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THE LIVES OF THE SAINTS

“Saint Hilarion of Gaza: A great ascetic with a heart open to those in need”

Why would someone become a hermit? Why would he leave everything behind for Christ, giving up the opportunity to live in community with other brothers and sisters, in order to be alone with God?

This choice can only be understood through the eyes of faith. From the world's perspective—so far removed from God—it might seem selfish. However, throughout the centuries, the Church and the faithful have held the hermit life in high esteem.

Although a hermit may feel a strong longing for solitude and intimacy with God, and although he may want to retreat to the most secluded place possible to find Him, it may happen that the Lord's plans differ from what he himself desires. God is the master of every vocation, and following His will is more valuable than fulfilling one's own desires, no matter how pious they may be.

Today's saint, St. Hilarion of Gaza, is a clear example of how God guides those who love Him and makes their lives bear abundant fruit.

Let us return to the question: Why does a person choose the hermitic life? In St. Hilarion's case, the answer becomes clear when we learn a little about his story.

He was born in Palestine around the year 290 into a pagan family and was sent to Alexandria to study. There, he encountered the Christian faith and converted. St. Jerome describes Hilarion's vocation as follows:

"When he heard the famous name of Anthony, known to all the tribes of Egypt, he wanted to meet this man and set out on the road to the desert. As soon as he met Anthony, he decided to take up the monastic life and stayed with him for two months to better understand his way of life and moral seriousness. He observed how often Anthony prayed, how helpful he was in welcoming brothers, how severe he was in reprimanding, how fervent he was in encouraging, and how no illness could divert him from his meager, simple rations."

In short, Hilarion felt compelled to adopt this way of life. Since Anthony was sought after by many people, which was too much agitation for Hilarion, he decided to return to his homeland with some other monks. By the time he returned, his parents had already died, so he gave part of his inheritance to his brothers and another part to the poor. He kept nothing for himself.

Hilarion was barely fifteen years old when he made this decision. Strengthened in Christ but without material resources, he withdrew to the desert stretching along the sea at Majuma, the port of Gaza.

One of the motivations for Hilarion's embrace of the hermitic life was the extraordinary example he found shortly after his conversion in St. Anthony the Abbot, the great father of the desert. The Lord was calling him to a life of hermitage. He longed for solitude, a desire that accompanied him throughout his life, but he was only able to fulfill it a few times. Until his death, he practiced strict asceticism.

So, what does a hermit do?

First, he prays and consciously walks the path of holiness. He leads an austere life, as did Hilarion and many other monks in Egypt and Palestine. Time and again, it is recounted that hermits must wage fierce battles with the devil. Let us remember that the Lord Himself was tempted by the devil in the desert and rejected his seductions for our sake.

St. Jerome describes the many areas in which the young Hilarion suffered and overcame. He was confronted by the devil throughout his life, but he did not only have to fight the personal struggles that anchorites generally have to fight. The fame of his holiness spread, and word got around that God wanted to work through Hilarion. Then, what he had tried to avoid happened: people began seeking him out, bringing him individuals who were possessed and were freed by his prayers.

What can a hermit who truly wants to live in seclusion do when confronted with the needs of others? Hilarion followed his heart and helped those in need. However, the number of people who came to him only increased. Jerome describes one of these encounters:

"After Hilarion had been in the desert for twenty-two years, a woman who was despised by her husband because she was infertile—after fifteen years of marriage, she still had no children—came to him for help. His fame had spread far and wide; he was known in all the cities of Palestine. Suddenly, the woman fell at his feet and said, 'Forgive my boldness; attribute it to my distress!' Why do you look away? Why do you want to flee from a suppliant? Do not see in me a woman, but one persecuted by misfortune." After all, it was a woman who gave birth to the Savior. It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. Finally, Hilarion stopped and asked the woman—the first he had seen in a long time—why she had come and why she was crying. When she told him, he raised his eyes to Heaven and urged her to have confidence. Then, he sent the weeping woman away. A year later, he saw her again, this time with a son. This was his first miracle."

The miracles continued. No matter how remote the place to which Hilarion retired, he did not find the solitude he longed for as a hermit. Monks sought a spiritual father to guide them on their path to following Christ, and people sought his help for their various needs. God made Hilarion's witness fruitful, and despite his fame, he never allowed himself to be seduced by the world.

St. Jerome wrote a biography about Hilarion, describing the many healings and deliverances he performed, as well as the monasteries he founded. Through St. Hilarion, the Lord gave the Church an extraordinarily fruitful witness. While not all of us can lead such an austere life, we can all choose to love God more and more, even if it means our dreams and desires do not come true as we wish.

Meditation on the Gospel of the day: <https://en.elijamission.net/2023/10/24/>