The First Hermit

Department of CHRISTIAN EDUCATION
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January 15 is the feast day of Venerable Paul of Thebes.

The region of upper Egypt in which he was born about 227 is called the "Thebaid" because it is near the city of Thebes. It's a desert area, and over the centuries it became the dwelling place of thousands of monks seeking to come close to God.

Paul was raised and well-educated in a loving Christian family. Orphaned as a teenager, he had no adult protection when imperial Rome began severely persecuting believers. He took refuge with friends.

One of the Roman government's ploys was to offer large rewards to people who turned in Christians who were hiding. Paul's greedy brother-in-law planned to give his name to the authorities, despite the tearful pleas of Paul's sister. Being warned of this, and wishing to spare his sister grief at her husband's treachery and his own arrest, Paul fled to the mountains.

At first Paul thought his time in the wilderness would last only until the persecution abated, but he found that he liked his new life. He went deeper into the desert, and discovered a large cave. Outside it was an ancient palm tree, with fruit for food and leaves for a garment. There was also a running stream. The cave became his home for the rest of his life, which lasted well over a hundred years.

When we think of the first person to pursue a life of prayer and fasting in the desert, we may remember Saint Anthony the Great. Tradition tells us that Anthony, living in another solitary place, also had the thought that "no monk more perfect than himself had settled in the desert." These words are from the life of Paul written by Saint Jerome in the fourth century.

Saint Jerome writes that Anthony had a vision in the night that "there was farther in the desert a much better man than he, and that he ought to go and visit him." Though already ninety, Anthony set out to find this elder.

An arduous journey finally brought him to Paul, and the two conversed for a whole day and night. As Anthony reluctantly prepared to leave, Paul asked the younger man to bring the cloak he'd been given by Saint Athanasius to use as Paul's burial garment, for he would die soon.

Anthony was amazed that Paul had heard of Athanasius and the cloak, but he did as Paul asked. When he had buried Paul, he took the elder's simple garment of palm leaves, and for the rest of his life honored "the first hermit" by wearing it only on Pascha and Pentecost.

Saint Jerome bluntly addresses the thoughtless, idle rich with these words about Paul: "Your drinking vessels are of precious stones; he satisfied his thirst with the hollow of his hand. Your tunics are of wrought gold; he had not the raiment of the meanest of your slaves. But poor though he was, Paradise is open to him; you with all your gold will be received into Gehenna."

Troparion - Tone 3

Inspired by the Spirit,
you were the first to dwell in the desert
in emulation of Elijah the zealot;
as one who imitated the angels,
you were made known to the world
by Saint Anthony the Great.
Righteous Paul, entreat Christ God
to grant us His great mercy.