

Church History I

(Early Church to Scholasticism)

Week 5 – Monasticism and Missions

Introduction: When looking at Church History one group that played a vital role in the church was that of the monastics. These men although at times misguided seemed to take their faith very seriously. The monastic movement, alongside expanding missionary frontiers, reflected the Church's desire to preserve holiness, discipline, and doctrinal purity amid the temptations of an imperial faith.

I. Monastics

A. Reasons for Monasticism

1. Monasticism seemingly began in the middle of the 3rd century.
2. Previously, in the age of persecution, only the genuinely committed wished to partake of Christ's kingdom. Now a period of peace produced lukewarm disciples. Many desired to escape a church that they viewed as enfeebled and polluted. ¹ **PTQ**
3. The schisms over readmitting the lapsed into the church disheartened many.²
4. Promotion through an ecclesiastical hierarchy was a substitute for advancement through the decaying Roman civil service system.³

B. Types of Monasticism

1. A formal definition should be given of monastic, coming from the Greek word monachos, meaning solitary, which was the idea of separation (From people, enjoyments, ease) in order to live with God in simplicity and Godliness.⁴ **PTQ**
2. Type based on number
 - i. Anchorite – talking about a complete solitary in the wilderness
 - a) The beginning worker of this form of Monasticism could be recognized as Paul the hermit or Anthony of the desert.
 - b) Anthony of the Desert brought the most significant amount of attention and notoriety to the movement. ⁵ **PTQ**
 - ii. Cenobite – Addressing groups of monks living together often in monasteries. **PTQ**
 - a) These recognized to some degree the need for a Simplistic life before God.



¹ William J. Bennett, *Tried by Fire: The Story of Christianity's First Thousand Years* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2016), 135.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Artistic interpretation of Athanasius's *Life of Saint Antony* by Michelangelo (c. 1487–88)

- b)** They saw the benefits of having great devotional time with God.
 - c)** They also saw the need for other people and the benefits of having several members.
 - 3. Type Based on belief or practice
 - i. Basillian 4th century
 - a)** Basil of Caesarea (c. 330–379) created a balanced rule emphasizing liturgy, charity, obedience, and communal life.
 - b)** Distinguished from desert asceticism by moderation and service to society.
 - c)** Became the normative model for Eastern Christianity. **PTQ**
 - ii. Augustinian 4-5th century
 - a)** Augustine of Hippo (354–430) gathered clergy into communities of prayer, study, and shared discipline.
 - b)** These proto-monastic communities blended pastoral ministry with ascetic life.
 - c)** The *Rule of St. Augustine* later developed from this model, influencing medieval canons. (Canon meaning: an official church list of clergy living together under a specific rule, often associated with a cathedral or collegiate church)
 - iii. Benedictine 6th century
 - a)** Benedict of Nursia (c. 480–543) wrote the *Rule of St. Benedict*, emphasizing *ora et labora* (prayer and work), stability, obedience, and balance.
 - b)** Monte Cassino became the model monastery.
 - c)** The most enduring Western rule, later mandated across Europe. **PTQ**
 - iv. Celtic/ Irish Monasticism 5th-7th century
 - a)** Patrick (c. 390–461), Columba (521–597), and Columbanus (543–615) established missionary monasteries across Ireland, Britain, and Europe. **PTQ**
 - b)** Marked by *peregrinatio pro Christo* (wandering for Christ), stricter asceticism, and penitential practices.
 - c)** Monasteries became centers of culture, mission, and manuscript preservation.
 - v. Columbian monasticism on the continent. 6th-7th century
 - a)** Columbanus founded strict monasteries in Gaul and Italy, emphasizing rigorous discipline and missionary zeal.
 - b)** His *rule* was eventually merged with Benedict's, but his penitentials influenced Western spirituality **PTQ**
- C. Strengths of Monasticism⁶
 1. Monks were often the only examples of peaceful industry in a region.
 2. They were effective and conserving truth. **PTQ**
 - i. By negating the spread of falsehoods like Arianism
 - “The monks,” said one source, “were prepared to subject their necks to the sword rather than to swerve from the Nicene doctrines.”⁷
 - ii. By preserving the Scriptures through copyists
 3. Monks were crucial in the missionary expansion of Christianity **PTQ**
 4. Became beacons of education (in their later years).

⁶ Mark A. Noll, [*Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), [91–92](#).

⁷ Bennett, [*Tried by Fire*](#), 168.

- With Cassiodorus came the standardization of teaching the trivium (grammar, logic, rhetoric) and quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy⁸) (namely, the basic educational forms for classical Christian education.) **PTQ**
- 5. They became standards of knowledge of History and creating new Standards to measure History by.
 - Venerable Bede (the Monk Historian) (673-735) Created the AD System (Anno Domini) which means “In the year of our Lord”⁹ **PTQ**
- D. Weaknesses of Monasticism¹⁰
 1. The hermit life fundamentally misunderstood the nature of spiritual growth by confusing withdrawal from the world with true inner transformation, and often masked spiritual pride behind a facade of humility and self-denial.
 2. Most monks (especially early on) lacked intellectual cultivation, which meant they often couldn’t engage in meaningful contemplation or study.
 3. Excessive asceticism could lead to extreme outcomes, including unnatural behaviors, mental instability, and in some cases, suicide. **PTQ**
 4. The monastic imagination often populated their solitary environments.
 5. They missed out on the spiritual growth that comes from interacting with others regularly.
 6. They forsook gifts of God as a distraction and were worse for it. (wives, children, etc.) **PTQ**
- E. Notable Monastics
 1. A partial list is seen below. ([Go through or skip people on the list as you see fit](#))
 2. Others not listed but also important would include Columba, Columbanus, and Gregory the Great.
 3. Gregory has been called even by some protestants “the last good Pope.”¹¹ **PTQ**
 4. Gregory the Great - One of the most influential figures of the early church age, Gregory won great acclaim in his own life for his highly popular disposition and extensive missionary efforts. Gregory commissioned many missionary trips around the continent and himself made tours around Europe as a way of making the church visible in underpopulated and pagan areas. He had a very tender spot for hands-on ministry, judging from his *Pastoral Rule*. Only two popes have the title “the Great,” and he is one of them (the other is Pope Leo I).¹²
- F. Rules for monastics **PTQ**
 1. Basil - Basil developed a communal form of monasticism that emphasized care for the poor, establishing networks of hospitals, soup kitchens, and shelters for the impoverished.¹³ His specific rules included a structured daily routine with:
 - i. One meal a day of bread and water

⁸ Bennet, *Tried by Fire*, 246.

⁹ Ibid., 260.

¹⁰ Philip Schaff and David Schley Schaff, [History of the Christian Church](#) (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1910), [3:169–171](#).

¹¹ Bennet, *Tried by Fire*, 170.

¹² Ibid., 401-402

¹³ Bennet, *Tried by Fire*, 170.

- ii. Very little sleep before midnight
 - iii. Regular prayers and singing (morning, noon, and evening),
 - iv. Work in the fields during the morning and afternoon.¹⁴
 - v. This became the standard for Eastern monasteries.
2. Augustine – Wrote an 8-chapter document called the Rule of St. Augustine, addressing these topics:¹⁵
- i. Purpose and Basis of Common Life
 - ii. Prayer
 - iii. Moderation and Self-Denial
 - iv. Safeguarding Chastity, and Fraternal Correction
 - v. The Care of Community Goods and Treatment of the Sick
 - vi. Asking Pardon and Forgiving Offenses
 - vii. Governance and Obedience
 - viii. Observance of the Rule
 - This became instrumental in later groups of monastics like the Dominicans and the Augustinians.
3. Benedictine - Among the basic principles of the Benedictine Rule were physical labor and vows of obedience, chastity, poverty, and stability—the last meaning that monks could not move from one monastery to another at will.¹⁶

II. Missions

A. Scotland **PTQ**

1. Ninian (date not known) – a wise and diligent man effectively evangelized the Picts (a barbarian tribe) by creating small monasteries across the land, which became centers for outreach.¹⁷
2. Columba (521-597) – Columba, a monk from Ireland who had already created some monasteries there, found that there was a need on an Island off Scotland. After starting and growing a monastery there, he continued across the mainland.

B. Ireland **PTQ**

1. Patrick (386-459) – kidnapped from Britain as a teenager and sold into slavery in Ireland. He worked as a shepherd for an Irish Chief. His familiarity with the druids and their religions later came to aid him in his missionary decisions. Patrick, who seemed to know Lord, already had a dream where he was told to catch a boat, which he did, and managed to get back home to Britain. Later, after a period in the priesthood, he had another dream about bringing the Gospel back to Ireland. Patrick was such an effective witness of the Irish that he is traditionally even stated to have run all the snakes out of Ireland. Patrick followed a similar model to that of Columba although he predated him.

¹⁴ Samuel Macauley Jackson, ed., in *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (New York; London: Funk & Wagnalls, 1908–1914), [1:500](#).

¹⁵ Augustine, trans. Robert Russell, *The Rule of St. Augustine*, 1976, <https://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/augustine/ruleaug.html>.

¹⁶ Justo L Gonzalez, *Church History: An Essential Guide* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2010).

¹⁷ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *In the Year of Our Lord: Reflections on Twenty Centuries of Church History* (Orlando, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 2018), 63-64,

- C. Gaul – Came to be led under the rulership of the Franks. Their center was the city of Paris. Clovis, the King of the Franks, became one of the First Kings to become Christian. This was done through careful prayers of his wife (who was a catholic believer) and him seeing no way out in a Battle. Although Clovis's conversion did immediately see other fruit, three thousand members of his army followed suit. This however did not convince everyone. Thus the church's mission to France came in full swing during the 6th century. A few of the large-scale leaders in that movement would include Columbanus, who served there faithfully, starting many monasteries, and the Bishops of Tours (the earliest and notable Martin and, at this time, Gregory of Tours).
PTQ
- D. Brittain – “In 596, Gregory commissioned a missionary expedition to the Britons, an endeavor led by a monk named Augustine...Using Frankish interpreters, Augustine “assured to all that took advantage of it everlasting joys in heaven and a kingdom that would never end with the living and true God.” Ethelbert was intrigued. He already had a Christian wife whom he had taken from the Franks, but the new message was still so mysterious and foreign to him that he ordered Augustine and his men to shelter where they were until he could figure out what to do with them...Augustine was allowed to take up residence in Canterbury, the seat of Ethelbert's power, in southeast England. To win converts, the Augustinians adapted their dress and behavior to the local customs...Sometime later, probably around the year 600 or 601, Ethelbert converted, becoming the first English king to convert to Christianity. Ethelbert's conversion spurred other kings to convert as well, and set in motion the gradual Christianization of Anglo-Saxon Britain.”¹⁸**PTQ**
- E. Spain and Italy – “Gregory worked with Reccared to implement Christianity in Spain, and in an event that recalled Clovis's conversion, Gregory developed a relationship with the Christian queen of the Lombards (“long-beards”) as they slashed and burned through northern Italy. Gregory was able to get her to convince her husband, King Agilulf, to show mercy to the Italian peninsula.”¹⁹**PTQ**
- F. Germany – “Gregory also commissioned full-scale missions to the Germanic areas in northern France and beyond the Rhine River in Germany. Gregory knew that the cultural traditions of these peoples were not going to be quickly given up, and he instructed that the priests he dispatched to those areas to plant churches and make disciples should have patience.”²⁰**PTQ**

III. Big Picture Details

- A. In the 400-600's Nicene Christianity took over in many of the Barbarian tribes. Conquering Europe like the Middle East had seemed to be.
- B. Monks played an essential role in the conservation of truth and scripture, promulgation of the faith, and education of the people.
- C. These ideals of the monks to seek separations from joy and distraction sadly brought a great amount of pain and isolation.
- D. Some of the most well-known Church historical characters came from the humble beginnings of Monks.
 - 1. Pope Gregory the Great marks the entrance into the Middle Ages. **PTQ**

¹⁸ Bennett, *Tried by Fire*, 258-260

¹⁹ Ibid., 253.

²⁰ Ibid., 253-254.

- E. The spread of Christianity seemed as if it would defeat the whole of the world until a new religion began to make its way onto the scene.

Conclusion: The Whole of Christendom was stiffened and expanded during this incredible time of Monastics and Missions. The monastic groups grew and changed with the times as was needed. Although these missionary efforts will continue into the future, the next danger to the church nearby is of utmost importance. Next week, we will learn about the rise of Islam and the Christian Response.

Monasticism in the Ancient Church

NAME	DATES	LOCATION	TYPE OF MONK	CONTRIBUTIONS
ANTHONY OF THEBES	c.251–356	Egypt	Anchorite	Initiated anchoritic practice as first hermit monk. Influenced many to practice monasticism. Encouraged martyrs during persecution of church in 311. Biography written by Athanasius.
PACHOMIUS	c.290–c.346	Egypt	Cenobite	Initiated cenobite practice by founding first monasteries. By his death, led nine cloisters for men, two for women.
HILARION	c.291–371	Palestine	Anchorite	Influenced by Anthony. First to bring anchorite practice to Palestine.
BASIL THE GREAT	c.329–379	Cappadocia	Cenobite	Founded monastery in Pontus. Founded first Christian hospital for care of lepers. His monastic rule still used in Eastern Church.
MACARIUS	d.c.390	Egypt	Anchorite	Influenced by Anthony. Supervised group of hermits in Libyan desert.
MARTIN OF TOURS	c.335–c.400	Gaul	Cenobite	Missionary to Franks. First to bring monasticism to the West. Served as bishop of Tours while living monastic life. First monk to be canonized.
JEROME	c.345–420	Syria Rome Bethlehem	Cenobite	Lived as an anchorite in Syria early in life. Encouraged asceticism in Rome.

				Founded monastery in a cave in Bethlehem, where he lived for 35 years while translating Vulgate.
AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO	354–430	North Africa	Cenobite	Converted under Ambrose in Milan after dissolute youth. Founded monasteries in North Africa as bishop of Hippo. Rule of St. Augustine influenced later ascetics.
JOHN CASSIAN	c.360–c.435	Gaul	Cenobite	Educated in monastery in Bethlehem. Founded monastery of St. Victor near Marseilles. Wrote in support of Semi-Pelagianism.
PATRICK	c.389–c.461	Ireland	Cenobite	Born in Britain, taken as slave to Ireland, where he later returned as missionary, converted over 100,000 Irish. Founded monastery at Armagh. Irish monasteries provided many missionaries for conversion of barbarian tribes.
SIMEON STYLITES	c.390–459	Syria	Anchorite	First of the pillar monks. Lived on a 50 - foot pillar for the last 36 years of his life. Influenced many other stylites.
CASSIODORUS	c.477–c.570	Rome	Cenobite	Wealthy nobleman who founded monastery on his own estate. Introduced practice of copying manuscripts to monastic life.
BENEDICT OF NURSIA	c.480–c.543	Monte Cassino	Cenobite	Began as a hermit in Subiaco. Founded monastery at Monte Cassino, which became first monastery of Benedictine Order. Wrote Benedictine Rule. ²¹

²¹ Robert C. Walton, [*Chronological and Background Charts of Church History*](#), Revised Edition, ZondervanCharts (Zondervan, 2018), 29.

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