The monastic life in the eastern orthodox Church
Panayiotis Christou
The origin of the monastic life

During the fourth century A.D. there appeared within the Church a strong movement of withdrawal from organized society to the desert, a movement which grew ever larger during the subsequent period. To interpret the sudden appearance of this movement historians have put forward various hypotheses, the most favoured of which are two. According to the first, the monastic life was a product of eastern religions, in which from earlier times asceticism was practiced, either in total solitude or in a monastery. According to the second, the monastic life provided a way out when a reaction was provoked by the closer contact of Christianity with the world, and the inevitable decline of moral standards.

The first hypothesis is without foundation, because it has not been possible historically to discover a link between oriental asceticism and the Christian monastic life. Moreover, if Christianity had been influenced in this way, the influence should have come from the ascetic groups of the Essene sect, whose environment was that in which Christianity was born; yet the monastic life appeared well after the disappearance of the Essence communities. This, of course, does not mean that in its later stages monasticism did not have certain features in common with the Essence and Neo-Pythagorean communities. The second hypothesis is likewise unacceptable, because there were numerous hermits living in the open country even before the recognition of Christianity by Constantine the Great.

Monasticism is a way of life which appeared within the Church and developed organically by pushing the moral principles of Christianity to their limits. Indeed, although Christianity did not enter the world either as a pessimistic philosophy or as a society dissolving force, nevertheless it was governed by principles which separated in the society of that time. It turned its whole attention to the center of life and disregarded the periphery. One thing has supreme value for man: the soul, beside which the whole world is insignificant. “For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul? (Matthew XVI, 26). The affairs of this world impede the movements of the soul, and the goods of this world accumulate around it, choking it and preventing it from developing into an integrated personality. A hard struggle therefore awaits man if he is to liberate himself from his lower self, which is attached to worldly things, and develop his higher, ideal self, which will render him capable of standing boldly before God. In this struggle, as Jesus Christ declared, man will have to submit himself and his activities to
rigorous examination. He must divorce himself from many earthly goods in order to acquire the heavenly treasure, and submit to the trial of suffering in order to purify his will.

On the basis of these principles the first Christians ordered their lives on an exceptionally high moral plane; but some of them wanted to advance to greater austerity, depriving themselves of more goods and imposing upon themselves greater self-restraint, fasting, and prayer. For the Christian marriage is honorable, a great sacrament, but it is an institution of this world, while in the beyond men will live like angels. For this reason, those who could avoided it; some sought to circumvent it by replacing it with a kind of spiritual marriage, in which man and woman lived together in purity (I Corinthians vii, 36 ff.). Many widows avoided marriage, and virgins entirely refused to marry. These women organized themselves into special societies, firstly for their own protection, and secondly for the channeling of their activity into social work. We have here the first form of monastic life which developed within the framework of organized Christian community.
The development of the monastic life

During the middle of the third century, persecution of Christians became so severe that many of them were forced to withdraw from the cities. This occurred on a still larger scale at the beginning of the fourth century, when the duration of the persecutions was greater, so that those who had withdrawn remained in the open country for a longer period. They became so accustomed to living there that they established a permanent abode there, far from the society of the world which was torn by hatred. The persecutions ceased, but the centuries persecution had become an inseparable element in the life of Christians, and many of them found life undisturbed by persecutors inconceivable. So they became persecutors of themselves: they went away to the mountains, and subjected themselves to privation and suffering. Instead of the “blood of martyrdom”, which had terminated a struggle with ferocious men, they submitted themselves to the “martyrdom of conscience”, which consisted in the struggle against demons.

Henceforth the mountains became abodes of hermits, and gradually of organized communities of monks also. With the passage of time more and more remote places were sought as ascetic refuges, such as Athos and Meteora. The father away the ascetics lived, the more reverence and admiration they evoked in the common people.

The first known hermit was Paul of Thebaid, but the first real leader of the desert life was Antony the Great (d. 356), whose life was written with insight and love by Athanasius the Great. He lived in the wilderness for more than seventy years, and went to Alexandria only when occasion demanded; that is, when he heard of persecutions, in order to encourage those who were suffering. His fame eared him the esteem of Constantine the Great, who frequently sought his advice by letter. But especially he aroused the zeal of many simple men, who imitated his example. Five thousand anchorites occupied the desert of Nitria and the surrounding regions. They lived in complete isolation, and only when they needed counsel did they visit Antony or some other elderly monk, an abba. It sometimes happened that one of them died and days passed before the order ascetics knew about it. Each anchorite organized his own prayer, shelter, clothing, food and work. Their work consisted chiefly of making straw artifacts, which they sold at country market-places. On Sundays alone they went to the nearest church, in order to pray together and receive Holy Communion. In this form, hermit life was not under the full control of the Church.
It was evident that absolute isolation could lead to arbitrary actions and did not embrace all the demands of the Christian Gospel. There was an absence, in the first place, of spiritual supervision of the hermits, and secondly of the directing of their activity towards serving their fellow men. This was early perceived by some of the great ascetic personalities, who undertook the appropriate reform: Hilarion in the region of Gaza, Palestine; Ammonius at Nitria, and Macarius at Sketis, in Egypt. All three lived during the fourth century. These men made the chief country market-place, where the hermits sold their products, their center of action. As such market-places were called lavras, the monastic establishments near them received the same name. The hermits lived in numerous cells built around the lavras, at such a distance that they could neither see nor hear one another. In this communal life, independence was curbed to some extent; and moreover, an element of flexibility became possible in ascesis. The leader of the lavra examined the cells from time to time and exercised a certain degree of authority over the hermits. Further, the latter gathered together for common prayer on Saturdays and Sundays. Beyond this, everything else: shelter, dress, food and work, was regulated by each individual for himself.
**The coenobitic system**

A further step was taken in Egypt by Pachomius (d. 346). As well as administration and prayer, he placed the shelter, dress, diet and work of the monks under supervision. Usually they lived in groups in spacious dormitories. It could be said that under this system monasticism became easier through the monks living together and associating with one another. A communal form of life made it possible for women to devote themselves to asceticism in seclusion: it is dangerous for them to live in complete isolation. But the main advantage of this system was that monasticism could now play a part in philanthropic activity.

The turning of monasticism in this direction was the chief work of Basil the Great the (d. 378), bishop of Caesarea. He lived in solitude for some time at his estate at Pontus, with members of his family. There he composed his famous work, *Aszetica*, which was to become the basis for the organization of monasticism during the subsequent period. He recommended the gathering of monks together in organized groups, in accordance with the social nature of men: “Man is a tame and social being, not a wild and solitary one. For there is nothing so characteristic of our nature as to associate with one another and to need one another and to love our kind” (Extensive Rules 3, I-P.G. xxxi, 947). According to this teaching, monks should return from the deserts to cities, and establish there philanthropic coenobia. Basil himself returned to Caesarea and organized a whole group of socially beneficial institutions, which later received, in his honour, the name of Basilieias. From the very beginning, the direction of these was in the hands of monks, who were called “fathers of orphans”.

The coenobium could be regarded as the final form of monasticism, but is not. Although at first it eased the yoke of the ascetics, later it rendered it much harder to bear. For this reason a tendency towards a less strict mode of life became apparent during the Middle Ages, and this resulted in the constitution of the idiorrhythmic life. The “contemplatives”, that is, those dedicated to the contemplation of God, sought release from practical and social work, in order to be unfettered for their spiritual work; and at the same time the weaker monks sought a relaxation of discipline. At the idiorrhythmic monasteries administration, dress, prayer, and to some extent living quarters remained communal. Diet and to some extent work were released from control. Thus monks were allowed to acquire private property, which could not, however, exceed certain limits. From one point of view, the idiorrhythmic life may be
regarded as a return to the communal system of the lavra, while from another standpoint it is a combination of the eremitic and the communal patterns of monasticism.

These four kinds of monasticism henceforth run parallel to one another throughout the centuries. Within the eremitical tradition there appeared strange and interesting variations, sometimes taking extreme forms. The confirmed shut themselves up for many years in their cells, communicating with the outer world only by letter, and to receive their meager allowance of food. The stylites dwelt on half-destroyed pillars. Those who became “fools” for Christ’s sake traveled about displaying their assumed madness for the sake of humility.

All four survive to the present day. Hermits are to be found almost exclusively on the furthest points of the peninsula of Mount Athos; the communal system is represented by the sketes of Athos; and the other two systems, the coenobitic and the idiorrhythmic, by monasteries in all Orthodox regions.
The geographic spread of monasticism

Today monastic life has spread over the whole world; but many years of effort were needed to achieve this. The movement began, as we have seen, in Egypt, where important monastic centers, with thousands of monks, rapidly developed, the monks living in cells, lavras, and monasteries. These were situated at the Thebaid, Nitria, Sketis, Tabenesis and Mount Sinai. The monastery of St. Catherine on Sinai, founded during the time of Justinian, has survived with undiminished vigour to the present day. From Egypt it spread very rapidly to Palestine. This country, sanctified as it was by the life and death of the founder of the Christian faith, attracted the interest of ascetics from all corners of the Empire, of the Latins Jerome and Rufinus became renowned. Later, great lavras were established there, about five hundred in number, by Theodosius the Coenobiarch, Savvas the Sanctified, and Euthymius the Great.

Ascetics appeared in Syria during the first decades of the fourth century. They were usually itinerant men and women, the latter garbed like men. They sought to abolish all differences between the sexes, and avoided work. Because of the dominant position which they gave to prayer, they were called Euchites, or, in the Syriac, Massalians. They were criticized by the Church for certain deviations. At the same time, the milder, organized form of monasticism also reached Syria. The great hymnographer and theologian Ephraim the Syrian also made successful efforts to organize the monks.

Monasticism began to lose ground in these three countries from the beginning of the seventh century, that is, from the time of the Arab conquest; but it never disappeared completely. Today, besides the Orthodox, the Copts, Jacobites, Armenians, and Nestorians also have monasteries.

By way of Cappadocia and Asia Minor, monasticism reached the capital of the Empire, Constantinople. Many of the monasteries that were established in the suburbs on both sides of the Bosporus became flourishing organizations, and through their activities influenced the course of ecclesiastical and sometimes of political affairs. The monastery of the Sleepless Ones, which was founded by Alexander about 430, received its name from the fact that the monks praised God throughout the entire day and night, being divided into three groups which succeeded one another in church. The monastery of Studion, likewise founded in the fifth century, by the Roman patrician Studius, became the center of the liturgical development of the eastern Church and the champion of its independence of state intervention. Theodore the Studite, who flourished at the beginning of the ninth century, became through his heroic conduct an
exemplar for all monks.

In these regions monasticism was definitely destroyed during the period of Turkish conquest.

Strong centers of monasticism had already been formed, however, in Greece. Among these, Mount Athos was distinguished from the tenth century onwards, and henceforth called the “Holy Mountain”. In 963, the emperor Nicephoros Phocas issued a decree, granting to the monk Athanasius the right to found there a great lavra, which he did. Within a short time other communities of monks were founded here, and these were placed under the general supervision of the Protos. In order to further the spread of monasticism there, Alexius Comnenus placed all the establishments of Athos under the jurisdiction of the nearest bishop, that of Ierissos. But understandably friction occurred between him and the Protos, and for this reason it became necessary to abolish the jurisdiction of the bishop of Ierissos. This was done towards the end of the fourteenth century.

The Protos of Athos was installed after approval had been obtained from the Patriarch of Constantinople. At first he was appointed for life, and lived at Karyes, the capital of the monastic commonwealth. He dealt only with the general external problems of the community, because the monasteries remained internally self-governing.

The dwelling places of the mountain are placed in an environment at once impressive and serene. The increase of piratical raids after the weakening of the Byzantine empire and the Turkish conquest influenced their architectural construction. The monasteries are built like powerful fortresses, with towers and embrasures. The cells are constructed on top of the fortress wall, three, and even six stories of them. In the middle of the courtyard there is a “katholikon”, or central church, with chapels around the sides.

Long foreign occupation caused many fluctuations in the power and vigour of these establishments. Today the land of this self-governing region is divided up among twenty self-sufficient monasteries. One representative of each monastery, elected annually, is sent to Karyes, where the Holy Community, a kind of parliament, meets. The monasteries are divided into five groups of four, each headed by one of the strongest monasteries: Lavra, Vatopedi, Iviron, Hilandari, and Dionysiou. Each group takes it in turns to exercise administrative for one year at a time. Thus, of the twenty representatives, four constitute the executive body, the committee of overseers, while the representative of the first monastery of the group which has the administrative initiative is the chief overseer. Each overseer keeps one-fourth of the seal of the monastic commonwealth.
Eleven of the monasteries of the Mountain, mostly on its western side, are coenobitic, and are governed by an abbot who is elected for life and has a council of elders to advise him. Nine, for the most part on the eastern side, are idiorrhythmic, governed by a committee of three superiors (proistamenoi) who are elected for one year. The monastery of Hilandari is Serbian; that of Zographos, Bulgarian; that of Panteleimon, Russian. There is also a Rumanian skete. The monastery of Iviron, which is now Greek, was formerly Georgian (Iberian). Until the thirteenth century there was the Latin monastery of the Amalfitans. Thus, the Holy Mountain became a symbol of the catholicity and unity of Orthodoxy; and it is still the chief monastic center of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, and is unique in its kind in the entire Christian world. Unfortunately there has been a decline in the number of monks for many now, which reduces the vigour of monastic life there.

During the years of the Despotate of Epiros, Meteora became a celebrated monastic center. Impressive monasteries were built above steep cliffs, looking from a distance like eagles’ nests; and many small hermitages were hewn out of the rock. Until a few decades ago, access to some of these monasteries was possible only by windlass and net. Of the twenty-four ancient monasteries of that region only four function today, with a small number of monks. Many monasteries still remain and continue to function throughout Greece, but with an ever decreasing number of monks.

From the East the monastic life was brought to the West, as early as the fourth century. It flourished there particularly during the Middle Ages, when strong monastic orders were organized. These played a large part in Christianizing and civilizing the peoples of northern Europe. Monasticism was also transmitted, together with Christianity, to the countries north of Greece: to the Slavs, the Rumanians, and other peoples. The Russian monastic leaders Antony and Sergios became famous. The elder ascetics of Russia, the starsti, enjoyed great renown, and innumerable crowds of people sought their counsel.
The ideals of the monastic life

As the first ascetics withdrew from the world to the desert, they were determined to detach themselves from many worldly goods: marriage, wealth, and independent action. Celibacy did not admit of degree, but was absolute. In poverty, however, there occurred the modification which we have noted above in connexion with the idiorrhythmic life. But even here poverty was essentially maintained, for the property of the idiorrhythmic monks was never sufficient for comfortable living. Finally, obedience, either to an abbot or to the spiritual father of the desert, the abba, was a significant concern of the monks. The selfish, independent spirit represented the secular world, and hence had to be uprooted completely. That is, the young ascetic had to surrender his evil will to God in the person of his spiritual father, in order that it might be transformed into a good will. This point is vividly illustrated an by an anecdote in which an abba, wishing to test the degree of progress of his spiritual son, asked him if he saw the horns—which were non-existent—of a beast of burden which was passing by; and he replied without hesitation, “Yes, I see them, abba”.

The observance of these three virtues is undertaken by novices in a special pledge, during which they are tonsured. The formulation of this vow coincided with the foundation of the coenobitic system, and the scriptural and doctrinal basis of monasticism was worked out soon afterwards. Without it, monasticism was in danger of deviating in the direction of the itinerant Massalians. In this way the subjection of monasticism to the Church, and the channeling of its power in direction which were useful to the Church were achieved. This subjection was sealed by Justinian and embodied in laws (Nearai, 5, i. 67, i).

The vices which threaten the moral integrity of the ascetic are not these three alone. In subsequent aretology, other vices, together with these, constitute the eight mortal thoughts: gluttony, fornication, avarice, anger, sorrow, despondency, vanity and pride. The passions which correspond to these thoughts must be deadened and a state of passionlessness achieved. Self-examination and self-censure, especially before going to bed, provide the monk with powerful weapons, as he sets out to struggle against the demons. But his chief weapon is prayer-continuous and intense prayer. The whole life of the monks is dominated by that converse with God; “the whole life is a time for prayer” (Basil, Ascetic Discourse, P.G., xxxi, 877).

The twenty-four hours of the monk’s day are divided into three eight-hour periods: one for prayer, one for rest, and one for work. Their intense work has a threefold purpose: to ensure their means of support, to aid their fellow-men,
and to avoid evil thoughts, which invade man’s consciousness particularly when he is idle. The products of monastic art and handicraft have always been of exceptional quality and are still in great demand, especially their paintings and wood carvings. Also, works of classical and Christian literature have been preserved in copies which came from monastic workshops.

Connected with their work were the philanthropic activities of the monks. As we have already observed, this devotion to philanthropy was first promoted and systematized by Basil the Great. After his time a monastery without a guest house, hospital and school was inconceivable. As a simple example we may mention that the monastery of Pantocrator at Constantinople, which was established in the twelfth century, had a hospital with men and women physicians, organized in a manner reminiscent of present-day hospitals. It was divided into four sections: medical, surgical, gynaecological, and the eye and ear infirmary. Remnants of this philanthropic activity can still be seen in our day. The Bedouins who live near the monastery of Sinai never make their own bread, but are given it free by the monastery of St. Catherine there; and those who visit any Orthodox monastery whatsoever receive free hospitality.

The monks who occupied themselves with work, as we have described above, and combined the struggle to free themselves from passion with serving those in need, were called in earlier times active (praktikoi). But beyond action there is a higher stage in the ladder of monastic perfection: contemplation (theoria), the striving for direct communion with God and the vision of Him. This differentiation of the activities of monks is encountered very early, in a poem by Gregory the Theologian:

«Will you prefer action or contemplation?
Contemplation is the occupation of the perfect,
Action belongs to the many.
Both are good and dear;
Choose the one that befits you.»

Silence has been an indispensable condition for the ascetic in his pursuit of perfection. By silence is meant inner quiet and the related outer quiet through which the causes of passion are removed. This state has given its name to the last brilliant period of Byzantine mystical theology: hesychasm.

Silence was inseparably bound up with Christian asceticism. The efforts of the first monks in this direction took the form of avoiding babbling and remaining silent whenever circumstances called for it. Abba Poimen is quoted as having said: “Whoever talks for the sake of God’s will acts rightly; and whoever remains silent for the sake of God’s will likewise acts rightly”. (Sayings of the Fathers, 721). In any case, the element of silence, even though it did not
predominate unduly in monastic thought, later received greater emphasis because of its connexion with inner prayer. It was judged that prayer, as a product of the disposition of the heart, need not be expressed vocally, inasmuch as such expression, by producing external stimuli, may interrupt concentration on the object of prayer. In this way there resulted inner, mental prayer, which became crystallized in the brief prayer of Jesus, repeated incessantly.

Surrounded by absolute, the spiritual silence, the spiritual eyes of “contemplative” monks are opened. They become worthy of visions and enjoy spiritual experience which can only be described with difficulty. They live in a state of continual illumination of the vision of light, and communion with the things of light. The word “light” and other related terms are encountered on almost every page of the writing of Simeon Theologian and Gregory Palamas. This light is part of God. Through a paradoxical fusion of the historical with the metahistorical, the experience of deification (theosis) becomes possible here and now. The light which was seen by Christ’s disciples on Mount Tabor, the light which the hesychasts see today, and the luminous quality of the world to come, constitute three phases of one and the same spiritual event, fused together into one supra-temporal reality.

The one-sided domination of the “contemplative” tendency has contributed to the neglect of the social mission of the monastic life in the East, in contrast to developments in the West. Despite the attempts which have been made from time to time, the reorganization of the monastic life on the older foundations, especially on the rule of Basil the Great, did not succeed, because these attempts were limited in scope and intensity. Without neglecting “contemplation”, to which religious literature and piety owe so much, there is a need for action to be emphasized once more, and for monasteries to be established which will promote Christian ideals within the organized society of mankind.
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