Church History I: The Rise of Monasticism (c. 250 – c. 540 AD)

“If you would be perfect, go, sell all your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” (Matt. 19:21, NRSV)

Definitions:

Eremitic monasticism – Eremitic monks are solitary, this word is also the root of our word hermit. Eremitic monks are sometimes also called anchorites, meaning those who have withdrawn. They remove themselves from human society to inhabit a desert or some other kind of wild land and commune with God alone.

Coenobitic monasticism – Coenobitic monks live in community with one another under a Rule that directs their daily behavior, often down to the smallest detail. They commune with God through corporate worship and directed prayer.

Ascetic – An ascetic is a person in training. In the case of Christian monasticism, both solitary and communal, that training includes dedication to prayer, the purgation of sinful thoughts and deeds, and the denial of bodily comforts or even necessities in the pursuit of perfection. First and foremost this means relinquishing all private property.

Rule – The description of the community life of a group of coenobitic monks that is enforced and interpreted by the Abbot, or father, of the monastery.

Three Early Monastic Leaders:

Antony of Egypt (c. 251 – 356)

Antony is often considered the father of Christian monasticism. Though he was not the first monk he was the most charismatic early monk and the longest lived. He is also the subject of a brilliant biography by Athanasius, one of the most famous churchmen of the 4th c. Following his entry into the monastic life, Antony moved further and further away from civilization into the Egyptian desert until he was almost entirely alone. There he prayed and wrestled demons and sought wisdom until he was ready to move back to a place where he could teach disciples.

Pachomius of Egypt (c. 290 – 346)

Pachomius founded coenobitic monasticism. He converted to Christianity and became a monk in the generation after Antony began setting his example (though Antony outlived him). Pachomius started out as a hermit but when disciples gathered around him he decided to live together with them in an ordered community, probably due to his time in the Roman military. He wrote a rule which directly influenced many later rules
around the Mediterranean. By the time he died he was abbot-general over nine monasteries for men and two for women.

Benedict of Nursia (c. 480 – c. 550)

Benedict is the founder of European monasticism; all the monastic orders of the middle ages were based on his order and his rule. The Rule of St. Benedict is austere but less harsh and militaristic than that of Pachomius and it encourages an asceticism far less severe than that practiced by the desert fathers. The central practice of the Benedictine community was the Divine Office, or the Liturgy of the Hours, which involved the recitation of the Psalms and some hymns in a continual cycle:

Lauds: Midnight prayer.
Matins: Early morning prayer.
Prime: The first hour of daylight, ca. 6 am.
Terce: Mid-morning, or ca. 9 am prayer.
Sext: The office of the sixth hour, which marks the middle of the day.
Vespers: Evening prayer.
Compline: Late evening or night prayer.

Benedict’s rule also stresses prayer, work and above all, obedience.

Positive Aspects of Early Monastic Life:

1) It encouraged charity; monks gave all their possessions to the poor.
2) It mandated prayer and memorization of the Bible.
3) It inculcated a strong sense of morality and the belief that conversion to Christianity necessitated a real change in one’s life.

Negative Aspects of Early Monastic Life

1) It often expressed an aversion to, or even a pathological hatred of, the body.
2) Spiritual athleticism brings with it the danger of pride. Some monks thought that only monks were likely to be saved.
3) Monks cut themselves off from the wider Christian community and they were often in conflict with their clergy.

How does Henry Chadwick explain the rise of monasticism in the third century?