

## **The Beginnings of Monasticism**

This is lesson ten, “Opus Dei: the beginnings of monasticism.” We will use for our prayer these words from Benedict of Nursia. Benedict was one of the great early Western monastic leaders and of course the founder of the movement we call the Benedictines. As we begin to think about this subject let us join together in prayer using these words from Benedict.

*“O gracious and holy Father,  
Give us wisdom to perceive you,  
intelligence to understand you,  
diligence to seek you,  
patience to wait for you,  
eyes to see you,  
a heart to meditate on you,  
and a life to proclaim you,  
through the power of the Spirit of Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.”*

We begin with an example of monasticism. There was a monk who lived on the top of a pole out in the desert. He had fled to escape the world and the worldliness of the church, and also to express some of the martyrdom spirit, which was, after Constantine, not generally a reality. There were no more martyrs, and so what did people do to set forth their commitment and love for God if they could not be killed for Him? One idea was to go into the desert, climb up on a mountain, and stay there. This monk’s name was Simeon Stylites. Simeon was his name, and “Stylites” indicated that he lived on top of a pole. Someone has said that he showed great sense in the placement of his pole as there were mountains in the background. He spent his time up there praying and preaching and giving advice to the admiring crowds that would come and gather way down on the ground below him. This is a very strange thing.

We will be talking today about one of the strange movements in the history of the Christian church, the monastic movement. Not only a few individuals like Simeon, but thousands of people fled the world during the fourth and fifth centuries to live alone in the desert, or later in small communities. They did this in order to, they thought, serve God better and seek God more earnestly. This movement greatly increased after the time of Constantine, but it began even before Constantine. Back in the third century there had been a long period of peace before the outbreak of the final time of persecution. During that time the church, according to some people, was more worldly and less devoted to God than it had been earlier. Therefore individuals began to seek ways in which they could express greater devotion and commitment to God than the average way Christians lived in society.

The most famous of the early monks was a man named Antony. He lived in Egypt when he was about 20 years old, which would be about the year 270 AD. This is an important date for the history of monasticism. He was challenged by Jesus’ words, “You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” That is the monastic text. That text will come up again and again in church history as people read it, pondered it, and decided to do it in a very literal and dramatic way. Antony did that. He gave away everything he had and went out and spent the rest of his long life—he apparently lived to be over 100—out in the Egyptian desert praying and meditating on God. Perhaps we would not have known so much about Antony, who was not such a famous person, but another famous person whose name was Athanasius, the church father of Alexandria who is so important for our study of the Council of Nicea, wrote *The Life of Antony*. This

became a kind of bestseller in the West as people read the story by Athanasius of this monk who had given away everything and resolved to serve God in the desert. Not everybody has been quite so positive about his actions. The historian Gibbons said, "It was an awful waste for a man like Antony to spend his life living in the desert." But the book by Athanasius certainly made an impact on many people, including Saint Augustine. As Augustine was attempting to come to some peace and resolution in his life, one of the books he read was *The Life of Antony* by Athanasius, and it certainly convicted Augustine of his worldliness and pushed him closer to his time in the garden in Milan when he heard the words and read the Scripture and was born again.

Antony was the first of a whole line of the Egyptian desert fathers, as they are called. They were people like Antony who went out one by one, sometimes in small groups of twos and threes, to live in the desert and pray and seek God. Collections have been made of the sayings of the desert fathers, and stories about them were remembered and taught and were finally put together into collections of writings including the most famous of these books. This was the book by Helen Waddell, the English classical and medieval scholar who wrote the book, *The Desert Fathers*. This is an interesting book to read because it includes many sayings that have been recovered and remembered by people and also some stories about the desert fathers. For example, Antony is quoted as having said, "He who sits in solitude and is quiet has escaped from three wars: hearing, speaking, and seeing. Yet against one thing shall he continually battle. That is, his own heart." So we see that even in going out to the desert where you do not see anything, hear anyone, or speak to anyone there is still a problem with trying to escape worldliness, and that is one's own heart.

In time in the monastic tradition eight demons were identified. These demons were considered to be the special enemies of the monks. They were gluttony, sexual thoughts, love of money, grief, wrath, sloth, vainglory, and arrogance. In time these came to be called the deadly sins that the church so often talks about and warns against. In fact, back in the time I am describing children in Egypt did not play at being cops [police] and robbers as children in the United States often do. Rather, they played at being monks and demons. One little child would dress in a black robe to represent the monks. All the others would be the demons, and they would jump around harassing the poor "monk." Well, that is certainly something the monks thought about and struggled with because they all came to realize that by fleeing the world they did not flee evil thoughts and their sinful nature.

There is another story in *The Desert Fathers* about a certain brother who had sinned. This is from the time when the movement had moved beyond just single monks in solitary places to little communities of monks, what is called cenobitic monasticism or common life monasticism. This story is about a certain brother who had sinned. The head of the group commanded him to go out from them because he was a sinner. But another one of the monks, a man named Byzerian, rose up and went out with him as well, saying, "I too am a sinner." That story shows how this particular monk realized that everyone is a sinner.

There were more interesting stories like those. In time these stories became very extravagant. Legendary stories such as this one grew up around the reputation of these desert fathers: one time an old monk came to another old monk to visit. The senior monk said to his disciple whom he had with him, "Make us a little lentil broth, my son." The disciple made the food and brought it to the two old men. One of the monks said, "Dip the bread in it for us." So the disciple dipped it in. But the two old monks went on talking about godly things and praying until the next day. Twenty-four hours later the senior monk said to his disciple, "Make us a little lentil broth, my son." The young man said, "I made it yesterday." They then rose and ate their food. The point of that story is that these monks were so concentrated on heavenly things that they forgot for a whole day to eat lunch. One more story; these are rather entertaining and especially this one: one day a man from the world went to visit a hermit on the top of

the mountain. The hermit said, “How are things getting along in the world? Do people have enough faith so that they can say to this mountain, ‘Rise up and be cast into the sea?’” Well, as the monk said those words the mountain on which he and his visitor were sitting began to rise up. “Oh mountain,” said the monk, “I was not giving orders, I was just quoting the Bible. Sit down.” And the mountain came back down. There was supposed to be great faith and power in the monasteries and among the monks. The desert fathers are famous, and you may read about them in various collections of writings about church history.

A new development, which I have already referred to, took place in monasticism. It began with a man whose name was Pachomius in Upper Egypt. That is, the cenobitic or common life monasticism. It is a kind of contradiction in terms because “monasticism” comes from a word that means “single” or “alone.” And when we talk about cenobitic monasticism we mean communities of monks, of solitaries. But that is the way these communities are referred to. These communities were small groups of monks, later larger groups who came together to live under a certain rule that described how they would live together. It was a simple life of prayer, work, and meditation. One of the promoters of cenobitic monasticism was Basil of Cappadocia, one of the great Cappadocians whom we will look at later. Even though he very much approved of the monastic lifestyle, he said, “How can a person test his humility when he has no one to whom he can show himself the inferior? It is very hard to be humble all by yourself, out in the middle of the desert. But if there are other people around then you can be. If the Lord washed the feet of the disciples, whose feet will you wash?” Thus groups would come together to practice Christian virtues in community. Basil wrote a rule for Eastern monasticism, which became very famous and influenced developments in the West largely through John Cassian. Cassian was an Eastern monk who lived for some years among the Egyptian desert Fathers. He later introduced Basil’s rule in the West.

Before I go on to describe monasticism in the East and the West, let me just say that there were not only monastic men. There were also monastic women. Antony’s sister became a nun. And Macrina, the sister of Basil of Cappadocia and Gregory of Nyssa, also became a nun. In fact, Macrina went into the monastic life before Gregory did. So there were single women and groups of women who also followed the monastic calling.

Monasticism in the East tended to stay more or less with the solitary ideal rather than the cenobitic development. Saint Isaac the Syrian said, “The glory of Christ’s church is the light of the solitary.” Thus in the East it was more common to find solitaries like Simeon Stylites. And also like Simeon Stylites, Eastern monasticism tended to have an extreme, almost fanatical side to it. People lived on pillars or chained themselves to rocks or punished their bodies in various ways. The further east you went the more extreme it was. At the same time (and this seems strange to me) that you have this extreme form of monasticism in the East, you have coupled with it a very strong missionary spirit. These monastics, we would almost think of them as fanatics—extreme people who were doing strange things—were also very concerned to carry the Christian message from village to village and from city to city. In many cases they were traveling missionaries. Now, the people on the poles or the people who chained themselves to rocks probably could not move, but the others were traveling through the East proclaiming the Christian message.

Let me describe monasticism in the West. This lesson is a kind of introductory lesson to a theme that we will look at for the rest of the semester because monasticism became such an important and major aspect of medieval history. The most important figure in early Western monasticism was Martin of Tours. You doubtless know the famous story. Martin was a soldier, and one day as he sat on his horse he saw a very poor man, a beggar, who was cold. Martin was moved with sympathy for this poor man, but Martin had

only one coat and he was also cold. So rather than giving the poor man his only coat he decided to share it with him. He took his coat off and cut it in half with his sword, keeping part of it and giving the poor man the other part. That night he had a dream. In his dream he saw Jesus, and Jesus was wearing the other part of his coat. That experience so impressed this rather proud and ambitious soldier that he moved into a monastic life. He then began to call others to give up worldly ambitions and serve God as he was serving God. If Martin is the pioneer of monasticism in the West, the greatest Western monastic is Benedict of Nursia whose prayer we used at the beginning of class.

The great center of the Benedictine movement is Monte Cassino. If you drive on the main highway from Rome down to Naples you will suddenly come to that mountain and huge buildings on the top of the mountain where the Benedictine movement began and centers even today. Benedict wrote what certainly for the West and maybe for all monasticism is the most famous rule. He wrote that in the year 540 AD. It is a masterpiece of practical wisdom and doctrine. You can read Kathleen Norris' statement from *The Cloister Walk*, a modern book from a Presbyterian woman who has spent considerable time in a Benedictine monastery in Minnesota. The book contains her own reflections about life in the monastery and the importance of the rule of Saint Benedict. It intrigues me that she says that the rule of Saint Benedict is sometimes taught in law schools to teach students how to legislate crisply and without unnecessary verbiage. This is because Saint Benedict in this brief rule, about 100 pages in the English translation, sets up the rules, the order, the requirements for the Benedictine movement. Let me just read a few lines from the prologue to give you a sense of what it sounds like, and also to show you how balanced and concerned Benedict is not to go to extremes but to create a rule that is workable. Actually, as you read the rule much of it is just his weaving together passages of Scripture, although that does not appear so much in this quotation from the prologue. He starts this way: "Therefore we intend to establish a school for the Lord's service. In drawing up its regulations we hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome. The good of all concerned, however, may prompt us to a little strictness in order to amend faults and to safeguard love. Do not be daunted immediately by fear and run away from the road that leads to salvation. It is bound to be narrow at the outset. But as we progress in this way of life and faith, we shall run on the path of God's commandments, our hearts overflowing with the expressible delight of love."

He goes on to describe how the monks should live together. Actually, the Benedictine requirements, their ideal, is pretty much like general monastic ideals. There are to be times of prayer, times of study, and times of work. In some that sounds like life for many of us at Covenant Seminary: prayer, study, and work. Prayer was well-defined and organized. This was the liturgy of the hours, or as it is usually called, the divine office. Benedict has referred to it as "the sanctification of time." The time was marked not so much by breakfast, lunch, and dinner or by going to work and getting off work but by these times through the day and through the night when the community would meet together for prayer. They would meet seven times a day, beginning soon after midnight with vigils and ending in the evening with *Compline*.

Not only was prayer included in the rule, but also study. Benedict spoke of "*lectio divino*," "divine reading" or "spiritual reading." This was the reading of the Scripture and the church fathers. We would almost describe this as devotional reading, reading for personal and community edification. That went on day by day in these Benedictine houses. There were also times of work. Benedict viewed work as a good thing, not as a very bad thing, as some of the monastics viewed it. Sometimes work could be viewed as a kind of punishment for falling asleep during a time of prayer or for missing one of the readings or something like that. But for Benedict work was part of the flow of one's day with prayer and study. Physical labor was shared by everyone in the monastery. No one was too good to do the worst and the least popular tasks. For instance, cooks were appointed week by week. Cooking was apparently

not a favorite of the monks, and they liked even less to wash dishes and clean up. But everyone took his turn in doing these tasks. To make it clear that this was not something unspiritual, the new lists of chores were given out during the times of prayer. As the community got together to pray they would also be given the task that they would do for that next week.

I would like to spend the rest of this lesson reflecting on monasticism a little. How do we view all of this? I have described some of the highlights of it, and I hope you have been able to read about it in the Gonzales' text. Since Martin Luther left the monastery, Protestants have generally been quite negative about monastic ideas and about the whole history of monasticism. So, let me give you my thoughts on whether monasticism is a good thing or a bad thing. As you probably could guess, I will say that there are good things about it and there are some bad things about it. We will start with the good. Certainly it is hard to condemn a movement that is devoted so earnestly to prayer. "*Opus Dei*," "the work of God," was the work of prayer. For centuries prayer was being offered, generally in the language of the Psalms. Some houses would pray through the Psalms every week or even more often. Prayer was offered day and night. There was a steady outpouring of prayer. In a fourth century history of the monks in Egypt there is this sentence: "People depend on the prayers of the monks as on God Himself. Through them the world is kept in being." God kept the world in being through the Dark Ages because of the billions of prayers from the monks in the monasteries throughout Europe.

The monks were not only engaged in prayer. They also engaged in learning and good works. The monasteries became centers of lights and learning, particularly as the great darkness crept across Europe. When we come to Saint Patrick and the Christian movement in Ireland, we will see that the light of learning was kept there flourishing in a time when so much of that had been lost in other parts of Europe. So the monastic movement contributed to learning and to civilization. There was a statement about the Benedictines in Latin that meant that they came "with a cross, with a book, and with a plow." They preached the cross, read and preached the Bible, and took a plow to cultivate land, to drain swampy areas, and to extend agriculture and farming in different parts of Europe. They also expressed charity in their own lives and in the institutions that grew up around the monasteries. One of Benedict's rules in the famous rule is this: "Every guest who comes to the monastery shall be received as if he were Christ himself." That was a warm welcome for many people who were traveling through difficult and dangerous places to come to a monastery and be taken in for the night.

Another positive feature of monasticism, especially in the East, was its commitment to missions. The monks were the missionaries. The monastic movement was in some sense almost a missionary movement. Later that became true also in the West, particularly when the great missionary orders were founded. We will study the Franciscans later and then the Dominicans, and then in Reformation church history we will study the Jesuits. These were all great missionary orders committed to the spread of Christianity throughout the whole world.

Another feature of monasticism—which I think we have to say is both good and bad—is separation from the world. Certainly the monastic rebuke to a worldly church, to the worldly spirit of Christendom that became more and more of a problem after Constantine, was certainly something the church constantly needed to hear. God's kingdom was not to be identified with any earthly realm or status or possessions or anything else. Andrew Walls is a Scottish missiologist and church history professor at Wheaton College. I once heard him in a lecture describe Antony as the first evangelical. By that he meant that here is a man who repudiated nominal Christianity and insisted on hard Christianity and religion that was not soft and indulgent. As I was reviewing these thoughts for this lesson last night I was listening to a radio station. Bach's *Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring* was on. But it got cut off because it was going on too long and the Wall Street Journal report needed to come on at ten minutes before the hour. This kind of

reinforced something I was thinking about: there is always the worldly emphasis and theme that can come in even in the midst of our religious and Christian meditations. The monks at their best set themselves against a worldly Christianity. But at the worst the separation from the world was a kind of Christ against culture idea that moved part of the church away from engagement with the people and issues of life in the world. Now, perhaps you could say some people could engage the world and these other people could go out and pray. That is all right, but if too many people go out and separate themselves from the world then who will go out and engage the thought of the world? In some ways perhaps that engagement was not so necessary in the medieval as it became later. In the High Middle Ages the thought of the world was generally Christian thought, at least in Europe. We will talk about that later.

But here is a problem with monasticism. That is, the two levels of Christian spirituality that it created. In fact, the word “religious” in Roman Catholic history began to mean the monks, the monastic ideal. “Secular” was everybody else. You could be a secular Christian, but if you really wanted to be a good Christian you should be a religious Christian, you should enter the monastery. That idea of spirituality continued right up to the time of the Reformation, and in the Catholic Church it continues right up until today. The monastic ideal is lifted up as the way to be a true, good, and earnest Christian. Now, most people were not going to do that. Therefore the monks became objects of veneration. They were admired, and their lives were viewed in some ways as the vicarious performance for the ordinary person, the ordinary Christians who continued to live in the world. The Reformers would take a very strong stand against this by claiming that there is only one way of spirituality, wherever you are and whatever you are doing. It is the same for everybody. Ministers, lay people, men, and women—it is all the same, there is no difference. There is not a category for super Christians like the category of monasticism.

Another serious problem with monasticism is that it could so easily degenerate into a system of salvation by works. It constantly did that, as thousands of monks down to and even beyond Luther discovered. Luther was a monk—a good monk. “If ever a monk could get to heaven by his monkery it was I,” he said. He tried to make the system work, but it was his own works, not his faith in God’s grace that he was depending on. Actually, as you read Benedict’s rule and some of the writings by the monastics, to be fair I think you would say grace is not altogether missing. Benedict says, “If we wish to dwell in the tent of God’s kingdom we will never arrive unless we run there doing good deeds.” That seems to set it pretty clearly that we will reach the kingdom by doing good deeds. But then later in the rule he says this: “These people who do these good deeds fear the Lord and do not become elated over their good deeds. They judge it as the Lord’s power, not as their own that brings about the good in them. They praise the Lord working in them and say with the prophet, ‘Not to us O Lord, not to us give the glory but to Your name alone.’” There is a sense of grace there as well. But I think a principle in our study, particularly in the study of doctrine, is that with the emphasis comes the theology. Your emphasis will become your theology. If you read the whole rule and much of the writings of the monks, the emphasis is certainly on the idea that you must do good works to inherit the kingdom of heaven. Grace is there, but it tends to be placed in a less prominent position. Saint Augustine, of course, would place it in a very central and strong position. But you know that the greatest opposition to Augustine came from the monasteries because the monks said, “If it is by God’s grace that we are saved, what are we doing here? Why are we spending all our time trying to get to heaven if this is not the way to get there?” The semi-Pelagian teachings that afflicted Augustine in his old age came right out of the monasteries in Southern Gaul.

Well, monasticism could become, and often did become, corrupt. A movement that started with principles of giving away everything to help the poor, this movement often in its various expressions became wealthy, corrupt, and worldly. But there was always within the history of monasticism a kind of reviving movement. We will see how one order arose, lost something of its original intent, and

something else came along, the Cistercians or the Franciscans or some other movement to say, “Now that this original movement has gone bad we will start it over and do it right.” But our history will reveal that constant reform movements were required, and the tendency—so dramatically expressed in the time of the Reformation—was for the monastic movement not to be a positive factor in the church but rather something of a drag on the life and teaching of the church.

It has been asked if systematic theologies come out of the monastic movement. Not really. Nothing like a systematic theology was produced by this movement. But perhaps I should qualify that because later there was a great intellectual monastic movement. That was the Dominicans. Thomas Aquinas was a Dominican. So certainly from the Dominicans came systematic theologies, but not so much from the Benedictines or other earlier movements. We do not even get any from the Cistercians with Bernard of Clairveaux, though some strong and good theology came from Bernard. Actually, the one anchor Calvin had after Augustine was Bernard. When people asked, “Where did you get this doctrine of grace?” he could say, “From Augustine.” They would say, “Where else?” And he would say, “From Bernard.” They would say, “Where else?” Well, he did not have much else. Bernard was both a mystic and a theologian. Thomas Aquinas of course was a great theologian. So in time there were theologies that came from the monasteries, or at least from the monastic movements. But early there were not really any. The writings were more mystical, certainly in the East. But let me qualify that again. The great Cappadocians, who were very much involved in monasticism, were also important theologians, helping to develop the doctrine of the Holy Spirit and so on. John Chrysostom, who became the great preacher of Constantinople, was a monastic. Almost everyone important in the East had some tie to monasticism. Some of them broke those ties to go back into the world and serve the church in some capacity. Having said all that—which may have confused you entirely—let me say that the major emphasis in writings that came out of the monasteries was more what we would call devotional writings or spiritual writings. They were not philosophical or theological writings.

It has also been asked if the monks came together with the idea of preserving the church in society. I think they had that in mind. It was like a purer church. Within the monasteries there were priests who served the monks. Some were non-ordained, lay brothers, but some were priests. One of the problems that developed as this movement grew strong was that it had a life of its own. You had the normal Catholic hierarchy with the pope and the bishops and so on, but then kind of dropped into that are the monasteries. They are able, in a sense, to do their own thing because they do not have to relate always directly to the diocesan hierarchy. They have their own direct link with the pope. The pope was called upon later to authorize the movements. He was always very concerned about this problem. If he let these Franciscans do what they wanted to do, would they take over too much power and kind of upset everything? So the popes were not eager to accept new movements. They had to be persuaded that this would be good for them and for the church. But as we move on in this study we almost have to keep our eyes on both things now: the regular church arrangement and the monastic orders, which both support and, in some cases, compete with the regular hierarchy.

“The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever” (Isaiah 40:8).