
St. Antony in Our Day?

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
by Dean Sam Candler**

This past week, on January 17, with so much else going on, I did my best to observe the feast day of St. Antony of Egypt. I suppose he is not known to most Christians, certainly not like the more popular heroes and strong leaders of the faith. St. Antony, who died in 356 AD, was rather the opposite. He seems to have fled popularity and strength.

Even before Christianity became legal in the days of Constantine (4th century AD), there were those Christians who were wary of the trappings of wealth and prestige. Antony's parents were apparently quite wealthy landowners in the 3rd century AD, in Egypt. When he was about 18 years old, they died, and he was left with both a considerable estate and an unmarried sister. Somehow, he heard the words of Jesus, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven" (Matthew 19:21). He disposed of his wealth, gave much away to his neighbors and to the poor, made sure his sister was taken care of, and he took off into the desert. This was about 270 AD.

Stories abound of St. Antony in the desert. Though not the first Christian hermit and ascetic, he is often credited with being the "Father of All Monks." There are tales of his skirmishes with demons and temptations. He fought laziness and boredom. He tried to avoid conversation with people who came out to ask him questions, but he nevertheless accumulated disciples who appreciated his wisdom. Much of what we know about him was written by the great Athanasius of Alexandria, in his *Life of Antony* (360 AD).

So, at the Cathedral of St. Philip, we remembered St. Antony this past Tuesday. What does it mean, in our day, as fairly prosperous American Christians, to remember Antony? For me, personally, I admit—almost daily—that I have not been called to give away what I have accumulated or what has been left to me. The vow of poverty is a monastic vow, but it is not a priestly vow. Nor is it a baptismal vow. The world has been made richer by prosperous Christians who also knew how to give, how to share, how to use wealth to benefit others.

I hope we all know that wealth can be a tremendous obsession, whether we have it or even if we don't. We are drawn to its power, and fascinated by its ability to command attention. It may be that the more we sense we are losing things, the more we are allured by those who seem to have things.

Thus, every prosperous Christian does well to remember the monastics: the hermits, the ascetics, those who have been called and able to deny material comfort and seek single-minded worship. Those monks—believe me!—are not pure! They have their own battles. They are the first to admit those battles. But their struggle serves as an example to us. No matter what we have, or what we don't have, God invites us to a life of single-minded devotion.

Those who engage this struggle, trying to give and to serve from whatever position God has called them in life – those who engage this struggle, are those we call humble. Their humility engages us, inspires our imagination, calls us!

In his biography, there is one thing Athanasius of Alexandria said of Antony of Egypt that represents the fruit of such struggle. Athanasius, describing Antony, asked, "Who ever met him grieving and failed to go away rejoicing?" Indeed. The fruit of Christian leadership is in serving others, in such a way that they are blessed by our presence – whether we have plenty or not. Whatever we have in life, or don't have, Christian service in our day rests in blessing those around us.

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