapter 29) and have responsibility for the convents founded by his sister (cf. chapter 32),

but he was also a man chosen by God to exercise a ministry of intercession and healing.

the wife of one of the area's leading politicians was bleeding. And when she heard about the great Pachomios, she asked...Dionysios to summon him. After the great man was summoned, he sat inside the church...and she...coming near him...touched the cowl on his head and was immediately cured.²⁰

The parallels between this account and that of Jesus' cure of the woman with a hemorrhage (*Matthew 9:20-22*) was obvious.

In fact, judging from the accounts preserved in the *Vita Prima Graeca*, Pachomios was to acquire a substantial reputation as a healer and worker of miracles. However, Pachomios – in his humility – never took himself quite so seriously. The *Vita Prima Graeca* records that Pachomios, who was often sick himself (cf. chapters 51-52) and who eventually died of a plague that swept through the community (cf. chapters 114-116), “was not astonished and grieved” when “he prayed for somebody's health and his request was not granted by the Lord” for “he himself (i.e., Jesus) used to say in prayer, ‘Let your will be done and not mine’.”²¹

The Man of Miracles and Visions

The *Vita Prima Graeca* is a remarkable sober and historically oriented document. The myriad of miracles which so often abound in much of hagiography are here infrequent and not essential to the narrative. Some of the earlier miracles ascribed to him involve his ability to step on scorpions and snakes without harm and to be with wild animals normally feared by man (cf. chapter 21) in fulfillment of the promise of Jesus made in Luke 10:19. Yet, that Pachomios was able to do these things was considered a sign that he had still to achieve “the highest point in the perfection of his knowledge.”²² It is made abundantly clear by the writers of the *Vita Prima Graeca* that these are derivative, secondary phenomena which are not necessarily indications of great spiritual stature: for example, the monk who, deluded by demons and his pride, was able to walk upon live coals without being burnt (cf. chapter 8); this is the same monk, mentioned earlier, who will eventually commit suicide by burning himself to death in a public bath.

Visions, however, are a constant theme of the *Vita Prima Graeca*. The spiritual father is pre-eminently a man of vision and it is asserted throughout the narrative that Pachomios, because of his spiritual depth, is able to see and hear things which the rest of humanity cannot (cf. chapter 93). It is a vision that commands Pachomios to build his monastery on the site of the deserted village of Tabennisis (cf. chapter 12); it is a vision that commands him “to minister to the

race of men and to reconcile them to" God (cf. chapter 23). In fact, a vision accompanies and is usually responsible for every major decision which Pachomios makes.

But not all visions come from God. The demonic forces of illusion against which Pachomios struggles to the end of his life can also be sources of visionary experiences:

...the evil spirits started distorting his (Pachomios') perception. For sometimes, as he was praying and about to kneel, they made the space in front of his appear as a pit, so that he might not kneel out of fear...at other times...the evil spirit came and took the form of a cock and crowed in his face.²³

Once, a demon appeared to him in bright light, claiming to be Jesus Christ (cf. chapter 87).

The necessity of discernment and a genuine sobriety with regard to all visionary experiences is characteristic of Pachomian spirituality. Pachomios discerned "the difference between good and evil spirits according to the Scripture" i.e., within the context of the core of the Christian tradition (cf. chapter 27). As one who interiorizes the Scriptures, the spiritual father is a man of discernment whose ability to evaluate visions, people and events flows from his intimate relationship with the Crucified and Risen Lord who is Truth.

One of the monks of the community asked Pachomios to tell him about the visions that he had seen and Pachomios' response was characteristically humble and sober:

He who in my view is a sinner is not to ask of God to see visions. For without God's will, visions are misleading...hear now about a great vision: it is a great vision to see a pure and humble man. For what is greater...than to see the invisible God in the visible man who is his temple.²⁴

Visions, like miracles, are thus secondary in the spiritual life and one is not to seek after them as if they were the goal of the Christian life. Pachomios is explicit that the desire for visions is more the result of human sinfulness and alienation from God than not and that it is far better to be "pure and humble" than to see visions.

Pachomios' ability to receive visions and to discern spirits became a matter of dispute once his fame spread and he became well known as a spiritual father and

healer. Shortly before his death, in the autumn of 345 A.D., Pachomios was summoned before a synod of bishops at Latopolis and asked to substantiate his reputation and to discuss the meaning of his spiritual gifts. With great candor, Pachomios firmly insisted that whatever spiritual gifts have been granted to him are also possible to all Christians. Pachomios is remarkably free from any desire to display miraculous power and explains that the gift of spiritual insight or discernment is not a magic power which can be called forth at will but a pure gift given by God to be used as a ministry to others (cf. chapter 112).

Conclusion

The “verbal” icon of the spiritual father which emerges from the *Vita Prima Graeca* stands as a prototype of the charismatic and prophetic Christian, the “new man,” to use the terminology of Paul’s epistles. The true spiritual father is the one who, freed from his illusions and arrogance, is able to offer his insights into Truth and the meaning of human existence to others; a minister whose compassion for others is so deep that it is he to whom a broken humanity naturally, almost instinctively, turns in order to find the path to God which lay open before us all

Abba Psenhaisios, Abba Souros and Abba Psoios used to agree in saying this: “Whenever we listened to the words of our father, Abba Pachomios, we were greatly helped...(and) we saw how, even when he kept silence, he taught us by his actions. We were amazed by him and we used to say to each other: ‘We thought that all the saints were created as saints by God and never changed from their mother’s womb, not like other men. We thought that sinners could not live devoutly, because they had been so created. But now we see the goodness of our God manifested in our father: for see, he is of pagan origin and he has become devout; he has put on all the commandments of God. Thus even we also can follow him and become equal to the saints whom he himself has followed.’”²⁵

This is the meaning of the communion of saints!

Notes

1. The *Vita Prima Graeca* translated by Apostolos Athanassakis (Scholars Press: Missoula, MT) 1975 and *Pachomian Koinonia, Volume I* translated and with an introduction by Armand Veilleux (Cistercian Publications: Kalamazoo, MI) 1980. For the sake of continuity, all quotations will be taken from the translation of Athanassakis.

2. Chitty, D. “Pachomian Sources Reconsidered,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 6 (1954).

3. *ibid.*, p. 47
4. V.P.G., pp 14, 32, 63 and 125.
5. *ibid.*, pp 10, 15, 33 and 75.
6. This, of course, presupposes a Pauline authorship for the Pastorals. For a discussion of the contemporary debate concerning the authorship of the Pastorals, cf. Denzer, George A. "The Pastoral Letters," *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, (57: 6-11) pp. 351-352.
7. V.P.G., p. 9.
8. *ibid.*, p. 9.
9. *ibid.*, p. 10.
10. Chitty, D. *The Desert A City* (SVS Press: New York) 1979 pp. 10-11.
11. V.P.G., p. 15.
12. *ibid.*, p. 23.
13. *ibid.*, p. 33. For an excellent discussion of the place and role of Scripture in the Pachomian community, cf. Veilleux, Armand "Holy Scripture in the Pachomian Koinonia," *Monastic Studies* 10 (1974).
14. V.P.G., p. 21.
15. *ibid.*, p. 15
16. *ibid.*, p. 39.
17. *ibid.*, p. 31.
18. *ibid.*, p. 125.
19. *ibid.*, p. 29.
20. *ibid.*, pp. 59-60.
21. *ibid.*, p. 67.
22. *ibid.*, p. 27.
23. *ibid.*, p. 25.
24. *ibid.*, p. 71.
25. *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* translated by Benedicta Ward (Cistercian Publications: Kalamazoo, MI) 1975, p. 205.

