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The Call of St. Anthony of the Desert

by: [St. Athanasius](#)
Bishop and [Early Church Father](#)



This is an excerpt of the famous life of St. Anthony written by St. Athanasius, patriarch of Alexandria and one of the foremost Fathers of the Church. Born in Egypt in 251AD, St Anthony is the originator of the monastic life. When his parents died, he listened to the words of the Gospel and gave all his belongings to the poor. He went out into the wilderness to begin a life of penitence, living in absolute poverty, praying, meditating, and supporting himself by manual work. He suffered many temptations, both physical and spiritual, but he overcame them. Disciples gathered round him, attracted by his wisdom, moderation, and holiness. He gave support to the victims of the persecutions of Diocletian and later helped St Athanasius in his fight against the Arians. He lived to be over a hundred years old, and died in 356. His feast day is on January 17.

When Anthony was about eighteen or twenty years old, his parents died, leaving him with an only sister. He cared for her as she was very young, and also looked after their home.

Not six months after his parents' death, as he was on his way to church for his usual visit, he began to think of how the apostles had left everything and followed the Savior, and also of those mentioned in the book of Acts who had sold their possessions and brought the apostles the money for distribution to the needy. He reflected too on the great hope stored up in heaven for such as these. This was all in his mind when, entering the church just as the Gospel was being read, he heard the Lord's words to the rich man: If you want to be perfect, go and sell all you have and give the money to the poor - you will have riches in heaven. Then come and follow me.

It seemed to Anthony that it was God who had brought the saints to his mind and

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that the words of the Gospel had been spoken directly to him. Immediately he left the church and gave away to the villagers all the property he had inherited, about 200 acres of very beautiful and fertile land, so that it would cause no distraction to his sister and himself. He sold all his other possessions as well, giving to the poor the considerable sum of money he collected. However, to care for his sister he retained a few things.

The next time he went to church he heard the Lord say in the Gospel: "Do not be anxious about tomorrow." Without a moment's hesitation he went out and gave the poor all that he had left. He placed his sister in the care of some well-known and trustworthy virgins and arranged for her to be brought up in the convent. Then he gave himself up to the ascetic life, not far from his own home. He kept a careful watch over himself and practised great austerity. He did manual work because he had heard the words: If anyone will not work, do not let him eat. He spent some of his earnings on bread and the rest he gave to the poor.

Having learned that we should always be praying, even when we are by ourselves, he prayed without ceasing. Indeed, he was so attentive when Scripture was read that nothing escaped him and because he retained all he heard, his memory served him in place of books.

Seeing the kind of life he lived, the villagers and all the good men he knew called him the friend of God, and they loved him as both son and brother.

This excerpt from the Life of St. Anthony by St. Athanasius is used in the Roman Office of Readings for January 17, the liturgical memorial of St. Anthony of the Desert.

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