

Christian Monasticism: Origins and Development

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1. Monasticism in the East

A. Origins

Christianity inherited its ascetical spirit and ideals from both Judaism and the more elevated pagan philosophies of the ancient world. Because of this, asceticism in some form has been practiced in the Church from the earliest times. In the first century before Christ, Judaism saw the establishment of the semi-monastic Qumran and Essene communities. Whereas some allowed marriage (those of Qumran), some even forbade it (the Essenes). Scholars acknowledge that St. John the Baptist and some of our Lord's own disciples likely came from these communities. While spreading the Gospel message, they would have also passed on aspects of asceticism which agreed with the Gospel. This may explain why, even from the time of the New Testament epistles, there were semi-monastic orders of widows and virgins. The passage "let a man keep his virgin" (1 Cor. 7:36-38) may also be a reference to an early ascetical practice in the Church of men and women living together in chastity in their own homes [Walker, 125]. Over the next few centuries, asceticism grew in importance in the Church and by the third century it was practiced by much of the clergy as well. The great third century theologian and Biblical scholar of Alexandria, the priest Origen, was an extreme practitioner of asceticism.

With the conversion of the Emperor and consequently the Empire, certain factors converged to dramatically increase the importance of asceticism in the Church. In ancient times the practice of contemplation was reckoned higher than that of active virtues [Walker, 125]. As the number of converts to the newly legalized faith vastly increased, this influenced the more serious minded Christians to seek to live by higher standards of devotion. Also, the end of the era of martyrdom left asceticism as the ultimate witness to Christ. Finally monasticism served, much as it did in Judaism, as an alternative form of religious expression rather than that of the Christian religious establishment.

B. St. Anthony the Great

St. Anthony the Great, who was a Coptic of Egypt, is credited as the founder of monasticism (c. AD 250-356). Inspired by a passage of the Gospel, he began by giving all of his inheritance and possessions away. He then took up an ascetical life in his home town of Koma. About fifteen years later, he adopted the life of a hermit in the desert. Here he was to remain for the rest of his life. He practiced the strictest fasting and continual prayer. In so doing he sought to conquer the desires of the flesh and to combat the unceasing attacks of demons. Word of Anthony's remarkable life soon spread throughout the reaches of the Empire. Numerous Christians began going out to the deserts (primarily of Nitria and Scetis) to imitate him. Some lived solitary lives others lived in groups, all following the eremitic life. After Anthony's twenty years of solitude in the desert, so many now began to imitate Anthony that, "the desert was made

a city,” populated by monks. As St. Athanasius wrote, “The monasteries in the hills were like tents filled with heavenly choirs, singing, studying, fasting, praying, rejoicing for the hope of the life to come, laboring in order to give alms, having love and harmony among themselves” [Life of Anthony, Ch. 11]. His profound, life-long witness of 106 years earned for Anthony the title, “Father of Monasticism.”

C. St. Pachomius

The next great figure of early monasticism was St. Pachomius of Egypt (c. AD 292-346). After his conversion from paganism, Pachomius embraced the eremitic life. Seeking a more ordered monasticism, he became a great innovator by establishing the first Christian monastery in Tabennisi, Egypt (c. 315). Hermits who joined the brotherhood were given “assigned work, regular hours of worship, similar dress, and cells close to one another” [Walker, 126]. The monks lived a life in common under the direction of one abbot. These brotherhoods were considered “the ideal Christian society,” as St. Athanasius put it, “in truth it was like a land of religion and justice to see, a land apart” [Life of Anthony, Ch. 11]. Pachomius established monasteries for women as well. By the end of his earthly life there were ten monasteries in Egypt which Pachomius had established [Walker, 126].

From these two great Desert Fathers came the primary forms of asceticism, i.e., the anchorite form of St. Anthony and the cenobite form of St. Pachomius. These two forms spread quickly throughout the Eastern Church. In Syria monasticism took on unusual expressions with those like Simeon Stylites who lived on top of a stone pillar for 30 years. Cenobite communities became more common in Caesarea of Cappadocia due to the encouragement of St. Basil the Great. St. Basil made many reforms and ultimately established his own Rule. His reforms included an increased emphasis on prayer and Scripture reading, charity work outside of the monastery, and the discouragement of extreme forms of asceticism. St. Basil’s Rule became the one followed by all Churches of the Byzantine Orthodox tradition and remains so unto this day - although with much less emphasis on works of charity [Walker, 126].

2. Monasticism in the West

A. St. Benedict of Nursia

Monasticism was introduced into the West by St. Athanasius the Great, primarily through his popular book, “The Life of Anthony.” St. Anthony’s example had a tremendous influence on such greats as St. Athanasius and St. Augustine. Other Western Fathers like St. Jerome, St. Ambrose of Milan and St. Martin of Tours were also instrumental in the spread of monasticism in the West in both of its forms (anchorite and cenobite). Although up to this time monasticism was primarily a movement among laity, Eusebius, bishop of Vercelli, was the first to require clergy to follow a monastic life. This is possibly the origin of the Latin emphasis on priestly celibacy, something which never became the rule for presbyters of the East.

For roughly a century, monasticism spread throughout the West but it was much disorganized. In many western monasteries asceticism waned and laxity became the norm. But much as St. Basil did in the East, St. Benedict of Nursia (c. AD 480-547) became the great

reformer and organizer of Western monasticism. In his adolescence Benedict had studied at Rome. Being repulsed by the immorality and evils rampant in the city, Benedict left Rome and became a hermit in the mountains of Subiaco, east of Rome. Still a young man, Benedict was offered to head a nearby monastery, which he accepted. The monks there ultimately rejected his discipline and vision causing him to leave the monastery. Around the year 529, Benedict established his own monastery on Monte Cassino and founded it on his newly formed Rule. His Rule “exhibited his profound knowledge of human nature and his Roman genius for organization” [Walker, 127].

Benedict’s Rule mandated that a monastery be permanent, self-sufficient, and a garrison of Christ’s soldiers headed by an abbot who must be obeyed [ibid]. In important matters abbots should consult with all the brethren. In lesser matters, abbots should consult with elder monks. To join the monastery one must live there for no less than one year and once the monastic vow was made it was for life. Worship was the primary duty of the monk and it comprised four hours of the day divided over seven periods of prayer. A great emphasis was placed on work as well as assigning both manual labor in fields and time for daily reading. During the Lenten Fast monks were assigned works to read and monitored to ensure these were accomplished. “Benedict’s Rule was characterized by great moderation... in its requirements as to food, labor, and discipline” [Walker, 127].

Benedictine monasticism spread slowly throughout the West via Roman missionaries to England and Germany. It took a few more centuries to penetrate France. By the time of Charlemagne it was virtually universal in the West. Every monastery was a “center of learning and industry” [ibid]. The effects of this were inestimable in the education of the Germanic peoples and the preservation of literature in the West. The Benedictine monks as pioneers rendered an immeasurable service to Western Europe. As Walker notes, throughout these centuries, not only did the greatest minds support the monasteries, most times they were found in them [ibid].

B. Celtic Monasticism

Monasticism spread from the Christian East also to the British Isles (Ireland, Scotland and Britain). This Celtic monasticism soon came to be characterized by its mystical emphasis and extreme asceticism. Its great contribution to the West was its vast missionary activity and dedication to higher learning. Great monastic schools developed in Ireland in the fifth and sixth centuries preserving the study of Greek and developing distinctive Celtic art. Celtic monasticism produced great saints like Finian of Clonard, Brigid, Columba and Columbanus. Their monastic system adapted to the Celtic clan system and the abbot or abbess became a position based on heredity. Celtic Christianity was centered on the monastery rather than the diocese so that the abbot or abbess was of more authority than a bishop [Walker, 127]. When Roman Christianity overtook Britain, Benedictine monasticism replaced Celtic monasticism there. But this became infused with the Celtic missionary spirit which produced the likes of Sts. Willibrord and Boniface who were very instrumental in the conversion of Northern Europe [Walker, 127].

3. Conclusion

Monasticism, finding its roots in Judaic and noble pagan asceticism, first became widespread with the life and example of St. Anthony the Great. St. Pachomius instituted the idea of monastic community living under one rule. St. Basil developed a modified rule which found great acceptance in the East. The West, inheriting monasticism from the East, developed it into two distinct forms, the Benedictine and the Celtic. St. Benedict formed his own Rule which became equivalent in the West to St. Basil's in the East. Celtic monasticism developed a unique form of monastic life which was very influential as well. Both Celtic and Benedictine monasticism greatly influenced the conversion and development of Western Europe.