

St. Antony of Egypt, Hermit

(251-356 AD)

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It is hard to overestimate the influence which St. Antony of Egypt has had on subsequent Christian history. Because of his pioneering role in the development of monasticism, Benedictines have a special interest in him, but his teaching and example, elaborated by the desert monks who followed him, have influenced all Christian history.

Antony's Life according to St. Athanasius

Around the year 251, Antony was born of a Christian family of Copts who were not poor. As a boy, Antony didn't like school, but he liked to go to church with his parents and listen to the Bible. When he was 18-20 years old, his parents died, and he was left with responsibility for the family property and for his young sister. Shortly afterward he heard the Biblical story about the rich man who wished to be perfect (Mt 19.16-30). He sold most of his goods then, but kept back a little to support his sister. Then hearing the passage about not worrying about the morrow (Mt 6.34), he gave away the rest of his possessions, confided his sister to some devout women, and dedicated himself to the ascetic life. A nearby hermit guided him. Antony also consulted other ascetics in the area.

Antony had himself sealed in a tomb for a while. There he had horrific struggles with temptations and demons. When his struggles were over, it seemed to him a light was shining through the roof of the tomb. Antony asked the luminous apparition: "Where were you? Why did you not appear at the beginning to stop my pains?" A voice came to him: "Antony, I was right here, but I waited to see you in action. Now, because you held out and did not surrender, I will ever be your helper and I will make you renowned everywhere."

About 385, at the age of 35, Antony withdrew to an abandoned fort (Pispir) where he spent the next 20 years, until 305. There he had disciples. During the persecution of Maximinus Daia (311 AD), he went to Alexandria to support and perhaps join the martyrs.

After he returned from that trip to Alexandria, Antony found himself overwhelmed by visitors. In 313, at the age of 62, he went deep into the Arabian desert, about 15 miles from the Red Sea, to live at an oasis at the foot of his "inner mountain." From then until his death, Antony commuted between the outer and inner deserts. When he knew that he was soon to die, Antony gave instructions to two followers who lived with him at the inner mountain. They were to bury his body secretly, because he didn't approve of the burial customs of his fellow Egyptians. He gave his few clothes to these two monks and to the bishops, Athanasius and Serapion.

Sayings of St. Antony

The 38 sayings attributed to Antony in the "alphabetical collection" of the Sayings of the Desert Fathers emphasize the inevitability and benefits of temptation. Recognizing that all are tempted

and all fall, Antony's sayings inculcate forgiveness of others. Having faced his own fears in his struggles against temptation, Antony would not have his monks fear, for love casts out fear.

He wants his monks to do manual work and pray. They should have God before their eyes and live according to the Scripture. They should stay in their monastic solitudes, and not be quick to move around.

Antony insisted on humility. Monks should not trust in their own righteousness. They are to be humble, prepared to bear insults, and able to control their tongues. A devout doctor in the city can be equal in holiness to a heroic monk like Antony.

The monk needs to learn and exercise discernment over the movements of his own heart. Visions and prophecies, even if true, can come from the devil. Candid discussion with an experienced person is a help to discernment.

The monk needs to make an effort to pray and develop virtues. He must dispossess himself of things. Nevertheless, just as a bow should not be strung too tightly, so the monk should relax his asceticism sometimes. In the end, Antony lived always in God's presence. Just to see him was a spiritual gift.

Letters of St. Antony

Still another source for our knowledge of Antony is found in seven letters which he wrote. The letters are full of Antony's humanity, his godly love for his friends and disciples, a very strong sense of the continuity of God's redeeming activity from Old Testament times to his own. He believes that human beings are essentially good in their inmost nature, and that they need to return to a life in conformity with that nature. Hence, it is important for Christians to know their deepest selves. The path to this return is the one Christ enables and trod, the path of self-emptying, poverty, and attentiveness to God's call. "He can make us wise through his ignorance, enrich us through his poverty and strengthen us through his weakness, and resurrect us all...." Antony urges his disciples to be worthy of the Spirit of adoption which Christ has given them and ready for Christ's return.

God sent his Son who resurrected our minds from death and taught us that we are members of one another. Antony tells his correspondents that he prays for them, the saints pray for them, and he tells them to pray also. Whoever sins against his neighbor, sins against himself.

Antony's Legacy

At the end of his struggles, Antony became a holy man, whose external appearance mirrored his inner goodness: "His soul being free of confusion, he held his outer sense also undisturbed, so that from the soul's joy his face was cheerful as well, and from the movements of the body it was possible to sense and perceive the stable condition of his soul."

His message to all who came to him or advice was "to have faith in the Lord and love him; to guard themselves from lewd thoughts and pleasures of the flesh \85 to flee vanity, to pray constantly, to sing holy songs before and after sleeping, and to take to heart the precepts of the Scriptures; to keep in mind the deeds of the saints." What made his advice so convincing were the joy and serenity which he manifested in spite of his troubles.

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General

Bresard. www.scourmont.be/studium/bresard/ This website contains an entire history of early monasticism. The second chapter is on Antony.

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