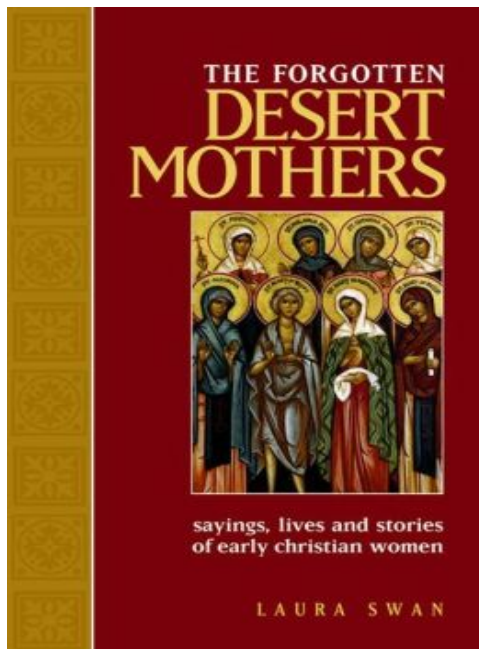


Laura Swan, *The Forgotten Desert Mothers: Sayings, Lives, and Stories of Early Christian Women*. New York: Paulist Press, 2001. ISBN 0809140160



By Dn. Lasha Tchantouridzé

Desert mothers of the ancient church overcame pressures exerted upon by society, political structures and cultural expectations. They went to desert to find freedom, and to wrestle with all kinds of adversity: with their own understanding of God, their place in the world, the demons within and socially oppressive practices of the world. Desert was the place where Christian ascetics lived from the very early days of the church, thousands of men and women found communities and resided in monasteries there, but there were numerous hermits in the desert as well.

Laura Swan, a Roman Catholic nun of the Benedictine Order, not only researched the lives of female monastics largely forgotten in western church traditions, but also attempted to experience desert monasticism first hand. Many of the female saints and monastic figures described in this book would be familiar to most Orthodox Christians, but perhaps they remain unknown in the Roman Catholic church and other western Christian traditions. Swan herself has served as a prioress of a Benedictine monastery in the Pacific Northwest of the United States – harsh desert conditions and ascetic rules demanded by the ancient

church or the current monastic rules of the Orthodox Church may be foreign to her, but not the idea of a monastic community itself. An educated scholar, she holds graduate degrees in theology and spirituality.

Most of the desert mothers whose expressions and lives were collected in the early centuries of Christianity have been remembered in the East, but there are those who are, perhaps, less well known. Swan provides a good collection of historical narratives and sayings by lesser known mothers whom she alternatively identifies as ‘mothers’ and ‘*ammās*.’

Swan addresses the subject of female ordination and provides many examples of females serving as deacons in the early church. She recounts a number of interesting stories, including one of spiritual women, who disguised themselves as males and joined all-male monasteries – the practice apparently was not that unusual in the ancient church as normally the monks would assume the disguised women to be eunuchs. The life story of one of these female monks reads like a script of a Hollywood movie: she was kicked out from the monastery after being falsely accused of fathering a child out of wedlock – she, indeed, left to raise the child, and eventually returned to the monastery after many years.

According to the author, female ordination was suppressed in the West in the 5th century at the urging of some popes and local synods. In the east, she notes, female deaconate continued to the 9th century. In fact, some Orthodox Churches kept the institution of female deacons for another thousand years – in the Church of Georgia female deacons existed till early 19th century – these were elderly monastic women (this tradition was stopped after Russia conquered Georgia and abolished autocephaly of the Apostolic Church of Georgia).

Swan quotes in a couple of places Galatians 3:28: “there is no such thing as Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, for all are one in Christ” (p. 165). Absolute equality of all people before God is proclaimed in this passage, and the desert mothers and their experience embodied its spirit fully. The author emphasizes the notion of equality between the genders and other groups, and quite reasonably insists that the monastic tradition established this equality far better and earlier than any other ecclesiastic or social institution in history, at least in historically Christian countries. Nowhere else in the world but in the Christian monastic tradition of the East women could claim full equality with

men, and would be afforded a general acknowledgment of such equality by the wider society.

The founders of the monastic movement, both males and females, went to desert for a number of compelling reasons. Swan notes further issues both social and spiritual motivating women who sought monastic life. There were persecutions by the Roman state, conflicts with heretics, battles both physical and spiritual. For Swan “desert” is much more than a geographic location or a geological descriptor – indeed, she sees desert as a factor both in the physical nature and the human nature:

For many of us, the desert is the season often called “midlife.” This is the time in our life when a cacophony of feelings and unknown forces seem to converge on us. We begin to experience loneliness and depression, even in the midst of loving family and friends. Questions emerge around our choices and values. Struggles appear endless, hope seems lost, and unfulfilled dreams stare us in the face. We seem to be continually birthing questions with stillborn answers (p. 167).

Christian monasticism started in Egypt and Palestine and understandably the author devotes more pages to the desert dwellers of the Middle East, but she also mentions few western nuns of the early church.

Swan does not distinguish between the cenobitic and eremitic types of monasticism, but treats them as one experience within Christian monasticism, as they have been in essence, but since she describes the lives of saints and monastic mothers, it is still important to make a distinction between the two. Cenobitic and eremitic types of monasticism are opposites; however, it is not unusual for monks to transition from one to the other and back – this happens today in the Orthodox Church as it happened two millennia ago, but experiences in these two could be dramatically different. Cenobitic communities are indeed communities, and historically, in most desert areas where such communities thrived, the accompanying lay settlements also grew and eventually turned into villages and even towns. From such developed communities then some monks would seek eremitic lifestyle and remove themselves from populated areas and go into a desert or an isolated area. However, in time they would be joined by other monks, a cenobitic community would start and trigger pilgrimage by faithful, which would eventually attract permanent settlers and traders, and the cycle of monks seeking seclusion and others following them would start all over.

The author builds parallels between the struggles of women of the early church and those of modern women, who are similarly barraged by social pressures and cultural expectations, idols and demons of our contemporary life. Needless to say, such personal and social struggles are universal and not limited to particular period in history or lifestyle. Sharing experience of the desert mothers is what Laura Swan looks to accomplish in this book, and she meets her goal rather well.

About the reviewer: Deacon Lasha Tchantouridzé, PhD, teaches church history at the St Arseny Institute, Winnipeg, MB.