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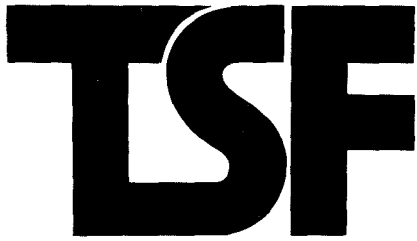
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the Two Thirds World nor endorse the tendency to generalize, avoid precision and even belittle the significance of Western theological debates. It is readily admitted that Evangelical theology in the Two Thirds World is represented by many voices with divergent views. Indeed, it has a long way to go, and in the process it will have a lot to learn from its counterpart in the One Third World.

However, I submit that the ultimate test of any theological discourse is not erudite precision but transformative power. It is a question of whether or not theology can articulate the faith in a way that it is not only intellectually sound but spiritually energizing, and therefore, capable of leading the people of God to be transformed in their way of life and to commit themselves to God's mission in the world. As the Apostle Paul reminded the Corinthian church many years ago, "the kingdom of God is not talk but power" (I Cor. 4:20).

¹ Ronald Sider (USA) presented a paper on "Miracles, Methodology and Modern Western Christology" and David Cook on "Significant Trends in Western Christological Debate." Cf. Samuel and Sugden, pp. 351f, 371f.
² Cf. George Cummings, "Who Do You Say That I Am? A North American Minority Answer to the Christological Question," in Samuel and Sugden, pp. 319-337.
³ Comment by a minority North American participant in the discussion with George Cummings, in Samuel and Sugden, p. 347.

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Antony of Coma: Spiritual Formation in the Egyptian Wilderness

by Stephen Brachlow

The lives and spiritual heroics of the fourth-century desert fathers and mothers have often exercised a peculiar fascination over the church, especially among those who have sought to live their lives wholly devoted to God.

This was certainly true for Thomas a Kempis, the late medieval author of one of the most widely read books in Christian devotional literature, *The Imitation of Christ*. Dazzled by the ascetic feats of the desert monks, a Kempis exclaimed with the highest admiration in the *Imitation*: "What a life of strict self-denial the fathers lived in the desert!" But it was not simply their radical self-renunciation that so enamored a Kempis; he was also deeply aware of the marvelous fruit produced by their painful austerities in the wilderness wastes of Egypt, through which these early Christian ascetics became "filled with patience and love," imbued with "virtue in plenty," and "enriched by the grace and comfort of God."¹

In this same way, our fascination with those early fourth-century monks Luther once affectionately termed "the holy

fathers of old in the desert,"² has at the deepest level had less to do with their seemingly bizarre religious observances (while stationed atop sixty-foot poles or entombed in dreary, dark caves) than it does with a paradox that lies very near the heart of Christian spiritual formation. It is that strange principle of inversion found in the gospels in which renunciation of life leads somehow by the Spirit of Christ into fullness of life. The desert tradition captures this mysterious movement by the way the desert is transformed by Christ from a place of demonic disorder, desolation, and death into a wellspring of life and a provisional haven of paradisaic bliss for those who in faith are led by the Spirit into it.³

This curious movement is one of the prominent themes in Athanasius' famous biography of the first desert monk, *The Life of Antony*. Written while Athanasius was Bishop of Alexandria, the book records the amazing story of how Antony of Coma, in middle Egypt at the end of the third century, gradually made his way alone into the depths of the Egyptian desert, where he gave himself to a life of solitary prayer for more than twenty years, a life of prayer that was nurtured by a daily, almost continual exposure to holy Scripture. A recognized classic of the spiritual life in our day, Athanasius' biography of Antony became the centerpiece of the vast lit-

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erature that sprang out of the desert tradition. As Gregory of Nazianzen observed near the end of the fourth century, Athanasius' *Life* provided "the *Charakter*, that is, the imprint, the mold, of the primitive monastic life."⁴ So impressive was its impact upon contemporary Christians, that the book inspired literally thousands of lay men and women to embrace the solitary life exemplified in Antony's story. Like Antony, they felt called to flee the degenerative allurements of secular Roman society and seek the salvation of their souls in the *eramos*, the desert wilderness, of Egypt, Syria and Palestine. Athanasius' biography also exerted its magnetic influence in the personal histories of many who rose to places of prominence in the post-Constantinian ecclesiastical hierarchy, as it did in Augustine's celebrated conversion to Christianity. Having heard the dramatic story of Antony's decision to follow Christ into the desert, Augustine explained in his *Confessions* how he felt himself somehow prepared by Antony's story for the sudden transformation of his own life that occurred one day while reading from Paul's epistle to the Romans.⁵

"Solitude is a terrible trial," Louis Bouyer has said in reference to Antony's experience, "for it serves to crack open and burst apart the shell of our superficial securities. It opens out to us the unknown abyss that we all carry within us."

Antony's Spiritual Transformation

The strange story of Antony's spiritual transformation begins in the year 271, in Antony's home village. He was a young, comfortably off peasant of about twenty, left with the responsibility of raising his younger sister after the premature death of his parents. One Sunday in the church at Coma, Antony listened to the gospel lesson from Matthew 19:21 urging total detachment: "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven."⁶

Antony took these words as a personal summons. He at once gave away his possessions, arranged care for his sister, and withdrew to a small hut on the outskirts of Coma where he joined an old, solitary person who for many years had observed a life of prayer. Having simplified his own life by reducing his personal needs to the bare minimum, Antony identified with the poor and disadvantaged of his village community; he gave himself to manual labor weaving rush mats and baskets while devoting his mind and heart in a spirit of unceasing prayer to the Scriptures which his older companion in solitude read aloud. Antony became so attentive in this practice to the words he heard that, as Athanasius relates, "nothing from Scripture did he fail to take in—rather he grasped everything, and in him the memory took the place of books."⁷

Unencumbered by the responsibilities as well as the many diversions of life in society, and increasingly centered in the deepening rhythms of solitary prayer and work, Antony found himself gradually but inexorably drawn toward the deep solitude that lay in the vast, empty reaches of the surrounding desert. Driven by his longing for purity of heart and an inexplicable desire to face directly, like Christ in the desert, the struggles of demonic temptations, Antony proceeded further and further into the very soul of the Egyptian wilderness. He first took up residence among the tombs of a graveyard outside the village. Then, after crossing the Nile, he barricaded himself for twenty years in an old, abandoned military fortress where he experienced a dreadful confrontation with Satan and underwent demonic temptations of extreme severity.

When, after these many years of seclusion, Antony once again emerged into public view, he did so as a changed person. According to Athanasius, he stepped from the fortress "as though from some shrine, having been led into divine mysteries and inspired by God."⁸ Significantly, it was at this point in Athanasius' narrative that Antony, now in his mid-fifties, was finally prepared for ministry in the world. His reputation as an ascetic quickly spread and hundreds of admirers surged into the desert to be near him. Having survived the rigors of his lonely trials in the fortress, Antony no longer needed to cling to his solitude. He was now free to give himself to healing the sick, casting out demons, comforting the sorrowful and reconciling enemies among the many people who came out into the desert to see him. In the year 306, when the last great persecution of Christians broke out in the city of Alexandria under the Roman emperor Diocletian, Antony left the safety of the desert and went resolutely to Alexandria in order to encourage and minister to the Christian martyrs suffering in prison, thus exposing himself to arrest.

In 313, after peace came to the Christian community under Constantine, Antony's fame mushroomed across the empire. Fleeing the adulation of the growing crowds of admirers and longing to remain true to the solitary life, this now aging religious celebrity journeyed with an Arabian caravan even further into the desert wilderness, this time to what Athanasius called "The Interior Mountain." There Antony lived out his remaining years, tilling a small patch of grain for sustenance and devoting himself to a continual observance of prayer. Yet even in this remote outpost, while seeking to avoid fame and public acclaim, the reputation of Antony continued to spread. His simple, quiet life acted in a powerful way as a sign of contradiction to the ways of the world, as a strange symbol of hope to those who knew of his devotion, and as a mysterious source of healing and compassion for those who sought him in the furthest corner of the Egyptian desert.

In this way, Athanasius' biography narrates the story of Antony, the first desert monk. What unfolds is a magnificent portrait of a fourth-century Christian eccentric in which the wilderness provides the context for an inner, spiritual metamorphosis that renewed not only Antony's own life, but also the lives of those who knew him. Three characteristics emerge from Athanasius' biography as fundamental components of this desert transformation: first, the wilderness is a place that generates inner clarity; second, it is a place for spiritual growth; and third, the barren wilderness becomes a place from which fruitful ministry begins.

In The Desert

Evagrius of Pontus, a second generation Egyptian monk, once explained that in the isolation of the desert, the eyes of those at prayer are opened and they come to see the true nature of things.⁹

For the desert ascetic like Antony, stripped of the many occupations that absorb a life engaged in the obligations and diversions of society, life in the desert brought a riveting clarity to existence in which he perceived, sometimes with alarming vividness, the emptiness of everything. Antony's many and often noisy bouts with Satan and a wide range of demonic

adversaries while alone in his desert fortress were as often confrontations with the poverty of his own soul as they were encounters with the chaotic spirits that rampaged through the vacant chambers of his heart. Alone in the desert, the eyes of Antony were opened to the interior bankruptcy that is uncovered when the social props upon which we so often depend for a sense of security and personal identity—the careers, titles and social roles we play—are removed and we stand alone and naked before existence. "Solitude is a terrible trial," Louis Bouyer has said in reference to Antony's experience of isolation, "for it serves to crack open and burst apart the shell of our superficial securities. It opens out to us the unknown abyss that we all carry within us."¹⁰ In the featureless desert, Antony came to see with inescapable clarity the transitory and illusory nature of all things that do not have Christ as their source; there he recognized that "by its very nature, life is uncertain" and, at best, "ephemeral."¹¹ Devoid of all the familiar comforts of home and community, Antony found himself peering headlong into a vast chasm of interior darkness and dread, of the fear and emptiness of death, and of the drastic nature of human sinfulness.

At the same time, in a strange and wonderful way, for Antony the desert also became a place for grace and freedom, where the vision of divine reality burned so vividly in the waiting heart of this lonely ascetic that the demonic horrors he confronted in isolation gradually receded and eventually lost their torturous hold over him. Alone at prayer in his cell, Antony came to see that all the fearful and debilitating thoughts which haunted his psyche were, in light of God's reality, mere "apparitions,"¹² or, in the words of the psalmist, "they are like a dream when one awakes, on awakening, you despise their phantoms."¹³ In this moment of clarity, like the click of a film coming into sync, Antony came to recognize not only that the

hermitage. Rather than a place of soothing retreat, Antony's isolation became a place of painful confrontation with obscure forces and disturbing conflicts that roamed through his heart; but these very confrontations also gave birth to a radical re-orientation of his life when illumined by the light of Christ.

Fired by flames of the Spirit while enduring the assaults of the Enemy, the desert became for Antony what Henri Nouwen has described as "the furnace of transformation."¹⁶ In the dizzy, oppressive heat of the Egyptian wastes, Christ slowly forged Antony into a new person, one who was whole, healthy and fully natural, freed from the enslaving compulsions of his "old self." He entered his desert cell a bent, fragmented individual, only to emerge more fully human and integrated, as God originally intended. Athanasius describes the transformed monk as one who had become "beautiful and perfectly straight, . . . according to nature, as it was created."¹⁷

In the desert experience of Antony, there is this other side of asceticism, which is the abundance and fruitfulness of life that flows from the Spirit through a life given to ascetic discipline. While the initial lesson for the desert monk is a recognition of one's inner brokenness and sinfulness, the ultimate statement of the desert solitary is, as Benedicta Ward has said, not one's "own worthlessness but the everlasting faithfulness of God." Thus, there arises in the desert literature wonderful images of light and joy, visions of angels and the sounds of laughter. The monks who live out their lives exposed to the harsh and cheerless landscape of the Egyptian wilderness are not encountered in the literature as gloomy legalists, but as integrated people who have found freedom. Even their physical appearance shows signs of the new life that is being born within them.¹⁸ Following the trials he endured while in his cell, the transformed Antony is depicted by Athanasius as the renewed Adam restored to wholeness not only in spirit but

For Antony, the desert became a place of clarity, transformation, and the beginning of meaningful ministry, as it has functioned throughout the history of the church.

temptations and lures of the world have no authority over the person who in faith flees from them, but that, as Athanasius has Satan rather poignantly confess to Antony, the demonic torments experienced by the desert monks were, in the end, self-generated and, therefore, illusory: "I am not the one tormenting them," Satan admits to Antony, "but they disturb themselves, for I have become weak. Haven't they read that *the swords of the enemy have failed utterly, and that you have destroyed their cities?*" Thus, with an eye of faith, Antony came to see the true nature of reality while in his wilderness solitude. There is no need, as he says, to "be plunged into despair . . . nor contemplate horrors in the soul, nor invent fears for ourselves" because Christ has "routed them and reduced them to idleness."¹⁴

The Furnace of Transformation

This mysterious movement from despair to hope, from what Thomas Merton called "opaqueness to transparency,"¹⁵ in a life given to prayer makes the solitude of the desert not only a place that generates inner clarity, but also a place for spiritual growth. When Antony first entered his desert fortress for twenty years of solitude, it was not for the purpose of self-gratifying leisure or peaceful repose. If anything, Antony found that the interior chaos and clamor of the demonic was louder—all the more intense—while living in the stark silence of his desert

physically: "And when they beheld him, they were amazed to see that his body had maintained its former condition, neither fat from lack of exercise, nor emaciated from fasting." The rich inner life of Antony became so pervasive that it quite naturally overflowed into the actions of his external life "so that from the soul's joy his face was cheerful as well, and from the movements of the body it was possible to sense and perceive the stable condition of his soul."¹⁹

However, these amazing reports of Antony's renewed life should not be taken to mean that Athanasius believed Antony had achieved a state of heavenly perfection. Athanasius also explains that even after Antony spent his twenty years in seclusion where he discovered "the divine mysteries," that was only a beginning; his transformation in the cell, while contributing to a radical change of heart, did not raise the monk to ever higher levels of mystic perfection, but simply set him "on the way."²⁰ Furthermore, Athanasius was careful to point out—and this is of great significance for understanding the theology behind the desert tradition—that Antony's metamorphosis was not exclusively a product of his strict asceticism or the wilderness environment. While both were indispensable, Athanasius labors to make plain the primacy of grace in the sanctification of Antony the Great.²¹ Later ascetics continued to emphasize this dimension of grace, without which the place of asceticism in the spirituality of the desert tradition is easily misunderstood as the epitome of "works righteous-

ness." Some twenty years after Antony died in 356, Rufinus of Aquileia, who founded a monastery at Jerusalem on the Mount of Olives, exhorted the heirs of Antony to "pray that the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ may be with us, for it is by his power that all the good works of the Egyptian monks have been performed."²²

Nevertheless, when viewed through modern eyes, the strict regimen of fourth-century ascetics like Antony often elicits images of emaciated religious fanatics, half-crazed from the boiling desert sun and psychologically deranged by sexual repression and social isolation. By contrast, the desert experience, according to Athanasius, served to transform Antony into a tolerant, humble, cheerful and eminently stable individual, whose interior life was "free of confusion," and whose "face had a great and marvelous grace."²³ Thus, the story of Antony reveals the strange ambiguity and the mysterious movement of desert spirituality. The desert is at once a place of encounter with darkness and a place for the revelation of light, a place of death and a place of life. The person who in faith enters this bewildering terrain of spiritual paradoxes begins a journey that leads from confusion and uncertainty to clarity and discernment, a kind of baptismal journey in which the "old self" dies and a "new, true self" is born.

The Emergence From Solitude

Finally, it was through the change wrought in this desert crucible that Antony was transformed by Christ into a wise, loving and compassionate individual who was to provide hospitality for weary travellers and minister to the broken and needy. In this respect, desert spirituality also becomes a discipline from which authentic ministry begins. Given Athanasius' own ecclesiastical and pastoral concerns as bishop of Alexandria, it is not surprising to find that ministry is a major theme in his treatment of the monk's bold experiment in the desert. Much of the *Life of Antony* is devoted to underscoring an irony in Antony's life: by seeking, as Athanasius writes, to "conceal" himself from others and retire from the public, Antony actually became more accessible to others and effective in ministry. What flowed from his solitude was not a self-satisfying, individualistic form of piety but, as Louis Bouyer has observed, "the most realistic kind of charity."²⁴

When Antony emerged from his cell, people recognized a new, transformed individual who embodied the gospel in his very person, and they flocked to him by the thousands. Liberated from insecurity by eschewing the illusory securities of the world and freed from the selfish compulsions of a life devoted to social attainment, Antony was transformed from one who was merely "God-loved" into the one Athanasius describes as the "physician given to Egypt by God."²⁵ He who had renounced society and who had suffered torments in the desert was now able, like Christ, to identify compassionately with those who stood alone in society, those who grieved, victims of poverty and injustice, others who were discouraged, as well as with the many martyrs who languished in the prisons of Alexandria.²⁶

At the same time, Antony was able to minister without compromise to the pressing needs of the wealthy and those in positions of power, persuading emperors, judges, and military officials throughout the empire to seek justice and serve the poor. In addition, Athanasius also portrays Antony as a clear-minded champion of orthodoxy against the Arians; the wise apologist confronting pagan philosophers; a reconciler of bitter enemies; and the generous dispenser of hospitality who warmly welcomed and entertained those who came to visit him.²⁷ Wherever Antony went, it seems that he carried in himself a ministerial spirit of compassion and healing. Athanasius

indicates that even for those who survived him, their memory of Antony's quiet, grace-filled life serve as a source of comfort to them.²⁸

Antony's astonishing success in ministry among his contemporaries after his twenty years of solitude did not, however, turn the hermit into a compulsive activist, as if the practice of solitude represented a kind of preparatory phase that, once complete, could be dispensed with for the more important work of ministry. Athanasius explains that even after Antony began his ministry, "he loved more than everything else his way of life in the mountain."²⁹ Without first centering his life in prayer, Antony knew that all his attempts at good works would communicate, as Thomas Merton once said about an activism not grounded in contemplation, "nothing but the contagion of his own obsessions, his aggressiveness, his ego-centered ambitions."³⁰

For Antony, the desert became a place of clarity, transformation, and the beginning of meaningful ministry, as it has functioned throughout the history of the church. Even though Martin Luther was a vehement critic of sixteenth-century monasticism,³¹ he nevertheless, like Antony, understood something of the clarifying and transforming power of desert spirituality for ministry. Near the end of his own fruitful ministry, Luther wrote, "no one is taught through much reading and thinking. There is a much higher school where one learns God's Word. One must go into the desert. Then Christ comes and one becomes able to judge the world."³² Antony knew this to be true from his own long sojourn in the desert. It was because he sought first to glorify Christ in this way that Antony, near the end of the *Life*, politely refused to be drawn too far from his cell into the world of action by well-intentioned admirers. He explained to them: "Just as fish perish when they lie exposed for a while on dry land, so also the monks relax their discipline when they linger and pass time with you. Therefore, we must rush back to the mountain, like fish to the sea—so that we might not, by remaining among you, forget the things within us."³³

Antony sought first the kingdom of God in solitude. It was only then that true, active love for others followed as a fruit of the Holy Spirit. In turn, Antony was glorified by Christ and became a revolutionary source of renewal for the church in his day.

¹ Thomas a Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ* (London, 1974), p. 60-61.

² Martin Luther, *Three Treatises* (Philadelphia, 1970), p. 143.

³ G. H. Williams, *Wilderness and Paradise in Christian Thought* (New York, 1962), pp. 10-28.

⁴ Louis Bouyer, *A History of Christian Spirituality* (New York, 1982), i, 307.

⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (London, 1970), pp. 167; 177-8.

⁶ Athanasius, *The Life of Antony*, trans. Robert C. Gregg (Paulist Press, 1980), p. 31.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁹ Henri Nouwen, *Clowning in Rome* (Garden City, NY, 1979), p. 88.

¹⁰ Bouyer, *History of Christian Spirituality*, i, 313.

¹¹ Athanasius, *Life*, pp. 44-5; 65.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 53.

¹³ Psalm 73:20.

¹⁴ Athanasius, *Life*, pp. 62-3.

¹⁵ Quoted in Nouwen, *Clowning in Rome*, p. 89.

¹⁶ Henri Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart* (New York, 1981), p. 25.

¹⁷ Athanasius, *Life*, p. 46.

¹⁸ *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*, trans. Norman Russell (London, 1980), p. 35.

¹⁹ Athanasius, *Life*, pp. 41; 87.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

²² *Lives of the Desert Fathers*, p. 141.

²³ Athanasius, *Life*, p. 87.

²⁴ Bouyer, *History of Christian Spirituality*, i, 309.

²⁵ Athanasius, *Life*, pp. 33; 94.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 94; 66.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 42; 69; 81; 84-90; 94.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

³⁰ Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (New York, 1971), p. 164.

³¹ Claude Peifer, "The Biblical Foundations of Monasticism," *Cistercian Studies*, (1966), i, 7-8.

³² Quoted in Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand* (Philadelphia, 1950), p. 224.

³³ Athanasius, *Life*, p. 93.