The Desert Fathers and the Eucharist

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[0:00] This morning we're talking about 4th century Egypt, and it's a long way from 21st century Vancouver. I think these folks, some of these desert fathers, they look a little bit more like John the Baptist than like you and me. And it's a little bit hard for us in some ways to get into their mind space, into their milieu, and into their context. I think one of the best ways to do that is to hear them in their own words, and to hear the stories that we have received from them.

So I'm going to open with a few stories about Abba Macarius, one of the desert fathers, and it's from this book, The Sayings of the Desert Fathers. There's a couple different collections of their sayings. This one is the alphabetical collection. It's edited by an Anglican sister, in fact, Benedicta Ward. And she did this work in the 70s. She's still very well known for her work with the Desert Fathers, based over in Oxford, Benedicta Ward. So let me open with these stories about Abba Macarius.

Abba Macarius the Great said to the brothers at Scytis, when he dismissed the assembly, Flee, my brothers. One of the old men asked him, Where could we flee to beyond this desert?

Abba Macarius put his finger on his lips and said, Flee that. And he went into his cell, shut the door, and sat down. Another story. It was said of Abba Macarius the Egyptian, that one day when he was going up from Scytis with a load of baskets, he sat down, overcome with weariness. And he began to say to himself, My God, you know very well that I cannot go any further. And immediately, he found himself at the river. A third story. One day, Abba Macarius went up from Scytis to Teranuthis and went into the temple to sleep. Now there were some old coffins of the pagans there. Taking one, he put it under his head as a pillow. The devils, seeing his audacity, were filled with jealousy. And to make him afraid, they called out as though addressing a woman, so-and-so, come to bath with us. Another devil replied from beneath him as though among the dead, I have a stranger on top of me, and I cannot come. But the old man, Macarius, was not afraid.

On the contrary, he knocked on the coffin with assurance, saying, Awake, and go into the darkness if you can. Hearing this, the devils began to cry out with all their might, You have overcome us.

[2:39] Filled with confusion, they fled. Who are these wild desert fathers? Today we'll be focusing on fourth century Egypt, although we could have chosen instead Syria or Palestine. But I'm interested, in the room here, what comes to mind when you hear about the desert fathers? Anything, any knowledge you have of the desert fathers coming in to today?

Solitude? Solitude. Absolutely. Yeah? Monks that had for cells that caves.

Yes. Absolutely. Friendship, in a sense, when you think of the Epidochians. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Friendship, absolutely. Yeah. Incredible aesthetic lifestyle. Yes. Yeah. Protests. Yes, definitely.

St. Anthony. St. Anthony. Thank you. We'll talk about him briefly today. Visions. Visions. Yes.

[3:59] Some of them did. Well, say they did. Some, some. Some of them did or say they did. Did or said they did. Yeah. Yes. Absolutely. Those are great answers.

The desert fathers have really compelled me since I was studying history as a first-year student at Regent. And I think everything about my first year at Regent was a little bit different, having moved 3,000 miles to study here.

And then I came across the desert fathers and said, well, these folks are unique. They are, they're something special. So that's what prompted my interest. Recent research, I think, has focused on what, what David mentioned, the protest.

You know, some of them might have been draft dodgers, maybe tax resistors, really going against the society of their day. They were holy men and women. Some, some mothers, desert mothers as well.

But they were self-sufficient in a lot of ways, doing some basket weaving. Those are pretty common practice for them. And then selling those occasionally in town. Doing some agriculture.

[5:06] We have some stories of St. Anthony specifically doing some farming for his guests and being hospitable in that way for them. One scholar said that they practiced a holy indifference with respect to the values of the dominant culture.

And I think that's, that's really helpful. Seeing this dominant culture as being antithetical in many ways to true Christianity. And so needing to, to say no to those values.

Certainly the forerunners of monasticism. And we'll, we'll touch on that a little bit this morning. Some of, some of them in communities, some of them, of course, more isolated as well in the cells as, as was mentioned.

The desert fathers were fighters. They were spiritual athletes of it in some sense. They were looking to live the Christian life of discipleship through their life of poverty, chastity, obedience, discipline, and wisdom.

I want to suggest four reasons for us to pay attention to the desert fathers. They're probably a little bit new to some of us. Some of us, it's just a refresher. And these are a highly subjective list of four reasons.

[6:17] Of course. First, the desert fathers helped me repent of my flabby spirituality. I think that's good.

They remind me that the spiritual life is a fight. It's a fight against my old nature. It's a fight against the devil's wiles. It's a fight sometimes against the seduction of society.

We do this together, of course. We do it in community, not just as lone rangers. We are to die, in one scholar's words, to a false self and the values of a society that is twisted in many ways.

So I wonder, if we've become flabby in our spirituality, if the desert fathers might help us with that. I think that they've done so over the centuries.

One Jesuit scholar memorably said, every time that there is spiritual renewal in the church, the desert fathers are present. I think that's interesting. Every time that there is spiritual renewal in the church, the desert fathers are present.

[7:19] So they help us first with a flabby spirituality. And secondly, the desert fathers help us with wisdom. They help us sort out what really matters in life.

The central question in some of these sayings from this book that I was reading earlier is, give me a word, father. Visitors from the city might go out to the desert fathers and they would ask the father to give them a word.

It's a word of wisdom that they're seeking. And the desert fathers themselves show us the pursuit of wisdom. What matters in life? Is it what society tells us? Is it the consumerism that we see around us?

One scholar helpfully notes that there are two desert questions, two primary desert questions. The first, what do you learn to ignore? What do you learn to ignore? And the second, what do you learn to love?

It's fitting with the book club, the book coming up. What do you learn to ignore? And what do you learn to love? These two desert questions reshape our heart. And St. Augustine, in his confessions, gives us an example of this.

[8:26] He tells of two political bureaucrats who one day came across Athanasius' book, The Life of St. Antony.

St. Antony, of course, was the first of the desert fathers, at least in Egypt. Went out to the desert around 290 A.D. And he was the forerunner in a lot of ways of what would come to be.

Athanasius wrote a very stylized biography that was quite compelling. It's one of the earliest life of the saints that we have an example of. And in Augustine's confessions, he tells about how these two political bureaucrats came across the life of St. Antony.

And let me just read a brief excerpt here, because I think it helps us with these two questions. What do you learn to ignore and what do you learn to love?

This life of wisdom. Augustine says here, one of these political bureaucrats began to read The Life of St. Antony.

[9:31] And his admiration and enthusiasm were aroused. As he read, he began to mull over the possibility of the same kind of life for himself, by renouncing his secular career, to serve God alone.

Quite suddenly, he was filled with a love of holiness, and a realistic sense of shame and disgust with himself. He turned his gaze to his friend, also a bureaucrat, and demanded, Tell me, where do we hope all our efforts are going to get us?

What are we looking for? In whose cause are we striving? Does life at court promise us anything better than promotion, to being friends of the emperor? And once we are, will that not be a precarious position fraught with perils?

Will it not mean negotiating many a hazard only to end in greater danger still? How long would it take us to get there? Whereas, I can become a friend of God here, and now, if I want to.

And it was The Life of St. Antony, via Athanasius, that woke that young political operative up. And I think that's a good example of just this challenge that the Desert Fathers bring us.

[10:42] It's this wisdom that they have pursued, helping us learn to ignore certain things in our society that we also have become accustomed to, and instead, teaching us how we should love and what we should love.

Third, I want to suggest the Desert Fathers help us seek solitude and seek silence. And this was mentioned earlier.

I think their practice of solitude and silence is helpful for us in our busy culture. We think of them in their cells. Desmond Tutu, in a short introduction to a book, he tells of how the Desert Fathers, they fled status, and they fled dignity, and they fled chatter.

Instead, to be still in contemplation of God, whose great love has removed our sin. I think we have a lot to be mindful of in contemplation, and so I think the Desert Fathers show us one way in which to do that.

And fourth, I think the Desert Fathers communicate a focus on Christ that is quite refreshing. Benedicta Ward, the Anglican sister that I mentioned earlier, talks about how their aim was not asceticism in its own right.

[11:58] It was not simply asceticism. But their aim was God. Their aim was God via the life of charity and love. Their aim was to deepen the central relationship that they had with God and Christ.

And that, I think, comes through very strongly. We'll see that a little bit this morning. That was from Benedicta Ward. As a side note, another one of the great Desert Fathers interpreters is Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury.

He has a great little book. Let me see if I can pull it out here. There's a great little book, Where God Happens, Discovering Christ in One Another. Desmond Tutu wrote the foreword that I just quoted from.

So it's interesting for us to have these Anglican interpreters of the Desert Fathers. In their focus on Christ, they show us how to love God and love neighbor.

And that's one very specific way of doing that. It's in some ways specific to their time. But it is a very clear picture of how to love God and love neighbor.

[13:01] Their focus on Christ comes through time and time again. And there's a memorable picture in Athanasius' life of Antony where he describes Antony coming out of the cave that he had spent most of his time in, in some of his first 20 years.

And it's this very vivid picture of Antony almost deified, glorified in a sense, as he comes out of the cave having spent time in contemplation, in solitude with God.

But it's this single-minded focus on how to live out the Gospels, how to live out this life in Christ that the Desert Fathers are pursuing.

And as you can imagine, this had a huge effect on the church down to present day, not least through monasticism. But it even had a strong effect on the church during the 4th century.

Many of the bishops spent time in the desert and were very affected by the life of the monks. It comes up time and time again in the 4th century.

[14:06] I think, I was thinking as I prepared this past week, I think if there was one century that I could visit in the life of the church, it would be the 4th century, just because of all the different things happening.

You have Nicaea in 325, you have the Christological debates, and you have the Desert Fathers representing a different, very compelling witness as well. Now it takes work, as I mentioned, to get onto the page of the Desert Fathers, but I think it's completely worth it.

Their personalities do come through, and we'll see that in our case study this morning. The stripped-away simplicity that they have in the desert, the fight that they have in the Christian life, their honesty, and even their graciousness.

In Dietrich Bonhoeffer's words, maybe their costly discipleship would be appropriate. They inspire me, and I think that they can inspire us this morning as well. My life truly is better for knowing them.

So I hope to communicate some of that this morning. We'll pick up a case study in just a moment, but let me conclude this opening introduction with another story from Macarius that shows some of the graciousness of the Desert Fathers that I think is helpful for us.

[15:19] They said of Abba Macarius the Great that he became, as it is written, a god upon earth, because just as God protects the world, so Abba Macarius would cover the faults which he saw, as though he did not see them.

And he would cover the faults which he heard, as though he did not hear them. It's a wonderful little anecdote about the graciousness of Macarius. So friends, we have a treat in store for us this morning.

After the break, we'll pick up our case study on the Desert Fathers and the Eucharist. But let's just briefly take a four-minute break, stand up, feel free to refill your coffee, say hello to a friend, and we'll resume in four minutes.

So we begin our case study, the Desert Fathers and the Eucharist. For the early Church, the central practice of Christian worship was the Eucharist. Christians placed great importance remembering Christ's death and resurrection as a community, celebrating the Eucharist together.

However, in the late 3rd century, men such as St. Antony the Egyptian, that I mentioned earlier, departed the community for the desert. They departed in order to live lives of purification, lives of holiness.

[16:35] And this movement and early monasticism of sorts flourished throughout the 4th century. Not only did it give rise to monasticism, it has profoundly shaped the Christian Church.

The question arises, given the solitary inclinations of some of these Desert Fathers, separating from their communities, how did the Desert Fathers celebrate the Eucharist? This morning we'll examine the original sources together, the earliest writings.

And we will see that after the earliest years, the Egyptian Desert Fathers, in fact, had a robust practice of the Eucharist. As such, we will then assess some recent historiography, and we'll conclude by drawing some connections with current research.

So, a historical take. St. Antony, as I mentioned earlier, entered the Egyptian Desert around 290 AD. As people sought him out, he, as you can imagine, moved progressively to more remote areas.

In these early years, he and some of the other anchorites, or solitary individuals, may have had little concern for Eucharistic practice. One scholar summarizes this well, saying, Antony and his emulators, Abba Amun and Abba Macarius, did not seem to have had any scruples, excuse me, that's a different Macarius, there are a couple Macarius fathers, just for reference.

[17:56] They did not seem to have any scruples about leaving the community of the faithful, and, by that very fact, being deprived of participating in the Eucharist. However, in some ways, we actually don't know.

There is minimal textual evidence from the Egyptian Desert in the earliest time period, the 290 to 330 AD window, and as such, the actual Eucharistic practice cannot be completely verified.

But around 330 AD, 40 years after Antony first entered the desert, there is evidence of more widespread Eucharistic celebration in the Egyptian Desert. This morning, we'll look together at two main sources, the first, the Lausiak history, and the second, the Historia Monochorum in Egypto.

Our first source, the Lausiak history, was written by a monk, later a bishop, named Palladius. He wrote this history around 420 AD, so a good time later.

Palladius was a native of Galatia, who became a monk at age 23, and then later became the bishop of Hellenopolis. In 388 AD, he traveled to Egypt.

[19:02] There, he spent three years in Alexandria in the city, and then a brief stint in the monastic settlement of Nitria, not too far from Alexandria. His main time, though, nine years, he spent at Kelia, a more solitary outpost, monastic outpost, to the south, before he returned home to Galatia.

His book, The Lausiak History, consists of, quote, straightforward accounts of what he had personally seen or experienced, and of what he had received in the way of similar stories from other people.

Our second source, the Historia Monochorum in Egypto, was similarly written by a visitor. The author of this book was one of seven Palestinian monks who traveled together through Egypt.

They traveled together through Egypt around 394 AD, a little bit after Palladius. And for historical purposes, these two sources this morning may be a bit more reliable than John Cashin's institutes and conferences, reason being that John Cashin's accounts are based on his journey through Egypt from about 385 to 400 AD.

But as Benedicta Ward, this Anglican sister that I mentioned earlier, as she notes, they are not verbatim accounts of the conversations with the monks of Egypt, more they're stylized in many ways.

[20:25] They are, in Benedicta Ward's words, quote, a carefully constructed interpretation of the aims and methods of monastic Egypt for the use of the monks of the West.

They are also shaped by the theological and ethical ideas of John Cashin. Now, that's not to say that they're not great reading. I think that they are. Bruce Hindmarsh wouldn't allow me to say any differently than that.

Somebody that David is studying with this term. But in light of that, we'll primarily attend to these two sources, the Lausiac History and Historia Monocorum. So first, our visitor from Galatia, Palladius, who stopped in the Egyptian desert at Nitria.

Nitria was founded around 330 AD by Abba Amun. At Nitria, the monks there lived in cells. We would call this in the terms of semi-ancheritic existence, being in cells, although near each other.

And on Saturdays and Sundays at Nitria, they gathered to celebrate the Eucharist and a common meal, which was the agape feast. However, because they were so close to the city, Alexandria and related areas, one scholar, a famous scholar, Derwas Chidi, describes Nitria as the gateway to the desert, the meeting place of the desert with the world.

[21:42] This was Nitria. And so by 338 AD, Nitria was experiencing an influx of new monks coming to join them from the city. And as you can imagine, this led the founder, Abba Amun, to search for a more solitary place.

There's a pattern here. Thus another location, Kelia, or the cells, was established. Over time, some of the monks moved from Nitria further south to Kelia, and the two locations of Nitria and Kelia remained connected.

Even at the more remote Kelia, we hear from the Historia Monochorum source that they, quote, come together in the churches only on Saturdays and Sundays and they meet one another.

The Latin translator, Rufinus, commented memorably, quote, only on Saturday and Sunday do they meet in church and then they see each other face to face as men restored to heaven.

Similarly, Palladius mentioned that monks gather in the church on Saturday and Sundays only. So you have this rhythm of life in the cells, whether they're reciting the psalms in their cells, that's a frequent practice, prayer, obviously, at all hours of the day and night, maybe some basket weaving, as I mentioned earlier, but then that they would actually gather with one another on Saturdays and Sundays.

[22:58] By 390 AD, we know that eight ordained priests resided at Nitria, and one more senior priest would celebrate the Eucharist for that community. Earlier, that was 390 that we know of the eight ordained priests, but earlier from a letter around AD 356, we know that there were four priests, four priests at Nitria.

The letter mentions that. And in fact, we even hear in, before the 340 AD window, Abba Macarius, who I started with the three stories from, Abba Macarius trekked 40 miles from one location, Scetus, to Nitria.

40 miles he went, just in order to receive the Eucharist from his friend, Abba Pombo. And so it's interesting, even given some of these little bit isolationist ideas, that the Eucharist still was practiced as a central theme, central practice, excuse me.

Around 330 AD, Abba Macarius had founded a settlement at Scetus, and this settlement at Scetus was a little bit more anchoritic, or a little bit more solitary than Nitria.

But I do believe, as indicated by his 40-mile trek for the Eucharist, that Macarius clearly valued the Eucharist and participation in that. Macarius had put off ordination, in fact, himself for many years.

[24:21] There was a famous saying among some of the desert fathers, not to stand too close to a bishop, lest you get ordained. There's a little bit of a tension there.

They knew the challenges of ordination. They knew the challenges of Christian discipleship when you are working in the church day in and day out. But around 340 AD, Abba Macarius did become ordained.

One scholar actually notes that this was possibly in order to celebrate the Eucharist with his monks at Scetus. So, like Nitria, which we already talked about, on Saturdays and Sundays, Scetus also would celebrate the Eucharist.

In these three communities, Nitria, Kelia, or the cells, and Scetus, we do see this clear practice of the Eucharist before 340 AD for two of them and after 340 AD for another.

But then if we move farther south in the Egyptian desert, we get to the Pachomian communities. Pachomius was a former military leader, a very gifted organizer, and so he is actually one of the systematizers in some ways of what the desert life for the monks was like.

[25:30] And he had these communities that he not just founded, but led in a lot of ways. And we hear in the Boherik life of Pachomius, a different source, that Pachomius built a church in a nearby village to one of his monasteries.

And we hear, quote, that he would take the brothers and would go out there on Saturday to receive the sacraments. And then later, Pachomius actually built a church in the monastery. We hear from the text, quote, but he would still go to the village for the celebration of the Eucharist on Saturday evening, while the clergy would come to celebrate it for them at the monastery on Sunday morning.

Because no one among them, Pachomius' community there, had clerical rank in the holy church. Very interesting, again, kind of this little bit of a church-monk divide.

Not as much as we would think. I'll get to that in the end, but there is a little bit of tension there. In fact, Pachomius, we're told, quote, did not want any clerics in his monastery for fear of jealousy and vain glory.

But throughout the life of Pachomius, this source, we hear that Eucharistic celebration continued on certain Sundays, and Eucharist was also celebrated on Easter and at funerals. With Pachomius' views regarding ordination, we can assume that probably it was imported priests that would come celebrate this.

[26:52] So in these southern communities, not just the ones in the north, but we also hear the Eucharist in the south. And that's important to hold together. Now let's turn to a few stories, because that's an overview of the communities themselves, but let's turn to a few stories.

I think that's one of the main ways that the Desert Fathers speak to us, and so it's important for us to hear them on their own terms. In the Historia Monochorum, one of our original sources, we hear that the Eucharist was mentioned in relation to an Abba Or.

Abba Or. The visitors who visited Abba Or recall that after foot washing, quote, he expounded many key passages in the scriptures for us, and having taught us the Orthodox faith, he invited us to participate in the Eucharist.

His visitors continue, quote, for it is a custom among the great ascetics not to give food to the flesh before providing spiritual nourishment for the soul, that is, the communion of Christ.

It's quite an interesting account of visiting Abba Or there, and saying that it's custom among the great ascetics not to eat before communion, which provides spiritual nourishment for the soul.

[28:04] It's unclear, I think, how widely this fasting before Eucharist would have been observed. We don't have too much in the literature from the Desert Fathers about that, but it was also mentioned with Abba Apollo, a different father.

About Abba Apollo, we hear, quote, those who live with him do not take any food themselves until they have assisted at the Eucharist and have received communion. They do this daily at the ninth hour.

Apollo himself said, quote, monks, if possible, should communicate daily in the mysteries of Christ. For he who separates himself from the mysteries separates himself from God.

He who receives communion frequently receives the Savior frequently. End quote. Now, I'm certainly not proposing that most communities in the Desert were celebrating the Eucharist daily.

I don't think that's true. But we do hear in the Desert Fathers a warning against infrequent celebration of the Eucharist. And there's a few memorable stories actually along these lines.

[29:07] I'm going to highlight four of them. These are from The Lausiac History by Palladius. In the first story, Abba Macarius heals a woman This is an interesting story.

In the first story, Abba Macarius heals a woman who had been turned into a horse by a local sorcerer. I'm not exactly sure what to make of that story completely. But let's just hear it for what it is. As Macarius sent the healed woman away when she's healed back to her normal self, quote, He enjoined her never to neglect the church or to stay away from communion.

He said, quote, These things happen to you because you are not at the Mysteries for five weeks. End quote. Very interesting story. In the second story, we hear of a man named Valens.

Valens, quote, reached such a state of arrogance that demons attacked him. Later, he became very conceited, so much so that he felt he was too good to partake of the Mysteries of Communion.

And after a demon appeared to him in a nighttime vision as Christ, Valens proclaimed, I have no use for communion for I saw Christ this very day. Very confused.

[30:18] And as a result, we hear from this account, quote, The fathers bound him and put him in irons for a year. The prayers of the fathers and an ordinary, unbusied life restored Valens to sanity once again.

In a third story, we hear of a man named Haran who also was tempted by pride. It's kind of a frequent theme running through the Desert Fathers, and there is this connection between pride and for some reason abstaining from communion.

We hear that Haran exalted himself, feeling himself greater than the fathers. He became so blind in his folly that later he too was put into irons when he refused to partake of the mysteries.

He was extremely sparing in his way of life, as many say he used to partake of food only every three months. Being satisfied with the communion of the mysteries and a little wild lettuce if some should come his way.

It's just an odd one, but unlike Valens who was restored, Haran's story ends more ambiguously. Haran left for Alexandria, where he frequented horse races, frequented the theater, and frequented taverns.

[31:29] Three things that you can imagine the Desert Fathers are not fond of in the least. There he fell into gluttony, also very against the Desert Fathers' teaching, and an affair.

We're just racking them all up. He's doing them all at once. And then he suffered a deforming illness. In the end, though, he came back, we hear, to a pious resolution and confessed everything to the fathers, but shortly thereafter he died.

It's a little bit ambiguous, just how we are to take that account. But again, just this resistance to, or this pride that leads him into folly by not partaking of the mysteries is clearly a key theme.

And in the fourth and final story, we hear of a man named Ptolemy. Ptolemy also reveals this connection between pride and gluttony to some degree and abstaining from the Eucharist. Ptolemy lived a very solitary existence.

And as such, we hear that he, quote, became estranged from the teaching and company of holy men. And he became estranged from their help and the continual communion of the mysteries. He reached such a pitch of nonsense as to say that these things were nothing.

[32:40] This story concludes unambiguously, saying, report has it that he is born about Egypt suspended a loft in his pride and has given himself over to gluttony and wine-bibbing, setting no good example to anyone.

That's Ptolemy. Each of these stories seems to be a cautionary tale to us. It's a cautionary tale of distorting the Eucharist, whether it's because of pride or some other malady.

One scholar, William Harmless, observes, Palladius had no doubt that the Eucharist was central to Christian life. Any distortion of Eucharistic piety thus meant a distortion in the spiritual quest.

So through hearing these stories and then before that hearing these accounts of these different communities, I think that we've seen the Eucharist being a central practice even in the desert among these desert fathers.

Historians have actually not consistently grasped this centrality of practice. The renowned historian Henry Chadwick stated, quote, in some forms of the ascetic movement, the sacraments were regarded as secondary or even indifferent.

[33:54] I think that's probably true to some degree, but I would want to nuance that. I think now that we have returned to the original sources a bit more and heard this, similarly, another historian, well-known, well-respected Christian historian, Justo Gonzales, notes, quote, many anchorites would go for years without partaking of communion, which from the very beginning had been the central act of Christian worship.

Both of these statements, I think both from Chadwick and Gonzales, probably are technically correct, but I just would suggest that they might be a little bit misleading in their emphasis. I think that scholar Columbus Stewart is a bit closer, who states, although participation in the Eucharist was presumed, actual practice is not always clear.

And in fact, I think as we've seen this morning, the evidence from both the Lausiak history and the Historia Monochorum in Egypto is a bit more conclusive. Scholar Lucian Regnault recognizes this and issues a strong corrective.

Regnault says, quote, contrary to what some historians have claimed, the Egyptian anchorites who withdrew from the local ecclesiastical communities did not in any way spurn the sacraments of the church.

And Rowan Williams in his book that I mentioned earlier, his great little treatment of the Desert Fathers great little introduction agrees with this. He says that they were never anti-sacramental in their outlook as Desert Fathers.

[35:19] So let's turn now from these stories and from the accounts of the communities, let's turn to the implications of these findings. I think that there are five areas worth highlighting.

First, the liturgical practices of the early Christians are relevant within liturgical studies. It's a wonderful field and it's fascinating research.

I think one scholar that I was reading for this paper specifically noted that the Eucharistic practice of the Desert Fathers is important as we trace liturgical practices from the early church through to the present day.

We can trace that strand down through the liturgies that we have received and so forth. So that's an important thing just to see what were the Desert Fathers especially as the forerunners to the monastic movement and to the that would thrive.

What were they practicing? So that is important within liturgical studies. On the other side, another scholar within liturgical studies has recently raised questions about people abstaining from the Eucharist in the desert specifically because of their notions of being impure and thus unable to participate in communion.

[36:35] This scholar writes, quote, while some of the 4th century Desert ascetics were practicing daily communion, others were being discouraged from receiving the sacrament at all if they were in an unworthy spiritual state.

As the flight to the desert, this scholar says, was often marked by a heightened awareness of human sinfulness, is it possible that prolonged abstinence from communion first arose there as a result of that attitude and then spread elsewhere.

The scholar then cites a specific example from Historia Monocorum, which we've looked at this morning, the story of Eulogius. Eulogius is said to have discerned the spiritual state of each monk who approached the altar and accordingly kept some monks back from communion.

But the story of Eulogius, when seen against the full historical backdrop that we've gone through this morning, I don't actually think affords this scholar's emphasis on abstention.

In fact, we hear from another person preaching around the same time as Eulogius towards the end of the 4th centuries, we hear of John Chrysostom, the golden-mouthed preacher, who in the cities of Antioch and Constantinople in his preaching also spoke of purity in regard to the Eucharist.

[37:51] So let me just quote from one sermon where Chrysostom states bluntly, you would not presume to kiss a king with a foul-smelling mouth, but you kiss the king of heaven with a reeking soul?

That is an outrage. And Chrysostom's goal here, I actually don't think was to prevent people from participating in the Eucharist. This is really an important distinction. Instead, it seems that Chrysostom's goal was for people to prepare themselves to receive Christ and receive one another in holiness.

I think it's probably possible that the desert father, Eulogius, had a similar goal. By talking to people as they, or discerning people's spiritual states as they approach the altar.

So I would really want to be careful about how we look at abstention from the Eucharist and especially as we hear of this person maybe potentially keeping some people from the Eucharist for a time, I don't think it would have been a prolonged abstention as this scholar speaks of.

Secondly, another implication, we see the spirituality of the desert fathers. I think the sight of Abba Macarius trekking 40 miles through the desert just to receive the Eucharist is quite memorable, isn't it?

[39:03] We see the rich place that the Eucharist did hold in the lives of the fathers. Every week they continued despite their solitude, some of them obviously in more solitude than others, but despite this solitude they still continued to come together every week to celebrate.

This was a key aspect of their spirituality. However, our conclusion here must be modest. We must be faithful to the texts. One scholar, I think, goes too far when he concludes, quote, to use their own athletic and military language, the Eucharist was their ration for spiritual warfare against sin, death, and the devil.

I don't think that claim is probably quite justified by the evidence that we've seen this morning, so I think we should be modest, but it does reveal some of their spirituality as we look at this. And third, we see the communal life of the Egyptian desert fathers.

While there are exceptions to this, we do hear of St. Anthony retreating to his mountain for 20 years and then even further as people discover him. They are just that. There are exceptions.

From 330 A.D. onward, I think that the primary desert experience was probably, at least in Egypt, to some degree communal, even in the more anchoritic or separate northern areas.

[40:19] And at the very least, their life was communal on Sundays, and I think that's important for us to recognize. A fourth implication, this clarifies the relationship between the desert fathers and the established church, which I referenced earlier.

The majority of this church desert fathers discussion is probably beyond our scope this morning, but we do see that the desert fathers were connected with the church locally, to some degree, and with its hierarchy.

I noted earlier how Pachomius was against ordination, and he definitely wasn't the only one, as we heard of the not standing too close to a bishop. But these reservations have been interpreted as devaluing ecclesial life, the life of the rest of the church.

I don't think that this is the full picture. Returning to Henry Chadwick, the renowned scholar, I think he likely overstates the case when he says, quote, it was easy for even the most orthodox monks to become indifferent, not merely to the calls of secular society and civilization, but also to the normal worshiping life of the church.

I think that probably overstates it. We do see a greater connection between the desert fathers in the church. We even, with leaders such as John Chrysostom, we hear of him entering the ecclesial ranks from an ascetic training, albeit a different geographical context, not Egypt.

[41:48] But there were multiple leaders in the church that came from this desert context. And then with return, even in exile, Athanasius, when exiled, returned to the desert. He was exiled a number of times and returned to the desert.

That's actually where he wrote his life of St. Anthony the year after Antony died. Antony, by the way, died at 105. And that life that Athanasius wrote was then a year after his death.

So leaders kind of moving back and forth between the church and the desert help us to re-look at how the two were linked. One scholar notes specifically about Nitria, that it was a desert city with clerical leadership and clear links to the larger world.

That's probably helpful for us. So there was this connection between the Egyptian desert fathers and ecclesial leadership. A very brief fifth point which follows on that fifth implication. This does show a connection of the city and the church with the desert.

Scholars such as Peter Brown, the renowned Augustine scholar, have recently recognized and emphasized this connection between the city and the desert. While the city is different from the desert, we should do that as connected in many ways.

[43:05] We see ordained priests in the desert, we see monks becoming bishops in the city, and throughout we do see these connections between the church and the desert. So in our discussion this morning, we have seen a vibrant Eucharistic practice among the Egyptian desert fathers.

And while Eucharistic practice may have been minimal in the earliest years of Antony and a few others, from around 290 to 330 AD, we do see clear Eucharistic celebration from 330, 340 AD and following.

This is true not only in Nitria and Kelia and Scetus in the north, but also the Pachomian communities in the south. So in conclusion, I find that historians should actually confidently emphasize this connection, this conclusion, excuse me, this conclusion, while acknowledging that there were exceptions and a lack of practice in the earliest desert years.

Sundays, and often Saturdays, as we've seen, in the Egyptian desert were a time of Eucharistic celebration, community, and fellowship. The early church in Egypt was unified in the Eucharist, not only in the city, but unified in the Eucharist in the desert as well.

Thank you. So that's our case study. So that's hopefully a window into some of the desert fathers, and we've heard some of their stories, and we've heard a bit of their case study.

[44:35] But I would love to, I know David's also been working on the desert fathers recently, with Bruce Hindmarsh, but I'd love to just open the floor for any questions that come up. There are any number of questions that could come up, so let's jump into that.

Yeah, please. How would you characterize the relationship between the desert fathers and the catechetical school? And the catechetical school. Tell us just a little bit about the catechetical school.

It's the school in Alexandria that basically churned out Christian education for 300 years across the entire Mediterranean world.

Yeah, yeah. And remind, can you remind me of the dates of catechetical school? Dates of catechetical school, roughly 180 AD to 450.

Yeah, yeah, that's good. Yeah, I'm not sure I can specifically speak to the catechetical school. Alexandria is going to be a no-flies zone for a lot of the desert fathers.

[45:42] They'll go to, some of them will go to sell things into the town, right? Or they'll go, and obviously there is some crossover, as we said, that people will come back to the city from the desert.

But I'm not sure I can specifically speak to the catechetical school. Yeah, that's a really good question, though. Great question.

Yeah. I might have to do some further reading and get back to you on that. Sheila? Well, maybe this ties in with what people were being taught about how to celebrate the faith, because it's very unclear to me.

At what point did the Eucharist become a priestly function? Great question. We had a bit of a kerfuffle last week about a missing minister, who should have been on the platform, apparently.

And I was listening to Marion making a desperate phone call to Dan. And I said, Marion, you know, we can put the priesthood of all believers to the test today.

[46:49] And here it is. You know, what's the fuss about? There are plenty of people that could serve communion. Apparently not in the early church, or nowadays.

So when did this, you mentioned having four ordained people at one time in one place. Was that needed? Were they escaping from something? But, and the desert fathers were not all ordained.

So how do they celebrate? Is there some confusion about who does this, and who distributes the elements, and do they use bread and wine?

I have no idea when the distinction came that only the priest drank the wine. That's a good question. Yeah, is there anybody that's able to answer that in the room, when that would have specifically happened?

Formally? Formally happened, yeah. Around the third century, when they were embracing Christianity. That's a fairly common criticism most Protestants have, of Catholicism, that in the beginning church around Jesus' time, you had the home churches.

[48:07] And we have clear evidence that they practiced celebrating the Lord's Supper, but clearly they didn't have priests there. You know, you have the apostles going and visiting, and you have other people who would go and visit and, you know, present the teaching they had.

But most of the time, it was a home church, where they had whatever scrap they had, and they would teach each other, but they would still celebrate the Lord's Supper. Yeah. When it became an official religion, you started having more formal structures.

Of course, in the pastorals, the emphasis on who leads here and who doesn't is crucial for all.

And there's an implication there that you don't get casual about how you run a church. Hey, who's got some bread and wine? Let's have our little thing. Who's leading is a big all-I concern.

Yeah. So, if I, if we look specifically at the Desert Fathers literature that we've been talking about this morning, there clearly is, at least by that point, this understanding that it is a priestly function.

[49:23] So, it's going to be before the middle. You know, like you said, it is at least by the early 3rd century, or excuse me, by the early 4th century. And it's probably, given Harvey's comment, earlier than that, in some nascent forms.

So, we could look at that. But, and then also... Unordained priestly fathers will not be in their cell or in a little community celebrating the Eucharist.

No, not that we have. So, not that we have from the literature. The literature is showing that they're coming together, and that there is an emphasis on who is ordained, so that you have somebody going either to the local church, maybe on a Saturday, like we heard, or importing some priests.

Or actually even risking the, you know, the terrors of ordination and the, you know, potential pitfalls to help that community celebrate.

So, somebody like St. Anthony, who went for 20 years, lived in a cave, by himself, would not be celebrating the Eucharist? If we take it at face value that he was in that cave for 20 years, yes, that is true.

[50:32] So, I think there's a little bit of, there's a little bit of just question on, I mean, it's a very interesting account by Athanasius. It's worth reading. The life of St. Anthony, probably some of us have read it, and I'm just not certain what all happened during those 20 years, I think.

But anyways, all that to say, by the time that we get the primary desert father's literature, there is an emphasis on ordination being required for administering, celebrating communion, and it is also bread and wine, which is interesting because the fathers are aware of pitfalls with gluttony, and so for them to still be celebrating at these agape feasts, some of them, and some of them just more specifically communion, they're engaging, but in moderation.

Right. Yeah. Hi. I'm, fantastic talk. Thank you. Really interesting stuff. I wonder about what they all did, you know, because it's just curious.

I mean, we've got this incredibly rich tradition that I understand dates from, you know, 40 years ago, but we're talking about the earliest beginnings of the church. Would it, would Eucharist have looked like what one sees in the Orthodox Church today where everybody stands up?

Would it, you know, I'm just curious about the shape of what the Holy Mysteries are. You mentioned foot washing at one point, somebody eating wild lettuce occasionally, you know, maybe that was difficult, but anyway, what, what, what, what's the, what do we know about what the shape of Eucharist would have looked like then?

[52:09] I'm just curious. Yeah. What elements are we kind of sure of, or would have a pretty good idea of, and what elements would maybe later on things? Great.

Just. It's great. It's a great question. Yeah, and that's actually something that we do know a fair amount about. I'm a bit rusty on that just because I didn't prep, I didn't revisit that before today, but I can speak to a little bit of it.

What we would recognize for sure is the, the presence of scripture and a homily. So we do have a number of the homilies. I mean, you don't, you can't go, you can't go back necessarily to first and second century homilies in great degree, but with John Chrysostom, we have a number of his homilies and they're very much worth reading.

They're very edifying. Extremely so. In fact, there, he wasn't the golden mouth creature for nothing. He really was just a wonderful homilist.

So the presence of homily scripture, the prayers, we do have some of these prayers that date back to at least the time frame that we're talking about today. And they're wonderful prayers.

[53:24] I think that is the todaym one that dates back to around, if not, if not the fourth century, it's just after. And that's in our morning prayers, in our book of common prayers.

So it really would look recognizable in certain ways. And there's some great research on the shape of the liturgy that I could share with you. Sorry that I'm just a bit rusty on that.

David. You talked about the, you said you characterized about the holy indifference. You talk more about the word indifference seems like, oh, I don't care.

And it's certainly more than that. Great, great, great question. Yeah, maybe you'd want to add to that too. For me, the holy indifference is seen in what is society telling them is important.

And if we think of the fourth century kind of tail end of Greco-Roman civilization, there is this emphasis on the influence and on the where, what is your status in society, that's something that comes up fairly often.

[54:36] Like, how do others think of you? How are you perceived by others? And the Desert Fathers tell us time and time again, forget that. Flee to yourself. Repent for your sins.

Cry out to God. Praise him. All those things that you're thinking that people are saying about you that's important, either praising you or critiquing you, it's not important.

How is your soul with God? And so there's a holy indifference to, obviously, what others are saying about you, but also the societal values. And that is a studied indifference.

There's a laying down of those things that we all do hold important in order to then love God's favor and God's grace and his grace towards us.

Would you add anything from your recent studies on that? I don't know if it's real. I've just been really struck by the ordering of what they love.

[55:40] And so the holy indifference to me is they are, it's easy to critique that maybe they live too far from community or they, their ascetical practices went too far. That's an interesting thing to think about, but I've been really struck by the motivation behind that, their ultimate love of Christ and their desire, which really is clear in Cassian, their desire for all else to see Christ.

And I think that's, you see that in the Eucharist, in the trekking 40 miles to come to the place where they believe that they would meet Christ in a real way. Yes. Absolutely.

So I think, yeah, they've been connected I think to that point. Yeah. I mean, some of the stories, let me just specifically mention this book again just because I've found it helpful to myself.

The Sayings of the Desert Fathers, the alphabetical collection, there's also the anonymous collection, just as worthy. But in this book, time and time again, you see their love, not only for Christ himself, but also for each other, that I think is in some ways not immediately what you'd expect given their solitude and their fleeing from society, but their love for one another.

And that's why I think I've read the Macarius quote towards the beginning of saying how he would overlook these faults as if he hadn't seen them or hadn't heard them.

[57:06] So there is this love of God and love of neighbor that we see very vividly, in part probably because of the desert setting and the things that they have stripped away from their lives.

But that love just does shine through. And it shines through each of these sayings that have come down to us today very clearly. Yeah. Yeah.

When you take the experience of the Desert Fathers, who are referred to as monks for the most part, how would their lives compare with monks who were at that point, certainly later, say in a Benedictine tradition, in an austere, well-regulated monastery.

Is it essentially a different form where they've not officially gathered together in a larger group? Or is it something that evolved into actual monasteries where isolation was not, at least a certain kind of isolation was not great.

Great question. I'll just give a simplistic, oversimplistic answer. That really, in Egypt at least, it depended on whether you're in the north or more in the south.

[58:37] And so in the north, you have these collections of cells that are near one another. So very much in their cells, on their own, but also maybe could even hear each other in their daily psalms, for instance, or in their morning praise.

There's one account that just talks about this valley where a number of the cells were just springing forth, I think even before the sun arose, in praise to God. So you do have people near one another to some degree in their cells, but still very much an isolated existence on a day-to-day basis.

That's why I think it's important for us to see how they did come together on Saturdays and Sundays, at least as much as we know. Further in the south, you have this, something that probably is more recognizable as a monastery, coming especially under Pachomius' leadership.

So you have the Pachomian communities, and those, they actually do start to have a shared rule of life together, and there is going to be much more in those communities, something that the Benedictine tradition would later embody.

So I think the Pachomian communities, if you were to lay those against the Benedictine, you could see much more of a progression. Maybe it's a little bit harder if you're up in the north looking at those cells.

[60:01] That's an oversimplification, but it really did vary geographically. Harvey, any modern scholarship that in any way directly or indirectly connects these people with the Dead Sea Scrolls communities?

Not that I'm aware of. Not that I'm aware of. Yeah, that's a good question. The person that really changed the field for us was Chitty.

I mentioned him just briefly. But he was one of the major scholars, and he was writing in the, I believe this was in the early 60s.

Yeah. And so a lot of the archaeological work is contained here, and then the archaeological work has obviously continued since then. But Chitty was kind of the major scholar, and I'm not aware of any connection that's specifically been found, but I could be missing something on that.

We're getting another learner's exchange now. No. No relation. From a man. No relation. No relation. Yeah, good. Thanks for answering that. Yeah. Thanks. Why are you saying another learner's exchange?

[61:17] Another learner's exchange member exchanging information. Good. A little assist, if you will. His PhD is Egypt. Yeah. All right. Call a friend lifeline.

Thank you for that. Yeah. Thank you. And he'll be speaking. No, this, oh, one last question here. Well, yeah, so just so you could do a summary of the sources of Cassian and Antony's.

Yeah. Yeah. Did they collect this stuff? Yeah. How late was it collected? Yeah. Great question. He did know Antony, yeah.

Yeah, so I've mentioned a number of sources this morning. Let me just highlight kind of two types of source. One is the collections of the sayings, which is really our best, you know, from the father's mouth, as much as we can tell.

So in, I think it's in her introduction, Benedicta Ward talks about how probably the sayings that we hear where a father is actually quoted, probably that's fairly, that's probably the most reliable historically.

[62:31] But then there's a story that can kind of come up around that saying, if you will. So the introduction to the Abba and so forth, that may be a little bit more flexible historically.

But so that's one section or one category of text is all the sayings that have come to us. And those would have been written down in the 5th century. They were orally passed throughout the 4th century.

And then our earliest texts, I believe, are late 5th century when they're written down. The other category of texts that we've used this morning are largely by travelers.

And so I highlighted that a little bit. But they're from often other monks even visiting the Egyptian area. So Lausiak history spoke of Historia monochorum in Egypto.

That was by Palestinian monks or one of one of the Palestinian group of monks. Palladius was coming from Galatia. That was his Lausiak history.

[63:31] And then I believe I mentioned one other. I'm just blanking on momentarily. But those were monks who have visited Egypt specifically to learn from them and then trying to write them down.

And that would have been John Cashin's example as well, writing it down for their home usage, essentially, for their fellow monks to use back in their country.

Yeah. So those are two kind of categories of text that we've used. And I really do commend especially the sayings of the Desert Fathers. And Athanasius' Life of Antony, I think, is a spiritual classic.

It's what we heard converted Augustine's two government employees that Augustine mentioned. And it's one that really did change the landscape of fourth century Christianity in a significant way.

It was just a significant, compelling life of a saint. And even if some of it maybe was more glorified than we would currently write as history, it really was an edifying text in a lot of ways.

[64:34] So thank you again. And thanks for being here. It's always a pleasure. Thank you.