

HEROES OF THE DESERT

Antony, Father of Monks

Biography

- Born near Herakleopolis Magna, central Egypt, in A.D. 251
 - well-to-do Christian parents; one sister
 - did not like school, but very attentive at Mass
- When he was 18 or 20, his parents died
 - about six months later, he was going to church
 - as he entered, he heard the Gospel being read:
 - “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” (Mt 19:21)
 - gave away almost all he had, keeping only enough for him and his sister
 - went back to church some time later, heard another Gospel:
 - “Do not worry about tomorrow; tomorrow will take care of itself.” (Mt 6:34)
 - sold his house and all his possessions, gave money to the poor
 - entrusted his sister to a community of holy women
- began to learn the ascetic life
 - started on the outskirts of his town
 - “If he heard of a zealous soul anywhere, like a wise bee he left to search him out, nor did he return home before he had seen him”
 - tried to incorporate the lessons he learned from each holy man and make them all his own
 - moved to an abandoned crypt in the cemetery
 - experiences many temptations to turn back and give up
 - terrible encounters with demons
 - this has become a favorite theme for artists
 - struggles bravely for several days
 - eventually rescued by a vision of the Lord in light
- departs the town and goes to Mt Pispir
 - barricades himself in an abandoned fort
 - lives in solitude for 20 years
 - travelers brought him food from time to time
 - avoids his old friends, devotes his life to prayer
 - eventually his friends break down the door; he emerges “as from a shrine”
 - many stay to live near him and become monks following his example

- during a persecution, he goes to Alexandria
 - is willing to be martyred but does not seek it out
 - appears in court and encourages his fellow Christians
- upon his return, feels a call to a deeper life
 - the first to go to the deep desert: his “Inner Mountain”
 - spends the rest of his life there
 - works many miracles
 - gives counsel to those who come to him
 - visits Alexandria again at the request of Patriarch Athanasius, to confront the Arian heresy
 - visits Saint Paul the First Hermit
- dies in A.D. 356, at the age of 105

The Wisdom of Saint Antony

- sources of his teaching
 - *The Life of Saint Antony*
 - written by Saint Athanasius (Patriarch of Alexandria), within a year of Antony’s death.
 - 27 of 93 chapters taken up with an Address to his monks
 - seven letters to his fellow monks in the surrounding area
 - a few dozen sayings in the *Sayings of the Fathers*
- Antony’s Address to the Monks
 - “Beginning over each day, let us increase our zeal.”
 - life is short in comparison to heaven
 - we must not grow weary doing what is right
 - we must not think that we are doing some great thing
 - we must not grow careless in the Lord’s service
 - there is no turning back—we must not regret what we left behind
 - “The accomplishment is within us if we have the will.”
 - The process of purification
 - the body is purified by asceticism
 - the soul is purified by repentance
 - this gives a taste of the Resurrection
 - God takes pity on the soul dedicated to repentance
 - “We have enemies, powerful and crafty—the wicked demons.”
 - they are great in number, of diverse kinds
 - they do not want us to take the place from which they fell
 - they have a general plan of attack
 - they place stumbling blocks with evil thoughts
 - they try to intimidate us by exaggerating their size and strength
 - they may incite us to prayer, trying to get us to take on immoderate levels of devotion so that we despair when it becomes difficult
 - the Enemy has no power except what God permits to him
 - we should pay no attention to the wonders they can perform
 - one must never boast of having power over them

- Humility
 - “I saw the snares that the Devil spreads out over the world, and I said groaning: ‘What can get through from such snares?’ Then I heard a voice saying to me: ‘Humility.’
 - “He who knows himself knows God, and he who knows God is worthy to worship him as is right.”
- Charity
 - “Our life and our death is with our neighbor. If we gain our brother, we have gained God. But if we scandalize our brother, we have sinned against Christ.”
- Practical Wisdom
 - “Whoever hammers a lump of iron, first decides what he is going to make of it: a scythe, a sword, or an axe. Even so, we ought to make up our minds what kind of virtue we want to forge, or we labor in vain.”
- Stillness
 - “Just as fish die if they stay too long out of water, so the monks who loiter outside their cells or pass their time with men of the world lose the intensity of inner peace. So like a fish going toward the sea, we must hurry to reach our cell, for fear that if we delay outside we will lose our interior watchfulness.”
- Renunciation
 - “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.”
 - “Let us not look back upon the world and think that we have renounced great things. For even the whole world is a very trifling thing compared with all of Heaven. . . . What we leave behind is practically nothing . . .”
 - “Remember what you have promised God, for it will be required of you on the day of judgment. 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.”