

### **Athanasius of Alexandria, *The Life of Anthony***

1. Antony you must know was by descent an Egyptian: his parents were of good family and possessed considerable wealth, and as they were Christians he also was reared in the same Faith.

2. Now it was not six months after the death of his parents, he entered the church, and it happened the Gospel was being read, and he heard the Lord saying to the rich man, 'If thou wouldest be perfect, go and sell that thou hast and give to the poor; and come follow Me and thou shalt have treasure in heaven.' Antony, as though God had put him in mind of the Saints, and the passage had been read on his account, went out immediately from the church, and gave the possessions of his forefathers to the villagers. Having committed his sister to known and faithful virgins, and put her into a convent to be brought up, he henceforth devoted himself outside his house to discipline, taking heed to himself and training himself with patience.

7. He at least gave no thought to the past, but day by day, as if he were at the beginning of his discipline, applied greater pains for advancement, often repeating to himself the saying of Paul: 'Forgetting the things which are behind and stretching forward to the things which are before.' He was also mindful of the words spoken by the prophet Elias, 'the Lord liveth before whose presence I stand to-day.' For he observed that in saying 'to-day' the prophet did not compute the time that had gone by: but daily as though ever commencing he eagerly endeavoured to make himself fit to appear before God, being pure in heart and ever ready to submit to His counsel, and to Him alone. And he used to say to himself that from the life of the great Elias the hermit ought to see his own as in a mirror.

14. And so for nearly twenty years he continued training himself in solitude, never going forth, and but seldom seen by any. After this, when many were eager and wishful to imitate his discipline, and his acquaintances came and began to cast down and wrench off the door by force, Antony, as from a shrine, came forth initiated in the mysteries and filled with the Spirit of God.

16. One day when he had gone forth because all the monks had assembled to him and asked to hear words from him, he spoke to them in the Egyptian tongue as follows: 'The Scriptures are enough for instruction, but it is a good thing to encourage one another in the faith, and to stir up with words.

19. 'Wherefore, children, let us hold fast our discipline, and let us not be careless. For in it the Lord is our fellow-worker, as it is written, "to all that choose the good, God worketh with them for good." But to avoid being heedless, it is good to consider the word of the Apostle, "I die daily." For if we too live as though dying daily, we shall not sin. And the meaning of that saying is, that as we rise day by day we should think that we shall not abide till evening; and again, when about to lie down to sleep, we should think that we shall not rise up. For our life is naturally uncertain, and Providence allots it to us daily. But thus ordering our daily life, we shall neither fall into sin, nor have a lust for anything, nor cherish wrath against any, nor shall we heap up treasure upon earth. But, as though under the daily expectation of death, we shall be without wealth, and shall forgive all things to all men, nor shall we retain at all the desire of women or of any other foul pleasure. But we shall turn from it as past and gone, ever striving and looking forward to the day of Judgment. For the greater dread and danger of torment ever destroys the ease of pleasure, and sets up the soul if it is like to fall.'

55. To all the monks therefore who came to him, he continually gave this precept: ‘Believe on the Lord and love Him; keep yourselves from filthy thoughts and fleshly pleasures, and as it is written in the Proverbs, be not deceived “by the fullness of the belly.” Pray continually; avoid vainglory; sing psalms before sleep and on awaking; hold in your heart the commandments of Scripture; be mindful of the works of the saints that your souls being put in remembrance of the commandments may be brought into harmony with the zeal of the saints.’ And especially he counselled them to meditate continually on the apostle’s word, ‘Let not the sun go down upon your wrath.’

‘Daily, therefore, let each one take from himself the tale of his actions both by day and night; and if he have sinned, let him cease from it; while if he have not, let him not be boastful. But let him abide in that which is good, without being negligent, nor condemning his neighbours, nor justifying himself, “until the Lord come who searches out hidden things,” as says the blessed apostle Paul. For often unawares we do things that we know not of; but the Lord sees all things. Wherefore committing the judgment to Him, let us have sympathy one with another. Let us bear each other’s burdens: but let us examine our own selves and hasten to fill up that in which we are lacking.’

72. And Antony also was exceeding prudent, and the wonder was that although he had not learned letters, he was a ready-witted and sagacious man. At all events two Greek philosophers once came, thinking they could try their skill on Antony.

77. But when they were at a loss, turning hither and thither, Antony smiled and said—again through an interpreter—‘Tell first how things in general and specially the recognition of God are accurately known. Is it through demonstrative argument or the working of faith? And which is better, faith which comes through the inworking (of God) or demonstration by arguments?’ And when they answered that faith which comes through the inworking was better and was accurate knowledge, Antony said, ‘You have answered well.’

78. ‘We Christians therefore hold the mystery not in the wisdom of Greek arguments, but in the power of faith richly supplied to us by God through Jesus Christ. And to show that this statement is true, behold now, without having learned letters, we believe in God, knowing through His works His providence over all things.

79. ‘For when has the knowledge of God so shone forth? or when has self-control and the excellence of virginity appeared as now? or when has death been so despised except when the Cross of Christ has appeared? And this no one doubts when he sees the martyr despising death for the sake of Christ, when he sees for Christ’s sake the virgins of the Church keeping themselves pure and undefiled.’

87. It was as if a physician had been given by God to Egypt. For who in grief met Antony and did not return rejoicing? Who came mourning for his dead and did not forthwith put off his sorrow? Who came in anger and was not converted to friendship? What poor and low-spirited man met him who, hearing him and looking upon him, did not despise wealth and console himself in his poverty? What monk, having being neglectful, came to him and became not all the stronger? What young man having come to the mountain and seen Antony, did not forthwith deny himself pleasure and love temperance? Who when tempted by a demon, came to him and did not find rest? And who came troubled with doubts and did not get quietness of mind?