

Due to copyright restrictions,
this image is only available
in the print version of
Christian Reflection.

**Through his struggle against demons in the desert,
St. Anthony participated in God's gift of spiritual
freedom from sin.**

*Martin Schongauer (1435-1491), SAINT ANTHONY ABBOT TEMPTED BY DEMONS (c. 1470-1480).
Engraving. 29.1 x 22 cm. Corte di Mamiano, Fondazione Magnani Rocca, Parma, Italy. Photo: ©
Scala/Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.*

Under Assault

BY HEIDI J. HORNIK
AND ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

The freedom to truly be followers of Jesus Christ, the unhindered discipleship that we seek, is constantly threatened by various temptations. Martin Schongauer's famous image of St. Anthony being pulled in many directions at once by demons reminds us of the daily distractions that draw us away from prayer and faithful living.

St. Anthony the Great of Egypt (c. 251-356) became a larger-than-life hero in late antiquity. He was only about eighteen or twenty years old when he inherited his family's wealth upon the death of his parents. Several months later as he was thinking about how the first Christians in Jerusalem shared their possessions (Acts 4:32-35), he heard in church the reading of Jesus' instruction to the rich young man, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me" (Matthew 19:21-22; cf. Mark 10:21; Luke 18:22). "When he heard this, Anthony applied the Lord's commandment to himself...[and] immediately went home and sold the possessions he owned," notes his biographer, Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria.¹ Anthony became a humble and devoted disciple, learning self-restraint, cheerfulness, gentleness, prayer, diligence in reading, and compassion from the more mature Christians around him. "He did this in such a way that although he surpassed all others in glory, he was nevertheless dear to them all," Athanasius writes, such that "they called him God's friend."² Nevertheless, during this period Anthony was haunted by sexual temptations.

Precisely because Anthony continued to grow in goodness through loving others (and drew them to love him in spiritual friendship), Athanasius suggests, Satan decided to send subordinate demons to attack Anthony when he was thirty-five years old. In many ways, these trials echoed the devil's temptation of Christ in the desert (Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13; Mark 1:12-13). Just as Christ resisted temptation by quoting God's instruction – e.g., "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Deuteronomy 8:3); "Do not put the Lord your God to the test" (Deuteronomy 6:16); and "Worship the Lord your God and serve only him" (Deuteronomy 6:13) – so Anthony responded to Satan by singing a psalm: "The Lord is my helper and I will exult over my enemies" (Psalm 118:7).

Athanasius describes the later stages of the devil's temptation of Anthony as a physical attack by demons masquerading as wild animals of the desert:

Then...a horde of different kinds of demons poured out. They took on the shapes of wild animals and snakes and instantly filled the whole place with specters in the form of lions, bulls, wolves, vipers, serpents, scorpions and even leopards and bears, too.... The face of each of them bore a savage expression and the sound of their fierce voices was terrifying. Anthony, beaten and mauled, experienced even more atrocious pains in his body but he remained unafraid, his mind alert.³

Athanasius's account of vicious demonic assault reflects the early Christian interpretation of Psalm 91, where God defends the believer from a desert attack. This is the psalm, by the way, that Satan mockingly sang to Christ in the desert (Matthew 4:6; Luke 4:11).

Saint Anthony Abbot Tempted by Demons is one of the most popular depictions of this key event in Anthony's pilgrimage. It is one of 116 engravings attributed to the German painter and engraver Martin Schongauer; at the bottom is the monogram "M+S." Schongauer was a student at Leipzig University in 1465 and was probably an apprentice between 1466 and 1469. The technique of engraving allows, through fine strokes and crosshatching, an expressive quality for modeling and shading. Schongauer's excellent craftsmanship is seen in the extraordinary line quality and intricate detail of each of the demons who tug on every possible part of Anthony.

In Schongauer's engraving each demon has a monstrous form—with frog scales, raptor talons, or bat wings supporting its maniacal human, fish, goat, dog, hawk, or apelike face. Such grotesquery is entirely foreign to Athanasius's account of Antony's temptation in which the demons take on recognizable animal forms and only their "savage expression" and "fierce voices" betray their demonic nature.

While the Christians of late antiquity knew stories about creatures with mixed and monstrous forms, they did not associate these fabulous beings with evil. Indeed, it was said that Anthony himself once encountered a friendly centaur (half human and half horse) in the desert, and conversed with a faun ("a man of no great height, with a hooked nose, his forehead sprouting sharp horns, the lower part of whose body ended in goats' feet") who asked the saint to pray for Christ's blessing on his tribe.⁴ In *The City of God*, Augustine opines that "certain monstrous races of [rational mortal animal], spoken of in secular history" may indeed exist, but he is confident that "no matter what unusual appearance" these monstrosities have, they share our human nature and are redeemable.⁵

David Jeffrey suggests that Augustine's broad-minded view of fabulous creatures endured "until virtually the end of the Middle Ages. The more skeptical and negative views come after that."⁶ Drawing on Germanic sagas of hairy beasts, dragons, and giants, the artists and writers of the northern

Renaissance saw the humanoid monster as “an evil force representing a threat to society from outside its moral and domestic order.”⁷ The fearsome monstrosities depicted in Schongauer’s image may reflect this later tradition. Their grotesque outward forms serve as analogues of their deformed souls.

About the conclusion of Anthony’s trials it is reported that “Jesus did not fail to notice his servant’s struggle but came to protect him.” The vicious assault ends when Anthony raises his eyes to see the light of the divine presence above him. As might be expected, the weary Anthony asks his Lord: “Where were you, good Jesus? Where were you? Why were you not here from the beginning to heal my wounds?” A voice answers, “Anthony, I was here, but I was waiting to watch your struggle.”⁸ Jesus saw Anthony’s success in resisting the demonic temptations and that his faith was not weakened.

Like Anthony, we are not immune to life’s temptations. They are opportunities for faithful obedience and resistance to evil. Through our struggle against them we participate in God’s gift of spiritual freedom.

NOTES

1 *Life of Anthony by Athanasius*, chapter 2, in Carolinne White, translator and editor, *Early Christian Lives* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1998), 9.

2 *Life of Anthony*, chapter 4, in *Early Christian Lives*, 11.

3 *Life of Anthony*, chapter 9, in *Early Christian Lives*, 15.

4 *Life of Paul of Thebes by Jerome*, chapters 7-8, in *Early Christian Lives*, 78.

5 Augustine, *The City of God*, XVI, 8, translated by Marcus Dods (New York: Random House, 1950).

6 David Lyle Jeffrey, “Medieval Monsters,” in Marjorie M. Halpin and Michael M. Ames, eds., *Manlike Monsters on Trial: Early Records and Modern Evidence* (Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia Press, 1980), 47-64, here citing 51.

7 *Ibid.*, 62

8 *Life of Anthony*, chapter 10, in *Early Christian Lives*, 16.



HEIDI J. HORNİK

is Professor of Art History at Baylor University in Waco, Texas.



ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

is Director of the Center for Christian Ethics and Professor of Philosophy at Baylor University in Waco, Texas.