

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Anthony the Great

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: January 17

Saintspedia · saintspedia.com

IN BRIEF

Saint Anthony the Great

Fourth-century Egyptian hermit, regarded as the father of Christian monasticism.

Feast day	January 17
Born	c. 251, Coma, Middle Egypt
Died	356, Mount Colzim, near the Red Sea, Egypt
Canonized	Pre-Congregation (venerated since antiquity)
Era	4th century
Patron saint of	monks, domestic animals, gravediggers

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Anthony the Great in Spiritual Combat

Novena to Saint Anthony the Great

Abbey of Saint-Antoine-l'Abbaye, Relics of Saint Anthony

Credits and sources

Booklet offered by Saintspedia, the directory of Catholic saints: lives of the saints, prayers, novenas and places of pilgrimage, at saintspedia.com. Texts written by Saintspedia, except traditional prayers marked as such. Original prayers and novenas are not official liturgical texts. Free booklet, to print and share for personal, family or parish use; please do not sell it.

LIFE

Saint Anthony the Great

Saint Anthony the Great, also called Anthony the Abbot, Anthony of the Desert or Anthony the Hermit, was an Egyptian Christian who, around the year 270, left everything to live alone with God. His long life in the desert, his spiritual battles and the disciples he attracted make him the father of Christian monasticism. He died at a great age in 356 and is celebrated on January 17, in both East and West.

Who was Saint Anthony the Great?

Anthony was born around 251 at Coma, a village in Middle Egypt, into a Christian family of well-to-do landowners. We know his life mainly through the *Life of Anthony* written shortly after his death by Saint Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, who had met him. Translated into Latin very early, the text was an immense success and spread the ideal of desert life throughout the Roman Empire.

It should be read as a spiritual portrait rather than a biography in the modern sense, but it rests on direct memories. Sayings of Anthony are also preserved in the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (the *Apophthegmata Patrum*).

He should not be confused with Saint Anthony of Padua, the thirteenth-century Franciscan invoked for lost things, who lived nearly a thousand years later.

Key dates in the life of Saint Anthony

- **c. 251**: Born at Coma, in Egypt.
- **c. 270**: After the death of his parents, he hears the call of the Gospel in church and gives away his possessions.

- **c. 270-285**: Lives as an ascetic near his village, then in tombs cut into the rock.
- **c. 285**: Shuts himself up in an abandoned fort at Pispir, on the east bank of the Nile, for about twenty years.
- **c. 305**: Comes out of his retreat; disciples settle around him.
- **311**: During the persecution of Maximinus Daia, he goes to Alexandria to support imprisoned Christians.
- **c. 313**: Withdraws farther, to the "inner mountain" near the Red Sea.
- **c. 338**: Travels again to Alexandria to support Athanasius against the Arians.
- **356**: Dies on Mount Colzim, over a hundred years old according to tradition.

"Go, sell what you possess"

Anthony was eighteen or twenty when he lost his parents and became responsible for his younger sister. Shortly afterward, entering the church, he heard the words of Christ to the rich young man: "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven" (Matthew 19:21). He took them as addressed to him.

He gave his land to the people of the village, sold his other goods for the poor and entrusted his sister to a community of consecrated virgins. He began by living as an ascetic on the edge of his village, learning prayer, fasting and manual work from older Christians. Athanasius stresses that he tried to imitate in each of them the virtue that marked them: the gentleness of one, the perseverance of another.



Saint Anthony Abbot and Saint Paul the Hermit, by Diego Velázquez (c. 1634).

The battle of the desert

Anthony went gradually deeper into solitude: first into tombs, then into an abandoned fort beyond the Nile, where he lived enclosed for about twenty years. The *Life* describes the terrible temptations he faced there: memories of his wealth, desires, discouragement, then attacks by demons in frightening forms.

These accounts, which inspired so many painters from Hieronymus Bosch to Matthias Grünewald, express in the language of their time a reality that monks would call spiritual warfare. After one of these trials, Athanasius tells us, Anthony asked the Lord where He had been; a voice answered that He had been there all along, and would always support him.

When his friends finally forced the door, around 305, they expected to find a weakened man. They found instead, says the *Life*, a peaceful man, neither wasted nor excited, perfectly balanced. Many then wanted to live near him.



The Monastery of Saint Anthony, near the Red Sea, in Egypt.

The father of monks

Anthony founded no order and wrote no rule. But groups of hermits formed around him, taking him as their guide, and the desert, says Athanasius, became "a city." He taught vigilance, humility, perseverance and charity. He received visitors, gave counsel, healed and reconciled. To find solitude again, around 313 he withdrew still farther, to a mountain near the Red Sea, where he tended a small garden and wove baskets.

Yet he did not cut himself off from the Church. He went to Alexandria twice: in 311, during the persecution, to encourage those confessing the faith, and around 338, to support Athanasius against the Arians. According to a

tradition reported by Saint Jerome, in his old age he visited Saint Paul of Thebes, said to be the first of the hermits, and buried him. Anthony died in 356 with two disciples at his side, having asked that the place of his burial be kept secret.



The Temptation of Saint Anthony, Isenheim Altarpiece by Matthias Grünewald (Unterlinden Museum, Colmar).

The cult of Saint Anthony in the West

His relics, discovered in the sixth century, are said to have been taken to Alexandria and then to Constantinople. In the eleventh century, according to tradition, a lord of the Dauphiné brought them to France, to a village that took the name of Saint-Antoine. Toward the end of that century a hospital brotherhood formed there, which became the Order of the Antonines (Hospital Brothers of Saint Anthony).

The Antonines cared for victims of "the burning sickness," a poisoning caused by ergot, a fungus of rye, also called "Saint Anthony's fire." They raised pigs that roamed freely in the towns: hence the pig that so often accompanies the saint in art, and the tradition of blessing animals on January 17.

Why is Saint Anthony the Great the patron saint of monks and animals?

As the first great figure of desert monasticism, Anthony is naturally the patron of monks and of all who live in solitude. The memory of the Antonines and their pigs made him the protector of domestic animals and livestock, and many parishes still bless animals on his feast. He is also counted as a patron of gravediggers, recalling the tradition that he buried Saint Paul the Hermit.

Above all, Saint Anthony reminds us that the Gospel can be taken literally, and that a call heard one Sunday can change a whole life. He shows that solitude is not an escape but a struggle, from which one returns freer and better able to love. Catholics pray to him in temptation, discouragement and illness, for monks and for animals.

To pray with him, use the prayer to Saint Anthony the Great in spiritual combat, or follow the novena to Saint Anthony the Great, from January 8 to 16, the eve of his feast.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Anthony the Great in art

- **An old bearded hermit in a monk's habit**, often with a hood.
- **The tau staff**: a T-shaped staff or cross, the sign of the Antonines, sometimes with a small bell.
- **The pig**: a reminder of the Antonines' herds and of his protection over animals.

- **Flames**: an allusion to "Saint Anthony's fire."
- **Demons and temptations**: the scene of the temptation of Saint Anthony, painted by Bosch, Grünewald and Schongauer.
- **The raven bringing bread**: in scenes of his visit to Saint Paul the Hermit.

Where to pray to Saint Anthony the Great

- **Saint-Antoine-l'Abbaye** (Isère, France): the Gothic abbey church that keeps his relics.
- **Egypt**: the Monastery of Saint Anthony, near the Red Sea, at the foot of the mountain where he lived, still home to Coptic monks.
- **Arles** (France): the Church of Saint-Julien, linked to a rival tradition about his relics.
- **Colmar** (France): the Unterlinden Museum, where the Isenheim Altarpiece, painted for the Antonines, keeps his memory alive.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Anthony the Great in Spiritual Combat

Saint Anthony the Great left no written prayer for the faithful, but his words were gathered very early by his disciples in the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, and by Saint Athanasius in the *Life of Anthony*, written around 357. This page presents a few passages, translated from the Greek by Saintspedia (the original texts are in the public domain), followed by an original prayer for times of temptation and discouragement.

The angel who wove rope

The first saying attributed to Anthony tells of a moment of discouragement, what the monks called acedia. It can be prayed as an answer to our own weariness:

> *Once, while he was sitting in the desert, Abba Anthony fell into discouragement and great darkness of thought. He said to God: "Lord, I want to be saved, but my thoughts will not leave me alone. What shall I do in my affliction?"*
>
> *A little later, going outside, he saw someone like himself, sitting and working, then getting up from his work to pray, then sitting down again to weave rope, and getting up again to pray. It was an angel of the Lord, sent to correct and strengthen him. And he heard the angel say to him: "Do this, and you will be saved."*

Source: *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, alphabetical collection, Anthony 1.

"Where were you?"

After a night of violent attacks, Athanasius tells us, Anthony saw the roof of his cell open and a light come down upon him. He spoke to the Lord:

> *"Where were you? Why did you not come at the beginning to end my sufferings?" And a voice answered him: "I was here, Anthony, but I waited to see your struggle. Since you held firm and were not overcome, I will always be your help."*

Source: Saint Athanasius of Alexandria, *Life of Anthony*, chapter 10.

Another saying to meditate on

> *"I saw all the snares of the enemy spread out over the earth, and I said with a groan: Who then can escape them? And I heard a voice saying to me: Humility."*

Source: *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, alphabetical collection, Anthony 7.

Prayer to Saint Anthony the Great in spiritual combat

Saint Anthony, you who heard the Gospel as a word spoken to you alone, and left everything to follow Christ, teach me to listen to His voice today.

You who knew discouragement and temptation in the desert, come to my aid when my thoughts weigh me down. Remind me that the Lord is here, even when He seems silent, and that He watches my struggle with love.

Teach me the humility that escapes every snare, perseverance in prayer and work, and the peace of an undivided heart. Keep me from pride as from despair.

I entrust to you monks and nuns, those who live in solitude, the sick and all who are going through a trial. I also entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence). Amen.

This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia, free to use for personal and community prayer.

When to pray this prayer

Saint Anthony the Great is celebrated on January 17, in both East and West. On that day, in many places, animals are blessed in his honor. You can pray to him at any moment of temptation, weariness or doubt. For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Anthony the Great, and read the life of Saint Anthony the Great.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Anthony the Great

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the *Life of Anthony* written by Saint Athanasius and by the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of his feast, begin on January 8; it ends on January 16, the day before his feast on January 17. It can also be prayed at any time of year, especially in a season of temptation or discouragement.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the meditation, say the prayer of the day and then an Our Father. If you can, keep a few minutes of silence: that is the first lesson of the desert. The suggested act helps carry the prayer into your day.



Saint Anthony the Great, church stained glass or statue.

Day 1: Hearing the call

One Sunday in church, Anthony heard: "Go, sell what you possess and give to the poor." He received this word as if it were spoken to him personally. He did not postpone his answer or explain it away; he acted on it that very day.

Prayer: Lord, open my ears to your Word. Let it be for me not an old text but a call for today.

Today: Read Matthew 19:16-22 and keep one sentence with you through the day.

Day 2: Letting go

Anthony gave away his land and his goods, keeping only what his sister needed. Inner freedom often begins with a concrete act of detachment. What we no longer cling to can no longer hold us back.

Prayer: Lord, show me what weighs me down and keeps me from following you. Give me the joy of giving.

Today: Give away an object or a sum of money you do not really need.

Day 3: Learning from others

At the beginning, Anthony watched the older ascetics and took from each a particular quality: gentleness, patience, prayer. No one becomes a saint alone. Even the father of monks began as a humble student, ready to receive from anyone what God wished to teach him.

Prayer: Thank you, Lord, for those who have shown me the way. Give me the humility to learn from everyone.

Today: Notice a good quality in someone close to you and tell them.

Day 4: Praying and working

When he was discouraged, Anthony saw an angel alternating between work and prayer: "Do this, and you will be saved." Holiness grows through faithfulness in simple things. The ordinary rhythm of a day can become a path to God.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to unite my work and my prayer, so that my whole day may be offered to you.

Today: Stop your work three times today for a short prayer.

Day 5: The struggle

In his solitude, Anthony faced temptation in every form. He did not deny it: he fought it with prayer, fasting and trust. The saints are not those who were never tempted, but those who did not give up.

Prayer: Lord, be my strength in temptation. Do not leave me alone before what draws me away from you.

Today: Name before God a temptation that keeps returning, and ask for His help.



The Temptation of Saint Anthony, triptych by Hieronymus Bosch (Lisbon).

Day 6: "I was here"

After a night of trial, Anthony asked the Lord where He had been. The answer came: "I was here, but I waited to see your struggle." God is not absent from our trials, even when we cannot feel His presence.

Prayer: Lord, when you seem silent, help me believe that you are near. I place in your hands what I do not understand.

Today: Pray Psalm 23, "The Lord is my shepherd."

Day 7: Humility

Anthony saw the snares of the enemy spread over the whole earth and asked who could escape them. A voice answered: humility. The proud trip over their own strength; the humble lean on God.

Prayer: Jesus, meek and humble of heart, make my heart like yours. Keep me from pride and contempt.

Today: Ask someone's forgiveness, or accept a criticism without justifying yourself.

Day 8: Welcoming others

When he came out of his retreat, Anthony received visitors, gave counsel and reconciled enemies. Solitude had made him more available, not more closed. True silence opens the heart.

Prayer: Lord, may my inner silence make me more attentive to others. Teach me to listen.

Today: Take time to truly listen to someone, without interrupting.

Day 9: Peace at the end of life

At a great age, Anthony died peacefully with two disciples beside him. He asked that his grave be kept hidden: he sought not glory but God alone. After nearly a century of life, most of it spent in the desert, he went to God with the same simplicity with which he had first left his village.

Prayer: Lord, at the end of this novena, I place my intention in your hands. Through the intercession of Saint Anthony, give me a peaceful heart, wholly yours. Amen.

Today: Spend fifteen minutes in silence, in a church or outdoors.

Closing prayer

Saint Anthony, father of monks, you who fought in the desert and found peace in God, I entrust to you the intention of these nine days. Pray for those who are tempted or discouraged, for the sick and for those who live alone. Obtain for us humility and perseverance, and the grace to find, in the midst of our own deserts, the God who never stops watching over our struggle. Amen.

To go further, read the life of Saint Anthony the Great and the prayer to Saint Anthony the Great in spiritual combat.

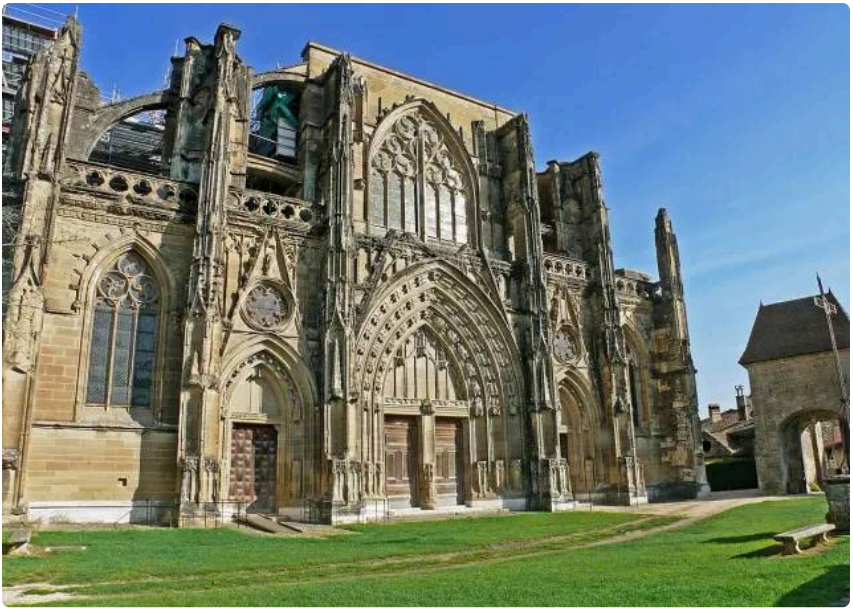
PILGRIMAGE

Abbey of Saint-Antoine-l'Abbaye, Relics of Saint Anthony

Saint-Antoine-l'Abbaye, a village in the Isère department between Grenoble and Valence, has housed the relics of Saint Anthony the Great in a vast Gothic abbey church since the Middle Ages. For centuries it was one of the great pilgrimage sites of Europe, and the cradle of the hospital order of the Antonines.

Relics from the East

According to tradition, Anthony's relics, discovered in Egypt in the 6th century, were taken to Alexandria, then to Constantinople. In the 11th century, a lord of the Dauphiné is said to have brought them back to his estate of La Motte, which was then renamed Saint-Antoine. A Benedictine priory, dependent on the Abbey of Montmajour, was charged with guarding them and welcoming pilgrims.



The abbey church of Saint-Antoine-l'Abbaye, in Isère.

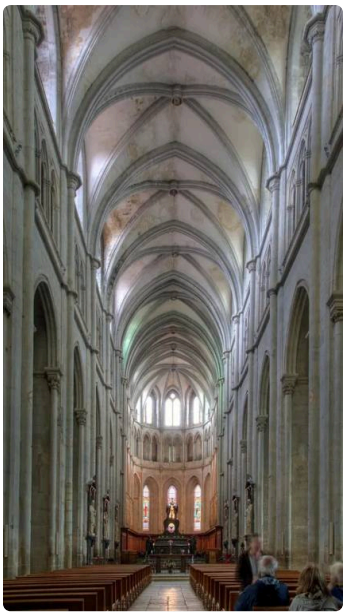
The Antonines and Saint Anthony's fire

At the end of the 11th century, a lay confraternity organized itself on the spot to care for the sick suffering from "ergotism," a poisoning caused by ergot in rye that produced terrible burns and gangrene of the limbs. It was called "Saint Anthony's fire." This confraternity became the order of the Canons Regular of Saint Anthony, the Antonines, who opened hospitals throughout Europe. In 1297, they obtained custody of the abbey. The order was merged into the Order of Malta at the end of the 18th century.

The abbey church

The abbey church, built from the 13th to the 15th century, is one of the finest Gothic complexes in the Dauphiné. Its flamboyant facade, wall paintings, and woodwork bear witness to the wealth of the pilgrimage. Above the high altar, a

reliquary holds the saint's relics. The conventual buildings now house a departmental museum devoted to the history of the abbey and the Antonines.



The abbey church of Saint-Antoine-l'Abbaye, the interior and the reliquary of Saint Anthony.

Praying near the relics of Saint Anthony

Before your visit, you may reread the life of Saint Anthony the Great. On site, a time of silence before the reliquary lets you entrust to him an inner struggle, a sick person, or a decision. The prayer to Saint Anthony the Great, with the words of the angel who braided ropes, suits this moment well. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Other places of Saint Anthony the Great

- **Egypt**: the Monastery of Saint Anthony, in the Eastern Desert near the Red Sea, founded near the cave where he lived; it is still inhabited by Coptic monks.

- **Arles**: the Church of Saint-Julien, where a rival tradition has placed part of his relics since the end of the 15th century.
- **Colmar**: the Unterlinden Museum, which displays the Isenheim Altarpiece, painted by Matthias Grünewald for the Antonine commandery of Isenheim.
- **Lisbon**: the National Museum of Ancient Art, which holds Hieronymus Bosch's triptych of the Temptation of Saint Anthony.

Practical information

Saint-Antoine-l'Abbaye is in northern Isère, near Saint-Marcellin. The well-preserved medieval village can be explored on foot. It is reached mainly by car. Check the opening hours of the abbey church, Masses, and the museum with the parish or the tourist office before you come.

Credits and sources

Texts: Saintspedia (saintspedia.com). The sources cited in each part are those of the corresponding page of the website. Biographical data partly from Wikidata (CC0). Font: EB Garamond (SIL Open Font License).

Images

- Cover: Michael Damaskinos, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons. Source · License
- Saint Anthony Abbot and Saint Paul the Hermit, by Diego Velázquez (c. 1634).: Image: Diego Velázquez, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons. Source · License
- The Monastery of Saint Anthony, near the Red Sea, in Egypt.: Image: Tentoila (talk), public domain, via Wikimedia Commons. Source
- The Temptation of Saint Anthony, Isenheim Altarpiece by Matthias Grünewald (Unterlinden Museum, Colmar).: Image: Matthias Grünewald, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons. Source · License
- Saint Anthony the Great, church stained glass or statue.: Image: Giovanni Richa, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons. Source · License
- The Temptation of Saint Anthony, triptych by Hieronymus Bosch (Lisbon).: Image: Hieronymus Bosch, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons. Source · License
- The abbey church of Saint-Antoine-l'Abbaye, in Isère.: Image: Jacques MOSSOT, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons. Source · License
- The abbey church of Saint-Antoine-l'Abbaye, the interior and the reliquary of Saint Anthony.: Image: Eusebius, CC BY 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons. Source · License



More free booklets

Lives of the saints, prayers, novenas and places of pilgrimage: find all the booklets to print at

saintspedia.com