

# CHURCH HISTORY: FROM PENTECOST TO THE GREAT SCHISM

## WEEK 8: FROM ST. BENEDICT TO CLUNY:

### THE DEVELOPMENT OF MONASTICISM

REV. ERIC M. AUGENSTEIN

#### The Ascetic Movement

Early in the Church, but the fourth century, some Christians had the desire to live a simple life away from the problems posed by politics, wealth, and possessions; devoted their entire lives to detaching themselves from the world in order to live for Christ; spent their time in prayer and doing works of mercy; most of the early ascetics did this as individuals, but they gradually became organized.

The Desert Fathers – hermits living in Egypt in the second half of the fourth century; greatly revered for their wisdom; individuals would visit them asking, “Speak to me a word, father, that I may live;”

The Stylites – individuals who lived for long periods on top of columns, trying to live as simple a life as possible, with no shade from the sun, little food, little clothing, and little contact with the world; e.g., Symeon the Stylite (390-459) in Syria and Daniel the Stylite (409-493) in Constantinople, who spent 33 years on a column

St. Antony of Egypt (251-356) – most famous of the early hermits; renounced his family wealth, giving the money to the poor, and moved farther and farther into the desert; attracted followers, for whom he founded monasteries, although he preferred the solitary life; biography written by St. Athanasius; known as the Father of Monasticism

St. Pachomius (c. 290-c. 346) – contemporary of St. Antony; began as a hermit, but felt called to found monasteries in Egypt based on a communal life (*coenobium*), called cenobites; stressed obedience to a superior and community life based on a rule; wrote earliest known rule for monks

St. Basil the Great (329-379) – saw the value of the ascetic movement, but it was separated from the structure and life of the Church; worked to bring monasticism into the fold of the Church by having monastic communities be governed by a Rule and subject to the authority of the local bishop; Archbishop of Caesarea; known as the Father of Eastern Monasticism

## **St. Benedict (480-547) – The Father of Western Monasticism**

Biography – born in Nursia (Umbria) during the age of barbarians, after the fall of Rome and the Western Roman Empire; studied law in Rome, but became discouraged with the paganism he saw there; retreated to a cave near Subiaco (30 mi. east of Rome), where he lived as a hermit for three years; was asked by a group of monks to become their abbot, and he reluctantly agreed; the monks were undisciplined and thought him to be too strict and so tried to poison him, but he survived; left Subiaco and founded 12 monasteries of 12 monks each, including Monte Cassino (80 mi. southeast of Rome) where he lived and wrote his Rule for monks; named patron of Europe

St. Scholastica – sister of St. Benedict (possibly twin); head of first monastery for women that followed the Rule; visited her brother annually and they had intense theological discussions

Abbey of Monte Cassino – most important Benedictine monastery, founded in 529; destroyed by Lombards in 577, by the Saracens in 833, by earthquake in 1349, by Napoleon's army in 1798, and by Allied bombings during World War II in 1944; rebuilt in 1964

The Rule of St. Benedict – written to govern the daily life of the Abbey of Monte Cassino; topics include: election and role of the abbot, arrangements of the psalms for prayer; how to correct faults among monks; clothing; procedure for becoming a monk; obedience; humility; reception of guests; often summarized as *Ora et Labora*, “Prayer and Work,” although this phrase does not occur in the Rule

Excerpts From the RB (*The Rule of St. Benedict in English*, The Liturgical Press: 1982)

Purpose of the Rule: Prologue 1-3 (p. 15)

Death and Everlasting Life: 4.46-47 (p. 28)

Sleeping and waking: 22.5-8 (p. 49)

Communal Ownership: 33.1-3 (p. 56)

Manual Labor: 48.1 (p. 69)

Lent: 49.1-3 (p. 71)

Guests: 53.1-2 (p. 73)

Monastic Promises: 58.17 (p. 79)

## **The Spread of Monasticism**

The influence of individual monks – like St. Gregory the Great – led to the spread of Benedictine monasticism; monasteries that became too large broke apart and formed new monasteries; monastic living became a popular way of Christian living throughout Europe, especially as monasteries became centers of learning – they were one of the few places men could receive an education or be guaranteed a stable livelihood; missionaries who were monks helped spread monasticism: Ss. Patrick (Ireland), Augustine of Canterbury (England), Boniface (Germany), Columban (Gaul); Charlemagne (c. 800) promoted use of the Rule of St. Benedict; monasteries became the center of religious life for towns

## **The Reforms of Cluny**

The Challenge of Feudalism – as feudalism developed in the Dark Ages, feudal lords exercised more and more control over the church, having great say in appointing bishops and abbots; local bishops and abbots were often selected because of their skill in managing farms and towns, not for religious reasons, and owed loyalty to secular rulers; simony and nepotism were rampant

The Monastery of Cluny – founded in 910 by a William the Pious, Duke of Aquitaine; its charter declared that it would be independent of any control by secular rulers; the abbot was elected only by the monks and answered only to the Pope – thus, Cluny broke free of the feudal system and it became possible for the Church to bring about renewal and reform; several holy abbots developed Cluny into a monastery of prayer and good works and spread their charism throughout Europe; hundreds of European monasteries reformed themselves and asked to be governed by the abbot of Cluny; the abbot of Cluny became second only to the Pope in Church influence in Europe; Gregory VII was a monk of Cluny

## **The Influence of Monasticism**

Church Hierarchy – by 1300: 24 popes, 200 cardinals, 7,000 archbishops, 15,000 bishops

Saints – by 1300, 1,500 canonized saints

European nobility – by 1300, many members of the nobility entered monasteries near the end of their lives, including: 20 emperors, 10 empresses, 47 kings, 50 queens

Agriculture – monasteries were often established in out-of-the-way areas on land that no one else wanted, or that had not been able to be cultivated; monks learned how

to convert swamps and forests to farmland; developed methods of irrigation; became experts at cattle breeding; spread farming techniques throughout Europe; at the height of monasticism, monasteries owned 1/5 of the land in Europe

Alcoholic Beverages – developed techniques for making wine and beer on a large scale; using hops in beer was developed at a monastery; the world's oldest continually operating brewery is Weihenstephan Abbey Brewery outside of Munich; champagne was invented by a monk, Dom Pierre Perignon of St. Peter's Abbey in France

Machinery and Technology – monks were far ahead of their time in developing machinery, especially for use in farming and other trades; used waterpower for crushing wheat, fulling cloth, and tanning leather

Clockmaking – first clock in recorded history was made in 996 by a monk of Cluny named Gerbert, who later became Pope Sylvester II (999-1003)

Inns and Hospitality – in welcoming all guests as Christ, monasteries were known as the most hospitable inns for travelers and pilgrims throughout Europe

Hospitals and Medicine – monks trained in medicine were the most accomplished physicians of the Middle Ages; hospitals and infirmaries at monasteries preserved and advanced medical techniques

Learning – monasteries preserved literacy through the Dark Ages

Scriptoria – monks copied manuscripts of Greek philosophy and Latin literature, in addition to the Bible; without these copies, the Bible may not have survived the barbarian invasions, and much of classical learning would have been lost

And much more ... architecture, music, mathematics, astronomy, genetics (Gregor Mendel in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century)