

Imitating St. Anthony the Great In The Twenty First Century

Xenia Moos

Sts. Cyril and Athanasius Institute for Orthodox Studies

Imitating St. Anthony the Great in the Twenty-first Century

Our father among the saints, Saint Anthony of Egypt, lived in the third and fourth centuries in a remote desert area of Egypt. Is it possible that the *Life* of this remarkable individual, as written by Saint Athanasius, could serve as an example for a person living in the American culture of the 21st century? Can one imagine two situations more disparate than the austere ancient Egyptian desert and, for example, today's California? What, if anything, can a modern non-monastic Orthodox Christian learn from reading his *Life*?

Father Thomas Hopko believes there is much value in heeding his sayings. He writes:

I urge you, and, if I could, I would command you, to read St. Anthony's thirty-eight sayings in the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. Everything we need to know in order to live is there for us in its simplest and clearest form.¹

Saint Athanasius himself, in his introduction, wrote "if the things said concerning him are true (...) you also might lead yourselves in imitation of him."²

Saint Athanasius' *Life of Antony* was hastily scabbled together yet became one of the most influential writings in Christian history.³ One can either read his *Life* as an example of a curious form of Christianity that is so foreign to modern readers as to be hopelessly inaccessible, or one can read it with the intention of gleaning insights that can be beneficial for one's soul. Three areas where the modern reader might find guidance for living the Christian life are in the story of his conversion, in his asceticism, and in his experiences with demons.

His Conversion

Saint Anthony was raised in a pious Christian family. Although his parents were affluent, he seems to have been a modest, unassuming child who did not like to learn his letters. After his parents died, he continued his pious custom of regular church attendance. One day as he was walking to church he was reflecting on how the Apostles forsook everything to follow Christ. Anthony was ripe to hear the following Scripture - a holy coincidence - being read in the church that day: *If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven* (Matthew 19:21). These words had a profound effect on the Saint. At the time Anthony heard this Scripture he was already a Christian yet his heart was stirred to ascend to a new level of Christian devotion. This Scripture worked in Saint Anthony's heart a conversion in that he advanced from leading an "ordinary" Christian life to an "extraordinary" Christian life. One might say he ascended to the next rung of the St. John Climacus' *Ladder*. While it would be wrong to say that Anthony was ever a nominal Christian, he left his old way of living behind and took up a new life *entirely* dedicated to following Christ.

How can one follow St. Anthony's example today? He inspires us to "kick it up a notch." so to speak.

1 Father Thomas Hopko, "The Thirty-Eight Sayings of St. Anthony the Great" *Ora et Labora* (<http://ishmaelite.blogspot.com/2010/04/thirty-eight-sayings-of-st-anthony.html>)<23 October 2014>.

2 Saint Athanasius, *The Life of Antony*, 29.

3 *Life*, 3.

If circumstances permitted, one could sell all one's possessions and join a monastery and live with a minimum of personal goods but this path is not open to most people. However, it is possible for the layperson to live in the world in a simple, non-materialistic way. If one spends only a small portion of one's wages on the necessities of life, one can give the remainder to the poor. This way of life may sound extreme but is not nearly as extreme as the actions Saint Anthony took. It is important to note that Anthony heard a commandment of God, was convicted in his heart, and acted on that conviction. This is something all Christians can do: act on godly convictions. If one has a family to care for, selling everything is not an option. However, one can decide to live with a minimum of possessions: the children don't need a roomful of toys, the parents don't need extensive wardrobes, perhaps walking instead of driving a car is an option, cooking simple food at home instead of eating in restaurants, and so forth are ways a family or an individual can spend less money on themselves, freeing up a larger portion of their income to give to the poor. In this way, one can act on the conviction to give *some* of one's possessions to the poor if not able to give *all*. Even laypeople can ascend to the next step on the *Ladder*, even if that step is not as severe as the step a monastic would climb. A conversion is a change of heart and this is possible for all Christians.

His Asceticism

St. Anthony led a life of extreme asceticism which is not appropriate for most people living in the world. For example, he often passed an entire night without sleep and when he did sleep, it was upon a rush mat or the bare ground. He ate but once a day, if that often, and his food was bread, salt, and water.⁴ What can a non-monastic learn from this example? Can the attitude of heart be imitated, if not the actual menu of water and bread?

Today, many people believe they have a right to enjoy a life that is free of pain and discomfort. Food must be plentiful and delicious, one's living arrangements must be comfortable and aesthetically pleasing, and one's body must be pain-free at all times. None of these things concerned St. Anthony. A non-monastic could choose to eat simple food, avoid gluttony and to be satisfied with less comfort and luxury. There is also, as C.S. Lewis wrote in his *Screwtape Letters*, a gluttony of delicacy. "All I want is...a cup of tea ...done properly."⁵

Asceticism can also involve avoiding the frivolous. One can avoid frivolous books, TV shows, movies, music and conversations. This doesn't mean one has to become humorless, but spending evenings watching sit-coms on TV is just as deleterious for the soul as eating a steady diet of junk food is for the body. Everything that enters the human person should be wholesome, be it media or food. It is a matter of attitude: Does one have the conviction to pare away unnecessary food, sleep, comfort, material possessions and entertainment for the sake of following close after Christ? If this is one's goal, one's conviction, and one acts on it the best one can, then they are following Saints Anthony's example. Saint Paul commanded that we *be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God* which applies to all Christians, not just desert-dwelling monastics (Romans 12:2).

This is one reason why making the attempt to live an ascetic life in the world can be difficult at times. A monastic can easily avoid television because he doesn't have one. His ascetic practices are set out for

4 Ibid.,36.

5 C.S. Lewis, *A Year with C.S. Lewis* (Zondervan. 2005). p. 255.

him or her; he “just” has to follow the plan, not that this is easy at all, but he or she is relieved of a certain amount of decision-making. The layperson, on the other hand, has to make judgment calls over everything, not just for himself but also for any children in his or her care. Sifting through the world's offerings for wholesomeness can be wearisome, especially if those in one's family are not in agreement. One has to find the right balance between an asceticism one might practice if living by oneself or the kind of asceticism one must settle for to keep peace in the family. If one keeps in mind the purpose of asceticism- to take up one's cross for the purpose of following Christ- it could be that *not* being able to follow one's preferred strict regimen because of a family situation *might* be a form of asceticism in itself because one is forced to deny oneself by accepting a less severe path out of love for others. In short, while we may not be able to imitate Saint Anthony's manner of living, we *can* imitate his attitude. As the author of the introduction to *The Life of Saint Antony* wrote, “his life can serve as a plumb line to show our own shallowness.”⁶

His Battles with Demons

It is common today, even among Christians, to minimize or deny the role or existence of demons in the world. Many modern men and women prefer scientific answers to all questions. As C.S. Lewis wrote in his *Screwtape Letters*, this attitude is pleasing to the demons themselves:

There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them.⁷

While modern men and women deny the existence of demons, one could get the wrong impression from reading Saint Anthony's *Life* that he fell into the opposite error, that of an excessive interest. What can we learn from Saint Anthony's experiences in the area of evil spirits?

We might begin by doing some self-examination. Do we *really* believe in the existence of demons? And if we do believe they exist, do we *really* believe they have a malevolent influence on our life?

Anthony made it his habit to imitate all the good he found in other people. His virtuous life attracted the attention of the devil, who attacked him in ways that seem incredible to the 21st century reader as they impersonated all manner of wild beasts and monsters. We must ask ourselves if we really believe this happened. If we reply in the voice of today's scientism and say the Saint suffered from delusions, then we will not be prepared to battle our own demons when they come to us in more subtle guise. Even today demons will launch their attack after the Christian has gained a spiritual victory. The evil ones may not come disguised as lions and giants but they will come in some form and the Christian must be prepared to do battle. We may not receive physical wounds as did Saint Anthony but may instead receive wounds of the soul: despondency, lethargy, doubt, fear, pride, timidity, reluctance to pray, pessimism, foul thoughts, criticism, temptations, apathy and so forth. Just as Saint Anthony recognized his attackers as demons, so must we, even if they appear to be psychiatric rather than demonic in origin, as an adherent of scientism might claim. (This is *not* to say there are no legitimate

⁶ *Life*, 14.

⁷ C.S. Lewis as quoted by J. Blount, “Three Important Things To Know About Satan”

(<http://www.theblazingcenter.com/2014/08/three-important-things-to-know-about-satan.html> <23 October 2014>).

mental illnesses.)

How did Saint Anthony fight the demons? In one instance, an entity identifying itself as the “spirit of fornication” launched an attack. The Saint gave thanks to the Lord, and responding boldly to the spirit, said:

You, then are much to be despised, for you are black of mind, and like a powerless child. From now on you cause me no anxiety, for the Lord is my helper. And I shall look upon my enemies.⁸

At these words, the demon cowered in fear. Anthony recognized that the demons had already been defeated by Christ. To another demon he shouted: “Here I am- Antony! I do not run from your blows, for even if you give me more, nothing shall separate me from the love of Christ.”⁹ This advice applies to Christians today for when we ourselves find that we are under demonic attack, we can, like Saint Anthony, make the sign of the cross and tell the spirit that we are Christ's and it has no hold upon us.

Some Possible Dangers

One of the dangers I can foresee befalling a person attempting to emulate Saint Anthony, or any other monastic, is trying to live the life of a monk when one is not in fact a monk. A single person may attempt to live as a hermit by living in isolation and spending days and nights in prayer and simple handwork but is this wise? Regarding the dangers of hermeticism, St. Symeon the New Theologian wrote that this was dangerous even for monastics:

He raises his hands, the eyes and the mind to heaven, imagines in his mind Divine councils, heavenly blessings, ranks of the Holy Angels, dwelling-places of the saints, in short, he gathers in his imagination everything he heard in the Divine Scriptures, contemplates it during the prayer, looks at the sky, all that excites his soul to the Divine desire and love, sometimes he sheds tears and cries. Thus, little by little his heart becomes conceited,... This is a sign of prelest. .. mostly hermits, who live alone, are subjected to such disasters...¹⁰

If the person is married and has children, there may be the temptation to turn one's household into a mini-monastery complete with rigid rules and schedules. This will surely lead to eventual resentment and rebellion. Monastics are tonsured and blessed to live the monastic life; parents are crowned and blessed to live in a family. This does not mean a family can't live a very pious life within the context of their local parish but family life, especially with small children, is quite different from monastic life. A bruised reed we must not break, and smoking flax we must not quench.

Another potential pitfall is the danger for certain susceptible individuals to develop religious scrupulosity, a form of obsessive behavior involving religious or moral fixations. “Scrupulous

⁸ *Life*, 35.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁰ St. Symeon the New Theologian, as quoted by Fr. Ignatius Brianchaninov, “On Prelest” *Preslet* (<http://oprelesti.ru/index.php/what-is-spiritual-delusion/587-on-prelest>)<10 October 2014>.

individuals are overly concerned that something they thought or did might be a sin or other violation of religious or moral doctrine.¹¹ For example, Saint Anthony's 38th Saying suggests a monastic must keep an accurate count of the number of steps he takes and the number of drops of water he drinks.¹² For certain people who are predisposed to OCD, following this advice could be disastrous.

Another problem that may befall a reader of Saint Anthony's *Life* is falling into despondency because one cannot live his life, or even the life of a modern monastic. Pining after the monastic life probably afflicts many Orthodox Christians occasionally but one must overcome this wistfulness with thanksgiving and fully embrace the life the Lord has given us. We can find our self living a diminished life if we do not whole-heartedly take up the life that God has assigned to us. In whatever state we find ourselves, we must do it as unto the Lord.

11 International OCD Foundation, "Scrupulosity" (http://www.ocfoundation.org/uploadedFiles/MainContent/Find_Help/IOCDF_Scrupulosity_fact_sheet.pdf)<10 October 2014>.

12 Saint Anthony the Great, *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Saying 38.

Bibliography

Athanasius, *Life of Antony*.

Saint Anthony the Great, *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*.

Hopko, Father Thomas, "The Thirty-Eight Sayings of St. Anthony the Great" *Ora et Labora* (<http://ishmaelite.blogspot.com/2010/04/thirty-eight-sayings-of-st-anthony.html>).

Lewis, C.S., *A Year with C.S. Lewis* (Zondervan. 2005).

Lewis, C.S., as quoted by J. Blount, "Three Important Things To Know About Satan" (<http://www.theblazingcenter.com/2014/08/three-important-things-to-know-about-satan.html>).

International OCD Foundation, "Scrupulosity"
(http://www.ocfoundation.org/uploadedFiles/MainContent/Find_Help/IOCDF_Scrupulosity_fact_sheet.pdf).

St. Symeon the New Theologian, as quoted by Fr. Ignatius Brianchaninov, "On Prelest" *Preslet* (<http://oprelesti.ru/index.php/what-is-spiritual-delusion/587-on-prelest>).