

17. January 2024

In the school of the desert fathers (I):
The combat in what we hear

Eph 6:10-13,18

Reading corresponding to the memorial of St. Anthony Abbot

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Pray at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints.

I wrote the meditations for the next few days a few years ago. I have now edited them slightly to share them again. This is because of the importance of the theme of spiritual warfare.

St Anthony Abbot, whom we commemorate today, was one of the fathers of the desert. In the third century he left the world for the sake of Christ and lived for a long time in the desert of Libya. 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 if you know someone who has gained experience on his spiritual path, others who are also seeking God will come to him to be taught.

In this way, a kind of hermit community was formed around St Anthony, in which, through work and constant prayer, they consciously tried to fight against temptations and against those forces of evil mentioned in the Letter to the Ephesians. Surely these men of God understood and undertook their combat in the name of the whole of Christianity and humanity.

Indeed, every time we reject a temptation, the demons suffer a direct or indirect defeat in their attempt to turn people away from their walk with God. Evil spirits not only

attack us directly through evil thoughts, feelings, etc., but they also love to hide behind the attractions of this world or the weaknesses of our flesh and use them to carry out their evil plans.

In the next few days we will meditate, point by point, on a meaningful phrase of St Anthony Abbot that can be very helpful for our spiritual life: "He who sits in the desert and tries to keep his heart calm has been saved from three battles: the battle of hearing, the battle of speaking and the battle of seeing. He has only one battle left to fight: the battle against impurity".

Today we will concentrate on the battle of hearing, and in the days to come we will deal with the battle of speech, the battle of sight, and the battle of impurity, which must be fought with particular intensity at this time.

The battle in what we hear

How difficult it is for us to listen attentively to the Word of God or to assimilate spiritual content! How easily, on the other hand, we allow ourselves to be captured and influenced by superficial and fleeting talk. In our time, which Saint Anthony did not know, there seems to be a systematic destruction of silence because of the constant entertainment and information offered to us. Thanks to the smart phones, it has become possible to talk on the phone anywhere. Anyone can be reached at any time, and we are even compulsively included in the conversations of other people who have nothing to do with us.

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

If God can speak to us more easily in silence and we can meet Him more deeply, then everything must be done to systematically destroy silence. Our ears must be bombarded with all kinds of content, except the Gospel and everything related to it. Our tendency to scatter, a product of our fallen nature, must be further encouraged so that we do not enter into silence at all.

In this way, the demons find a suitable field of action to lead us away from God's way without us noticing; and if they cannot do this, 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 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 sources of information, especially the Internet, which is available around the clock. We should only devote 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 using it. This is where we need to be vigilant, because we are often unaware of the enormous seduction that these sources of information, such as smartphones, can exert on us. They have become almost constant companions, they have become "illegitimate members of the family", and it can get to the point where almost all communication is done by this means. And we hardly notice it because we have got used to it!

What is more important is to take time for silence and withdrawal, to practice these practices regularly, and thus to escape from constant listening.

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