

# The Human Vocation

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Evagrius Ponticus, who was at first very much part of the established 'orthodox' Church in the fourth century CE. He contributed passionately to all the debates that marked the early church, which were basically about who Jesus really was and what his life and teaching meant. Then subsequently for personal reasons he left his life in the world and became a deeply beloved and respected 'Desert Father', a real 'Abba'. He was very in demand for spiritual guidance by the ordinary Christian men and women, who had like him retired to the Egyptian desert to lead a truly Christian life, taking Jesus as their example.

Evagrius led an extremely ascetic life totally dedicated to prayer, as we can see from this variation on the Gospel saying: *"Go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and take up your cross so that you can pray without distraction."* Prayer and following Jesus was one and the same for him. But his emphasis is on private prayer: *"Vainglory recommends praying in the marketplaces, but whoever resists this, prays in his room."*

Because of his life in the world as well as in the desert he appreciated the importance of theology, faith and actual spiritual experience. He did not separate these aspects: *"If you are a theologian you truly pray. If you truly pray you are a theologian."* Not just for him but for all early Christians theology and contemplative prayer went hand in hand.

Evagrius is absolutely convinced that the human vocation is to discover the Divine 'image' within and achieve Divine 'likeness'. He envisions this spiritual journey to be in two stages: 'praxis' and 'theoria'. 'Praxis' means the spiritual path, where prayer helps us to come to self-knowledge, to understand our ego-driven desires, which block us from our true 'self'. The more we know who we truly are, the more we can let go of our vices and act out of virtues.

'Theoria' is the contemplation of God. Evagrius sees 'theoria' itself also as consisting of two stages. Nature, God's creation, is the first level of contemplation, a manifestation of the Unmanifest. Creation, including us, is seen as essentially good; therefore it allows us to penetrate from ordinary surface reality to the Divine Reality: *"As for those who are far from God...God has made it possible for them to come near to the knowledge of him and his love for them through the medium of creatures."* Therefore not only scripture but also nature itself leads us to a sense of 'knowing', a sense of interconnectedness and a sense of wonder.

The second level of contemplation is the contemplation of things not seen by the senses, but *"by a simple glance of the spirit"*. This is 'pure' prayer, only possible by moving beyond the surface, by gradually letting go of all thoughts, images and forms. It is a move from multiplicity to simplicity. It is meditation.

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