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ATHANASIUS OF ALEXANDRIA AND “THE KINGDOM OF THE DESERT” IN HIS WORKS

The concept of monasticism is ancient and can be found in many religions and philosophies. In the centuries immediately before Christ, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Judaism developed alternative styles of life which involved renouncing the world in some ways, in order to seek liberation or purification or union with God, sometimes as a solitary ascetic, sometimes in community. In the third and fourth century, a significant numbers of Christians preferred the desert as the way to come closer to God. So they abandoned their family life and they chose the isolation in the wilderness as the safe path which ends in their deification¹.

The wilderness in the Bible is a barely perceptible space, an in-between place where ordinary life is suspended, identity shifts, and where the new possibilities emerge. Beginning with the Exodus and then through the Old Testament times, the desert was regarded as a place of spiritual renewal and return to God². From the experiences of the Israelites in exile, one can learn that the Biblical wilderness is a place of danger, temptation, and chaos, but it is also a place for solitude, nourishment, and revelation from God³. These themes emerge again in Jesus' journey into the wilderness after His baptism (cf. Mt 4:1-11; Mk 1:12-13; Lk 4:1-13) and when the Christianity started to develop in the period of Roman Empire. Early Christian monasticism drew its inspiration from the examples of the Prophet Elijah and John the Baptist, who both lived alone in the desert and above all from the story of Jesus' time in solitary struggling with Satan in the desert, before his public ministry⁴.

So in the desert of Egypt, the Christian monasticism was born at the end of the third and in the fourth century. In the Egyptian desert, the revolutionary

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¹ Cf. G. Herring, *An Introduction to the History of Christianity: From the Early Church to the Enlightenment*, New York 2006, 67.

² Cf. D.W. Kling, *The Bible in History. How the Texts Have Shaped the Times: How the Texts have shaped the times*, New York 2006, 33.

³ Cf. W. Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism*, New York 2004, 3.

⁴ Cf. Harmless, *Desert Christians*, p. 11-12.

Christians, who were seeking God, led their ascetic life. They renounced the world in order to follow individually God's call. Their withdrawal from the society and from the towns gave them a chance to know the genuine spirituality⁵. Drawing the eschatological dimension of the Church, the isolation of monks in the desert did not have as goal to escape from history and the world, but to "grab" the way of the salvation and the experience of the God's kingdom within history⁶.

The Egyptian Christian monasticism, created and developed in the desert, was the result of love towards asceticism which has been cultivated by the Christian teaching. Of course, before the appearance of Christian monasticism there were other forms of solitary life, which differed much from the standards of Christian asceticism which were the basis for monasticism. Furthermore, the various ascetic tendencies created within the Christian religion were linked many times to the enthusiastic tendencies that often reached the limits of hyperbole⁷.

The tradition of Christian monasticism began with St Paul's of Thebes retreating to a cave in the Egyptian desert in 250 A.D. to avoid the persecution initiated by the emperor Decius. Besides St. Paul⁸, there may have been other Egyptian hermits at this time. The best known of them was St. Anthony. He undoubtedly was a historical figure who in the earliest decades of the fourth century became one of the leaders of the change from village asceticism to desert monasticism. Some say that Anthony was the first and that opinion is commonly held by the mass of the people but is only partly true. Since it is not so much that he was the first as that he was the one who did so much to encourage others to do so. Indeed, even the disciples of Anthony – Amathas and Macarius – who buried Anthony's body, nowadays assert that Paul of Thebes was the pioneer of this kind of life⁹.

Generally, the rapid expansion of Christianity during the third and fourth century had as a result a similar growth of the number of people pursuing an ascetic life. The asceticism didn't have as characteristic the hatred or loathing of the body, because the body is not something evil for Christians. It had as the goal to imitate the risen and triumphant Christ¹⁰.

⁵ Cf. D. Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism*, New York 1993, 3.

⁶ Cf. J.E. Goehring, *The Origins of Monasticism*, in: *Eusebius, Christianity, and Judaism*, ed. H.W. Attridge – G. Hata, Detroit 1942, 237.

⁷ Cf. Herring, *An Introduction to the History of Christianity*, p. 68.

⁸ Paul the Hermit lived in close communion with God. Before the end of his life at age 113, he met with St. Anthony the Great, who led an early community of monks elsewhere in the Egyptian desert. Cf. Hieronymus, *De Vitis Patrum* 7.

⁹ Cf. *ibidem*.

¹⁰ Cf. Herring, *An Introduction to the History of Christianity*, p. 72.

1. The Desert of Egypt as the center of Christian asceticism. The desert of Egypt played an important role for the people of Israel. It offered them, after the exodus from Egypt, shelter and safety from the fury of the Egyptians. Within this, the Israelites were able to come closer to God and to enter into a new covenant with Him¹¹. For nearly forty years the children of Israel were lost to view in the obscurity of the desert (cf. Deut 2:14-15). Israel saw great wonders done by the hand of God since coming out from Egypt. They saw the plagues, the death of the firstborns, the Red Sea parted, the Egyptian army destroyed and they saw victories won by prayer. They ate the manna, they drank the miraculously provided water and they saw miracle after miracle. The miracles for them could not accomplish anything in the heart of Israel. If God did not send His Spirit to change their hearts, then the greatest imaginable wonder would not make a difference¹².

In Christianity, the desert was the place where asceticism and institutional monasticism have begun as a way for the testimony of their devotion to God. Anthony of Egypt (251-356) is the best known of these early hermit¹³-monks¹⁴. Anthony the Great and Pachomius were early monastic innovators in Egypt. In 313 A.D. Constantine the Great issued "The Edict of Milan"¹⁵ which decriminalized Christianity throughout the Empire and returned to the Christians their confiscated property. The way was opened for the Church to become an institution within the Roman Empire. But while this might have been a boon to the respectability of Christians in the eyes of the world around them, and was even

¹¹ Some 40 years before this, at Horeb (Mount Sinai), Israel made a covenant with God: "Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read in the hearing of the people. And they said, «All that the LORD has said we will do, and be obedient». And Moses took the blood, sprinkled it on the people, and said, «This is the blood of the covenant which the LORD has made with you according to all these words»" (Ex 24:7-8); "Carefully follow the terms of this covenant, so that you may prosper in everything you do" (Deut 29:9) and "The Lord your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live" (Deut 30:6).

¹² Cf. Deut 29:4-6: "And I have led you forty years in the wilderness. Your clothes have not worn out on you, and your sandals have not worn out on your feet. You have not eaten bread, nor have you drunk wine or similar drink, that you may know that I am the Lord your God".

¹³ The word hermit comes from the Greek ἡρῆμ...θῆς – "of the desert", which in turn comes from αἰρημοί, signifying "desert", "uninhabited", hence "desert-dweller".

¹⁴ The word "monk" comes from the Greek word μοναχός, meaning "alone".

¹⁵ Cf. E. Artemi, *Emperor Constantine and the theology of Christianity from his autocracy to the second Ecumenical Council*, in: *Saint Emperor Constantine and the Christianity. Proceedings of International Conference Commemorating the 1700th Anniversary of the Edict Milan*, ed. D. Bojović, II, Niš 2013, 87: "The Edict did not only protect Christians from religious persecution, but all religions, allowing anyone to worship whichever deity they chose. A similar edict had been issued in 311 by Galerius, then senior emperor of the Tetrarchy; Galerius' edict granted Christians the right to practice their religion without causing any troubles «Ut denuo sint Christiani et conventicula sua componant, ita ut ne quid contra disciplinam agant» but did not restore any property to them".

thought by some to be a step toward the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth, many saw the Romanization of Christianity as an inhibitor to the real purpose of Christ, namely, to make people holy. This was true, because, without the suffering of persecution and martyrdom as a means to Christian perfection, many of the Christians began to conform to this world. In their freedom and wealth, they began to forget that the Christian life is about leading the soul from this world to the Kingdom of Heaven. It was a path of suffering in this life in order to obtain peace in the future. Many people who were seeking spiritual perfection, instead of the pleasures of this world, removed themselves to the desert to seek out those, who had adopted solitary lifestyles there¹⁶.

There is a popular misunderstanding that the ascetic disciplines of Christ were undertaken by ascetics as a means of punishing or mortifying their bodies – as though that were the goal. Neither did Christian ascetics hate their body nor did they want to think it as the prison of the soul¹⁷. Most of the ascetics pursued their lifestyles for the same reason that set Anthony on his path: the goal of spiritual perfection¹⁸. Their unique and ultimate goal was to enter the kingdom of God, or kingdom of heaven. The immediate aim was purity of heart. For without purity of heart none can enter into that kingdom (cf. Lk 17:21). The purity of heart is the precondition of the vision of God. This was the goal of asceticism – the true Christian asceticism not the asceticism of the stoic who thought that they could make themselves perfect, but the asceticism of the believer who knew that they couldn't and so they turned them to the only One, the Triune God who can.

The Desert Fathers had a major influence on the development of Christianity. The desert monastic communities that grew out of the informal gathering of hermit monks became the model for Christian monasticism. The eastern monastic tradition at Mount Athos and the western Rule of St Benedict both were strongly influenced by the traditions that began in the desert¹⁹.

2. St. Anthony and Athanasius of Alexandria. St. Anthony the Great (ca. 251-356) is known as the father of monasticism and his long ascetical sermon, included in *The Life of Saint Anthony* by St. Athanasius the Great, can be called the first monastic rule. Concerning Anthony of Egypt we have more knowledge than of any other saint of this early period, thanks to the biography

¹⁶ Cf. A. Christophilopoulou, *Byzantine History, A'*, 324- 610, Thessaloniki 1996², 132.

¹⁷ Cf. S. Fraser, *The Orthodox Christian Concept of Man*, "Word Magazine" 7 (1972) 11-12: "There is no 'dualistic antagonism' between a man's soul and body as though he were also endowed with intrinsic schizophrenia. To overemphasize either aspect would lead to a denial of the truth. The body does not imprison the spirit as was taught by Platonism, but is meant to be forever united with it. Spirit and matter in man are not in opposition to each other. Man has one nature – human. He is a unity of body and soul, the latter being called 'spirit' in its higher aspect".

¹⁸ Cf. D.B. Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality*, New York 2007, 238-239.

¹⁹ Cf. A. Tradigo, *Icons and Saints of the Eastern Orthodox Church*, Milan 2004, 322; W.H. Mac-kean, *Christian Monasticism in Egypt to the Close of the Fourth Century*, London 1920, 106.

written by St. Athanasius in the mid-fourth century. According to *The Life of Saint Anthony*, he retreated to the wastelands of Egypt to lead an intensely ascetic life with the sole purpose of pursuing God in solitary prayer. He remained alone until his holiness and evident wholesomeness attracted a growing circle of followers. So deep was his influence that he is considered the father, not only of the movement of desert fathers and mothers of fourth-fifth century Egypt, but also the father of the entire Christian monastic family.

The Life of Saint Anthony provides a detailed account of Anthony's acts of asceticism and penitence and his battles against incessant demonic temptations. Anthony the Great was born around 251 A.D. in Upper Egypt and lived a long life. He was descent an Egyptian: his parents were of good family and possessed considerable wealth, and as they were Christians he also was reared in the same faith. Athanasius writes:

"After the death of his father and mother he was left alone with one little sister: his age was about eighteen or twenty, and on him the care both of home and sister rested. Now it was not six months after the death of his parents, and going according to custom into the Lord's House, he communed with himself and reflected as he walked how the Apostles left all and followed the Saviour"²⁰.

This word penetrated Anthony's heart and changed his life. He sold his portion of his family's wealth and distributed it to the needy and churches, after he gave to his sister her portion²¹. Anthony placed his sister in a convent²², gave away all his possessions and withdrew to a cave near his village to live in absolute solitude. Then he left the world and went on visiting the hermits, spending his time in prayer and meditation, and reading the Sacred Scripture²³. He henceforth devoted himself to discipline, taking heed to himself and training himself with patience. For there were not yet so many monasteries in Egypt, and no monk at all knew of the distant desert; but all who wished to give heed to themselves practiced the discipline in solitude near their own village. There was then in the next village an old man who had lived the life of a hermit from his youth up. Anthony, after he had seen this man, imitated him in piety. And at first he began to abide in places outside the village, then if he heard of a good man anywhere, like the prudent bee, he went forth and sought him, nor turned back to his own place until he had seen him; and he returned, having got from the good man as it were supplies for his journey in the way of virtue²⁴. So dwelling there at first, he confirmed his purpose not to return to the

²⁰ Athanasius Alexandrinus, *Vita Antonii* 2, PG 26, 841C, transl. J.H. Newman: St. Athanasius the Great, *Life of St. Anthony the Great*, <http://www.elpenor.org/athanasius/anthony-life.asp> [30. 08. 2015].

²¹ Cf. *ibidem*.

²² Cf. *ibidem*.

²³ Cf. *ibidem* 3.

²⁴ Cf. *ibidem*. See J. Cowan, *Desert Father. A Journey in the Wilderness with Saint Anthony*, Boston 2002, 22.

abode of his fathers or to the remembrance of his kinsfolk, but to keep all his desire and energy for perfecting his discipline. He worked, however, with his hands, having heard, “he who is idle let him not eat”²⁵ (2Thess 3:10) and part he spent on bread and part he gave to the needy. And he was constant in prayer, knowing that a man ought to pray in secret unceasingly. For he had given such heed to what was read that none of the things that were written fell from him to the ground, but he remembered all, and afterward his memory served him for books. It was during the solitude that he was faced with great spiritual temptation from the devil and spent many years fighting the temptation with prayer and fasting²⁶. After some time, people came to visit him seeking advice, healing and aspiring to live in his way. By the beginning of the fourth century, St. Anthony started providing guidance to a community of hermits that had grown around him and which established him a father of the monks. He provided spiritual and practical advice to his disciples²⁷.

He was thinking that the asceticism is the way for the eternal life, for this reason, he was encouraging his disciples all the time:

“Let this especially be the common aim of all, neither to give way having once begun, nor to faint in trouble, nor to say: We have lived in the discipline a long time: but rather as though making a beginning daily let us increase our earnestness. For the whole life of man is very short, measured by the ages to come, wherefore all our time is nothing compared with eternal life. And in the world everything is sold at its price, and a man exchanges one equivalent for another, but the promise of eternal life is bought for a trifle. For it is written, «The days of our life in them are threescore years and ten, but if they are in strength, fourscore years, and what is more than these is labour and sorrow»” (Ps 89(90):10)²⁸.

While St. Anthony was probably the first Christian monk, the legacy of the monastery grew in the Egyptian desert around him and the inspiration of his great story inspired generations of monastics throughout the East²⁹. St. Anthony taught that the evil is the worst enemy of an ascetic, but it could be overcome through the prayer and with the sign of the cross:

“Let us always remember during those times of our greatest despair and when we struggle even to pray, to make the sign of the cross and remember Gods greatest gift to us, the gift of salvation!”³⁰.

²⁵ Cf. Athanasius Alexandrinus, *Vita Antonii* 3.

²⁶ Cf. S. Papadopoulos, *Patrologia*, II, Athens 1990, 186-187.

²⁷ Cf. Athanasius Alexandrinus, *Vita Antonii* 3.

²⁸ Athanasius Alexandrinus, *Vita Antonii* 16, PG 26, 868A, transl. Newman, <http://www.elpenor.org/athanasius/anthony-life.asp>.

²⁹ Cf. Papadopoulos, *Patrologia*, II, p. 183.

³⁰ Athanasius Alexandrinus, *Vita Antonii* 78, PG 26, 952B, transl. Newman, <http://www.elpenor.org/athanasius/anthony-life.asp>.

Saint Athanasius described the mode of Saint Anthony's life was actually semi-eremitic in essence. This type of monasticism was mid-way between monachism and the cenobitic system³¹. While the earliest desert fathers lived as hermits, they were rarely completely isolated, but often lived in proximity to one another, and soon loose-knit communities began to form in such places as the Desert of Nitria and the Desert of Skete. The progression from hermit "anchorite"³² to monk "cenobite"³³ living in community under one abbot, came quickly, when in 346 A.D. St. Pachomius established in Egypt the first cenobitic Christian monastery. Ten years later, St. Anthony died. According to Jerome's chronicle, Anthony of the Desert, warrior and saint of God, died in 356 at the age of a hundred and five. This date is corroborated by a letter from Serapion of Thmuis to Anthony's disciples which spoke about Anthony's death³⁴.

Athanasius of Alexandria (295/296-373)³⁵, the great champion of the faith against Arianism³⁶, came from Egypt, the same country as Anthony. When he

³¹ Cf. Angaelos [Bishop], *The Altar in the Midst of Egypt: A Brief Introduction to the Coptic Orthodox Church*, Stevenage 2000, 33.

³² The term "anchorite" (from the Greek ἀναχωρῶ, signifying "to withdraw", "to depart into the country outside the circumvallated city") is often used as a synonym for hermit, not only in the earliest written sources but throughout the centuries.

³³ The English words "cenobite" and "cenobitic" are derived, via Latin, from the Greek words κοινός – "common", and βίος – "life". The adjective can also be cenobiac (κοινοβιακός). A group of monks living in community is often referred to as a "cenobium".

³⁴ Cf. R. Draguet, *Une lettre de Sérapion de Thmuis aux disciples d'Antoine (A.D. 356) en versions syriaque et arménienne*, "Le Muséon" 64 (1951) 1-25; S. Rubenson, *The Letters of St. Anthony: Monasticism and the Making of a Saint*, Minneapolis 1995, 42, note 4.

³⁵ Athanasius of Alexandria was a protege and successor of Patriarch Alexander of Alexandria, who's generally credited with having come up with the Trinity doctrine. He is one of the greatest and most controversial figures of early Christian history. His life spanned the period of fundamental change for the Roman Empire and the Christian Church that followed the conversion of Constantine the Great, the first Christian Roman emperor. A bishop and theologian, an ascetic and a pastoral father, Athanasius played a central role in shaping Christianity in these crucial formative years. As bishop of Alexandria (328-373) he fought to unite the divided Egyptian Church and inspired admiration and opposition alike from fellow bishops and the emperor Constantine and his successors. Athanasius attended the first ecumenical Council of Nicaea summoned by Constantine in 325 and as a theologian would be remembered as the defender of the original Nicene Creed against the "Arian" heresy. He was also a champion of the ascetic movement that transformed Christianity, a patron of monks and virgins and the author of numerous ascetic works including the famous *Life of Anthony*. All these elements played their part in Athanasius' vocation as a pastoral father, responsible for the physical and spiritual wellbeing of his congregations. See D.M. Gwynn, *Athanasius of Alexandria Bishop, Theologian, Ascetic, Father*, Oxford 2012.

³⁶ Cf. Artemi, *Emperor Constantine and the theology of Christianity*, p. 89: "It is referred that Athanasius had a very important role into Nicene Council. His theology was the base for the Creed of the Council. Athanasius was teaching that there isn't any analogy between God and the beings. In *Contra Gentiles*, Athanasius was discussing the means by which God can be known. These are mainly two, the soul and nature. God may be known through the human soul, for 'although God Himself is above all, the road which leads to Him is not far, nor even outside ourselves, but is within

was writing *The Life of Saint Anthony*, he was bishop of Alexandria, the capital of Egypt. He showed a profound interest in the monasticism and asceticism. In his writings, the monasticism took a serious place in the thinking of the Church and it was developed because of its establishment by Athanasius³⁷. In his work on Anthony, Athanasius referred to the theological depth of the asceticism. He saw in St Anthony “a worthy model of asceticism”³⁸. Also, he spoke about the different kinds of spiritual fights. *The Life of Saint Anthony* was written soon after the death of Anthony (356), during “the Arian invasion” which forced Athanasius to leave Alexandria and take refuge into the desert. It was written for brothers in another land, in a country where monasticism only recently begun to appear.

In conclusion, Athanasius the Great is the first authority in the Christian Church who recognized the importance of monasticism for the Christian way of life³⁹. He was acclaimed as one of the ascetics. This personal involvement of Athanasius with the asceticism was to become one of the decisive factors of his forty-five years-long tenure of the Episcopal life⁴⁰.

3. “The Kingdom of Desert” in Athanasius’ Great works. Athanasius was the bishop of Alexandria, a position which he held for 45 years, 16 of which he spent in exile. As a result of rises and falls in Arianism’s influence, he was banished from Alexandria only to be later restored on at least five separate occasions, perhaps as many as seven. This gave rise to the expression *Athanasius contra mundum et mundus contra Athanasium* – “While the world is set against Athanasius, Athanasius is equally set against the world”⁴¹. During some of his exiles, he spent time with the desert fathers, monks and

us, and it is possible to find it by ourselves’. It is also possible to know God not only through person’s soul but through the creation. The order of the universe shows not only that there is a God but also that he is one. For Athanasius, the Word of God who rules the world is the living Logos of God, that is, the Word who is God himself’.

³⁷ Cf. Papadopoulos, *Patrologia*, II, p. 183.

³⁸ Cf. Athanasius Alexandrinus, *Vita Antonii* Prologue, PG 26, 837BC, transl. Newman, <http://www.elpenor.org/athanasius/anthony-life.asp>: “These things are insignificant compared with Anthony’s virtues, but judge from them what the man of God Anthony was like. From his youth until his old age, he kept his zeal for asceticism, he did not give in to the desire for costly foods because of his age, nor did he alter his clothing because of the infirmity of his body. He did not even wash his feet with water. He remained very healthy, and he could see well because his eyes were sound and undimmed. Not one of his teeth fell out, but near the gums they had become worn due to his advanced age. He remained strong in his hands and feet [...]. He was spoken of everywhere, and was admired by everyone, and was sought even by those who had not seen him, which is evidence of his virtue and of a soul dear to God”. See Papadopoulos, *Patrologia*, II, p. 185.

³⁹ Cf. Ch. Kannengiesser, *Athanasius of Alexandria and the Ascetic Movement of his Time*, in: *Asceticism*, ed. V.L. Wimbush – R. Valantasis, Oxford 1998, 479.

⁴⁰ Cf. *ibidem*.

⁴¹ Cf. H. Giles, *There is one God, and one mediator between God and Men, the man Jesus*

hermits who lived in remote areas of Egypt and "were established in the faith of God, and sanctified in Christ, and who say, «Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed Thee» (Mt 19:21)"⁴². One experience of a different kind, most fruitful in its consequences, was Athanasius's acquaintance with the great hermit St. Anthony of Egypt. The life and thought of Athanasius showed just how worldly – and deeply political – ascetic theology could be. And also, he underlined that the ascetics could be away from the world but on the other hand near it and concerning it. Athanasius tells us, in his *The Life of Saint Anthony*, that he often saw Anthony and although that reading of the conclusion of the preface, which makes him say that "he himself for some time attended on him, and poured water on his hands"⁴³ may be considered doubtful, yet we know that he was afterwards spoken of as "the ascetic", and that when, years later, he took shelter in the cells of the monks of Egypt, he found himself perfectly at home⁴⁴.

Athanasius contracted an admiration for monasticism, which would not surprise those who remembered that the spiritual intensity of the Christian life had found a most emphatic, though a one-sided expression, in the lives of men who fled, like Anthony, from a society at once tainted and brutalized beyond all modern conception. He admired the ascetics who colonized the desert. Those monks came forth from their own people, and enrolled themselves for citizenship in the heavens⁴⁵. For Athanasius, the ascetics in the desert were part of the kingdom of the desert. Through his works, it is presented how the Alexandrian Bishop honored the Christian asceticism. The kingdom of desert was the forerunner of the eternal kingdom of God. There, the life of monks should be as the model of the dedicated life to the incarnated God, Jesus Christ. The monks and Athanasius had the mutual admiration for each other. This appreciation and respect can be found in a strong bond in collaboration.

Athanasius' *Festal Letters* of the years 333-334 and work *On the Incarnation* are a clear testimony that bishop of Alexandria had chosen to dedicate them to Christians who were living in desert, as a creative appropriation of mystical values of asceticism⁴⁶. Also, he tried to persuade monks and virgins to stay stable in their decision for a life dedicated to Christ. He wrote letters to virgins warning them that to live celibately with a man was to pour fuel on the flame of passion: "For does a person tie up a fire in his bosom and not burn his

Christ, in: J. H. Thom – J. Martineau – H. Giles, *Unitarianism Defended: A Series of Lectures*, London 1839, 22.

⁴² Athanasius Alexandrinus, *Epistula ad monachos* 1, PG 25, 691A, own translation.

⁴³ Idem, *Vita Antonii* Prologue, PG 26, 840A, transl. Newman, <http://www.elpenor.org/athanasius/anthony-life.asp>.

⁴⁴ Cf. *ibidem* 14.

⁴⁵ Cf. *ibidem* 14.

⁴⁶ Cf. Kannengiesser, *Athanasius of Alexandria and the Ascetic Movement of his Time*, p. 485.

clothes?” (Prov 6:27)⁴⁷, “Or does a man walk on a fire’s burning coals and not burn his feet?” (Prov 6:28)⁴⁸.

Athanasius practiced the ascetic life with great zeal. Having a great love for the desert monks who became his protection again and again underlined facts for the life of St. Anthony, in order to show the monks how they should live⁴⁹ in the kingdom of desert, avoiding the traps of the Satan:

“The devil, therefore, as David says in the Psalms (Ps 37:12), observed Anthony and gnashed his teeth against him. But Anthony was consoled by the Savior and continued unhurt by his wiles and varied devices. As he was watching in the night, the devil sent wild beasts against him. And almost all the hyenas in that desert came forth from their dens and surrounded him; and he was in the midst while each one threatened to bite. Seeing that it was a trick of the enemy he said to them all: «If they have received power against me I am ready to be devoured by you; but if ye were sent against me by demons, stay not, but depart, for I am a servant of Christ» (Ps 23:4). When Anthony said this they fled, driven by that word as with a whip”⁵⁰.

The patriarch of Alexandria, Athanasius, underlined that Christians, who chose to live in the kingdom of desert, were isolated from the world without stopping to take care of people: those who draw near to God do not withdraw from men, but rather become truly close to them. He underlined the monks should follow the advice of a leader, as Anthony the Great. He explained that the Scriptures were enough for instruction, but it was a good thing to encourage one another in the faith and to stir up with words:

“Wherefore they, as children, carried that which they know to their father, and he [Anthony] as the elder share his knowledge and what experience had taught him with them”⁵¹.

This especially was the common aim of all, neither to give way having once begun, nor to faint in trouble, nor to say that they had lived in the discipline a long time; but rather as though making a beginning daily, they should increase their earnestness. For the whole life of man would be very short, measured by the ages to come, wherefore all their time was nothing compared with eternal life⁵².

⁴⁷ Cf. Athanasius Alexandrinus, *Vita Antonii* 47, PG 26, 912B. See J.E. Goehring, *Alone in the Desert? Why thousands of early Christians took up the monastic way*, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/1999/issue64/64h020.html>, 3-4 [29. 08. 2015].

⁴⁸ Cf. Athanasius Alexandrinus, *Vita Antonii* 33-34, PG 26, 893A-B. See Goehring, *Alone in the Desert?*, p. 3-4.

⁴⁹ Cf. Athanasius Alexandrinus, *Vita Antonii* Prologue.

⁵⁰ Ibidem 52, PG 26, 917C, transl. Newman, <http://www.elpenor.org/athanasius/anthony-life.asp>.

⁵¹ Ibidem 16, PG 26, 868AB, transl. Newman, <http://www.elpenor.org/athanasius/anthony-life.asp>.

⁵² Cf. ibidem 16.

Athanasius, through the words of St. Anthony, taught the ascetics and the monks how they should behave in order to go from the kingdom of desert to the eternal Kingdom of God. Also they should avoid the communion with any heretics and especially with Arians⁵³ and they should obey their bishop, if the latter thought and acted with an orthodox way. They should obey at home as children they should obey their father, and not oppose what he approved⁵⁴. Also, the desert fathers should emphasize the inevitability and benefits of temptation. Recognizing that all were tempted and all fall, they should inculcate forgiveness of others. The monks should not fear, for love cast out fear⁵⁵. They must do manual work and pray⁵⁶. Also, they should have God before their eyes and live according to the Scripture⁵⁷. They should stay in their monastic solitudes, and not be quick to move around⁵⁸. They must have humility⁵⁹, to be humble⁶⁰, prepared to bear insults, and able to control their tongues⁶¹. They should not trust in their own righteousness⁶². The monk needed to learn and exercise discernment over the movements of his own heart⁶³. Visions and prophecies, even if true, could come from the devil⁶⁴. A candid discussion with an experienced person would be a help to discernment⁶⁵. Every monk needed to make a hard effort to pray and develop virtues. He must dispossess himself of things⁶⁶. Nevertheless, just as a bow should not be strung too tightly, so the monk should relax his asceticism sometimes⁶⁷. All these, they made them to live always in God's presence, which was the most precious spiritual gift. When they put in practice all these advice, they should be worthy of the Spirit of adoption which Christ had given them and ready for Christ's return⁶⁸.

Athanasius presented Anthony's life as the way that a monk could follow in the kingdom of the desert. They should imitate Anthony's attitude as a monk. Athanasius argued that it was not the physical dimension of Anthony that distinguished him from the rest, but the stability of his character and the purity of

⁵³ Cf. idem, *Epistula ad Maximum* 1-5; idem, *Epistula ad monachos* 2; idem, *Ad episcopos Aegypti et Libyae. Epistula Encyclica Contra Arianos* 17.

⁵⁴ Cf. idem, *Epistula ad Palladium* 1; Eph 6:1-3.

⁵⁵ Cf. Athanasius Alexandrinus, *Vita Antonii* 19-20.

⁵⁶ Cf. ibidem 3-4.

⁵⁷ Cf. ibidem.

⁵⁸ Cf. ibidem 4-5.

⁵⁹ Cf. idem, *De virginitate* 5, 1-5.

⁶⁰ Cf. ibidem 8, 1-9.

⁶¹ Cf. idem, *Vita Antonii* 4-5.

⁶² Cf. ibidem.

⁶³ Cf. ibidem 7.

⁶⁴ Cf. ibidem 36.

⁶⁵ Cf. ibidem 16.

⁶⁶ Cf. ibidem 4.

⁶⁷ Cf. Kannengiesser, *Athanasius of Alexandria and the Ascetic Movement of his Time*, p. 480.

⁶⁸ Cf. Athanasius Alexandrinus, *Vita Antonii* 4.

his soul. The latter was free of confusion, Anthony held his outer senses also undisturbed, so that from the soul's joy his face was cheerful as well, and from the movements of the body it was possible to sense and perceive the stable condition of the soul. He was never troubled, his soul was calm, and he never looked gloomy, his mind was joyous⁶⁹.

Generally, the kingdom of desert in Athanasius' work *The Life of Saint Anthony* was the practice of the words of Jesus Christ: "If thou hast a mind to be perfect, go home and sell all that belongs to thee; give it to the poor, and so the treasure thou hast shall be in heaven; then come back and follow me" (Mt 19:21). This writing deed of Athanasius inspired thousands of men and women to move to the desert and adopt a monastic lifestyle.

The desert always was a place where the people of God could have repentance and came near God. Athanasius the Great as a disciple of St. Anthony was influenced by him. With his work *The Life of Saint Anthony*, Athanasius showed how important for Christians is the kingdom of the desert, which is the forerunner of the Kingdom of God. In his work, he recorded the journey to God of an ideal monk. His example had the influence on the other young monks, who would try to come near God and avoid the traps of Satan. The ascetic values influenced Christian population and created the pillars for the expansion of Christianity because they made clear that the passions were a disaster in the life of a monk and generally in the life of every Christian.

Athanasius underlines that in the desert Anthony had reached a point in his spiritual relationship with God in which his mental state was entirely undisturbed. This was something that all the monks and nuns should imitate. Only then their bodies would be reflective of the peace in their inner soul. Their spiritual state manifested such a change in their physical body that they were imbued with joy. By this way, the Christians of the desert had shrugged off the burdens of man by embracing God and in return were freed from "confusion".

It was important to be remembered that Athanasius with his *The Life of Saint Anthony* strengthened the beginning of the monastic movement in Egypt and he spread the knowledge of monasticism in the Roman Empire and showed how precious the kingdom of desert is for the Christian Church. Also through his works, he showed how Christians and mainly monks should be:

"in humbleness of mind, and a pure conscience; in meditation of the law by night and by day. And casting away all hypocrisy and fraud, putting far from us all pride and deceit, let us take upon us love towards God and towards our

⁶⁹ Cf. *ibidem* 7.

neighbour, that being new [creatures], and receiving the new wine, even the Holy Spirit, we may properly keep the feast, even the month of these new [fruits]"⁷⁰.

ATANAZY Z ALEKSANDRII I „KRÓLESTWO PUSTYNI” W JEGO DZIELACH

(Streszczenie)

Prezentowany artykuł ma na celu ukazanie roli św. Atanazego Wielkiego w propagowaniu życia monastycznego w jego dziełach: *Żywocie świętego Antoniego*, *Listach do mnichów* i *Listach paschalnych*. Na przykładzie św. Antoniego Atanazy ukazywał rolę, ważność i zalety życia poświęconego Bogu, z dala od świata. Atanazy ukazuje się poprzez swe dzieła jako propagator monastycyzmu i życia ascetycznego, a jednocześnie obrońca ortodoksji. Dzięki jego pismom, monastycyzm, który wyrósł na egipskiej pustyni, stał się znany daleko poza Egiptem i stał się podstawą do tworzenia grup monastycznych w całym ówczesnym Imperium Rzymskim.

Key words: Athanasius of Alexandria, kingdom of the desert, Anthony the Great, monks, asceticism.

Słowa kluczowe: Atanazy Aleksandryjski, królestwo pustyni, Antoni Pustelnik, mnisi, ascetyzm.

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⁷⁰ Idem, *Epistula Festalis* 1, 9, PG 26, 1365C, transl. P. Schaff, NPNF II/4: *Athanasius*, ed. H. Wace, New York 2007, 509.

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