

Eastern Monasticism Second Week in Ordinary Time Wednesday, January 17, 2018
8:15 AM 1 Sm 17:32-33, 37, 40-51; Mk 3:1-6 **St. Anthony, Abbot** (So we have this religious element within our faith tradition that may be good in some way, but is not actually the result of Jesus' own preaching or the work of his early apostles like St. Paul.)

Today we are celebrating the memorial of **St. Anthony of Egypt**. Believe it or not he is **one of the most significant saints in the history of the Church**, even though you probably don't know much about him. Anthony was an heir to a rather sizable fortune for that time. He inherited several hundred acres of very fertile land. He was well off. He had a sister. But he was also a very devout man and he thought about the gospel story about the rich young man who went to Jesus and said, **"What must I do to inherit everlasting life?"** And Jesus said eventually, **"Go sell what you have and give to the poor and come follow me."** And he was thinking about this as he was going to church. And low and behold as he entered into church—he was late that day—the **gospel was being proclaimed, and it was that very gospel.**

Now this is called **an experience of synchronicity when two things happen simultaneously and it can have a very powerful effect on someone.** Now some very well-meaning and pious Christians have told me there is no such thing as a coincidence. Oh, yes, there are coincidences. **In a world where God has granted free will, there are coincidences.** Everything cannot be divine providence. **If everything were divine providence there would be no free will.** And yet there is divine providence, and sometimes **divine providence working through free will and the grace that God gives to the will to move it toward the good, sometimes the results are astonishing in their coincidence, in their coinciding at a particular moment.** And this is what happened to Anthony. He was blown away. And so **he sold his farm and gave away his furniture and property and things. And after taking care of his sister putting her in the care of some noble virgins of the area, he became a hermit.**

Now this is where he became very important because, especially in the East, especially in **Eastern Christianity, Christianity took on this sort of hermit like monastic kind of reclusive characteristic.** I don't know how the gospels of Jesus Christ motivated that. I don't see it, but they did. And if you look at the whole world over a long period of time, you see that religious people often do this. They withdraw from the world. **They build monasteries or abbeys to get away from a world they don't believe is really compatible with their religious beliefs and**

practices. As I said, this is particularly true of Eastern Christianity, which is almost totally monastic in its nature and characteristic, in fact so much so that when the czar of Russia, Peter the Great, built this magnificent palace in St. Petersburg, he named it of all things *The Hermitage*. Well, it is not a hermitage. But the whole idea that **that's an ideal is something that just is within the entire Eastern Christian culture.**

But even **in the West we have St. Benedict**, although Benedict of course was facing a very different sort of world, a world where there was really no order. Out there in society it was a brutal, barbarian world. And so he built a network, at least he began **a network, of monasteries to keep, you might say, civilization alive within the walls, because outside the walls it could not be.** That's not quite the same motivation for Anthony. But this has been part of our tradition in history.

And as I have mentioned already, it is not exactly the result of the gospel. **It may be consistent with traditional religious behavior, but it isn't the thrust of the gospel of Jesus Christ or the epistles of St. Paul.** They are outward looking. They are moving into the world. **Jesus sent his disciples into the world to act as leaven.** That isn't actually what Anthony ended up doing. And I'm not criticizing him in any way. I'm just saying that isn't actually the gospel message. So we have this religious element within our faith tradition that may be good in some way, but is not actually the result of Jesus' own preaching or the work of his early apostles like St. Paul. **We need to always balance everything, always keeping the good and letting go of the not so good.**