

Origins of Monasticism

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Learning Objectives

- Know how Paul and the Gospels contributed to the rise of asceticism
- Know the contributions to rise of asceticism and monasticism in the East made by:
 - St. Anthony (251 - 356)
 - Pachomius (290 - 345)
 - Basil of Caesarea (330 – 379)
- Know the contributions to rise of asceticism and monasticism in the West made by:
 - Benedict of Nursia (480 – 545)

Asceticism

- From the Greek: ἄσκησις, áskēsis, "exercise" or "training"
- Describes a lifestyle characterized by abstinence from various sorts of worldly pleasures often with the aim of pursuing religious and spiritual goals

Monasticism

- From Greek *μοναχός*, *monachos*, derived from Greek *monos*, alone
- A religious way of life characterized by the practice of renouncing worldly pursuits to fully devote one's self to spiritual work

The Ascetic Movement

- Christians did not invent asceticism and were not the only group that practiced it
- The urge to reject wealth, family and sexuality went back to the early days of Christianity
- Paul's letters and the gospels contained the "Hard Sayings" of Jesus – encouraged abandonment of the values of the world

“But he [Jesus] said to them [his disciples], “Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can” (Mt 19:10-12)

“And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life” (Mt 19:29)

Paul

- Recommended forms of asceticism in regard to sexual activity
 - Approved of marriage – kept people from seeking sexual satisfaction in ways he did not approve
- Drew his ascetic conclusions from his strong belief that the end was very near

Early Christian Ascetic practices

- Gnostic Christians – Sometimes strict: fasted, vegetarians, avoided reproduction
- Montanist Christians – Rejected second marriages and fasted severely awaiting Christ's appearance
- Proto-Orthodox Christians – mild forms
 - Fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays
 - Avoided public games because pagan gods honored
 - Penitents had to adopt sever asceticism, particularly fasting

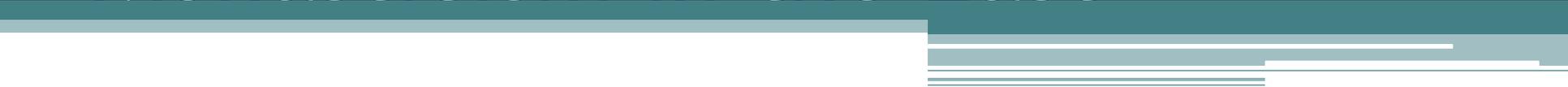
Ascetics Gain Favor

- Virgins, widows, and celibate men were much admired
 - Prayed frequently, read the scriptures
 - Wore simple clothing
 - Engaged in charitable activity
- Ascetics were set apart from the majority of Christian laity and clergy
 - Christian elite – followed Jesus' advice on how to be “perfect”
 - Though self-denial and holy living gained Holy Spirit
 - Thought to be able to read human hearts and give inspired advice

Early Monasticism

- 1st & 2nd centuries – Christians practiced their ascetic way of life *within* or *near* Christian communities
- 3rd century, c. 280 – a few ascetics withdrew into the deserts of Egypt and the Near East
- 4th & 5th centuries – numbers grew
 - First monks mostly lay Christian
 - No single blueprint on how to live as an ascetic in the desert
 - Improvised based on interpretation of the “hard sayings” and accumulated experience

Monasticism in the East



St. Anthony of Korma



St. Anthony in Egypt

(c. 251-356)

- Athanasius of Alexandria (328-373) wrote *Life of Anthony*
- Coptic Christian (native Egyptian)
- Not a clergyman – called by gospel passage
- Guided by an experienced ascetic
 - Failed in the village
 - Moved to the desert to become a hermit “desert dweller”
- He is the first to try and live in the desert

St. Anthony the Hermit

- Ate only one meal a day: bread, salt and water
- Beset by temptations
 - Haunted by demons, in male and female form
 - Erotic visions
- Move into ever more remote places in the Egyptian desert
- Disciples followed him to learn the ascetic life
- Ordinary people and other ascetics visited Anthony for wise advice, prophecies and healing

Egypt - Settlements of Hermits

- Climate was favorable for austerity
- Loosely organized settlements – each hermit
 - Lived in his own hut
 - Pursued his own ascetic way of life
 - Earned his own living
 - Gathered together on Sundays for worship
- Those who tried to live entirely alone often went mad

Pachomius

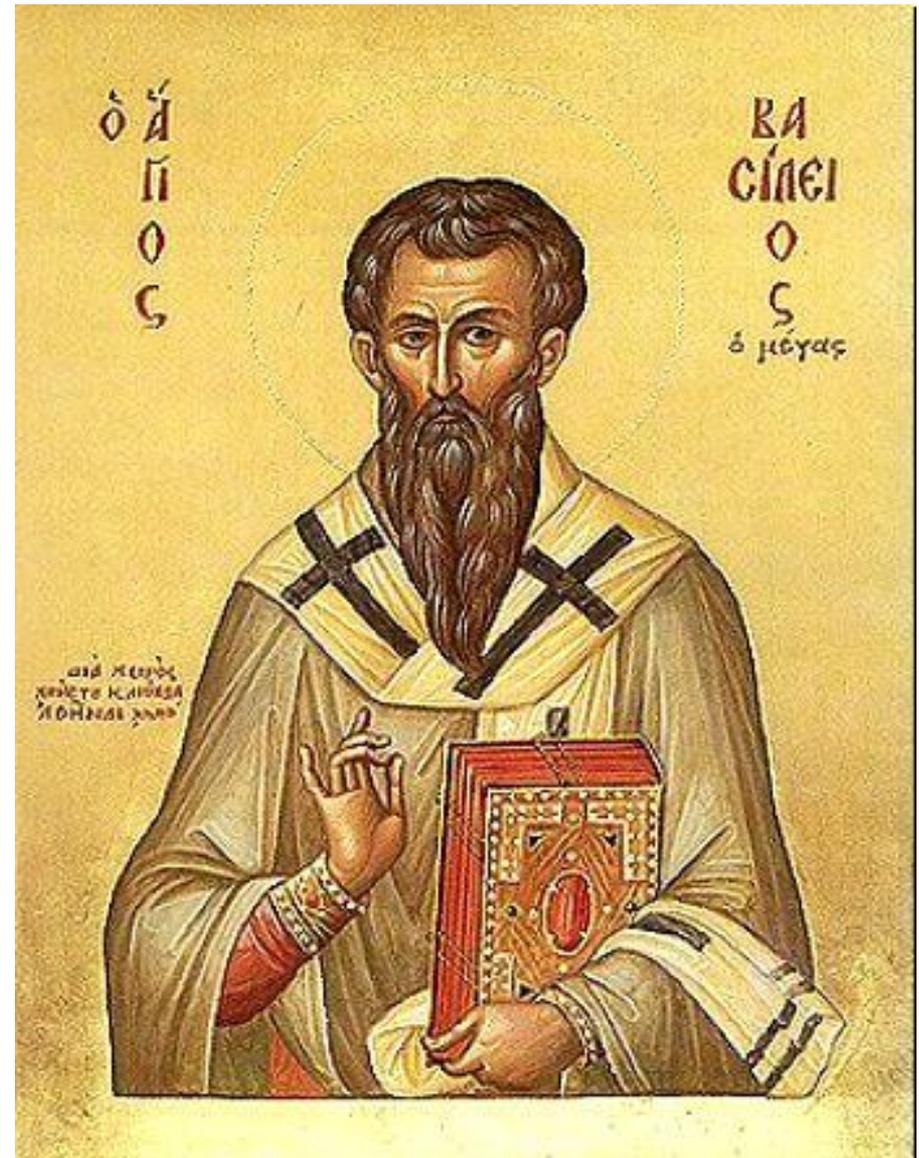


Pachomius

(290-345)

- Convert to Coptic Christianity (southern Egypt)
- Developed a communal type of hermit life (cenobitism “common life”)
- Organized nine monasteries and two nunneries
- Composed the first written monastic rule
 - Prescribed a stern and difficult life
 - Monks and nuns memorized scripture
 - Worked in agriculture or at a trade
- Monasteries were set up in abandoned villages

Basil of Caesarea



Basil of Caesarea

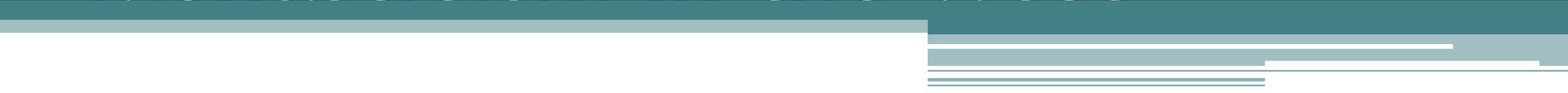
(330-379)

- Crucial figure in the acceptance of monasticism in the Greek speaking world
- Discouraged excessive bodily asceticism
- Image of monastic life as climbing a ladder of increasing perfection through self-denial, prayer and charitable works

Basil of Caesarea

- Composed the rule that is universal in the East to this day
 - Orderly life divided into 6 gathering for prayers in the daylight and 2 at night
 - Every monk worked according to his talents
 - Monasteries submitted themselves to the bishops
 - Prohibited strong drink and non-canonical readings
 - Social service among the poor and orphaned
- His monks lived in the city of Caesarea

Monasticism in the West



Monasticism in the West

- Widows and virgins who lived in their own homes were common
- Heard about Eastern ascetics and monks from pilgrims to Palestine and Egypt
- Western Christians slower to accept monasticism until after the Germanic invasions
- Cold climate of West prevented some kinds of eastern asceticism from taking root there.

Monasticism in the West

- 4th & 5th centuries western bishops were members of aristocratic families
 - Expected to govern and to be obeyed
 - Less tolerant of unregulated independence of hermits and monks
 - Tried to gain control over ascetics
 - Favored cenobitic communities, which they might endow with property, protect and control

Benedict of Nursia



Benedict of Nursia

(c. 480-545)

- Created a long-lasting form of monastic life in the West
- Revered as the “Father of Western Monasticism;” however, one abbot among many
- Born in central Italy
- Attend school in Rome
- Lived as a hermit for 3 years in a cave at “Subiaco”

Benedict of Nursia

- Monastic movement was about 200 yrs. old
- Each monastery had its own rule – some were very lax
- Asked to be the abbot of a monastery – too strict – the monks tried to poison him
- Returned to his solitude - disciples followed him

Order of St. Benedict

- Wrote the *Rule* for monks – remarkable for its discretion and its clarity of language
- Demanded entrants
 - Promise to stay for life (vow of stability)
 - Give up all personal possessions (vow of poverty)
 - Give up their selfish will and adapt to the way of life in the community (vow of conversion of behavior)

Idleness is the Enemy of the Soul

- Gathered 8 times a day to hear reading from the scriptures and sing hymns
- Manual labor in the monastery's fields or shops
- Serious directed reading
- Worship throughout the day and night
- Ascetic practices moderate
 - Celibacy
 - Vegetarian diet
 - Physical labor alternating with worship, prayer, and reading

Order of St. Benedict

- Monastic community cut off from world
- Provided virtually no services to outsiders
- Self governing – monks elected the Abbot
- Allowed intervention of local Bishops
- Benedictine monasteries eventually spread through western Europe
- Each monastery had a library

Summary

- Asceticism arose from Jesus' "hard sayings" and Paul's letters
- In the East asceticism was more severe than in the West
- St. Anthony was the first hermit "desert dweller"
- Pachomius composed the first monastic "rule"

Summary

- Basil of Caesarea
 - Promoted monasticism in the East
 - Composed the rule that is universal in the East today
- Benedict of Nursia
 - Promoted monasticism in the West
 - Wrote the *Rule* used in western monasteries