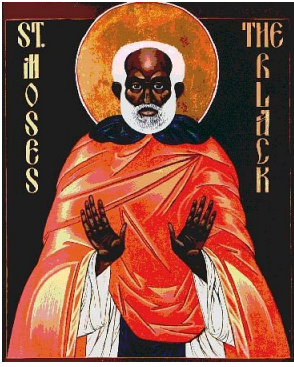


August 28

Commemoration: Moses the Black, monk, martyr, c. 258



Saint Moses the Black was an ascetic monk and priest in Egypt in the fourth century AD. Moses was a slave of a government official in Egypt who dismissed him for theft and suspected murder. He became the leader of a gang of bandits who roamed the Nile Valley spreading terror and violence. He was a large, imposing figure.

On one occasion, a barking dog prevented Moses from carrying out a robbery, so he swore vengeance on the owner. Weapons in his mouth, Moses swam the river toward the owner's hut. The owner, again alerted, hid, and the frustrated Moses took some of his sheep to slaughter. Attempting to hide from local authorities, he took shelter with some monks in a colony in the desert of Wadi El Natrun, then called Sketes, near Alexandria. The dedication of their lives, as well as their peace and contentment, influenced Moses deeply. He soon gave up his old way of life, became a Christian, was baptized and joined the monastic community at Scetes.

Moses had a rather difficult time adjusting to regular monastic discipline. His flair for adventure remained with him. Attacked by a group of robbers in his desert cell, Moses fought back, overpowered the intruders, and dragged them to the chapel where the other monks were at prayer. He told the brothers that he didn't think it Christian to hurt the robbers and asked what he should do with them. The overwhelmed robbers repented, were converted, and themselves joined the community.

Moses was zealous in all he did, but became discouraged when he concluded he was not perfect enough. Early one morning, Saint Isidore, abbot of the monastery, took Moses to the roof and together they watched the first rays of dawn come over the horizon. Isidore told Moses, "Only slowly do the rays of the sun drive away the night and usher in a new day, and thus, only slowly does one become a perfect contemplative."

Moses proved to be effective as a prophetic spiritual leader. The abbot ordered the brothers to fast during a particular week. Some brothers came to Moses, and he prepared a meal for them. Neighboring monks reported to the abbot that Moses was breaking the fast. When they came to confront Moses, they changed their minds, saying "You did not keep a human commandment, but it was so that you might keep the divine commandment of hospitality." Some see in this account one of the earliest allusions to the Paschal fast, which developed at this time.

When a brother committed a fault and Moses was invited to a meeting to discuss an appropriate penance, Moses refused to attend. When he was again called to the meeting, Moses took a leaking jug filled with water and carried it on his shoulder. Another version of the story has him carrying a basket filled with sand. When he arrived at the meeting place, the others asked why he was carrying the jug. He replied, "My sins run out behind me and I do not see them, but today I am coming to judge the errors of another." On hearing this, the assembled brothers forgave the erring monk.

Moses became the spiritual leader of a colony of hermits in the Western Desert. Later, he was ordained a priest.

At about age 75, about the year 405 AD, word came that a group of Berbers planned to attack the monastery. The brothers wanted to defend themselves, but Moses forbade it. He told them to retreat, rather than take up weapons. He and seven others remained behind and greeted the invaders with open arms, but all eight were martyred by the bandits on August 28.

A modern interpretation honors Saint Moses the Black as an apostle of non-violence. His relics and major shrine are found today at the Church of the Virgin Mary in the Parameos Monastery. In 1994, the film *Pulp Fiction* sported a character named Jules Winnifield, who may have been based off of Moses the Black.