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Chapter 15

15
The Monastic Reaction

> Monks who leave their cells, or seek the company of others, lose their peace, like the fish out of water loses its life.
>
> ANTHONY

The new position of the church after Constantine's peace was not equally received by all. Over against those who, like Eusebius of Caesarea, saw the more recent events as the fulfillment of God's purposes, there were those who bemoaned what they saw as the low level to which Christian life had descended. The narrow gate of which Jesus had spoken had become so wide that countless multitudes were hurrying through it—many seeming to do so only in pursuit of privilege and position, without caring to delve too deeply into the meaning of Christian baptism and life under the cross. Bishops competed with one another over prestigious positions. The rich and powerful seemed to dominate the life of the church. The tares were growing so rapidly that they threatened to choke out the wheat.

For almost three hundred years, the church had lived under the constant threat of persecution. All Christians were aware of the possibility that some day they might be taken before Roman authorities, and there placed before the awesome choice between death and apostasy. During the prolonged periods of quiet in the second and third centuries, there were those who forgot this; and when persecution did arrive, they proved too weak to withstand the trial. This in turn convinced others that security and comfortable living were the greatest enemies of faithfulness, and that these enemies proved stronger during periods of relative peace. Now, when the peace of the church seemed assured, many of these people saw that very assurance as a snare of Satan.

How was one to be a true Christian in such circumstances? When the church joins the powers of the world, when luxury and ostentation take hold of Christian altars, when the whole of society is intent on turning the narrow path into a wide avenue, how is one to resist the enormous temptations of the times? How is one to witness to the crucified Lord, to the one who had nowhere to lay his head, at a time when many leaders of the church live in costly homes, and when the ultimate witness of martyrdom is no longer possible? How to overcome Satan, who is constantly tempting the faithful with the new honors that society offers?

Many found an answer in the monastic life: to flee from human society, to leave everything behind, to dominate the body and its passions, which give way to temptation. Thus, at the very time when churches in large cities were flooded by thousands demanding baptism, there was a veritable exodus of other thousands who sought beatitude in solitude.

THE ORIGINS OF MONASTICISM

Even before Constantine's time, there had been Christians who, for various reasons, had felt called to an unusual style of life. Reference has already been made to the "widows and virgins"—that is, to those women who chose not to marry or to remarry, and to devote all their time and energies to the work of the church. Some time later, Origen, following the Platonic ideal of the wise life, made arrangements to live at a mere subsistence level, and led a life of extreme asceticism. It is said that he even took literally the Word of

Christ about those who have made themselves “eunuchs for the Kingdom.” Also, although Gnosticism had been rejected by the church, its influence could still be felt in the widely held notion that there was a fundamental opposition between the body and the life of the spirit, and that therefore in order to live fully in the spirit it was necessary to subdue and to punish the body.

Thus, monasticism has roots both within the church and outside of it. From within the church, monasticism was inspired by Paul’s words, that those who chose not to marry had greater freedom to serve the Lord. This impulse toward celibacy was often strengthened by the expectation of the return of the Lord. If the end was at hand, it made no sense to marry and to begin the sedentary life of those who are making plans for the future. At other times, there was an additional reason for celibacy: since Christians are to witness to the coming Kingdom, and since Jesus declared that in the Kingdom “they neither marry nor are given in marriage,” those who choose to remain celibate in the present life are a living witness to the coming Kingdom.

A number of outside influences also played a part in the development of Christian monasticism. Several schools of classical philosophy held that the body was the prison or the sepulcher of the soul, and that the latter could not be truly free as long as it did not overcome the limitations of the body. Stoic doctrine, very widespread at the time, held that passions are the great enemy of true wisdom, and that the wise devote themselves to the perfecting of their souls and the subjugation of their passions. Several religious traditions in the Mediterranean basin included sacred virgins, celibate priests, eunuchs, and others whose lifestyle set them apart for the service of the gods. This sense that the body—and particularly sexual activity—was somehow evil or unworthy of those devoted to holiness became so widespread that in an attempt to curb this extreme practice, the Council of

Nicea, in 325 CE, ordered that any among the clergy who had castrated themselves be deposed, and no one be admitted into the clergy who had done such a thing. But according to ancient chroniclers even at that council there were already some who wished to order clerical celibacy—a move that was defeated by the impassioned opposition of bishop Paphnutius, widely respected for his steadfastness during the persecution and his own celibate life. Thus, the ideals of early Christian Monasticism arose both from Scripture and from other sources quite alien to Christianity.

THE FIRST MONKS OF THE DESERT

Although there were early monastics throughout the Roman Empire, it was the desert—especially the Egyptian desert—that provided the most fertile soil for the growth of monasticism. The very word *monk* is derived from the Greek word *monachos,* which means "solitary." One of the driving motivations for the early monks was the search for solitude. Society, with its noise and its many activities, was seen as a temptation and a distraction from the monastic goal. The term "anchorite," which soon came to mean a solitary monk, originally meant withdrawn or even fugitive. For these people, the desert was attractive, not so much because of its hardship, but rather because of its inaccessibility. What they sought was not burning sands, but rather an oasis, a secluded valley, or an abandoned cemetery, where they would not be disturbed by others.

There are indications that the early Christian monastic movement was often associated with a parallel movement of individuals who abandoned their villages fleeing from the hardships imposed by the government, particularly taxation. At about the same time that early Christian monasticism flourished, the population of rural Egyptian villages dwindled, as people found it impossible to fulfill all the obligations that the government imposed on them and fled to more inaccessible areas. These too were fugitives or anchorites, and it was not always possible to distinguish between them and those who fled to the desert in search of greater holiness.

It is impossible to tell who was the first monk—or nun—of the desert. The two who are usually given that honor, Paul and Anthony, owe their fame to two great Christian writers, Jerome and Athanasius, who wrote about them, each claiming that his protagonist was the founder of Egyptian monasticism. But the truth is that it is impossible to know—and that no one ever knew—who was the founder of the movement. Monasticism was not the invention of an individual, but rather a mass exodus, a contagion, which

seems to have suddenly affected thousands of people. In any case, the lives of Paul and Anthony are significant, if not as those of founders, certainly as typical of the earliest forms of monasticism.

Jerome's life of Paul is very brief, and almost entirely legendary. But still, the nucleus of the story is probably true. Toward the middle of the third century, fleeing persecution, a young man named Paul went to the desert, where he found an abandoned hiding place for counterfeiters. There he passed the rest of his life, spending his time in prayer and living on a diet that consisted almost exclusively of dates. According to Jerome, Paul lived in such conditions for almost a century, and his only visitors during that time were the beasts of the desert and the elderly monk, Anthony. Although this may be somewhat exaggerated, it does point to the ideal of solitude that was so important to the early monastics.

According to Athanasius, Anthony was born in a small village on the left shore of the Nile, the son of relatively wealthy parents. Most likely he was a Copt—a descendant of the ancient Egyptians, who now suffered oppression and discrimination from Greeks and Romans alike. When they died, Anthony was still young, and his inheritance was sufficient to permit a comfortable life both for him and for his younger sister, for whom he now took responsibility. His plans were simply to live off his inheritance, until a reading of the gospel in church had such an impact on him that he felt compelled to change his life. The text that day was the story of the rich young ruler, and the words of Jesus were very clear to Anthony, who was relatively rich: "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven" (Matt. 19:21). In response to those words, Anthony disposed of his property and gave the proceeds to the poor, reserving only a portion for the care of his sister. But later he was moved by the words of Jesus in Matthew 6:34: "do not be anxious about tomorrow." He then disposed even of the small reserve fund that he had kept for his sister, placed her under the care of the virgins of the church, and left for the desert.

Anthony spent his first years of retreat learning the monastic life from an old man who lived nearby—which shows that Anthony was not the first Christian anchorite. These were difficult times for the young monk, for often he missed the pleasures he had left behind, and began to feel sorry for having sold all his goods and withdrawn to the desert. When he was thus tempted, Anthony had recourse to stricter discipline. Sometimes he would fast for several days; at other times he would limit his food to a single meal

a day, after sunset.

After several years, Anthony decided that it was time to leave his elderly teacher and the other neighboring monks from whom he had learned monastic discipline. He then went to live in a tomb in an abandoned cemetery, where he subsisted on the bread some kind souls brought him every few days. According to Athanasius, at this time Anthony began having visions of demons that accosted him almost continuously. At times, his encounter with these demons was such that it resulted in a physical struggle that left him sore for days.

Finally, when he was thirty-five years old, Anthony had a vision in which God told him not to fear, for he would always be able to count on divine aid. It was then that Anthony decided that the tomb in which he lived was not sufficiently distant from society, and moved farther into the desert. He found an abandoned fort where he now fixed his residence. Even there the demons followed him, and the visions and temptations continued. But Anthony was now convinced that he had God's help, and the struggle became more bearable.

However, it was not only demons that pursued the monastic athlete. He was pursued by other monks who were desirous to learn from him the discipline and wisdom of prayer and contemplation. And he was also pursued by the curious and the ailing, for by then he was becoming famous as a saint and a worker of miracles. Again and again the elderly anchorite withdrew to ever more desolate places, but he was repeatedly found by those who sought him. He finally gave up this struggle and agreed to live near a number of disciples, on condition that they would not visit him too frequently. In exchange, Anthony would visit them periodically and talk with them about monastic discipline, the love of God, and the wonders of contemplation.

On two occasions, however, Anthony did visit the great city of Alexandria. The first was when the great persecution broke out under Diocletian, and Anthony and several of his disciples decided to go to the city in order to offer up their lives as martyrs. But the prefect decided that such ragged and disheveled characters were not worthy of his attention, and the would-be martyrs had to be content with speaking words of encouragement to others.

Anthony's second visit to Alexandria took place many years later, during the Arian controversy regarding the divinity of the Son of God. The Arians claimed that the holy hermit had sided with them, and against Athanasius,

and Anthony decided that the only way to undo such false rumors was to appear in person before the bishops gathered in Alexandria. According to Athanasius, the elderly monk, who had to speak in Coptic because he knew no Greek—and who probably was also illiterate—spoke with such wisdom and conviction that he confounded the Arians.

Finally, toward the end of his days, Anthony agreed to have two younger monks live with him and take care of him. He died in 356, after instructing his two companions to keep the place of his burial secret and to send his cloak—his only possession—to bishop Athanasius in Alexandria.

Both Paul and Anthony went to the desert before the time of Constantine —and even then, there were others already there. But when Constantine came to power, the life these hermits had led became increasingly popular. Some travelers who visited the region declared, with obvious exaggeration, that the desert was more populated than some cities. Others speak of twenty thousand women and ten thousand men leading the monastic life in a single area of Egypt. Similar figures are sometimes given for the arid regions of Cappadocia, in what is now Turkey, where monks dug caves in the soft stone of the region. No matter how exaggerated these figures may be, one fact is certain: those who fled society for the withdrawn life of the hermit were legion.

Their life was extremely simple. Some planted gardens, but most of them earned their living weaving baskets and mats that they then traded for bread

and oil. Apart from the ready availability of reeds, this occupation had the advantage that while weaving one could pray, recite a psalm, or memorize a portion of scripture. The diet of the desert consisted mostly of bread, to which were occasionally added fruit, vegetables, and oil. Their belongings were limited to the strictly necessary clothing, and a mat to sleep on. Most of them frowned on the possession of books, which could lead to pride. They taught each other, by heart, entire books of the Bible, particularly the Psalms and books of the New Testament. And they also shared among themselves edifying anecdotes and pearls of wisdom coming from the most respected anchorites.

The spirit of the desert did not fit well with that of the hierarchical church whose bishops lived in great cities and enjoyed power and prestige. Many monks were convinced that the worst fate that could befall them was to be made a priest or a bishop—it was precisely at this time, and partly as a result of the changes brought about after Constantine's conversion, that Christian ministers began to be called "priests." Although some monks were ordained, this was done almost always against their will or in response to repeated entreaties from a bishop of known sanctity, such as Athanasius. This in turn meant that many anchorites would go for years without partaking of communion, which from the very beginning had been the central act of Christian worship. In some areas, churches were built in which the nearby hermits gathered on Saturday and Sunday. On Sunday, after communion, they would often have a common meal, and then part for another week.

On the other hand, this sort of life was not free of temptations. As years went by, many monks came to the conclusion that, since their life was holier than that of most bishops and other leaders of the church, it was they, and not those leaders, who should decide what was proper Christian teaching. Since many of these monks were fairly ignorant and prone to fanaticism, they became the pawns of others with more education, power, and cunning who used the zeal of the desert hosts to their own ends. In the fifth century, this came to the point where rioting monks would seek to impose by force and violence what they considered to be orthodox doctrine.

PACHOMIUS AND COMMUNAL MONASTICISM

The growing number of people withdrawing to the desert, and the desire of most of them to learn from an experienced teacher, gave rise to a new form of monastic life. Anthony was repeatedly compelled to flee from those who sought his help and guidance. Increasingly, solitary monasticism gave way

to a communal form of the monastic life. Those who lived in such communities still called themselves "monks"—that is, solitary—but by this they meant, not that they lived completely alone, but that they lived in solitude from the world. This form of monasticism is called "cenobitic"—a name derived from two Greek words meaning "communal life."

As in the case of solitary monasticism, it is impossible to name the founder of cenobitic monasticism. Most probably it appeared simultaneously in various places, brought about, not so much by the creative genius of one person as by the pressure of circumstances. The completely solitary life of the early monastics was not well suited for many who went to the desert. Furthermore, if the center of Christian life is love, there is some question as to how one living absolutely alone, seldom having to deal with other people, practices love of neighbor. Thus, cenobitic monasticism was born both out of the natural tendency of monastics to gather around particularly saintly leaders, and out of the very nature of the gospel.

Although not its founder, Pachomius deserves credit as the organizer who most contributed to the development of cenobitic monasticism. Pachomius was born around the year 286, in a small village in southern Egypt. His parents were pagans, and he seems to have known little about Christianity before being taken from his home and forced to join the army. He was very saddened by his lot, when a group of Christians came to console him and his companions. The young recruit was so moved by this act of love that he vowed that, if he somehow managed to leave the military, he too would devote himself to serve others. When quite unexpectedly he was allowed to leave the army, he sought someone to instruct him in the Christian faith and to baptize him. Some years later, he decided to withdraw to the desert, where he asked an old anchorite to be his teacher.

For seven years young Pachomius lived with the anchorite, until he heard a voice commanding him to move. His old teacher helped him build a shelter, and there Pachomius lived by himself until his younger brother, John, joined him. Together, the two brothers devoted themselves to prayer and contemplation.

But Pachomius was not satisfied, and he constantly asked God to show him the way to better service. Finally, he had a vision in which an angel told him that he was to serve humankind. Pachomius rejected the vision, declaring that he had come to the desert to serve God, not humans. But the message was repeated and Pachomius, perhaps remembering his early vows when he was a soldier, decided to change the direction of his monastic life.

With his brother's help, he built a large enclosure, sufficient for a number of monks, and recruited what would be the first members of the new community. Pachomius hoped to teach them what he had learned of prayer and contemplation, and also to organize a community in which all would help one another. But his recruits had not been properly selected, discipline broke down, and eventually Pachomius expelled the lot.

He then began a second attempt at communal monasticism. The earlier attempt had failed because his recruits said that he was too demanding. In this new attempt, rather than relaxing his discipline, he was more rigorous. From the very beginning, he demanded that any who wished to join the community must give up all their goods and promise absolute obedience to their superiors. Besides, all would work with their hands, and none would be allowed to consider any task unworthy. The basic rule was mutual service, so that even those in authority, in spite of the vow of absolute obedience which all had made, had to serve those under them.

The monastery that Pachomius founded on these bases grew rapidly, to the point that during his lifetime nine such communities were established, each with several hundred monks. Meanwhile, Mary, Pachomius's sister, founded similar communities for women. At that time, there were some in city churches who felt that the institution of the widows and virgins was no longer necessary, and as a result many of these women left the cities and joined other women in monastic communities, often in the desert. According to witnesses who visited the region, in some areas in Egypt there were twice as many women monastics as there were men.

Each of these monasteries was encircled by a wall with a single entrance. Within the enclosure there were several buildings. Some of them, such as the church, the storehouse, the refectory, and the meeting hall, were used in common by the entire monastery. The rest were living quarters in which monks were grouped according to their responsibilities. Thus, for instance, there was a building for the gatekeepers, who were responsible for the lodging of those who needed hospitality, and for the admission and training of those who requested to join the community. Other such buildings housed the weavers, bakers, cobblers, and so forth. In each of them there was a common room and a series of cells, one for every two monks.

The daily life of a Pachomian monk included both work and devotion, and Pachomius himself set an example for the rest by undertaking the most humble tasks. For the devotional life, Paul's injunction to "pray without ceasing" was the model. Thus, while the bakers kneaded the bread, or the

cobblers made shoes, all sang psalms, recited passages of scripture, prayed either aloud or in silence, meditated on a biblical text, and so forth. Twice a day there were common prayers. In the morning the entire community gathered to pray, sing psalms, and hear the reading of scripture. In the evening they had similar services, although now gathered in smaller groups in the common rooms of the various living quarters.

The economic life of Pachomian communities was varied. Although all lived in poverty, Pachomius did not insist on the exaggerated poverty of some anchorites. At the tables there was bread, fruit, vegetables, and fish—but never meat. What the monks produced was sold in nearby markets, not only in order to buy food and other necessary items, but also in order to have something to give the poor and any sojourners who came by. In each monastery there was an administrator and an aide, and these had to render periodic accounts to the administrator of the main monastery, where Pachomius lived.

Since every monk had to obey his superiors, the hierarchical order was clearly defined. At the head of each housing unit there was a superior, who in turn had to obey the superior of the monastery and his deputy. And above the superiors of the various monasteries were Pachomius and his successors, who were called "abbots" or "archimandrites." When Pachomius was about to die, his monks vowed obedience to whomever he would choose as his successor, and thus was established the custom that each abbot would name the person to succeed him in absolute command of the entire organization. This new abbot's authority was final, and he could name, transfer, or depose the superiors of all the communities in the entire system.

Twice a year, all Pachomian monks gathered for prayer and worship, and to deal with any issues necessary to maintain proper order of the communities. The organization was also kept together by frequent visits to all monasteries by the abbot or his representative. Pachomius and his followers never accepted ecclesiastical office, and therefore there were no ordained priests among them. On Sundays a priest would come to the monastery and celebrate communion.

In the women's communities, life was organized in a similar fashion. While each was headed by a woman, the male abbot of the original community—Pachomius and his successors—ruled over them just as they did over the male Pachomian communities.

Those who wished to join a Pachomian community simply appeared at

the gate of the enclosure. This was not easily opened to them, for before being admitted to the gatekeepers' house candidates were forced to spend several days and nights at the gate, begging to be let in. Thus, they were required to show both the firmness of their resolve and their humility and willingness to obey. When the gate was finally opened, the gatekeepers took charge of the candidates, who lived with them for a long period, until they were considered ready to join the community in prayer. Then they were presented to the assembly of the monastery, where they sat at a special spot until a place was found for them in one of the houses, and a role assigned to them in the ongoing life of the monastery.

A surprising fact about the entire process of admission to the Pachomian communities is that many of the candidates who appeared at the gates and were eventually admitted had to be catechized and baptized, for they were not Christians. This gives an indication of the enormous attraction of the desert in the fourth century, for even pagans saw in monasticism a style of life worth pursuing. To what degree such attraction was religious, and to what degree it is an indication of the harsh living conditions of the rural poor in Egypt, it is impossible to tell. Significantly, however, the vast majority of those who fled to the Egyptian desert were Copts, that is to say, the descendants of the ancient Egyptians who were now at the lowest echelon of Egyptian society.

THE SPREAD OF THE MONASTIC IDEAL

Although the roots of monasticism are not to be found exclusively in Egypt, that was where the movement gained most momentum in the fourth century. Devout people from different regions went to Egypt, some to remain there and others to return to their countries with the ideals and practices they had learned in the desert. From Syria, Asia Minor, Italy, and even Mesopotamia, pilgrims went to the land of the Nile and on their return spread the story and the legends of Paul, Anthony, Pachomius, and countless others. Throughout the Eastern portion of the empire, wherever there was a suitable place, a monk fixed his abode. Some exaggerated the ascetic life by ostentatious acts, such as spending their lives atop a column of a ruined temple. But others brought to the church a sense of discipline and absolute dedication that was very necessary in what seemed the easy times after Constantine.

However, those who most contributed to the spread of the monastic ideal were not the anchorites who copied the ways of the Egyptian desert and sought secluded places where they could devote themselves to prayer and

meditation, but rather a number of bishops and scholars who saw the value of the monastic witness for the daily life of the church. Thus, although in its earliest times Egyptian monasticism had existed apart and even in opposition to the hierarchy, eventually its greatest impact was made through some of the members of that hierarchy.

Several of those who thus contributed to the spread of monasticism were of such importance that we shall deal with them in upcoming chapters. But it may be well to point out here their significance for the history of monasticism. Athanasius, besides writing the *Life of Saint Anthony,* repeatedly visited the monks in the desert, and when he was persecuted by imperial authority he found refuge among them. Although he himself was not a monk, but a bishop, he sought to organize his life in such a way that it would reflect the monastic ideals of discipline and renunciation. When exiled in the West, he made known to the Latin-speaking church what was taking place in the Egyptian desert. Jerome, besides writing the *Life of Paul the Hermit,* translated Pachomius's *Rule* into Latin, and he himself became a monk—although an unusually scholarly one. Since Jerome was one of the most admired and influential Christians of his time, his works and his example had a significant impact on the Western church, which thus became more interested in the monastic spirit. Basil of Caesarea—known as Basil the Great—found time in the midst of all the theological debates in which he was involved to organize monasteries where time was given both to devotion and to the care of the needy. Answering questions addressed to him by monks, he wrote a number of treatises which, although not originally intended as monastic rules, eventually were quoted and used as such. Soon the harsh lands of his native Cappadocia—in what is today central Turkey—became populated by monastics. Augustine, the great bishop of Hippo, partly owed his conversion to reading Athanasius's *Life of Saint Anthony,* and lived as a monk until he was forced to take a more active role in the life of the church. Even then, he organized the priests who worked with him into a semi-monastic community, and thus provided inspiration for what would later be called the Canons of St. Augustine.

But the most remarkable example of the manner in which a saintly and monastic bishop contributed to the popularity of the monastic ideal was Martin of Tours. The *Life of Saint Martin,* written by Sulpitius Severus, was one of the most popular books in Western Europe for centuries and was one of the most influential elements in the shaping of Western monasticism.

Martin was born around the year 335 in Pannonia, in what is now

Hungary. His father was a pagan soldier, and during his early years Martin lived in various parts of the empire—although the city of Pavia, in northern Italy, seems to have been his most frequent place of residence. He was very young when he decided to become a Christian, against his parents' will, and had his name included in the list of catechumens. His father, in order to force him away from his Christian contacts, had him enrolled in the army. It was the time when Emperor Julian—later known as the Apostate—led his first military campaigns. Martin served under him for several years. During this period, an episode took place that ever since has been associated with the name of Martin.

Martin and his friends were entering the city of Amiens in what is now France when an almost naked and shivering beggar asked them for alms. Martin had no money for him, but he took off his cape, cut it in two, and gave half to the beggar. According to the story, later in his dreams Martin saw Jesus coming to him, wrapped in half a soldier's cape, and saying: "Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me." This episode became so well known, that ever since Martin is usually represented in the act of sharing his cape with the beggar. This is also the origin of the word *chapel*—for centuries later, in a small church, there was

a piece of cloth reputed to be a portion of Martin's cape. From that piece of cape—*capella*—the little church came to be called a "chapel," and those who served in it, "chaplains."

Shortly after the incident at Amiens, Sulpitius Severus tells us, Martin was baptized, and two years later he was finally able to leave the army. He then visited the learned and saintly bishop Hilary of Poitiers, who became a close friend. Several different tasks and vicissitudes took him to various parts of the empire, until finally he settled just outside the city of Tours, near Poitiers. There he devoted himself to the monastic life, while the fame of his sanctity spread through the region. It was said that God performed great works through him, but he always refused to count himself as anything more than an apprentice in the Christian life.

When the bishopric of Tours became vacant, the populace wanted to elect Martin to that position. The story goes that some of the bishops present at the election opposed such an idea, arguing that Martin was usually dirty, dressed in rags, and disheveled, and that his election would damage the prestige of the office of bishop. No agreement had been reached when it was time to read the Bible, and the person assigned for that task was nowhere to be found. Then one of those present took the book and began reading where it fell open: "By the mouth of babes and infants, thou hast founded a bulwark because of thy foes, to still the enemy and the avenger" (Ps. 8:2). The crowd took this to be a direct message from heaven. Martin, the filthy and unseemly man whom the bishops scorned, had been chosen by God to silence the bishops. Without further ado, Martin was elected bishop of Tours.

But the new bishop was not ready to abandon his monastic ways. Next to the cathedral, he built a small cell where he devoted all his free time to the monastic life. When his fame was such that he could find no peace in that cell, he moved back to the outskirts of the city, and from there he would carry on his pastoral tasks.

When Martin died, many believed that he was a saint. His fame and example led many to the conviction that a true bishop ought to be like him. Thus, the monastic movement, which at first was in great measure a protest against the worldliness and the pomp of bishops, eventually left its imprint on the idea itself of the episcopate. For centuries—and in some quarters to the present time—it was thought that a true bishop should endeavor to achieve the monastic ideal as much as possible. In that process, however, monasticism itself was changed, for whereas those who first joined the

movement fled to the desert in quest for their own salvation, as years went by monasticism would become—particularly in the West—an instrument for the charitable and missionary work of the church.

Already in these early stages, the monastic movement had shown its ability to evolve in various directions. From the solitude of the early anchorites, it evolved into large communities, some with hundreds of members. A movement that at first eschewed books and learning soon enrolled scholars such as Jerome, Augustine, and Basil. Originally a lay movement that tended to reject much of the life of the organized church, it was soon embraced by bishops, and eventually set the ideal standard for all bishops. This adaptability would continue through the ages. In the ensuing centuries, monastics would become missionaries, scholars, teachers, preservers of ancient cultural traditions, settlers of new lands, and even soldiers.

In all of this, there was a common thread: the conviction that the ideal Christian life was one of personal poverty and sharing of goods. The earlier practice of Christian communities in general, of sharing goods among its members, now became the hallmark of monasticism, something expected of monks and nuns, but not of the rest of the church. Now that almost all the population had become Christian, most were excused from such sharing, while monastics continued that earlier tradition. Thus arose a distinction between two levels of Christians which would mark most of the history of the church—a distinction reinforced by the vows of celibacy and obedience that only monastics took.