
Monastic Wisdom from *The Life of Antony*

Antony's bee-like formation

Now at that time in the neighbouring village there was an old man who had practiced from his youth the solitary life. When Antony saw him, he emulated him in goodness. At first he also began by remaining in places proximate to his village. And going forth from there, if he heard of some zealous person anywhere, he searched him out like the wise bee. He did not go back to his own place unless he had seen him, and as though receiving from him certain supplies for travelling the road to virtue, he returned.

... He was sincerely obedient to those men of zeal he visited, and he considered carefully the advantage in zeal and in ascetic living that each held in relation to him. He observed the graciousness of one, the eagerness for prayers in another; he took careful note of one's freedom from anger, and the human concern of another. And he paid attention to one while he lived a watchful life, or one who pursued studies, as also he admired one for patience, and another for fastings and sleeping on the ground. The gentleness of one and the long-suffering of yet another he watched closely. He marked, likewise, the piety toward Christ and the mutual love of them all. And having been filled in this manner, he returned to his own place of discipline, from that time gathering the attributes of each in himself, and striving to manifest in himself what was best from all.¹

The way of virtue is not measured by time - each day is a new beginning

And this tenet of (Antony's) was also truly wonderful, that neither the way of virtue nor separation from the world for its sake ought to be measured in terms of time spent, but by the aspirant's desire and purposefulness. He, indeed, did not hold time passed in his memory, but day by day, as if making a beginning of his asceticism, increased his exertion for advance, saying continually to himself Paul's word about *forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead*,² and recalling also the passage in which Elijah the prophet says, *the Lord ... lives, before whom I stand today*.³ He observed that in saying *today* he was not counting the time passed, but as one always establishing a beginning, he endeavoured each day to present himself as the sort of person ready to appear before God - that is, pure of heart and prepared to obey his will, and no other. And he used to tell himself that from the career of the great Elijah, as from a mirror, the ascetic must always acquire knowledge of his own life.⁴

¹ *Life of Antony* 3-4 (Gregg, pp.32-3)

² Philippians 3:13

³ A paraphrase of 3 Kings 17:1 and 18:15 in the Septuagint version of the Old Testament

⁴ *Life of Antony* 7 (Gregg, pp.36-7)

The life of virtue is natural

[Antony said...] Do not be afraid to hear about virtue, and do not be a stranger to the term. For it is not distant from us, nor does it stand external to us, but its realization lies in us, and the task is easy if only we shall will it. Now the Greeks leave home and traverse the sea in order to gain an education, but there is no need for us to go abroad on account of the Kingdom of heaven, nor to cross the sea for virtue. For the Lord has told us before, *the Kingdom of God is within you*.⁵ All virtue needs, then, is our willing, since it is in us, and arises from us. For virtue exists when the soul maintains its intellectual part according to nature. It holds fast according to nature when it remains as it was made - and it was made beautiful and perfectly straight ... But when it turns from its course and is twisted away from what it naturally is, then we speak of the vice of the soul. So the task is not difficult, for if we remain as we were made, we are in virtue, but if we turn our thoughts toward contemptible things, we are condemned as evil.⁶

The wisdom of Antony

Antony was also extremely wise. It was a marvel that although he had not learned letters, he was a shrewd and intelligent man. For example, once two Greek philosophers visited him, thinking they would be able to put him to the test. He was in the outer mountain at the time, and knowing what the men were from their appearance, he went out to them and said through an interpreter, "Why did you go to so much trouble, you philosophers, to visit a foolish man?" When they responded that he was not foolish, but quite wise, he said to them, "If you came to a foolish man, your toil is superfluous, but if you consider me wise, become as I am, for we must imitate what is good. If I had come to you I would have imitated you; but since you came to me, become as I am; for I am a Christian." In amazement they withdrew, for they saw that even demons feared Antony.⁷

"A monk away from the mountain is like a fish on dry land"

Another time [Antony] was subjected to this kind of pressure from people in need, and the military commander, through many messengers, asked him to come. And after he came and delivered a few statements about salvation and remarks pertaining to those who required help, he hastened to return. When the one called the duke implored him to stay, he replied that it was impossible to spend time with them, and by a graceful illustration he persuaded the duke, saying, "Just as fish perish when they lie exposed for a while on the 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 the fish to the sea - so that we might not, by remaining among you, forget the things within us."⁸

⁵ Luke 17:21

⁶ *Life of Antony* 20 (Gregg, p.46)

⁷ *Life of Antony* 72 (Gregg, pp.83-4)

⁸ *Life of Antony* 85 (Gregg, pp.92-3)