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THE DAWN OF CHRISTIANITY

The Fourth Century – Part I

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I. ANTONY OF EGYPT

I have made allusion to the increasing laxity of the Church during the years preceding the Decian Persecution in the mid-3rd century, its growing wealth, prestige, and ease. For a generation it had not known persecution. It is one of the reasons so many, so quickly forsook the church and offered sacrifices when persecution began in earnest. The Church was filled with individuals who had never had to count the cost and whose faith was like the seed that fell upon the path or on shallow ground in Jesus' parable. But there was another, equal and opposite reaction. Some began to look for ways to distinguish themselves from the crowd of easy Christians. Many began to move to the outlying districts of villages and cities to practice their faith more strictly. These became known as Christian Ascetics or Hermits.

One such individual whose life became an inspiration to ten of thousands was a Coptic speaking Christian from Egypt. His name was **Antony; or Antony the Great**--the man usually considered the **Father of Christian asceticism** and sometimes called the "**Father of all Monks.**" **Antony of Egypt was born c. 251 and died over 100 years later, in 356 at age 105.** Which just proves how beneficial fasting can be to long life! To be fair, we need to underline the fact that:

asceticism (*defined as "practicing strict self-denial as a measure of personal and especially spiritual discipline"*),

was being practiced already in Syria in the 2nd Century. The Assyrian Teacher Tatian taught it in Edessa. He spawned an heretical movement called the **Encratites** calling for severe self-denial, the condemnation of marriage refusal of wine, and dismissal of Paul's epistles; subsequently, both his writing and the movement he started was denounced by **Irenaeus of Lyons** later the same century as heresy. But this strict asceticism was already, it must be admitted, relatively widespread in Syria and the East, and much admired. It had an influence on what was to come that was later to be accepted as legitimate. These precursors of legitimate Christian asceticism, **Syrian solitary recluses**, would chain themselves to rocks; they bent their bodies under iron weights; they walled themselves up in caves...and one ascetic, a certain Aones, lived like a wild beast in the caves near Edessa by the well where Jacob met Rachel and only allowed himself to eat uncooked grass. (Moffatt, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, page 76). As I say, this heretical asceticism was denounced as such by Irenaeus already in the second century. The practice seemed to be based on several different ideas. Some of it came from gnosticism, the Greek idea that the body and the material world is evil. Some came from Greek teachers, such as Pythagoras, who imposed ascetic practices on their disciples.

But some of it seemed to be a response to teachings of the New Testament. It was healthier and definitely more orthodox. It seemed to be an attempt to pursue the sanctifying work of God in

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our lives so that these solitaries might fully live out the virtues demanded by the scripture without being dragged down by self and sin.

Roberta C. Bondi, in a book called To Love as God Loves, speaks of the the spiritual efforts and physical withdrawal of the hermits and monks as attempts to love purely; to live out the love God commands, redeemed of the self. They would struggle against the “passions” at work within us which draw us away from God which they categorized and defined. A 4th century monk, Evagrius Ponticus, made a list of eight of them: **gluttony; avarice; impurity; sadness or depression; anger; acedia** (defined as boredom or dissatisfaction with one's situation); **vainglory; and pride**. These later were reduced to seven and became the basis for the seven deadly sins of the Medieval Ages. Their desire was to rule over these passions by the power of Christ.

QUESTION: Can you see anything in the Bible that might induce people to withdraw and practice self-denial? Any examples? What Biblical teaching might be interpreted in such a way as to induce a person to remove himself/herself to the desert to fast and pray?

Here are a few possible Biblical roots: the example of John the Baptist living in the wilderness; Jesus' warning about our not being able to serve two masters--God and money, and his parables concerning the dangers of wealth and his encouragement to use our wealth to benefit the poor; Jesus' warning about looking at a woman lustfully, and Paul's struggle with the flesh in Romans 6 and 7, as well as Paul's recommendation to remain celibate might lead men to flee contact with women entirely. Jesus' exhortation to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him might lead some to feel that a life of prayer and self-denial is the true Christian path; and his instructions to the 70 not to take a bag for their journey might lead to the idea that we should trust God to provide. Jesus' presumption that his disciples would fast would fit in well with a life devoted to prayer. Fear of Hell, and Jesus call to labor for that which is eternal could also be strong motivators. John talks about the world passing away, what better, then, to spend ones life in prayer and intercession? The writer of Hebrews exhorted his readers to seek “that sanctification, without which none of us will see God.” All of this might contribute to the ascetic and monastic call.

Question: What might be a counter balance to that? Remember: 1 Timothy 4:1-6

When Antony retreated to the desert of Egypt, there were other factors mingled in. The Decian Persecution of mid-2nd century had placed great personal and economic stress on the Coptic (or native, rural Egyptian) communities. In Alexandria, there were Pogroms against Christians in 248, that, as with the Jews in Russia, could always spring up again. Men wondered whether they should flee the persecutions and attempt a precarious livelihood in the desert. Some who did, stayed there and provided an example to others including Antony. Yet others were simply disillusioned with the increasing formality and wealth of the Church and wished to give themselves to total obedience to Christ.

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ANTONY'S STORY

In the year **270 A.D.**, a **19 year old farmer named Antony** who had just inherited a large sum of money at the death of his parents, wondered what he should do with it. In church one Sunday in his Coptic village church he heard a sermon on a text in Matthew, and concluded God was speaking to him: *"... If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."* Hearing that, and taking the meaning literally, Antony soon obeyed. He placed his younger sister (thanks bro!) under the care of the Virgins of the Church, gave his money and property away, and retreated to the edge of the desert, but still near a Coptic village, living in a tomb in the mountains to the west of Alexandria. He stayed there for years trained by a hermit named **Paul of Thebes** until he began to develop a reputation and so many misfits and grumblers gathered round to join him, that he withdrew to a more solitary place in the Arabian Mountains on the East side of the Nile, where he stayed for another 18 years until the outbreak of the Great Persecution (about which more next week), in 303 A.D. **Antony's desire was to put into practice what Jesus did when he withdrew into a solitary place to pray.** But his retreat, according to Eusebius, was also a protest against the actions of the rich, whom, **he complained, "grind the faces of the poor"** (Frend, 422). Antony was not quite an ascetic in the mold of the Syrians. His desire was to live purely, to pray, to conquer the flesh, and to live on as little as necessary, sometimes fasting for several days, sometimes eating only a meal a day. But he did not punish himself by chaining himself to rocks, or by eating grass. His efforts to conquer the flesh and its desires, were recorded by Athanasius—about whom we'll hear more in the next couple weeks--who wrote a history of him. At the beginning, he felt sorry for himself, regretting having given everything away. This would trouble him. So he would redouble his efforts to bring his thoughts into line by memorization of scripture and prayer.

According to Athanasius, the devil fought St. Anthony by afflicting him with boredom, laziness, and visions of women, which he overcame by the power of prayer. At one point his friends from the local village came to visit him and found him unconscious, battered, he later said, by demons, and carried him to a church.

After he recovered, he made a second effort and went back into the desert to a mountain further away. There he lived strictly enclosed in an old abandoned Roman fort for some twenty years. According to Athanasius, the devil again resumed his war against Antony, only this time the phantoms were in the form of wild beasts, wolves, lions, snakes and scorpions. They appeared, so the story goes, as if they were about to attack him or cut him into pieces. But Antony would laugh at them scornfully and say, "If any of you have any authority over me, only one would have been sufficient to fight me." At his saying this, they disappeared as though in smoke, and God gave him the victory. At this point Antony did not allow anyone to enter his cell; whoever came to him stood outside and listened to his advice. He began to have a reputation as a miracle worker. Many curious came to visit him, others to hear his teachings. He saw that these visits kept him away from his worship. As a result, he went further into the desert. He traveled to the inner wilderness for three days, until he found a spring of water and some palm trees, choosing to settle there. **On this spot still stands the monastery of Saint**

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Anthony the Great. But so many began to come to join him, that he relented and formed them into a community of solitaries. Soon this became a mass movement. Thousands upon thousands fled to the desert for prayer, so that some areas of the desert became more populated than cities. (But we're into the fourth century here.)

The Church had grown; many of the bishops had great prestige; and these solitary Christian men and women hated it. They called themselves “**Anchorites**”, meaning, “**fugitives**”, (Gonzales, pages 137-40) or “those who withdraw”, fleeing the pomp and prestige of the churches for a life of contemplation, prayer and humility. The worst fate they could imagine was to be ordained a priest or bishop.

What did they do? They developed rules for a life of prayer and subsistence living. For his own followers, Antony developed a simple rule: “**Pray and work**”. Anthony himself cultivated a garden and wove mats of rushes. His disciples weaved baskets and mats that they traded for bread and oil. As they weaved they recited psalms and prayed or memorized portions of Scripture. They taught each other by heart entire books of the Bible, particularly the Psalms and the books of the New Testament. He and his disciples were regularly sought out for words of enlightenment and in time, these statements were collected into a book: Sayings of the Desert Fathers. He died in **356 A.D. at age 105**, instructing his two companions to keep the place of his burial secret.

QUESTION: Here are a few of his words as quoted by Athanasius. What can you glean from them that might help us understand this movement? What might be profitable?

II. SAYINGS OF ANTONY OF EGYPT (pages 59-60, Athanasius: The Life of Antony)

“And let this too be a sign to you: When the soul remains in fear, that is due to the presence of the enemies. For the demons do not remove the fear caused by such appearances, as the great Archangel Gabriel did for Mary and for Zacharias, and the angel who appeared at the tomb did for the women. On the contrary, when they see people who are fearful, they multiply the apparitions so as to terrify them all the more, and then descend in order to malign them, saying, 'Fall down and worship me.' In this way they deceived the Greeks, who considered them to be gods, as they are falsely named. But the Lord did not allow us to be beguiled by the devil, and censuring him whenever he made such appearances, he said, Begone, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.' Therefore let the crafty one be despised by us more and more, for what the Lord has said, this he has done for our sakes, so that when the demons hear sayings of this sort from us they may be chased away through the Lord, who in these words censured them.”

“We ought not to boast about expelling demons, nor become proud on account of healings performed; we are not to marvel only at him who casts out a demon, and treat with disdain him who does not. Let one learn well the discipline of each, and let him either copy and emulate it, or correct it. For the performance of signs does not belong to us—this is the Savior's work. So he said to the disciples: Do not rejoice that the demons are subject to you; but rejoice that your names are written in heaven. The fact that the names are written in heaven is a witness to our virtue and manner of life, but the ability to expel demons is itself a gift from the Savior, who bestowed it. So to those boasting, not in virtue, but in signs, and saying, Lord, did we not cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your

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Name? He answered, 'Amen. I say to you, I do not know you!' For the Lord does not know the ways of the ungodly. Certainly one must pray, as I said earlier, to receive the gift of the discernment of spirits, so that we might not, as Scripture says, believe every spirit."

"Moreover, when Antony saw the crowd [who pressed in to see him], he was not annoyed any more than he was elated at being embraced by so many people. He maintained utter equilibrium, like one guided by reason and steadfast in that which accords with nature. Through him the Lord healed many of those present who suffered from bodily ailments; others he purged of demons, and to Antony he gave grace in speech. Thus he consoled many who mourned, and others hostile to each other he reconciled in friendship, urging everyone to prefer nothing in the world above the love of Christ. And when he spoke and urged them to keep in mind the future goods and the affection in which we are held by God, who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all, he persuaded many to take up the solitary life. And so, from then on, there were monasteries in the mountains and the desert was made a city by monks, who left their own people and registered themselves for the citizenship in the heavens." (page 42-43).

QUESTION: What might go wrong with asceticism and the solitary life?

II. PACHOMIUS

As time went on, ascetics began to feel the need for community. Not everyone had Antony's herculean ability to resist temptation and remain in solitary prayer.

"The demons did not always lose their battle. The loneliness of the solitary's life increased the chance of abnormality, eccentricity, even madness. The admiration of visitors could turn weaker heads. The man whose capital fault was pride or lust or gluttony did not find that he had cured himself by escaping from his friends and family...The solitary sometimes lacked wise guidance in discipline and prayer. The call to self-denial could easily become the exaltation of suffering: discipline could become an end instead of a means. The movement needed wise organization, wise discipline, wise instruction. The leaders met this need by grouping solitaries in loose organizations. They prayed their offices at common hours, they consulted each other on questions of discipline and prayer, they joined in corporate worship at the church of their group on Saturday and Sunday, they accepted as a necessary step on the road to holiness obedience to a senior monk or council of senior monks. And it became the standard teaching of the Antonian leaders that no one should be allowed to attempt the solitary life until he had served a long probation in a community. This ban was sometimes defied...But on the whole, the teaching was accepted. A renunciant might remain twenty years or more in a community before venturing to join a hermit group—in the endeavor to learn the first steps in conquering self-will by obeying a superior; to train his patience and his charity by accepting the necessary frictions of common life; to become disciplined in regular worship, regular prayer, regular reading or memorization of the Bible; and to have his spiritual development watched and guided by experienced men. The quest for discipline and sane guidance led some thinkers to reject the ideals of the solitaries altogether." (Western Asceticism, Owen Chadwick, ed., page 24).

Into the gap stepped another Egyptian named **Pachomius who lived from 286 to 348**, dying at 62 years of age. He was the father of **Cenobite monasticism**, or monasticism with community

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life. Whereas the anchorites or solitaries would have a minimum of community life, cenobite monasticism was a conscious structuring of community life punctuated by prayers, worship, work, and mutual service.

Pachomius was born into a non-Christian home around 286. When he was of age, he was drafted, much to his dismay, into the Army. He hated it. But one day, while he was feeling particularly glum and sorry for himself, some Christians happened by and stopped to console and pray with him. He was so impressed by their kindness that he committed his life to Christ and swore to serve him. When later, he was unexpectedly released from the army, he, like so many of his contemporaries, made his way to the desert to be trained by anchorites. After 7 years of training and prayer, having been joined by his younger brother, something happened that dramatically changed his life and that of countless others. He received a vision of God. In that vision God gave him a message that he found, at first, confusing. God told him to serve humanity. He protested that he had committed himself to serve God, not humanity. But God, for some odd reason, insisted. He gave him a *second* vision telling him to serve his fellow man. What was he to do? He concluded that God meant him and his brother to live, not alone, but with others. So together, they constructed a large enclosure and began to recruit members for a community which would have as one of its goals to serve the poor. His sister felt a similar call and founded a community for women. This is what they did: They built communities with various buildings designed each for specific purposes: There was a church, a common dining hall, there were storehouses, work places for cobblers, bakers, weavers, etc., there were buildings for door keepers—as the monasteries generally had walls--and there were cells: one for every two monks. The name they adopted, “**monks**” comes from the Greek, *monachos*, meaning “**solitary**”. But the genius of this organization was that these “solitaries” were able to advance in their sanctification and pursuit of God, *together*. Lifting each other up when they fell or became discouraged. Moreover they could give themselves to work and the development of skills, so that they were not idle. While they worked, while they kneaded bread or cobbled shoes, they sang psalms, recited passages of scripture, prayed aloud or in silence, meditated on a biblical text, and twice a day they said prayers in common. In the morning the entire community gathered to pray, sing psalms, and hear the reading of Scripture together. In the evening they had a similar service. Nor did they see fasting as an end in itself. At the table there was bread, fruit, vegetables, and fish, but never meat which was too expensive. What the monks produced was sold in nearby markets to buy food, and also, in order to have something to give the poor and any sojourners who came by whom they would welcome and house.

There were rules: Among others, every monk had to obey his superior. But insofar as each superior was also called to humility, even they were obliged to serve those below them, often in very menial tasks.

Pachomius established nine such monasteries in his lifetime. The Abbot ruled over all the monasteries. Twice a year, all the Pachomian monks would meet together from the various monasteries for worship and prayer. Pachomius established the rule that the monks would swear obedience to the successor whom the Abbot would name just before he died.

To enter the monastery, a suppliant would appear at the gate of the enclosure begging to be let in. They would be left there for several days and nights until such time as the gate keepers

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would be convinced that the request was sincere, and that the applicant had the resolve to keep the rules which they would subsequently be taught. Interestingly, these monasteries were held in such esteem by the surrounding populations, that pagans would often seek entry. They would begin by instruction in the basics of the Gospel and faith.

For some, entry into a monastery was actually a step up, given the extreme poverty of many Christian believers in Egypt, Syria and Palestine.

One other interesting insight: their rejection of pomp and of ordination created a problem for them. Ignatius, as we have seen in the first century already, had insisted that communion was only valid performed by an ordained pastor or one he designated. This was now true the Christian world over. So what did the monks do? They attended a local church on Saturday, and then on Sunday, they would receive communion from a visiting pastor.

This monastic, cenobite model spread through the Christian world like wildfire. Soon, as we shall see, it was being introduced by Martin of Tours in Gaul. Everywhere monks and monasticism were held in high regard. Thousands of young men and women left to join, so many that, by mid 4th century, when monks in Egypt decided to celebrate Founders Day and sent invitations to the members of their Pachomian order, 50,000 showed up.

III. THE DESERT FATHERS

So what was the wisdom of these men and women? In the late 4th and early 5th centuries, people traveled to hear the wisdom of these monks, and their sayings were collected and distributed in works called “The Sayings of the Desert Fathers.” We still have some of these writings. The most important collection of sayings comes to us from a man named **John Cassian** (ca. 360 – 435) who, along with a fellow monk named Germanus, traveled to visit various Abbots, or Fathers, to interview them in the early 5th century. Many of the sayings they collected, however, are from the 4th century. Here is a small sampling.

QUESTION: Please read what follows. What are your observations?

“Abba John the Short said: ‘If a king wants to take a city whose citizens are hostile, he first captures the food and water of the inhabitants of the city, and when they are starving subdues them. So it is with **gluttony**. If a man is earnest in fasting and hunger, the enemies which trouble his soul will grow weak.’” (The Sayings of the Fathers, Part IV, “of Self-Control” #19)

*“Another brother was goaded by lust. He rose up in the night and went to tell his temptations to an old man, and the old man, consoled him. So he returned, comforted to his cell. But again the spirit of **lust tempted him**. And a second time he went to the old man. This happened several times. The old man did not reproach him, but spoke words to his profit: ‘Yield not to the devil, and guard your soul. Whenever the demon troubles you, come to me, and rebuke him, and so he will go away. Nothing troubles the demon of lust more than disclosure of his pricks. Nothing pleases him more than the concealment of the temptation.’”*

“Eleven times the brother went to the old man, and blamed himself for his imaginings. And then the brother said to the old man: ‘Of thy charity, Abba, speak to me a word.’ the old man said to him: ‘Believe me, my son, if god allowed the imaginings which goad me to be passed to

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you, you would not bear them but would be utterly destroyed.' and so by his words and deep humility, that brother found rest from the goad of lust." (page 63, Western Asceticism, Owen Chadwick.)

"Abba Serapion said to Abba Moses: 'While I was still a lad, I was staying with Abba Theonas; and after each meal I was moved by some demon and **stole one of the rolls of bread**, and secret ate it, Theonas knowing nothing of the matter. For some time I went on with this, until the sin began to dominate my mind, and I could not stop myself. Only my conscience judged me, for I was ashamed to say anything to the old man. But by God's mercy it happened that some visitors came to the old an in search of profit to their soul, and they asked him about their own thoughts. The old man replied: 'Nothing harms the monk so much, and gives such happiness to the demons, as when he conceals his thoughts from his fathers in the spirit.' and he also talked to them about self-control. And while he was speaking, I thought to myself that god had revealed to him what I had done. Stricken in my heart, I began to weep: then I pulled the roll of bread out of my dress, threw myself on the floor, and begged forgiveness for what I had done, and for pry aer that I might be helped not to do it again. Then the old man said: 'My son, you are freed from your captivity though I have said nothing. You are freed by your own confession. The deomn which by your silence you let dwell in your heart, has been killed because you confessed your sin. You let him rule you because you never said him nay, never rebuked him. Henceforth he shall never make a home in you because you have thrown him out of doors into the open air.'" (Chadwick, Sayings, Part IV, "on Self-Control, #25).

*"An old man was asked how a watchful monk should not be **scandalized** when he sees others returning to the world. And he replied: 'A monk ought to look at hounds when they are hunting a hare. One of them glimpses the hare and gives chase: the others merely see a hound running, run some way with him, then they get tired and go back on their tracks. Only the leading hound keeps up the chase until he catches the hare. He is not deterred by the others who give up; he thinks nothing of cliffs or thickets or brambles; he is often pricked and scratched by thorns; yet he keeps on until he catches the hare. And so the man who searches for the lord Jesus, aims unceasingly at the cross, and leaps through every obstacle in his way until he comes to the Crucified.'" (Chadwick, Sayings, Part VII, "Of Patience", page 92).*

"Abba Evagrius said: '**A wandering mind** is strengthened by reading, and prayer. **Passion** is dampened down by hunger and work and solitude. **Anger** is repressed by psalmody, and long-suffering, and mercy. But all these should be at the proper times and in due measure. If they are used at the wrong times and to excess, they are useful for a short time. But what is only useful for a short time, is harmful in the long run.'" (Chadwick, Sayings, Part X, "On Discretion"#20, page 109).

*"Abba Joseph asked Abba Poemen: '**How should we fast?**' And Abba Poemen said: 'I would have everyone eat a little less than he wants, every day.' Abba Joseph said to him: 'When you were a young man, did you not fast for two days on end?' And the old man said to him: 'Believe me, I used to fast three days on end, even for a week. But the great elders have tested all these things, and they found that it is good to eat something every day, but on some days a little less. And they have shown us that this is the king's highway, for it is easy and light.'" (Chadwick, Sayings, Part X, "On Discretion" # 44 , page 115)*

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“Some brothers asked Abba Macaius: **'How should we pray?'** And the old man said: 'There is no need to talk much in prayer. Spread out your hands often, and say: 'Lord, have mercy upon me, as thou wilt and as thou knowest.' but if war presses into the soul, say: 'Lord, help me.' He knows what is best for us, and has mercy.” (Chadwick, Sayings, Part XII, “That we ought to pray earnestly and unceasingly”, #10, page 143).

*“One of the fathers said: 'No one can see his face reflected in muddy water: and the soul cannot **pray to God** with contemplation unless first cleansed of harmful thoughts.'”* (Chadwick, Sayings, Part XII “That we ought to pray earnestly and unceasingly”, #13, page 143).