

An Introduction to Western Monasticism

What is Monasticism and where did it come from?

As we make our way, we read the helpful signs left by those who have gone before us, and we endeavor to leave our own for those who will come after us. More than words, of course, the most effective signs are the examples of those who have been and are being faithful to this sacred vocation. The monastic life has never been so much about adhering to written rules as it has been about yielding to the work of the Spirit. The life-giving source that most inspires and instructs us is found in those letters "written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts" (2 Cor. 3:3).

- The Rule of Life of the Community of Jesus¹

In an age which embraces a rising secular generation, the character of monasticism is often misunderstood, perhaps even largely unknown. A monk or a nun, in the broadest sense, is someone who, out of love for God, vows to live under a rule, or way of life, renouncing worldly pursuits and dedicating their life to spiritual work. Monks and nuns today carry forward and embrace monastic life from within the monastery, drawing from examples set forth by centuries of holy men and women. A doorway into an understanding of the character of contemporary Western Christian monasticism opens through investigation of the origins of monastic life.

Precedent for Christian monastic life strongly identifies with Saint John the Baptist. John was a contemporary of Jesus often credited with paving the way for Jesus' public ministry. He was a Nazarite. Nazarites were Jewish men and woman that made a vow of separation consecrating themselves to God.² According to scripture, Christ compliments Saint John the Baptist rather significantly by saying, "...among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than

¹ "The Rule Of Life Of The Community Of Jesus: Principles And Procedures." Accessed July 19, 2018. <https://www.communityofjesus.org/wp-content/uploads/CJ-Rule-of-Life.pdf>.

² Jones, Robert C. *Monks and Monasteries: A Brief History*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2010.

*John the Baptist...*³ Interestingly, John the Baptist led a particularly rigorous, ascetic lifestyle removed from society. The character of John is quickly understood through his own words directing his followers towards Jesus, "*He must increase, but I must decrease.*"⁴ As such, Saint John the Baptist's life is seen as a biblical model for the monastic life.⁵

Monasticism does not begin to tangibly emerge until the 3rd and 4th centuries. Prior to its emergence, persecution, of an intense and often fatal character, is a central feature of the early Christian narrative. To be a Christian meant a believer chose a radical, illegal, and misunderstood persecuted life, sometimes resulting in martyrdom. Interestingly, Christians associated or identified their suffering with Christ's own suffering who was crucified. Stories of early martyrs are rife with brutality; martyrs were ripped apart by lions, stoned, and burned. Consequently, early Christian life was intense and deeply committed, in a way which monasticism would seek to emulate.⁶

With Constantine the Great's *Edict of Milan* in 313 AD Christianity became legalized.⁷ The intense sacrifice of earlier Christian life suddenly required a new expression. Holy men and women, who would eventually become known as the Desert Fathers and Mothers, began seeking a new expression of sacrificial living, an ascetic life. The Desert Fathers were the first Christian hermits and ascetics who retreated from society into the Egyptian desert where they lived an austere life focused on prayer. Saint Anthony the Great is considered the father of the movement. Although he was not necessarily the first, his life was recorded by Saint Athanasius and the narrative has become a canonical text in the tradition and study of monasticism.

³ "Bible Gateway." Matthew 11:11 - NRSV - Bible Gateway. Accessed July 18, 2018.

⁴ "Bible Gateway." John 3:30 - NRSV - Bible Gateway. Accessed July 18, 2018.

[https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John 3:30&version=NRSV](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John%203:30&version=NRSV).

⁵ "Monastic Overview." Dallas Baptist University. Accessed July 19, 2018.

<https://www3.dbu.edu/mitchell/monasticoverview.htm>. and

Jesus himself is often considered a model for monasticism, as well as Mary the Mother of God through her complete obedience. Indeed, Dariusz Kasprzak, O.F.M. Cap., expounds quite eloquently on numerous biblical models: Adam, Elijah, Elisha and the prophet's sons, John the Baptist, Jesus, the Apostles, and the first Church community in Jerusalem. - Kasprzak, Dariusz. "Monastic Exegesis and the Biblical Typology of Monasticism in the Patristic Period." *Theological Research. The Journal of Systematic Theology* 2, no. 1 (2014): 85-103. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15633/thr.680>.

⁶ Verdon, Mons. Timothy. "St. John the Baptist." Lecture, Mount Tabor Centre for Art and Spirituality, Barga, Italy, June 18, 2018.

⁷ Bryant, Joseph M. "The Sect-Church Dynamic and Christian Expansion in the Roman Empire: Persecution, Penitential Discipline, and Schism in Sociological Perspective." *The British Journal of Sociology* 44, no. 2 (1993): 303-39. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/591221>.

Legendary, miraculous episodes in the lives of the Desert Fathers border on the fantastical, but nonetheless communicate a bit of the character of monasticism's roots. The underlying lessons drawn from teachings are often easy to discern, such as this lesson from Saint Anthony advocating for full commitment and warning against selfishness:

A brother renounced the world and gave his goods to the poor, but he kept back a little for his personal expenses. He went to see Abba Anthony. When he told him this, the old man said to him, 'If you want to be a monk, go into the village, buy some meat, cover your naked body with it and come here like that.' The brother did so, and the dogs and birds tore at his flesh. When he came back the old man asked him whether he had followed his advice. He showed him his wounded body, and Saint Anthony said, 'Those who renounce the world but want to keep something for themselves are torn in this way by the demons who make war on them.'

— Saint Antony of Egypt⁸

The earliest monastics, like Saint Anthony, were considered eremitic hermits living on their own in the desert wilderness. As luxury and casual Christianity increased within society, eventually becoming the state religion of the Roman Empire, the life of Saint Anthony and others inspired devout Christians to follow the example of the Desert Fathers retreating into the wilderness. This movement would grow to the point where cenobitic communities began to coalesce into formal monasteries. Cenobitic monasticism stresses or encourages community life, sharing in both spiritual struggles and joys; a significant shift from the mindset of a solitary, reclusive hermit. Saint Pachomius is credited with gathering monks together to live communally in the first monastery.⁹ Here he established rules inspired by scripture which governed the lives of the monks with the intention of guiding the monk towards Christ.

Living under a specific rule is a key component of monastic life today. Men and women who are drawn to monastic life eventually choose to make vows adopting the rules of their monastery and are received as monks and nuns. Different orders of monastics, of which there are many, such as Trappists, Carthusians, Cistercians, and Benedictines, are identified by the rule which they follow. For example, Benedictine monks follow the *Rule of Life* developed by Saint

⁸ Chadwick, Owen. "Western Asceticism"

⁹ Knox, John S. "The Monastic Movement: Origins & Purposes." Ancient History Encyclopedia. July 21, 2018. Accessed July 21, 2018.
<https://www.ancient.eu/article/930/the-monastic-movement-origins--purposes/>.

Benedict of Nursia (480 – 543 AD), or a rule inspired by and similar to the original. Benedict's rule emphasizes obedience, poverty and chastity while establishing times throughout the day for prayer, worship, and work. The rules set forth by Saint Benedict cover a broad range of life in the monastery and tend to oppose societal norms, ignoring the temporal with a perspective towards the eternal. For example, Chapter 57 calls for the removal of skilled craftsmen who lose humility in order to instruct them towards humbleness:

If there are craftsmen in the monastery, let them practice their crafts with all humility, provided the Abbot has given permission. But if any one of them becomes conceited over his skill in his craft, because he seems to be conferring a benefit on the monastery, let him be taken from his craft and no longer exercise it unless, after he has humbled himself, the Abbot again gives him permission.¹⁰

A curiously notable aspect of monasticism is that, as obvious as it may sound, the monk lives in a monastery. The monk is distinct from mendicant religious orders, such as Franciscan or Dominicans, who embrace an itinerant or habitually travelling ministry. Mendicants, often referred to as friars, also make vows and follow a rule of life, but deliberately move wherever their ministry is required, as opposed to monastics who are rooted to a specific monastery in a specific place. Typically the monk includes in his or her vows, a vow of stability which commits the monastic to a monastery for the remainder of their lives. Perhaps the distinction between friars and monastics is not all that important, considering the intentions of both are directed towards God, yet the character of stability forms and shapes the monastic in a unique fashion. The monk seeks God throughout their life centered in a physically stationary place: the monastery.

Today, within various expressions of monasticism a broad spectrum exists between orders which are especially contemplative with a focus on prayer and worship, and those which are oriented toward active social mission, for example; teachers. Indeed, monastics often experience this push and pull between contemplation and action within their own lives. Saint Augustine of Hippo (354-430 AD)¹¹, a bishop of the Church, found and categorized this push and pull within the biblical narrative:

¹⁰ Benedict. "St. Benedict's Rule for Monasteries." Gutenberg. September 22, 2015. Accessed July 22, 2018. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/50040/50040-h/50040-h.html>

¹¹ Saint Augustine is a particularly fascinating fellow in my opinion, his autobiography, especially modernized translations, are a rather enjoyable read.

The active life is signified by the Apostle Peter¹², the contemplative by John [the Baptist]. The first is wholly carried out here until the end of this world, and there finds an end; the last is deferred, to be completed after the end of the world, but in the world to come it has no end.

This distinction or categorization is not unique to religion, perhaps a universal human condition. Indeed, Augustine clarifies his comments and discussion by referencing academia:

As the study of wisdom consists in action and contemplation so that one part of it may be called active and the other contemplative ... Socrates is said to have excelled in the active part of that study, while Pythagoras gave more attention to its contemplative part.¹³

In the United States, Thomas Merton (1915–1968), a trappist monk, brought monasticism to the forefront of cultural conscience with the publication of a bestseller, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948). The book is Merton's autobiography detailing his conversion experience as he finds his way towards his vocation and falls in love with God. He would become a prolific writer, with more than seventy books which had a profound effect drawing men and women towards monasticism.¹⁴ His writings are exemplar works of prose which challenged thinkers, such as this curated excerpt from *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966):

I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, ... There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun... Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed¹⁵

Merton, as a trappist monk, was committed to one of the strictest orders of monasticism. Trappists follow the original 6th century rule of St. Benedict quite literally, for example, speaking only when only necessary, consequently; trappists are silent most of the time. Yet his writings speak volumes and exhibit a tremendous freedom...exploring Eastern religions, rife with an

¹² The Apostle Peter was a disciple of Jesus who was charged by Christ to establish and build the church, consequently a particularly active mission.

¹³ Bonnell, Robert A. "An Early Humanistic View of the Active and Contemplative Life." *Italica* 43, no. 3 (1966): 225-39. doi:10.2307/477732.

¹⁴ Martin SJ, James. OnFaith. (2016). 7 Ways Thomas Merton Changed the World. [online] Available at: <https://www.onfaith.co/text/7-ways-thomas-merton-changed-the-world> [Accessed 26 Jul. 2018].

¹⁵ Center for Action and Contemplation. "Thomas Merton, Part II." Center for Action and Contemplation. September 26, 2017. Accessed July 25, 2018. <https://cac.org/thomas-merton-part-2-2017-10-06/>.

ardent social activism, and exhibiting a transparency into the confused human heart. The fruits of Merton's works, exhibiting a wild freedom, seem to belie assumed constrictions of living life under a rule.

As much as rules and vows shape monasticism, in the spirit of Merton, Saint Anthony, Saint John the Baptist and centuries of holy men and women, ultimately it is the monks themselves and the choices they make which give a monastery character. Choices respond to the discernment of God in their lives, as Saint Benedict says in his rule, "*Listen and attend with the ear of your heart.*"¹⁶ Choices such as whether to pursue an active or a contemplative life lead to a growing relationship between Christ and the monk. The greatest monastics, who seem to make courageous choices minute by minute, become inspiration and encouragement. The next generation within the monastery then seeks to emulate these holy men and women. Being a Christian is, after all, a commitment to follow after and emulate the holiest of men; Christ. Monasticism is simply another expression of this Christian life.

¹⁶ Benedict. "St. Benedict's Rule for Monasteries." Gutenberg. September 22, 2015. Accessed July 22, 2018. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/50040/50040-h/50040-h.html>