

January 17

ON THE LIFE OF SAINT ANTHONY, ABBOT

97.1 First Point

When Saint Anthony heard the following words of the holy Gospel read in church: If you wish to be perfect, go, sell all you have, and give it to the poor,⁵⁴⁵ he immediately began to carry out this invitation as though it had been addressed to him personally, convinced that this was what God was asking of him.

Let us admire this saint's fidelity to the first suggestion of grace and his promptness in following the inspiration God gave him. Are we as faithful to God's inspirations as Saint Anthony? Are we as quick to do what grace asks of us?

We made a profession, just as he did, to renounce everything when we left the world, but have we earnestly given up everything? Are we no longer attached to anything? We know this if we are glad to be poor and if we do not want to have comfortable things for ourselves, or possess anything at all.

97.2 Second Point

After he gave away all his possessions in favor of the poor, Saint Anthony withdrew to the desert where he labored manually to earn a livelihood and to help the poor. To his labor he joined constant prayer.

If we wish to give ourselves to God it is not sufficient to abandon all that we possess and all exterior things; we must also strive to attain inner perfection and to renounce our passions and our own inclinations.⁵⁴⁶

It is by withdrawing from the world that we gain this advantage. For it is not possible to overcome ourselves unless we know ourselves, and it is very difficult to know ourselves while living in the midst of the world. Do we profit by the advantage we have of living in seclusion in order to study how we can completely avoid following our natural inclinations?

97.3 Third Point

Saint Anthony acquired perfection in the desert and became filled with the Spirit of God.⁵⁴⁷ He then left the desert for a time on account of the persecution that was raging, in order to encourage the martyrs and to strengthen the Christians in their faith. His own sanctification had kept him in solitude, but the zeal he had for the salvation of his brothers withdrew him from it. Still, distrustful of himself, once the persecution was over, he went back to the desert and lived there with more fervor than ever.

Such should also be your conduct. You should love seclusion where you can labor effectively at your own perfection, but you should leave it when God asks you to work for the salvation of the souls he has entrusted to you. As soon as God no longer calls you there, when the time of your work is over, you should, after the example of Saint Anthony, return to your solitude.

Anthony (Ca 251 - Ca 356) is called the father of monasticism. The story of his life, written by his contemporary and friend, Saint Athanasius (meditation for May 2), is considered to be the first formal biography of a monk, and was widely imitated, beginning with Saint Jerome's stories of the monks Paul, Hilarion, and Malchus. (De La Salle has a meditation of Saint Jerome for September 30). Anthony was born in Upper Egypt and at an early age became a disciple of the hermit Paul of Thebes. He later founded two monasteries in the mountains near the Nile, one of which, Der Mar Antonios, still stands in the Eastern Desert between the Nile and the Red Sea. His temptations are described in great detail by Saint Athanasius and have been the subject of famous masterpieces by such artists as Bosch, Grunewald, and Ernst. During the time of the Arian controversy he left his solitude to help Saint Athanasius in his conflict with Arius and the Roman emperors.