

The Imperial Church, Part 2: Monasticism

Church History

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CHURCH AGES

The Early Church AD33-590

AD33-100 The First Century Church

AD100-300 The Patristic Age (Early Fathers)

AD300-590 The Imperial Church

The Medieval Church AD590-1517

The Reformed Church AD1517-1800

The Modern Church 1800-present

REVIEW

It could be argued that the fourth century (AD300-400) is the most significant century in the history of the church. The events of this century account for almost everything that the church would become both good and bad as well as the foundation for both later corruption and later reform.

The fourth century saw Christianity become an official state religion leading to nominal faith and totalitarian rulers; "high church" worship; vestments for clergy; ordinances becoming sacraments rather than commemorative; calling pastors priests; infant baptism; clerical aristocracy, use of the term "pope" for bishops; designated buildings for worship that became increasingly lavish; the designation of holy sites and the collecting of relics; the establishment of the special status of sainthood; a prosperity gospel; official church doctrine; complete recognition of the canon; publishing of the complete text of Scripture; Scripture becoming more common, sectarianism; a stronger; more centralized church; and the rise of monasticism.

? What about the rise of the Roman Church, Islam, and the reformation?

Two circumstances flavor the entire century.

1. The official status of Christianity, first in Armenia (301), then Aksum (325), finally Rome (381).
2. The defense of the divinity of Christ.

We will focus primarily on three more major events in the fourth century, the rise of monasticism, the rise of the Donatists, and the Council of Constantinople.

INTRODUCTION TO MONASTICISM

Monasticism *μοναχικος*

Christian monasticism is the devotional practice of Christians who live ascetic and typically cloistered lives for purposes of worship, separation, and study.

Asceticism

severe self-discipline and avoidance of all forms of indulgence, typically for religious reasons.

The man regarded as the first Christian hermit was Paul of Thebes. He reportedly lived his life from 16 to 113 by himself in the desert. He began this life of separation under the persecutions of the third century. Of course, he was not the first man of God to live apart from society. Elijah in the Old Testament famously fled King Ahab, John the Baptist lived in the wilderness, Paul spent several years in the desert studying, the Essenes were even a community of religious people that remained distant from society.

In the fourth century, monasticism became increasingly popular. It also became an official, established institution within the Church. Rules began to be written for the conduct of a monk, or a nun, especially those who gathered together in a community of monks, called monasteries.

Christian asceticism in some cases gave vent to bizarre expressions of Christianity. We will learn of Simon Stylites who lived his life atop a pole. Initially, some became monks to escape persecution or temptation. Others feared the growing popularity of Christianity. Many truly thought asceticism was a way to be more devoted to Christ.

? Is monasticism, as an entire life event, a valid form of religious expression in Christianity?

Monks did not live in monasteries at first, rather, they began by living alone. As more people were attracted to desert Christianity, communities of monks came to be formed. There are three forms of monasticism: community (cenobites), seclusion (recluses), or integrated (anchorites). There are three elements of self-renunciation: poverty, chastity, and obedience.

Today, I want us to consider three early monks and one early monastic movement.

ANTHONY THE GREAT

We know what we know about Anthony because Athanasius of Alexandria wrote a biography (AD360) entitled, "The Life of Anthony," having come to respect, and even consult the desert hermit. Anthony was born in Coma, Egypt, January 12, 251. His parents were wealthy, but Anthony never learned to read or write. He probably spoke only his native language, Coptic.

When he was about 20 years old, his parents died and left him to care for his unmarried sister.

At some point, Anthony was convicted by Jesus' words to the rich young ruler:

Matthew 19:21

Jesus said to him, "If you want to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me."

Anthony gave away some of his family's lands to his neighbors, sold the remaining property, and donated the funds to the poor, then walked into the desert, having placed his sister with a group of Christian virgins. He spent fifteen years as a disciple of Paul of Thebes. Then he left for the desert west of Alexandria Egypt where he lived for 13 years. He lived in an abandoned Roman fort.

He ate only bread, salt and water which people would throw over the wall to him. He never ate meat or wine. He only ate once each day and often fasted for days at a time. According to Athanasius, the devil fought Anthony by afflicting him with boredom, laziness, and the phantoms of women, which he overcame by the power of prayer, providing a theme for Christian art.

He was visited by pilgrims, but he refused to see them. Some of these pilgrims would become his disciples and lived in the caves close by. Eventually, these disciples formed a community of ascetics and they begged Anthony to be their spiritual guide. Anthony agreed around the year 305.

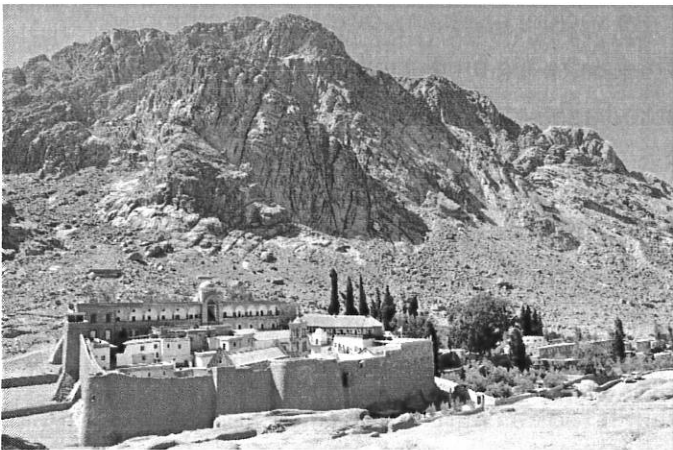
For five or six years he devoted himself to the instruction and organization of monks; but once again he withdrew into the desert that lay between the Nile and the Red Sea, near the shore of which he fixed his abode on a mountain where still stands the monastery that bears his name, Der Mar Antonios. Here he spent the last forty-five years of his life, in a seclusion, though he would see those who came to visit him.

During the Diocletian Persecutions (311) Anthony went to Alexandria to visit prisoners. Athanasius consulted Anthony about the Arian controversy. In 338, he left the desert temporarily to visit Alexandria to help refute the teachings of Arius. The Emperor requested Anthony's prayers.

As his death approached, he granted his staff to Macarius of Egypt, one of his sheepskin cloaks to Athanasius of Alexandria and the other sheepskin cloak to Serapion, his disciple. Anthony died in AD356 and was buried in a grave next to his cell.

ST. PACHOMIUS

One of Anthony's disciples was a man named Pachomius. Born in 292, Pachomius is generally acknowledged as the father of cenobitic monasticism. He was the first monk to set down a written rule for ascetic life.



St. Catherine's Monastery

Pachomian monasteries were a collection of buildings surrounded by a wall. The monks were distributed in houses, each house containing about forty monks. There could be thirty to forty houses in a monastery. There was an abbot over each monastery and provosts with subordinate officials over each house. The monks were divided into

houses according to the work they were employed in: thus there would be a house for carpenters, a house for agriculturists, and so forth. But other principles of division seem to have been employed, e.g., there was a house for the Greeks. On Saturdays and Sundays, all the monks assembled in the church for Mass; on other days the Office and other spiritual exercises were celebrated in the houses. (from Wikipedia)

By the time Pachomius died in 346 there were thought to be 3,000 communities dotting Egypt. From there monasticism quickly spread out first to Palestine and the Judean Desert, Syria, North Africa and eventually the rest of the Roman Empire.

BASIL OF CAESAREA

Basil was born in AD330 to wealthy Christian parents. He was well educated and originally taught law. He was an influential theologian who used his political ties to contend for the Nicene Creed.

His conversion to Christ came after meeting a Christian ascetic. In a letter he described his spiritual awakening:

"I had wasted much time on follies and spent nearly all of my youth in vain labors, and devotion to the teachings of a wisdom that God had made foolish. Suddenly, I awoke as out of a deep sleep. I beheld the wonderful light of the Gospel truth, and I recognized the nothingness of the wisdom of the princes of this world."

Upon his baptism in 357, he traveled through Palestine, Mesopotamia, and Egypt studying asceticism. He gave his fortune to the poor. In 358 he established a monastery on his family estate with a group of disciples, including his brother, Peter.

He attended the Council of Constantinople. In 362 he was ordained a deacon and by 365, an elder. He spent years fighting Arianism and was so popular that Bishop Eusebius became jealous of him. Basil withdrew into the monastery. In 370, Eusebius died, and Basil was chosen to succeed him.

His letters show that he actively worked to reform thieves and prostitutes. They also show him encouraging his clergy not to be tempted by wealth or the comparatively easy life of a priest, and that he personally took care in selecting worthy candidates for holy orders. He also had the courage to criticize public officials who failed in their duty of administering justice. At the same time, he preached every morning and evening in his own church to large congregations.

Basil died in January 379 at the age of 48. He suffered from liver disease and probably died from excessive ascetic practices. Many of Basil's writings and sermons, are still in existence, including writings on principles for ascetic life. He became known as the Father of Eastern Monasticism.

SIMON STYLITES

MEMBERS OF THE COVENANT

The Members of the Covenant was an ascetic movement that developed in Syria and Persia. They held a different view of spirituality as a journey of steps toward God. Syriac monasticism came from Jesus' words, "whoever wants to save his life will lose it," as a challenge to seek a drastic way of living which measures up to Jesus' call for discipleship.

The difference between Syriac and Roman monasticism is found in the Syrians' refusal to flee society. Unlike Egyptian monks who felt the need to escape the pressures of Roman rule in order to form Christ-like lives in an isolated desert, members of the covenant remained connected to a church, within a city, but removed from regular habits in normal society.

They were often cloistered close to a church. They considered themselves "strangers," not isolated from society but living differently within society. They were big on discipleship, evangelism, and stood against injustice. They would come out on Saturdays and Sundays for worship.

They became servants to the church. Members of the church, deacons and elders would come up with a vision and the sons and daughters of the covenant would carry it out. They were convinced that it took a church to raise a Christian.

They often lived with family, though some lived in cells connected to the church and became known as "brides of Christ."