

# Spiritual message of the desert mothers: Synkletica, Sarah and Theodora

Przesłanie duchowe matek pustyni:  
Synkletyki, Sary i Teodory

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**Abstract:** The article presents the teachings of the three desert mothers: Synkletica, Sarah and Theodora, focusing on those indications that can support the spiritual development of both lay and consecrated persons. The basic source is the apophthegmata in the *Gerontikon*. The analysis of the statements of the desert mothers allows us to conclude that the content of many of their thoughts remains valid to the present day. Importantly, all of them are the fruit of the experience of spiritual life, not theoretical, pious considerations.

**Keywords:** desert mothers; asceticism; apophthegmata; Christian antiquity

**Abstrakt:** W artykule przedstawiono nauczanie trzech matek pustyni: Synkletyki, Sary i Teodory, skupiając się na tych wskazaniach, które mogą być wsparciem dla duchowego rozwoju zarówno osób świeckich, jak i konsekrowanych. Podstawowym źródłem są apoftegmaty zamieszczone w zbiorze *Gerontikon*. Analiza wypowiedzi matek pustyni pozwala na stwierdzenie, że wiele ich przemyśleń pozostaje w swojej treści aktualnych do czasów współczesnych. Co istotne, wszystkie one są owocem doświadczenia życia duchowego, a nie teoretycznych, pobożnych rozważań.

**Słowa kluczowe:** matki pustyni; asceza; apoftegmaty; starożytność chrześcijańska

## Introduction

An important element of caring for the spiritual sphere is submitting to the guidance of a person experienced in this regard. The development of this prac-

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tice is associated with the rise of monasticism. It was the anchorites, leaving for deserts to devote themselves completely to God, staying in solitude and far from human settlements, who became the first spiritual directors. Indeed, the testimony of their ascetic life attracted the faithful, who remained in the world and sought advice thanks to which they could deepen their interior life. They often waited a long time for the monk's advice, and when they finally got it, they were convinced that God Himself had spoken through the word of abba<sup>1</sup>. Thus, they kept these clues, and that is how sets of sentences called apophthegmata were created<sup>2</sup>. Much of their message is still valid today. Among the apophthegmata preserved to this day, three sets in the so-called Geronticon, belong to the desert mothers: Amma Syncletica, Amma Sarah and Amma Theodora<sup>3</sup>.

In this text, the statements of Amma Synclectica, Amma Sarah and Amma Theodora will be discussed. They can help modern people, both lay and consecrated, in their spiritual development. The teaching of the desert mothers has already been the subject of many studies, but the topicality of their indications in the spiritual formation in contemporary realities has not been extensively developed<sup>4</sup>.

In the presented article, we will first briefly present the profiles of the desert mothers. In the following sections, we will discuss those guidelines that can be applied to both lay and consecrated persons, and then those that apply only to consecrated persons.

## 1. Silhouettes of the desert mothers

Amma Syncletica lived in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. According to John Chryssavgis, she was born in 380 and died around 460<sup>5</sup>. She came from a wealthy senatorial family from Macedonia, which settled in Alexandria. She had two more brothers who died early, and a blind sister. In her youth, she received a thorough education. At home already she practiced asceticism. After the death of her parents, she sold all the family goods and gave the proceeds to the poor. As a sign of taking up the consecrated life, she cut her hair and, together with her sister, lived in the

<sup>1</sup> Cf. M. Starowieyski, *Wstęp*, in: *Księga starców*, Kraków 1983, pp. 28–29.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. idem, *Apoftegmaty ojców pustyni. Zagadnienia literackie*, in: *Apoftegmaty ojców pustyni*, vol. 1: *Gerontikon*, Źródła Monastyczne, vol. 4, Kraków 2007, pp. 93–122.

<sup>3</sup> The statements of the desert mothers were collected at the turn of the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries in a much richer collection entitled Meterikon. It was much appreciated and widely read by women who had dedicated their lives to God. Cf. A. A. Thiermeyer, *Ojcowie pustyni i Matki pustyni*, in: *Meterikon. Mądrość Matek pustyni*, Warszawa 2010, pp. 33–34.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. P. Turzyński, *Istotne i charakterystyczne elementy duchowości matek pustyni*, „Vox Patrum” 66 (2016), pp. 219–234; J. Chryssavgis, *W sercu pustyni. Duchowość Ojców i Matek Pustyni*, Kraków 2007; L. Swan, *Zapomniane Matki Pustyni. Pisma, życie i historia*, Kraków 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. J. Chryssavgis J., *W sercu pustyni*, p. 28.

family tomb near Alexandria. Over time, women for whom she became a spiritual director began to gather around her. Syncletica's spirituality was significantly influenced by the precepts of Evagrius of Pontus<sup>6</sup>. A description of her life, which for many women became a guide in spiritual development, has been preserved<sup>7</sup>. However, her biographical details are still a matter of debate<sup>8</sup>.

Amma Sarah lived in 5<sup>th</sup> century Egypt. She came from a rich Christian family. Like Syncletica, she was carefully educated. She devoted herself to the life of a monk, settling in the desert. According to Laura Swan, it was a desert near Pelusium close to Antinoe<sup>9</sup>. Little else is known about this desert mother. Most likely, from the age of 15, she lived in some community of nuns, and only then, at the age of about 60, she took up a solitary life<sup>10</sup>. According to the information preserved in the apophthegmata, she experienced strong temptations of the demon for 13 years. Interestingly, she never asked God for their cessation, but only for the grace of perseverance<sup>11</sup>. She convinced the visiting monks that although she was a woman in body, she was a 'man' in spirit. In this way, she expressed the strength of her spirit against the monks who wanted to humiliate her because of her gender<sup>12</sup>. Thus, Sarah must have been an extraordinary woman, with a strong character, and a deep believer.

Amma Theodora lived in the 5<sup>th</sup> century and, like Sarah and Syncletica, led a solitary life in the Egyptian desert. There is little information about her. According to tradition, she was married. However, she left her husband, wanting to devote herself to God in the consecrated life. Fearing that her husband would look for her in women's communities, she disguised herself as a man, took the name Theodore, and took up residence in the male monastery of Oktokaidekaton, located near Alexandria. She was respected there because of her mortifications. Despite this, at one point she was accused of being the father of the child. For this reason, she was banished from the convent. For seven years, living in the desert,

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. L. Swan, *Zapomniane Matki Pustyni*, p. 45.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Pseudo-Atanazy, *Vita et gesta sanctae beataeque magistrae Syncleticae*, PG 28, 1488–1557. The work dates from the 5<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>8</sup> E. Wipszycka is convinced that the relationship between the hermit and Alexandria is not confirmed either in the preserved life of the nun or in the apophthegmata. Cf. E. Wipszycka, *Drugi dar Nilu, czyli o mnichach i klasztorach w późnoantycznym Egipcie*, Kraków 2014, p. 297. Perhaps, however, Alexandria, which is a port city, is supported by the fact that in the surviving apophthegmata, Syncletica often refers to images of the ships that are clearly associated with the sea.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. L. Swan, *Zapomniane Matki Pustyni*, p. 39. Antinoe is an ancient Egyptian city founded around 137 by Emperor Hadrian, located near today's Ash-Sheikh Ibadah.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *Gerontikon*, p. 465.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Amma Sara, *Apoftegmat 1* (884), in: *Gerontikon*, p. 465.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. eadem, *Apoftegmat 4* (887), 9 (991), in: *ibid.*, p. 466; L. Swan, *Zapomniane Matki Pustyni*, p. 42; P. Turzyński, *Istotne i charakterystyczne elementy duchowości matek pustyni*, pp. 226–227.

she raised a child and then was readmitted to the convent community. It was only after her death that the superior of the community learned in a vision who Theodore really was<sup>13</sup>. According to L. Swan, Theodora was an acquaintance of Theophilus, bishop of Alexandria, as evidenced by the request addressed to him to explain the words of the apostle Paul, 'Buy time', recorded in the letters to the Ephesians (5:16) and Colossians (4:5)<sup>14</sup>. Even though she was a woman, she enjoyed great authority<sup>15</sup>.

## 2. Universal indications, useful for lay and consecrated persons

### 2.1. Entrusting your life to Christ

The analysis of preserved statements of the desert mothers allows us to conclude that they primarily concern the fight against the evil spirit. The attitude of the hermits and their teachings show how every human being can overcome Satan's temptations. Firstly, it should be borne in mind that temptation affects all people to a greater or lesser extent. However, the more a person wants to get closer to God, the more Satan attacks him. It is necessary to realize that 'for those approaching God, the beginnings are full of struggle and terrible toil'<sup>16</sup>. The devil uses various ways to destroy a person. Syncletica points to Satan's methods of operation. She is convinced that if he cannot destroy a man by bringing him into misery, he tries to do so by giving him wealth; if insults do not help, he wants to destroy him through pride, which has its source in fame and praise. If he fails to destroy a man in health, he sends a sickness upon him. All so that in moments of suffering he would doubt God's love<sup>17</sup>. The hermit advises that in such moments you should give yourself even more to God's care, remembering the words of Psalm 118:18, 'The Lord punished me severely, but he did not deliver me to death'. One must believe and be deeply convinced that it is better to suffer on earth than to suffer eternal punishment with endless suffering. In addition, according to the words of the Holy Scriptures, through suffering and affliction, man is purified. Therefore, ultimately this difficult experience becomes a blessing for a person. As Syncletica argues, 'You were made of iron, but through fire you got rid of the rust. But if you are sick, though you are righteous, you progress from perfection to greater perfection. Are you

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. *Gerontikon*, p. 252.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Amma Teodora, *Apoftegmata* 1 (309), in: *Gerontikon*, p. 253.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. L. Swan, *Zapomniane Matki Pustyni*, p. 65.

<sup>16</sup> Amma Synkletyka, *Apoftegmata* 1 (892), in: *Gerontikon*, p. 468.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. eadem, *Apoftegmata* 7 (898), in: *ibid.*, p. 469.

gold? Through fire, you will become pure gold'<sup>18</sup>. Theodora is of the same opinion. She also, referring to Christ's indications about the need to choose the way through the narrow gate, states that 'we cannot become heirs of the Kingdom of Heaven, except through many tribulations and temptations'<sup>19</sup>.

Sarah also encountered a number of difficulties on her way to sainthood. In her statements, she indicates that in such moments, it is necessary to entrust oneself to God's care. Experienced by the demon of impurity, she defended herself against the fall by undertaking ascetic practices and, above all, remaining in the fear of God. Significantly, she asked God for the strength to persevere, not for the end of temptations<sup>20</sup>. The anchorites were convinced that fighting temptations and overcoming them contributed to their spiritual growth. Abba Anthony's statement can be mentioned here, 'No one can enter the Kingdom of Heaven untested. Take away the temptations, he says, and no one will be redeemed'<sup>21</sup>. Therefore, the struggle against temptations accompanied the hermits on a daily basis<sup>22</sup>. Victory over them meant another step in spiritual development. However, they did not attribute the glory of victory to themselves. This is evidenced by Sarah's attitude. For when 'the incarnate spirit of impurity said: *You have conquered me, Sarah!* She replied, *I have not conquered you, but my Lord Christ*'<sup>23</sup>. In this way, she not only pointed to the source of her strength in the fight against temptations, but also showed humility. She did not admit victory to herself, but to Christ, to whom she entrusted herself in the moment of temptation.

## 2.2. The value of humility

Humility has always been considered one of the most important virtues that allow you to overcome the evil spirit and achieve salvation. In discussing this issue, Amma Syncletica used a comparison that was unusual for a woman of that time. It reminds us that just as you cannot build a ship without nails, you cannot achieve salvation without humility<sup>24</sup>. Therefore, this virtue is indispensable in the spiritual life of every man who consciously strives for eternity. Amma Theodora also points to the value of humility and its superiority over other virtues.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 470.

<sup>19</sup> Amma Teodora, *Apoftegmat* 2 (310), in: *Gerontikon*, p. 253.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Amma Sara, *Apoftegmat* 1 (884).

<sup>21</sup> Abba Antoni, *Apoftegmat* 5 (5), in: *Gerontikon*, p. 131. Cf. Abba Ewagriusz, *Apoftegmat* 5 (231), in: *ibid.*, p. 225; J. Chryssavgis J., *W sercu pustyni*, p. 37; P. Turzyński, *Istotne i charakterystyczne elementy duchowości matek pustyni*, p. 229.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Amma Teodora, *Apoftegmat* 7 (315), in: *Gerontikon*, p. 255.

<sup>23</sup> Amma Sara, *Apoftegmat* 2 (885), in: *ibid.*, p. 466.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Amma Synkletyka, *Apoftegmat* 27 (1000), in: *ibid.*, p. 475.

She believes that it is much more important than even the strictest asceticism, vigils or other hardships. The basis for such a conclusion was the experience of an unspecified hermit who, while expelling evil spirits, asked, *'What drives you away: fasting? — They replied, We neither eat nor drink. — Wakes? — They said, We are not sleeping. — A recluse's life? — They argued, We ourselves live in the desert. — So what drives you out? — They replied, Nothing can overcome us except humility'*<sup>25</sup>.

Practicing humility was an expression of spiritual maturity. It protected the nuns from self-centeredness, taking credit for everything. Pride, the opposite of humility, led man to fall. Humility, on the other hand, makes it possible to submit to God's will and to recognize His saving action in human life. Humility also teaches gratitude. Such attitudes accompanied many anchorites<sup>26</sup>. This was expressed by Amma Syncletica, convinced that one cannot tell others about one's virtues. They should be kept to oneself, because *'virtue exposed and made known to all, decays, and as wax melts under the influence of fire, so the soul, under the influence of praise, decays and abandons hardships'*<sup>27</sup>. In another statement, she added that it is impossible to *'be glorified in the world and bear heavenly fruit'*<sup>28</sup>. Such unequivocal emphasis on the value of humility in spiritual formation does not mean that the nuns diminished the importance of other ascetic practices, such as fasting, prayer or vigils.

### 2.3. The importance of perseverance in working on spiritual development

According to Amma Theodora, persevering prayer is extremely important in the ascetic life. Sometimes it causes a great difficulty for a person, especially in times of illness and suffering. But that is when it is especially important. The nun mentioned a certain monk who, whenever he started praying, got chills, fever, headache. However, he did not give up. Then he said to himself, *'Here I am sick and about to die: so I must get up and say my prayers before I die.* Such thoughts made him compel himself to say his prayers, and when he finished them the fever subsided. By putting it this way, he resisted the devil'<sup>29</sup>. Persevering prayer thus becomes a wonderful tool for overcoming satanic temptations, and simultaneously for spiritual growth. Therefore, for the sake of one's inner life one should avoid all forms of negligence<sup>30</sup>.

<sup>25</sup> Amma Teodora, *Apoftegmata* 6 (314), in: *ibid.*, pp. 254–255.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. J. Chryssavgis, *W sercu pustyni*, pp. 69–70.

<sup>27</sup> Amma Synkletyka, *Apoftegmata* 21 (994), in: *Gerontikon*, p. 473.

<sup>28</sup> Eadem, *Apoftegmata* 22 (995), in: *ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Amma Teodora, *Apoftegmata* 3 (311), in: *ibid.*, p. 254.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Amma Synkletyka, *Apoftegmata* 23 (996), in: *ibid.*, p. 473.

Syncletica also draws attention to the importance of perseverance in working on spiritual development. She makes her disciples aware that beginnings are usually very difficult and require sacrifice. She says they are ‘full of struggle and terrible toil’, but this toil is rewarded. For then comes the time of unspeakable joy. Everything happens as when lighting a fire. One has to endure the hardships of smoke in order to finally enjoy the intended good that fire brings. The same is true of working on yourself. God’s fire is also kindled in the midst of hardships and tears<sup>31</sup>. You have to be persistent to achieve your goal. The Cross of Christ is always helpful in persevering and fighting hardships. Syncletica is convinced of this, sharing her spiritual experience, referring to the image of the ship, ‘Even those who set out to sea first enjoy a favorable wind and unfurl their sails, and then they encounter a contrary wind again; but sailors do not abandon the ship because of the random wind. Attacked by the storm, they wait a while and resume sailing. So too should we, when a headwind comes upon us, spread the cross as a sail and end our journey without fear’<sup>32</sup>. Therefore, perseverance in the fight against adversities cannot be based on man’s own strength, but on faith in the power of the Cross of Christ. Belief in its strength was very common among the desert fathers. Abba Anthony, tempted by the evil spirit, advised his disciples to use the sign of the cross as an effective defense against the devil’s temptations<sup>33</sup>.

Amma Theodora, encouraging perseverance in ascetic practices, refers to the example of a monk from a rich family. The fact of the origin of the monk is very important here. It must be presumed that before he left for the desert, he led a prosperous life. Meanwhile, in the desert, he experienced a very difficult test of scabies and plenty of lice. As an ascetic attests, he overcame this test by his perseverance<sup>34</sup>. Thus, this virtue is extremely important in prayer, asceticism and fighting temptations. No one will attain union with God unless he perseveres.

#### 2.4. The value of other ascetic practices

An important element of spiritual life is its development not only in the desert, but also in the world, in everyday life. It is interesting that this topic can also be found among the indications of the desert mothers. Amma Theodora takes up the problem of directing her life towards God, in the midst of the bustle of worldly conversations. She was once asked, ‘*How can you simply listen to any worldly talk and at the same time, as you said, be directed towards God?*’ She said: *It is as if you were seated at a table where there would be many foods, and*

<sup>31</sup> Cf. eadem, *Apostegmat* 1 (892).

<sup>32</sup> Eadem, *Apostegmat* 9 (900), in: *Gerontikon*, p. 471.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Atanazy Wielki, *Żywot św. Antoniego* 13, Kraków 2017.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Amma Teodora, *Apostegmat* 9 (954), in: *Gerontikon*, p. 255.

*you would take of them, albeit reluctantly; so it is with the speeches of the world, which, although they come to your ears, nevertheless keep your heart directed towards God, and with this attitude you will not listen to them willingly, nor will they harm you*<sup>35</sup>. Therefore, it is possible to develop spiritually even in the midst of the hustle and bustle of the world, but you have to be able to choose what is valuable. This is also confirmed by Syncletica in the words, ‘It is possible to live like a monk while living in a crowd, and living alone in the mind to be among crowds’<sup>36</sup>. Thus, it all depends on the inside of a person. You can be a monk and have your heart occupied with the world and its affairs, and you can live in the world and have your heart occupied with God. Therefore, one should always direct one’s thoughts towards Him.

This orientation towards God is also expressed in a responsible approach to material goods. Syncletica makes her listeners aware of the dangers of the desire for wealth. She is convinced that the more a man has, the more his desire to have even more grows. And although Amma does not say it directly, the conclusion is obvious: the unbridled desire for wealth enslaves the man, who always wants more and ultimately is never satisfied with what he has. Meanwhile, concern for the development of one’s spirituality is expressed through perseverance in the fear of God<sup>37</sup>. Proper distance to material goods is also manifested in the practice of almsgiving. Amma Sarah encourages the sharing of material goods. She believes that even if at first the motivation is purely human, to be appreciated by other people, in the end any kind of charity will lead to ‘pleasing God’<sup>38</sup>.

Amma Syncletica also draws attention to the need to work on anger. She refers to the words of St. Paul in Ephesians 4:26 ‘let not the sun go down on your wrath’. Interestingly, the nun quotes only the first words of the apostle, apparently assuming that their content is commonly known. In her statement, she advises never to hate a man who is guilty, but his sin. She argues this with the words, ‘It was not his fault, but the devil’s’<sup>39</sup>. Such an attitude towards the guilty person requires a sufficiently deep spiritual formation from the victim.

Syncletica believes that the attitude of vigilance is important in internal development. She devotes several of her speeches to it. At the same time, she refers again to the image of the sea, which symbolizes human life. She distinguishes between the situation of people living in the world and in ‘the desert. She believes that those who live in the world often wake up amidst storms and

<sup>35</sup> Amma Teodora, *Apoftegmat* 8 (953), in: *ibid.*, p. 255.

<sup>36</sup> Amma Synkletyka, *Apoftegmat* 10 (993), in: *ibid.*, p. 473.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. eadem, *Apoftegmat* 10 (901).

<sup>38</sup> Amma Sara, *Apoftegmat* 7 (890), in: *ibid.*, pp. 466–467.

<sup>39</sup> Amma Synkletyka, *Apoftegmat* 13 (904), in: *ibid.*, p. 472. This approach to sinful man was known among the Fathers of the Church — cf. B. Czyżewski, *Nauka św. Augustyna o gniewie Boga w „Enarrationes in Psalmos”, „Verbum Vitae”* 33 (2018) pp. 315–341.



darkness, and yet manage to save the ship. However, the monks, while in the desert, sail on a silent sea. And probably the stillness of the sea calms them down enough to stop their vigil, and thus they lose their ship. Therefore, remember the words of St. Paul, 'Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall' (1 Corinthians 10:12)<sup>40</sup>. The righteousness earned is not given forever. It is necessary to bear in mind the temptations of Satan, who acts on man both from the outside and from the inside. Also this time, Syncletica refers to the image of a ship that is flooded both by the waves of a stormy sea and by the water that has penetrated into it. The same happens with man, 'sometimes we are lost by external sins, other times by internal thoughts. Therefore, one must guard against attacks coming from without, but also restrain the ejaculations of inner thoughts'<sup>41</sup>. Therefore, in working on oneself, it is necessary to be constantly vigilant and care for the senses, which are like open windows through which smoke enters the building and makes it black<sup>42</sup>.

An important element of spiritual formation is also repentance for committed sins. An expression of this is sadness, which is called useful, as opposed to harmful sadness, coming from the evil spirit. 'Useful sorrow consists in weeping for our own sins and the weaknesses of others, and that we do not desire to attain the perfection of good'<sup>43</sup>. It should be emphasized that Syncletica considers man's fault not only in sins, but also in the lack of desire to achieve perfection. In this way, it clearly indicates that a Christian is obliged to care for his spiritual development. But what to do with the sadness coming from the evil spirit, which is called acedia? Syncletica does not explain in more detail what this acedia consists of. However, since she was influenced by the teachings of Evagrius of Pontus, she certainly understood this state of mind as he did. In his view, acedia is a companion of sadness, although they should not be identified. Acedia is understood as the temptation of boredom, feeling useless, longing for other places, it is called the demon of the south<sup>44</sup>. As a remedy for its effects, the hermit prescribes prayer, above all the recitation of the psalms<sup>45</sup>.

One more important advice of Syncletica, not often found in the apophthegmata of the desert fathers, should also be mentioned. The nun encourages you to practice the virtue of temperance. She recommends using it primarily when undertaking fasting. For it is not good to undergo severe fasting for a few days and then

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Amma Synkletyka, *Apoftegmat* 26 (999), in: *Gerontikon*, p. 474.

<sup>41</sup> Eadem, *Apoftegmat* 25 (998), in: *ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Cf. eadem, *Apoftegmat* 24 (997), in: *ibid.* Similar indications, but much more developed, can be found in Jan Chryzostom's treatise *O wychowaniu dzieci*.

<sup>43</sup> Amma Synkletyka, *Apoftegmat* 28 (1001), in: *Gerontikon*, p. 475.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. O.V. Desprez, *Początki monastycyzmu*, vol. 2. Kraków 1999, pp. 96–97; T. Špidlik, I. Gargano, V. Grossi, *Duchowość ojców Kościoła*, Kraków 2004, p. 120.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Amma Synkletyka, *Apoftegmat* 28 (1001).

eat your fill. According to her, ‘absence of moderation is fatal in everything’<sup>46</sup>. In addition, the severity of asceticism should be adapted to age. The older a man is, the sicker and weaker he is. Therefore, when you are young, you should ‘gather supplies, so that you will be safe when you lose your strength’<sup>47</sup>.

### 3. Advice for consecrated people living in communities

Some of the guidelines of the desert mothers apply only to those who have chosen a life totally dedicated to God. They should realize that by choosing this form of life, they expose themselves to the particularly vexatious temptations of Satan, and to many other difficulties. Amma Theodora warns, ‘Know, however, that as soon as a person decides to live in isolation and recollection, the devil comes and burdens his soul with sadness, discouragement and temptations. The body is also burdened with sickness, lethargy, loosening of the knees and all the limbs, and thus deprives me of the strength of soul and body, so that I can no longer perform the prescribed prayers’<sup>48</sup>. However, in the face of all these spiritual and bodily sufferings, man is not defenseless. They can be overcome with an attitude of vigilance, that is, perseverance in prayer even in times of illness and other sufferings. Fidelity to ascetic practices, above all prayer, makes the disease stop. Theodora refers here to the experience of a monk who ‘in this way resisted the devil; and he does his prayers, and the devil has triumphed’<sup>49</sup>. Therefore, the behaviour of consecrated persons should be restrained. On this occasion, Syncletica draws attention to the problem of mastering the senses, practicing modesty and abstaining from disordered gaiety<sup>50</sup>.

An important element of monastic spirituality is staying in a community, in a chosen place. Amma is convinced that ‘just as a bird that drops its eggs will never hatch them, so a monk or a virgin grows cold and dies of faith if he/she wanders from place to place’<sup>51</sup>. Frequent changes of place are not only not conducive to spiritual development, but can even lead to a weakening of faith. Nor can one es-

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<sup>46</sup> Eadem, *Apoftegmat* 15 (906), in: *Gerontikon*, p. 472.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Amma Teodora, *Apoftegmat* 3 (311), in: *Gerontikon*, pp. 253–254.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 254.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Amma Synkletyka, *Apoftegmat* 2 (893), in: *Gerontikon*, p. 468.

<sup>51</sup> Amma Synkletyka, *Apoftegmat* 6 (897), in: *Gerontikon*, p. 469. E. Wipszycka is convinced that the cited apophthegmata could not have been created in the women’s environment, because only monks decided to change the place. As a rule, women did not travel alone. A nun wandering alone would arouse the suspicion that she had been expelled from the community or had run away from it. Cf. E. Wipszycka, *Drugi dar Nilu, czyli o mnichach i klasztorach w późnoantycznym Egipcie*, p. 296.

cape from internal problems by changing the place<sup>52</sup>. Certainly, the constancy of the place helps to concentrate on spiritual matters and prevents the mind from wandering among crowds<sup>53</sup>. This advice can also be understood as an encouragement not to leave your cell or monastery too easily.

One more point should be mentioned for all those who have the courage to instruct others in spiritual matters. In order for such teaching to bear fruit, firstly the one who preaches it must experience for himself what he preaches. If the preached word is not followed by a life example, such teachers 'work to the detriment of those who visit them. For though by words they exhort them to the way of salvation, by their evil example they do even more harm to their followers'<sup>54</sup>. Therefore, words alone are not enough, however valuable and attractive they may be. An example of living in accordance with the preached doctrine is necessary. It attracts above all the testimony of conduct, words are only to be its confirmation.

## Conclusions

The presented teaching of Syncletica, Sarah and Theodora is always valid for everyone who wants to undertake a systematic spiritual formation. Both lay and consecrated persons can benefit from the experience of these nuns. As the experience of the desert mothers shows, all of them must be aware that working on oneself is above all a constant struggle with various types of satanic temptations, but also with one's own weaknesses. However, these difficulties should be considered helpful in spiritual development. Overcoming them, thanks to complete trust in God, faith in the power of the Cross of Christ and the virtue of humility, strengthens a person spiritually. In the times of the discussed mothers of the desert, it was common to believe that following the path to perfection is impossible without fighting temptations. Persevering prayer, vigil and proper distance to material goods are also important practices necessary for the spiritual formation. It is also worth noting the very original advice to use moderation in ascetic practices, especially when it comes to fasting, which is not often found among anchorites.

Everyone undertaking work on spiritual development, both lay and consecrated, should realize that they are entering a difficult road. It requires systematic work and awareness of many lurking obstacles. However, always, according to the assurance of the desert mothers, some support is needed with the gift of God's grace.

In the indications addressed only to consecrated persons, the desert mothers warn against the increased activity of Satan. It can only be overcome by perse-

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Amma Teodora, *Apoftegmata* 7 (315).

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Amma Synkletyka, *Apoftegmata* 19 (992), in: *Gerontikon*, p. 473.

<sup>54</sup> Eadem, *Apoftegmata* 12 (903), in: *ibid.*, p. 471.

vering prayer, sense control and purity. Hermits consider frequent changes of place harmful to spiritual development. Thus, it is good that monks and nuns do not leave their religious houses for trivial reasons. It certainly does not serve their spiritual development. Moreover, anyone who undertakes spiritual direction must remember that the preached word bears fruit only when it is confirmed by the witness of life.

Certainly, the contemporary involvement of consecrated persons in pastoral activity requires constant contact with 'the world'. Therefore, it is hard not to leave the community. All the more important seems to be such a radical approach to the spiritual formation, which was proposed by the desert mothers in the guidelines discussed above.

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