



A SERMON by:

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## Why is this day different?

*Sermon preached at The Holy Eucharist at Mt. Alvernia Retreat Center, January 17, 2013  
The Winter Convocation of the Brotherhood of Saint Gregory  
The Feast of St. Antony of Egypt  
Based on Mark 10: 17-21*

*Mah nishtanah ha-lahylah ha-zeh mi-kol ha-layloht?  
She-b'khol ha-layloht anu okhlin chameytz u-matzah.  
Ha-lahylah ha-zeh, ha-lahylah ha-zeh, kooloh matzah.*

“Why is this night different from all other nights, from all other nights?  
On all other nights, we may eat chametz and matzah. On this night, only matzah.”

At the heart of the Passover Seder is a series of four questions which the youngest person present asks of the leader. The context of these questions is really quite fascinating. They provide an opportunity for those gathered to both explain why they are performing the ritual actions that will occur that night. But they also make a space in which it is possible to reflect on the meaning of the story that they are retelling. There is an unexpected twist, though, that takes the visitor to the meal by surprise—the leader goes on to explain that the celebration is not only about events that happened in a distant time and place to some long-departed ancestors. The meal at which the community is gathered actually connects those present to those distant events which are now being remembered and celebrated. The miracles of salvation history which God accomplished in that distant time to those people is made real, present, and effective in the here and now. It was not our ancestors who were freed from slavery in Egypt, but we ourselves who are liberated by God’s powerful and loving action.

The Feast of our Holy Father, Antony of Egypt, like the Passover Seder provides us with an opportunity to ask some very important, and perhaps challenging questions as well. And, I suspect that the stories which we choose to tell will enable us to engage in a kind of time-travel in which we also are able to reconnect not only with this fascinating and engaging character, but also with the God who was at the very center of his life. We might begin by asking a first question. What is the origin of the idea and the ideal of a religious life in the Christian experience? How did that come into being?

I doubt that we could say with any certainty that Antony was the first monk, the first Abbot, the first “desert-father,” or even the first person to choose to lead a religious life. But, thanks to Athanasius’ famous biography of him, Antony is the first about whom we really know very much. Even if we accept the fact that there was no video camera recording Antony’s actions and that Athanasius, engaged as he was in a life-and death struggle with his Arian rivals may have had ulterior motives in writing the biography, we can not help but be gripped by the compelling character to whom he introduces us! We quickly encounter someone who, although at first glance, appears to be quite different or odd or even shocking, when we actually get to know and to understand more about him, to be surprisingly normal and approachable.

Unlike some of the more daunting figures from the scriptures who engage in prophetic acts, or who wear strange clothes, or who eat unusual things, Antony comes across as quite normal to us. But we quickly discover, after only reading a few chapters of the biography the paradox that is so often present in those same passages from scripture, God seems to often choose people who on the outside appear to be quite unremarkable and even ordinary to work in their lives and through their actions quite extraordinary things!

At the very center of the reality of Antony of Egypt is a grace-filled moment in which he has an encounter that completely changed his life. Athanasius paints an interesting portrait of Antony before his conversion. He was a Christian child who was raised in a non-Christian

world at a time of transition. Even during Antony's life Christians were martyred for their faith in the very city in which he lived. But with the conversion of the Emperor and the legalization of his faith, that threat appeared to be eliminated. Some have speculated, of course, that it is only with the freedom that the Edict of Toleration provides that what took place in Antony's life became possible. But in any event, we see that Antony appeared to be a happy, normal, and average child. We aren't told about any miraculous events in his childhood or about anything that might have caused us to really find him remarkable in any way—he does not appear to be a precocious scholar or an athlete or the rock-star of his day. He comes from a devout and prosperous family. And he appears to be a well-loved child.

Life was precarious, though, and in an age in which diseases were rampant and treatments were few, Antony lost both of his parents in a tragic way. And all at once he found himself in a position of great responsibility with a large estate and with a younger Sister who was dependent on him. It must have caused him to ask some very important questions. As he struggled to understand what had happened and what it all meant, we see him turning to scripture—and in particular to the Acts of the Apostles, in an attempt to find answers to some of those questions. What did wealthy people do in the early Church when they became Christians? How did the Church attempt to provide for the needs of the poor, the ill, and the homeless? What did he need to do to be a faithful follower of Jesus in his own time and place and context?

In the midst of this introspection, Antony found himself at Church. When the Gospel of Mark was read that day, something amazing happened. Antony heard those words proclaimed that day, "Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, 'You lack one thing: go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, then come, follow me.'" All at once he knew that those words were not only directed to that rich young man some two centuries before him, Jesus was speaking those very words to him! And the amazing thing was that unlike that rich man who went away sadly (Matthew 19: 22), Antony left jubilantly and did what he had heard Jesus ask him to do! The power of that yes to God changed the entire orientation of his life and set him on a quest to find, discover and to give himself to God for the rest of his life.

Why did religious life begin with Antony, then, and how did that come about? One of the key ideas that is made clear in the *Life of Antony*, is that it is possible to be a good, faithful, and devoted Christian without going out into the desert to live a life of penitence and conversion. Certainly, it does not appear that the Lord told everyone—or even many of his followers to embrace a life of poverty. But the key to this mystery may be found in some translations of this passage from Mark, 'if you wish to be perfect.'" While one could spend an entire lifetime struggling to understand what it could mean to attempt to lead a perfect life, it does seem clear that Jesus is issuing a special invitation here. And the radical call by Jesus to abandon everything to become a disciple (one thinks for instance of those other disciples of Jesus who said yes, like Peter, James and John to give a few examples) seems to have only been given to a small chosen group. So, the expectation seems to be that one could remain a husband and baker or farmer or even a soldier and still be a faithful follower of Jesus. For Antony, and for those who followed after him, though, there is a new paradigm. In the call of Jesus to "be perfect" they literally hear a vocation. They are called to place the Lord at the very center of their lives and to rearrange everything else to fit into that new model.

The rest of the story of Antony is really an attempt to put that into practice. In the ensuing years of his quest for God, he discovers and utilizes all sorts of tools and helps to help him make progress on his journey. He turns to those other wise elders who have attempted the same sort of a vocation. He listens to their counsel, asks them for advice about his own struggles and then does what they suggest. He becomes so familiar with Scripture through his recitation of the Psalms and through his memorization of the Gospels that he becomes a walking Bible. He works and gives alms to the poor and needy. And then he goes even deeper into the desert and spends twenty years in solitude. In that time we are told that he wrestles with demons! For a modern reader, that can be a difficult thing to hear. Whether one literally believes that demons exist, or prefers Freudian or Jungian frames of reference for an internal struggle to overcome brokenness and to regain wholeness and integration, it is clear that something significant happened in Antony's life in those years of solitude and quiet.

While re-reading the *Life of Antony* (*Athanasius: The Life of Antony of Egypt* by Albert Haase, O.F.M, IVP Books, Downers Grove, IL, 2012) in preparation for this day, I was quite taken by the way in which Shane Claiborne, who wrote the introduction, commented on these

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passages, “The devil doesn’t always come with a pitchfork; sometimes he comes with a briefcase and Limo. But we must all wrestle demons and powers today as the desert saints did. We must reimagine the world as the desert saints did. We must reject the patterns of the world that teach us lies like violence can bring peace or happiness can be purchased. We must say yes to Jesus and no to all the things that try to get us to settle for something short of God’s dream for the world . . . Antony’s life is an invitation not to settle for the world as it is but to learn of the world as it could be.”

Then, in the last years of his life, Antony emerged from the cauldron of solitude to live a life in common with the disciples who came knocking at the door of his hut, an even with the visitors who came from the big city to view the spectacle of the unfolding of the religious life. In this context he now took the role of that wise elder who mentored and guided the young neophytes as they began their own journey in the quest for God.

Athanasius’ biography of Antony, written during his third exile, became the best seller of his day. Everyone seemed to be reading it, and when it was translated into Latin, it even made its way to the West. As a result, it seemed at times that the cities were emptying and the deserted places filling as Christians filled with zeal tried their vocations in the new monasteries and collectives that began to emerge. Albert Haase, the translator of the fascinating edition of Athanasius’ work phrased it in this compelling way, “Antony was the real deal, and as far as I’m concerned, just remembering how he responded to God’s grace and what happened as a result gives me goose bumps, because the same thing could happen to you and me. So rather than just sit on the sidelines and applaud his success, let’s try to walk in his shoes.”

The last question which we may wish to consider is how do we as Twenty-First Century spiritual descendants of Antony connect to his own charism? What does all of this mean for us? Is God asking us to clear out our apartments and homes, have a yard sale and give the proceeds to the local homeless shelter, and head for the wilderness? In some cases the answer might be yes! But in most cases, I think not. But all of us who have said yes to Jesus through our vows as Gregorian Friars, and our Brothers who have committed themselves to joining us as Postulants and Novices can learn from the life and devotion of Antony. We see so many of those same tools in our own daily lives by

- ❖ Praying the daily office
- ❖ Participating in the weekly Eucharist
- ❖ a time of daily Examination and Reflection
- ❖ the contribution of our finances, gifts and talents to the community and to the Church through the Tithe
- ❖ and Ministries of Service in our communities, in our parishes and to the Church at large

If our primary formation has been completed and we no longer have a mentor to assist us, there are others to serve as Spiritual Guides and Directors—both within and outside the confines of the Brotherhood.

Like Antony we are called to say yes to God—both as individuals and as a community. And, like Antony, may we have the grace to find the loving, nurturing, and transforming reality of God’s love active and present in our lives!

On this different day let us celebrate the gift of Antony of Egypt. And, as we receive the Bread of Life and the Cup of Salvation, may we always have the grace to say Yes to God.

“Holy Antony, our Father among the saints, pray for us that our lives may be of service to the People of God.” On this Feast of Saint Antony of Egypt, to God alone be the glory. *Soli Deo Gloria!*