The description of the conversion of Anthony in his *Vita* written by Athanasius is the *locus classicus* for the portrayal of a radical conversion. Numerous are the echoes of this passage in early Christian writers. The author of the *Vita Antonii* may have stylized the biography in some respects, the outline of the aspirations of the new ascetic movement, as described by Athanasius, presents very authentic features.

Right at the beginning we notice that the example of the apostles and of the first Christian community led by them influenced the young Anthony.\(^1\) One Sunday morning, Anthony, son of a well-to-do Egyptian farmer, eighteen years of age, goes to the church and on the way, considers how to shape his life. At once texts from the New Testament occurred to him: that the apostles had given up all their possessions following the Lord;\(^2\) that some Christians had sold their possessions and put down the proceeds at the feet of the apostles to be distributed among the poor.\(^3\) After he entered the church, he heard another text of the same tenor\(^4\) and moreover, a week afterwards, he had a similar experience. It meant to him that those divine words were—like an oracle—intended for him personally. His answer was the radical resolution to detach himself from all property and so to be free to follow Christ and to seek perfection.

This is the first time a monastic text presents the apostles who follow Christ and the first community of Christians in Jerusalem with an ideal to aim at. The same idea is to be found in many later monastic writings. The texts about Jesus sending out His apostles and instructing them to set off without purse, rucksack or footwear were also quoted in this connection.\(^5\) The ascetics aimed at the revival

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\(^1\) Athanasius *Vita Antonii* 2.2–4 (SC 400.132).
\(^2\) Matt. 4.20.
\(^3\) Acts 4.32–5.
\(^4\) Matt. 19.21.
\(^5\) Matt. 10.5–15; Mark 6.7–13; Luke 10.2–12.
of the enthusiastic Christian community described in Acta Apostolorum 4. The life of the first Christians was interpreted as a programme of the way towards perfection.\(^6\)

In the life of the Church, again and again, these texts received a new actuality bringing about a new dynamic power. They accompanied the ascetics on their path of life, for asceticism is a laborious process and the imitation of Christ demands continuous attention from day to day. Monastic texts emphasize that restriction of material needs and the \textit{fuga mundi} are only a first step and that essentially it is the attitude of inner abstinence that is most important; it is this that makes possible the \textit{imitatio Christi} and total devotion to God. Only by means of continuous effort can the consistent way of life be acquired that reflects this ideal. Many ascetics looked back to the inspiring examples from the first days of the Church. ‘Heimweh nach der Urkirche’, as Bacht called it,\(^7\) was a characteristic feature of early Christian monasticism. Even more than the prophets of the Old Testament, did the apostles, as leaders of the earliest Christian communities, impose \textit{exempla}. They were, as Theodoret of Cyrrhus says, torches lighting the way for the Christians.\(^8\)

In the course of time, the importance of the apostles—who at first chiefly provided a standard of the Christian doctrine—in setting an example for Christian life was gradually stressed. Called by Christ Himself, they had given up their earthly possessions and, as Irenaeus already remarked, those who follow their example may also expect the reward of the apostles.\(^9\) In fact, the principal monastic ideas are a heritage of the earliest Christian traditions. The vocation of the monk is properly speaking the vocation of the baptized Christian. Monasticism has its roots in a spirituality that applies to all Christians.


\(^{7}\) H. Bacht, ‘Heimweh nach der Urkirche’, \textit{Liturgie und Mönchtum} 7 1950 64–78.

\(^{8}\) Theodoret of Cyrrhus \textit{Graciarum affectionum curatio} 8.5,70 (SC 57.312,335).

\(^{9}\) Irenaeus of Lyons \textit{Adversus haereses} 4.12.5 (SC 100,II.523).