

First things first

Amma Syncletica said, *“We ought not, therefore, make our treatment of the soul superficial, but we ought to put our soul in order throughout, paying particular attention to its depths. We have our hair cut off; at the same time let us remove also the ‘lice’ on our head, for by themselves these will cause us still more grief. Our ‘hair’, you see, was the worldly element in life: honours, fame, possession of goods, splendid outfits of clothing, use of baths, enjoyment of foods. These we thought it wise to discard; but rather let us cast off the soul-devouring ‘lice’, some of which are these: slander, perjury, avarice.”*¹

Most people do not choose Syncletica’s austere monastic life. But all of us have a soul, the fundamental aspect of our true identity. The soul is “who we are.” It is our “head” and, although a sacred gift, can be scattered and distorted from its life with God by “the worldly element in life.” Yet, these “superficial” distractions can hide even deeper “soul-devouring” influences. Whether we are a monk or not it is wise “to put our soul in order throughout.” How can we care for our souls today?

Where it all begins and ends

Amma Syncletica also said, *“My children, all of us – male and female – know about being saved, but through our own negligence we stray from the path of salvation. First of all we must observe the precepts known through the grace of the Lord, and these are: ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your soul, and your neighbor as yourself’... Whatever people say by the grace of the Spirit, therefore, that is useful springs from love and ends in it. Salvation, then, is exactly this – the two-fold love of God and of our neighbor.”*²

The Great Commandment was at the center of the lives of the desert elders because it was at the center of the life of Jesus. It is the foundation of “the path of salvation.” In Syncletica’s day the Greek word for salvation carried the meaning of health and wholeness. She sees salvation as a present reality rooted and grounded in “the two-fold love of God and neighbor.” It is not “pie-in-the-sky-after you die.” Everything “that is useful springs from love and ends in it.” Salvation is about love, here and now. But Syncletica is street-wise enough to know that we can “stray from the path of salvation.”

Limiting our options

Amma Syncletica said, *“If you find yourself in a monastery do not go to another place, for that will harm you a great deal. Just as the bird who abandons the eggs she was sitting on prevents them from hatching, so the monk or nun grows cold and their faith dies, when they go from one place to another.”*

¹ Pseudo-Athanasius. *The Life and Regimen of The Blessed and Holy Syncletica*. Trans., with notes, by Elizabeth Bryson Bongie. Toronto: Peregrina Publishing Co., 1999, 80, page 50.

² *Ibid.*, 22, page 20.

Some of us have too many options: superstores, internet surfing, broadband TV channels, self-help programs, and an endless variety of spiritual paths and resources. My options include endless music CDs, books, retreats, mini-courses, time with friends, and travel. It is tempting to craft a continuous personal spiritual path based on one's current needs or interests. Amma Syncretica urges us to find a spiritual home and remain committed to its way of life as a vital complement to our personal prayer. If we "*go from one place to another*" we forfeit the environment of a faith community that will give birth to spiritual vitality and challenge us to develop fruits of the Spirit. Fewer options will help us enter into the lives of other people.