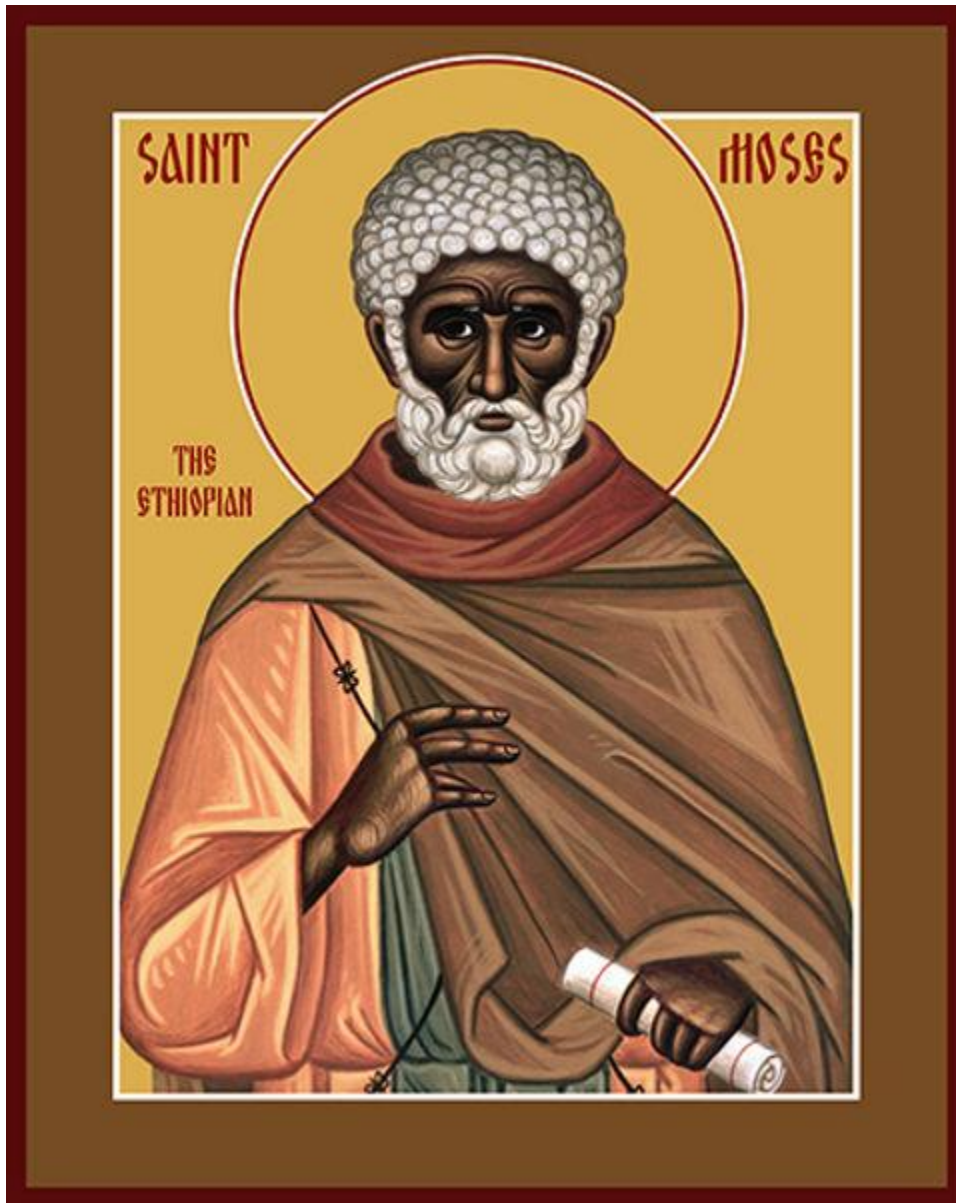


Sit in Your Cell and Your Cell Will Teach You Everything



There is a story about one of the great Desert Fathers, Moses the Black:

It happened that Abba Moses was struggling with the temptation of fornication. Unable to stay any longer in the cell, he went and told Abba Isidore. The old man exhorted him to return to his cell. But he refused, saying, 'Abba, I cannot.' Then Abba Isidore took Moses out onto

the terrace and said to him, 'Look towards the west.' He looked and saw hordes of demons flying about and making a noise before launching an attack. Then Abba Isidore said to him, 'Look towards the east.' He turned and saw an innumerable multitude of holy angels shining with glory. Abba Isidore said, 'See, these are sent by the Lord to the saints to bring them help, while those in the west fight against them. Those who are with us are more in number than they are.' Then Abba Moses, gave thanks to God, plucked up courage and returned to his cell.

Interestingly, a few lines later in the same collection we read this:

A brother came to Scetis to visit Abba Moses and asked him for a word. The old man said to him, 'Go, sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything.'

What Abba Moses had learned from Abba Isidore he was able to share himself: "Go, sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything." It is a simple, seemingly unremarkable, bit of counsel. Unremarkable, because it seems as if it is basically counsel to do nothing: sit in your cell. That certainly doesn't seem like much, and it certainly doesn't seem like a great ascetical labor or warfare. But within this simple commandment is hidden a rather remarkable and profound bit of wisdom.

When we are battling against temptation, we often start casting about trying to figure out what we can do to make it stop. How do we win this fight? How do we make the temptations go away? These are the thoughts that plague us and drive us, like Moses, looking for relief, for something to do.

But, perhaps counter-intuitively, the very first thing we must learn is not to do anything. "Go, sit in your cell." Don't, that is, do anything. Why? Because you don't yet know what to do, and anything you do will be the wrong thing. At this point any action that we would undertake would be something that we have learned in the past, something out of our old, fallen habits and activities, and these are the very things that got us where we are in the first place, i.e. enslaved to the passions. So, the very first thing that we must do is to do nothing but sit in our cell, not act according to old habits and responses, but to simply wait and watch. And immediately, if we do this, we will learn that this sitting in the cell is not nothing but a very definite and profound something. For to sit in the cell is itself a great act of faith.

If we go sit in our cell, we will discover that the thoughts are still there and that the temptations will not magically go away as if God were to wave a magic wand over us. But if we persist in sitting still, neither running from the thoughts nor giving into them, then the cell will begin to teach us everything, as Abba Isidore promised. It will teach us that the very things within us to which the temptations appeal, our passions, are not truly satisfied with the things with which we are tempted, but will, if heeded, leave us defeated, empty, and filled with despondency as they have always done. Furthermore, it will show us the very things that drive these passions and give fuel to the temptations: our fears, lust, desires, and a seeking for comfort and consolation in things that can never comfort or console us. Ultimately, if we persist in sitting in our cell, we will be led to the One and only One who can truly give us comfort and consolation, the One who said, "Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." All of this will be learned only if we sit in our cell and do not act according to all of our typical reactions, which were, as I said, formed in the same processes that shaped and defined our former way of being as slaves to sin. The new way of being, in Christ, will be formed and shaped in the cell like life in the womb. For that is what the cell is, a virginal womb awaiting the Word. Real spiritual life, then, is not something we produce ourselves within ourselves. Our work is to sit, waiting in faith, with patience and hope. And this sitting and waiting is not nothing but a profound something. It is the plaintive cry of the Psalmist. It is the Virgin maiden

awaiting, though she does not know it, the arrival of the archangel. And it is even, mysteriously, the watching, piercing gaze of the Father looking for the arrival of the prodigal. For it is God himself, already in us, awaiting our arrival to the heavenly home, our deep heart.

A few days ago, I had a conversation with a man, a recovering alcoholic, who was experiencing a series of traumatic events in his life. In the past his response to such trauma would have been the obvious reaction to drink, looking for comfort and consolation in alcohol. The temptation is ever present, it doesn't magically go away when someone stops drinking, and the temptation was present as he spoke. My simple and direct counsel to him was not to drink. That might seem like a simple negative, something not to do. It is, rather, the simple and yet profound wisdom of Abba Moses: "Sit in your cell and your cell will teach you everything." Not drinking means sitting in the cell. And if that is undertaken as a simple act of faith it will become the womb from which the new life in him will be born.

The poet Rainer Maria Rilke, wrote:

The space within us reaches out, translates each thing. For the essence of a tree to be real for you, cast inner space around it, out of the space that exists in you. Encircle it with restraint. It has no borders. Only in the realm of your renouncing can it, as tree, be known.

True ascetical life is, to use the poet's words, "the space within us." And it is only in this "realm of your renouncing" that anything can be known. Sitting in your cell, not drinking, not looking for comfort and consolation in our old habits and sins, makes the inner space within us a fertile womb which can become, like the Mother of God's, border-less and more spacious than the heavens when it receives the infinite Word. And it is only there and then that we can know him, and knowing him truly know ourselves for the first time.

With love in Christ,
Fr John.