

# ANTONY OF EGYPT

Reflections on His Life

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## A Profile of Antony's Life <sup>1</sup>

### Early Years and the Call to Become a Monk

Antony, the Egyptian, was born near the Nile River at Qoman, modern Qoman El-Arous, circa 251. His parents were prosperous Christian landowners. When Antony was 18 he and his younger sister were orphaned. Six months later, inspired by the faith and generosity of the followers of Jesus described in the *Acts of the Apostles*, Antony was deeply moved by Jesus' words "Go, sell all you have and give to the poor, and come follow me". In c. 269 he responded by selling his parents' land, giving cash from the sale of personal possessions to those in need, and fostering his sister into the care of a local group of monastic women.

There were not many monasteries in Egypt at this time, but there were a number of devout Christians who had separated themselves from the conventional patterns of family and social life to devote themselves to

prayer. They lived in or near towns and villages in solitude and were revered and cared for by the local people. Many were sought out for their piety and wisdom. Antony was eager to learn about life dedicated solely to God and visited many village holy men. Eventually he apprenticed himself to an old man in a neighboring village. Antony, himself, became known, loved, and sought out as a holy man. During this period Antony was moved by the eagerness for prayer, freedom from anger, watchfulness, gentleness, patience, desire for learning, and the human concern of these village ascetics.

As Antony's desire for ascetic life grew deeper he experienced contests with a spirit he called the devil. This demon, whose choice to fall away from original goodness drove him to lure Antony away from his goal to seek God. These early troubling contests taught him two essential truths: each day must be a new beginning to present himself to God and he must acquire knowledge of his own life in order to persevere in his dedication to God and ascetic practice.

### **The Need for Distance from the Village**

Antony recognized his growing need for deeper solitude and moved to some tombs situated further from the village, near Qoman, and lived by himself. His time in the tombs, surrounded by an environment of death, made his own withdrawal from the inhabited world a

form a personal and psychological dying. His encounters with demons became more intense, with terrifying apparitions and physical exhaustion. Those who brought him food thought he was dying. Antony believed it was a battle for his heart and remained determined to depend only on Christ's power and love.

His pattern of life included one meal a day after sunset, usually bread, salt and water. He slept on a rush mat and often on the bare ground. He fasted regularly, eating every second or fourth day. He did not use oil to cleanse and care for his body, preferring to deny bodily needs for a more intense nurture of the soul. His nights with little desire for sleep were filled with watchfulness and spurred him to a greater sense of wonder. He tried not to dwell on memories of his past life so that he could devote himself more fully to the path toward virtue which lay ahead. He maintained contact with people from the village who were inspired by his good disposition and enthusiasm for their suggestions. He worked making rope which he sold to buy food and make offerings to those in need.

### **A Call to Isolation as a Desert Hermit**

Even the dark quiet of the tombs did not fulfill Antony's need for a more intense solitude. In c. 285, almost 21 years after his initial call to ascetic life, he ventured further east, crossing the Nile and making his way further into the desert. He settled near a mountain

as a hermit in a room within a long-abandoned fort at Pispir. He barricaded the door and never left the fort for twenty years, nor did he admit visitors. People who wanted to be close to him and consult him encamped outside the fort. Twice a year bread and basic supplies were let down to him from the upper level of the fort. A source within the fort provided water.

The disturbing conflicts with demons continued, but Antony was neither discouraged nor overcome. People outside the fort heard noises suggesting the intensity of his battles as well as Antony's singing as he invoked Christ's power and gave thanks for God's presence.

For nearly 20 years people had come to be influenced by Antony's example and finally in c. 305 they tore down the door and he came out. They were amazed to see him in good health and in a state of mental and spiritual equilibrium. He began a period of rich pastoral ministry healing the sick, teaching, reconciling personal conflicts, consoling mourners and exhorting everyone to prefer nothing in the world above Christ. He persuaded many to take up the solitary life of a hermit. Monks came to him for instruction in the ascetic life and encouragement in their own battles with demons. Many settled near Antony's hermitage at Pispir. Coptic Christians identify this period of pastoral activity as the formation of a skete, a monastic community where one or more small groups of hermits

live in solitude in the vicinity of a revered ascetic teacher called “abba” or father. They claim that in c. 310 Antony composed a simple monastic rule in Coptic for their guidance which Athanasius later translated into Greek .<sup>2</sup>

Antony taught that virtue lies within every human being and that as stewards of “a work of God” each person should collaborate with God to preserve his or her soul. He emphasized that the source of evil is the scattering of the human spirit and mind by the demons. Each person must develop patient endurance so that their focus on experience of God would not be deflected or discouraged. Antony recommended being aware of emotions in order to discern between demonic influence and authentic experience of God and desires to do God’s will.

During this period of pastoral activity Antony traveled at least twice to Alexandria at the mouth of the Nile. His first visit in 311 was to support Christians in the face of unjust persecution of Emperor Diocletian. Antony ministered to Christians in prisons who were in danger of martyrdom. In a second visit he gave support to Athanasius, 20<sup>th</sup> Patriarch and Bishop of Alexandria, in a theological battle against Arians. The Arian debate centered on the teaching of Arius, a priest in Alexandria. He maintained that the Son did not share the divinity of God, the Father, and is subordinate to the Father, although the greatest of all creatures. Antony’s experience of Christ’s power over the demons and the

wisdom he learned from Christ as the Word, and not simply a creature, were arguments he used in support of Athanasius' position. Antony's solitude did not ignore his devotion to political justice or the needs of the Church.

## **A Deeper Calling to Geographic and Spiritual Solitude**

Eventually Antony decided it was time to resume his life of silence and solitude. He left those who had settled at Pispir under the leadership of either Ammonas or Marcarius, who had become followers, and moved further into the eastern desert. <sup>3</sup> Antony chose a beautiful site with a natural source of water and a cave near the top of Mt. Qolzoum became his cell. This location, 30 km. west of the Red Sea and 100 km. south of Suez, would be his final place of withdrawal and he died at this "Inner Mountain" in 356 at the age of 105 (according to Athanasius). During this last period in his life Antony continued to provide teaching, offering prayer and advice, but only during visits to his previous "Outer Mountain" at Pispir. At Pispir monks continued to come to him for a word about the ascetic life and the dangers of demons. Antony's responses were filled with the wisdom of his own experiences and his total dependence on the presence of God. His ascetical theology was incarnational. God's presence in Antony's cell was real and became manifest in his demeanor, virtue and pastoral activity. Athanasius gives a glimpse

of Antony's ascetic praxis in some of his advice to monks about confrontations with demons:

*We need, therefore, to fear God alone, holding (the demons) in contempt and fearing them not at all. Indeed, the more they do these things, let us all the more exert ourselves in the discipline that opposes them, for a great weapon against them is a just life and trust in God. They are afraid of the ascetics on several counts - for their fasting, the vigils, the prayers, the meekness and gentleness, the contempt for money, the lack of vanity, the humility, the love of the poor, the almsgiving, the freedom from wrath, and most of all their devotion to Christ. It is for this reason that they do all they do - in order not to have those monks trampling them underfoot."* <sup>4</sup>

From Antony's *Life* and his letters <sup>5</sup> we learn of his knowledge of the Hellenistic thought of his time and his familiarity with the writing of the most influential Christian theologian and philosopher of that period, Origen of Alexandria. Origen's rich life of prayer, study of the Bible, and theology were influenced by Greek philosophical insights. Yet he was firmly Christian, combining his often mystical theology with the integrity of the Christian experience of God within bodily existence and insisting on the divine presence of God in Jesus, the Son. This was congruent with Antony's wisdom learned from his solitude.

Although Antony was aware of Hellenistic thought and Origen's work, his learning was based primarily in the Christian education of his day and his experiences in solitude. <sup>6</sup> We know, also <sup>7</sup>, that his closest associates were the monk Amoun of Nitria (in lower Egypt where groups of anchorites lived near each other in settlements called *sketes*), and Paphnutius, a monk from upper Egypt where monks lived together in community. Antony's close followers were Paul the Simple, Marcarius the Egyptian (the Great), and Ammonas and Pitryon who in turn succeeded Antony at Pispir. The sayings and letters of these monks reflect the teaching of Antony and they provide a link between Antony's life and influence and the later development of monasticism in Egypt.

## **Reflections on Antony's Life**

### **The Innovations of Antony's Asceticism**

Antony is often called the "father" of Christian monasticism. Although there were monks and monasteries before his ascetic life began, Antony's monastic life provided a unique and substantive influence on the development of monastic life. His personal innovation of deep withdrawal into the desert and the access to his ascetic praxis and teaching so soon after his death established Antony's asceticism as a model which drew others to the desert and gave the life of a hermit lasting integrity within developing forms of



monastic life. His influence is great because his life was personally attractive and manifested God's presence in an authoritative and grace-filled manner.

The seeds of Antony's innovation, based on his own experiences in the desert, are:

- A desire to seek God without distraction
- Anachoresis: a commitment to withdrawal for solitude and silence
- Mentoring in anachoresis and prayer within proximity of the "inhabited world"
- Recognition of the need for deeper awareness of the distractions to seeking God, manifested in the battle with demons, the forces seeking to deflect the desire for God
- An intentional commitment to move away from the inhabited world for total aloneness and silence to enable:
  - Greater integration of soul, body and psyche with experience of God through ascetic praxis
  - Total dependence on God, rather than self-sufficiency or self-mastery
  - Embodiment of God's wisdom and love for other people through pastoral activity
  - Guarding the life of prayer and love of neighbor through continued separation from the influences of the inhabited world

- Awareness of the need for an integration of solitude and community by faithfulness to being a hermit and to pastoral activity

Antony's innovation was recognizing the need for extended geographical and spiritual solitude. His long periods in the "Outer" and "Inner" mountains became a model and example for an integral dimension of Christian monastic life: *the hermit and the hermit's environment, the desert*. Antony's contribution to monastic life was establishing the integrity of a life of anachoresis. Through total withdrawal in a place where the monk is removed from "the inhabited world", he or she must depend solely on God. In that environment the monk comes face-to-face with the psycho-somatic human passions which, if misused, can deflect a monk from "the path of virtue" which leads to experience of God.

*"Someone asked Abba Antony, 'What must one do in order to please God?' The old man replied, 'Pay attention to what I tell you: whoever you may be, always have God before your eyes; whatever you do, do it according to the testimony of the holy Scriptures; in whatever place you live, do not easily leave it. Keep these three precepts and you will be saved.'"* <sup>8</sup>

*Antony's experiences in total solitude gave birth to the integrity of solitude as a pattern for monastic life.* Anachoresis is not only a geographic "cell", but also a confrontation with all the inner and outer forces which

distract and distort the monk's original human virtue. The place **and** the ascetic discipline within the place become the tutor for self-knowledge, the experience of the presence of God, and the struggle to direct the natural human passions toward the desires and will of God.

*"But do not be afraid to hear about virtue, and do not be a stranger to the term. For it is not distant from us, nor does it stand external to us, but its realization lies within us, and the task is easy if only we shall will it. Now the Greeks leave home and traverse the sea in order to gain an education, but there is no need for us to go abroad on account of the Kingdom of heaven, nor to cross the sea for virtue. For the Lord has told us before, 'the kingdom of God is within you.' All virtue needs, then, is our willing, since it is in us, and arises from us. For virtue exists when the soul maintains its intellectual part according to nature. It holds fast according to nature when it remains as it was made – and it was made beautiful and perfectly straight.*

*"As far as the soul is concerned, being straight consists in its intellectual part's being according to nature, as it was created. But when it turns from its course and is twisted away from what it naturally is, then we speak of the vice of the soul. So the task is not difficult, for if we remain as we were made, we are in virtue, but if we turn our thoughts toward contemptible things, we are condemned as evil. If the task depended on something external that must be*

*procured, it would be truly difficult, but since the matter centers in us, let us protect ourselves from sordid ideas, and since we have received it as a trust, let us preserve the soul for the Lord, so that he may recognize his work as being just the same as he made it.*<sup>9</sup>

Antony's experiences in solitude also demonstrate the need for a monk to face the personal and emotional aspects of seeking God. These are present in the struggle to face the thoughts prompted from memories and temptations from the monk's earlier life, current temptations which can profane the body, and emotional issues which can dissipate the monk's resolve to continue seeking God. These thoughts are openings for the demons, the counter-forces, to lure the monk away from "the path to virtue". Antony identified this as **a spiritual struggle** with the demons who are determined to profane the natural passions of the monk, manifesting evil rather than love of God and neighbor. This placed the spiritual path of the monk **in a human environment** which included **the whole person as sacred**: body, soul, and mind. Antony affirmed that the virtue already lies within each person and is the normal state of human life. He realized that encounters with demons could become "blessings" when they lead the monk to total dependence on God, resulting in joy and gratefulness rather than fear and discouragement.

*“He also said, ‘Whoever has not experienced temptations cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven.’ He even added, ‘Without temptation no one can be saved.’”*<sup>10</sup>

## **The Core of Antony’s Teaching**

Antony’s teaching and wisdom is reflected in incidents from his life and his sayings collected by his disciples and the pilgrims who visited him in the desert. His unique contribution to the discipline of Christian living, especially monastic life, may be summarized in four “spiritual virtues”:<sup>11</sup>

- The work of each moment of each new day is to be congruent with God’s will. This work flows from an interior alertness (self-knowledge) which guides us to discern what is our personal business (calling) in God’s ordering of all things.

*“He also said, ‘Nine monks fell away after many labors and were obsessed with spiritual pride, for they put their trust in their own works and being deceived they did not give due heed to the commandment that says, ‘Ask your father and he will tell you.’ (Deuteronomy 32:7)”*<sup>12</sup>

- We must always avoid both a sense of self-sufficiency and trusting in our own virtue. At the

same time, we should be cautious of what we say and what we eat (consume). Since our Ego dwells in the past and seeks to preserve the present, we should avoid focusing on present sensory experience as an end in itself. We must try to see into the present and discern how it leads toward what God desires for this day and the future. We should prefer nothing to Christ.

*“He also said, ‘Always have the fear of God before your eyes. Remember him who gives death and life. Hate the world and all that is in it. Hate all peace that comes from the flesh. Renounce this life, so that you may be alive to God. Remember what you have promised God, for it will be required of you on the day of judgement. Suffer hunger, thirst, nakedness, be watchful and sorrowful; weep, and groan in your heart; test yourselves, to see if you are worthy of God; despise the flesh, so that you may preserve your souls.’”*<sup>13</sup>

- We must live in such a way that the presence of God is always before us, especially in the lives of other people. The presence of God should also become a reality in our manner of living, made possible by an open heart, a place always watchful and receptive to God’s presence. This is why acetic praxis is an essential part of spiritual formation.

*“For he (Antony) said that the soul’s intensity is strong when the pleasures of the body are weakened. And this tenet of his was also truly wonderful, that neither the way of virtue nor separation from the world for its sake ought to be measured in terms of time spent, but by the aspirant’s desire and purposefulness. He, indeed, did not hold time passed in his memory, but day by day, as if making a beginning of his asceticism, increased his exertion for advance, saying continually to himself Paul’s words about forgetting what lies behind and straining for what lies ahead, and recalling also the passage in which Elijah the prophet says, ‘ the Lord...lives before whom I stand today. (Antony) observed that in saying today he was not counting the time passed, but as one always establishing a beginning, he endeavored each day to present himself as the sort of person ready to appear before God – that is, pure of heart and prepared to obey his will, and no other.”<sup>14</sup>*

- The aim of our seeking God, our learning and our ascetic praxis is go beyond thoughts and words and manifest God’s likeness in our very being...to share the life of God...to live in a pattern of daily dying and rising.

*“Three fathers used to go and visit blessed Antony every year and two of them used to discuss their thoughts and the salvation of their souls with him, but the third always remained silent and did not ask him anything. After a long time, Abba Antony said to him,*

*'You often come here to see me, but you never ask me anything,' and the other replied, 'It is enough for me to see you Father.'*" <sup>15</sup>

## **Antony's Awareness of God's Time**

The core of Antony's teaching makes a new experience of time possible. <sup>16</sup> He learned that the past can entrap and enslave us, while the future, full of expectation, can rob the present of its energizing integrity, reality and work. Being conscious of our death enables us to live only in the present. Each moment in the present is the time to experience God. By living in the present we can let go of our desire to control both the past and the future and unite them in the present which becomes an environment manifesting the coming of Christ in history. Antony's experience of time is firmly incarnational.

When Christ is present in a moment of time, the Ego's view of time as linear is transformed. The present is no longer a material "possession" of the Ego to be used, but a moment filled with the eternal wholeness (virtue) for which we are created. The **present** moment ("each new day is a beginning", in Antony's words) is a time for praxis which opens us to become aware of the eternal dimension hidden in the present **and** to manifest in our present lives the aspects of the transformation which awaits us **in eternity**. To live in the past or to pine



for the future is to avoid the opportunities for the grace of the present.

Antony's emphasis on "being conscious of your death" invites a dying to our grasping of time as a possession, so that a new experience of life may emerge. When we are open to this "new" Christ-filled time, we can experience the ways the present time and the present world are wrapped in God's presence, wisdom and power.

In Antony's life we see that the desert exhorts us not to live for the sake of longevity or self-interest. It offers us a perspective of time, and of ourselves within time, that can transform the way we see our neighbors, the events of the modern world, and ourselves. But we must let go of time as the venue wherein we complete what we desire for ourselves and the world. This "dying" makes a rebirth possible where time is no longer temporal, but **an integration of the present laced with eternity.**

The difference between our "Ego time" and "eternal time" is that the old time is limited by the decay of life and our individualism. The new time contains the old ("what is") **and** the fulfillment of "what is" even before the fulfillment has become manifest. This brings the future into the present. Through the sacrifice of our "control of time" we are reconciled with eternity. This makes a unity of all life possible. When eternity becomes

the “backdrop of life”, love of neighbor is not only possible, but natural.

What is so exciting about Antony’s life is that his life was his primary message. His sayings, stories and mentoring of other monks were the result of his experiences in the desert alone and with other people.

### **The Pattern of Antony’s Spiritual Path**

- Christian parents and family life
- Hearing the word of God (worship, Bible, mentors)
- Responding to the Word
- Finding a mentor for the ascetic life
- Moving deeper in praxis and self-knowledge
- Complete devotion to God in the midst of battles with thoughts and demons which tempted him away from his spiritual path
- Responding to others seeking his influence
- Combining contemplative experience with pastoral activity and teaching
- Involvement in Church and society
- Mentoring disciples and pilgrims
- Awareness of what nurtures him and disciplines him
- The fundamental importance of prayer, learning, dependence on God and live of neighbor

## **Antony's Sources of Spiritual Nurture**

- Time with God in solitude and silence
- Personal mentors
- Self-awareness
- Battles with forces that would deflect his focus on divine presence and power
- Ascetic praxis
- Meditation on the Bible
- Patient endurance: in his cell and in his praxis as well as endurance in the midst of temptations
- Simplicity of life
- Dependence on God
- Need for manual labor
- Concern for the needs of other people
- Offering of self through gifts, mentoring and pastoral activity
- Guarding his spiritual path and his ability to manifest Christ in his life

## **The Grace of Antony's Life**

The combination of Antony's life as a hermit and the spiritual struggle it produced formed Antony into a person in whom God's presence was clearly recognized. This gave his innovation to monastic life its integrity. The following aspects of his life are described in Athanasius' *Life of Antony*. Although the *Life* is clearly a combination of biography, hagiography and some personal agendas important to Athanasius and his battle

with the Arians, it presents aspects of Antony's life which are a model for Christian spiritual formation.

- As an ascetic he was loved and sought after, both as village ascetic and hermit
- He developed a grace of speech and a "presence" which manifested calmness and peace
- He emphasized love of neighbor and the dangers of anger
- Even as a hermit, his life included periods of pastoral activity, teaching, healing and encouragement
- His pastoral activities did not deflect him from his ascetic praxis which he considered the essential root of his life
- He was a mentor to many monks, yet was accessible to lay persons as well
- His life as a hermit did not disconnect him from the social issues of public of church life

In summary, Antony's life showed that spiritual formation must include withdrawal, prayer, meditation on scripture, learning, psychological discernment, healing and resistance to misuse of human passions which can profane human goodness and virtues. An open and listening heart is necessary to manifest the humility which results in love of God and neighbor. Dependence on God is learned from knowledge gained in a struggle with one's thoughts and the forces which scatter the resolve for transformation. Patient endurance in ascetic life leads toward the manifestation of God in

the life of monk. This pattern of life is formed by a commitment to solitude and silence and genuine concern for the lives of the monk's neighbors.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> This profile is based on various narratives in *Athanasius' The Life of Antony and the Letters to Marcellinus*. Translation and Introduction by Robert C. Gregg. Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1980. Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, knew Antony personally, spent years in the desert himself, and was familiar with desert traditions about Antony's teaching and wisdom. The *Life* was written within a year of Antony's death and almost immediately became widely read and influential because of Antony's reputation. The *Life* became a model for subsequent lives of saints and because of its subject had a substantive influence of the development of monasticism. The *Life* contains both factual information and episodes which present Antony in an idealized fashion to emphasize the spiritual power of God's presence in his life. This style of biography is called *hagiography* because it presents the "holy life" of the person rather than a strictly factual biography. Athanasius' *Life of Antony* is generally regarded by scholars as being an accurate presentation of Antony's life, ascetic practice and teaching. For more information see Columba Stewart, OSB, "Antony of the Desert" in Philip F. Esler. *The Early Christian World: Volume II*. London: Routledge, pages 1088-1101.

<sup>2</sup> Bishop Dioscorous and H.H. Pope Shenouda III. *Coptic Orthodox Monastery of St. Antony the Great*. Cairo: Anba Reuis Press. Pg. 1 & 33.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 1 refers to Macarius and the *History of the Monks of Egypt*, HM 15.1-2 refers to Ammonas, who was followed by Pitryon.

<sup>4</sup> *Athanasius' Life*, pg. 54.

<sup>5</sup> See Samuel Rubenson. *The Letters of St. Antony. Monasticism and the Making of a Saint*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995.

<sup>6</sup> For more detail see Columba Stewart, OSB, *op. cit.* pp. 1095-97.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* pg. 1100.

<sup>8</sup> Benedicta Ward SLG, *Sayings*, pg. 2.

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<sup>9</sup> *Athanasius' Life of Antony*, pp. 46-47.

<sup>10</sup> Benedicta Ward SLG, *Sayings*, pg. 4.

<sup>11</sup> Stelios Ramfos, a Greek Orthodox philosopher and scholar of the patristic period, in his detailed study of the wisdom of the desert abbas, *Like a Pelican in the Wilderness*, summarizes these unique features of Antony's teaching in a chapter entitled "Antony the Great", pp. 52-62. His scholarship has significantly influenced my understanding of Antony's wisdom and I am grateful for the clarity of his organization of Antony's basic teaching. My description of the core of Antony's teaching is both a response to Dr. Ramfos' work, and the result of my own reflection and study of the life and sayings of Abba Antony.

<sup>12</sup> Benedicta Ward SLG, *Sayings*, pg. 8-9.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 8.

<sup>14</sup> *Athanasius Life of Antony*, pp. 36-37.

<sup>15</sup> Benedicta Ward SLG, *Sayings*, pg. 7.

<sup>16</sup> For more detail see Stelios Ramfos, *Pelican*, pp. 58-62.