

Christians in Religious Community

Our Catholic Heritage

The Growth of Monasticism in the Church

By FATHER THOMAS McMANUS
 "Among the mountains were the monasteries, like tabernacles filled with divine choirs, singing, studying, fasting, praying, existing in the hope of things to come, working for alms-deeds, having love and harmony towards one another."
 (Life of St. Anthony, by St. Athanasius)

In the middle of the third century the first monks (solitaries) began their flight into the deserts and mountains of Egypt and Syria. It is interesting, and by no means coincidental, that the monastic movement began at the very moment when the Roman state was making its peace with the Church. In a world that had ceased to treat them as enemies, many Christians of both sexes desired to live as enemies of that world — lest they become its slaves.

Monasticism was not the pursuit of a lazy, egotistical life of motionless self-contemplation. Men and women went to the desert to fight the devil,

for there was his dwelling place (cf. the example of Jesus in the wilderness of Judea).

It was a life founded on work, manual labor, as the primary form of asceticism. The monks would busy themselves growing their own food, weaving mats and baskets for the marketplace and working as harvest laborers. It was a life of prayer, nourished by study and reading, especially of the Scriptures. It was a life of detachment, not of isolation, directed toward the perfection of charity to others.

Monasticism belongs to the order of charisms, of spiritual liberty. Nothing was more purely evangelical in its impulse. The Desert Fathers wished only to continue the apostolic life within the Church.

"They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles, to the brotherhood, to the breaking of bread, and the prayers." (Acts 2,42)

The most famous of the solitaries was St. Anthony of Egypt (251-356 A.D.). St. Pachomius (290 - 346 A.D.) was the first to organize the solitaries into communities, with an ordered discipline and a written rule. Such communities devoted themselves to ceaseless prayer, the "everlasting praise," which has developed into the Divine Office still recited by clergy and Religious every day.

Women vied with the men in what the Irish would come to call "the green martyrdom" of the solitary life. Mary, the sister of Pachomius, founded the first communities of women. Heroines like Pelagia, Thais, Euphrasia and Mary of Egypt became legends in their own day. Sex was no determinant for prominence as an "athlete of God." Neither was race. St. Moses the Black (d.405) gained such a reputation for holiness that he was chosen to be a priest.

In time, the world abandoned by the monks came to them for counsel

and guidance. All of the great fourth century Fathers of the Church, save St. Ambrose, were at one time monks. St. Basil the Great (330-379) is considered the Father of Eastern Monasticism. St. Martin of Tours (315-397) carried the monastic ideal to the West where it reached its flowering in the work of St. Benedict (480-547), the Father of Western Monasticism.

The picture of an emaciated figure clothed in goatskin and kneeling in the burning deserts of Africa may be viewed as quaint, or mocked as fanatical. We may, however, have much to learn from them.

"The monk should work with his hands, be ever mindful of his last end, joyful in hope, patient in adversity, unceasingly prayerful, giving thanks in all things, humble towards everyone, hating pride, sober and watchful to keep his heart from evil thoughts." (St. Basil the Great)

St. Anthony of Egypt's Life in the Desert

By FATHER THOMAS McMANUS

"If you would be perfect, go and sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in Heaven; and come, follow Me."
 (Matt. 19,21)

The hearing of those words at Mass one day about the year 270 brought about a profound change in the life of a young Egyptian named Anthony.

St. Anthony of Egypt is the first monk whose story we really know. We owe this to the Life of St. Anthony written by his friend, St. Athanasius.

Anthony's parents died when he was about 20 leaving him as guardian of his only sister. After hearing the words of the Gospel noted above, Anthony desired to follow the calling of the apostles. He gave away all he owned, provided for his sister's support in a convent, and began to live the ascetical life.

There were already many holy men and women living in the deserts of Egypt. Anthony began to visit them, and he noted:

"How gracious was one, how intensely prayer-



(Art by Robert F. McGovern)

St. Anthony

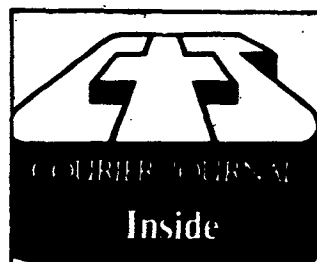
ful another . . . of one he observed the long vigils, of another the eager love of learning . . . and in all he saw the same reverent love for Christ and mutual affection for one another." (Life of St. Anthony)

Anthony retired to the desert, not as one fleeing from the world, but as one advancing to meet the enemy. For months on end he endured the constant assaults of the devil. After a long and victorious combat, he cried out to Christ in his weariness: "Where were you? Why were you not there to help me in my torment?"

A voice answered him:

"I was here, Anthony, waiting and watching your struggle. Because you have endured and conquered, I will always be your helper and make your name renowned throughout the world." (Life of St. Anthony)

Anthony lived to the age of 105, the greatest of the Desert Fathers. His last words are the testament of the solitaries: "With every breath you breathe, draw in Christ . . ." (Life of St. Anthony)



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