

Saturday, April 28, 2007 -
St. John the Baptist, Ottawa -
"Monasticism - the most radical
movement the Church has ever
known."

Monasticism or monachism is, literally,
the act of dwelling alone from the
Greek $\mu\acute{o}\nu\omicron\varsigma$, $\mu\omicron\nu\acute{\alpha}\xi\epsilon\iota\upsilon$, and $\mu\omicron\nu\alpha\chi\acute{\iota}\varsigma$.
It generally refers to individuals
and their mode of life in seclusion
from the world. Today these
individuals would normally have
vows and be subject to a fixed
rule. In the extended sense, any
type of religious life is sometimes
meant and might include monks &
nuns in the strict sense and also
friars and various forms of religious
life. The basic idea of monasticism
is seclusion or withdrawal from
the world or society. Hence the word
anchorite from the Greek $\alpha\chi\alpha\omicron\rho\epsilon\iota\tau\acute{\iota}\varsigma$ -

to withdraw. Basically monasticism is a way of life whose ideal is different from and largely at variance with that pursued by the majority of mankind. Christian monasticism shuns the accumulation of personal wealth and marriage in imitation of Christ and for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.

This lifestyle is, in fact, quite universal and is found in all human societies and all religions. Besides Christian monks, the Buddhist Sangha is well known as well as the numerous ascetics found in Hinduism. Judaism had the Essenes & the Sufis are found in Islam. In Judaism and Protestantism we also find movements which are not strictly monastic, but, nevertheless, maintain their own societies aloof from the world such as the Hasidim, the Amish, Mennonites & ~~the~~ Hutterites.

Christian monasticism is basically in imitation of Christ who was known to frequently withdraw to deserted places to pray.

This way of life is also based on the words of Christ to the rich young man: "If you would be perfect, sell all that you have + give the proceeds to the poor and come follow me." The word in Greek for perfect is τέλειος - which would have been well understood by the pagans.

The monks followed ideals which had, in fact, been those of all Christians from the beginning.

The asceticism is a constant struggle against worldly principles even against those which are merely worldly without necessarily being sinful. The world desires and honours wealth; so the ascetic loves and honours poverty. In imitation of Christ fasting and virginity are

also honoured and run counter to the licentiousness so often encountered in the world.

Passages in the gospel about having values different from the world are legion. Christianity and especially Christian monasticism are counter-cultural. In 1 John 2:15-17, for example, we read: "Love not the world, nor the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him." For all that is in the world is the concupiscence of the flesh, and the concupiscence of the eyes, and the pride of life, which is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world and its concupiscence pass away. But he who does the will of God abides forever." Even before the appearance of monks in the fourth century, numerous Christians, of the first generations, were in the habit of using all their possessions for the poor and to

living ~~the~~ in poverty while preaching the gospel. This is essentially what the apostles did.

The first Christian monks are reported as appearing in Egypt with St. Anthony being considered the father of Christian monasticism, St. Paul of Thebes often referred to as the father of hermits and St. Pacomius as the father of cenobitism or community life.

The question naturally arises as to why in the fourth century we suddenly find Christians in quite large numbers withdrawing from society and going to the desert.

First it must be remembered that for the first several generations of Christians, the second coming of Christ was imminent. As a result they held their belongings in common, preached the gospel and gave what they didn't need to the poor. They

were also quite occupied with the support and care of a very large number of widows and orphans since so many had died as martyrs during the persecutions of the first 300 years of Christianity.

In the fourth century, the imminent second coming of Christ was no longer as strong an expectation as previously and in the early fourth century, the persecutions ceased and the government began to show favour to the Church.

There was also another factor at work, namely the very strong belief in evil spirits. This belief was very strong in the Church as witnessed by the numerous cases in the gospels of Jesus casting out demons and of His constant reference to the work of Satan in the world. The first Christians saw the kingdom of Satan actually realized in the

political and social life of pagan society around them. The pagans were seen as worshipping demons "The gods of the heathen are demons." In their eyes the numerous temples in all the cities were shrines to devils. To participate in their rites, which was a normal civic responsibility, was to participate in devil worship. The Council of Jerusalem made the Christian position very clear by its decree about meat which was offered to idols and was sold in the market (Acts XV:20) consequently certain professions were practically closed to believers since a soldier, teacher, or state official might be called upon to participate in some ~~the~~ ceremony of the state religion.

This difficulty existed for everyone, since the presence of the gods permeated life on a

daily basis. Christians could not honour these gods yet to ignore them would be quite apparent to everyone. Christians were in a dilemma. St. John warns them in (1 John v. 21): "Keep yourselves from idols." What he is really saying is stay out of public life, keep aloof from society, stay away from politics — in general keep your distance from the pagans. In other words — renounce the world.

As is the case ~~from~~ for all Christians, the goal of monasticism is the acquisition of the Holy Spirit. Like all Christians, monks must strive with God's help to love God above all things and to love their neighbours as they love themselves.

In order to do this, the monks follow what are called the evangelical counsels and normally take some

of poverty, chastity and obedience. Some monks also take a vow of stability which means that they belong to one monastery where they will spend the rest of their lives.

Poverty: With regard to His kingdom, Jesus probably has more sayings on poverty than any other subject. The large number of quotes would indicate that these sayings were considered quite important and were acted upon. Jesus warns the rich to be aware of their own difficulty in entering the kingdom of heaven. Jesus says: "You cannot serve God and mammon."

As a result, monks do not normally own, but are only permitted to use certain things. An exception to this is found in an idiorhythmic monastery & is seen as a corruption of the ideal.

The degree of strictness of interpretation varies from monastery to monastery and from order to order. Poverty, while difficult, is normally considered the least difficult of the vows.

Chastity. The second traditional vow, in imitation of Christ, and normally considered the next in difficulty after poverty is Chastity. It is a common opinion that it is Chastity which forms the basis of the essence of monastic life. This is based on the saying of Jesus: "If any man come to me and hate not his father and mother and wife and children and brethren and sisters, yes even himself, he cannot be my disciple. This is a renunciation of all sexual relations and of emotional attachments. The monastic idea here is ^{life} like that

of the angels. It is very eschatological for "in the kingdom of heaven, they neither marry nor are they given in marriage." Strict fasting associated with monasticism is connected with chastity.

Obedience - is by far the most difficult vow and is in imitation of Christ who was obedient to His Father in heaven even to death on the cross. Jesus said: "I came to do not my own will, but the will of Him who sent me." Obedience is very important as Jesus said: "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." Matt. xvi. 24

In eastern Christian, especially Orthodox monasticism, and especially as regards Mount Athos monks are classified according to four types as well as by one of the six types of

dwelling they inhabit.

The four types of monks are:

1. Hermits
2. Semi-Hermits
3. Cenobites & 4 Idiorhythmic monks.

1. Hermit - from the Greek ἐρημος - desert. is a solitary who lives alone in quiet and is sometimes called a hesychast. His model is St. Paul of Thebes or St. Anthony for 20 years of his life. This is strictly speaking the life a monk. μοναχὸς from μόνος meaning alone. A monk lived in a μονή - dwelling.

2. Semi-erimetical - St. Anthony is the model, He became the abbot or father of a colony of hermits. They normally lived just out of earshot of one another. They followed their own rule of asceticism, but might

come together for special occasions. They would also help one another if necessary.

3. Cenobites. Cenobites live in community and have a common life. The first communal monasteries were organized by St. Pacomius at Tabennisi in upper Egypt. St. Basil adopted the community ideal of St. Pacomius.

In due time, it became common to have the 3 lifestyles subject to the same regimen of one monastery.

4. Idiorhythmic monks were a development in the 14th century as a result of a certain growing laxness in asceticism. Idiorhythmic monks may own private property and bequeath it to other monks. They basically became independent of

the hegumen. In time idiorrhythmic monasteries were governed by a council instead of an hegumen.

The idiorrhythmic style is generally considered a lax form of cenobitical monasticism. On Mt. Athos an ~~idiorrhythmic~~ idiorrhythmic monastery can become cenobitic, but a cenobitic monastery cannot become idiorrhythmic.

As regards the various Athosite dwellings we find:

1. The Cenobium (Kouvolior) - monastery of the common life. In a cenobium the monks hold all things in common.

In an idiorrhythmic monastery, the rule of poverty is relaxed and the monks receive remuneration for their labour.

The main Church in a monastery is

called the Katholikon because all the monks worship there. There are also numerous chapels.

2. Skete: a skete is a monastic village, much smaller than a monastery & dependant on a large monastery. In an idiorhythmic skete, the monks live in separated houses called Kalyvai (Cottages) & in the midst of them is the Kyriakon or Church where services are taken in common on the Lord's day. Normally there are 3 monks in each cottage.

Originally, a Lavra (lane, passageway) was a type of skete.

3. Kellion - a single building like a farmhouse containing a chapel. Normally 3 monks lease the kellion from a monastery. Monks in a kellion normally support themselves from the produce they grow on the kellion's land.

4. Kalyvrai - There are some Kalyvrai distant from the main monastery or sketes which are semi-heremitical.
5. Kathisma - this is a small hut occupied by a hermit. By paying a specified sum of money when he takes possession of his hut the hermit receives a regular supply of bread for the rest of his life.
6. Hesychoasterion - this is a cave in the wilderness & is often inaccessible. These monks rarely eat cooked food & stay hidden.

As regards monastic grades or professions, they are normally based on the degree of asceticism practiced by the monk. Each grade has an addition of more parts of the full monastic habit.

The 3 levels are.

1. Rasophore: a beginner monk, but more than a novice in the western understanding at least after he has passed the 3 year probation. As he has received the tonsure he is expected to keep all the rules of the monastery. A rasophore may choose to remain at that level for the rest of his life.
2. Stavrophore: - they are always under vows and receive the tonsure + little habit.
3. Megaloschenos: - a monk of the highest grade who wears the full monastic habit. These monks spend much time in prayer + silence. Some are strict vegetarians.

Those who live like angels dress in eschatological garb which ignores

the changing fashion of the world.

Monasticism is a living of Christianity in a radical way and really belongs to all Christians. This lifestyle really goes back to the very first Christians with some of the details developing later.

Monasticism today is characterized by a radical living out of the gospel. Its institutional signs which are reflective of inner realities are the vows, the tonsure and the angelic habit.

Even those who ~~do not~~ ^{are} not called to this particular vocation, nevertheless, have the same goal for their lives which is the acquisition of the Holy Spirit.