

SAINT BARSANUPHIUS

A fifth-sixth century anchorite. Although he is not mentioned in the Coptic SYNAXARION, Barsanuphius deserves a place of honor because of his outstanding [holiness](#) and the exceptional influence he exercised in the history of Christian spirituality. He was of Egyptian origin, and his [mother](#) tongue was Coptic. We know nothing of his youth or life until we find him as a hermit in a monastery founded near Gaza at the end of the fifth century by Seridos. “The Grand Old Man,” as he was called, never left his cell and saw nobody except Seridos, who acted as his secretary. Barsanuphius was not only the spiritual director of the monks of the community of Seridos and the superior but was also consulted by a host of monks, priests, laymen, and bishops of the region.

All these exchanges were carried out in [writing](#) through the intermediary of Seridos, who passed on the requests and replies, the latter being written down by him in [Greek](#) to the dictation of the Grand Old Man or the “alter ego” of Barsanuphius, “the other Old Man,” John, a hermit in a neighboring cell.

About 850 letters from this correspondence, collected by a monk of the community, have been preserved and were published by Nicodemus the Hagiographer at Venice in 1816. A good many of these letters were translated into Arabic and Georgian. The [Garden of the Monks](#), published in Cairo, contains long extracts from them. Multiple editions in Slavonic and Russian appeared in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

This dossier of undisputed [authenticity](#) is the only document of this kind that informs us about the practice of spiritual direction in ancient monasticism. Brought up on the Bible and the apothegms of the fathers, which he quoted constantly, Barsanuphius was indeed in the line of his Egyptian masters by reason of his rigorous asceticism and deep spiritual life. He also emulated them in his humility and the extraordinary gifts with which God endowed him. Among his most famous disciples at least

two names well known in Oriental [hagiography](#) must be mentioned: Dorotheus and Dositheus.

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