

JANUARY XVII.

SAINT ANTONY, ABBOT,

PATRIARCH OF MONKS.

[From his life, compiled by the great St. Athanasius, vol. ii. p. 478, a work much commended by St. Gregory Nazianzen, St. Jerom, St. Austin, Rufinus, Palladius, &c. St. Chrysostom recommends to all persons the reading of this pious history, as full of instruction and edification. Hom. viii. in Matt. t. vii. p. 128. It contributed to the conversion of St. Austin. Confess. lib. viii. c. 6 and 28. See Tillemont, t. vii.; Helyot, t. i.; Stevens, Addit. t. i.; Ceillier, &c.]

A.D. 356.

ST. ANTONY was born at Coma, a village near Heraclea, or Great Heracleopolis, in Upper Egypt, on the borders of Arcadia, or middle Egypt, in 251. His parents, who were Christians, and rich, to prevent his being tainted by bad example and vicious conversation, kept him always at home; so that he grew up unacquainted with any branch of human literature, and could read no language but his own. He was remarkable from his childhood for his temperance, a close attendance on church duties, and a punctual obedience to his parents. By their death he found himself possessed of a very considerable estate, and charged with the care of a younger sister, before he was twenty years of age. Near six months after, he heard read in the church those words of Christ to the rich young man: "Go sell what thou hast, and give it to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven." He considered these words as addressed to himself; going home, he made over to his neighbours three hundred *aruras*, that is, above one hundred and twenty acres of good land, that he and his sister might be free for

(1) Matt. xix. 21.

ever from all public taxes and burdens. The rest of his estate he sold, and gave the price to the poor, except what he thought necessary for himself and his sister. Soon after, hearing in the church those other words of Christ, "Be not solicitous for tomorrow,"¹ he also distributed in alms the movables which he had reserved; and placed his sister in a house of virgins, which most moderns take to be the first instance mentioned in history of a nunnery. She was afterward intrusted with the care and direction of others in that holy way of life. Antony himself retired into a solitude, near his village, in imitation of a certain old man, who led the life of a hermit in the neighbourhood of Coma. Manual labour, prayer, and pious reading were his whole occupation; and such was his fervour, that if he heard of any virtuous recluse, he sought him out, and endeavoured to make the best advantage of his example and instructions. He saw nothing practised by any other in the service of God, which he did not imitate; thus he soon became a perfect model of humility, christian condescension, charity, prayer, and all virtues.

The devil assailed him by various temptations; first, he represented to him divers good works he might have been able to do with his estate in the world, and the difficulties of his present condition,—a common artifice of the enemy, whereby he strives to make a soul slothful or dissatisfied in her vocation, in which God expects to be glorified by her. Being discovered and repulsed by the young novice, he varied his method of attack, and annoyed him night and day with filthy thoughts and obscene imaginations. Antony opposed to his assaults the strictest watchfulness over his senses, austere fasts, humility, and prayer, till Satan, appearing in a visible form, first of a woman coming to seduce him, then of a black boy to terrify him, at length confessed himself vanquished. The saint's food was only

(1) Matt. vi. 34.

bread, with a little salt, and he drank nothing but water; he never eat before sunset, and sometimes only once in two, or four days: he lay on a rush mat, or on the bare floor. In quest of a more remote solitude he withdrew further from Coma, and hid himself in an old sepulchre; whither a friend brought him from time to time a little bread. Satan was here again permitted to assault him in a visible manner, to terrify him with dismal noises; and once he so grievously beat him, that he lay almost dead, covered with bruises and wounds; and in this condition he was one day found by his friend, who visited him from time to time to supply him with bread, during all the time he lived in the ruinous sepulchre. When he began to come to himself, though not yet able to stand, he cried out to the devils, whilst he yet lay on the floor, "Behold! here I am; do all you are able against me: nothing shall ever separate me from Christ my Lord." Hereupon the fiends appearing again, renewed the attack, and alarmed him with terrible clamours, and a variety of spectres, in hideous shapes of the most frightful wild beasts, which they assumed to dismay and terrify him; till a ray of heavenly light breaking in upon him chased them away, and caused him to cry out, "Where wast thou, my Lord and my Master? Why wast thou not here, from the beginning of my conflict, to assuage my pains!" A voice answered: "Antony, I was here the whole time; I stood by thee, and beheld thy combat: and because thou hast manfully withstood thy enemies, I will always protect thee, and will render thy name famous throughout the earth." At these words the saint arose, much cheered and strengthened, to pray and return thanks to his deliverer. Hitherto the saint, ever since his retreat, in 272, had lived in solitary places, not very far from his village; and St. Athanasius observes, that before him many fervent persons led retired lives in penance and contemplation, near the towns; others

remaining in the towns imitated the same manner of life. Both were called ascetics, from their being entirely devoted to the most perfect exercises of mortification and prayer, according to the import of the Greek word. Before St. Athanasius, we find frequent mention made of such ascetics: and Origen, about the year 249,¹ says, they always abstained from flesh, no less than the disciples of Pythagoras. Eusebius tells us, that St. Peter of Alexandria practised austerities equal to those of the ascetics; he says the same of Pamphilus; and St. Jerom uses the same expression of Pierius. St. Antony had led this manner of life near Coma, till resolving to withdraw into the deserts about the year 285, the thirty-fifth of his age, he crossed the eastern branch of the Nile, and took up his abode in the ruins of an old castle on the top of the mountains; in which close solitude he lived almost twenty years, very rarely seeing any man, except one who brought him bread every six months.

To satisfy the importunities of others, about the year 305, the fifty-fifth of his age, he came down from his mountain, and founded his first monastery at Phaium. The dissipation occasioned by this undertaking led him into a temptation of despair, which he overcame by prayer and hard manual labour. In this new manner of life his daily refection was six ounces of bread soaked in water, with a little salt; to which he sometimes added a few dates. He took it generally after sunset, but on some days at three o'clock; and in his old age he added a little oil. Sometimes he eat only once in three or four days, yet appeared vigorous, and always cheerful: strangers knew him from among his disciples by the joy which was always painted on his countenance, resulting from the inward peace and composure of his soul. Retirement in his cell was his delight, and divine contemplation and prayer his perpetual occupation. Coming to take his

refection, he often burst into tears, and was obliged to leave his brethren and the table without touching any nourishment, reflecting on the employment of the blessed spirits in heaven, who praise God without ceasing.¹ He exhorted his brethren to allot the least time they possibly could to the care of the body. Notwithstanding which, he was very careful never to place perfection in mortification, as Cassian observes, but in charity, in which it was his whole study continually to improve his soul. His under garment was sackcloth, over which he wore a white coat of sheepskin with a girdle. He instructed his monks to have eternity always present to their minds, and to reflect every morning that perhaps they might not live till night, and every evening that perhaps they might never see the morning; and to perform every action as if it were the last of their lives, with all the fervour of their souls to please God. He often exhorted them to watch against temptations, and to resist the devil with vigour: and spoke admirably of his weakness, saying, "He dreads fasting, prayer, humility, and good works: he is not able even to stop my mouth who speak against him. The illusions of the devil soon vanish, especially if a man arms himself with the sign of the cross."² The devils tremble at the sign of the cross of our Lord, by which he triumphed over and disarmed them."³ He told them in what manner the fiend in his rage had assaulted him by visible phantoms, but that these disappeared whilst he persevered in prayer. He told them, that once when the devil appeared to him in glory, and said, "Ask what you please; I am the power of God:" he invoked the holy name of Jesus, and he vanished. Maximinus renewed the persecution in 311; St. Antony, hoping to receive the crown of martyrdom, went to Alexandria, served and encouraged the martyrs in the mines and dungeons, before the tribunals,

(1) St. Athan. Vit. Anton. n. 45, p. 830.

(2) P. 814.

(3) P. 823, ed. Ben.

(1) Orig. lib. v. p. 264.

and at the places of execution. He publicly wore his white monastic habit, and appeared in the sight of the governor; yet took care never presumptuously to provoke the judges, or impeach himself, as some rashly did. In 312, the persecution being abated, he returned to his monastery, and immured himself in his cell. Some time after he built another monastery called Pispir, near the Nile; but he chose, for the most part, to shut himself up in a remote cell upon a mountain of difficult access, with Macarius, a disciple, who entertained strangers. If he found them to be *Hierosolymites*, or spiritual men, St. Antony himself sat with them in discourse; if Egyptians (by which name they meant worldly persons), then Macarius entertained them, and St. Antony only appeared to give them a short exhortation. Once the saint saw in a vision the whole earth covered so thick with snares, that it seemed scarce possible to set down a foot without falling into them. At this sight he cried out, trembling, "Who, O Lord, can escape them all?" A voice answered him: "Humility, O Antony!"¹ St. Antony always looked upon himself as the least and the very outcast of mankind; he listened to the advice of every one, and professed that he received benefit from that of the meanest person. He cultivated and pruned a little garden on his desert mountain, that he might have herbs always at hand, to present a refreshment to those who, on coming to see him, were always weary by travelling over a vast wilderness and inhospitable mountain, as St. Athanasius mentions. This tillage was not the only manual labour in which St. Antony employed himself. The same venerable author speaks of his making mats as an ordinary occupation. We are told that he once fell into dejection, finding uninterrupted contemplation above his strength; but was taught to apply himself at intervals to manual labour, by a vision of an angel who ap-

peared plating mats of palm-tree leaves, then rising to pray, and after some time sitting down again to work; and who at length said to him, "Do thus, and thou shalt be saved."¹ But St. Athanasius informs us, that our saint continued in some degree to pray whilst he was at work. He watched great part of the nights in heavenly contemplation; and sometimes, when the rising sun called him to his daily tasks, he complained that its visible light robbed him of the greater interior light which he enjoyed, and interrupted his close application and solitude.² He always rose after a short sleep at midnight, and continued in prayer on his knees with his hands lifted up to heaven till sunrise, and sometimes till three in the afternoon, as Palladius relates in his *Lausiac history*.

St. Antony, in the year 339, saw in a vision, under the figure of mules kicking down the altar, the havoc which the Arian persecution made two years after in Alexandria, and clearly foretold it, as St. Athanasius, St. Jerom, and St. Chrysostom assure us.³ He would not speak to a heretic, unless to exhort him to the true faith; and he drove all such from his mountain, calling them venomous serpents.⁴ At the request of the bishops, about the year 355, he took a journey to Alexandria, to confound the Arians, preaching aloud in that city, that God the Son is not a creature, but of the same substance with the Father; and that the impious Arians, who called him a creature, did not differ from the heathens themselves, "who worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator." All the people ran to see him, and rejoiced to hear him; even the pagans, struck with the dignity of his character, flocked to him, saying, "We desire to see the man of God." He converted many, and wrought

(1) St. Nilus, ep. 24; Cotelier, *Apoth. Patr.* p. 340; Rosweide, *Vit. Patr.* lib. iii. c. 105, lib. v. c. 7.

(2) Cassian, *Collat.* c. 31.

(3) St. Athan. n. 82, p. 257; St. Chrys. *Hom.* 8, in *Mat. St. Hier.* ep. 16; Sozom. lib. vi. c. 5.

(4) St. Athan. n. 63, 69, p. 847.

(1) Rosweide, lib. iii. c. 129; Cotelier, &c.

several miracles : St. Athanasius conducted him back as far as the gates of the city, where he cured a girl possessed by the devil. Being desired by the duke or general of Egypt, to make a longer stay in the city than he had proposed, he answered : "As fish die if they leave the water, so does a monk if he forsakes his solitude."¹

St. Jerom and Rufin relate, that at Alexandria, he met with the famous Didymus, and told him that he ought not to regret much the loss of eyes, which were common to ants and flies, but to rejoice in the treasure of that interior light, which the apostles enjoyed, and by which we see God, and kindle the fire of his love in our souls. Heathen philosophers, and others, often went to dispute with him, and always returned much astonished at his humility, meekness, sanctity, and extraordinary wisdom. He admirably proved to them the truth and security of the Christian religion, and confirmed it by miracles. "We," said he, "only by naming Jesus Christ crucified, put to flight those devils which you adore as gods ; and where the sign of the cross is formed, magic and charms lose their power." At the end of this discourse he invoked Christ, and signed with the cross twice or thrice several persons possessed with devils, in the same moment they stood up sound, and in their senses, giving thanks to God for his mercy in their regard.² When certain philosophers asked him how he could spend his time in solitude, without the pleasure of reading books, he replied, that nature was his great book, and amply supplied the want of others. When others, despising him as an illiterate man, came with the design to ridicule his ignorance, he asked them with great simplicity, which was first, reason or learning, and which had produced the other ? The philosophers answered, "Reason, or good sense." "This.

then," said Antony, "suffices." The philosophers went away astonished at the wisdom and dignity with which he prevented their objections. Some others demanding a reason of his faith in Christ, on purpose to insult it, he put them to silence, by showing that they degraded the notion of the divinity, by ascribing to it infamous human passions, but that the humiliation of the cross is the greatest demonstration of infinite goodness, and its ignominy appears the highest glory, by the triumphant resurrection, the miraculous raising of the dead, and curing of the blind and the sick. He then admirably proved, that faith in God and his works is more clear and satisfactory than the sophistry of the Greeks. St. Athanasius mentions, that he disputed with these Greeks by an interpreter.¹ Our holy author assures us, that no one visited St. Antony under any affliction and sadness, who did not return home full of comfort and joy ; and he relates many miraculous cures wrought by him, also several heavenly visions and revelations with which he was favoured. Belacius, the duke or general of Egypt, persecuting the Catholics with extreme fury, St. Antony, by a letter, exhorted him to leave the servants of Christ in peace. Belacius tore the letter, then spit and trampled upon it, and threatened to make the abbot the next victim of his fury ; but five days after, as he was riding with Nestorius, governor of Egypt, their horses began to play and prance, and the governor's horse, though otherwise remarkably tame, by justling, threw Belacius from his horse, and by biting his thigh, tore it in such a manner that the general died miserably on the third day.² About the year 337. Constantine the Great, and his two sons, Constantius and Constans, wrote a joint letter to the saint, recommending themselves to his prayers, and desiring an answer. St. Antony seeing his monks surprised, said, without being moved,

(1) St. Athan. n. 85, p. 852.

(2) Ibid. n. 80, p. 855.

(1) N. 77, p. 852.

(2) N. 86, p. 860.

"Do not wonder that the emperor writes to us, one man to another; rather admire that God should have wrote to us, and that he has spoken to us by his Son." He said he knew not how to answer it: at last, through the importunity of his disciples, he penned a letter to the emperor and his sons, which St. Athanasius has preserved; and in which he exhorts them to the contempt of the world, and the constant remembrance of the judgment to come. St. Jerom mentions seven other letters of St. Antony to divers monasteries, written in the style of the apostles, and filled with their maxims: several monasteries of Egypt possess them in the original Egyptian language. We have them in an obscure, imperfect, Latin translation from the Greek. He inculcates perpetual watchfulness against temptations, prayer, mortification, and humility.¹ He observes that as the devil fell by pride, so he assaults virtue in us principally by that temptation.² A maxim which he frequently repeats is, that the knowledge of ourselves is the necessary and only step by which we can ascend to the knowledge and love of God. The Bollandists³ give us a short letter of St. Antony to St. Theodorus, Abbot of Tabenna, in which he says that God had assured him in a revelation, that he showed mercy to all true adorers of Jesus Christ, though they should have fallen, if they sincerely repented of their sin. No ancients mention any monastic rule written by St. Antony. His example and instructions have been the most perfect rule for the monastic life to all succeeding ages. It is related⁴ that St. Antony, hearing his disciples express their surprise at the great multitudes who embraced a monastic life, and applied themselves with incredible ardour to the most austere practices of virtue, told them with

tears, that the time would come when monks would be fond of living in cities and stately buildings, and of eating at dainty tables, and be only distinguished from persons of the world by their habit, but that still, some among them would arise to the spirit of true perfection, whose crown would be so much the greater, as their virtue would be more difficult, amidst the contagion of bad example. In the discourses which this saint made to his monks, a rigorous self-examination upon all their actions, every evening, was a practice which he strongly inculcated.¹ In an excellent sermon which he made to his disciples, recorded by St. Athanasius,² he pathetically exhorts them to contemn the whole world for heaven, to spend every day as if they knew it to be the last of their lives, having death always before their eyes, continually to advance in fervour, and to be always armed against the assaults of Satan, whose weakness he shows at length. He extols the efficacy of the sign of the cross in chasing him, and dissipating his illusions, and lays down rules for the discernment of spirits, the first of which is, that the devil leaves in the soul impressions of fear, sadness, confusion, and disturbance.

St. Antony performed the visitation of his monks a little before his death, which he foretold them with his last instructions; but no tears could move him to die among them. It appears from St. Athanasius, that the Christians had learned from the pagans their custom of embalming the bodies of the dead, which abuse, as proceeding from vanity and sometimes superstition, St. Antony had often condemned: this he would prevent, and ordered that his body should be buried in the earth as the patriarchs were, and privately, on his mountain, by his two disciples, Macarius and Amathas, who had remained with him the last fifteen years, to serve him in his remote cell in his old age. He hastened back to that solitude, and some

(1) Ep. 2. ad Arsinotas.

(2) Ibid.

(3) Maij. t. iii. p. 255.

(4) Rosweide, Vit. Patr. lib. v. c. 8; Abr. Eckellena. in Vit. St. Ant. p. 106; Cotel. 344; Mart. Coptor.

(1) St. Athan. n. 55, p. 858. (2) N. 16 and 43.

time after fell sick: he repeated to these two disciples his orders for their burying his body secretly in that place, adding, "In the day of the resurrection, I shall receive it incorruptible from the hand of Christ." He ordered them to give one of his sheep-skins, with a cloak in which he lay, to the Bishop Athanasius, as a public testimony of his being united in faith and communion with that holy prelate; to give his other sheep-skin to the Bishop Serapion; and to keep for themselves his sackcloth. He added, "Farewell, my children, Antony is departing, and will be no longer with you." At these words they embraced him, and he stretching out his feet, without any other sign, calmly ceased to breathe. His death happened in the year 356, probably on the 17th of January, on which the most ancient Martyrologies name him, and which the Greek empire kept as a holyday soon after his death. He was one hundred and five years old. From his youth to that extreme old age, he always maintained the same fervour in his holy exercises: age to the last never made him change his diet (except in the use of a little oil), nor his manner of clothing; yet he lived without sickness, his sight was not impaired, his teeth were only worn, and not one was lost or loosened. The two disciples interred him according to his directions. About the year 561, his body was discovered, in the reign of Justinian, and with great solemnity translated to Alexandria, thence it was removed to Constantinople, and is now at Vienne in France. Bollandus gives us an account of many miracles wrought by his intercession; particularly in what manner the distemper called the Sacred Fire, since that time St. Antony's Fire, miraculously ceased through his patronage, when it raged violently in many parts of Europe, in the eleventh century.

A most sublime gift of heavenly contemplation and prayer was the fruit of

this great saint's holy retirement. Whole nights seemed short in those exercises, and when the rising sun in the morning seemed to him too soon to call him from his knees, to his manual labour or other employments, he would lament that the incomparable sweetness which he enjoyed, in the more perfect freedom with which his heart was taken up in heavenly contemplation in the silent watching of the night, should be interrupted or abated. But the foundation of his most ardent charity, and that sublime contemplation by which his soul soared in noble and lofty flights above all earthly things, was laid in the purity and disengagement of his affections, the contempt of the world, a most profound humility, and the universal mortification of his senses and of the powers of his soul. Hence flowed that constant tranquillity and serenity of his mind, which was the best proof of a perfect mastery of his passions. St. Athanasius observes of him, that after thirty years spent in the closest solitude, "he appeared not to others with a sullen or savage, but with a most obliging sociable air."¹ A heart that is filled with inward peace, simplicity, goodness, and charity, is a stranger to a lowering or contracted look. The main point in Christian mortification is the humiliation of the heart, one of its principal ends being the subduing of the passions. Hence true virtue always increases the sweetness and gentleness of the mind, though this is attended with an invincible constancy, and an inflexible firmness in every point of duty. That devotion or self-denial is false or defective, which betrays us into pride or uncharitableness; and whatever makes us sour, morose, or peevish, makes us certainly worse, and instead of begetting in us a nearer resemblance of the divine nature, gives us a strong tincture of the temper of devils.

(1) St. Athan. n. 67, p. 847, and n. 73, p. 850.