

St. Anthony (Father of all Monks)

Objectives

To learn from the example of St. Anthony, honor and blessings of the monks

References

- ❖ Coptic Monasticism by Fr. Daniel El Antouny
- ❖ El Anba Antonius by St Athanasius the Apostolic.
- ❖ Synexerium of the 22nd of Toubah

Scriptural Verse

“Blessed is the man who walks not in the council of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night” (Psalm 1: 1, 2)

Lesson Outline

Life of St Anthony

St. Anthony was born in the year 251A.D in the city of Qimn El-Arous, Egypt to rich parents who loved the church and the poor. They raised him up in the fear of the Lord. When he was twenty years old, his parents departed, and he had to take care of his sister. Once he entered the church, and he heard the words of the Lord Jesus Christ in the gospel, saying, “If you want to be perfect, go sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasures in heaven; and come follow Me” (Matthew 19:21), he returned to his house, decided to fulfill this commandment and considered it directed to him personally. He gave his wealth to the poor and needy, and he took his sister and placed her with some virgins. At that time, monasticism had not yet been established. All those who wanted to live a solitary life went and lived on the outskirts of the city. This was what St. Anthony did as he dwelt alone, worshipping and living an ascetic life.

The devil fought him there by afflicting him with boredom, laziness, and the phantoms of women. He overcame the devil’s snares by the power of Jesus Christ, and he used to say to them “If any of you have the authority over me, only one would have been sufficient to fight me.” By saying this they used to disappear as though as smoke. He was always singing this psalm, “Let God arise, let His enemies be scattered; let those also who hate Him flee before Him”.

Divine Guidance

During the time of persecution, St. Anthony longed to be a martyr. But God preserved him according to His will, for the benefit of many. As a result, he traveled to the inner wilderness of the eastern desert that took him three days to get to the spot where he found a well and some palm trees. One time, St. Anthony was bored, and he heard a voice telling him, “Go out and see.” He went out and saw an angel who wore a tunic with a cross, one resembling the tunic of monks (El-Eskiem), and on his head was a head cover (Kolonsowa). He was sitting while braiding palm leaves, then he stood up to pray, and again he sat to weave again. A voice came to him saying, “Anthony, do this and you will have rest.” Henceforth, he started to wear this tunic that he saw, and began to weave palm leaves, and never got bored again.

Establishing Monasticism

St. Anthony established the first discipline of monasticism that is the monastic groups based on the gathering of monks around one of the spiritual fathers where every monk lives the solitary life in a separate cell and all monks meet together on every Saturday night for prayers, guidance, confession and partaking of the holy communion on Sunday; then each monk goes back to his cell.

St. Anthony didn't set ascetic rules for the ascetics and only requested them to live the life of asceticism, fasting, praying and doing manual work guided by the life of the Lord, the Apostles and inspired by the angel who appeared to him.

The monastery of St. Anthony is still in the eastern desert where St. Anthony travelled with some Bedouins to the inner wilderness for three days until he found a spring of water and some palm trees and then he chose to settle there.

St. Anthony clothed St. Macarius, who came to visit him, with the monk's garb and foretold him what would be of him. (St. Macarius founded monasticism in the western desert, Wadi El Natroun, following the same regime of Monasticism founded by St. Anthony.)

St. Anthony and St. Paul

One day, the Lord revealed to Abba Anthony that, "within the wilderness lives a man whom the whole world is not worthy of his footsteps and by his prayers, God brings rain and dew to fall on the earth, and bring the flood of the Nile in its due season." Immediately Abba Anthony took his rod and began searching for this saintly ascetic. He walked for an entire day then fell on his knees to pray and remained praying throughout the night, and in the morning he got up and continued his journey. As the sun was setting, an angel directed him to a cave nearby and he knocked the door. Abba Paula opened for him and the two fathers embraced, then prayed together. As they spoke about the many wonders of God, a raven flew by and dropped a loaf of bread before them. Abba Paula held the loaf of bread reverently, and turned to Abba Anthony saying, "Blessed is the Lord my God; for seventy years He has provided for me half a loaf of bread daily, but today because of your presence, He has given us a full loaf" then he said: "Anthony, return now to your cave and come back to me with the gown Pope Athanasius will give you, for with it you must wrap my body for burial; so go quickly, for the hour of my departure has come!" Abba Paula blessed and prayed for Abba Anthony, and then they embraced each other before departing.

Abba Anthony took the gown given to him by Pope Athanasius (was a gift from Emperor Constantine), and returned to the saintly father's cave. On arrival he saw a host of angels carrying the soul of the blessed saint Abba Paula. Abba Anthony entered his cave and found the saint lying on the ground with his hands outstretched like a cross. He wept bitterly. He then carefully wrapped the pure saint's body within the gown, and prayed over him with heartfelt tears. As he was wondering how he was going to dig a grave for the saint's blessed body, two lions entered the cave, knelt down beside Abba Paula's body and looked to Abba Anthony who marked for them the digging place, and immediately the lions began digging. After Abba Anthony placed Abba Paula's body within the grave, he took his garment made from weaved palm, and went back to the Patriarch Abba Athanasius and told him all that he had seen and experienced of the

life of the great Abba Paula. The Patriarch took Abba Paula's garment as a blessing and only wore it three times a year: on the feasts of Epiphany, Easter and the Ascension of our gracious Savior.

Abba Anthony and Abba Paula are inseparable friends. They are found standing together in icons, mentioned together in Doxologies, and in the Liturgy's commemoration.

Struggling till the end

St Anthony went to Alexandria once to strengthen the martyrs during persecution seeking to be a martyr himself and another time to preach against Arius.

When St. Anthony felt that the day of his departure had approached, he commanded his disciple to hide his body and to give his staff to St. Macarius, and to give the sheepskin cloak to St. Athanasius. St. Anthony lived for one hundred and five years, struggling in the way of holiness and purity.

The influence of St. Anthony's life written by St. Athanasius, extended to all states of the Old World outside Egypt. His life was the main reason of conversion of St. Augustine from a life of sin to a life of holiness and piety. The church celebrates the departure of St. Anthony each year on the 22nd day of the blessed Coptic month of Tubah.

May his prayers be with us all. Amen.

Conclusion

Monasticism is a continuation for the martyrdom era as Christians offers their pure lives as sacrifices of love for their Savior.

Activities/ Discussion Points

1. Make comparison between St. Anthony's response to the word of God heard from a deacon and the rich man response to the same words heard directly from the mouth of the Lord (Mark 10: 21, 22).
2. Is the life of virginity blessed more than Marriage although marriage is a great sacrament in our church?
3. Why is the life of virginity so blessed?