

## The Desert Fathers

According to Wikipedia, and who am I to argue with them, “The **Desert Fathers** or **Desert Monks** were early Christian hermits and ascetics, who lived primarily in the Scetes desert of the Roman province of Egypt, beginning around the third century AD.

The *Apophthegmata Patrum* is a collection of the wisdom of some of the early desert monks and nuns, in print as *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. The first Desert Father was Paul of Thebes, and the most well known was Anthony the Great, who moved to the desert in AD 270–271 and became known as both the father and founder of desert monasticism. By the time Anthony had died in AD 356, thousands of monks and nuns had been drawn to living in the desert following Anthony's example, leading his biographer, Athanasius of Alexandria, to write that "the desert had become a city." The Desert Fathers had a major influence on the development of Christianity.

The desert monastic communities that grew out of the informal gathering of hermit monks became the model for Christian monasticism. The eastern monastic tradition at Mount Athos and the western Rule of St Benedict both were strongly influenced by the traditions that began in the desert. All of the monastic revivals of the Middle Ages looked to the desert for inspiration and guidance. Much of Eastern Christianity spirituality ..., had its roots in the practices of the Desert Fathers. Even religious renewals such as the German evangelicals and Pietists in Pennsylvania, the Devotio Divina movement, and the Methodist Revival in England are seen by modern scholars as being influenced by the Desert Fathers.”

Over the next few weeks I will be sharing with you short extracts from the Sayings of these early Fathers and Mothers, which are often humorous, occasionally enigmatic, and worth thinking about. Today, something from Abba Anthony.

*A brother renounced the world and gave his goods to the poor, but he kept back a little for his personal expenses. He went to see Abba Anthony. When he told him this, the old man said to him, 'If you want to be a monk, go into the village, buy some meat, cover your naked body with it and come here like that.' The brother did so, and the dogs and birds tore at his flesh. When he came back the old man asked him whether he had followed his advice. He showed him his wounded body, and Saint Anthony said, 'Those who renounce the world but want to keep something for themselves are torn in this way by the demons who make war on them.'*

## **SAINTS:**

**Augustine of Hippo, *Teacher of the Faith*. 28 August.** Augustine was born in North Africa in 354. His career as an orator and rhetorician led him from Carthage to Rome, and from there to Milan where the Imperial court at that time resided. By temperament, he was passionate and sensual, and as a young man he rejected Christianity. Gradually, however, under the influence first of Monica, his mother, and then of Ambrose, bishop of Milan, Augustine began to look afresh at the Scriptures. He was baptised by Ambrose at the Easter Vigil in 387. Not long after returning to North Africa he was ordained priest, and then became Bishop of Hippo. It is difficult to overestimate the influence of Augustine on the subsequent development of European thought. A huge body of his sermons and writings has been preserved, through all of which runs the theme of the sovereignty of the grace of God. He died in the year 430.

**Gregory the Great, *Teacher of the Faith*. 3 September.** Gregory was born in 540, the son of a Roman senator. As a young man he pursued a governmental career, and in 573 was made Prefect of the city of Rome. Following the death of his father, he resigned his office, sold his inheritance, and became a monk. In 579 he was sent by the Pope to Constantinople to be his representative to the Patriarch. He returned to Rome in 586, and was himself elected Pope in 590. At a time of political turmoil, Gregory proved an astute administrator and diplomat, securing peace with the Lombards. He initiated the mission to England, sending Augustine and forty monks from his own monastery to refound the English Church. His writings were pastorally oriented. His spirituality was animated by a dynamic of love and desire for God. Indeed, he is sometimes called the 'Doctor of desire'. For Gregory, desire was a metaphor for the journey into God. As Pope, he styled himself 'Servant of the servants of God' -- a title which typified both his personality and ministry. He died in 604.