

**The Role of the Synaxis  
in the Spiritual Life  
of the Egyptian Desert Monks**

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## **Thesis**

The Synaxis<sup>1</sup><http://www.csn.net/advent/cathen/14383a.htm>

played an important role in the spiritual life of the Desert monks<sup>2</sup>. This paper will discuss that role in the spiritual lives of the Desert monks. In particular, attention will be paid to details of the Synaxis itself and how the details of the Synaxis related to the spiritual life of the Desert monks.

The central question to be addressed is why the monks would leave the silence and solitude of their cells to go to the Synaxis once a week. It is the thesis of the author that the growing increase of importance of the Synaxis is primarily due to the increase of the importance of the Eucharist as the central point of the communication of grace in Orthodox doctrine and praxis<sup>3</sup>.

## **Introduction/Terms**

The term "Synaxis" has two distinct meanings in desert literature. One of these meanings was the offices of prayer that a monk said in his cell - the private Synaxis. The other meaning was the weekly gathering for Holy Communion - the public Synaxis.

### **The Private Synaxis (in the Cell)**

In the private Synaxis, the monk daily said formal prayers and recited portions of the Psalms and possibly other parts of the Scripture. Performance of the offices in the cell of the monk was a fine balancing act between being occupied with form and actual communion with God. Per Burton Christie, this was observed either in solitude, or in a small group of monks twice a day, in the early evening (Vespers) and during the night<sup>4</sup>. For instance, AP Macarius the Great 33, the Saying relates the story of the two brothers who rose in the middle of the night, recited the "twelve Psalms" and prayed for each other. There is very little detail about the private Synaxis in the literature. The remainder of this paper covers the public synaxis.

### **The Public Synaxis**

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White lists three functions of the weekly Synaxis; religious observances, the common meal, and semi-secular business<sup>1</sup>. These three major functions are discussed in the following sections.

### **Religious Observances of the Weekly Synaxis**

There were three religious observances at the weekly Synaxis. These were Holy Communion, vespers, and the night office.

### **The Synaxis and Holy Communion**

Holy Communion was offered on both the Sabbath and Sunday<sup>2</sup>.

Currently, the Eucharist is at the center of current Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox spirituality<sup>3</sup><http://www.ewtn.com/library/councils/v2church.txt> as the weekly point of contact for the grace of God. Similarly, the act of consecration of the Host could only be performed by a priest, hence the concrete need to regather together for the Eucharist. A person could not consecrate and administer the Host.

### **The Meaning of the Eucharist**

In AP Daniel 7, the Sayings contain a direct reference to a Eucharistic controversy over the nature of the elements of communion. Orthodoxy is represented by the two old men (Abbas) in the saying and the heterodox position is found as represented by a noble, but ignorant townsman from Scetis<sup>4</sup>. This Saying foreshadows the controversies of the Protestant Reformation with the townsman claiming that "the bread is not really the body of Christ, but a symbol."

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Orthodoxy answers the townsman in the person of the two old wise men who correct him and let him know that's not the Catholic position. The story invokes the claim of a confirming miracle (a vision) which happened to prove that the Eucharist really is the body and blood of Christ. Whether the event actually happened or not, this demonstrates the importance that the editors of the Sayings placed on the central role of Holy Communion<sup>5</sup>.

This debate was operating at a much deeper level at the time. Per J. N. D. Kelly<sup>6</sup>, the spiritualizing of the Lord's Supper traces to Origen. Origenism was a main target of the compilers of the Sayings of the Desert Fathers. Thus, the inclusion of Sayings which argued against Origenism would be of great importance in establishing the limits of orthodoxy in the time that they Sayings were compiled. However, textual critical commentary on the Sayings is beyond the scope of this paper. At the very least, this limits the historical claim of those who would try to use the Fathers to support their doctrine of the Eucharist.

In AP Poemen 30, it relates that "... for the monks: sitting in the desert they are burned by the venom of evil demons, and they long for Saturday and Sunday to come to be able to go to the springs of water, that it to say, the body and blood of the Lord, so as to be purified from the bitterness of the evil one.

Another story tangentially demonstrates the central position of the Eucharist in the spiritual life of the desert monks. In AP Theodore of Pherme 29, a story is given of how three thieves robbed Theodore and were about to steal his habit (which was worn to the Synaxis). Theodore started fighting with the thieves which made them very frightened. He suggested that they divide his goods into four portions and had the habit placed into his pile. The thieves took the other three portions. Without the habit, the monk could not attend the Synaxis. The importance of keeping the habit so that he could attend the Synaxis indirectly demonstrates the importance of receiving

the Eucharist at the Synaxis.

The habit played a role in AP Cronius 4 where a brother came to the Synaxis "in a little old mafort darned all over". He was questioned by one of the brothers who informed him that was not appropriate clothing for the Synaxis. He answered that he did not have a habit and one was given to him. The importance of not drawing attention to ones self by apparel - either too fancy, or too poor - is illustrated. Better to blend in, than to stand out as different. Even the monks had a formal dress code. When receiving the Holy Communion, the monks would remove their sandals<sup>7</sup>.

### **The Priestly Draft**

In order for the monks to be able to perform the public Synaxis which involved consecrating the Eucharist, it was occasionally necessary for one of their ranks to be ordained as a priest. Several of the sayings make a curious point about the relative positions of the priest and the monk in the minds of the monks. In AP Matoes 9, a bishop grabs a monk and ordained him as a priest. The monk did not ever offer the sacrifice of the Eucharist as a priest because he did not want the responsibility that comes along with it. The monk was also concerned that it would interrupt his private prayers to be made a priest.

The draft became so commonplace that it was said that when a monk would see a bishop approaching he would run and hide out of the fear of being made a priest. The corruption of the church was another reason monks fled from being made priests. The bishops were looking for spiritual men to make priests and the monks were a prime pool of talent.

The calling of the priest was seen as lower than the calling of a monk. The monks also wanted to remain in silence and solitude which pragmatically were the opposites of how a priest lived. The

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goal of inner peace and tranquility for a monk could only be disturbed by becoming a priest. In AP Apphy 1, the monk, Abba Apphy, becomes a bishop but finds himself unable to live the austere life of the monk while a bishop. He was informed that while in solitude God was his helper, but while he was in the world, it was man. This saying makes the point that the monk had the discipline while a monk, but in the world couldn't have the same discipline. Clearly becoming a bishop or priest was viewed as a worldly occupation in contrast to being a monk.

### **Vespers and the Night Office**

Some of the monks fell asleep during the Synaxis - most probably during the Night Office. This caused some of the Abbas to come to Abba Poemen, as related in AP Poemen 92, and ask him what should be done about the monks who were sleeping. Poemen replied that if he saw a monk who was sleeping he would put his head on his knees and let him rest. This is exemplary of the non-judgmentalism of the monks. They should not assume that the monk is a lazy sluggard and despise his fellow monk in their hearts.

The proper attitude of prayer prior to the Synaxis is modelled in AP Poemen 32 where it is related that Poemen spent an hour or so sitting alone and examining his thoughts prior to going to the Synaxis.

### **The Scripture at the Synaxis**

Burton-Christie emphasizes the importance of the reading of Scripture at the weekly Synaxis. Many of the monks were of humble backgrounds and could not read. The only time that they were exposed to the Scripture was at the Synaxis. Per Burton-Christie

While it is clear that Scripture as a written word served as an important formative influence upon

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many of the desert fathers, it is likely that for the majority of them this was not the primary means of access to the sacred texts. Rather, the monks most often encountered and appropriated the Word through hearing the Scriptures at the weekly synaxis and from the lips of the elders<sup>8</sup>.

Burton-Christie notes that the monks heard and recited the Scriptures at the Synaxis on a regular basis and took that into the cells with them, "taking the words they had heard away with them<sup>9</sup>."

### **The Agape Meal**

The sharing of the agape meal was another reason for attending the Synaxis. A similar potential problem existed as described by the Apostle Paul in 1 Cor 11. The monks were instructed to break their fasts prior to the Synaxis. This is exemplified in AP Arsenius 24 where a monk is told to "break your fast at one so as to celebrate the Synaxis untroubled, and drink some water, otherwise your body will soon suffer." The agape would essentially be the only time that they would eat cooked food<sup>10</sup>.

The attendance at the agape was a live issue for some time. A brother, as related in AP Sisoës 2, asked Sisoës if he had to remain for the agape meal after the service. The concern of Sisoës was in the amount of wine that was drunk at the agape. The brother asked if the three cups of wine were too much and the Abba answered that "If Satan is not in it, it is not much." There was a concern that the behavior at the agape would be gluttony or drunkenness.

Attendance at the agape was highly recommended and the exceptions to this demonstrate the general case. In AP Abba Isaac the Theban 2, the story is related that Abba Isaac would attend the Eucharist but not allow anyone to join him. At the end of the Synaxis, he would refuse the bread and wine offered to each of the brethren<sup>11</sup> in order to rush back to his cell into ceaseless

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prayer. When questioned, he explained that he needed to be illuminated by the Eucharist, but to keep the fire lighted, he had to return to his cell. This demonstrates that his was exceptional and not the general case.

In a contradictory Saying, AP Motius 1, a brother is instructed by Motius to attend both the Synaxis and the agape. The reason being that it is humility to do so. Otherwise, the monk might view himself as above the other monks and be consumed with spiritual pride. "Don't seek to be known for anything" was the moral of the story. Even being known for being holy - if it was beyond the others - could become a cause of pride and should be avoided.

The growing worldliness of the agape fellowship was noted in AP Megethius 4 where it says, "Originally, when we met together we spoke of edifying things, encouraging one another and we were 'like the angels'; we ascended up to the heavens. But now when we come together, we only drag one another down by gossiping, and so we go down to hell." While this has a tone of the old adage, "things were better in the good old days", there was certainly some ring of truth to it.

Instruction is given in AP Sisoës 20 that if a brother is doing penance for sin and the time of the penance overlaps the time of the agape, he should not attend the agape.

### **Social Roles of the Synaxis**

Beyond the agape meal, the Synaxis met other social needs. For the monks, the Synaxis provided a break in silence. There would be an opportunity for some fellowship and sharing, particularly at the agape meal. Before the Synaxis, the brothers would have a conference together as noted in AP Paul the Simple 1, where it says "after the customary conference, the brothers entered the holy church of God to perform the Synaxis there, as usual."



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The Synaxis provided a chance to check on the well being of other monks who were normally in their cells during the week. If a monk had died, or was sick someone could go check on him<sup>12</sup>. If the monks noted that someone was missing from the Synaxis they would make a deliberate point of checking on the brother during the week.

White indicates that the Synaxis provided a chance for the monks to share their income. They brought into the central cenobium the produce of their manual labor during the past five days, and on the Sunday evening received their allowance or ration consisting of bread, dates, and a vessel of water together with palm branches for their manual labor, for the following week<sup>13</sup>.

The Synaxis provided a chance for resolution of grievances between the monks. This is based on the Scriptural principle of not going to the altar until the grievances with a brother are resolved. In AP Arsenius 16, the story is related of how some of the brethren did not share with Arsenius a small amount of figs. The monks did not give any to Arsenius in order to not offend him (the figs were worthless). Arsenius did not attend the Synaxis and some of the brethren went to find out why he did not come. Arsenius explained that he felt disfellowshipped by them not sharing in the few small dried figs. Although the moral of the story was to illustrate the humility of Arsenius, it also illustrates that the Synaxis caused estranged brothers to reconcile.

Conversely, the Synaxis provided a chance for rebuke. In AP Poemen 11, the Saying relates the story of a priest, at the Synaxis, who defrocked (took away the habit) of some monks who had a reputation for loose living when they went into the city. It was also a chance for repentance as the priest realized he was prone to sin as well. This story has several themes contained in the one Saying. For one, a priest, at his very best, was viewed as lower than a monk. For another, the monks were rebuked and for a time suffered the loss of the habit. Additionally, it shows the

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chain of authority in that a priest had the ability to defrock a monk, but when he was bothered by his decision he went to see Abba Poemen who showed him that he was a sinner as well.

A chance to meet with the spiritual father<sup>14</sup>. The novice would be able to receive encouragement and instruction from his spiritual father at the time of the Synaxis. During the week the monk was alone in his cell typically not even seeing his Abba until the Synaxis.

In some cases, there may have been a more pragmatic reason for coming to the Synaxis. The church was located near the well and some of the monks were 5 or more miles<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 175 notes that "many of these monks come a distance of three or four miles to meet at the church." from the nearest water<sup>16</sup>. The monk could bring a container for water and carry it back with him on his return from the Synaxis.

The Synaxis was used on occasion as a place to warn the monks about particular heresies that were spreading through the countryside. For example, the Letter of Ammonius to Theophilus warns of the heresy of the Arians and was read to the assembled monks at the Synaxis. Although the monks were quite tolerant in the areas of personal sin, they were extremely zealous to preserve the orthodox faith against the many heresies of their day<sup>17</sup>.

### **Anchorites and the Eucharist**

The above discussion relates primarily to semi-anchoritic and cenobitic monks. The distinguishing characteristic of Anchoritic as compared to Semi-Anchoritic monasticism was the gathering together of the Semi-Anchorites for the Synaxis.

The prototype of all Anchoritic monasticism, Antony, went nearly 20 years without leaving the

fort, in which he imprisoned himself, to see anyone<sup>18</sup>. Clearly, there was some special operation of Grace in the life of such a person as Antony since he emerged after 20 years looking as if he had not aged a single day. Such a person would not leave his anchoritic lifestyle to receive the Eucharist.

Yet, receiving the Eucharist was to become a normal part of later monasticism. This can only be reasonable attributed to the rise in the importance of the doctrine over time. Else, if Holy Communion was central to the faith at the time of Antony, why didn't Antony leave his solitude to receive Holy Communion? Similarly, if Holy Communion is the primary means of communication of the Grace of God to man, then why there the thought that a man had to enter into silence and solitude in order to obtain Grace?

There are examples such as what is related in AP Mark the Egyptian 1, where a priest would regularly bring the Holy Communion to an anchorite monk. Clearly, Stylite monks such as Simon had to have a priest bringing them the Eucharist as well if they were to receive it. In this way, they were able to receive the elements without fear of slipping out of their monastic vows.

### **Cenobites and the Synaxis**

Cenobitic monasticism was monasticism lived as a community of men or women. Chitty<sup>19</sup> notes that the monastery of the cenobites had an assembly hall (also known as the synaxis) where the offices of the Synaxis would be held. There are also references to the kitchens needed to bake the bread for all of the monks when they would attend the synaxis<sup>20</sup>. At Scetis, Nitria and Cellia, services were only held on the Sabbath and on Sunday<sup>21</sup>. John Cassian<sup>22</sup>**Coptic Life** (fol. 99)

formulated the rules of monastic life for the Cenobites. These rules could be found in the form of Canons<sup>23</sup>

## Conclusions

The Synaxis played a significant role in the spiritual life of the Desert Fathers. It provided an opportunity for fellowship, friendship, mutual encouragement and caring in community for the desert monastics who were normally extremely isolated.

Most importantly, at the Synaxis, the monk could hear the Scripture being read and receive in the bread and wine of Holy Communion.

The Eucharist played an increasingly important role in the life of the monastics. In the early days, hermetic monks such as Antony would not receive the Eucharist for many years. If the doctrine of the necessity of the Eucharist for spiritual life was as central as some apologists for Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism claim, then why was it not a part of Antony's life? In particular, why was Antony revered as the father of Anchoritic monasticism instead of a social rebel against the ecclesiastical authority of the church? The best answer is to be found in the concept that the teaching was not nearly as central to the faith as some would claim today.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> .Synaxis - a general name for the course of the ecclesiastical offices. From the World Wide Web at: <http://www.osb.org/osb/gen/topics/lectio/cassian/inst/instnote.html> For a thorough description of the history of the Synaxis in the Christian church, see the World Wide Web page:

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the significance of desert in the Bible and history, see: SMITH, Historical Geography of the Holy Land (London, 1897); CHEYNE, Encyclopedia Biblica (London, 1899); HASTINGS. Dict. of the Bible; VIGOUROUX, Dict. de la Bible.

<sup>3</sup> White, p. 186, notes "We need only state here that the main purpose of the brethren in so assembling was to partake together of the Holy Communion."

<sup>4</sup> Burton-Christie, p. 117.

<sup>1</sup> White, p. 208.

<sup>2</sup> White, p. 208 fn 4. Quoting Cassian Inst III, 2. cf. Timothy of Alexandria, Responsa Canonica (P. G., XXXIII, col: 1305), who excepts the Sabbath and Sunday "because on them the Spiritual Sacrifice is offered to the Lord." So also Paphnutius when in disgraces used to go to the church, "on the Sabbath Day or on Sunday, not to partake of the Holy Communion", but to prostrate himself", etc.

<sup>3</sup> However, it is in the eucharistic cult or in the eucharistic assembly of the faithful (Synaxis) that they exercise in a supreme degree their sacred functions; there, acting in the person of Christ[67] and proclaiming his mystery, they unite the votive offerings of the faithful to the sacrifice of Christ their head, and in the sacrifice of the Mass they make present again and apply, until the coming of the Lord (cf. 1 Cor. 11:26), the unique sacrifice of the New Testament, that namely of Christ offering himself once for all a spotless victim to the Father (cf. Heb. 9:11-28). On the World Wide Web at:

<sup>4</sup> This towns person is described by various adjectives in the narrative as "notable life", "simple faith", "naive", "deceived", "simplicity - not malice". Clearly he is being cast in a role.

<sup>5</sup> For Protestants today, this Saying presents evidence that there were people who held that the elements were symbols. For Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox, this saying presents early evidence of the consensus of the Fathers as to the nature of the elements.

<sup>6</sup>Kelly, p. 441-442.

<sup>7</sup> White, p. 197.

<sup>8</sup> Burton-Christie, p. 117.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 117.

<sup>10</sup> White, p. 188. Also p. 207.

<sup>11</sup> He was not refusing the element of communion, but refusing the agape meal afterwards.

<sup>12</sup> White, p. 175 quoting HM "If anyone is missing from that assembly, they know at once that he has been prevented by some bodily ailment, and all make their way to visit him - not in a body, but some at one time, some at another; and each takes with him anything he may have which can please the sufferer.

<sup>13</sup> White, p. 207. White references Cyril of Scythopolis, Life of Euthyius, chs LXXXIX, XC. There are no references to this in the primary literature used in the course which this paper was prepared for. Perhaps it was more the custom of the cenobitic lifestyle and is not so much found in the Sayings?

<sup>14</sup> spiritual father - The Abba.

<sup>15</sup> White, p. 122 notes that Paphnutius had a cell 5 miles from the church and would not move it closer in spite of his customary journey to the church for the Sabbath and Sunday. He was over ninety years of age at the time and carried a jar of water back with him.

<sup>16</sup> White, p. 34.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 74.

<sup>18</sup> Life of Antony 14.

<sup>19</sup> Chitty, p. 22.

<sup>20</sup> White, p. 177 contains the claim that bread was baked for "the six hundred anchorites in the utter desert". See also White, P. 162.

<sup>21</sup> White, p. 185.

<sup>22</sup> .A well-written introduction to the life of John Cassian can be found at: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03404a.htm>

<sup>23</sup> See the World Wide Web page:  
<http://www.ocf.org/OrthodoxPage/reading/St.Pachomius/African/khame.html>.