

The FOUNDATIONS
of WESTERN
MONASTICISM

Saint Antony of the Desert

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The FOUNDATIONS
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Edited by
William Edmund Fahey, Ph.D.

SAINT ANTONY
OF THE DESERT

By Saint Athanasius

THE HOLY RULE OF
SAINT BENEDICT

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THE TWELVE DEGREES
OF HUMILITY AND PRIDE

By Saint Bernard of Clairvaux



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*The editor dedicates this volume
with gratitude and affection to those communities
within the family of Saint Benedict, which
have shown him such generosity over the years:*

The Monastery of the Holy Spirit (Conyers, Georgia)

Pluscarden Abbey (Elgin, Scotland)

Our Lady of the Assumption Monastery (Clear Creek, Oklahoma)

Saint Benedict Abbey (Still River, Massachusetts)

Hospes fui, et suscepistis me.

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PREFACE TO THE FOUNDATIONS
OF WESTERN MONASTICISM

ASCENDING THE HEIGHTS —
AN INTRODUCTION TO
CHRISTIAN MONASTICISM

By William Edmund Fabey, Ph.D.

THE heart of the White Mountains lies in the Franconia Notch, near the center of New Hampshire—location of the fabled “Old Man” of the Granite State. Three connected mountains offer the best views of the region: Little Haystack, Mount Lincoln, and Mount Lafayette. Each summit near or above 5,000 feet affords a distinct but related vantage point for observing the fundamental character of the Appalachian chain as it moves dramatically through New England. Which of the three mountains presents the best view is difficult to say, and although there are higher peaks and more dramatic scenery elsewhere, as an introduction to the White Mountains and the region, the three taken together remain unsurpassed.

This volume is not unlike a simple handbook introducing hikers to the Franconia region: its pages concentrate on three superlative heights, which will provide novices with an essential first viewing of Christian monasticism. St. Antony of the Desert, St. Benedict of Nursia, and St. Bernard of Clairvaux rise above other figures of Catholic history. To

travel with them and to seek a view upon the heights of their personal holiness and wisdom is to secure passage into the rich and complex world of monasticism. Like an introduction to the Franconia region that focuses solely on Haystack, Lincoln, and Lafayette, and therefore *not* on the Pemigewasset River, the Flume George, or Boise Rock, this introduction to Christian monasticism is selective. Despite all the appeal of other features, it will remain selective so as to provide a focused exploration.

By nature, all introductions must be selective and provide a succinct guide to the key features of a subject. Again, this book provides an introduction to *Christian* monasticism. It speaks nothing of Hindu Sannyasa or Buddhist Sangha. It does not offer a response to the question of why Muslim culture discourages monasticism. It does not unearth the roots of monasticism in Ancient Israel—whether through the Nazirites, Essenes, or Therapeutae. St. Pachomius is not allowed a place amongst the founders discussed here, nor St. Basil or St. Augustine. The exotic practices of Stylites and Dendrites, the traditions of the Copts and the ancient Irish, and much else is kept for other guides.

This guide introduces its readers to three men and three works. *The Life of St. Antony*, the *Rule of St. Benedict*, and the *Twelve Degrees of Humility and Pride* are offered as a simple and short path to the essence of Christian monasticism. St. Antony is presented as monasticism's foremost founder, St. Benedict as its greatest law-giver, and St. Bernard as its greatest mystic. Taken together, these men and these writings will allow the reader to ascend the heights of Christian monasticism and arrive at certain vantage points which may suggest later forays, but should suffice in themselves. The words of the editor are designed merely to provide assistance in the reading of the primary text and encouragement for future journeys.

Our words “monk” and “monasticism” are derived from a very old set of Greek words: *monachos anachoretēs*—a person who stepped aside from the rest of society. In the Hellenistic world, the concept originally

applied to those who would not participate with the political system, pay taxes, or bow to social pressure. In time, the Greek expression was applied to a specific spiritual concept in the Aramaic language: *ihidaya*. *Ihidaya* described someone dedicated to spiritual perfection who elected to seek this perfection by the voluntary rejection of the common human inclinations and social customs related to the desire for wealth, power, and bodily pleasure. To be a “monk,” of its very nature, was and remains about both social withdrawal and spiritual perfection. Yet it is gravely mistaken to believe that the essence of monasticism was or is withdrawal or separatism. This confusion reverses the ends and the means of monasticism and contributes to the mistaken notion (held by believers, critics, and seekers) that monasticism is a rejection of the world, a scorning of life, or a sign of social and psychological vulnerability. Monasticism, as the literature will indicate, is one of the most demanding states of life in which a human can place himself, and it is a way of being whose attention and activity is ordered *towards*, not *away from*.

The silence and solitude depicted in monastic biographies and rules made a theatre for contemplation and action, not a hideaway from conflict or responsibility. If anything, responsibility and conflict came to the fore in the monastic life. It was for true freedom that monks clapped on the iron practices of obedience and restraint. The intellect and the will came under rigorous self-discipline, not because the monk rejected the world or his fellow man, but because he sought out a superlative opportunity for uniting his thoughts, words, affections, and actions to the divine will and mind of God and he sought to do so freely and with love. This required some specialized knowledge and, more importantly, considerable mental resolve, fitness and stamina, regular training, and constant struggle. It should not, therefore, come as a surprise that the language of monasticism is so richly analogous to military or athletic language. The vigor of monastic concepts and words is akin to that found in the Old Testament Prophets or the writings of St. Paul. Only a virile and heroic language could begin to approach the interior

world experienced by the monks. Only an elaborate, but also agonistic, imagery could sustain the ideas monastic writers were trying to express. The literature of monasticism is at once muscular and poetic, rhetorical and systematic.

Again, the common images and attitudes towards monasticism in our era should not distract us. It is true that the monk stands alone at times; the monk does embrace solitude, but the student of monasticism must ask with sympathy, “why?” The answer can be heard clearly in the rallying cry of that first monastic age: because the good life means preferring nothing to Christ, seeking nothing but His pleasure, His worship, His Justice, and His companionship. This quest was made possible by the monk’s unshakeable confidence in His mercy. Yet as readers of these texts will see, this solitary focus on Christ did not mean that the monk sought to be a lonely individual or that loneliness was essential to monastic life. It is potentially misleading to see in monasticism the birth of some value such as individualism—or the birth of western culture itself for that matter. Such things may be *derived from* the monastic endeavor; they were not, however, its *aim*. Finally, monks do not view creation, society, or mankind as evils. The monk simply loves what is highest and best. All creation is understood in light of the one great desire: union with God. For Christian monks, this did not and does not demand a rejection of creation, only an ordering of love, desire, thought, and action. An attentive reader will see that the texts contained in this volume demonstrate that the ordering of these things often freed the monk for a greater service to others. As Pope Benedict XVI states at the conclusion of his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, “Those who draw near to God do not withdraw from men, but rather become truly close to them.” What is more, they show to all a path to the very heights of wisdom and peace. For that reason, they remain for all a subject for admiration and imitation.

Further Reading

The literature available on western monasticism is voluminous. The following recommendations are offered so that readers may deepen their interest in and love for the subject. It is the editor's opinion that primary sources are usually best (hence this volume as a starting point), but often readers seek a more systematic presentation of monastic spirituality or a unified narrative of monasticism over time.

General Introductions and Histories (works specific to the authors and orders discussed in this volume follow in the subsequent chapters):

- Charles-Forbes-René, Comte de Montalembert, *The Monks of the West*, 2 vols. (Boston: Thomas B. Noonan & Co, 1860). Montalembert's book is widely ignored due to its strong tinge of Romanticism. Yet this monumental work, written over the course of several decades, bears witness to how a worldly man could return to the Christian heart of European culture and find personal consolation. The work is detailed, thoroughly documented, and exquisitely written.
- C. H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism: Forms of Religious Life in Western Europe in the Middle Ages* (London: Longman, 1984). In this volume, Lawrence provides an excellent scholarly narrative history of monasticism.
- Jean Leclercq, O.S.B., *Alone with God*, trans. E. McCabe (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1961). Dom Leclercq turns his attention in this work to the emermetical side of monasticism, that is, a systematic introduction to the spirituality and life of the hermit.
- Thomas Merton, O.S.C.O, *The Silent Life* (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1957). One of the most influential Cistercian writers of the modern period offers a succinct work that goes to the center of the monastic experience and monastic spirituality, while providing a historical survey of the entire monastic

movement in the West. The prologue and epilogue deliver a profound challenge to the anti-spiritual assumptions of the modern world.

M. Raymond, O.S.C.O., *The Silent Spires Speak* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing, 1966). Fr. Raymond was a contemporary of Thomas Merton, but today is little-known. This volume is a dialogue between a jaded College student and a Trappist monk, suggesting that monasticism offers to the world an essential clarity on the place of contemplation in everyone's life.

Hubert Van Zeller, O.S.B., *Approach to Monasticism* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960). Zeller presents what remains one of the most sober assessments of what monasticism as practiced really demands and what sort of person it will not tolerate.

Benedict XVI, *Church Fathers*, 2 vols. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008 & 2010). In these volumes, one will find addresses on the individuals at the center of this anthology: St. Athanasius, St. Benedict, St. Gregory the Great, and St. Bernard.

The literature on *Lectio Divina*—the slow and contemplative reading and enacting of Sacred Scripture—is overwhelming. Three books must suffice:

Michael Casey, O.S.C.O., *Sacred Reading—The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina* (Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 1995).

Tim Gray, *Praying Scripture for a Change: An Introduction to Lectio Divina* (Boulder, CO: Ascension Press, 2009).

Mario Masini, *Lectio Divina* (New York: St. Pauls/Alba House, 1988).

An important aspect of monasticism has always been its influence on art and culture. Readers of monastic works could receive a false impression that monks are so “otherworldly” that they have no interest in architecture or art or the material world. The following three books are

fine correctives to such a view. Monks have long provided Christians with an example of how to appreciate and act upon the priority of the spiritual above the material, while still recognizing the goodness of creation and the human (and more than human) capacity for creativity found amongst all men:

Sacheverell Sitwell, *Monks, Nuns, and Monasteries* (New York: Holt, Rinehard & Winston, 1965).

Peter Fergusson, *Architecture of Solitude* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

Terryl N. Kinder, *Cistercian Europe: Architecture of Contemplation* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2002).

SAINT ANTONY
OF THE DESERT



By Saint Athanasius



PREFACE TO THE LIFE
OF SAINT ANTONY

LIGHT IN THE DESERT —
PREFERRING NOTHING
TO CHRIST

By William Edmund Fabey, Ph.D.

ACROSS the southern desert of Egypt in the Red Sea Mountains sits Der Mar Antonios, the monastery established in honor of St. Antony the Great shortly after his death in A.D. 356. Even today it is a remote spot, away from the thriving cities of the Nile, hidden amidst the arid highlands. Was it here that St. Athanasius received the sheepskin cloak of Antony the Great, one of the fathers of monasticism? In his last days, St. Antony had specified that the bishop of Alexandria should be one of the few recipients of one of the few existing personal belongings of Antony. To bestow a cloak, we know from Elijah, was long considered a blessing, as well as a symbol of succession and the transferral of authority. In that year St. Athanasius had been on the run, a hunted man now in his third exile. The Roman imperial government, dominated by heretical Arian leadership, sought to crush the resistance of those who clung to the Nicene belief that Christ was fully God as well as fully man. Pope Liberius had already been arrested and the small minority of priests and bishops willing to voice their views on

the divine and co-equal nature of God's Son were once again fugitives, if not incarcerated. As the most outspoken defender of Nicene orthodoxy, Athanasius was a marked man.

For six years St. Athanasius remained in exile, sometimes hiding in the desert, sometimes moving secretly about the cities in northern Egypt. Athanasius wrote many of his finest works during this period, among them the *Life of St. Antony*. For many years the two men had been in communication—although Athanasius was Antony's junior by some four decades—and it is fair to say that while Athanasius's work was not written by a close friend in the natural sense, the spiritual bond between the two was intense. Athanasius composed the text in Greek, having interviewed Coptic-speaking monks who knew St. Antony. Within a few years of its completion Bishop Evagrius of Antioch translated the *Life* from Greek into Latin. Why the work was rendered into Latin, we cannot say for sure. It would seem that Evagrius was a friend or associate of St. Jerome, who then lived in Palestine and whose network of friends were arduously studying and promoting monasticism. In any case, it was Evagrius's translation that entered into the Western Mediterranean in the 370s. It was this text that was discovered a decade later in the humble cottage of some monks which the friends of St. Augustine came upon while walking one afternoon in the countryside just beyond the walls of Trèves along the Moselle in Germany. In the account of St. Augustine, the *Life of Antony* and the example of this Egyptian saint became the spark for numerous ascetical quests of men and women, who left behind the ordinary concerns of the world to become wholly at the service of God.

St. Antony's profound humility compelled him to discourage his own veneration, as readers of his life will discover. St. Antony tried so very hard not to leave any trace of his remains behind and his monks succeeded in a secret burial. Nevertheless, the *Life of St. Antony* was designed as a pattern of life for widespread veneration and imitation. This is ironic, but profoundly beneficial for the development of Christian spirituality.

The suggested readings at the end of this introduction will guide readers who wish to continue studying Antony the Great. To Antony are attributed many letters, which survive in Greek, Latin, Syriac, Coptic, and Arabic. A rich body of modern literature now exists for the study of early Christian monasticism and the monasticism of Egypt, but the work that launched all future studies, whether spiritual or historical, was Athanasius's *Life of Antony*. A few features of that *Life* are worth consideration.

Athanasius presents Antony's spiritual program for readers in its authentic simplicity. The young Antony responded to hearing the Word of God. He came from a comfortable family background, but shortly after the death of his parents he heard the words which would forever change his life, and the life of western civilization: "If thou wilt be perfect, go sell all that thou hast and give to the poor, and come follow me and thou shalt have treasure in heaven." (*Matt.* 19:21) Unlike the young man in Scripture and so many others through the ages, Antony responded immediately. Looking forward, such obedience—the word literally means "attentive listening"—would become central to the organization of western monasticism and the spirituality of the monk (e.g., *The Rule of St. Benedict*, chapter 5).

St. Antony developed his program in four locations, always in response to grace and the circumstances around him. The first was his hometown, Herakleopolis, and one of its nearby villages. Antony placed himself under the tutelage of wise Christian men and learned Scripture by ear, while working with his hands. He renounced the possessions and the ease into which he was born. Then followed many years of honing his monastic excellence: some years in the Nitrian Desert; some sixty miles west of the ancient cosmopolitan center of Alexandria; some on Mt. Pispir (Der el Memum) in an abandoned Roman fort. Careful readers will observe that though removed from centers of population, St. Antony was never so remote as to be completely free from human exchange. Indeed, during the height of persecution, Antony spent time in Alexandria and elsewhere giving courage

to the martyrs and ministering to their needs. Finally, Antony departed to the “inner wilderness” far to the south and east of Cairo, on Mount Galala, where eventually his followers would establish the community of Der Mar Antonios.

When one reads over the events of his life or considers his advice to others, one can discern that his spiritual program has two essential parts: the discipline of the body, and what we may call the spirituality of the present moment. The discipline of the body can, of course, be found amongst pagans and Jews in antiquity. One thinks of the program of Pythagoras, which had great influence over Plato’s thought, or the Stoics. Indeed, the virtue of temperance had many champions in antiquity. Only when the body and its cravings were brought under control could the soul be properly and rationally governed. In his meditation on St. Paul’s maxim from *2 Cor.* 12:10, “When I am weak, then am I strong,” Antony understood it in a manner that would have been very attractive to a host of ancient observers: “when the enjoyments of the body are weak, then is the power of the soul strong.”

Yet the second part of Antony’s program reveals how the motives for bodily discipline and the self-governance of the soul differed from that of Greco-Roman philosophical movements. Athanasius describes what he calls St. Antony’s “strange-seeming principle”:

He held that not by length of time is the way of virtue measured and our progress therein, but by desire and by strong resolve. . . . Each day, as though beginning his religious life, he made greater effort to advance . . . as though always beginning, he was earnest each day to present himself such as one ought to appear before God: clean of heart and ready to obey His will and none other.

Antony has set the stage for subsequent development in Christian spirituality. The age in which the second coming of Christ was thought increasingly imminent had passed. So too, during Antony’s life was passing the sense that persecutions would usher in some glorious End

Time. Antony transforms that simple eschatology into a deeper sense that God is already present, just as Jesus had said. The kingdom is at hand now, and so each day one must simply renew a resolve to be present to the God who is present, not to prepare for some future. Thus, St. Antony's governance of his soul, his austerity in thought, speech, and way of life, was not an end in itself. For all his emphasis on the will, the goal was not simply the will to power, but rather to live a life that would allow Antony each day to say with confidence: "nothing shall separate me from the love of Christ." Everything that readers tend to thrill over when encountering the life of Antony—his instant renunciation of wealth, his effective Scripture-based education, his combat with demons, the miracles, his extra-ordinary mortifications of mind, desire, and body, his combating of heresy, his shunning of schism, his good counsel, his ability to defeat pagan philosophers by their own dialectical sparring, his good death—all these were undertaken day after day to maintain loving union with Christ.

It is only appropriate to make a brief cautionary statement regarding the depiction of St. Antony which follows. It is the life of Antony, but it is the Life of Antony written by St. Athanasius. We know from the extant letters of Antony that he had a learned, even scholarly side that Athanasius does not draw out. He knew some Greek and was engaged in reconciling aspects of Greek philosophy with Christian revelation; he was linked to a vast network of both scholars and ascetics; and he seems to have been less pre-occupied with the defeat of heresy and paganism than Athanasius. No biography can fully reveal the complexity of any human, especially a saint. Athanasius distills for us the essence of Antony: his confidence (which would explain his lesser concern with pagans and dealing directly with heretics), his self control, and his Christocentric way of being.

St. Antony in this biography and in other early sources consistently appears to readers as an exemplar of how the Christian holy man could subvert the sensual and power-based lifestyle of paganism. He demonstrates that the only true freedom comes from renouncing the will,

the only true power comes from governing one's soul. And contrary to later notions of monasticism as a haven for the weak and disengaged, Antony demonstrated the heroic and virile nature of monasticism. In sum, Antony set out the simple monastic program, at once scriptural and natural: to seek God—to overcome all obstacles, especially those internal obstacles of will and always to prefer nothing to Christ.

Further Reading

For those who simply wish to read more early Christian writings from the world of Egyptian Christianity—by St. Antony and others—the following works may prove stimulating:

Samuel Rubenson, *The Letters of St. Antony: Monasticism and the Making of a Saint* (Fortress: Minneapolis, 1995).

The Lives of the Desert Fathers, trans. Norman Russell (Cistercian Publications: Spencer, MA, 1980).

The Desert Fathers, trans. Helen Waddell (Vintage: New York, 1998).

The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks, trans. Benedicta Ward (Penguin: London, 2003).

Thoughtful Catholic reflections on both Antony and Athanasius can be found in the following nineteenth century works:

Bl. John Henry Newman, *The Church of the Fathers* (University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame, 2002).

Roger Bede Vaughn, O.S.B., *The Life and Labours of St. Thomas of Aquin*, vol. 2 (Longmans & Co.: London, 1872).

Amongst modern scholarship, serious readers should consider starting with the following:

Derwas Chitty, *The Desert a City: An Introduction to the Study of Egyptian and Palestian Monasticism Under the Christian Empire* (St. Vladimir's Press: Yonkers, 1977).

- John Chryssavgis, *In the Heart of the Desert: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers* (World Wisdom: Bloomington, IN, 2003).
- Douglas Burton Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1993).
- William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2004).