

## Two Hermits



In January the feast days of two very different saints are celebrated. On the 17<sup>th</sup> we remember St Anthony of Egypt, and on 5<sup>th</sup>, Simeon Stylites.

Anthony was born around 250 and at about eighteen gave away all his possessions and commenced a life of asceticism. Around 285 he retired to the desert, where is said to have fought temptations that came to him in the form of wild beasts. His evident holiness standing in contrast to the sinfulness of the world, and his ordered life standing in contrast to the eccentricities of some other hermits attracted followers and around 305

Anthony came out of his solitude to organise a community of hermits. They lived according to a rule, but without the communal life that characterised later orders. Although he returned to solitude a few years later, his opinions remained influential and the numbers attracted a solitary life in the desert. He is closely associated with St Athanasius, who played an important role at the Council of Nicea, wrote a life of Anthony which established his reputation and is said to have played influenced the conversion of St Augustine. Anthony died in 356.

St Simeon also sought solitude, but instead of going out, went up. A son of a shepherd, born in Syria around 390, Simeon first joined a monastery in Antioch, but then decided that he would live on the top of a pillar. His first pillar was only nine feet high, but because his devotion attracted a constant stream of pilgrims this did not give him the solitude he desired. Over the years he built larger and larger pillars, living the last ten years until his death in 459 on a pillar some sixty feet high. People still came, and others imitated his strange devotion.

St Simeon seems to have used his fame to exercise a considerable influence, both through conversation and through correspondence, and is known for converting pagans and reconciling enemies.

These two figures remind us of the need to be sometimes alone so that we can seek and wait on God. But they also remind us that we need also to act for good in the world: although they lived apart from the world, they continued to engage with it.

