

Saint Hilarion the Great

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On Wednesday of this week we remember a saint who began life possessing many of the delights the world can offer, and willingly gave them all up. He is Saint Hilarion, who became one of the foremost ascetics of Palestine.

Born to pagan parents in a town called Thabatha, south of Gaza, Hilarion had a happy and relatively carefree childhood. He read and played music, enjoyed sports and games, and idled away hours with his friends. There was little to suggest that he would deny himself the pleasures of life as he grew up.

Hilarion's parents wanted to give him a good education along with his other advantages. They sent him to Alexandria in Egypt—a sophisticated city known for its libraries, schools, and excellent teachers—to study. It was then, as a student, that his life changed forever, and in ways his parents couldn't have anticipated.

Alexandria offered many forms of entertainment. A person could go to the theater, attend the circus, or shout with the crowds at violent, bloody contests in the arena. But Hilarion was unimpressed and even repelled by these. He found himself drawn instead to the assemblies of Christians who met often to worship. These people became his friends and his guides in the spiritual life.

Like everyone in Alexandria, Hilarion had heard about the famous monk who made his home in the forbidding Egyptian desert and lived a wonderfully simple, prayerful life there. The monk's name was Anthony, and before long Hilarion set out to visit him.

The visit changed young Hilarion's life forever. He stayed with Anthony for two months, and carefully observed everything the older man did—his constant prayer, his extremely austere diet, the gentle way he dealt with other people while being so strict in his own habits. Hilarion decided to begin a life modeled on Anthony's, and returned to Palestine. His parents were dead, so he quickly settled his affairs. Saint Jerome, who wrote an account of his life, described his efforts:

"With no other covering for his limbs but a shirt of sackcloth, and a cloak of skins which the blessed Anthony had given him when he set out, and a blanket of the coarsest sort, he found pleasure in the vast and terrible wilderness with the sea on one side and the marshland on the other. His food was only fifteen dried figs after sunset."

Like Anthony, Hilarion endured frightening and hideous demonic attacks. He was compelled to move frequently so as not to attract adoring followers, and constantly fought the temptations of his flesh and his lustful thoughts. But over the years he became a healer, a counselor, and a worker of miracles. He founded monasteries all over Palestine, instituting strict rules in each one. Hilarion's love of ease in his youth gave way to a love of the "narrow road" of monasticism which can seem harsh, but which has been the path of salvation for many men and women.