

17. January 2022

**In the school of the Fathers of the desert (I):
"Combat in what we hear"**

Eph 6:10-13.18

Reading for the memorial of Saint Anthony Abbot

Finally, grow strong in the Lord, with the strength of his power. Put on the full armour of God so as to be able to resist the devil's tactics. For it is not against human enemies that we have to struggle, but against the principalities and the ruling forces who are masters of the darkness in this world, the spirits of evil in the heavens. That is why you must take up all God's armour, or you will not be able to put up any resistance on the evil day, or stand your ground even though you exert yourselves to the full. In all your prayer and entreaty keep praying in the Spirit on every possible occasion. Never get tired of staying awake to pray for all God's holy people.

Over the next few days, we will meet two saints who are exemplary models of all those who left everything to follow the Lord and serve him unreservedly. In the first instance, we will speak about St. Anthony Abbot, father of the desert, whom we commemorate today, and we will dwell on a particular phrase of his, drawing on it for the benefit of our spiritual life.

This passage from the Letter to the Ephesians that has been chosen for his memorial is enormously important, and I would like to recall that a few months ago I posted a lecture on spiritual combat on my YouTube channel: <https://youtu.be/UjivpXNTAQU>

It is worth listening to it again and again to become aware of the struggle we are engaged in in the present situation in the world. It goes far beyond just the question of finding the right drug to treat Covid-19. It is a struggle in which exactly what St. Paul tells us here is taking place: *"For it is not against human enemies that we have to struggle, but against the principalities and the ruling forces who are masters of the darkness in this world, the spirits of evil in the heavens"*.

The meditations of the next three days will be about how we can be better prepared on the inner level to fight this combat. Let us begin, then, by taking a look at the saint whom we commemorate today:

In the third century, St. Anthony Abbot left the world for the sake of Christ and lived for a long time in the Libyan desert. The fame of his wisdom spread, and many

people came to him, although in reality he had chosen a life of solitude. But people seek guidance, and when you know of someone who has gained experience in his spiritual path, then others who are also seeking God will come to him to be instructed.

Thus, a kind of hermit community formed around St. Anthony, in which they consciously sought to fight, through work and constant prayer, against temptations and against those forces of evil mentioned in the Letter to the Ephesians. Certainly these men of God understood and undertook their struggle on behalf of the whole of Christianity and humanity.

Indeed, every time we reject a temptation, the demons suffer directly or indirectly a defeat in their attempt to turn men away from their walk with God. Evil spirits not only attack us directly, through evil thoughts, feelings, etc., but they also like to hide behind the attractions of this world or the weaknesses of our flesh, taking advantage of them to carry out their sinister plans.

Let us meditate today on an aspect of this little text of St. Anthony, which he himself put into practice in his life: *"He who sits in the desert and tries to be calm of heart has been saved from three battles: the battle of listening, the battle of speech and the battle of sight. He has only one battle left to fight: the battle against impurity"*.

Unlike the monks who lived in the desert, we are not exempt from any of the first three combats mentioned by St. Anthony, unless one actually lives in the desert. So, not only do we have to fight against impurity, but we also have to fight the battle of listening, speaking and seeing. This means that we must learn to deal with all of these according to what is fruitful for the spiritual life.

Let us focus today on the struggle against what we hear, and in the coming days we will cover the struggle in speech and sight, as well as the struggle against impurity, which in the present time must be waged with particular intensity.

The struggle in what we hear

How difficult it is for us to listen attentively to the word of God or to assimilate spiritual contents! How easily, on the other hand, do we allow ourselves to be trapped and influenced by superficial and fleeting talk. In the present time, which St. Anthony did not yet know, there seems to be a systematic destruction of silence, because of the constant entertainment and information offered to us. Thanks to mobile phones, it has become possible to talk on the phone anywhere. Everyone can be reached at any

time, and we are even forcibly included in the conversations of other people who have nothing to do with us.

And what is the work of the demons in this field?

If God can speak to us more easily in silence and we can meet Him more deeply, then everything possible must be done to systematically annihilate silence. Our ears must be bombarded with all kinds of content except the gospel and everything related to it. Our tendency to dispersion, which is the product of our fallen nature, must be further encouraged, so that we do not by any means enter into silence.

Thus the demons find here a suitable field of action to keep us from God's way without our noticing it, and, if this is not possible for them, at least to make it more difficult for us.

We must consciously take up this fight in the strength of the Lord! It will be necessary to fight, if we are to close our ears to what is unnecessary or harmful, and to open them to the Word of the Lord.

This requires discipline and a very conscious use of information sources, especially the internet, which is available around the clock. We should devote only a certain amount of time to it, which we ourselves have determined, and we should also be clear about the purpose for which we are going to use it. At this point, we have to be vigilant, because we often do not realise the enormous seduction that these sources of information, such as smartphones, can exert on us. They have almost become permanent companions, they become "illegitimate members of the family", and it can get to the point that almost all communication is done by this means. And one hardly notices it, because we have become accustomed to it!

More important than this is taking time for silence and withdrawal, frequenting these practices on a regular basis and thus escaping from constant listening.

We must then decide for ourselves what we listen to and what we do not want to listen to. To do this, it is also necessary to overcome any kind of curiosity, to fight against superficial interest in quick information and, above all, to always seek the Lord anew, to listen to Him.