

Holy imitation: A manual for disciples

by [Demetrios S. Katos](#) in the [June 28, 2011](#) issue



Melania the Younger. Icon photographed by [Prietenii](#), licensed under the [Free Art License](#).

Of Paul's many bold statements, perhaps none seems more brazen to modern readers than his demand that the Christians in Corinth take him as their model (1 Cor. 4:16). Our culture values originality, not slavish imitation. Wouldn't you rather take the road less traveled than another's beaten path?

Our modern quest for uniqueness, however, is constantly undermined by the pressures of mass culture. Mass media and marketing promote conformity. We happily brandish logos, slogans and imprints on our clothing and possessions and even our food. Our very bodies are being transfigured into the image and likeness of commercial enterprises. It seems that virtually all people pattern their lives on some kind of model, whether they like it or not.

No such unease about imitation existed in Paul's day. His contemporaries prized imitation in all domains—even in speech, writing and art. The people hearing Paul's letter in Corinth would have taken for granted that conventions are beautiful and that the subtlest manipulation of them can generate fresh ideas. There's no question that Paul's demand for imitation resonated with his readers of that time.

Thus it's no surprise that Basil of Caesarea, a fourth-century cleric in Cappadocia, held that scripture records the lives of holy people specifically so that others might imitate them. A generation later, another cleric named Palladius affirmed the need

for models by compiling an anthology of the sayings and deeds of various holy men and women he met in his wide travels across the Mediterranean world. Many of these individuals lived as ascetics in the desert and wilderness. Palladius wrote his accounts of monks and nuns for his patron Lausus, chamberlain of the imperial court and one of the wealthiest men in the Roman Empire.

How was Lausus expected to imitate ascetics? More pointedly, why should he? Recognizing the relevance of his question, Palladius prefaces his work, known as *The Lausiatic History*, with an apologia for ascetic literature. He argues that readers should imitate an ascetic vision, not specific ascetic practices. The people whose lives he records imitated Paul and "suffered the loss of all things" in order to gain Christ (Phil. 3:8-17). They imitated the prophets, who were "destitute, afflicted, and ill treated—of whom the world was not worthy" (Heb. 11:32-38). They renounced everything to commit themselves to the gospel without distraction.

Palladius's remarkable anthology of ascetic feats and spiritual wisdom was one of the first of its type, a type that later became quite popular. In recent decades, Christians of many backgrounds have rediscovered the value of these writings—and of the practice of imitation—for discipleship. Once we admit that despite the premium our culture places on originality, we all imitate models of some kind, then it follows naturally that we should try to choose the right models.

Palladius lived for more than a decade in the deserts of lower Egypt among hermits devoted to a life of prayer. Many lived in loosely organized communities that gathered for the Eucharist and spiritual guidance. Most supported themselves with minor crafts such as weaving; some, such as the former merchant Apollonius, engaged in trade. Palladius writes that at night he could hear the divine psalmody rising from neighboring cells and could imagine himself in paradise with the angels.

Palladius also traveled and recorded stories of people devoted to serving their neighbors. One was a celibate woman named Piamoun who lived with her mother in a small Egyptian village and earned her keep by spinning flax. Her spiritual gravitas earned her the role of patron and mediator for her townspeople, whom she protected by averting an attack on the village during a dispute over water rights. In Ancyra, a provincial capital in Asia Minor, a woman named Magna dispensed her wealth to local hospitals, travelers and the poor, while a monk walked the streets at night and anonymously handed out alms.

Verus and Bosporia earned a reputation in Ancyra for selflessness during a famine after they opened their stores of grain to the public. Rather than passing their wealth on to their children, the aristocratic couple bequeathed it to the poor of the city. Some other aristocrats disposed of their wealth and devoted themselves to the poor, among them the widowed Olympias of Constantinople and the fabulously wealthy Melania the Younger and her husband Pinianus of Rome. Palladius also mentions many otherwise unknown wives and daughters of Roman tribunes, counts and generals.

This odd mix of desert dwellers and city folk, of peasants and aristocrats, reveals how much Palladius relished individuals' freedom to enact the gospel's injunctions as they saw fit. Many of his contemporaries sought to restrict this freedom, limiting the legitimate ascetic models to the few that they personally approved of. Palladius's varied selections demonstrate that he was not promoting ascetic practice for its own sake. He recognized that all asceticism was merely an action, or praxis, in the classic Aristotelian sense: a means to a greater end.

Palladius grants asceticism no intrinsic value, and he identifies it as dangerous in extreme cases. He criticizes Heron and Ptolemy for becoming so proud of their ascetic feats that they became utterly deluded and abandoned their desert cells for the taverns of Alexandria. Valens, Palladius explains, fell from grace for the same reason: his conceit became so great that he believed he had seen God with his own eyes in the middle of the night.

Palladius promoted as authentic spiritual models only those who embraced praxis for the purpose of working out their salvation. He believed that one should practice asceticism to become receptive to God in both scripture and prayer, and his examples delineate a common path of spiritual progress toward this goal.

The first signpost on this path is dispassion—*apatheia*—a term that Christians borrowed from the Stoics. Like the Stoics, Palladius and his associates were criticized for teaching that emotions could and should be eradicated. In fact, *apatheia* describes the internal state of a person whose desires, actions and thoughts have been not eradicated but properly ordered. *Apatheia* indicates a life according to nature, not contrary to it.

This ideal helps explain one of the most bizarre stories in *The Lausiatic History*. Sarapion Sindonites, an Egyptian ascetic, travels to Rome penniless and, on a dare,

walks naked through the streets. So great is his *apatheia* that he regains Adam's original innocence, performing this audacious act—which shows an ascetic woman how proud *she* still is—without the least bit of shame or grandstanding.

Above all, *apatheia* is for Palladius the doorway to knowledge, or *gnosis*. Only when desire, action and thought are properly ordered—when a natural life is attained—can one see God in the scriptures and in creation. Palladius reserves his greatest praise for those men and women who knew scripture well. He eulogizes Isidore the Hospitaller as a modest and peaceable man devoted to reading scripture—not as one of the most powerful clerics in the Alexandrian church, which was also the case. Similarly, Palladius extolls the monk Ammonius not for his rigorous renunciation—he is said to have cut off his ear to avoid ordination to the priesthood!—but for committing all the scriptures to memory and possessing an extensive knowledge of scriptural commentary.

To be "knowledgeable," a gnostic in the true sense, is Palladius's greatest compliment. No one looms larger in his *History* than the Roman matron Melania the Elder, a spiritual mentor of his. Melania abandoned Rome and the distractions of her spectacular wealth, devoting herself to the study of scripture. According to Palladius,

She was most erudite and fond of literature, and she turned night into day going through every writing of the ancient commentators—three million lines of Origen and two and half million lines of Gregory, Stephen, Pierius, Basil and other worthy men. And she did not read them once only and in an offhand way, but she worked on them, dredging through each work, seven or eight times. Thus it was possible for her to be liberated from knowledge falsely so called and to mount on wings thanks to those books—by good hopes she transformed herself into a spiritual bird and so made the journey to Christ.

Melania's diligent study resulted in nothing less than an experience of God. Her encounter with God in the scriptures was a stepping-stone to a more direct, unmediated experience.

Early Christians didn't conflate factual knowledge derived from books or study with truly knowing God. As Adam was said to "know Eve," "knowing God" connotes direct experience of intimate union. This is why Palladius records that Isidore the Hospitaller was often caught up in ecstatic, wordless prayer, and why he claims that Macarius of Egypt spent more time enraptured by heavenly things than dwelling

among the mundane. Such experiences, however, are reserved for those who have truly made great progress in the spiritual life. Once, after an unusually long period of ecstatic prayer that strained his spiritual faculties to their limits, Macarius of Alexandria was beset by a terrifying temptation that he likened to a fire consuming his monastic cell and personal belongings. As a word of warning to those inexperienced in prayer, Palladius informs us that Macarius feared falling prey to delusion, and so he descended to the contemplation of God in the world and scriptures, a realm of prayer that is accessible to a broader spectrum of his readers, before essaying a return to ecstatic prayer.

The biographical sketches in *The Lausiatic History* are most effective when they narrate action and end with a memorable maxim. Prayer, however, requires a different genre. *On Prayer*, by Palladius's spiritual guide Evagrius, is a classic treatment of wordless prayer. Each of its pithy "chapters"—none longer than a short paragraph and some as short as a sentence—requires slow, meditative reading. It has 153 chapters, that being the number of fish caught by the disciples during one of Jesus' postresurrection appearances (John 21:11). Just as the disciples' net strains to contain the number of fish caught at Christ's command, so also the mind devoted to wordless prayer strains to the breaking point but does not break because of God's grace.

Evagrius recognized that there are many forms of prayer. Some are penitential, others intercessory, others doxological—all of which he groups under the rubric of psalmody. This treatise, however, he dedicates to wordless prayer, also called "imageless prayer" because it forbids capturing God in either words or mental images. More often Evagrius calls it "true prayer" or "pure prayer," the supreme form of prayer. He argues that pure prayer can be experienced only by those who have attained *apatheia*, because they alone have set aside selfish desires, words and images. They alone have set aside their own poor conceptions of God, making themselves utterly receptive to what God wishes to reveal to them.

Evagrius exhorts readers to pray purely and to experience the unsurpassed joys that await them. He sees pure prayer as the mind's truest activity, because the mind is not just cognitive but also spiritual: its highest purpose is the contemplation of God. According to Evagrius, pure prayer leads to pure love for God and neighbor. Those who pray purely experience pure joy and pleasure in the contemplation of others' salvation. They come to see themselves united with others, and they consider everyone with reverential respect. Having achieved such simplicity, they become

like angels beholding the face of God in heaven (Matt. 18:10).

This vision of God is not physical and sensory—Evagrius and Palladius warn against such delusions. Instead it floods the believer in immaterial light, like Moses after his encounter with God on the mountain (Exod. 34:29). Elsewhere Evagrius says that pure prayer is akin to beholding the place of God, as the elders of Israel on Sinai did when they ate and drank in God's presence (Exod. 24:9-11). Later Christian writers compared pure prayer to the disciples' experience at the Transfiguration, when Peter wishes to set up booths to remain there in that blessed state.

Palladius's subjects were disciples of his day who, like Peter, wished to remain with Jesus—not physically on a mountain but spiritually through pure prayer. He praises those who imitate Paul by silencing their own voice and thoughts so that the Holy Spirit might intercede for them "with sighs too deep for words" (Rom. 8:26). Like Paul, these imitators were ravished up into the third heaven. There they heard not their own voice and prayer but things that cannot be told (2 Cor. 12:3-4). They strove to fulfill Paul's exhortation to pray constantly (1 Thess. 5:17).

The holy men and women of *The Lausiac History* took their models from scripture: to be a Christian is to pattern yourself after Christ and to be crucified and raised with him. Palladius offers additional patterns and paradigms for Christian imitation. His models sacrificed everything to be with Christ, and yet their vigorous asceticism was not what Palladius found admirable. At the center of their lives was a boundless love for God.

We all imitate others. Why not imitate people such as these?