

How Solitude Builds Community

An ancient monk's surprising role in bringing justice and healing to his neighbors.

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As a history professor, I have asked my students, "What is monasticism?" and I often get suspicious, negative answers: "Monks withdrawing from the world."

"Unhealthy isolation and no evangelism." "Men and women who won't engage with the surrounding culture."

"Those who think the body and material world are evil."

"Those too busy in self-centered devotions to care for others."

"My students think they know what motivated the early monks: obsessed with their own salvation and afraid of their own sexuality, they retreated to the desert to fight "demons," which were actually vivid manifestations of their own libidinal right?"

Interestingly, the early monks did fear the temptations of demons, but what sorts of temptations did those demons actually present to their would-be victims? Sure, fornication was among them. But what did fornication actually mean?

For at least one of the original monks, Antony of Egypt (A.D. 251-356), **fornication stood for anything that dragged the heart away from God—any flirtation with an idolatrous replacement for the Lord. Fornication could mean sex and sensuality, but it could also mean forsaking vows, going home, and being caught up in the commerce and competition of life in the Nile Valley.** In ancient dream theory, if a man dreams of a woman, he is dreaming of his business—how he supports the woman. That was the deepest fear of the monk: not that he would merely indulge himself sexually, but that the entire direction of his life and affections would shift from following God to the distracting entanglements of "life in the city."

Buying into the disciplined life

Antony's story is helpful. The son of a prosperous farmer, Antony launched into his life of spirituality as a young man who had recently lost his father. He took to heart the words he heard at church one day: "Sell all you have, give to the poor and come, follow me." So he sold his birthright—200 acres of lush, fertile Nile valley land. Then he began to live as a solitary, at first just at the edge of his small town. He apprenticed himself to a local holy man, absorbing from his elder everything he could learn about the ascetic life.

Solitude is not removing yourself from service to others; it is the essential preparation for service. That preparation remains necessary today.

Asceticism—askesis in Greek—meant "**training.**" Before the Christian monks picked up the term, it referred to the cultivation of soul and body (stripping down and doing leg-lifts while reciting poetry) the Greeks had always been so keen to practice in their gymnasiums. Certainly, as anyone who has done physical training today knows, there were certain disciplines involved in this "training." But as the Christian monks began to practice it, askesis never entailed merely giving up things like food or sex. Rather, it was a mode of exercising the heart and building up oneself in godliness.

Ironically, Antony's pursuit of solitude made him that much more valuable to the community. He was recognized as possessing a spiritual power that was a valuable resource for the community at large.

This seems to be a paradox: the root of the term "**monastic**" is **monos**, meaning "**sole.**" The monastic life was a solitary life, in which the monk is dependent on God alone. Those who lived that life had decided, when they left their towns in heavily communal, interdependent Egypt and went out to the desert, that they wouldn't depend on the ancient network of mutual support.

But by the time of his death, Antony had been visited by thousands of people who trekked deep into the desert just to see "the man of God." Hundreds stayed to imitate his way of life, so that, in Athanasius's words, "the desert was made a city." Community leaders called Antony repeatedly back to civilization from his "inner mountain" to act as judge in difficult legal cases. Emperor Constantine and his two sons Constantius and Constans wrote to him seeking advice. Athanasius said of this solitary hermit: "It was as if he were a physician given to Egypt by God."

More tempting than sex

For Antony and other early monks, sex represented social entanglement. But engagement with the world could take on more sinister aspects. For Antony and the other desert fathers, sexual sin was the tip of the temptation iceberg. What worried them even more deeply was another sort of emotional and social snare: **anger**.

In fact, the ancient world saw anger as a severe social threat. Many passages of ancient writing deal with this subject. The Egyptian Nile villages, deeply interdependent and precariously dependent on the periodic flooding of the Nile, dwelt also under a flood of litigation. Plausibly, one motive of those who retreated to the desert was simply to "get away from all this nastiness." And since anger lives not outside but inside us, they found themselves continuing to struggle even as they disciplined themselves toward holiness.

Though anger seems to have been Antony's greatest concern, he linked it to other potential transgressions of community. Nightly, Antony had said, each one should **"recount to himself his actions of the day and night, and if he sinned, let him stop. But if he has not sinned, let him avoid boasting; rather, let him persist in the good, and not become careless, nor condemnatory of a neighbor For frequently we are unaware of the things we do Therefore, yielding the judgment to [the Lord], let us treat each other with compassion, and let us bear one another's burdens."**

Antony's relational language is clearly aimed at those living in communal interdependence, but the fight against anger is universal.

Even the secular Greeks recognized these holy men's wisdom in the area of social harmony. As an old man, Antony was called down from the inner mountain for "judge duty." Athanasius records the event: "He was disconsolate at being annoyed by so many visitors ... For even all the judges requested that he descend from the mountain, for it was impossible for them to come there because of the litigants who followed them." At first, Antony turned down the judges, but "they persisted and even sent those who were in soldiers' custody, so that he might be moved to come down for their sake."

Antony was indeed moved, and he set out to serve as requested. Reports Athanasius: "His arrival worked to the advantage and benefaction of many. He aided the judges, advising them to value justice over everything else, and to fear God, and to realize that by the judgment with which they judged, they themselves would be judged."

In other words, by moving outside of society in order to meet God and practice holiness, Antony had attained to such sanctity that his presence in the midst of society's nexus of anger—the courtroom—sanctified and corrected the broken relationships whose jagged edges cut each of the litigants there. His solitude equipped him to serve his community in a powerful way.

Disengaged from society? Hardly. Rather, from Antony's time onward, monks were offered bishoprics, maintained pilgrimage sites, anchored councils, and wrote and preached to audiences far beyond their cloisters.

Antony himself wrote to emperors, imploring them to be "men of concern, and to give attention to justice and to the poor." What monks learned in the desert, as Rowan Williams says, is **"not some individual technique for communing with the divine but the business of becoming a means of reconciliation and healing for the neighbor."**

By the high middle ages, Western society comprised three essential groups: those who worked (the peasants, craftsmen, and merchants), those who fought (the knights and nobles), and those who prayed (the ministers, monks, and nuns). And even in the painful periods of monastic decadence, people believed that "those who prayed" served society in essential ways.

In the desert monks learned, in other words, **"not to escape neighbors but to grasp more fully what the neighbor is—the way to life for you, to the degree that you put yourself at their disposal in connecting them with God."**

Solitude is not a removal from service to others but it is the essential preparation for service. And that preparation remains necessary today for those who would serve their neighbors wisely and well.

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