

## **THE ORIGINS OF CHRISTIAN MONASTICISM**

There are monks and nuns in all the great religions. They are not so much the typical of Christianity as of a basic religious attitude that aspires to the union of the soul with God. A first condition of this consummation is withdrawal from the world to pray, meditate and practice asceticism. Asceticism is an exercise designed to mortify the desires of the senses; it aims at purifying the soul by renunciation and self denial, with the attainment of spiritual perfection as its final aim.

### **FLIGHT INTO THE DESERT:**

Christian monasticism originated in an ascetic movement in Egypt that one might call a "flight into the desert". If we are to believe Jerome, a Church Father and a writer on church matters from the fourth and fifth centuries, believers withdrew into the Egyptian deserts as early as the third century, at the time of the persecution of the Christians, to prepare themselves for the Last Judgment by asceticism and solitude. They saw the persecution of the Christians as an apocalyptic sign and believed that the kingdom of heaven was at hand.

This "flight into the desert" only became a mass movement in the fourth century, when the persecution of Christians had abated. We still do not know exactly what it was that stimulated this enthusiasm for the ascetic life and triggered such an exodus into the desert. Possibly the prevailing social and political conditions and the incipient secularization in the towns helped to provoke this search for an alternative, for a strictly evangelical way of life.

The first champion of anchoritism was the great Egyptian Desert Father Anthony the Great, who died in AD 356 at the age of 105. He set an example that was followed by many. Hermitages were soon being set up all over the Nitrian and Sketic deserts. Towards the end of the fourth century there must have been well over 20 000 hermits in Egypt, scattered all over the country and living either alone or in colonies. Their numbers inevitably made them a political problem. The Emperor Valens attempted to control the movement in 365 by issuing an edict. Ten years later, when this move had proved fruitless, he conscripted 5000 monks from the Nitrian desert as soldiers. But even this was not enough to stop the contagious exodus. When the ascetics began to turn up even in the towns, the Emperor Theodosius passed a law-it was AD 390- that forbade their presence in the towns; but only two years later he repealed it. There seemed to be no recipe for dealing with this young and dynamic monastic movement. Before long it had reached the Near East and Asia Minor, where it took on a wide variety of forms in the fourth and fifth centuries. It also spread into the Western world, where in the sixth century it found its legislator in the person of St. Benedict of Nursia.

### **FORMS OF EARLY ANCHORITISM:**

The Christian hermits appear in ecclesiastical history under many names. They were called "ascetics" because of their austere spiritual exercises, "hermits" because they lived in the desert, "anchorites" because of their retirement from the world, and "recluses" because they shut themselves off.

There are almost as many terms for the forms which anchoritism took in the course of its

historical development. There were monks who set up their cells in complete solitude, either in the desert or later in the forest, or who found themselves a remote cave. There were others who had themselves shut up in their cells, who withdrew into the branches of a tree as "dendrites" or on to top of a pillar as "stylites" There were also the "boskoi" (the grazers) who did without any kind of shelter and lived on hay or wild herbs. Others deliberately made fools of themselves so as to ensure that they could not fall victims to pernicious pride.

### **EARLY CHRISTIAN PILGRIMAGE:**

The hermitages and the colonies of monks in the Nitrian and Thebaic deserts attracted many visitors, some of whom were seeking a religious uplift, while others were disgusted by the pampered life of the towns and were on a sort of "back-to-nature" quest. The monks and hermits were regarded as the receptacles of the spirit as the martyrs and confessors had been before them, as they were able to resist persecution only because the spirit of God gave them strength. Their words were therefore cherished as a guide in difficult times. And even if the anchorites were often reluctant to speak, the mere sight of them gave comfort and fortitude to many.

The pilgrims came from all quarters of the compass. There were sea routes to Alexandria from the whole of the Mediterranean, and it was fairly easy to reach the monasteries and hermitages from there. Quite often, however, a visit to the Egyptian anchorites was not the only purpose of pilgrims who came from overseas. The nun Egeria, for instance, who came from the West and has left us an account of her journey, wanted to see the places where Christ had walked and preached when she set out towards the end of the fourth century to visit the main places of pilgrimage in the eastern Mediterranean. Her journey also took her to the monks in the desert of Thebes. We know others by name, too, who passed here, for instance Jerome, who sojourned in the Nitrian desert with Paula, a Roman, in 386. In fact, the monks were visited by pilgrims from all parts of the Imperium Romanum, from Asia Minor to Spain, and some sites even remained places of pilgrimage after the death of their occupants.

### **THE DEVELOPMENT OF MONASTIC COMMUNITIES:**

The excesses of anchoritic life soon revealed its dangers. Even the ascetic striving for holiness could turn out to be error. The need for some spiritual guidance was obvious. This led to the emergence of teachers who were soon surrounded by pupils. The teachings of the leading Desert Fathers were collected in the form of the *Apophthegmata patrum*, religious aphorisms which were to be used by generations of monks in the East and West as directions for the spiritual life.

There are repeated accounts in the *Apophthegmata* of novices who ask advice of an aging hermit: "Then one of them asked Father Anthony what he must do to please God. The old man answered him as follows: 'Do as I tell you! Wherever you go have God in mind. Whatever you do, or whatever you say, seek witness for it in the Holy Scriptures. If you settle in a place, do not go away again easily. Take heed of these three things, and you will find salvation.'"

Very soon novices began to gather around recognized ascetics and to set up their cells in the vicinity of their masters. In this way loose communities of hermits were formed, with each living in a small dwelling of his own. There was not as yet any fixed organization. The hermits lived "idiorrhhythmically", each deciding his ascetic program himself. The only model was the example set by the Abba, which each one emulated in his own way.

Anthony the Great was the first nucleus around which a colony of this kind crystallized. While he was still alive, Amoun (died c. 356) established an anchoritic community in the Nitrian desert in Lower Egypt which is supposed to have comprised 500 members and had its own church. The hermits worked to earn their living. Hours of work and of prayer were exactly regulated. The monachist principle of "Work and pray" was accordingly being applied even at this early date.

Even stricter rules were adopted in the colony that came into existence under Macarius the Great (died c. 390) in the desert of Scete or Sketis about 15 kilometers south of the Nitrian Mountains, near the village of Kellea. The hermits here lived in very humble conditions in wooden cells or in caves. Silence was observed at all times. Only on Saturdays and Sundays did the monks meet for a joint divine service in the church.

As we know from the Philokalia, a collection of monastic precepts, Macarius derived the ascetic ideal of the hermit's life from the Greek concept of monachos, which is also the origin of the word "monk": "'Monachos' originally means 'solitary'; and the monk is solitary because he has no dealings with woman and has renounced the world both outwardly and inwardly: outwardly because he has given up all material things, and inwardly because he refuses even to occupy his mind with worldly things and forbids his thoughts to turn to them. Secondly, the monk is so called because he ceaselessly prays to God so as to purify his spirit of the various harmful thoughts, in order to become solitary in himself and to live in purity before the true God, rejecting every evil thought, and to remain righteous all the days of his life in God's presence."

In Upper Egypt it was Palemon who gathered a community of hermits around him. Further colonies existed, in the first half of the fourth century, near Edessa, at Antioch and in the desert of Chalicis.

## **PACHOMIUS, THE FOUNDER OF CENOBITISM:**

It is not really surprising that from the end of the fourth century onwards a growing need should have been felt—partly as a result of anchoritism, but partly for other reasons—for a form of regulated life in monastic communities. The anchoritic ideal was not lost in the sequel, but made part of monastic life and survived within it, even being regarded as the highest form of monkhood.

This development was not without its practical logic, for the initial surge of religious zeal that had produced the colonies of hermits was not really stable enough to endure. Fixed rules of community life had to be formulated.

The first known organizer and legislator of a monastic community was Abbot Pachomius (died 346), a pupil of the anchorite Palemon. It was around 320 that Pachomius founded a large monastery in Tabennisi in Upper Egypt which was marked by almost military severity in its practical framework of liturgical prayer, work and economic management, though there was as yet no exact regulation of the individual quest for salvation. Pachomius's monastery, in which hundreds of monks were united in a religiously inspired production unit, was still far removed from the cenobitic institutions in which monks lived out a *koinos bios* under a fixed rule.

Pachomius expected of his monks, as basic requirements, "simple clothing, moderate eating and reasonable refreshment and sleep". He also considered it important that his monks should remain laymen. If a eucharist liturgy was to be celebrated, he had a priest come from the neighbourhood. None of the brothers was to have priestly powers or to strive for spiritual rank, lest this should cause quarrels and jealousy in community life.

He said: "For as the smallest spark that falls in the barn and is not extinguished as quickly as possible will often destroy the whole year's harvest, so the thought of ruling, that is of having spiritual office, does harm when it comes over monks and is at not once suppressed, even destroying easily the most arduous asceticism" (Pachomius vita)

The monks were allocated to houses according to their profession or task, and each house was under a head and his deputy. These two were themselves subordinate to a central authority. The monk had to live in complete chastity and to renounce all personal possessions. He received his frugal rations from the monastery and had to practice absolute obedience to his superior this was an essential feature of monastic asceticism. And above all he had to keep to the prescribed hours of common prayer in the morning, at noon and in the evening, before sleep and in the middle of the night. The strict daily rhythm was part of the asceticism. The foundations were thus laid for a communal, institutionalized monkhood, though this did not end the original form of anchoritism in the East. In fact, anchoritism continued to be practiced either alone or within the cenobitic framework.

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