

Conclusions - Antony the Great 2025

Conclusioni

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We have come to the conclusion of our 31st Colloquium on Orthodox Spirituality, dedicated this year to the 'Father of Monks' of East and West, Saint Antony the Great.

The speakers, who deserve our gratitude, presented the ecclesial and human context in which Saint Antony lived his long life (250/251-356), then the main literary sources that allow us to learn about his ascetic conversion, his battles against the Evil One, and his spiritual doctrine; and finally, the legacy he leaves today to monks and nuns, namely their vocation to serve God, the Churches, and humanity. It is, in a way, a triptych, the central panel of which is the monastic example and doctrine of Saint Antony as recounted by literary sources.

1. The ecclesial and human context

'Antony is a figure whom history finds difficult to pin down. So many problems have accumulated in research on him as a concrete actor and as an author of letters that it seems only natural that a shadow of doubt should fall over the oldest testimonies relating to his life and the texts attributed to him,' Alberto Camplani told us at the beginning of his lecture. Does the Antony of the *Life* written by St. Athanasius of Alexandria, a masterpiece and prototype of monastic hagiography, not rather reflect the figure of the monk-hermit according to the bishop's heart, in accordance with the hierarchical ideal concerned with integrating his charism, in the face of the Meletian schism, in the service of the unity of the Church? What can be said about the corpus of seven *Letters* addressed by St. Antony to monastic colonies or communities? If we accept their authenticity, and I am personally inclined to do so, they reveal to us the oldest and most fascinating vision of monastic theology, parallel to that of the Pacomian circles. In other words, our saint, directly or indirectly, was confronted, as the *Life* also attests, with the Gnostic, philosophical, Manichaean and ascetic currents flourishing in Egypt at the time. A special atmosphere, then: Antony, like his compatriot the Neo-Platonic philosopher Plotinus, was ashamed of having a body, according to Athanasius... Did the teachings and debates of the catechetical school of Alexandria (the didaskaleion) influence the young ascetic? These are some of the questions raised by the historical approach, which allow us to better situate the holy monk in his Coptic human and ecclesiastical environment.

We had a reliable guide for our archaeological tour of Egypt in the second half of the 3rd century in the person of Ewa Wipszycka. The visit held a few surprises for us... Koma, Antony's birthplace, was not just any village in Middle Egypt, but a small town. His family was well-off, if not very wealthy, owning more than 80 hectares of fertile land. The future ascetic received a good education and probably some basic Greek. But the tomb in which he retired, according to St Athanasius, cannot be found. It is therefore part of Athanasius's dramatization of Antony's fight to the death with the devil and his accomplices, a dramatisation very different from the sobriety of the same fight as described in Letter IV. The fortress in which Antony lived for 20 years in radical solitude, the option of the great or deep desert, is, on the other hand, perfectly identifiable. His friends took him away from there in 305. Antony was 55 years old. He settled near Pispir, the outer mountain, a place of relative solitude near the Nile. In search of more complete solitude, Antony found refuge in the oasis of Wadi Araba, 45 kilometers from the Red Sea (the inner mountain). Nevertheless, during the last 50 years of his life, the saint returned regularly to Pispir to meet with lay people and monks, and twice even to Alexandria (311 and 337).

2. The figure of St. Antony according to the main literary sources

We have three main sources, which I will present in chronological order: the *Letters*, the *Vita* written by St. Athanasius, and the *Apophthegms*. We have become aware that the sources diverge and converge. They diverge partially when we question their factual historical veracity; they converge in the teachings of the Father of Monks concerning the essentials of Christian and monastic life: obedience to the Word of God, discernment of spirits, and the lived experience of the victorious struggle against the Evil One. This is what the monastic traditions of East and West have received and continue to receive from the charism of St. Antony.

The Letters

A corpus of seven *Letters* attributed to St. Antony has come down to us, not in Coptic, nor even in its Greek translation, attested as early as 392 by St. Jerome, but thanks to several ancient versions made from the Greek. Some question their authenticity. An important argument in favor of their Antonian authenticity is the Arabic version made directly from the lost Coptic text. The Arabic text is part of a larger corpus of 20 letters, including letters from Ammonas, a disciple of Antony. The Arabic version has clearly toned down the more "esoteric" passages, but it reads the 8th letter on 17 January, the saint's feast day, in which, according to it, the spiritual doctrine of the Father of Monks is summarized. The continued reception of the *Letters* by the Coptic monastic tradition from antiquity to the present day seems to me to be a strong argument in favour of their substantial authenticity.

In a posthumous book (2004), my revered teacher Antoine Guillaumont entitled his vision of Evagrius *A Philosopher in the Desert. Evagrius Ponticus*. Samuel Rubenson reminded us of this provocative title by giving his own lecture the title: 'The First Theologian of the Desert: The Letters of Antony and the Birth of Monastic Theology in Egypt'. His dense

presentation gave us a broad outline of the theological doctrine of the "Father of Monks". We are grateful to him for these valuable pages, which open our minds to a difficult line of thought. He reminded us of his discovery of the Letters in Arabic at the monastery of St Macarius of Scete in 1980. Since then, Rubenson has given us the essential reference study on the Letters (1990/1995). The synthesis he has offered us paves the way for future research. Is the Antony of the *Letters* the same as the "illiterate" but "taught by God" Antony of the *Life*? Is Evagrius a true heir, as he himself claims, to Antony's theology?

We now come to the center panel of our triptych, which contains the most important document: the *Life* written by St Athanasius of Alexandria shortly after the death of our saint.

The great liberal theologian Adolf von Harnack once described the *Life* as "the most harmful book ever written". More accurately, St. Gregory of Nazianzus, in a homily delivered in Constantinople (oratio 21, 5) in 379 or 380, declared: 'He (Athanasius) himself wrote the life of the divine Antony as a monastic rule, in the manner of a narrative'. Athanasius himself clearly expresses his intention: 'The life of Antony is an excellent model for monks' (Life 1, 3).

Andrew Cain has presented us with the status quaestionis of studies on the *Life*: 'The author, sources, recipients and purpose of the Life of Antony.' A certain consensus has been reached among scholars. While in the past the *Life* was considered the main source of information about Antony, studies in recent decades have established that the *Life* also and above all reflects the ecclesiastical, theological and ascetic interests of the Archbishop of Alexandria. Does this mean that it has no historical value? Certainly not! But Athanasius, exiled five times, fought on several fronts: the doctrinal defense of the homoousios of the Council of Nicaea, the reduction of the Meletian schism and its monasticism, the ecclesial integration of a protean urban and rural ascetic movement, the eradication of Egyptian or Hellenistic idolatry, Manichaeism, the defence of the Cross against the contempt of pagan philosophers...

Daniel Lemeni analyzed the long speech that Athanasius puts into the mouth of St. Antony when he leaves the fortress where he has lived for 20 years, at the moment of his epiphany as "Father of Monks" (Life §§ 16-43). He teaches what he has learned from experience about the asceticism of body and soul, through spiritual combat to the extreme limits of his physical and mental strength. His spiritual discernment is not limited to recognizing enemy spirits, he also teaches how to fight them. Almost all of us here are ignorant of the combat of the "deep desert". Lemeni sums it up well: 'The desert illustrates the concept of metanoia based on ascetic discipline and spiritual combat. Living in this desert means re-evaluating one's life, because the desert is the place of inner change, not outer peace. The desert is the place of fundamental encounter, not easy escape. It is the place of repentance...' I personally had the privilege of accompanying for nearly 30 years a colleague who lived his heremitic vocation on the property of my monastery. He often read B. Lavaud's translation of the *Life* of Antony, and he had underlined passages in pencil, and sometimes said to me, taking my hand, about the struggle of thoughts: 'It's true! It's true!' Antony explored the abyssal depths of the human soul. And perhaps only those who have faced the deep desert and endured the struggle of solitude can understand this from experience.

"He made himself man, so that we might be made God; and he made himself visible through a body, so that we might have some notion of the invisible Father; and he himself endured the insults of men, so that we might share in incorruptibility". St. Athanasius summarizes the argument of his treatise 'On the Incarnation' (54, 3; SC 199, pp. 458-459) with this threefold proposition. Eirini Artemi introduced us to Athanasius' theology of deification based on this assertion. Deification is the transfiguration of man by the Holy Spirit. The divinisation of man is not absorption into the divine essence, but participation by grace in the uncreated divine energies, the ultimate goal of Christian life. St. Antony is the model of the deified believer: by renouncing his possessions and purifying himself of sinful passions, he attains spiritual enlightenment and, beyond that, union with God, in constant communion with him, becoming a "theophore" radiating the beauty of the transfigured Incarnate Word.

Dom Ignasi Fossas asked himself on our behalf whether Athanasius' treatise 'Epistle to Marcellinus' by Athanasius can help us understand the *Life* of St. Antony. It is true that this short treatise in the form of a letter has not yet revealed all its secrets. Who is this anonymous elder (geron) who initiates his archbishop into the Christian way of praying the Psalms? It is true that the "Letter to Marcellinus" is one of many writings from the 4th century (scholia, homilies and commentaries) that seek to help Christians, ascetics and monks to pray the Psalms in the light of the Gospel (see the works of M.J. Rondeau). The challenge was pastoral, and let us add that it still is today! The Psalms contain prophecies about Christ the Saviour. They help us to know ourselves, as if in a mirror. They give us the right words to pray to God. The Lord himself is our teacher in the prayer of the Psalms, both personal and communal. Finally, singing the Psalms promotes peace and inner serenity. The *Life* of Antony gives frequent examples of his practice of praying the Psalms and their therapeutic and laetific value.

The third literary source on Saint Antony is the Apophthegms. Moa Cristina Airijoki presented them to us under the title 'Abba Antony: the image, authority and teachings of the "Father of Monks" in the Apophthegmata Patrum'. The two major collections of sayings of the Desert Fathers are the alphabetical-anonymous (PG 65) and the systematic (Sources Chrétiennes). In their current form, they were compiled in Greek in Palestine, about 150 years after the saint's death. They bear witness to the diverse and updated reception of Antony's paternity. Saint Antony opens the theory of the Desert Fathers in the alphabetical collection with 38 sentences.

The first apophthegm immediately instructs us on the charismatic primacy of Antony, "Father of Monks", the first and foremost example of solitary saints. It should be noted in passing that the Syriac collection of the Apophthegms of Anan Isho of Beth 'Abhé begins with St. Arsenius and presents him, in accordance with the dominant monastic lifestyle in the

Syriac tradition churches, as the ideal model to be imitated.

Let us listen to this first apophthegm of Antony.

"The holy Abba Antony one day in the desert fell into acedia and deep confusion of thoughts. He said to God, "Lord, I want to be saved, but my thoughts will not allow it! What can I do in my distress? How can I be saved?" He got up and went outside and saw someone like himself, sitting and working, then getting up from his work and praying. Again he sat down and wove the rope, and then got up again to pray... It was an angel of the Lord, sent to correct and reassure Antony. And he heard the angel say to him, "Do this and you will be saved". At these words, he felt great joy and took courage, and acting in this way, he was saved. A few remarks... No demons, but thoughts of depressive discouragement and nonsense. When such a trial arises, the monk must resort to the discernment of a spiritual father. Antony, being the first monk according to the apophthegm, could not have one. God therefore sends an angel, who does not develop a teaching on the fight against acedia, but shows how to combat it in a concrete way: ora et labora. Antony's first apophthegm is like the access code to the spiritual struggle of the solitary. Antony's apophthegms also highlight an aspect of discernment that is less emphasised in the *Letters* and the *Life*, namely the measure or discretion to be maintained in asceticism. The Apophthegms are therefore more concerned with Antony's doctrine than with his historical journey.

We admired a selection of iconographic and pictorial representations of the "Father of Monks" in the Christian East, thanks to Raphaëlle Ziadé.

Nikolaos Kouremenos' lecture serves as a transition to the third part of our triptych: 'The Life of Antony, a bridging text in the development of hagiography and monastic literature between East and West .' The *Life* of St. Antony by St. Athanasius is a seminal text that served as a grammar of monastic life from Egypt to Gaul, Syria, Armenia, Ethiopia, the Arab and Slavic worlds, and far beyond today. Translations into all the languages of Christian antiquity attest to this. Its spiritual influence far exceeds its undeniable cultural influence. It indicates the spiritual axes of monastic life: the fight against evil and discernment, spiritual fatherhood, incessant prayer, ora et labora, the memory of death, ever-offered repentance and God's mercy, ecclesial and human communion forged in solitude before God.

3. The legacy of Saint Antony today

Porphyre Georgi spoke to us about spiritual fatherhood: 'Antony and his disciples: the origins of spiritual fatherhood'. All Christian fatherhood has its source in the fatherhood of God the Father and of the one who is the perfect image of the Father, Jesus Christ. St Antony became the image of Jesus, the icon of the Father, and as an imitator of the Lord, a teacher and spiritual father to countless sons and daughters. In him we discover the essential traits of the spiritual father: humble charity, the charism of teaching as a spiritual master, intercessory prayer for the sons and daughters entrusted to him by God and for all people, discernment between good and evil, and between good and good. He also reminded us that there is no 'father' without sons and daughters. Fatherhood is not a one-way street. It is at the service of the human and spiritual growth of Christian freedom in action in the baptized.

St John the Baptist's response to those who wanted to arouse his jealousy about Jesus, who was making more disciples than he was, sums it up perfectly. "He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. This is my joy, and it is now complete. He (Jesus) must increase, but I must decrease" (Jn 3:29-30). The spiritual father is the friend of the Bridegroom...

Finally, we monks and nuns are indebted to Metropolitan Cyril of Krini for his wonderful encouragement to contribute to the communion between our Churches. Monasticism in the East and West seeks to live a life guided by the Gospel. St. Benedict teaches us to prefer nothing and no one to Christ Jesus. St. Antony is our father and example. Of course, differences have arisen throughout history. Rather than emphasizing these differences, let us recognize our common inspiration, coming from St. Antony and the Desert Fathers. St. John Cassian and St. Benedict acknowledged their debt to them. Our differences have more to do with culture and history than with theology. Eastern monasticism places greater emphasis on prayer of the heart and contemplation, while Latin monasticism emphasizes brotherhood and service. The two sensibilities are complementary, both being oriented towards the coming Lord Jesus. Monasticism reminds the Churches and humanity that this world is passing away, while communion with God remains the only thing that is necessary.

More personal conclusions

We could have broadened our investigation into the figure and significance of St. Antony, father of monks, beyond what we have heard. The *Letters* will certainly give rise to further research.

We could also have asked ourselves why St Nicodemus the Hagiorite placed at the beginning of the Philokalia a century of 170 chapters attributed to Antony, in fact a "Christian Epictetus". But might Nicodemus, a connoisseur of ancient philosophies, have remembered Antony's disputes with the philosophers reported in the *Life* and the great discourse to the monks (§§ 16-43 and 72-80), with the unspoken intention of completing or rectifying the Athanasian image of the monk Antony as an illiterate philosopher?

The Enlightenment and rationalism have not succeeded in banishing the demons from our world. A Benedictine confrere, Anselm Grün, author of dozens of best-selling books on spirituality, translated into more than 30 languages, has just published a book on the Christian's spiritual struggle against the Evil One and his accomplices *Widerstehen und Wachsen. Die Macht des Dunklen in unserer Zeit – und wie wir ihr entgegenzutreten* ('Resist and Grow: The Power of the Evil One in Our Time, and How to Confront It'). The Gospels and the Desert Fathers obviously occupy their rightful place

