

Of the hagiographies available to modern readers, Athanasius' *The Life of Antony* and Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Macrina* present very different images of the lives of ascetics. The two accounts are not without similarity; still, the polemical tone and overall attention to the defeat of heretics in Athanasius' account stands in contrast to the far gentler, even maternal, tone of Gregory's account. Both present distinct images of the ascetic life. What characteristics make Antony and Macrina worthy of admiration?

Both Antony and Macrina come from noble, wealthy families. Not only that, both of their parents raised them in the Christian faith. By this, we know that Antony and Macrina were life-long followers of Christ, which speaks to the important theme of purity in both accounts. Both Antony and Macrina were obedient children who attained early spiritual maturity.¹ Antony's childhood is covered quickly and the first key information given about his ascetic discipline is an account of his having sold all his possessions, given the proceeds to the poor and gone to the outskirts of the village to learn the ascetic way.² Compare this account with Gregory's account of Macrina, in which Macrina's beauty and modesty is doted on as a primary symbol of her holiness. Early on, then, the two accounts begin to diverge. Macrina is defined, in many ways, as the exemplary woman, where Antony is characterized by hyper-masculine attributes.

Antony's ascetic experience is largely defined by experiences of struggle with demonic forces that manifest themselves in animal attacks, mental temptations and threats by other human beings. Antony is never overcome and urges those whom he

¹ Antony, 30-31 and Macrina 962A-964B

² Antony 31-32

teaches that Christ has overcome every power of the Devil for the sake of those who believe. Antony even goes so far as to say that believers can recognize the presence of demonic forces on others. "From this come immediately terror of the soul, confusion and disorder of thoughts, dejection, enmity toward ascetics, listlessness, grief, memory of relatives, and fear of death."³ In light of this description, Antony is later described; "He was never troubled, his soul being calm, and he never looked gloomy, his mind being joyous."⁴ This seems ironic given the hagiography's frankness when describing Antony's rude behavior towards those who came to him for help.⁵

This description stands in stark contrast to Gregory's description of his sister, Macrina. Where Antony's first ascetic triumph is his willingness to part with his possessions, Macrina's triumph is her willingness to remain betrothed in spirit to the man her father chose for her in marriage, even after his death. It might be said that Antony parts with his possessions and Macrina does not resist being possessed. After his death, Macrina resolves never to leave her mother and her willingness to become a caretaker of others is celebrated as a saintly decision.⁶

By their example, both Macrina and Antony cause others around them to take on the ascetic life. Macrina's mother sells her possessions and together they take in guests and strangers to form a monastery of ascetic women.⁷ Not only that, Antony's and Macrina's devotion is so great that they receive supernatural attention. This is evidenced by the demonic attacks on Antony, in which he is, at one point, even attacked

³ Antony 58

⁴ Antony 81

⁵ Antony 67

⁶ Macrina 964A-966B

⁷ Macrina 970C, 976C

by Satan.⁸ On the other hand, Gregory of Nyssa is sent a vision concerning Macrina's death, which is apparently significant enough to warrant divine foretelling. Many other qualities are celebrated in the accounts of these saints, including their celebration of death as further union with Christ, their resistance of material wealth and even the presence of miraculous healings.

As his hagiography records, Gregory of Nyssa was an accused heretic; Athanasius was a strict adherent to orthodoxy.⁹ With this in mind, the differences between the two accounts are illuminated. The one accused of heresy emphasizes care for the stranger and is more concerned about the nurturing relationships between the ascetics. Athanasius' account is full of symbolic language that emphasizes the necessity for ascetics to resist heretical belief and to keep on guard against demonically influenced people. In our age, religious persons must navigate a relative smorgasbord of belief. Certainly, some are tempted to follow the example of Athanasius, violently resisting all forms of belief that are not identical to their own. As history has shown, violence begets violence. There is yet another way, as seen in *Life of Macrina* that emphasizes hospitality to the stranger (and their beliefs) and models for us a life of faith that is both obedient to Christ and attentive to others.

⁸ Antony 62.

⁹ Macrina 976A, Antony 81