

### The Ascetic Movement

- Christian did not invent asceticism and were not the only group that practiced it, but many of them eagerly embraced and intensified the ascetic tendencies of the world around them
- The ascetics gradually became the Christian elite, who did what Jesus had recommended to those who wanted to be “perfect”
- Before the later fourth century the clergy as a group were not required to be ascetics

### Early Asceticism

- Early ascetics were following St. Paul’s suggestion that men and women believers might well practice sexual abstinence and live as “Virgins”
- Christian ascetics of the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd centuries practiced their distinctive way of life *within* the Christian communities – sometimes outside but near.
- C. 280 a few ascetics took their quest for spiritual perfection a step further when they withdrew from the surrounding of ordinary life into isolated places, especially into the deserts of Egypt and the Near East
- In the late 3<sup>rd</sup> & 4<sup>th</sup> centuries in Egypt, Syria, and Palestine, the Christian form of the ascetic movement found new and long-lasting forms in what are called “cenobitism” or “monasticism”
- Monasticism grew rapidly in the Catholic Church after Christianity was made the imperial state religion

### St. Anthony in Egypt (251-356)

- First ascetic to try and live in the desert as a hermit
- Anthony was a Coptic Christian (native Egyptian)
- Called to asceticism when he heard in church the gospel passage, (Matthew 19:21)
- After a failed attempt at asceticism in his village he went away into the solitude of the desert to become a hermit “desert dweller” - practiced an extreme form of asceticism

### Pachomius

- A convert to Coptic Christianity in Southern Egypt he developed a communal type of hermit life (cenobitism) and organized monasteries (and one nunnery) under a rule of balanced work and meditation, directed by an abbot
- He composed the first written monastic rules, which regulated the basic features of ascetic life carried on inside a community
  - Prescribed a stern and difficult life.
  - Monks and nuns memorized scripture
  - Worked in agriculture or at a trade or craft
- Lived in abandoned villages where they planted orchards, farmed the fields, produced the necessities for their communities and sold the surplus

- Did not replace the hermit's life, the two coexisted for centuries, although there were soon many more cenobites than hermits

#### Basil of Caesarea (330-379)

- Crucial figure in the acceptance of monasticism in the Greek speaking world
- He wrote the rule for monasteries that is universal in the East to this day.
  - Discouraged excessive bodily asceticism
  - Proposed an image of monastic life as climbing a ladder of increasing perfection
    - The individual monk tried to progress to ever high degrees of spiritual attainment through self-denial, prayer and charitable works
- Basil's monks lived within the city of Caesarea, supported orphanages, distributed food to the needy, and maintained hostels for travelers and hospices for the sick

#### Monasticism in the West

- Also had ascetics usually widows and virgins who lived in their own home
- Heard about Eastern ascetics and monks from pilgrims to Palestine and Egypt
- Christians in the western, Latin-speaking parts of the empire were slower than the easterners to accept monasticism, but when the Germanic invasions turned the society upside down, it became popular and developed many independent orders

#### Benedict of Nursia (c 480-545)

- Created a long-lasting form of monastic life in the West
- In later centuries, monks revered Benedict as the "Father of Western Monasticism" but in his own time he was one abbot among many.
- 6<sup>th</sup> Century created the order of St. Benedict
  - *Rule* for monks - remarkable for its discretion and its clarity of language
  - Demanded that entrants to his community to promise to:
    - Stay for life (a vow of stability)
    - Give up all personal possessions (a vow of poverty)
    - Give up their selfish "will" and adapt to the way of life in the little community (the vow of conversion of behavior)
  - Life of manual labor in the monastery's fields or shops, serious directed reading and worship throughout the day and part of the night
  - His ascetic practices were moderate and he did not allow his monks to practice the harsh and dramatic feats of asceticism associated with eastern monks
  - Benedict's monks provided virtually no services to outsiders with the exception of welcoming guests
  - Self governing – monks elected the abbot on whose character, judgment, and diligence the entire monastery depended but allowed intervention by local bishops
- Benedictine monasteries eventually spread through western Europe
- Each had a library thereby saving books that might have been lost otherwise