

HOLINESS IN THE DESERT

A LIFE OF ST. ANTHONY OF EGYPT

Alexandria

There is a tradition, though comparatively late, that St. Mark the Evangelist, founded the Church in Alexandria, once Egypt's most prestigious city and the accepted centre of Greek culture in the Roman Empire.

Situated on the Nile Delta Alexandria linked East and West not only in philosophical thought and learning but also in thriving trade. An influential Jewish colony flourished there and it was at Alexandria that the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek and about fifty years before the birth of Christ the Book of Wisdom was composed by an Alexandrian Jew.

Famous Teachers

In the Acts of the Apostles written by St. Luke we find that Apollos, a convert Jew from Alexandria, and a man of great eloquence, preached Jesus in both Ephesus and Corinth between the years 53 and 58, the period of St. Paul's third Missionary journey. It seems then that knowledge of Christ did reach Alexandria early in the history of Christianity. A Church official whom today we call a Bishop was there by 61.

By the end of the second century Christianity was firmly anchored in Alexandria. It had a catechetical school and a succession of gifted teachers like Pantenus, Clement and Origen, whom made Alexandria an illustrious Christian centre where highly educated converts could find satisfying reasons for their new-found religious faith. Teaching emphasis, however, especially in the case of Origen, fell principally on acceptance of the message that had been handed down from the Apostles and their successors. Sacred Tradition was paramount though the truth in pagan philosophy was welcome for it belonged to Christ and had a place in proving and defending Christianity. Thus early in the teaching Church's history were sown the seeds of St. Anselm's definition of theology centuries later: "faith seeking understanding".

Anthony

But the Gospel was never intended for the wealthy and educated only. Its message went out especially to the poor and ignorant, a class of people Greek learning had never reached let alone influenced. So the Gospel seeped down the Nile Valley from the Greek

intelligentsia of Alexandria to the humble peasants of Lower Egypt. There at Coma Anthony was born to Christian Egyptian parents, Copts, in the year 251.

Persecution

It was not a good year for birth into a Christian family in any Roman province. That year the Roman Emperor Decius was making a systematic check on loyalty to the gods of Rome. On a particular day everyone in cities, towns and villages was commanded to appear before a group of magistrates, offer sacrifices to the Roman gods and receive a certificate attesting to that fact. Failure to comply meant imprisonment and ultimately death.

Prisons soon became full of dissenting Christians including Denis, the Bishop of Alexandria. At Cappadocia, the learned and saintly Origen in his old age almost had his desire to die for Christ fulfilled. As a youth fifty years earlier in Alexandria he wanted to rush off to join his father, Leonides, in martyrdom but was prevented by the simple strategy of his mother. She hid his clothes. Given the opportunity this time he loyally confessed Christ, and the persecution stopping as suddenly as it started, he died as a result of his tortures later on in Tyre. Two outstanding martyrs in this persecution were Alexander, Bishop of Jerusalem, and Pope Fabian at Rome.

The persecution, however, revealed on one hand the Church's heroic strength and on the other her human weakness for there were many Christians who did not stand the test. Thus at baptism Anthony entered a Church recently made glorious by her heroic martyrs and confessors, those who had suffered publicly on behalf of Christ but had not been put to death, and humiliated by weaker Christians who had lapsed at their time of trial yet later sought forgiveness and reconciliation.

It had not been the Church's practice to admit back to communion even through public penance people who were guilty of idolatry, fornication or murder. So a controversy ensued. Should these penitent, apostate Christians be accepted back or not? Many of them were apostates only in a technical sense - they were given certificates by indulgent magistrates, bribed or otherwise, or had forged ones. The compassion of Christ prevailed however. St. Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, himself a confessor and later to be a martyr said yes provided they did penance and were received back officially by their bishop and his clergy. Thirty years earlier, Pope Calixtus in virtue of his power as successor to St. Peter had admitted adulterers back to communion after the performance of penance. In the crisis Pope Cornelius called a council of bishops at Rome. This council sanctioned St. Cyprian's view which then became standard for the Church as a whole. Thus the child Anthony was to grow up in a Church, as one historian has put it, no longer a society of saints but a school for sinners.

St. Athanasius

Anthony lived to be a very old man indeed. He died in 356 aged one hundred and five at Mt. Colzim in the desert of Lower Egypt about one hundred and sixty kilometres south east of modern Cairo. Fortunately for us Anthony had a firm friend and supporter in Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria from 328 until his death in 373 though with periods of exile owing to his staunch and courageous defence of Catholic faith. About ten years after Anthony's death Athanasius wrote his "Life of Anthony" and to it we are indebted for our detailed knowledge of this remarkable desert saint.

In life there scarcely could have been two Christians more different from each other than Athanasius and Anthony. Athanasius belonged to the cultured, intellectual class of Alexandria. As a deacon and theologian he accompanied his bishop to the Council at Nicea in 325. The creed in which we express our faith at Mass on Sundays and holy days comes substantially from him. In the Council he championed the divinity of Christ against the teaching of his fellow Alexandrian, Arius. Arius and his later followers contended that the Word was not of the same substance as the Father nor eternal like Him but created out of nothing by the Father. That, St. Athanasius insisted, was not the faith of the Apostles. Through insistence on Apostolic faith, he suffered at the hands of two Roman emperors who with absolute power supported Bishops that had accepted the views of Arius. It was probably while in exile from his diocese of Alexandria and in hiding among the desert monks of Lower Egypt that Athanasius first met Anthony.

The Beginning

Anthony's parents had not been poor by the standards of the third century. They farmed over two hundred acres of land, enough to provide them, their son, Anthony and a daughter in comfortable living. Sundays saw them and their two children at the celebration of the Eucharist where Anthony soon evinced an interest in divine things. What he heard in Church and at home had a deep effect on him. He was a quiet, serious-minded boy not given to games and the companionship of others of his age. Stories of the Egyptian martyrs must have reached his ears very early. During his childhood in the reign of the Emperor Valerian, priests, deacons and laity witnessed to Christ with their lives at Alexandria. St. Denis, at that time Bishop of Alexandria, could write later that Valerian's persecution was productive of glorious martyrdoms in which men and women, young and old, triumphed in the contest and received eternal crowns. Esteem for the martyrs was strong in the early Church. The recurring anniversaries of their "dies natalis", day of birth into everlasting life, were occasions of inspiration and challenge to all faithful followers of Christ.

Devotion to the Martyrs

The cult of the saints began with the martyrs who gave witness of fidelity to Christ by their suffering and death. Our word martyr comes from a Greek work meaning to give witness.

Pope St. Clement I in his letter to the Church in Corinth about the year 96 praised the steadfast endurance of Saints Peter and Paul as a glorious witness to their faith. The early Church considered Jesus as the first and chief of martyrs.

On his way to Rome doomed to be torn to pieces by wild beasts, St. Ignatius of Antioch rejoiced at the prospect of becoming an imitator of Christ and at last a true disciple. He was martyred about 116.

At Smyrna the pagan authorities could not persuade the city's old bishop, Polycarp, to curse Christ although he knew death by burning would be the consequence. He died about 156 witnessing to the faith that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.

The first public veneration of the martyrs that we know of is connected with St. Polycarp. The Christians of Smyrna gathered his charred remains and buried them. On the anniversary of his death each year they assembled at his grave to revere his memory.

A rich spirituality of martyrdom developed.

The Spirituality of Martyrdom

From the account of the passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas written in the third century, it is clear that Christians believed that there was a special presence of Christ in martyrs during the ordeal of martyrdom which strengthened them to the end.

Martyrdom was seen as the highest charism, the great act of faith that gave the spirit of prophecy. The martyr's love of Christ and identification with Him in suffering became a means of exhortation, encouragement and correction for all who witnessed the death or heard about it.

Mystically, Origen explained martyrdom as the supreme Eucharist. The martyrs drank the chalice that Jesus drank. Therefore they would reign with Him and sit in judgement on kings. Anyone taking up the chalice of salvation and calling on the name of Jesus would be saved.

Tertullian saw martyrdom as a second baptism. The martyrs' blood washed all their sins away, restoring baptismal purity and fitting them for immediate entrance into heaven.

It is little wonder then that Christians soon invoked the prayers of the martyrs, Christ's champions, reigning in glory with Him. Their day of death had become their birthday in eternal life. Prayers for the martyrs turned into prayers to them whenever their tombs were honoured whether in the catacombs of Rome or elsewhere.

Over a century before the persecution of Christians ceased officially by the edict of Emperor Constantine in 313, Clement of Alexandria had taught the doctrine of "white martyrdom". All who lived in purity of faith and obedience to God's commandments confessed God by their lives and were martyrs before him.

Clement's successor, Origen, considered all faithful Christians carrying the cross after Jesus and ready to die for Him, to be already martyrs in God's eyes.

Early Influences

From the religious climate of his family circle and the Church, Anthony undoubtedly inhaled the heady air of heroic allegiance to Christ. Even as a boy, Athanasius tells us, Anthony did not pester his parents for rich or fancy food, an indication of the first stirrings within him of future self-denial and detachment from earthly pleasures. Long before Anthony's boyhood, Origen who took Our Lord's teaching on asceticism quite literally - for years he wore no shoes and possessed only one coat - had urged Christians to live lives that prepared them for Martyrdom. In the light of large numbers that lapsed from Christ in the persecution of Decius, many Christians, it seemed, did not make this preparation. They had settled down rather too comfortably in their non-Gospel world. Anthony on the other hand went into training young to be a champion of Christ.

Meditations

Though with an early leaning towards self-renunciation, Anthony had little or none towards formal education. He did not take to schooling. However, of a thoughtful nature, he listened attentively to the lessons read to him and remembered them. When he was about twenty, both parents being dead, the family property came into his hands and with it the care of his sister. About this time too he was given to meditations on New Testament scenes and teaching. On his way to Church one Sunday Our Lord's call of the first Apostles filled his thoughts. The promptness of Peter and his companions to leave all and follow Jesus especially impressed him. Next his mind turned to St. Luke's description of the first Christian community in Jerusalem. The unselfishness of those who sold their possessions and gave the proceeds to the Apostles for the support of all was an inspiration to him. Finally St. Paul's words of encouragement to the Christians at

Ephesus flooded in on him: their great hope of heavenly riches because of the ready response they had given to God's call.

A Gospel Reading

After this sequence of reflections Anthony entered the Church late, just as the deacon was reading the Gospel. That Sunday the Gospel reading happened to be the story of the rich man who refused the invitation of Jesus to be his disciple at the price of selling all his possessions and giving the money to the poor. The remarkable coincidence between the nature of his meditations along the road to Church and the Gospel text of the day struck Anthony as providential. Christ's call to the rich young man was a call to him, too, there and then. Anthony accepted the invitation. Soon he returned to the townspeople the fertile tract of land inherited from his ancestors, sold his possessions and gave the money to the poor except a small amount for his sister's support. Sometime later and again in Church, Anthony heard read out the Sermon on the Mount. Immediately he took to heart Jesus' message about concern for tomorrow and action followed. He committed his sister to the care of well-known and trusted virgins, put his remaining money in the hands of the poor and so freed himself for a life of asceticism.

Christian Asceticism

Dom David Knowles, a distinguished English Church historian, held that the year of Anthony's entrance into solitude was 271 and that that year marked the beginning of what would later be called the Monastic movement. Yet Anthony was by no means the first Christian to renounce the ordinary way of living for a life apart on the fringe of a village. Indeed St. Athanasius informs us that anyone concerned about his spiritual destiny opted for solitude somewhere on the outskirts of his village. Anthony himself was well acquainted with an old ascetic near a neighbouring village who had lived a solitary life since his youth. So the sight of solitaries, anchorites, as they were called was nothing new in the second half of the third century. (Anchorite comes from the Greek meaning to retire from withdraw). Nor was the religious spirit of the Anchorites something new. Bouyer, a French expert in the history of spirituality, identified a continuous stream of Christian idealism flowing from the Apostles to the solitaries and then to the Cenobites (Monks in community), an unbroken chain linking them with the ascetics and virgins of the primitive Church. Anthony we remember entrusted his sister to the care of virgins. Virgins, women who consecrated their human love to Christ, are mentioned in the New Testament itself.

Anthony learnt the ways of an ascetic not out of books but from the example and maxims of the neighbouring ascetics themselves. His spiritual formation made an itinerant of him. Like a bee gathering nectar he went from anchorite to anchorite to draw from each the secret of his union with God. First hand he learnt about graciousness, earnestness in prayer and patient endurance as well as vigils, sleeping on the ground and fasting. Though each anchorite generally practised a particular virtue to a high degree Anthony found in all great devotion to Christ and love for one another.

Prayer and the reading of Scripture began to occupy large portions of his day. His retentive memory allowed the Word of God to be constant source of prayer for him. But Anthony also worked hard to support himself and help the poor. Heavy, exacting labour became a means of self-denial besides a way of identifying with the poor. At that time only the poor were manual labourers.

Anthony's personal grace and wisdom quickly endeared him to all in his new mode of life. He did not try to out-rival the old solitaries in their special virtues but humbly learnt all he could from them and followed their counsels. Among his young fellow ascetics his spiritual triumphs engendered no resentment but drew them more closely to him. Such was the charm of his personality. Later Athanasius, who knew Anthony only in his mature years, could write that just to think of Anthony did him good. Anthony's influence too went out well beyond the anchoritic circle; people in the villages called him God's friend and loved him as one of their own.

Anyone who begins to follow Christ seriously can expect temptation. Anthony was no exception. He had done all the wrong things the tempter suggested. He should never have given away his property or abandoned his sister. Desire for money, fame, the joys of eating and drinking, all the good things of life crowded in on him coaxing him away from solitude and penance. But with the two great arms of faith and persevering prayer he won the day and all such blandishments were put aside. Next he was attacked where young people can be most vulnerable, in his chastity. Yet once again through faith, prayer and fasting he conquered.

The Anchorites' flight from the world and their practice of penance were often strongly motivated by a desire to overcome temptation and to save their souls. Among the sayings of the Desert Fathers two attributed to Anthony are relevant here - "Without temptation no one can be saved" and "Work and pray and you will be saved".

Among the Tombs

When Anthony's spiritual training was over, after he had mastered himself as St. Athanasius put it, he went into great seclusion in a most unusual place — among tombs. A tomb itself became his hermitage. At long intervals only did he receive bread from a

friend. Yet it was in this place of isolation and penance that he suffered the severest onslaughts from the devil and other demons. They physically assaulted him and he even got close to death. But neither the earthquakes nor the frightful apparitions they instigated could oust Anthony from his tomb retreat.

Yet God was not unmindful of Anthony. In the midst of his confusion came light and spiritual vision. The demons fled and Anthony's pains were gone. Then Anthony put the question, the same question, repeated down the years by countless saints emerging from spiritual darkness and physical pain, "Lord, where were you? Why did you not come at the beginning and take away my suffering?" The answer came, familiar in the lives of all God's mystics: "Anthony, I was present all the time." In the silence and apparent absence of God, Anthony had remained faithful. As a reward God promised him renown everywhere, a promise certainly fulfilled. At the completion of his period among the tombs, Anthony was thirty-five years old.

Why did Anthony choose to live in a cemetery? From the "Life" it appears the reason was to confront the devils that lived there and to expel them. It appears too that Anthony had already driven the devils from the village by his earlier asceticism.

There is support for such an attitude towards demons in one of Origen's homilies. This homily draws attention to the fact that both Israel and Jesus had to struggle against demons. According to Origen part of everyone's asceticism in imitation of Jesus is to struggle against demons, too. Origen held that every passion overcome is a devil defeated and therefore one fewer to harass Christ's followers. To support his view Origen referred to Jesus expelling the demons from the man who lived among the tombs in the country of the Gadarenes (Matt. 8: 28-34). Origen's influence was strong in Egypt long after he left Alexandria for Ceasarea and his death in 254.

In the Desert

The next phase in Anthony's spiritual development took him into the desert. He became the first to live the eremetical life in the strict sense. ("Hermit and "eremetical" come from the Greek word for desert.) Anthony entered the desert fired with even greater zeal in the service of God after spiritual experiences among the tombs. However, on the way he had to rebuff temptations not to embrace his new way of life.

In the desert Anthony settled down on his "Outer Mountain", Mt. Pispir, where he was to spend the next twenty years of his life. He locked himself in an old fortress, lived on bread supplied every six months and drank only water. It is clear that Anthony did venture into the desert in search of what the Greeks called "hesychia" - stillness quiet and tranquility. As we have seen, he had external and internal hesychia before he left the place

of tombs. His motive for entering the desert was in imitation of Jesus who went there to struggle against the devil (Matt. 4: 1-11.)

Origen had taught that Christian asceticism is basically an imitation of Christ's struggle against evil. In his commentary on St. Matthew's Gospel he identified Christ's Cross with the cross of the Christian ascetic. Every Christian crucified with Christ shares in Christ's victory over principalities and powers in the Cross for the spiritual life consists in imitating and participating in the life of Christ.

The Gospels, especially St. John's furnish ample evidence that the world before the coming of Christ was in the grip of the devil. The kingdom of God has not yet been established on earth definitively so the devil still has some sway in the world. Bouyer, the French writer already referred to, held that in solitude with nothing to screen his presence the devil has direct rule; likewise among the tombs. In the graveyard the devil has apparent victory through the presence of physical death. So to dwell among tombs or go into the desert to practise asceticism is a deliberate confrontation with him and an effort to dislodge him from his own domain.

The modern mind almost instinctively exorcises many of Anthony's combats with demons and sees largely at their root physical and psychological causes. Solitude and fasting can do strange things to a man. Our world of science and materialism is not kindly disposed towards any suggestions of the presence of the spiritual or the supernatural. At best it is either complacent or sceptical when faced with what appears to be other-worldly phenomena. Centuries ago, however, Shakespeare voiced a timeless warning about over-human confidence in denying the possibility of such occurrences when he had Hamlet remind Horatio that there were more things in heaven and on earth than were even dreamed of in his philosophy.

A Spiritual Father

Anthony's friends however did not allow him total solitude in his desert retreat at Mt. Pispir. In their efforts to meet him in his barricaded fortress they could hear him in conflict with the demons of the desert, overcoming them by prayer and especially by singing psalms. Sometimes they did manage to talk to him through the door. In these unusual conferences they learnt how to overcome every dream by making the sign of the Cross.

Eventually around 306 when he was fifty-five years old and after twenty years in the desert Anthony was forced to break his seclusion. So many people sought him out for spiritual direction and wished to imitate his holy life that he yielded to their pressure and became perforce a spiritual father.

It was a very engaging Anthony that emerged from solitude. Long years of solitary prayer and penance had not robbed him of his humanness or personal charm. They had rather made him fully human, fully alive as St. Irenaeus would say later, very much in control of his desires and filled with the spirit of God. Moreover his natural warmth in speaking and the simplicity of his spiritual message attracted crowds of men to the desert to hear him and there they remained. Anthony thus became the guide and spiritual director of all who wished to imitate his way of life.

The Origin of Monks

Earlier it was noted that in Dom David Knowles's view the monastic movement began in 271 with Anthony's acceptance of Our Lord's invitation to sell all, give the money to the poor and follow him. From that year on Anthony lived alone in prayer, self-denial and work. Other men as we have seen acted similarly before him but Anthony differed from them all in his outstanding dedication and the unflinching holiness of a long life. He was gifted as well with an ability to inspire others and lead them along his spiritual path.

Before 271 individual anchorites or even small groups of them were not seen as a distinctive class within the Church like the widows and virgins going back to New Testament times. As a class within the Church the monks began with Anthony. In 271 he became their prototype and later their father in God. Men flocked to Anthony to learn his secret of holiness, union with God. It was his example that drew them into the desert and in the desert it was his counsel that formed them into Monks. St. Athanasius paints an idyllic picture of the first hermit Monks living under Anthony's spiritual direction: their isolated dwellings in the hills became tabernacles of heavenly choirs singing psalms before God.

Anthony's Discourse to Monks

This discourse takes up almost one-third of the "Life". It is difficult to determine how much of Athanasius is in it and how much belongs to Anthony. A safe assumption seems to be, however, that Athanasius is responsible for the more highly developed theological parts and Anthony for the sections similar in style and teaching to the more down to earth sayings of the desert Fathers. The whole discourse is markedly scriptural in emphasis. Yet this provides no clue to authorship. All the writings of Athanasius draw heavily on Scripture and Anthony himself was notable for memorising God's word.

St. Gregory Nazianzan held that the whole "Life" was a rule for monks in the form of a biography. The discourse really constitutes a rule within a rule. What Anthony did in

the first part of the "Life" becomes the source of his spiritual doctrine later. What he did - pray, struggle with demons, practise penance - Monks also must do. This is the way of purification from unruly appetites, the way to the virtues and the way to union with God, true holiness. The discourse can be seen as Anthony's direction to beginners, given out of the wealth of his own experience. Their formation consists in listening to and imitating him.

Humility

At the opening of the discourse Anthony exhorts the monks to be humble and in childlike simplicity, to bring to him, their spiritual father, what they know and tell it while he, their senior, will share with them his knowledge and experience. This method of approach, in practice a dialogue between a beginner and a monk well advanced in the spiritual life, became later the model of Monastic initiation and direction. It required of the novice humble openness of mind and heart and of the director maturity and great wisdom.

Encouragement

Early in the discourse Anthony strikes a note of encouragement. He urges his hearers not to grow weary in their present task of mortification and self-discipline. Though their struggles are on earth they will most certainly be crowned in heaven. Their inheritance is not in this world but in the next with God whose promises are sure. By greater faith and livelier hope that bane of every monk's life, weariness and boredom in God's service, can be overcome.

Acquisition of Virtues

Riches even desires for them must be foreign to all Monks. Their desires should be all for the kingdom of God and what they can take into it, the virtues acquired in the ascetical life. Virtues can be the only possessions of Monks, prudence, justice, fortitude, temperance, faith, love of Christ, charity, meekness and hospitality are their true wealth. Possessing them they are rich in the currency of heaven.

Temptation

Knowing as we do of Anthony's own battles with the devil and demons, his teaching on the influence of evil spirits comes as no surprise in the discourse. The evil

one, Anthony says, is full of deceits and ruses. The evil thoughts demons induce are stumbling blocks meant to obstruct monks on their way to God.

Even the worst of the demons' fantasies are in reality nothing at all. They quickly vanish at a sign of the Cross. Monks in particular should not fear attack from demons because they have at hand the great means of victory, a stronger devotion to asceticism. Further, devils themselves fear monks because of their fasting, vigils, humility and especially their loyalty to Christ.

Discernment of Spirits

However in his combat with demons no monk should fight alone. He needs the help of an expert guide, whose role it is to aid him in the discernment of spirits. Yet, Anthony points out, experience alone is not enough in discerning spirits. The spiritual father must be a man of great prayer if he is to receive from the Holy Spirit this important gift.

Experienced, mortified, prayerful and graced by God's Holy Spirit, a spiritual father can discern the presence of good or evil spirits by the effects they produce in a monk. The good spirit comes quietly, gently, filling the soul with joy and courage; under its influence the soul remains untroubled and can discern for itself. It is filled too with desires of God and life with Him for all eternity and even for immediate death if God should so will.

On the other hand, the presence of the evil spirit throws the soul into confusion, causing disturbance and upheaval. It is flooded with fear, melancholy and dejection. Pleasant memories of kinsfolk and distaste of asceticism invade it together. It becomes afraid to die, disdains virtue and even desires evil. The power of the evil spirit can subvert the very character of the soul itself. Unlike the great Archangel Gabriel who banished the fears of Zachary and Mary an evil spirit holds a soul in fear.

In summary, Anthony's discourse treats of the monastic vocation in itself, the constant, virulent attacks made by Satan on Monks, the powerlessness of those assaults because of monastic virtues, the ideal of asceticism and prayer and finally the importance of discernment of spirits in every spiritual father.

Desire for Martyrdom

In the year 311 while Anthony was acting as spiritual father to the solitaries who had spontaneously placed themselves under his guidance the persecution of Emperor Diocletian broke out in Egypt. Like Origen, Anthony too longed to die for Christ. He left the security of the desert and went to Alexandria, hoping, as he expressed it, to take

part in the contest should God so will, if not, to admire the contestants. In Alexandria he openly identified himself with the confessors for the faith by being in court at their trials and by seeing to their wants in prison and in the mines. But God did not call on Anthony to share in the passion of His Son through martyrdom. Following the general, prudent advice given to Christians in times of persecution, he did not surrender himself to the Roman authorities for martyrdom. However it was only after the persecution had ceased that he returned to the desert.

A Substitute for Martyrdom

Back in the desert Anthony practised his asceticism even more zealously and intensely as a substitute for martyrdom. Athanasius informs us that after Anthony realised that the grace of martyrdom of blood was not to be his, he became every day a martyr to his conscience. It is clear that Anthony regarded the ascetical life as a martyrdom. In his eyes the monk became the successor to the martyr. This concept of the truly ascetic life as a substitute for martyrdom is undoubtedly a high point in the history of monastic spirituality especially when one considers the theology of martyrdom current at the time. Apropos, Clement of Alexandria had taught that martyrdom was at once achievement and perfection because it produced a work of perfect love. Likewise a monk's asceticism motivated by love of God achieved perfection for him. Martyrdom and asceticism both entailed struggles with demons, the enemies of God and man, but also triumph over them through God's grace and to His glory.

The Lay Spiritual Director

Anthony's work of spiritual direction in the desert continued after 311 at least intermittently until his death in 356. It was a remarkable ministry - a layman acting as guide and counselor to all who came, and wonders being achieved in souls. Indeed Anthony had become the desert physician of souls. We know from the "Life" that at least deacons were amongst those who sought his help.

In fact, Anthony had begun to play an important role in the Church. He had gone to the desert in the first instance for a purely personal objective - his own perfection and sanctity. But the manifest holiness that he achieved and which God confirmed by granting extra-ordinary graces drew men and women to him like steel to a magnet. Young women, for example, who simply got a glimpse of him from a distance, forgot their human love and became virgins for Christ. Anthony had begun a spiritual ferment in the desert first and foremost by the example of his saintly life. The anchorites whom he

especially directed became athletes of Christ like him and paths were worn from cities and towns to the desert.

Athanasius records no alarm on the part of ecclesiastical authorities at Alexandria or elsewhere at the religious practices of the laity in the desert. The bishops undoubtedly recognised the authentic Christian lifestyle of Anthony and his followers. A life of work, asceticism and prayer had firm New Testament backing. But Anthony was not really ahead of his times as a lay spiritual director. Clement of Alexandria in his doctrine on the performance of penance for serious sin was the first to recommend penitents to have a spiritual guide, who by advice and personal prayer, would aim them in their performance of penance. Thus spiritual directors were introduced into the Eastern Church in addition to the bishops, priests and deacons. Such spiritual directors were the perfect Christians of the community. The efficacy of their help by prayer and self-denial was based on their own personal perfection. Origen, too, recognised the role of a Spirit-filled guide among the penitents, and the Alexandrian theologians, generally, attributed great value to the collaboration of a perfect Christian in the performance of a canonical penance. Thus, such theological opinion readily paved the way for the acceptance of lay spiritual directors in the monastic movements.

Return to Eremitical Life

Despite Anthony's involvement with the anchorites and the people of all classes who sought his spiritual ministrations, he was essentially a hermit at heart. The call of the eremitical life again drew him away into deeper solitude. This time his place of retreat was "the Inner Mountain", Mt. Colzim, in the open desert on the South Qalala Plateau, a most inhospitable place but Anthony fell in love with it, not because of its scenery or geographical charm, but for the opportunity it afforded for penance and contemplation. This solitude however was not absolute. The brethren came to visit him, and he provided them with food, as well as other visitors, by the labour of his hands.

Later at the request of the monks Anthony left his solitude, went down the Nile and made visitation of all the monks and their settlements. His spiritual counsel was typically simple and direct. They should flee conceit and pray continually, sing psalms before eating and after, commit to heart the commandments enjoined in the Scriptures, and hark back to the deeds of the Saints so that their example might prompt other monks to greater zeal.

Athanasius supplies a glowing account of Anthony's visitation. The Egyptian monks welcomed him warmly as a spiritual brother. Anthony on his part brought them spiritual riches from his mountain and practical counsel. During the visitation Anthony

met his sister now grown old in her virginity and herself the guiding spirit of other virgins.

However, Anthony did not remain long away from his solitude. After his return to it, he became again the guide of all the monks who visited him.

If distinction can really be made between hermit and anchorite that distinction is that the hermit lived in greater isolation than did the anchorite. In making the following point, the term hermit and anchorite are interchangeable.

In the immediately preceding section of Anthony's "Life", Athanasius' message surely is that the anchorite life is a life of union with God lived in isolation, but it is neither inhuman nor unchristian. Firstly, no one can properly enter into the anchorite's way of austerity, work and contemplative prayer except through the guidance of a proved leader. Each anchorite novice must experience some form of basic community until he is formed as an anchorite. Secondly, the fruit of anchoritism is spiritual paternity. Each spiritual father becomes a source of light and strength to others precisely because his isolation from men is never an end in itself, but the response to a call from God, mediated through his Word, contained in Scripture and living and active in the Church. In turn each spiritual father enriches the Church not only through his own holiness and example but through his spiritual wisdom in the direction of others. The true anchorite therefore is not cut off from the community of believers, but remains at the heart of the Church's holiness, and serves the faithful through his share in divine wisdom which he imparts to others.

A Man of the Church

Athanasius brings out Anthony's service to the Church in another way, namely by showing him as the soul of orthodoxy in matters of faith. Anthony refused all compromise with the Meletian schismatics and refused to have anything to do with the Manichaeans. Further Anthony put his solitude at Mt. Colzim second to the defence of the Church's teaching when about the year 337, he went into Alexandria to denounce the Arian heretics. Athanasius tells us that Anthony proclaimed the Catholic faith in the Blessed Trinity by teaching the Alexandrians that the Son of God is not a creature nor has he come into being from non-existence; but, He is the eternal Word and Wisdom of the substance of the Father. It is highly debatable, however, whether Anthony could have used such theological language in his defence of the Trinity. It is more likely that we have here the terminology of Athanasius himself. But Anthony did publicly testify to the faith and ally himself with the Catholic bishops against heretics.

In St. Anthony's service of the Church one is reminded of later great mystics, St. Bernard of Clairvaux and St. Catherine of Siena, for example, who made the concerns of

the Church their own and supported orthodoxy in public. Monastic flight from the world and seclusion in prayer can at times yield place to the Church's needs. In crises in the life of the Church a faithful monk can become a real prophet.

Not only did Anthony as a monk identify himself unambiguously with the Church and its teaching but he was also deferential to her ordained ministers. Though renowned himself for outstanding holiness, he showed a marked deference for all clerics. Through the example of Anthony, Athanasius pointed the way for monks to conduct themselves towards the clergy. By the time he wrote his "Life of Anthony" monks were numerous and without doubt strains had arisen between them and local clergy. It is not difficult to supply a reason for this.

Tension would naturally have centred on leadership in the Church. Who were to rank first - officially ordained ministers or charismatic monks? By a telling description of Anthony, Athanasius left no room for doubt about the answer to this question. Anthony always made a respectful bow before a bishop or a priest and if a deacon approached him for spiritual direction he willingly gave it but when it came to prayers he invariably asked the deacon to lead. By highlighting Anthony's relationship with the clergy Athanasius taught plainly the hierarchical nature of the Church and that within the Church one of the characteristic virtues of every monk should be humility. Under St. Pachomius, a contemporary of St. Anthony's latter years, the monks always attended the Eucharistic Liturgy in the village church although they had a church of their own. In this way Pachomius upheld and preserved the original and completely lay ideal of monasticism. He feared the dangers of jealousy and vainglory if monks were elevated to the priesthood.

The Acclaim of the World

Anthony's humility remained intact amidst the recognition and acclaim of the secular world. In due course his desert fame reached the ears of Emperor Constantine and his court.

Impressed by what they heard, the Emperor and his sons wrote to Anthony. He expressed no elation on receipt of the Imperial family's letters and the great honour conferred on him. When finally he was persuaded to reply, the messages bore no slavish praise of his rulers but were in every way worthy of a monk. He commended Constantine and his sons for their allegiance to Christ, reminded them of God's final judgment day and exhorted them to act justly, with a special care for the poor.

Even Greek philosophers went to the desert to see and hear Anthony. In Anthony's discussions with them the influence of Athanasius the philosopher is plainly discernible. But the wit and practical wisdom found alongside all the philosophical erudition of the

dialogues, bring out Anthony, the pleasant Copt, wise with the wisdom of God and the experiences of man. The philosophers themselves were astounded by Anthony's wisdom and his miracles. Anthony's reaction to their amazement was typical of his humble appraisal of himself: Christ does great things through those who believe in Him. The lesson is clear to learn: human wisdom and miracles even, are secondary: Christ and his power are primary, and through faith they are operative in the simple and untutored. Perhaps this lesson was meant for others besides Greeks and monks.

Around this time Christianity had been made intellectually respectable by conversions of erudite Greeks. These people brought into the Church with them the erudition of their pagan teachers and created within its ranks a new secular intelligentsia. It can happen that learning and pride go together. In contrast to this new element in the Church Athanasius presented Anthony, a practically illiterate monk, a little one in the Gospel sense, teaching Greek literates how to understand the ways of God. Thus he used the monastic movement to illustrate as St. Francis and his Friars Minor would again in the thirteenth century, the Gospel's emphasis on the virtues of simplicity and humility and its exaltation of the poor and the lowly.

Faithful to the End

By the year 356 Anthony's long life was closing. His final words to his monks were typical of the advice and exhortations given over the years: they were not to become lax nor lose heart on the ascetical path but to live dying to themselves daily and trying to emulate the holiness of others.

Anthony's own example was the monk's best sermon. In old age there was no mitigation of his austerities, no slackening along the uphill road. Despite this his health remained sound. But the weight of years slowly overwhelmed him. He began to feel his end drawing near. With two companions he withdrew into greater solitude and soon after died alone. At death he left very few personal possessions behind, two sheepskins, a cloak and a hairshirt. It was then eighty-five years since Anthony as a young man had first heard Our Lord's call to leave all, not to be solicitous about the morrow and to watch and pray. For eighty-five years Anthony had remained faithful - a truly poor man of the Gospel. He had the reward of the poor at last. The Kingdom of God was his.
