

## The *Life of Antony* and Spiritual Direction

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### Abstract

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The ministry of spiritual direction can be traced to the time of Antony the Great, the "Father of monks." Antony is appropriately considered an "archetypal figure" in spiritual direction. This paper revisits the *Life of Antony* in search of wisdom and guidance for spiritual direction today. The first section retells the story of Antony as a "spiral itinerary." The second section is a reflection on spiritual direction ministry and Christian spirituality based on four recurring themes in the *Life of Antony*.



## Introduction

Throughout the centuries, the *Life of Antony*, written in about 356, has attracted many readers.<sup>1</sup> On the threshold of the third millennium, this ascetic (who lived c. 250–355) still appeals. Contemporary studies of the *Life of Antony* have covered topics such as its socio-political context, Antony's psychological makeup, and the metaphorical language of the text.<sup>2</sup> Very little has been written on Antony as a spiritual director among the monks.<sup>3</sup>

Spiritual direction is a growing interest among Christians today.<sup>4</sup> Many institutions offer ministry or training in spiritual

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<sup>1</sup> H. Ellershaw's translation is used here: Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds. "Life of Antony," trans. H. Ellershaw, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church. Vol. IV. St. Athanasius: Selected Works and Letters* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1957). Note, however, the more recent version: Robert Gregg, *Athanasius: The Life of Anthony and the Letter to Marcellinus* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980). In order to facilitate cross referencing to other translations, citations will be made to chapters. The textual and authorship issues of the *Life of Antony* have been widely disputed. See, for example, T.D. Barnes, "Angel of Light or Mystic Initiate? The Problem of the Life of Antony," *Journal of Theological Studies* 37 (1986): 353–68. More and more evidence suggests that Athanasius may not be the original author, hagiographical materials may have been added.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Brian Brennan, "Athanasius' *Vita Antoni*: A sociological Interpretation," *Vigiliae Christianae* 39 (1985): 209–27; Marilyn Nagy, "Translocation of Parental Images in Fourth-Century Ascetic Texts: Motifs and Techniques of Identity," *Semeia* 58 (1992): 3–23; and Neal Kelsey, "The Body as Desert in The Life of St. Anthony," *Semeia* 57 (1992): 131–52.

<sup>3</sup> A study of the goal of the ascetic practices of Antony and other desert hermits can be found in Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 213–40; especially 226–32. With regard to the meaning of spiritual fatherhood in the literature of the desert, Andrée Louf's paper is an excellent resource. See his, "Spiritual Fatherhood in the Literature of the Desert," in *Abba: Guides to Wholeness and Holiness East and West. Papers Presented at a Symposium on Spiritual Fatherhood/Motherhood at the Abbey of New Clairvaux, Vina, California, 12–16 June, 1978*, ed. John R. Sommerfeldt (Kalamazoo Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1982), 37–63.

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth Leech discusses this interest as it manifested itself in the mid-seventies. Many of his observations are still valid today. We continue to witness the spiritual quest of young people, the yearning for inward journey or deep Eastern spiritual experiences, the Charismatic renewal, and different versions of liberation spirituality. These phenomena, to some extent, explain the burgeoning

direction.<sup>5</sup> Thus, questions regarding training, supervision, and ethics in spiritual direction are widely discussed.<sup>6</sup> Among others, the qualifications of directors has become an important issue.

As Thomas Merton wrote, spiritual direction is "a monastic concept,"<sup>7</sup> and Antony was the first of the holy men who went into the desert in the fourth century, from whom many would seek spiritual direction.<sup>8</sup> To use Merton's expression, Antony is an "archetypal figure" in the practice of such direction.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, in spite of our different cultural milieu and theological orientation, Antony's experience has much to offer.

This paper revisits the *Life of Antony* in search of wisdom and guidance for spiritual direction today. After surveying the *Life of Antony* as a "spiral itinerary," I shall extricate four recurring themes from the text, and reflect, in the light of those themes, on various spiritual direction practices.

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of spiritual direction ministry. See Kenneth Leech, *Soul Friend: The Practice of Spiritual Direction* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977), 5–33.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, the advertisements in a newly published journal, *Presence: An International Journal of Spiritual Direction* 2 (1996): 72–87.

<sup>6</sup> These topics are addressed in almost every issue of *Presence*. See, for example, Susan S. Jorgensen, "Peer Supervision: One Model," *Presence* 2, no. 1 (1996): 23–37; Sandra Lommasson Pickens, "Looking at Dual/Multiple Relationships: Danger or Opportunity?" *Presence* 2, no. 2 (1996): 51–58; Jonathan Foster, "Liability Issues in a Ministry of Spiritual Direction," *Presence* 2, no. 3 (1996): 50–63; and Steven Wirth, "Reflections on Power Issues in the Training of Spiritual Directors," *Presence* 3, no. 1 (1997): 30–39. Regarding the issue of ethics, see Janicemarie K. Vinicky, "A Code of Ethics for Spiritual Directors," *Human Development* 14, no. 3 (1993): 20–24.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Merton, *Spiritual Direction and Meditation* (London: Burhs & Oates, 1961), 13. Spiritual direction, originally a monastic phenomenon, has had a variety of expressions throughout the history of Christian spirituality. Leech, in his book *Soul Friend*, has surveyed the wide use of this helping relationship in the Christian tradition.

<sup>8</sup> Leech, *Soul Friend*, 41. Antony is seen as the bridge between the martyrs and the monastic movement. See Edward E. Malone, *The Monk and the Martyr* (Washington, Catholic University, 1950).

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Merton, "The Spiritual Father in the Desert Tradition," *Cistercian Studies* 3 (68): 4.