

PERSONAL HOLINESS AS THE SOURCE OF CHRISTIAN SOCIAL JUSTICE:
A CASE STUDY OF HOLINESS AND HOSPITALITY IN THE LIFE OF
ABBA MACARIUS THE EGYPTIAN

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Abstract

In Jesus' life the road to from baptism to justice led through the desert. There he was refined and prepared for service. From the foundation developed in the desert, he launched the ministry of justice announced in Luke 4. For some in the church, this journey through the desert has served as a model for developing a ministry of justice. In this model the work of justice flows out from the personal holiness refined in the desert through submission to Christ. The desert father Macarius of Egypt serves as a guide for contemporary Christians in the journey through the desert. This study explores the interaction of personal holiness and justice through the life and practice of Macarius of Egypt. Macarius' habit of asceticism led him to acts of justice that imitated Christ's acts of justice by freeing the captives, giving sight to the blind, and liberating the oppressed. As contemporary Christians imitate Macarius, as he imitated Christ, strength for Christian justice will flow from the fountain of personal holiness.

Introduction

Luke 4:16-21 (English Standard Version)

¹⁶ *And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read.* ¹⁷ *And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written,*

¹⁸ *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.*

*He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,*

¹⁹ *to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”*

²⁰ *And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.* ²¹ *And he began to say to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”*

Jesus in the desert

Jesus spoke bold and powerful words in Nazareth's synagogue that day. He spoke words of liberation and healing, freedom and justice. Luke the Evangelist chose these as the first words of Jesus' public ministry to demonstrate the radical nature of Jesus' mission. Jesus refined this mission not in the places of political power, not in the seat of religious authority, not even living and working among the poor and outcast, but in a pursuit of holiness which led through the desert wilderness.

The Spirit led Jesus into the desert so that he might learn the vocation of the Son of God. As he refined himself in holiness, through communion with the Spirit and testing by the devil,

his mission of liberation, healing, and justice became clear. As Jesus drew closer to his Father, he was led into the lives of the hurting and oppressed. Thus, his mission to the sick and lost was a natural outflow from his relationship with the Father and the Spirit, an outflow from his personal piety.

So it is in the life of every true seeker of God. As Christians draw near the Lord, they are drawn into service and love of others. Personal holiness provides the fuel from which the fire of social justice burns. Without this sustaining private life of prayer and discipline, communion and thanksgiving the fire of social justice may burn brightly but also burn too quickly. In the end, the sincere seeker of justice may burnout before the battle is won, if s/he does not seek first the God of justice.

The basic premise of this paper is that sustainable social justice must be built on a foundation of personal holiness.¹ Jesus began a campaign freeing the captive, blind and oppressed, only after his journey in the desert. His ministry was sustained by prayer in the lonely places (Mark 6:30-32). Thus, it is appropriate to look to the desert for an understanding of the interaction of personal piety and social justice.

For this journey into desert holiness and justice, Macarius the Egyptian will serve as a guide. He has guided many into the life of holiness and justice; his direction continues to be useful. Through the various works in which his words and deeds have been preserved, Macarius will serve as a case study in the interaction of personal holiness and social justice. In his life an ascetic discipline permeated by prayer overflowed into a ministry of hospitality that freed those captive to physical illness, gave sight to the spiritually blind, and liberated those oppressed by too heavy burdens.

A note on hagiography

It may be helpful at the outset to comment on the literary form of the stories recorded about Macarius the Egyptian. The sources available on Macarius are hagiographical in nature. That is, while they record eye witness or second hand accounts, these stories are not told to preserve history. They are intended to stir others to the same heights of holiness that Macarius and the other monks attained (Harmless, 2000, 483-518).

One might argue that this undermines the use of these accounts in an endeavor to determine a model for the interaction of holiness and justice. However, though the writers of these stories were intent on extolling the virtues of these holy men and women, they could not avoid speaking of their works of mercy and justice. This literature, which perhaps pushes the limits of reality and paints portraits of saints in nearly mythic proportions, is precisely the

¹ It is beyond the scope of this paper to address the importance of social holiness, but it is assumed that membership in a holy community, where possible, is an essential feature of personal holiness. Indeed, this was a feature of desert monasticism. Even the most isolated hermits met periodically with others who supported them or maintained a partnership with one or two other monks. On this see John Chryssavgis, *In the Heart of the Desert*, (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2003), especially chapter 12.

literature to view the reality of justice as the consequence of the holy life because if this were not a necessary outcome of Christian holiness these writers would not have hesitated to leave it out. Yet, they tell many stories of holy men and women who work healings, open blind hearts and free the oppressed.

Holiness of Macarius

Asceticism

The first men and women who fled to the deserts of Egypt had one goal in mind. Macarius often referred to the goal of the monastic life as unity with God (Vivian, 2004a, 4, 105).² Today it might be called holiness of heart and life. For the purposes here, Macarius language (unity with God) will be used interchangeably with the term holiness. In the Egyptian desert unity with God was developed through a rigorous asceticism.

At the time of the monks, and the recording of their stories, asceticism did not carry the connotations it does in later centuries. It referred to an athlete's striving and training. Yet, this definition was expanded by the Christian ascetics for "the monks went without sleep because they were watching for the Lord; they did not speak because they were listening to God; they fasted because they fed on the word of God. It was the end that mattered, the ascetic practice was only a means" (Ward, 1975, xxv). Thus, in Macarius' life asceticism refers to his training and vigilance for unity with God. Central to this practice was continual prayer, indeed this was another way of stating the goal of this life. Three nearly universal characteristics of desert asceticism are separation of place, restraint of appetites, and deconstruction of the will.

Separation of place

The defining characteristic of desert asceticism was spatial separation. They began by going to the outskirts of town. In time, many made their way further into the desert for greater isolation. Yet, this isolation was not merely for the sake of being alone. Rather, it served two functions, first to intensify the struggle for a holy life and thereby subdue and purify the passions. Second, they went to the desert for relative safety in this intensification of the struggle. Palladius, author of the *Lausiac History*, wrote that in the place where Abba Macarius practiced asceticism even those who neglected their practice had very little to eat (Vivian, 2004a, 4, 105). Thus, by removing themselves from society, the ascetics insulated themselves, to a degree, from those things that would allow them to fall from their practice.

² A note on citation: The stories are organized within translations by paragraph number. Thus, the italicized number marks the paragraph number; the final number in the notation marks the page(s) on which the story is found. Additionally, most of the stories recounted in this paper are paraphrased from the sources listed. In some places direct quote from the sources overlap with statements from Macarius, this strains the current notation system.

Restriction of appetite

As indicated above, one of the purposes of going to the desert was to intensify the struggle with the passions³. They did this because one of the primary tasks of the monk was to gain restraint of their appetites. For they knew that as long as the ascetic was controlled by the passions (whether the stomach, intellect, loins, etc.) s/he is not free to fully submit to Christ. The purpose of overcoming the passions was not to have accomplished a great feat (for this would lead to pride), but because unbalanced appetites kept them from union with God.

Deconstructing the will

Submission of the will to Christ permeates and enlivens the holiness that made Macarius famous. The following story highlights the importance of humility in the life of the ascetic: It is said that a demon once met Macarius on the road, and attempted to strike him repeatedly, but the devil could not touch the old man. The devil then said, “You and I, we are not so different. You fast, I do not eat. You keep vigil, I never sleep. How are you so powerful? Only in one thing do you best me.” “What is it?” Macarius asked the demon. “Your humility, because of that I am powerless over you” (Ward, 1975, *II*, 129f).

The rest of the life of asceticism was useless, indeed dangerous, if humility was not the outcome of the practice, for true humility was continual submission to Christ (Vivian, 2004c, 49, 123). Thus, to achieve union with God it was necessary to defeat the passions that would lead one astray from that union. In order to defeat these passions it was necessary to submit oneself to the humble service of Christ. This was often learned first through submitting to an abba or amma. The distractions of society threatened to keep one from wrestling with the passions and from submission to Christ, thus many fled society to pursue union with God.

Prayer

Prayer is not merely another piece of the ascetic life, but it binds the whole together and offers it as a humble sacrifice to Christ. Thus, although it is not separate from the rest of the ascetic life, prayer will receive a separate treatment. For, prayer constitutes the primary vehicle for developing the humility of the monk and of maintaining dependence on Christ.

Active prayer

Macarius strove, as all monks do, to fulfill the call to pray continually. In this pursuit, many words may become a burden. For this reason spoken prayer is quite limited in the life and practice of Macarius. He limits the specific words used in prayer to a few, brief lines. Using an early form of the Jesus Prayer he instructs his students to say, “Lord Jesus, as you will, have mercy” or “Lord Jesus, as you will, lead me.” Recognizing, however, that this may not suffice in

³ In the literature of the desert, the passions are often personified as demons. Thus, the monks encounter the demon of gluttony, the demon of fornication, the demon of greed, etc. Often the stories say that certain monks “wrestle with demons.” This refers to a monks struggle to resist the urge to satisfy some ungodly appetite, or over indulge some godly appetite.

all instances, he adds to this teaching. “If you are afflicted, say, ‘Lord, help me!’.” These brief instructions cover the vocal or active prayer of Macarius (Vivian, 2004b, 23, 68).

Contemplative prayer

Despite the somewhat limited spoken or active prayer Macarius fulfilled the call to continual prayer. His disciples said that in all things he continually turned his mind to union with God. That is, though he prayed with only brief words, whatever he did, whether manual labor, care for the sick or his work as priest, “his thoughts would often fly to the heights and he would speak with God while abiding in the vision of heaven” (Vivian, 2004a, 4, 105).

One means of achieving unceasing prayer is continually blessing the Lord Jesus in the heart and mind. Macarius taught his followers to ‘ruminate’ on Christ (Vivian, 2004c, 34, 111). He taught monks to continually tend the name of Christ in their heart and dwell with Christ. A tool for this was the prayer mentioned above, “Lord Jesus, have mercy.” Through filling themselves with thoughts and visions of Christ, the monks’ thoughts remained on God and thoughts introduced by the demons, or any source that would pull attention from God, would be powerless.

Prayer and the body

Macarius refutes separation between the work of the body and the work of the spirit as unorthodox. Thus, the work of prayer is the work of the whole person. If left to itself, the body will pull the heart and mind from the work of prayer. Likewise, if separated from the work of the body, the heart and mind may begin to wander from Christ as boredom sets in. Thus, Macarius recognized the union of mind and body, and disciplined both in the life of prayer. This was done through manual labor during prayer, and the utilization of various prayer postures.⁴

Thus, Macarius fled to the desert in order that he might pursue unity with God with his whole being. His life of prayer formed the foundation and mortar for a severe ascetic practice. Through this practice he subdued his appetites and submitted himself to the service of Christ. In this way he remained continually united with God. Being united with God, however, he was not left to himself. Having been called into the desert and having achieved union with God and submission to Christ, Macarius was in turn sent to live out his life in service to others.

Macarius’ hospitality as an outgrowth of holiness

It is quite paradoxical that a man who taught others to avoid speech (Vivian, 2004b, 14, 63f), to be dead to the world (Ward, 1975, 23, 132), to remain in their cell and weep for their sins (Vivian, 2004b, 3, 53f) and to train their thoughts on the Lord alone would be held up as a model of social justice through hospitality. Indeed, the stories from the desert—like the stories from scripture—are quite paradoxical.

⁴ Macarius practices the union of body and mind through “stretching the hands out to pray,” or sitting down to weave baskets while praying, or weaving while in spiritual discourse with another monk.

Despite seeking solitude and God alone, the great hermits learned that a life of holiness is completed by service to others and providing justice for the people of God. As the holy men and women of the desert pursued and progressed in unity with God, many were gifted for service. This was a way of knowing that they were on the right path and that they were trustworthy guides. By these gifts the Spirit verified their holiness, and also made them useful to others. Thus, their pursuit of unity with God led them to service to others because they were sought out for their healing abilities, as guides on the road of holiness, or as consultants with regard to orthodoxy.

Macarius' fame first grew, it seems, because of his giftedness with healings. Many of the stories told of him recount the many people who sought healing from Macarius, either from physical ailment or from a demon. So, as stated generally above, the fruit of Macarius' union with God was his healing service to others.

As Macarius' fame as a healer grew, so did his reputation as an abba, a father, or guide on the path to unity with God. A curious form of monasticism grew up around Macarius. His followers were semi-anchoretic monks. That is they lived as hermits—alone or with one partner—keeping a private rule, which was guided by the abba or amma. Many sought the guidance of Macarius or his closest disciples and as such there developed a loosely associated community of hermits. The uniqueness of his community afforded Macarius great publicity, for many heard of and visited Scetis, the area in which the Macarian community and daughter monasteries settled.

In the ways described above, Macarius received the gift of hospitality on the merit of having pursued holiness through discipline and prayer. In order to maintain unity with the Spirit who had thus gifted him, Macarius needed to use this gift by welcoming and serving those who sought healing and guidance from him. Thus, Macarius' asceticism and holiness led him to do justice by training many monks, and healing many who sought his help. In time Macarius' ministry of hospitality grew to include orthodox, heterodox and pagan priests, bishops, well known monks and demoniacs, the rich and the poor, gluttons and the most severe ascetics, and even the animals. As such, all parts of creation were impacted and enriched by Macarius' humility.

Macarius' hospitality as social justice

The central question remains, though, does the ascetic practice that culminates in a mission and ministry of hospitality fulfill the call of social justice? If the message and ministry of Jesus are any measure (and they seem to be the church's ideal model of justice), then yes, Macarius' life and ministry demonstrate a robust understanding and fervent pursuit of social justice. For in his declaration of a mission for justice Jesus reads a passage that centers on freedom for captives, sight for the blind, and liberation for the oppressed. The following accounts from the life of Macarius will demonstrate that the same themes are found in the life and ministry of Macarius the Egyptian.

Setting captives free

Macarius' personal holiness is expressed as hospitality perhaps most obviously through the many healings performed through him. Palladius gave us only a glimpse of the known healing miracles done through Macarius. He summed up the multitude, however, stating, "God did great miracles through this Abba Macarius the Egyptian, healings of those who were sick, all of which I will recount together, for he used to cast out numerous demons" (Vivian, 2004a, 4, 105). Through this healing ministry, Macarius freed many who were held captive by physical ailment and demon possession.

Macarius' hospital near the church at Scetis

Macarius' served not only those who would be healed immediately and so demanded only limited hospitality. Rather, recognizing his gift of healing, the old man made space in his life for regular care of the sick. He built a hospital near his church, where many stayed while they were under Macarius' care. There were so many who visited him that he had a personal passage from the church to the hospital, so that he could come and go without being swamped by the crowds who came for healing. It is said that five or six people became well everyday under the ministry of Macarius (Vivian, 2004a, 7-9, 120-123).

Though his was a habit of solitude and constant prayer before God he did not exclude regular care for the afflicted. Also, though his was a continually demanding schedule of care for others he was sustained by the above identified continual communion with Christ. If the stories are to be believed, his care for the many did not distract him from devotion to the One. It was in this habit of continual devotion that he was sustained in his care for others.

Macarius and an antelope

Macarius' healing ministry by which he freed those in bondage to physical ailment was not limited to the human order. Animals also sought him out, and were not neglected. A number of stories exist, yet consider this tale of hospitality to an antelope.

Abba Macarius once told of a time he was met at the river by a distraught looking female antelope. She pulled at the monk's tunic, desiring for him to follow. As they went, she led him to where her young were at rest. As he examined the young, he learned they were deformed. Having compassion on the beasts, he prayed for them to the Lord Christ and made the sign of the cross over them. As a result, they were healed. The mother antelope fed her young and the old man went away rejoicing (Vivian, 2004c, 14, 97).

Once again, while following his rule Macarius was led to welcome and care for those bound by physical malady. Through communion with Christ, he was given the ability even to care well for the wild beasts. In response to this, he opened himself to the possibility of what Christ might do to heal creation through him.

The healing of the procurator's daughter

When Macarius' name had been heard through much of the Empire, the procurator of Antioch, Agathonicus, sent his daughter to Macarius for healing. The daughter's affliction is not recorded, but it is said that she was healed the moment the old man prayed for her. She was then sent back to her father, full of life (Vivian, 2004c, 3, 86).

The hospitality of Macarius is not immediately apparent in this story. However, the wider literature reveals that this openness to welcome and care for a woman is questionable at best. Another story from the literature of this Macarius tells of the uproar caused by bringing a female near the monks' cells for healing (Vivian, 2004a, 5, 106ff). One of the greatest, most distracting weapons the demons had against the desert monks was the thought of a beautiful woman. As such, they strove to avoid women to preserve their habit of prayer. Thus, for Macarius to make space within his rule for the healing of this young woman reveals great hospitality.

Macarius' hospitality took the form of concern for the physical wellbeing of humans and beasts, those who could be quickly cured and those who required prolonged care, those for whom it was acceptable for him to care and those whom the care of might call his reputation into question. The many who came, encroaching on his monastic solitude, were graciously welcomed and as many as came received freedom from physical bondage.

Blind to the truth of God

From Macarius' holiness and unity with God flowed a serenity that extended hospitality even to followers of other gods and those deceived by devils. He met enemies with grace, peace, and truth. He did not permit deceit to be spoken, but he was gentle in rebuke. It was this nonviolent way that led many who had been blind to the truth of God.

Encounter with a pagan priest

Once Macarius' hospitality contrasted that of his disciple (who, it would seem, had not progressed so far as Macarius on the road toward hospitality), and in this contrast a pagan priest saw the true image of Christ. On a journey, the old man's disciple ran on ahead. Meeting a pagan priest on the road, the disciple called to the priest and insulted him for his lack of faith. Upon hearing this, the priest's heart was hardened against the truth and love of God and he violently beat the inhospitable disciple.

Going on a bit farther, the priest met Macarius on the road. "Greetings, greetings you weary man," Abba Macarius said to the priest. The priest replied, "What do you see in me?" The old man said, "I've seen you wearing yourself out in vain." The priest was honored, he told the old man, "I recognize now that you are on God's side. I just met a wicked monk on the road and beat him nearly to death." He then fell at the feet of the old man and begged to be made a monk. The old man agreed, and many other pagans came to the faith because of this priest. Thus, the hospitality and kind greeting of Macarius, rooted in his unity with Christ, won the heart of the priest. As a result, many pagans were saved. Reflecting on this experience, Macarius stated, "one evil word makes even the good evil, while one good word makes even the evil good" (Ward, 39, p 137).

Thus, it was not in dismissive or hostile confrontation that Macarius won the lives of heretics⁵ and pagans; rather it was through the hospitality of Christ. This is justice in the meeting of unbelievers with honor, yet defending the faith through word and deed. Truly, Macarius' hospitality, undergirded by his personal piety, facilitated not only physical wellness but also interreligious justice, shining the light of Christ into blind eyes and healing them.

Releasing the oppressed

Macarius' ministry freed many from oppression. Many were granted freedom through his example of a simple rule, continual prayer and hospitality. Macarius realized that asceticism was of no value if it did not lead to unity with God. He once said, "Be vigilant in all things. Ensure that your habit leads you to unity with God, otherwise it is useless. For even fasting, compassion and asceticism lead to Gehenna if they lead away from God" (Vivian, 2004c, 49, 123) Thus, Macarius was determined to protect those he could from an oppressive discipline that would separate them from unity with God.

Oppression of too severe penance

There was a brother who fell into sin. He came to one of the fathers, Abba Macarius of Alexandria. The Alexandrian placed the brother under a severe penance, increasing his asceticism to choke out the sin. However, the brother found that he could not complete the penance and could not defeat the sin. Fearful, the brother sought the direction of Abba Macarius of Egypt.

The Egyptian heard the case of the brother. Having pity on him, he encouraged him to do what he could to defeat the sin, and to resume his ascetic practice as before. "But what of the orders of Macarius of Alexandria?" the brother asked. "My son," he replied, "you are not bound by that order, rather Macarius is bound by his words." The brother was greatly encouraged by this.

The Alexandrian heard what the Egyptian had said. He then fled into a marsh to remain there until he had completed the penance he had placed on the brother. The Egyptian learned that the other Macarius had fled, and so he sought him out. He reproached the father for his behavior, and instructed him, "I said what I did to encourage the brother, not to burden you. So get up and go home."

"No," the Alexandrian replied, "I will not leave until I have completed the sentence with which you bound me."

"No, come with me and I will show you your penance," the Egyptian said. "This will be your penance: this year, eat only once each week." Abba Macarius said this because he knew this was already the practice of the Alexandrian (Vivian, 2004b, 27, 70-71).

Having shown true repentance, both the brother and the Alexandrian needed not burden themselves further, but find the freedom of Christ. Macarius of Egypt enabled both to find proper

⁵ For another, more entertaining (and perhaps inspiring) story, see Vivian, 2004a, 6, 109.

repentance, which involved returning to their habit. They were to return to their life in service to Christ and, having acknowledged their fault, not allow their sin to deter them from further progress in the pursuit of unity with God. Too great a burden would have hindered their progress, so Macarius sought to free them from that oppression to be free to love and serve the Lord.

Freedom in Christ's compassion

Macarius echoes the above teaching in another place. A brother confessed a sin to him, and he replied, "Turn back to God and do not fear. Turning you will find the compassion of Christ, compassion that is like a nursing mother who is not deterred by the bad smell and excrement of her child. Rather, she turns to the child with pity, looking on him with joy, and takes away his uncleanness. So, God does not desire the destruction of sinners, but longs that they turn to him and receive life" (Vivian, 2004c, 23, 104).

Again, Macarius does not seek to tie heavy burdens to the fallen, but seeks to lift them up to the face of Christ. He knows that only there will they find life and liberation from oppression. As such, Macarius' ministry of justice involved freeing fallen monks from the fear of turning to a too demanding and judgmental God.

Oppressed by the world

Another brother came to him asking how he might be saved. Macarius instructed him to go to the cemetery and insult the dead; throw rocks at them and call them names. So the brother did.

He returned the following day. Macarius asked him, "Well, did they speak to you?" "No," replied the brother. Macarius instructed him to go again to the cemetery and praise the dead. "Call them saints, apostles and righteous," he told him. The brother went.

Returning the next day the brother said, "I praised them." "And did they reply?" the old man asked. "No." the brother answered. "So you abused them and they did not respond and you praised them and they did not respond. Thus it must be with you. Be dead to the world and its scorn and praise. If you wish to be saved, take no notice of the abuse or compliments of the world" (Ward, 1975, 23, 132).

Abba Macarius sought to free the brother from the cares and opinions of the world. Seeking the praise of onlookers is a demanding task. Subjecting oneself to the opinion of others is a great burden. So, Macarius desired to free this brother for the oppression of catering to the world.

Macarius' ministry of justice freed, gave sight to, and healed many. Following the model of Christ, Macarius journeyed into the desert, was refined by struggle with passions and communion with the Spirit, and attained unity with God. As a result, he was empowered to offer liberating hospitality to many.

Egyptian holiness and Wesleyan holiness

It seems that, for Macarius the Egyptian, a habit of sitting alone in his cave for long hours, eating very little, and weaving palm baskets was a legitimate path through personal holiness to unity with God to social justice. It also seemed to work for his many followers, of whom many stories like the ones recounted above are told. Yet, those who may read these words will likely have neither the leisure for nor the calling to this sort of holiness. How might this Christ follower, who looks so strange to modern eyes, be a guide for Christ followers in the Wesleyan tradition the United States?

Several considerations seem helpful here. First, Macarius recognized the need for singleness of mind and freedom from distraction. Next, he understood the importance of caring for the self in order to care for the many. Finally, he understood the heart of Christ to be the only legitimate source of social justice.

John Wesley wrote on the one thing needful (Wesley, 1991). Full devotion to Christ is central to the Christian life; from this everything else flows. This is central to the spirituality of the desert as well. Macarius did not flee to the desert because he hated people. He did not live in a cave to live as an eccentric old man. Rather, he did these acts to find freedom from the cares and concerns of the world.

Christians in America have no shortage of distractions. The desert edict to flee may be a welcome word of life. Though it may not be necessary to find a cave, it may be helpful to be known as one who lives under a rock. Perhaps living less distracted by a constant flow of media, food, and other pleasures may provide freedom for the continual contemplation of Christ. Fleeing the noise of the world may afford the freedom to hear the direction of the Spirit. As Christians seek the one thing needful, they may find the world knocking on their door to receive healing, vision and freedom.

Additionally, and in correlation to singleness of vision, Macarius reminds his students not to lose themselves attempting to save another. If reproving another leads to self-gratification or anger, it is better not to reprove the other (Ward, 1975, 17, 131). Also, Macarius' practice of hospitality and justice rested in a rhythm of service and solitude. Macarius' hospital was a primary location for his ministry of healing. Macarius had a private tunnel from the hospital to the church. As he walked back and forth, twice a day, he would say twenty-four prayers. Thus, he took this time of walking as private time to commune with Christ (Vivian, 2004a, 8, 121). Macarius' habit and teaching remind Christians even in the United States that the life of the believer must be protected in order to be effective. This emphasizes the need for a continual, personal communion with Christ and periodic "desert" retreat in order to sustain a ministry of justice.

Finally, a brother once inquired of Abba Macarius saying, "Others have told me to follow this great commandment, 'Go, visit the sick.'" Macarius replied, "Yes, the Lord said, 'you visited me when I was sick,' but for you it is better to remain in your cell...for it was not without entering into the darkness that Moses received the tablets inscribed by the finger of God"

(Vivian, 2004c, 69, 136). Macarius perceived that, for this brother, it was better for now to remain in his cell.

Another saying may help to clarify the one above. He once told a brother, “If you enter into the solitary life, endure it with great patience. Do not allow yourself to too easily abandon your post. Do not leave unless the Lord directs you to a brother in greater suffering than yourself” (Vivian, 2004c, 68, 134).

Abba Macarius in both sayings is not discouraging service or justice, but he is calling into question the motives of the server. The greatest strength of the monk is humility. Conversely, the surest way to fall is pride. Macarius protects the brothers against pride in their own works. He counsels all his hearers to be sure the Lord calls for a certain act of mercy, otherwise the one performing the act may become prideful and be destroyed.

Macarius, then, is a model in at least these things: he teaches (1) that the Christian’s sole aim must be unity with God, (2) that to achieve this one must nurture that relationship, and (3) that justice ministry flows out from the heart of Christ, and Christians join in that ministry as they are joined to him. In a saying mentioned above, Macarius stated that even compassion may lead to Gehenna if it leads away from God. Thus, whatever the Christian or Christian community does must be rooted in and lead toward relationship with God.

Personal holiness as the well-spring of social justice for the contemporary church

Macarius’ love for Christ led him to strive fervently after unity with God. For his pursuit of and devotion to Christ he was granted great powers to serve the sick, oppressed, and blind. As he served, unity with God and devotion to God sustained his ministry of hospitality. The Church continues to be led along this path and pattern of the holy life.

A vibrant model of the life of holy service to others, then, seems to be a trail in the desert. Along this trail one is refined and unified with God, and in time the trail blossoms with a great ministry bringing healing and freedom. Striving to keep one’s life rooted in Christ and continually looking to him infuses our service with the life and direction of the Spirit. In this model, the work of justice flows out from union with God.

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