

# EARLY CHRISTIAN MONASTICISM

Fr. Luke Dysinger, OSB

This is an expanded version of an article written for the *Encyclopedia of Ancient History* in 2010.

“Monasticism” in *Wiley-Blackwell, Encyclopedia of Ancient History*, (Blackwell, 2012; Online ISBN: 9781444338386

---

## [1] BEGINNINGS

Christian monasticism, understood as a way of life characterized by prayer, withdrawal from society, celibacy, and dispossession of goods, first attains prominence in Egypt toward the end of the third century. Earlier antecedents certainly existed but are only faintly discernible in patristic allusions and early monastic biographies. Ignatius of Antioch (d.c. 107) sent greetings to a community of “virgins called widows” in Smyrna (*Let. Sm.* 6.13), reminiscent of the community of widows mentioned in the pastoral epistles (1 Tim. 5). The *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus (c. 215) highlights the commitment of these women to prayer, while insisting that they are not to be reckoned among the clergy (*Ap.Trad.* 10). All that is known of these primordial communities of consecrated virgins (*parthenoi*) is that they were sufficiently organized and established by the middle of the third century that Antony of Egypt (c. 251-356) revered as the founder and “father of monks” could entrust his young sister to their care before embarking on his own ascetical career around the year 270 (*Vit.Ant.* 3).

## [2] EGYPTIAN MONASTICISM

Male ascetics living in the outskirts of Antony’s village in the Fayum served as his role models and teachers (*Vit.Ant.* 3). Their asceticism was strict but not overly severe, emphasizing fasting, prayer, kindness, and many of the classical virtues. Less is known of these earliest male *apotaktikoi* (“renouncers”) than of their feminine counterparts. It is tempting to speculate, but impossible to prove, that they may have been influenced by non-Christian forms of asceticism, such as: the Roman *otium*; the withdrawal from society advocated by some Greek and Roman philosophers; the Jewish hermit-colonies in Egypt and communities in Palestine described by Philo; or even Hindu and Buddhist ascetics resident in Alexandria. It is certain, however, that the earliest Christian monks and nuns were powerfully influenced by the heroism of martyrs who were revered as intercessors and spiritual guides, and by the teachings Clement of Alexandria (d.215), and Origen (d.254), who encouraged both asceticism and the study of sacred scripture.

Antony’s extraordinarily popular biography by Athanasius (d. 373) depicts him as a model of perseverance and virtue in whom the struggle against temptation yields inner harmony and balance. Athanasius portrays him as the chief exemplar of the hermit life, withdrawing deeper into the desert by successive stages, eventually finding peace around the year 311 in a mountain cave near the Red Sea, where he settled with a few disciples and lived in semi-solitude until his death in 356. Antony was not a complete recluse, however; and even in extreme old age he would return at irregular intervals to his former hermitage, an abandoned fort near the Nile, where he would offer spiritual advice to pilgrims.

Various forms of cenobitic (communal) monasticism also emerged in fourth-century Egypt. In Nitria, thirty miles southeast of Alexandria, monks lived alone in small houses or in groups varying in size from two or three to over two hundred. Founded around 330 by the monk Amoun, Nitria included a more remote hermit-colony fifteen miles to the southwest called Kellia, “The Cells”. According to Palladius by the end of the fourth century these two communities comprised more than five thousand monks. A third monastic settlement called Scetis was founded by Macarius the Egyptian at roughly the same time as Nitria, thirty-six miles to the southwest in the Wadi Natrun. The history and practices of these three communities are known chiefly through the *Lausiac History* of Palladius, the anonymous *History of the Monks of Egypt*, the *Apophthegmata*, or teachings of the *abbas* (fathers) and *ammas* (mothers). The monks lived as disciples of a chosen *geron* (elder) whose discipline they imitated, but they followed no fixed rule. On Saturday night and Sunday they gathered in large groups for common prayer and a eucharistic celebration. During the fourth century the practice of psalmody, reciting or

chanting the psalms, was increasingly emphasized in monastic literature and ritual. This preference for the Book of Psalms radiated outward from the monasteries into the liturgical practice of Christian cathedrals and parishes.

A more structured and regulated form of monasticism was introduced in Southern Egypt around 320 by Pachomius, whose monastic rules echo the hierarchical organization of the Roman army in which he unwillingly served for a brief time. He established four large communities near Tabennesi (Nag Hammadi) in Southern Egypt, each with its own leader who acknowledged Pachomius as general superintendent. The monasteries were walled enclosures containing dormitories for the monks, a guesthouse, infirmary, kitchen, refectory, and church. The monks raised their own food and practiced a variety of handicrafts that rendered the monasteries self-sufficient. They also provided social services, such as care of the sick and poor, to surrounding villages. The ideal of Pachomian *koinonia* (community) is depicted in a collection of biographies, sermons, and rules that were translated into Latin by Jerome and thus influenced later monastic founders in the West.

A theoretical framework for monastic asceticism and contemplation was provided by Evagrius Ponticus (245-399) a disciple, first of Basil in Caesarea, then of Gregory Nazianzen in Constantinople, of Rufinus and Melania in Jerusalem, and finally of Macarius of Alexandria and Macarius of Egypt in Kellia and Scetis. He systematized the insights of his Cappadocian and Egyptian teachers by employing terminology drawn from Clement of Alexandria and Origen. He recast Aristotle's distinction between the active and contemplative life into a method of spiritual progress. The first level, *praktiké*, entails vigilant watchfulness over thoughts and actions so that the struggle against vice, considered according to eight principal *logismoi* (tempting-thoughts), facilitates the quest for virtue, especially love and *apatheia* (freedom from obsessions and compulsions). As mastery over sin and compulsions is attained, the ascetic progresses to *gnostiké*, contemplation of the deeper meanings of scripture and the natural world (*physiké*), that leads in turn to wordless prayer and imageless contemplation of God (*theologia*). Growing disapproval of Origen's theology, especially his doctrine of *apokatastasis* (universal salvation) cast suspicion on Evagrius' writings, which effectively went underground, acquiring a large readership in East and West under the pseudonyms of Nilus and Athanasius. In 399, a few weeks after Evagrius' death, the "first Origenist crisis" precipitated the expulsion and exile of many of Egypt's most gifted and articulate monks: although a "golden age" thus ended, Egyptian monastic theory and practice was disseminated throughout the Roman Empire through the example and teaching of the exiles.

### [3] CAPPADOCIAN MONASTICISM

Around 357 Basil of Caesarea visited the Northern Egyptian monasteries, then lived briefly as a monk with friends on his family estate in Cappadocia. After his ordination as bishop in 370 he adapted what he had experienced as an ascetic for use in his diocese of Caesarea. He proposed an organized form of communal life that placed less emphasis on solitude and withdrawal from society than on imitation of Christ and compassion in interpersonal relationships. Around 360 he compiled the *Moral Rules*, an arrangement of over fifteen-hundred New Testament texts illustrating principles for Christian life. He avoided the technical term "monks", preferring to describe as "servants of God" those who lived according to the rules he elaborated in his *Greater and Lesser Ascetikon*. Basil encouraged the servants of God to support the local Christian community through prayer and material support of charitable institutions such as hospitals.

### [4] SYRIAN MONASTICISM

Syrian Christianity had a strong ascetical character that favored the growth of monasticism. Celibacy was highly regarded, and had even been considered a prerequisite for baptism in the late third century. By the early fourth century an indigenous proto-monasticism emerged, the "Sons and Daughters of the Covenant", young celibate men and women who lived singly, in small groups, or

with their parents, offering social and liturgical service to the churches in their villages. The Syrian church slowly adopted the forms and spirituality of Egypt monasticism; but it retained an independent spirit, sometimes expressed in exotic forms such as the stylites who lived atop pillars, dendrites who made their homes in trees, and *boskoi* (browsers) who foraged with beasts in the wild. The more moderate norm of Syrian proto-monasticism is expressed in the ascetical exhortations and homilies of the *Book of Steps* and the hymns and poetry of Ephrem (d. 373); while its later, mature spirit is conveyed in the writings of Philoxenus of Mabug (d. 523) and Isaac of Ninevah (d.c. 700)

## [5] PALESTINIAN MONASTICISM

Tradition associates the introduction of monasticism into Gaza and Palestine with the names of Hilarion, a disciple of Antony, and Chariton, one of Antony's predecessors. In Judea a preferred form of communal life was the *lavra*, a closely-grouped community of hermits who gathered weekly for prayer in a common church and lived in cells or caves, often hollowed out of cliff faces. Among the more famous Palestinian monasteries are those of Euthymius (d. 473) and Sabbas (d. 532) whose lives and virtues are extolled in John Moschus' *Spiritual Meadow* and in the histories of Cyril of Scythopolis (d. 558). The monasteries of Gaza produced monks and authors renowned for their sound spiritual advice. The 850 responses of Barsanuphius and John (d.c. 540) to questions posed by monks and pilgrims, as well as the writings of Dorotheus of Gaza (d.c. 560) reflect a mature, balanced approach to spiritual direction. The most famous eastern monastic treatise on the spiritual life is the *Ladder of Divine Ascent* by John Climacus (d.c. 649), a monk of the monastery of St. Katherine in Sinai who compiled the insights of his predecessors into a manual of spiritual progress that has remained a perennial spiritual classic.

## [6] WESTERN MONASTICISM

The development of monasticism in the West was significantly influenced by the brief admonitions now compiled as Augustine's *Letter 211*. Written around 397, it is a composite of instructions for a monastery of virgins together with recommendations for the "servants of God" Augustine had established as a community in Hippo. Earlier in his life Augustine had undertaken the Roman *otium* together with friends and family in Cassiciacum; based on this experience he later insisted on an exclusively cenobitic model of monastic life based on Acts 4:32-35, emphasizing common ownership of goods as a visible sign of unity. Unlike the Egyptians, Augustine emphasized neither apprenticeship to a charismatic *abba* or *amma*, nor the value of the solitary life: the communities were closely supervised by the bishop, who appointed as leader a presbyter, assisted by a *praepositus* (prior). Although widely-read and often quoted in the West, *Letter 211* would not be followed as *The Rule of St. Augustine* until the rise of the canons in the ninth century.

Like Augustine, bishops in Italy, Gaul, and Spain supported and founded ascetical communities of men and women. Early episcopal patrons of Western monasticism include Martin of Tours (d.397), Ambrose of Milan (d.397), Eusebius of Vercelli (d. 371), and Victricius of Rouen (d.c. 407). By the mid-fourth century Rome possessed both traditional monasteries of widows and virgins and new experimental celibate communities of educated aristocratic women. Among the advisors of these well-to-do circles was Jerome, who was able to convince several aristocratic patronesses to support his monastic foundation in Bethlehem, and even to join him there. His letters and translations of eastern monastic biographies and rules were widely read. Even more influential for the development of Western monasticism was John Cassian (360-435), a Romanian who travelled to Egypt during his youth and became a disciple of Evagrius Ponticus during the last decade of the fourth century. Cassian accompanied the exiled Origenist monks to Constantinople, then travelled to Rome and Gaul where he settled near Marseilles around 415 and founded monasteries for both men and women. For these communities he wrote the *Institutes*, in which describes and adapts Egyptian ascetical practices to the climate and social conditions of Gaul. At the urging of the superior of the monastery of Lerins near

Cannes he later wrote the *Conferences*, advanced treatises on spirituality and prayer intended primarily for hermits, whom he regarded as the summit of monastic perfection.

The monastery of Lerins, an Island near Cannes in France, was founded by Honoratus in 410 and became famous as a “nursery of bishops”, including Vincent of Lerins (d. 445) Honoratus (d. 449), Faustus of Riez (d. 495), and Caesarius of Arles (d. 542). Patrick may have spent time there before being sent as a bishop to Ireland around the year 431. In Ireland a unique form of monasticism flourished from the late fifth century, embracing both solitary and cenobitic forms. The local church formed around Celtic clans, often taking on a monastic character with the local chieftain assuming the title of abbot. A strict, penitential asceticism prevailed, combined with an esteem for literacy and scholarship. Since exile was considered one of the severest of penalties, it was sometimes embraced voluntarily by enthusiastic ascetics who became wandering monastic missionaries. Through their efforts Celtic monasticism was introduced in Scotland (on Iona by Columba in 563), northern England (on Lindesfarne by Aiden in 635), and on the continent, chiefly through the labors of Columbanus (c.543-615) and his successors. The penitential code of Celtic monasticism required regular confession of sins, but permitted the commutation of severe, protracted punishments into easier practicable penances. In both East and West the monastic practice of confession facilitated a shift from the penitential discipline of late antiquity, under the exclusive control of the bishop, to that of the early middle ages where the authority to remit sins came to be exercised by a local priest-confessor, or even in exceptional circumstances (especially in the East) by a non-ordained monastic *abba* or *amma*.

The Rule of Benedict was composed around the middle of the sixth century, when the fortunes of the West were at a low ebb. The deposition of Romulus, the last Emperor of the West, by the Germanic chieftain Odoacer in 476 had delivered a stunning blow to the collective western psyche. During the relatively benign period of Ostrogothic rule that followed, two succinct attempts at monastic legislation appeared: the *Rule of the Four Fathers* and the *Second Rule of the Fathers* condensed Cassian’s prolix *Institutes* into succinct maxims. During the devastation and depopulation that accompanied Justinian’s Gothic wars of 535-554 another series of monastic rules were composed in Gaul and Northern Italy that attempted to reconcile Cassian’s idealization of the hermit life with Augustine’s and Basil’s more sober emphasis on cenobitic community. These include Caesarius of Arles’ *Rule for Monks* and *Rule for Virgins*, and the anonymous *Regula Orientalis*, *Rule of Tarn*, *Rule of Ferreolus* and the *Rule of the Master*. Benedict (c.480-c.550) borrowed from many of these sources, but especially from the Rule of the Master, in composing his own rule, which struck an effective balance between traditional asceticism and the need for charitable mitigation of strictness. He envisioned a monastery that would elect its own abbot, who would rule with the assistance of appointed officers, taking regular advice from the whole community. Liturgical prayer eight times a day was the principal monastic work; but the times of prayer were not unduly long, and the monks’ manual labor afforded economic self-sufficiency. Literacy (and thus teaching) was required, and care of the sick and hospitality to travellers was particularly emphasized.

A more erudite vision of monasticism was proposed by Benedict’s contemporary, Cassiodorus Senator (d. 585), an Italian public servant who retired to his estate in Calabria around 540 to found the monastery of Vivarium. The central feature of his monastery was an extensive library where Cassiodorus encouraged literacy, the copying of manuscripts, and an intellectual program of study, the *Institutiones divinarum et saecularum litterarum*. Although Vivarium existed as a monastery for less than a century, his *Institutiones* continued to be read and used as a model of studies throughout the West. During the seventh and eighth centuries the practice of *regula mixta* (combined rules) often paired stricter codes such as the Rule of Columbanus with Benedict’s more moderate approach; but by the early ninth century the Rule of Benedict had proved to be the most adaptable form of monastic legislation in the West, so that the early middle ages can with justice be described as the “Benedictine centuries.”

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bamberger, J. (1970) *Evagrius Ponticus; the praktikos, chapters on prayer*. Collegeville, MN.
- Brock, S. (1987) *The Syriac fathers of the church on prayer and spiritual life*. Collegeville, MN.
- Brown, P. (1988) *The body and society, men, women, and sexual renunciation in early Christianity*. New York.
- Cemus, R. (2003) *Historical atlas of eastern and western Christian monasticism*. Collegeville, MN.
- Chadwick, O. (1968) *John Cassian*. Cambridge.
- Chitty, D. (1966) *The desert a city*. New York.
- Fry, T. (1980) *RB-80: The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English*. Collegeville, MN.
- Gregg, R. (1979) *Athanasius: the life of Antony and the letter to Marcellinus*. Mahwah, NJ.
- Kitchen, R. (2004) *The book of steps, the Syriac liber graduum*. Collegeville, MN.
- Knowles, D. (1969) *Christian monasticism*. New York.
- Luibheid, C. (1982) *John Climacus: The ladder of divine ascent*. New York
- Ramsey, B. (2000) *John Cassian: the conferences*. (1997) *John Cassian: the Institutes*. New York.
- Rubenson, S. (1995) *The letters of St. Antony: monasticism and the making of a saint*. Minneapolis, MN.
- Veilleux, A. (1980) *Pachomian koinonia*, 3 vols. Collegeville, MN.
- Vogüé, A. (1983) *The rule of Saint Benedict; a doctrinal and spiritual commentary*. Collegeville, MN.
- Wagner, M. (1950) *Saint Basil: ascetical works*. Washington D.C.
- Ward, B.(2003) *The desert fathers: sayings of the early Christian monks*. London.
- Wortley, J. (1992) *The spiritual meadow of John Moschos*. Collegeville, MN.

[.http://www.encyclopediaancienthistory.com/sample\\_content.asp](http://www.encyclopediaancienthistory.com/sample_content.asp)