

THE RISE AND INFLUENCE OF MONASTICISM  
ON THE CHURCH

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## OUTLINE

Thesis: Monasticism's development greatly influenced and impacted the church.

I. What Monasticism Is

II. What Monasticism Is Not

III. What Monasticism's Legacy Is

IV. What Monasticism meant in Practice: The Life of Saint Anthony the Great

To many in the western experiences of Christianity, particularly the post Catholic types, the person in black can be seen as eccentric. Modern society appears to be more disconnected than ever with monasticism. It is indifferent to the ways of the monastic, possibly due to limited opportunities of influence and interaction in post-Catholic circles. To some individuals who have pondered the ascetic, the monk is viewed as actually negating the spirit and heart of Christianity.<sup>1</sup> They have taken the simplistic approach, misinterpreting the motives<sup>2</sup> and errors of the ascetic on the development of physical and historical concepts. It is true that at certain times in the past, some elements within the monastic movement have acted shamefully. The behaviour exhibited at the Council of Ephesus, better known as the Synod of Robbers,<sup>3</sup> or that Chalcedonian contempt and rejection, of Chalcedon as an ecumenical council, by Egyptian and Syrian factions, for instance, was spurred on and fed by the monastic elements within those territories.<sup>4</sup>

However, a bushel of apples is not impugned over the vileness of one rotten apple. If there is a necessity for monasticism it should be regarded in its fullness and most exuberant

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<sup>1</sup>For example, "Asceticism encourages the idea of a double standard, with a spiritual elite set above the general level of Christians." Tim Dowley, ed., Eerdman's Handbook to the History of Christianity (Lion Publishing: Tring, Hertfordshire, England; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), 204 (page reference is to reprint edition).

<sup>2</sup>For example, in the introduction to the Vita, the growth of monasticism is credited to the physical persecutions driving many people into the desert to escape it, or that Christians naturally imitated the pagan institutions or further as a way to escape legal, civic and social responsibilities. Cf. Vita 409-410. Further to this notion is the view that as physical martyrdom was coming to an end, monasticism was the closest thing to martyrdom for those who had missed its opportunities. Ted Byfield, ed. The Christians: Their First 2000 Years (Edmonton, AB: Christian History Project, 2003), vol. 4, Darkness Descends: A.D. 350-565 The Fall of the Western Roman Empire, 79.

<sup>3</sup>Alexander Schmemmann, The Historical Road of Eastern Orthodoxy, trans. Lydia W. Kesich, (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1977; reprint, Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Press, 2003), 133-134 (page references are to reprint edition). Cf. also, Byfield, 192.

<sup>4</sup>Schmemmann, 140.

expressions, not in the subjugation of certain tenants to fit the mind of the beholder.<sup>5</sup> So, with that in mind, it becomes evident that the Christian Church could not have functioned nor could it be what it is today without its monastic influence. The life of Saint Anthony should stand as proof in the counter argument against the actions of the monk Senuti *et al.* It is necessary to first trace the historical context of monasticism before the wonders and God-filled grace of Saint Anthony the Great can be appreciated.

What is a monk? This is the vital introductory question. In its most simplistic explanation, “a monk is a believer who has undertaken to enter prayerfully into unceasing communion with God.”<sup>6</sup> Two of the primary tenants within the monastic movement are prayer and repentance.<sup>7</sup> Leading to prayer is solitude, for without stillness it becomes very difficult to pray. Stillness provides the participant with the opportunity of “unceasing prayer and love of neighbour,”<sup>8</sup> and to the following of Christ’s teachings by the “renunciation of self.”<sup>9</sup> If one is to pray unceasingly, there needs to be the abandonment of worldly living and the fulfillment of the passions. This occurs most successfully through the limitation of food consumption, by increased prayers, works, dialoguing with others about their experiences, and of course,

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<sup>5</sup>This already entails the assumption that the monastic is a necessary and vital part of Christendom. The acts of a few should not trump the good and pure motives of what the ascetic is trying to achieve. So if there is a failure to live up to its ideals this should in no way prejudice the whole.

<sup>6</sup>John Climacus, [The Ladder of Divine Ascent](#), trans. Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell, The Classics of Western Spirituality Series. (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982), xxvii. Historically, the rise of monasticism occurred at a time when the martyrdom of blood (red martyrdom) was drawing to a close. Monasticism soon became identified as a martyrdom (white martyrdom), but in its expression it identifies and proclaims what life really is. Compare, Timothy Ware (Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia), [The Orthodox Church](#) (London, England; Penguin Books; reprint, Pelican Books, 1997), 37 (page references are to reprint edition). From the emergence of Christianity, the seeds of asceticism had already been sowed through the example of Saint John the Forerunner and the order of the prophets.

<sup>7</sup>Bohdan Hladio, “Monasticism: Part One,” *Visnyk*, December 2010, 5.

<sup>8</sup>Bohdan Hladio, “Monasticism: Part Two,” *Visnyk*, January 2011, 9.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*

humility.<sup>10</sup> This may seem to be extreme self-denial, but if there is no higher good than to, “cling to the Lord and to persevere in unceasing union with Him?,”<sup>11</sup> then to strive for greater union with God should take whatever arrangement is necessary. Not only are the monks concerned with their own salvation, but upon their salvation is also the salvation of the world. The monastic life is, “a light for all men . . .”<sup>12</sup> and so it is that the ascetic is always to act in virtue, and in conduct never giving an opportunity for scandal. Without the prayers of the monastic, the Church and the world at large would be in greater turmoil and more impoverished. The monastic has willingly renounced all sorts of worldly joys for the benefit of God and humanity, on a level not attainable to those outside of the monastic community.

Three forms of monasticism have emerged. By the year 350AD, all three forms were prevalent in Egypt.<sup>13</sup> The first type is the community dweller. An example would be Saint Pachomios. Then there is the opposite extreme by way of the hermit, also known as the eremitic way (Saint Anthony the Great).<sup>14</sup> The eremitic way is extreme, and is only permitted for those greatly experienced in the ascetic ways, and with a calling for such a life because, “every human being needs community.”<sup>15</sup> The third form is a synergy of the two extremes so that the benefits from both are achievable in one setting. This is known as the semi-eremitic

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<sup>10</sup>Climacus, Section 1; 74, and also, xxiii.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid, Section 28; 278.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid, Section 26; 234.

<sup>13</sup>Ware, 37.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Hladio, Dec 2010, 5.

way, “where instead of a single highly organized community there is a loosely knit group of small settlements . . . living together under the guidance of an elder.”<sup>16</sup>

The monk is the fullest expression of loving “God with all your heart, with all your strength and with your entire mind.” They are witness to the Glory of God and the continuing embodiment of Christ’s parables of the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl of Great Price.<sup>17</sup> The monk is so aware of God, so “overwhelmed” of His reality that the present is renounced in order to live “the life of the Spirit.”<sup>18</sup> It is exile, “a separation from everything, in order that one may hold on totally to God.”<sup>19</sup> The renunciation of the present cultivates a deep love for all people<sup>20</sup> that will inevitably see everyone as a brother or sister.<sup>21</sup> There is a correlation between the enduring of hardship and the inner resources of the ascetic, in that the adherent experiences enhanced spirituality.<sup>22</sup>

As to what brings a person to the act of renunciation, Saint John Climacus states three reasons. “All this is done . . . either for the sake of the coming kingdom, or because of the number of their sins, or on account of their love for God.”<sup>23</sup>

This self renunciation is not, as some charge, an indication of dualism or of neo-platonic thought. However if such a charge is levelled perhaps it should be directed towards Christ

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<sup>16</sup>Ware, 38. The elder is a monk of spiritual wisdom and discernment who is adopted by other monks, which can also include lay people, as their guide and director. Cf. Ware, 39. Saint Anthony the Great was such an elder.

<sup>17</sup>Compare Saint Matthew’s Gospel, 13:44-46.

<sup>18</sup>Climacus, xxiii.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid, Section 3; 85.

<sup>20</sup>Hladio, Jan 2011, 9.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Climacus, xvi.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid, Section 1; 74.

Himself. The monk is after all, only attempting to live the standard that was introduced by his Master's teachings; "Be holy," and "Pick up your cross and follow Me." Secondly, "the practice of fasting implies no condemnation upon the action of eating, but serves to make that action sacramental and eucharistic."<sup>24</sup> As to the yearning for solitude, ". . .[this] is not an escape from human interaction, but a means of cultivating a different type of human interaction."<sup>25</sup>

If there is nugget of truth in the charge of a dualism within monastic thought, it is not in the dualism of spirit and matter. This is neither repackaged gnosticism nor current invention identifiable in post-reformation circles. Rather the dualism refers to the status of the Christian who is called to be in the world but not of it. Saint John Climacus mentions this concept in a variety of ways, the "fallen and the unfallen," of "life and death" and of "immortality and corruption."<sup>26</sup> For, "Asleep or awake, the monk is a soul pained by the constant remembrance of death. Withdrawal from the world is a willing hatred of all that is materially prized, a denial of nature for the sake of what is above nature."<sup>27</sup> The motives involving renunciation, are to draw closer to God, to long for the fullness of God, and to long for the fullness of His kingdom.<sup>28</sup> Further there is present a tension to, ". . .hold the hour of death in constant remembrance regarding each day as our last."<sup>29</sup> And at the same time we should, "await death as though it were life."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid, 31.

<sup>25</sup>Hladio, Dec 2010, 5.

<sup>26</sup>Climacus, Introduction 21.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid, Section 1; 74.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid, 6.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid, Section 6; 135

<sup>30</sup>Ibid, Section 4; 106.

With this in mind the monastery is both, “ a tomb before the tomb,” and “heaven on earth.”<sup>31</sup> It is “heaven on earth,” for it provides a beacon to those in spiritual need and does not subtract from the church. Rather, it complements the parishes.<sup>32</sup> The monastic reminds others that the Christian is not made for this world. It can become easy to be so consumed by earthly cares which neglect the kingdom to come, which is itself the restored and true creation. The pattern of monasticism is a withdrawal in order to return to serve. One must learn about both the self and God, of bringing the passions under control. At that point can the people be served.<sup>33</sup> Saint Anthony is a clear example of this, for after asceticizing for a period of time, then did the populaces flock to him. On other occasions Saint Anthony went to the people. On a certain trip to Alexandria when he was looking for martyrdom, God rather kept him safe from harm for the benefit of Christians, and as a salesman for the monastic setting.<sup>34</sup>

Through monasticism, the church was offered a counterbalance, and a harmony of being in the world and not of it. It provided a sober second thought, that though the empire might be Christian, God still requires from us a martyrdom of sorts. “Be perfect as your Father in Heaven is perfect.”<sup>35</sup> But monasticism also brought to the Church a wealth of experiential theology composed and adapted into various services. For instance, Saint Romanus Melodus, introduced to the church the kontakia.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid, Section 4; 113, 111 respectively.

<sup>32</sup>Hladio, Jan 2011, 9.

<sup>33</sup>Ware, 40.

<sup>34</sup>Athanasius: Select Works and Letters, ed. Phillip Schaff, Vita Saint Anthoni, Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers. Vol. 4, Second Series, (New York: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1892), Chapter 46; Page 430. Accessed from [www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf204.html](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf204.html)

<sup>35</sup>Holy Gospel of Matthew 19:21

<sup>36</sup>Schmemmann, 195.

The theme of repentance, so prevalent during the Lenten Triodion, is itself a reflection of monastic thought.<sup>37</sup> In the prayers of preparation for receiving Holy Communion, the themes of repentance and humility are major ingredients for its reception. Every prayer is written by a monastic: two by Saint Basil the Great, four by Saint John Chrysostom, one by Saint Simeon the Translator, two by Saint John of Damascus, and one by Saint Simeon the New Theologian.

The Great Canon of Saint Andrew of Crete, is composed by the monastic with the expressions of repentance, remorse, humility, and mercy. Part of the legacy of the monastic influences is the leadership provided to the Church. Every hierarch is a practicing monastic. Time does not permit the further exploration of other themes handed down to the Church within the services of Saint John Chrysostom's Divine Liturgy, the Supplicatory Canon to the Theotokos by Theoctistus, the Paraklesis by Theophanes, St Patrick's Breastplate, and others. Nor is there time to explore the legacy that the monastic community has upon the theological understanding and experience of prayer.<sup>38</sup>

The Church in its infinite wisdom saw that repentance, by fasting, prayer and vigil were necessities for the achievement of salvation, and thus absorbed them into the services. Not only did the Church absorb the theological abstracts of monastic experience, but the life of Saint Anthony the Great had a tremendous impact upon the Church. Saint Anthony was not the first monk. He is known as the first to receive public attention, almost to the scope of a

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<sup>37</sup>"Repentance is the daughter of hope and the refusal to despair. . . .Repentance is reconciliation with the Lord." Climacus, Section 5; 121.

<sup>38</sup>One important aspect is the interpretation of "praying without ceasing," by the usage of the Jesus Prayer.

celebrity.<sup>39</sup> He was raised in a Christian home by wealthy Egyptian parents.<sup>40</sup> He had no desire for education, aspiring instead for godliness, visiting churches and attending their services, and heeding carefully the Holy Scriptures.<sup>41</sup> After his parents reposed, he heeded the gospel pericope about being perfect. In keeping with the words of Christ, Saint Anthony also did likewise, giving away his possessions to the poor,<sup>42</sup> and living as an ascetic. He strived for godliness with all sincerity and devotion, and the Lord bestowed upon him the graces of healing, wisdom, comfort, and many others.<sup>43</sup> His struggles were extreme and Satan and his minions inflicted him mercilessly.<sup>44</sup> In all Saint Anthony's endeavours he remained humble<sup>45</sup> and any graces he bestowed, was due to, "Christ in answer to prayers."<sup>46</sup> The legacy of Saint Anthony brought a development and transformation within Christianity. "He persuaded many to embrace the solitary life. And thus it happened in the end that cells arose even in the mountains and the desert was colonized by monks. . . ."<sup>47</sup> Saint Anthony was known for his love and its expression.<sup>48</sup> His was a life of dying daily,<sup>49</sup> and in his piety to God he became famous in order that he would be a "lamp enlightening all."<sup>50</sup>

Monasticism reminds us to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind. It gives us examples of how to pray, of keeping ourselves humble and not blinded spiritually with pride.

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<sup>39</sup>Byfield, 69.

<sup>40</sup>Athanasius, Vita, Chapter 1 (page 412)

<sup>41</sup>Synaxarion of Saint Anthony the Great, January 17/30. Accessed from the Menologion at [www.SaintJohnWonderworker.org](http://www.SaintJohnWonderworker.org).

<sup>42</sup>Athanasius, Vita, Chapter 2 (page 412).

<sup>43</sup>Ibid, Chapter 14 (page 418).

<sup>44</sup>Ibid, Chapters 5,6,8-10,51-53.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid, Chapter 62 (page 437).

<sup>46</sup>Ibid, 38 (page 427), 44 (page 430), 48 (431), 54 (433), 80 (443).

<sup>47</sup>Ibid, 14 (page 418). This even included the wealthy and soldiers. Cf. Chapter 87 (page 447).

<sup>48</sup>His love was expressed even to the cruel. Cf. Chapter 86 (page 446).

<sup>49</sup>Ibid, Chapter 91 (page 448).

<sup>50</sup>Ibid, Chapter 93 (page 449).

As spiritual elites, the monastic is not above the general populace in terms of earthly honour and position. Rather, the ascetic compliments and bridges heaven and earth, for the benefit of our salvation. They are as necessary for the Christian as is water to the survival of God's creation. As the troparion of Saint Anthony declares, "You imitated the ways of Elias, and followed the straight path of the Baptist, O father Anthony, you became a desert dweller and strengthened the universe by your prayers, therefore beseech Christ God for the salvation of our souls."

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