

EARLY MONASTICISM IN THE EAST

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AND the multitude of believers had but one heart and one soul; neither did any one say that aught of these things which he possessed was his own; but all things were common unto them."¹ Thus St. Luke portrays for us the life of the early Christians. Their common life was an attempt made to fulfill the counsels of the gentle Saviour. Gradually, through the expansion of the Church by the conversion of men from every state and condition of life, the pursuance of the common life by all men of all times was rendered impractical.

Then there was Christ's answer to the rich young man: "If thou wilt be perfect, go sell all thou hast and give to the poor, and thou shalt find treasure in heaven and come and follow me."² Patently, all men could not follow Christ to this extremity. But there were many, from the beginning of the Christian era, as the Martyrology tells us, who did renounce all things for Christ. The lives of numerous virgins, confessors and martyrs of the early Church establish beyond a doubt that Christ's words did not go unheeded. These elect of God, many of them never raised to the altars of the Church, privately vowed perpetual virginity, while otherwise living ordinary lives like their fellow Christians. These confessors and virgins were held in high esteem by their brethren throughout the Christian world. It is logical enough to assume that very shortly groups of those who chose "the better part" gathered together for their mutual companionship and edification. Then there were those who fled from the centers of civilization to avoid the vice and corruption of the decadent Roman Empire. Mountain crags and desert huts became their chosen homes.

The chief concern of these ascetics was to love God more, and this they accomplished by prayer and mortification in solitude and isolation. Each individual was his own spiritual director. If there

¹ *Acts*, iv, 32.

² *Luke*, xviii, 8.

was a particular passion that needed to be brought into subjection, the individual adopted the means he himself deemed most suitable. The fasts and other penitential exercises were extreme, each recluse attempting to transcend the heights of self-abnegation reached previously by another.

It is this competitive spirit among some of the Ramoboth of St. Jerome's time that that learned saint decries. He infers in his oft-quoted Twenty-second Epistle (to Eustochia), that it is to their discredit and shame that these make known to men their fasts, which should be a secret between God and themselves. The culmination of all this weird and excessive bodily penance seems to have been reached when St. Simeon in 423 introduced to Eastern Christianity the practise of living on top of a pillar. In fact, he and his imitators are known as Stylites (pillar-saints). One of the most famous of Simeon's disciples was St. Alypius, who stood on top of his Paphlagonian pillar for fifty-three years. His legs were unable to support him longer, so, without leaving his pillar, he rested on his side for the remainder of his life, a period of fourteen years.

It was the love of God that prompted these saints and others like them to endure what seems to us excessive bodily mortification. No doubt anyone attempting such a form of penance today would be classified as demented. Only very exceptional individuals could subject themselves to such unrestrained mortifications and still retain a proper mental balance. Hence for the ordinary person who desired to lead a more perfect life, an experienced, guiding hand was an absolute necessity; a mature individual, well grounded in all the virtues, one that could point out the pitfalls as well as the indispensable aids and requirements.

There were, in the third and fourth centuries, two outstanding leaders in the spiritual life most deserving of consideration and study. One chose for himself and his disciples an eremitical life as the means to perfection; the other, the cenobitical life. It was St. Anthony who adopted the former mode and it is he who is generally regarded as the founder of monastic life; whereas it was St. Pachomius who was the chief exponent of the cenobitical life. Both in their young manhood had voluntarily retired from the world to serve God, and this they did by severe mortification of their bodies, manual labor and uninterrupted prayer. In no way did they desire to be leaders of other men, except in virtue. They did not seek for followers, but were rather sought after.

It was our Lord's advice to the rich young man that prompted St. Anthony at the age of twenty to begin a life of asceticism. For a number of years he wandered about, seeking spiritual guidance and help from those renowned for their sanctity. At the age of thirty-five (in 305) he retired to the desert, living in complete solitude for a period of twenty years. He was at last prevailed upon by a large group of devout Christians to leave his solitude to instruct them in the ways of perfection. His sermons and exhortations most certainly had their salutary effects, but undoubtedly it was his sterling example that led so many to lead lives of sanctity. All of Anthony's followers were called upon to follow the same rule; they did not, however, lead a community life. The individuals still lived lives of solitaries with Anthony as their father and spiritual director. Even fifty years after the death of Anthony, as Palladius of Helenopolis writes, the monks "assembled at the Church only on Saturday and Sunday."

St. Anthony, despite the fact that the number of his followers continued to grow, still retained an intense desire for solitude. Fearing lest his reputation as a saint should lead him to vainglory, he fled farther into the desert where he might unmolested commune with God. Even his yearning for complete isolation did not prevent him from desiring martyrdom, a hope that arose within the anchorite's breast at the time when Maximinian Galerius was carrying on his very severe persecution in Egypt. Anthony even followed his fellow Christians to Alexandria defending them in the courts, consoling and rejoicing with those about to receive the martyr's crown.

Anthony, although not considered a learned man in the eyes of the world, did much to halt the Arian avalanche that was sweeping over the Eastern Church. At the request of Athanasius and other bishops he again left his desert home to go to Alexandria and there refute the heretics. The Arians could do naught against this man who supported his clear-cut arguments and doctrines with miracles. When at last his work was completed he once more returned to the desert, never again to leave it, resuming for the rest of his life his intense penances and prayer. It was in the year 356 that he died, surrounded by a number of his disciples who, at his request, hid his body so that no man would know where he was buried. A recluse in death as in life!

It was a contemporary of Anthony, St. Pachomius, who made the next appreciable advance in the stabilization and unification of the lives of the anchorites. It was he who bore the standard of the cenobitical life and it appears that it was his appreciation of the great-

est of Christian virtues that caused him to choose a cenobitic rather than an eremitic life for his spiritual children.

Pachomius at the age of twenty was a member of a newly conscripted army that was making its way down the Nile. *En route* he was astonished by the charity and kindness manifested by a group of men attending the sick and distressed. Upon enquiry he learned that these were Christians who showed such love for their fellow men. Thereupon he resolved to learn more of these strange men and their cult. Pachomius' discharge from military service followed in a short time and he enrolled himself among a class of catechumens. Following his baptism at Chinoboscium he sought out a holy anchorite named Palemon who lived in a desert close by. The aged monk admitted Pachomius to his cell where both dwelt until the death of the former, Palemon ever counselling, assisting, exhorting his younger companion to a greater love of God and neighbor.

Shortly after the death of Palemon, Pachomius was joined by his older brother, who desired to lead the life of an anchorite. Only once did trouble arise to disturb the peace of their mutual habitation. Pachomius, upon repeated admonitions from heaven, had begun to enlarge their dwelling and to add several new cells for those he expected would join him in due time.¹³ His brother had no desire to have any new brethren come so he reprimanded Pachomius for his apparently needless labor. Pachomius bore his brother's jibes with humility, asking God to forgive him any impatience he may have felt at his brother's importunities. They continued to live in peace and harmony until the elder brother died, leaving Pachomius alone to make preparations for the disciples that were in a short time to throught to his retreat.

His idea of the cenobitical life as the "union of souls in order to save them" opened up a new road to perfection. Good example, mutual forbearance, self-sacrifice—a practical application of the second great commandment of God was made in the new order of things as St. Pachomius provided in his rule.

A necessary virtue which Pachomius strove at all times to inculcate into the lives of his children was humility. He even refused ordination to the priesthood himself and did not want his own monks to be priests, although he was not averse to having priests join his ever-increasing community, since of necessity priests were required to administer the Sacraments and say Mass in his monasteries.

The virtue of obedience likewise played an important role in the monastery at Tabenna. It was through this virtue that Pachomius

wished his monks to accomplish their salvation. A truly humble monk must necessarily be obedient to lawfully constituted authority. He counselled his charges to have proper love and respect for the bishops and clergy, as well as for the Church they represented. He assigned to each of his community certain labors that the individuals must perform. By manual labor, the community was able not only to support itself, but also to render much needed assistance to the poor and helpless. Pachomius even had his monks build a monastery for his sister. She, by his pious exhortations and example, had been prevailed upon to enter religion, founding a community of women upon the same plan and under the same rule as the monks.

At the time of Pachomius' death in 348, there were, according to one account, fourteen hundred monks living under his rule, whereas another account states that there were seven thousand under his fatherly direction.³ Although Pachomius was born forty-two years after Anthony, he passed to his reward in 348, eight years ahead of Anthony.

To form an accurate estimate of the good accomplished by Anthony and Pachomius would be an impossible task. That these men and their work had a powerful influence over subsequent religious foundations in the East and in the West is beyond question. St. Augustine frankly admits in his *Confessions*⁴ that the life of St. Anthony was the indirect cause of his conversion. Anthony and Pachomius by different routes led thousands to the gates of heaven. They were the pioneers of the religious life. In their rugged simplicity they laid the foundations of numerous splendid, spiritual structures that stand as guardians about the glorious Church of Christ.

³ *Cambridge Mediaeval History* (Vol. 1, p. 523).

⁴ *Confessions*. Bk. VIII, Ch. 6.