

RECLUSION

Like ANACHORESIS, reclusion is a form of separation from the world, a fundamental element of the monastic ideal. Much practiced among the monks of Syria, it was also practiced in Egypt from the earliest days of monasticism. Saint ANTONY himself lived for a long time as a recluse before his great anachoresis in the Arabian Desert. First, he spent about ten years shut up in a tomb not far from his village, provisioned by a friend who brought him bread from time to time. Thereafter he lived for about twenty years shut up in an abandoned Roman fort.

The most celebrated Egyptian recluse was JOHN OF LYCOPOLIS, who is known from chapter 35 of the *Lausiac History of PALLADIUS* and the first chapter of the [HISTORIA MONACHORUM](#) IN AEGYPTO. He lived to a very advanced age in a three-room cave about five miles from Lycopolis (Asyut). One room was reserved for prayer; in another room a window opened on a vestibule in which the numerous visitors waited to converse with John on Saturdays and Sundays.

No one ever entered his cell, and he himself never left it. The [Historia monachorum](#) (chap. 6) mentions another recluse named Theonas, whose cell was in the neighborhood of Oxyrhynchus. He communicated with his visitors only in writing, for he had vowed perpetual silence. He came out only at night to gather the plants that were his food.

There also were some recluses in Lower Egypt. The *APOPHTHEGMATA PATRUM* mentions some among the monks of the deserts of NITRIA and SCETIS. Reclusion must be distinguished from the residence in the cell to which the monks in these deserts were constrained. They could leave their cells to visit one another, and above all to participate at the end of the week in the meal taken in common and in the liturgy celebrated in the church. But the recluse remained shut up in his cell and did not come out, even to go to church (cf. Nau, 1907, pp. 56-58). In certain cases, a priest came to celebrate the [Eucharist](#) in the recluse's cell.

Since he never left his cell, the recluse used the services of a faithful layman to obtain what he required. It was not necessary to withdraw to the desert to practice reclusion. A young Alexandrian named Theodorus, who later became a [disciple](#) of PACHOMIUS, lived for twelve years in quarters that the patriarch ATHANASIUS had fitted up for him in the church, where he acted as a reader.

Reclusion was a form of solitary life better suited for women than anachoresis in the desert. The *Apophthegmata patrum* notes some cases of women recluses, such as the former prostitute converted by Serapion. Palladius heard in Alexandria of a young woman named [Alexandra](#) who, having left the town, shut herself in a tomb; she remained there until her death, ten years later, without seeing anyone, receiving what she required through an opening in the wall (Palladius, chap. 5).

This voluntary reclusion is evidently very different from the reclusion imposed upon monks guilty of serious faults. Some monasteries, like those of Pachomius and SHENUTE, had, in fact, prisons. Inspired by a purely religious motive, reclusion could appeal to the word of Jesus in Matthew 6:6: “When you pray, go to your private room and shut the door, and [pray](#) to your Father who is in secret.”

Several historians (among them Bouché-Leclercq) have maintained, following H. Weingarten, that reclusion among the monks was a survival within Christianity of the way of life of men who lived in the Serapeum at Memphis, to whom the Greek papyri give the name *katochoi*, a term generally translated as “recluse.” This thesis was refuted as early as 1920-1922 by P. Gobillot. Even retaining the meaning of “recluse,” which has been contested by E. Preuschen, according to whom the *katochoi* were “possessed,” the motives for this reclusion are not very clear and have been debated. K. Sethe saw recluses simply as prisoners, most often shut up for debt. For L. Delekat, they were people in difficulty who had taken refuge in the temple, claiming the right of asylum. According to these diverse hypotheses, the reclusion of the *katochoi* does not appear to

be inspired by any religious motive, which is essential in monastic reclusion.

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