

ABBA PAULA, THE FIRST HERMIT.

Born in the province of Tiba (Luxor, Upper Egypt) in the year 229 A.D., Paula was the second son of a very rich man.

When the father died, the two sons wanted to share the inheritance, so Peter, being the eldest, took the majority and gave what was left over to his brother Paula. This action caused great friction between the two brothers, and because they could not come to an agreement, they decided to settle the matter in court.

Along the way, they noticed a coffin being carried, and a great multitude mourning the loss. Paula approached one of the men to find out who had died, and the man responded, "Son, this man who died today, delighted in luxuries and lived the life of indulgence, possessed large amounts of gold and silver, and always dressed in expensive attire. Today he left the world and all his riches behind. Take heed my son that we not follow his example, but rather persist in enduring spiritual struggles, for blessed is the man who lives in this world, but does not belong to this world, for the Lord will reward him richly in His Heavenly Kingdom."

Paula heard these words and felt as if he was spiritually awakened, and suddenly the world before him seemed as nought. He turned to his brother and said, "Brother, let us return." As they were returning home, Paula walked slowly behind his brother, then quickly escaped from his sight. Peter searched for days, and when he could not find his brother, he cried bitterly, "Why did I quarrel with my brother on worldly riches?!"

Having left the town, Paula found an empty tomb, and so he remained within it for three days and three nights, in continuous meditation and prayer. On the fourth day, an angel of the Lord appeared to him and led him into the inner Eastern Wilderness. The angel directed him into a deserted cave, which was located near a spring of water and a fruitful palm tree. He dressed

himself in a tunic he weaved from palms, and diligently prayed, "My Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, save me from the traps of the enemy, be merciful to me so that I may accomplish Your will and rest safely between Your hands, for to You my King, is all glory and power forever, amen!"

He began his ascetic life in the Eastern Wilderness in the year 250 A.D., and remained there for 80 years.

Abba Anthony meets Abba Paula:

One day, Abba Anthony thought to himself proudly, "I am the first person to ever venture into and live in the inner wilderness!" but the Lord revealed to him that, "within this wilderness lives a person whom the whole world is not worthy of his footstep." Immediately Abba Anthony took his rod and began searching for this saintly ascetic. He walked for an entire day, then fell on his knees to pray. He remained praying throughout the night, and in the morning he got up and continued his journey.

As the sun was setting, he noticed a cave nearby. When he approached it, he found the door closed, so he knelt on the ground and said, "My saintly father, you know who I am and where I am from, and I will not leave this place before seeing you! You who would not refuse the entry of an animal, I ask you, do not refuse me!" Abba Paula then replied from within the cave, "No one asks for charity by scolding, but rather by weeping."

Abba Anthony remained kneeling at the entrance of the cave for a long while, before finally Abba Paula opened the door for him. The two fathers embraced, then prayed together.

As they spoke about the many wonders of God, a raven flew passed and dropped a loaf of bread before them. Abba Paula held the loaf of bread reverently, and turned to Abba Anthony saying, "Blessed is the Lord my God; for eighty years He has provided for me half a loaf of bread daily, but today because of your presence, He has given us a full loaf! Blessed is the Lord, who satisfies the needs of my body!" Together they once again

stood to pray before eating.

They spent the entire night praising God, until the morning sun dawned. Abba Anthony then said to Abba Paula, "Blessed is the hour in which God made me worthy of seeing you my father." Abba Paula replied, "Anthony, return now to your cave and come back to me with the gown Pope Athanasius will give you, for with it you must wrap my body for burial; so go quickly, for the hour of my departure has come!" Abba Paula blessed and prayed for Abba Anthony, and then they embraced each other before departing.

Abba Anthony returned to his monastery after a two day journey through the wilderness. His disciples who were very worried about him being gone so long, rejoiced when they saw him. They ran towards him asking, "Father, where were you?" to which he replied, "I am a sinner and unworthy, for indeed the Lord has revealed to me someone much greater than I."

Taking the gown given to him by Pope Athanasius, Abba Anthony returned to the saintly father's cave. On arrival he saw a host of angels carrying the soul of the blessed saint Abba Paula. Abba Anthony entered his cave and found the saint lying on the ground with his hands outstretched like a cross. He wept bitterly. He then carefully wrapped the pure saint's body within the gown, and prayed over him with heartfelt tears.

As he was wondering how he was going to dig a grave for the saint's blessed body, two lions entered the cave, knelt down beside Abba Paula's body and kissed him. They then turned and began licking the feet of Abba Anthony as if to say, 'where shall we dig?' Abba Anthony drew the sign of the cross on the ground inside the cave, and immediately the lions began digging. After Abba Anthony placed Abba Paula's body within the grave, he took his garment made from weaved palm, and went back to the Patriarch Abba Athanasius and told him all that he had seen and experienced of the life of the great Abba Paula. The Patriarch took Abba Paula's garment as a blessing and only wore it three times a year : on the feast of Epiphany,

Easter and the Ascension of our gracious Saviour.

Pope Athanasius had the thought of bringing back from the wilderness the body of Abba Paula so that he may rest beside the body of Pope Ananious. So Abba Anthony, together with some priests went in search for Abba Paula's cave. After two days of wandering through the wilderness, they became disoriented and were unable to find the saint's cave. Abba Paula then appeared to Abba Athanasius in a vision saying, "Send word for the fathers to return from their search, because it is God's will that no one find my body." Immediately the Patriarch sent forth Abba Olgious that he might convey Abba Paula's message to the fathers, so that they may return from the wilderness.

Pope Athanasius wrote the life story of Abba Paula and placed it in the church of Alexandria, so that it may be a blessing and inspiration to all those seeking monasticism.

There was once a boy called Aladnos from Alexandria who fell terribly sick and died. Pope Athanasius said, "I took the garment which Abba Paula used to wear and placed it over the boy's body; immediately he arose, and I personally witnessed this."

Abba Paula lived to be over one hundred and ten years old, during which time he spent more than eighty years as an ascetic dwelling in the Eastern Wilderness.

The monastery of Abba Paula in the Eastern Wilderness was built in the 4th century, and to this day is the home for a community of monks. It is situated to the south east of the monastery of Abba Anthony. Both these monasteries are located in the centre of Boash, which is a town proceeding the province of Bani-Suweif.

Abba Anthony and Abba Paula are inseparable friends. They are found standing together in icons, mentioned together in Doxologies, and in the Liturgy's commemoration : "...our righteous father Abba Anthony the great, the upright Abba Paula..."

The church celebrates the feast of Abba Paula each year on the 2nd day of the blessed Coptic month Amsheer.

"Hail to our father Anthony the light of monasticism, hail to our father Pavli beloved of Christ..." (From the Verse of the Cymbals)