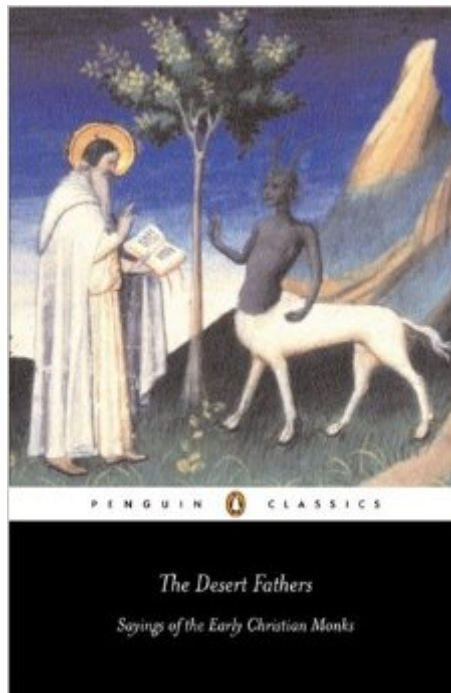


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# The Desert Fathers: Sayings Of The Early Christian Monks (Penguin Classics)



## Synopsis

The Desert Fathers were the first Christian monks, living in solitude in the deserts of Egypt, Palestine, and Syria. In contrast to the formalized and official theology of the "founding fathers" of the Church, they were ordinary Christians who chose to renounce the world and live lives of celibacy, fasting, vigil, prayer, and poverty in direct and simple response to the gospel. First recorded in the fourth century, their Sayingsâ "consisting of spiritual advice, anecdotes, parables, and reflections on lifeâ "influenced the rule of St. Benedict, set the pattern for Western monasticism, and have inspired centuries of poetry, opera, and art. Organized around key themesâ "Charity, Fortitude, Lust, Patience, Prayer, Self-control, and Visionsâ "this edition of the Sayings is fresh, accessible, and authoritative. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700Â titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust theÂ series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-dateÂ translations by award-winning translators.

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## Customer Reviews

This 2003 paperback is a good first book on the Desert Fathers. Benedicta Ward's introduction is excellent and her scholarship within the field is well known. This volume is a translation of the Latin text, *Verba Seniorum*, which arranges the stories and sayings according to topics (Self-Control,

Fortitude, Unceasing Prayer, Humility, Charity, etc.) This particular text would make an excellent addition to a home library or a textbook for highschool or college students. A more complete version of these ancient texts can be found in Benedicta Ward's *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Cistercian publications, 1975) and *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*, translated by Norman Russell with a monograph by Benedicta Ward (Cistercian publications, 1981.)

"The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks," translated and with an introduction by Benedicta Ward, not only provides insight into the life and thought of early Christian monasticism, but is a source of inspiration for anyone who wishes to take seriously the disciplines of the Christian faith today. As I read through most of these thought-provoking quotes and anecdotes, I was amazed at how much the spiritual struggles of these holy men and women are similar to my own. Granted, these were written about and for the monastic setting in the desert over 1,500 years ago, but it doesn't take much to translate the principles provided here into our secular contemporary lives. This priceless volume served as my bedtime reading for many months, and it will be in the rotation so that I can return to it again and again. There are so many treasures here. Below are a few samples: "Chastity is born of tranquility, and silence, and inner prayer." "If you are not tempted, you have no hope; if you are not tempted, it is because you are sinning." "The passions work in four stages: first in the heart, then in the face, third in words, fourth in deeds -- and it is in deeds that it is essential not to render evil for evil. If you purify your heart, passion will not show in your expression, but if it does, take care not to speak about it; if you do speak, cut the conversation short in case you render evil for evil." Highly recommended reading for anyone seeking spiritual discipline.

As a protestant evangelical, a book on the Desert Fathers is probably flirting with heresy for me. However, I have always admired monastic figures (even from my pre-Christian days when I studied Buddhism). The men and women in the Desert Fathers obviously showed signs of radical conversion. It seems to me that what makes them different from some great Protestant figures, however, is their internal focus: the Fathers did not become evangelists or preachers but rather solitary, often silent practitioners of a kind of self-denial that most evangelicals would probably shun as being untrue to the gospel. However, as a single celibate man who lives in rather humble circumstances (at least when compared to my upper-middle-class upbringing) I can relate to the Fathers--or, rather, look up to them as role models or heroes. Therefore I keep a copy of this book by my bedside and often turn to it at night when tempted toward impurity or despair over having not achieved the American dream for myself. While as an evangelical I would have trouble elevating

these sayings over God's word in the Bible, I am certainly glad to have the witness of the Desert Fathers as a spur toward righteousness in my walk with Christ (Hebrews 10:24).

This wonderful collection gives an insight into early Christian thought and the part it played in the development of medieval monastic culture. The introduction by Ward is informative, placing the writings in their historical context and outlining the breadth of their influence throughout the middle ages and beyond. The book is a collection of sayings by Palestinian, Syrian and Egyptian monks and is organised around various themes such as compunction, charity, humility, lust, patience and fortitude. One aphorism by Sisois from the first section in the collection, entitled 'Progress in Perfection', establishes a theme that is a constant refrain throughout the volume: 'Be despised; put your self-will behind your back; be free of wordly concerns, and you will have peace.' The section on compunction is possibly the most rich and humane in the collection. It is the 'deep piercing' or 'compunction' of the soul by grief and love that was central to the faith of the Desert Fathers: 'It was said about Arsenius that whenever he was doing manual work he kept a cloth at his chest because of the tears that streamed from his eyes.' The desert fathers, most likely due to their harsh environment, had a particularly low opinion of the natural world and the human body. Their ideas could consequently be seen as contributing to the anti-ecological strain of Christianity, and the notion that man's spirit is supposedly superior to the rest of creation. Nevertheless, Ward has produced a wonderful translation of the Latin texts that offer unusually rich insights into the secrets of the heart and the psychology of the spiritual life. Its pages are full of wisdom that can still resonate with people in a modern context and, despite their antiquity, assuage some of the anxieties peculiar to our contemporary condition.

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