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**TREASURE IN HEAVEN:
ECONOMICS AND CHRISTIAN MONASTICISM IN LATE ANTIQUITY**

by

Benjamin Wade Harman

**Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree**

of

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Treasure in Heaven:
Economics and Christian Monasticism in Late Antiquity

Benjamin Wade Harman

If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.

Matthew 19:21

In the 3rd century CE a new variety of Christian practice emerged to popularity that took a marked turn from traditional practice. It was an ascetic movement that led many people to deny themselves bodily pleasures, and even some to self-inflict pain. There were some who chose to live a solitary life in the desert or in caves, and others lived in monasteries or isolated on top of stone pillars. This movement encouraged individuals to sell all of their belongings and rely on others' charity, or even God's grace, to survive. While asceticism had previously existed in other cultures and religions, it did not exist on any large scale in Christianity for the first 200 years. But once it arrived on the scene, it developed rapidly and became uncontrollably popular. It was formalized as monastic practice and the practitioners were called monks.

What is most interesting about the monastic movement was that it began as a countercultural movement that opposed and rejected the institutional authority of the Orthodox Church, but by the 6th century it was the driving force behind the institution itself.¹ In the space of about three centuries monasticism made a remarkable transformation. The purpose of this paper will be to trace how this development took place paying specific attention to social and economic pressures. It will follow the development of monasticism as it evolved from the peripheral in east to the center of Christian consciousness in the west. This paper will be divided up into five sections. The first section will explain the cultural and economic background of the early Christians. The second section will explain what led to the rise of ascetic practice in Christianity.

¹ Arietta Papaconstantinou, "Egypt," in *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, ed. Scott Fitzgerald Johnson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) 214.

The third section will track the emergence of monasticism in the east; specifically Egypt, Syria, and Asia Minor. The fourth section will then follow monasticism and its developments as it moved west into Gaul and Italy and how the institutional church finally accepted it. The final section will then explain how it became the driving force behind the institution.

Before this paper will proceed, there are some terms that will be used throughout that need defining: ascetic, anchorite, eremitic, and coenobitic. The word *Ascetic* comes from the Greek word for training or disciplining the body for an athletic event. Christianity adopted it to mean disciplining the spirit and body for contemplation of God. The less emphasis one put on the body, the greater focus one could have on things of a spiritual nature. A monk who lives alone is a hermit or *anchorite*. Anchorite comes from the Greek word *anachoresis*, meaning retiring or retreating. This is called eremitic monasticism, *Eremitic* come from the Greek word for desert. Monastic practice in a group or community is called Coenobitic monasticism. *Coenobitic* comes from the Greek words *koinos* and *bios*, meaning common and life.²

I – Social and Economic Background of Christianity

In its first centuries, the main growth of Christianity did not take place in rural villages. Christianity was an urban phenomenon.³ Given the time period of Late Antiquity the urban cities were densely populated. This meant that there was little privacy because everybody knew everybody else. However, this worked as a great method for maintaining traditional social controls. It was evident if there was anyone not

² Robert Louis Wilken, *The First Thousand Years: The Global History of Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 102.

³ Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christianities: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 9-12.

participating in social or religious activities.⁴ This put Christians in a difficult position. The religious environment that Christianity sprang from was a very polytheistic worldview. There was no limit to the amount of gods that one could have. If one moved to a new city or town where there was a different set of gods one could just merely adopt them. Christianity on the other hand, was one of the first religions to actually require that one reject all other gods. As a result Christians would not participate in many public festivals, but more importantly they would not contribute and sacrifice to the pagan gods in the temple. This started to put a slight economic strain on the state and competing religions. The more people converted to Christianity, the greater this strain would become.

Outside of Christian circles, the way a wealthy elite would receive glory and honor was by donating to the state. Being viewed a “lover of his home city” elevated the status of Roman citizens. That is in part why there were so many extravagant buildings and monuments in Rome; the greater the donation the greater the honor. The rich would donate with the expectation of being praised by the other citizens.⁵ Christianity on the other hand started to challenge this notion. Christianity changed the consciousness of being charitable to one’s city, to being charitable to the needy. In Christian groups it was not fashionable to be a “lover of his home city,” rather they praised people for being “lovers of the poor.” This notion stems from Jesus, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.”⁶ In a sense, the poor and lowly were elites. This message was not likely to have much success attracting those in power. But whom it could attract

⁴ Peter Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 4.

⁵ Peter Brown, *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2002), 4-5.

⁶ Luke 6:20

were those not in power; those disillusioned by the excessive displays of wealth and abuse of power by the elites.⁷ This was a particularly attractive message to a world where unemployment constantly loomed overhead, and the vast majority of society lived under a constant fear of impoverishment.^{8 9}

The Christian community carefully protected its boundaries.¹⁰ Not anyone could be a recipient of Christian charity. Christian almsgiving did not include non-believers. Much like how the Romans would only take care of citizens, Christian altruism only required donating to other Christians.¹¹ As Christianity kept growing, the duties required of the bishops grew as well. Bishops eventually expected financial support from the fellow believers.¹² So instead of donating directly to the poor, contributions for the needy were to be donated to the bishop. After he took what he needed to survive, he was to then redistribute the remaining wealth. “The bishop was presented, above all, as the *oikonomos*, as the ‘steward,’ of the wealth of the church.”¹³ By the 3rd century, on top of receiving gifts, the clergy also started to receive a monthly allotment.¹⁴ Peter Brown stated, “in a sense, it was the Christian bishops who invented the poor. They rose to leadership in late Roman society by bringing the poor into ever sharper focus.”¹⁵

As the church grew the status and influence of the Christian bishops grew as well. “The intrusion of the Christian Church into the political and then economic life was

⁷ Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1987), 321.

⁸ Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity: AD 150-750* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013), 8.

⁹ Peter Brown, *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire*, 14.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹² *Ibid.*, 22.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁴ Karen Jo Torjesen, “Clergy and Laity.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, edited by Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter, 389-405. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

¹⁵ Peter Brown, *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire*, 8-9.

certainly one of the major revolutions of the later empire. In the space of a few years, the church assembled landed estates and riches that allowed it to play an ever-growing role in politics.”¹⁶ The increasing the wealth of the Christians that simultaneously caused a decrease in wealth of the state did not come at a good time for the Empire. The Barbarian raids that started midway through the 3rd century were the beginning of the Empire’s economic ruin.¹⁷ After the year 230 large tax increases were required to continue to defend and maintain unity in the Empire.¹⁸ “Between 238 and 270, bankruptcy, political fragmentation, and the recurrent defeats of large Roman armies laid bare the weaknesses of the old system of government.”¹⁹ Certainly aware of the growing power of Christianity, the Roman Emperor Trajan Decius issued an edict in 250 that became known as the Decian persecution. It required everyone sacrifice to the Roman gods and the Emperor. The penalty for disobeying was death. This forced Christians to decide where their loyalties would lie. Many Christians were put to death because of the edict and others went into hiding.

In 284, Diocletian became the Emperor and he took it upon himself to repair the crumbling Empire. Maintaining communication and control over such a vast Empire was especially difficult. Diocletian increased the size of the army from an estimated 300,000-400,000 to 500,000 men. The army needed to be large enough so that it could control every part of the Empire. Providing food, money, clothes, and shelter for this vast

¹⁶ Georges Depeyrot, “Economy and Society,” In *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine*, ed. & and trans, by Noel Lenski, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 247.

¹⁷ Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, 540.

¹⁸ Peter Brown, “Late Antiquity,” In *The History of Private Life, vol. 1*, ed. Paul Veyne, (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), 271.

¹⁹ Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200-1000, 2nd Edition* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 56.

military proved to be very expensive as well.²⁰ Around this same time inflation started to become a large problem. To try and combat it Diocletian resorted to price fixing and debased the coinage; neither had any effect.²¹

Because the Roman Empire was expanding, it actually appeared much more wealthy and economically stable than it actually was. With each new territory that it conquered, there would be an increased amount of wealth that would flow into the Empire. This obviously could not continue on forever since there is a limited amount of land that can be plundered. This technique worked great temporarily, but the larger and larger that the Empire grew, the more and more money was needed to just maintain already conquered lands. To sustain this expansionary policy, it would need to continually conquer lands at an accelerating rate.²² This was not possible. "Once that policy reached its limits, the weaknesses of the economic system began to show."²³ As military expansion slowed down and eventually ceased, it shut off one of the main sources of wealth.²⁴ No rich neighbors remained to be pillaged. Diocletian only found two solutions: debasing the coin and increasing taxation.²⁵ What further made the situation worse is that Diocletian had a near endless desire for building.²⁶

Eventually taxation reached such a high point that many people were simply unable to pay. This compounded the problem because many farmers and peasants stopped producing and fled in the wilderness or the desert where the Romans technically

²⁰ Christopher Donaldson, *Martin of Tours: Parish Priest, Mystic and Exorcist* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 13.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

²² Justo L González *Faith and Wealth: A History of the Early Christian Ideas on the Origin, Significance, and Use of Money* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002), 52.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

²⁶ Georges Depeyrot, "Economy and Society," 231.

had no legal authority and would not follow.²⁷ The mixed coins that Diocletian minted did not have the effect he desired either. Eventually people would not even accept the newly mixed coins as a form of payment and they started hoarding the older purer coins.²⁸ It appears that Diocletian thought the only reason that inflation happened was the debasing of currency. To counter act this, he increased the amount of silver in the coins and sent out a decree that stated all coins that had been previously minted were worth exactly half as much. “Diocletian apparently expected that simply producing better coins would automatically increase their value. What he did not realize was that increasing the number of coins in circulation, no matter what their metal content, would work in the opposite direction.”²⁹

Under the impression that the coins now held more value, Diocletian ordered an increasing amount of them to be minted. Believing the coins to be worth more, as inflation continued Diocletian assumed that the merchants must have been making huge profits so he ordered price fixing.³⁰ In 301, Diocletian put price ceilings on nearly all goods and services.³¹ At the beginning of the edict, he takes a direct jab at the merchants. “And though each of them is overflowing with the greatest riches, which could supply entire populations, yet they chase after tiny amounts of money and pursue exacting percentages. Oh my provincials, the reason of common decency persuades us to put a limit on their avarice!”³²

²⁷ Justo L González *Faith and Wealth*, 56.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 55.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 59.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 59-60

³¹ Christopher Donaldson, *Martin of Tours*, 14.

³² Georges Depeyrot, “Economy and Society,” 235.

The economic instability that these policies brought about only made Christianity more successful. This was a world that already lived in constant fear of harvest shocks and famine.³³ One season of drought could mean death. The recent economic uncertainty only added to these peoples already existing anxiety. Since the church was exclusive the safety net it provided was becoming more attractive to outsiders. As a result Christians did not struggle to find converts. It was a continual circle that perpetuated itself, the more people converted to Christianity, the wealthier it became. The wealthier it became, the better it could take care of its members, and more people converted. Because of this Christianity could be found in nearly all places in and even outside of the Empire.³⁴ The Empire was levying a near suffocating level of taxes and the church was offering relief. Slowly people's loyalty started shifting from the Empire to the church.³⁵ As the empire was in crisis, it needed to petition help from their gods. While many people thought the Christians were at least partially to blame for this crisis, it was not because it was thought that Christianity was bankrupting the Empire. Rather, the less people worshiped the gods of the Empire and joined Christianity, the less the gods were going to intervene on the Empire's behalf. This led to violent acts and persecutions against Christians in many cities. We already saw first empire wide edict against Christianity in 250 and there was another again in 257.³⁶

Diocletian attempted the same thing that Decian tried a half-century earlier.

Seeing the influence of the Christians on the rise he attempted to stomp it out while they

³³ Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 69.

³⁴ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (New York: Viking Penguin Group, 2009), 164.

³⁵ Christopher Donaldson, *Martin of Tours*, 15.

³⁶ Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, 62.

were still a relatively small minority. Diocletian initiated the an edict that became known as the “Great Persecution.”³⁷ The edict was issued in 303 and the persecution continued for about 11 years in Egypt, Syria, and Asia Minor.³⁸ The persecutions were largely targeted at the Christian bishops and other high profile leaders. Diocletian also ordered Christian scriptures and buildings to be burned.³⁹ Diocletian ruled as Emperor for two more years. In 305 he became the first Roman Emperor to voluntarily abdicate his position. His reason was that he was not well and the Empire needed someone stronger to be in command. Emperor Constantine began as a co-emperor a year later in 306.

Constantine, inheriting many of the same problems that Diocletian had, also started to take steps to revive the economy. In 309, Constantine instituted another change in the coinage. He had a new coin minted called the solidus. He reduced the existing gold coin from about 6 grams to 4.5. He started to slow the production of new silver coins and primarily minted the gold solidus. The production of the gold coins increased the money supply at a stable rate and Constantine did not attempt to mandate a worth of the coin or fix prices. He allowed it become a floating currency. This change in economic policy turned out to be the most important policy of the forth century and lead to a greater stabilization of the Empire.⁴⁰ It was so successful that neither Constantine, nor any of his successors, ever changed any of the coins characteristics.⁴¹

Then something else happened that would change the history of the Roman Empire and Christianity forever, Constantine converted to Christianity. Once Constantine became a Christian, he did not lighten taxation on the church, he exempted the church.

³⁷ Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, 529.

³⁸ Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, 62.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 62-63.

⁴⁰ Georges Depeyrot, “Economy and Society,” 237.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 237-239.

Church property was exempt from land tax, and all ranks of clergy were exempt from personal tax and mandatory service for the state; both of which took up many people's time and money. Any clergy who had any employment outside of the church still had that income exempted from taxation because it was expected that the profits were to be used to care for the poor and the needy. This allowed the clergy to amass such large amounts of wealth that they eventually became known as the "aristocracy of the exempt." Not surprisingly, many prosperous citizens started to join the ranks of the clergy as it served as an excellent way to protect their wealth.⁴² Peter Brown said:

If God helps those who help themselves, then no group better deserved the miracle of the 'conversion' of Constantine in 312 than did the Christians. For the Christian leaders seized their opportunity with astonishing pertinacity and intelligence. They besieged Constantine in his new mood: provincial bishops, notably Hosius of Cordova (c. 257-357), attached themselves to his court; other bishops, from Africa, swept him into their local affairs as a judge; Lactantius emerged as tutor to his son; and, when Constantine finally conquered the eastern provinces in 324, he was greeted by Eusebius of Caesarea, who placed his pen at the emperor's disposal with a skill and enthusiasm such as no traditional Greek rhetor had seemed able to summon up for Constantine's grim and old-fashioned predecessors – Diocletian and Galerius.⁴³

Christians up until this time have taken pride in being a persecuted people. Being a Christian was hard and only the "elite" could practice it. When becoming a Christian one had to be ready for a life of persecution and potentially martyrdom. The conversion of Constantine changed all of this. Not only was there little risk in being a Christian, it became comfortable. Many social elites were now Christians. The church starting losing its exclusivity and it started to appear as if it was being corrupted by the world. This created a tension between some members and the wider Christian community.

⁴² Peter Brown, *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire*, 29-31.

⁴³ Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity*, 86.

II – Roots of Christian Asceticism

Uncomfortable with the current state of the church, many Christians faced an identity crisis. It was this fear of losing distinctiveness that led to the emergence of asceticism, and the later development of monastic practice. However, this crisis ran much deeper than just social and economic conditions. “In a world haunted by underemployment, far more people than we might imagine had time to think and to argue; and religion provided them with the universally available and sophisticated language with which to do so.”⁴⁴ As a result there were many theological ideas that people had time to wrestle with and many problems had not yet been solved satisfactorily. Several notions were in danger of losing their meaning and had to be reinterpreted to retain any value.

One of the most prevalent ideas in the early church was that of the *Parousia*; the expected return of Christ and the bringing of the kingdom of heaven. This influenced the way people thought and the way they acted.⁴⁵ Many Christians not only believed in the literal coming of Christ, they believed it was going to happen soon. To quote from the Paul’s epistle to the Thessalonians, “For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And

⁴⁴ Peter Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity*, 8.

⁴⁵ Geza Vermes, *Christian Beginnings: From Nazareth to Nicaea* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 79.

the dead in Christ will rise first.”⁴⁶ This same notion was repeated in his epistle to the Romans, “Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand.”⁴⁷

With Scriptures such as these there were many first generation Christians who thought that the second coming was imminent, they would be alive to witness it.⁴⁸ Anyone who did not become a Christian was going to be damned on this Day of Judgment. However, this foretold Second Coming never came and the enthusiasm for it could not be maintained for long.⁴⁹ A new framework needed to be built. The notion needed to be reinterpreted or abandoned. By the year 100 more stable Christian communities started forming with formal gatherings and rituals.⁵⁰ The *Parousia* became a point of struggle for many Christians who tried to comprehend why it never happened. The church father Origen was still wrestling with this problem in third century, he proposed an alternative explanation. He postulated that the Second Coming could have already happened, but it was just symbolic. He suggested that it could have meant the gospel being spread to all parts of the world. So in a spiritual sense the coming of Jesus happens when the spirit of God manifests itself to the individual.⁵¹ This explanation did not satisfy many people.

Another problem Christians faced that we have already touched on was that to be a Christian in Late Antiquity, in a sense one had to reject the world. Converting to

⁴⁶ 1 Thessalonians 4:15-16

⁴⁷ Romans 13:11-12

⁴⁸ Charles Freeman, *A New History of Early Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 57.

⁴⁹ Geza Vermes, *Christian Beginnings*, 80.

⁵⁰ Charles Freeman, *A New History of Early Christianity*, 114.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 191.

Christianity was breaking away from the larger community into an exclusive elite community. Christianity was making a new culture.⁵² Christians would not join the military or go to public bathhouses, which were the centers of social and political life.⁵³ As stated earlier, they would not participate in any of the greater community's religious activities.⁵⁴ There were great societal pressures to follow the culture of one's city. People were expected to act in a certain way, and depending on one's actions they people could either be publicly shamed or honored.⁵⁵ Given that the condensed population provided little privacy, it was difficult to be a Christian.⁵⁶

Often when one became a Christian, it mean leaving one's family behind. Jesus said, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple."⁵⁷ This proved difficult for members, but at the same time it provided a strong familial bond among members. They were "brothers and sisters" that could use each other as support.⁵⁸ Wayne Meeks said, "Becoming a Christian meant something like the experience of an immigrant who leaves his or her native land in the assemblies to the culture of new, adopted homeland.... Leaving the family of birth and the culture of residence in becoming a sister or brother of those who are God's children."⁵⁹

⁵² Wayne A. Meeks, *The Origins of Christian Morality: The First Two Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 2.

⁵³ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity*, 158.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 157-158.

⁵⁵ Wayne A. Meeks, *The Origins of Christian Morality*, 43.

⁵⁶ Peter Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity*, 4.

⁵⁷ Luke 14:26

⁵⁸ Wayne A. Meeks, *The Origins of Christian Morality*, 2-3.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

However, much of this started to change. Around the mid-third century, wealthy people started to enter the church.⁶⁰ After the conversion of Constantine he issued the Edict of Milan that declared Christianity a state endorsed and protected religion. With the exception of Julian, Christianity would be the religion of every Emperor following Constantine. The Emperors would appoint other Christians to different political positions. It now became politically advantageous to become Christian, and therefore started to lose its feeling of eliteness. Because the Empire was embracing the church, bishops started to be more like official magistrates than religious leaders.⁶¹ As stated in the first section, after the clergy got an exemption from taxes many wealthy upper-class men started to join the clergy. To try and counteract this Constantine passed a law in 326 to try and prevent rich townsmen from joining the ministry.⁶²

This cultural change troubled many Christians. “The closer the Church came to society, the more obvious were the tensions with some of the founder’s messages about the rejection of convention and the abandonment of worldly wealth.”⁶³ When the Christians see their bishops become so wealthy that they become know as “aristocracy of the exempt,” it is very hard to reconcile the teachings of Jesus when he said, “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.”⁶⁴ Originally, to become a Christian, one had to reject the world, but what are Christians to do when the church starts to look like the world?

⁶⁰ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity*, 160.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 197.

⁶² Peter Brown, *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire*, 31.

⁶³ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity*, 200.

⁶⁴ Matt 19:21

Perhaps the single most powerful idea that pervaded the consciousness of the early Christians was the concept of martyrdom. Martyrdom was central to early Christianity. People argued about what exactly Jesus meant by many of his teachings, but nearly all agreed that the crucifixion was the pinnacle of what Jesus accomplished; Jesus died for his mission, he was a martyr. Many early Christians believed that the way to follow Christ, was to be a martyr for the cause of Christ. The word martyr comes from the Greek word *martus*, which actually means witness.

The church father Tertullian viewed the killing of Christians as a good thing. He said, “The oftener we are mown down by you, the more we grow in numbers: the blood of the Christians is seed!”⁶⁵ The Great Persecution created the continual opportunity for martyrdom.⁶⁶ Martyrdom became a central part of Christianity. To become a Christian was to prepare to be martyred. This became so popular of a narrative that there were many Christians who even greatly desired martyrdom. Ignatius of Antioch said, “Let fire and cross, packs of wild beasts, the wrenching of bones, the mangling of limbs, the grinding of my whole body, cruel punishments of the devil on me – my only wish is to attain Jesus.”⁶⁷

Martyrs were glorified in *The Church History* written by Eusebius.⁶⁸ While some have argued that many of the stories Eusebius’s history were not based on actual events, and the persecution and martyrdom was not nearly as widespread that many have believed it to be, there is no denying at least the idea of martyrdom was pervasive in

⁶⁵ Richard M. Price, “Martyrdom and the Cult of the Saints,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, ed. Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 815.

⁶⁶ Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, 596.

⁶⁷ Robert Louis Wilken, *The First Thousand Years: The Global History of Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 29.

⁶⁸ Eusebius, *The Church History*. ed. and trans. Paul L. Maier (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2007), 127-140.

Christian consciousness. Peter Brown stated, "Even at the height of the Great Persecution, martyrdom was not an everyday occurrence for Christians. But martyrdom did not have to be frequent for its message to inspire horror and awe."⁶⁹

The first saints were martyrs, the first shrines were sites of martyrdom, and the first relics were bones and possessions of martyrs.⁷⁰ Irenaeus said, "You must take up your cross and bear it after your Master... The *sole* key to unlock Paradise is your own life's blood." So whether or not many Christians regularly died for their beliefs did not matter, one just needed to be willing. "The heroism of the martyrs was merely the climax of the inherent sense of superiority of the Christians as a whole."⁷¹ Martyrs were viewed as people that had a special relationship with the divine; they were 'friends of God.' It also was a practice that was open to everyone; rich, poor, male, female, slave, or free.⁷² It gave the lower class a chance to become an elite.

Once again, this all changed with the conversion of Emperor Constantine. While this event seems have made Christianity better off, some were not so sure. Constantine's conversion effectively ended martyrdom. Like the Jews after the destruction of the second temple, Christians lost a central part of their religion. This further perpetuated the crisis among Christians. In order for the idea of martyrdom to retain any meaning, it had to be reinterpreted given the current circumstance.

One thing that provided an answer to all of these problems Christians were facing was ascetic and monastic practice. In its beginnings, asceticism entailed Christian monks living isolated out in the desert. It turns out that this simple idea offer the solution to

⁶⁹ Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, 66.

⁷⁰ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity*, 161.

⁷¹ Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity*, 56.

⁷² Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity*, 161.

Christianity's identity crisis. It offered a meaningful reinterpretation of the idea of the *Paraousia* or Second Coming. Many Christians acted proactively and took matters into their own hands. If the kingdom of heaven was not going to come, ascetic monks were going to go bring themselves to heaven. They were going to separate themselves from the worldly influences. Peter Brown said, "A relationship to heaven was shown most irrefutably by a move to the desert."⁷³ Many desert fathers spoke of the desert as heaven. The desert became better than any paradise with countless choruses of angels.⁷⁴ Antony, a monk who is talked about in the next section, persuaded many to take up the solitary life. "The desert was made a city by monks, who left their own people and registered themselves for the citizenship in the heavens."⁷⁵

Going out into the desert provided an escape from the world. For the Christians that lived in densely populated urban centers with no privacy, the desert was an escape. With an empire that had increasingly levied higher and higher taxes, one solution was to go far into the desert beyond the tax collectors reach.⁷⁶ As Christians saw their own church become corrupted by the influence of the world, one solution was to abandon the church. Diarmaid MacCulloch said, "All Christian monasticism is an implied criticism of the Church's decision to become a large-scale and inclusive organization."⁷⁷ Much like how Christianity originally required one to reject the world, when the church starts to look like the world, one needs to reject the church.

⁷³ Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity*, 87.

⁷⁴ Daniel Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks: Spiritual Authority and the Promotion of Monasticism in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 5.

⁷⁵ Athanasius, *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, trans. Robert C. Gregg (Mahwah: Paulist Press, Inc., 1980), 42-43.

⁷⁶ Athanasius, *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, 64.

⁷⁷ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity*, 201.

Most importantly asceticism and monasticism offered a way for Christians to maintain a meaningful conception of martyrdom. The principle behind martyrdom was that one ought to be willing to sacrifice one's life for Christianity. This did not necessarily have to happen from an outside force or happen all at once. If society was not going to martyr Christians, some were going to take matters into their own hands. They were going to practice a form of self-martyrdom; opening the door to ascetic practices. The desert also provided a social death.⁷⁸ Claudia Rapp said:

Asceticism was a tool to achieve spiritual growth. Hermits and monks subjected their bodies to a lifetime of ever more demanding physical rigors. The duration of their ascetic efforts set them in contrast to the martyrs whose bodily suffering was compressed into the short period of time prior to their execution.... In this way, those who lived the monastic life, whether in solitude or in a community, became the successors of the martyrs, once the Edict of Milan (312) had declared an end to the persecutions and thereby removed the opportunities for dramatic singular acts of martyrdom.⁷⁹

Also as we will see, even though many would not participate in ascetic actions themselves, the monks offered an exemplar that Christians could be proud of, like they had been for the martyrs.

At this same time a theological debate was taking place that centered on the Christian conception of sin and its relation to the physical body. There emerged two dominant competing conceptions of sin. Paula Fredriksen argues that this difference in interpretation can be seen emerging from the beginning with Jesus and Paul. These two views eventually developed with the competing theologies of Origen and Augustine.

⁷⁸ Brown, Peter. *The World of Late Antiquity*, 88.

⁷⁹ Claudia Rapp, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity: The Nature of Christian Leadership in an Age of Transition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 75.

Augustine thought that all humans were born with what he called "Original Sin."⁸⁰ People were born into a sinful state and there is nothing they can do about it. This has important theological implications for human action. Augustine did not believe in freewill; the human condition was one of bondage. Even the most saintly individuals do not have the capacity of human mastery.⁸¹ The only way one can avoid sin is through the grace of God.⁸² The sinful state that humans are born into was a result of Adam's sin in the Garden of Eden; it was not because of the material body. The fact that God chose to mix flesh and spirit demonstrated that it was a divine combination.⁸³ Augustine held the belief that the concept of resurrection entails bodily resurrection. Salvation was not becoming free of one's body, but was having one's flesh perfected.⁸⁴

The theology of Origen on the other hand is almost the polar opposite. Origen's world was also a dualistic; matter and spirit. However, the reason that people sinned was because of the material body. Flesh or body even stood as the rhetorical shorthand for sin.⁸⁵ God is the only entity that does not have a body, but is pure spirit. Therefore the spirit was viewed as good, and the body was viewed as bad. God is the only perfect and unchangeable being precisely because he does not have a body. Everything else in the universe has some sort of body, which implies everything is in a fallen state.⁸⁶ However, people are not entirely helpless like in the theology of Augustine. Origen believed that

⁸⁰ Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent: Sex and politics in Early Christianity* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 131.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁸² Paula Fredriksen, *Sin: The Early History of an Idea* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 124.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 128-129.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 101-102.

humans have freewill.⁸⁷ The only thing that kept them sinful was their intentional actions. Therefore it was important that people did all they could to avoid sin. It is believed that Origen went so far as to have a doctor castrate him to lessen his desire to sin.⁸⁸ Salvation specifically meant redemption from the flesh.

So one can easily see that an Origenist conception sin would effortlessly lead to ascetic practices. Since the flesh is sinful, one should deny oneself bodily pleasures and nourish their spirit. This notion also pairs seamlessly with the idea of self-martyrdom. Also if one is doing everything they can to avoid sin, removing oneself from temptation by living away from society is a logical conclusion. The rise of asceticism therefore was not a result of one particular event or idea, but rather was a combination of social, cultural, economic, and theological pressures.

III – Emergence of Monasticism in the East

Egypt: Antony and Pachomius

Egypt has traditionally been viewed as the birthplace of Christian monasticism. Furthermore, Antony and Pachomius were often considered as the founders of eremitic and coenobitic monasticism. But as more sources have become available, it appears that this might not be exactly true. Monasticism in Syria and Asia Minor appear to date as far back as Egypt, but are less documented and overall less influential.⁸⁹ However, it can be stated that Antony and Pachomius were the first to popularize their given styles of monasticism on a large scale. Antony's lasting influence can largely be attributed to Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria, wrote a biography of Antony shortly after his

⁸⁷ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 163.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁸⁹ William Harmless, "Monasticism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, ed, Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 493-494.

death. Through this text, Antony's life became the prototypical model for how a monk should live.⁹⁰

In order to understand how monasticism developed in Egypt, it is important to first understand what Egypt was like in Late Antiquity. The area immediately around the Nile was virtually the only fertile land that Egypt had to offer; the rest was desert. The rainfall in Egypt averages 1.1 inches a year. This can make survival a difficult task. It puts an extreme pressure on communal organization, stability, and sustainability. To live people had to settle in one place and perform manual labor; such as pottery and reed-weaving.⁹¹ Therefore the vast majority of the population was located on a narrow strip of land that was along the sides of the Nile River. The deserts to the east and west of the Nile contained some minerals and gold.⁹² While there was not much rain, the Nile floods annually fertilizing the soil allowing the people to reliably cultivate crops which is the reason Egypt could support a very large population for its day.⁹³ The annual flooding lasted for about 3 months from around June to September. They would harvest right before the flood started and sowing season began right as it ended. This gave residents a lot of down time for trading, social life, and religious activities.⁹⁴

At this time Alexandria was the capital of Egypt. Origen, who was most likely born in Alexandria, spent much time there and left his mark.⁹⁵ Origen was a very influential thinker, but was not inline with what became the accepted orthodox position.

⁹⁰ William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 85.

⁹¹ Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Roman Studies*, vol. 61 (1971), 83.

⁹² Arietta Papaconstantinou, "Egypt," 200.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 196.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 200.

⁹⁵ Raymond Van Dam, "The East (1): Greece and Asia Minor," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, ed. Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 344.

Alexandria culturally and economically dominated the eastern Mediterranean. Egypt produced, and Alexandria controlled, much of the grain that went to them to the rest of the Empire. Political changes also affected Egypt in many ways.⁹⁶ Because of the increased weight of taxation levied by emperor Diocletian, farmers that had traditionally lived a comfortable life were now struggling.⁹⁷ That combined with the “Great Persecution,” resulted in many Christians fleeing into the deserts.⁹⁸ One of these Christians was Antony.

Antony (c. 251-356) became known as the ‘father of the monks.’⁹⁹ Antony grew up in a village along the Nile River and was raised in a Christian family that held Origenist views.¹⁰⁰ When he was about 18 years old both of his parents died leaving Antony with a sizable inheritance for himself and to help take care of his younger sister.¹⁰¹ While walking to church one day Antony was thinking about what Jesus said to a rich young man in the book of Matthew, “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.”¹⁰² Antony felt as if the story was directed to him. Being a rich young man, he was so moved by this passage that he immediately sold everything that he had and gave nearly all of his money to the poor; setting aside a small amount for his sister.¹⁰³

Antony went and stayed with an old monk who lived on the outskirts of a village who taught him the ascetic way. He performed manual labor, went nights without sleep, and maintained a diet of bread, salt, and water. At this point Antony decided to go further

⁹⁶ Arietta Papaconstantinou, “Egypt,” 197.

⁹⁷ Brown, Peter. *The Making of Late Antiquity*. 84-85.

⁹⁸ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity*, 203.

⁹⁹ Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity*, 96.

¹⁰⁰ William Harmless, “Monasticism,” 500.

¹⁰¹ William Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 60.

¹⁰² Athanasius, *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, 31.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

than any monk had before into the desert.¹⁰⁴ He withdrew into the desert alone where he remained for 20 years. Eventually he returned to society to inspire others to live the ascetic life in the desert.¹⁰⁵

Antony was so successful in persuading many to take up the solitary life that Athanasius said, "from then on, they were monasteries in the mountains and the desert was made the city by monks."¹⁰⁶ Peter Brown said that to establish a city in the desert away from the Nile River and sustainable resources would have been the equivalent of settling on the Antarctic continent.¹⁰⁷ When questioning how Antony was to survive, he was reminded of another scripture:

Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.... Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'.... But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.¹⁰⁸

This was the ideal of monasticism in its purest form; being the solitary faithful monk.¹⁰⁹ Many monks believe that it was not out of virtue that one lived in solitude, but weakness. In the desert there are very few sins that can be committed because most sins arise in a social context.¹¹⁰ But life in the desert was not easy, especially alone. It was hot during the day and it was cold at night.¹¹¹ On top of the harsh environment food was scarce. As Antony brought more and more people into the desert serious logistical problems surfaced. Supporting a large population of people who take no thought of where

¹⁰⁴ William Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 60.

¹⁰⁵ Robert Louis Wilken, *The First Thousand Years*, 101.

¹⁰⁶ Athanasius, *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, 42-43.

¹⁰⁷ Peter Brown, "Late Antiquity," 288.

¹⁰⁸ Matt 6:25-33

¹⁰⁹ Daniel Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks*, 25.

¹¹⁰ Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity*, 83.

¹¹¹ Daniel Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks*, 35-36.

they will get food is going to be difficult in any circumstance; in the desert of Egypt it was nearly impossible. Cyril of Alexandria, wondered who would provide for the monks if everyone imitates monks.¹¹² Furthermore, depression became a very real problem. Living a life alone, doing nothing but sitting in a cell was not conducive to happiness. To fight this they developed a religious attitude toward manual labor. It gave them a task. While a monk was weaving a rope he was asked, "what is needed for salvation?" The monk replied, "You are looking at it."¹¹³

With depression and large logistical problems, this form of monasticism could not continue to grow forever. From this point on in Egypt, monasticism developed in two main ways. In both cases, monks generally stopped going deep into the desert. In the first development, Monks would still move out into the desert, but they would stay within sight or walking distance of nearby villages where they could interact with villagers and get food. This allowed them to be both heroes and spiritual guides to the villagers.¹¹⁴ It made the morality of city living unclear, and the desert morally superior.¹¹⁵ Living on the outskirts gave the monks the feeling and appearance of being distant from the world. In some circles they started to be viewed more esteemed than bishops. Because of this, monasticism started to become slightly problematic because it was not exactly clear how the bishops and monks were to interact.¹¹⁶

Pachomius (292-348) pioneered the second development of monasticism; coenobitic. He realized not everyone could live the life of an eremitic monk. The solitary

¹¹² Ibid., 45.

¹¹³ Ibid., 39-40.

¹¹⁴ Peter Brown, "Late Antiquity," 288.

¹¹⁵ David Brakke, "The East (2): "Egypt and Palestine," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, ed. by Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 353.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 352.

life, even on the outskirts of towns, was too difficult for some.¹¹⁷ If monks were to live in groups they needed to develop a more sustainable way of life.¹¹⁸ Pachomius slowly transitioned monasticism in Egypt from eremitic to coenobitic by gathering solitary monks to live in the same region. As the number of monks increased, Pachomius gave the communities more structure. He established the first monastic *Rule* or guidelines. He directed regular times for work, meals, and prayer. They built large buildings that had a church, kitchen, bakery, dining hall, assembly hall, and infirmary.¹¹⁹ He required monks to renounce family, property, marriage, career, and to replace them with ascetic practices such as fasting, vigils, poverty, celibacy, and a life of manual labor.¹²⁰

Pachomius knew that if monasticism was going to survive, there had to be several changes made. He started to set up monasteries in populated areas. Some settled right along the Nile and became thriving communities. Some even became sailor-monks that would go up and down the Nile engaging in commerce and trade.¹²¹ The monks had renounced property, but economically they interacted with the society around them. While the monks technically did not own anything, the monasteries themselves became very wealthy. They now could afford to pay taxes so they did not have to live in the desert.¹²² The manual labor that monks performed was then channeled toward a specific good or product that could then be traded for food. Not only were they financially better off, but also it was safer to live in a communal monastery than in the desert.¹²³

¹¹⁷ Daniel Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks*, 36.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹¹⁹ Wilken, Robert Louis. *The First Thousand Years*, 102.

¹²⁰ William Harmless, "Monasticism," 493.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 507.

¹²² Marilyn Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism: From the desert Fathers to the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 32.

¹²³ Daniel Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks*, 37.

It should not come as a surprise that in the long run, coenobiticism became the preeminent form of monasticism. Not only did Pachomius win the endorsement of Basil, a bishop covered later, but it also cultivated an environment of social harmony and economic stability.¹²⁴ ¹²⁵ The culture of Egypt itself was viewed by outsiders as industrious and self-sufficient.¹²⁶ That was the culture the monks came from and it carried over into their practice.

As the popularity and economic success of monasticism started to gain the attention of church leaders, they were both interested and suspicious. The relationship between the monastery and village was not clearly defined and neither was the relationship of the ascetic ideals and the broader Christian community.¹²⁷ The wider church did not know if monasticism was going to be a friend or foe. Pachomius, not wanting to stir up trouble, honored bishops and told his monks to respect their authority. However, he remained resolutely against the ordaining of monks.¹²⁸

Syria: Abraham and Symeon

From early on asceticism played a vital role in the faith communities of Syrian Christianity. Even the Christian commoners engaged in varying degrees of ascetic practices.¹²⁹ Asceticism was built more into their culture because it was viewed as a directive from the Apostles. Judas Thomas was understood to be the brother of Jesus and believed to have been the one that converted the lands east of Jerusalem to Christianity.

¹²⁴ Athanasius *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, 15.

¹²⁵ Daniel Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks*, 43.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹²⁷ Andrea Sterk, *Renouncing the World Yet Leading the Church: The Monk-Bishop in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 15.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹²⁹ Daniel Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks*, 55.

This included Syria, Persia, and even India.¹³⁰ The Acts of Thomas, which mostly likely has a Syrian origin as well, was accepted as scripture at the time. In this narrative, Thomas never builds a place to live but is a wanderer and anything that he gains he gives to the poor. He is also constantly referred to as a stranger. The narrative conveys the ascetic ideals of the Syrian Christians that produced it.¹³¹ It appears to have been written around the same time as the Syrian theologian Tatian, who instructed Christians to live a life of abstinence and self-denial.¹³²

The environmental conditions in Syria were fairly different than those in Egypt. Wandering, solitary monks were actually far better off in the deserts of Syria. It did not rain frequently, but more often than it did in Egypt. Here one could find wild nuts, thistles, asphodel roots, and in some areas even fruits and vegetables.¹³³ There was enough food to support a hermit year round, but in order to live off of the land it required one to stay on the move.¹³⁴ The geography of Syria also allowed solitary monastic practice to take a different form. There were many mountains and steppes that were in large part uninhabited. The climate was mild and one did not have to venture far to get to a mountain and be physically separated from the nearby towns.¹³⁵ This allowed them to be distinct from the world, but also meant that Syrian monks had more interaction and a greater influence on society as a whole because one did not have to travel into the remote desert to get council from a monk.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 57.

¹³¹ Ibid., 58.

¹³² Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity*, 202.

¹³³ Daniel Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks*, 52.

¹³⁴ Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man," 83.

¹³⁵ Andrea Sterk, *Renouncing the World Yet Leading the Church*, 23.

In the beginning, Syrian monks were not organized. Many lived in villages and others in small informal groups. Along with living a fairly normal life, they also started to administer to the needs of the church community.¹³⁶ Unemployment in Syria was constant problem. From November to April many worked harvesting olives, but after the harvest was over there was not as much work to do. Often people would become craftsmen making products to use as barter and then roam from town to town to engage in trade. Wandering monks would often join with groups like these.¹³⁷

Ascetic monks were considered holy men. Since they were not positioned at the center of a village, but usually at the edge, they were trusted to be impartial towards the events within the community. At some point people started to use them for arbitration purposes. If there was a dispute that could not be resolved, people could appeal to the military soldiers who were stationed nearby, but this often could be costly and time consuming. Monks were easier to access and performed arbitration faster. As more and more monks started to fill these roles, people started using the military less and less. Eventually the role of monks expanded to mediating disputed with other villages, organizing taxation demands, handling lawsuits, and distributing the water supply.¹³⁸

Peter Brown in his article, 'The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity' wonders how people of extreme practices rose to political power. They were people who had removed themselves from society and become a stranger, like Thomas. But paradoxically, in removing themselves from patronage of society, they become the ultimate patron. Seen as pure, holy, and untainted from the world, people went to them to mediate disputes such as law suites, debt, taxes, and feuds. They were a form of arbitration and were arbiters of the holy.¹³⁹

¹³⁶ Ibid., 21.

¹³⁷ Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man," 86.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 85-87.

¹³⁹ William Harmless, "Monasticism," 508-509.

An example of this in Theodoret's *A History of the Monks in Syria* is a monk named Abraham.¹⁴⁰ Abraham went to visit a town in Lebanon but at first does not reveal that he is a monk. He assumes the role of a nut trader and rents a house in the village. He eventually starts singing psalms and reciting the liturgy. At first the village try to ignore him. When they could no longer tolerate his reciting, they go to banish him from the village. At this same time tax collectors showed up and demanded a payment beyond what the villagers could pay. Abraham immediately negotiated with the tax collectors to be lenient, and also arranged for a loan to buy extra time for the village to pay. The villagers seeing his knowledge of the workings of the world, instead of trying to banish him, they asked him to stay and to be their patron. Abraham agreed to stay if they built a church.¹⁴¹ He stayed in the village and along with being a church leader, he also became the one people visited to settle legal disputes.¹⁴² As monks' responsibilities grew, eventually they became a mediator for the village to the rest of the world.

But by the mid-fourth century, Syrian monasticism started to change when Egyptian ideals started to make its way into their culture. Syria already had an ascetic tradition in place, but did not yet have the notion of a complete withdrawal from society to solitary isolation.¹⁴³ This started competitiveness between the Egypt and Syria. Syrians notions of poverty were already much more extreme than other regions. For them poverty included social poverty; it was an emptying of the self. If one was to be "poor" they had to remove all indications of wealth and power. They not only refused to participate in

¹⁴⁰ Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man," 86.

¹⁴¹ Theodoret, *A History of the Monks of Syria*, trans. R. M. Price (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1985), 120-121.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 123

¹⁴³ Claudia Rapp, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity*, 114.

society, they would mock it. They were successors of the Cynics.¹⁴⁴ Some even rejected social behavioral norms and pretended to be mentally ill.¹⁴⁵ These already extreme notions of poverty coupled with monks consciously trying to out do those in Egypt resulted in Syria producing some of the strangest, yet most memorable monks in Christian history. With an environment far more forgiving, monks could engage in very outlandish practices.¹⁴⁶

Some Syrian monks grazed on grass, lived chained to rocks, others imprisoned themselves in caves, and voluntarily lived in filth.¹⁴⁷ The most famous monks were the stylites, or pillar-dwellers. They built stone columns and lived in a wicker basket placed on top.¹⁴⁸ Their eclectic practices got them much publicity.¹⁴⁹ In Egypt, Antony when stressing moderation in all things, he even stressed moderation in ascetic practices.¹⁵⁰ In Syria there existed no such exhortation. The more peculiar a monk's behavior was, the more they were revered and esteemed.¹⁵¹

Once the duties of the monks were established by the practices of the wandering ascetics, many monks no longer had to seek people out; people sought them. The service the monks provided now had legitimacy. This paved the way for the stationary monks. As previously stated the deserts of Syria were not hostile, but one had to stay on the move. That is unless people bring you food. Now that a monk's societal role was more clearly defined, people started to seek out the most holy ascetics. This usually coincided with the most extreme ascetics.

¹⁴⁴ Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, 266.

¹⁴⁵ Averil Cameron, *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 73.

¹⁴⁶ Daniel Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks*, 53.

¹⁴⁷ William Harmless, "Monasticism," 497.

¹⁴⁸ MacCulloch, Diarmaid. *Christianity*, 206-207.

¹⁴⁹ William Harmless, "Monasticism," 507.

¹⁵⁰ Daniel Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks*, 20,26.

¹⁵¹ Robert Louis Wilken, *The First Thousand Years*, 103.

Symeon the stylite (c. 390-459) was born into a Christian family. He joined a monastery near Antioch for ten years, but Symeon eventually left to go live on top of a hill for three years.¹⁵² He then built a small pillar to live on so he could reside “between heaven and earth,” which was symbolic of him being a mediator between God and man.¹⁵³ His pillar was eventually built taller and taller, reaching more than 20 feet.¹⁵⁴ Symeon became extremely popular and his pillar became a pilgrimage site. Eventually there were four churches built around him so people could come and hear him preach and ask for healings.¹⁵⁵ Symeon also performed the same duties as a patron except people had to go to him.¹⁵⁶ He served as an intercessor in legal and political disputes. Symeon lived on top of the pillar for a total of 40 years.¹⁵⁷ As respect and popularity for monks grew, just like in Egypt, it implicitly challenged the authority of the church and local bishops.¹⁵⁸

Asia Minor: Eustathius and Basil

Asia Minor had much colder winters than both Egypt and Syria, making solitary living much more difficult given Anatolia’s climate.¹⁵⁹ Unlike most of the monks that we have seen so far, the majority of monks in Asia Minor lived in much greater conjunction to nearby communities. The harshness of winter made the eremitic life unrealistic. Furthermore, living away from a city even in a coenobitic community was not really an option. Asia Minor was the first area where monasticism was mainly an urban occurrence.

¹⁵² Theodoret. *A History of the Monks of Syria*, 164.

¹⁵³ William Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 426.

¹⁵⁴ Robert Louis Wilken, *The First Thousand Years*, 103.

¹⁵⁵ Theodoret. *A History of the Monks of Syria*, 165-167.

¹⁵⁶ Peter Brown, “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man,” 90.

¹⁵⁷ William Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 426.

¹⁵⁸ Andrea Sterk, *Renouncing the World Yet Leading the Church*, 24.

¹⁵⁹ MacCulloch, Diarmaid. *Christianity*, 209.

The point of reference for people in Asia Minor was the city. Andrea Sterk said, "If in Athanasius's famous description of Egyptian monasticism the desert became a city, one might well affirm the for many ascetics of Asia Minor the city became their desert."¹⁶⁰ This meant the monks inhabited the same space as the church bishops from its inception so they were not as free to develop from outside pressures. Monasticism, being the weaker power, could not be as anti-church as other monastic movements had been. It had to develop in such a manner to try and be in harmony with the church. This was not always successful and resulted in ongoing conflicts between the monks and bishops.¹⁶¹

Eustathius of Sebaste (c. 300- c. 377) played a foundational role in establishing monasticism in Asia Minor. He was born in Pontus, his father was the bishop of Sebaste, and by 325 he was a member of the clergy. With a growing disdain for the worldly influences in the church he became an ascetic philosopher. His father expelled him from the church so he subsequently traveled to Egypt, Antioch, Caesarea, and Constantinople. In Antioch he attempted to join the clergy but was not allowed. However, when he went to Caesarea he was ordained a bishop. Eventually he returned to Pontus and started organizing ascetic groups.¹⁶² Because of the nature of his teachings and practices, he stirred up much controversy. In the year 340, a synod in Neocaesarea excommunicated Eustathius.¹⁶³ He was made a bishop again by 357 in Sebaste, but the Council of Grangra excommunicated Eustathius again shortly thereafter. The fact that he had been expelled

¹⁶⁰ Andrea Sterk, *Renouncing the World Yet Leading the Church*, 25.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 25-26.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 27-28.

¹⁶³ William Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 430.

from the church once and excommunicated twice shows the growing tensions and fear the church had towards monasticism.¹⁶⁴

The Council of Grangra directly condemned many of the teachings and practices of Eustathian ascetics. Eustathius and his followers condemned marriage and advocated for strict virginity, they encouraged children to leave their parents, wives to leave their husbands, and slaves to rise up against their masters to pursue ascetic practices. Eustathian monks taught those that did not forsake everything had no hope of salvation. They avoided most church services and Christian feasts, taught that one should not take the Eucharist that had been blessed by married priest, and they held their own private services without the church's approval.¹⁶⁵ They were a mix of asceticism and social protest. They sought a radical equality that broke down the barriers between male and female, and slave and masters.¹⁶⁶

“The canons of Gangra suggest that Eustathian ascetics were considered suspect not because they had fled the world but rather because they had sought to pursue their ascetic location *within* the world and in the church. Their presence as a kind of countercultural community within the urban milieu would naturally stand as a challenge to the status quo.”¹⁶⁷ Many bishops feared that they would attempt to enforce their strict ascetic practices on everyone and thought that Eustathians posed a challenge to their spiritual authority.

Basil of Caesarea (329-379) was greatly influenced by Eustathius but sought not to protest the church, but to harmonize the church with asceticism. Basil was born into a

¹⁶⁴ Andrea Sterk, *Renouncing the World Yet Leading the Church*, 27-28.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

¹⁶⁶ William Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 430.

¹⁶⁷ Andrea Sterk, *Renouncing the World Yet Leading the Church*, 30.

wealthy family from Cappadocia. He started school in Caesarea, and then went to Constantinople, and finally Athens.¹⁶⁸ After Basil finished his university studies, he went back to Caesarea to teach rhetoric. He did not teach for long because he felt his current course of action was vain and self-serving. Like Antony, Basil was also moved by the imperative to sell all one had and give to the poor. Basil sold a portion of his inheritance to give it to the poor and then that he traveled to monastic communities in many different countries.¹⁶⁹

He toured monastic sites in Egypt, Syria, Mesopotamia, and Palestine.¹⁷⁰ He was very influenced by monasticism and sought to combine the power of asceticism and monasticism with the wider church. There were a variety of monastic movements in Asia Minor, but they were usually competitors or critics of the institutional church.¹⁷¹ Even though Basil was greatly influenced by Eustathius he would not become one of his followers.¹⁷² He started his own monastery in Pontus in 357 and was later ordained a deacon and then a Bishop in 370.¹⁷³

Basil stated one should live an ascetic life because the more one withdraws from society, they closer that they draw to God.¹⁷⁴ Basil's sister Macrina, who was also a monk, had a great influence on him.¹⁷⁵ She established a monastery for women that took care of orphan girls.¹⁷⁶ Seeing the social good that her monastery did, Basil shifted away from a solitary monasticism towards society, and he eventually even became critical of

¹⁶⁸ Marilyn Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism*, 35.

¹⁶⁹ Basil, *On Social Justice*, trans. C. Paul Schroeder (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1981), 18-19.

¹⁷⁰ Marilyn Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism*. 35.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁷² William Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 430.

¹⁷³ William Harmless, "Monasticism," 496.

¹⁷⁴ Robert Louis Wilken, *The First Thousand Years*, 104.

¹⁷⁵ William Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 431.

¹⁷⁶ Basil, *On Social Justice*, 19.

hermits.¹⁷⁷ Basil's career also coincided with epidemic disease and a food stress that lasted several years; something he always remembered as severe. When reading Jesus's injunction, "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me."¹⁷⁸ He interpreted the command from Jesus, was not that one should sell all they had for the sake of poverty; one should sell all they had to benefit those in poverty.¹⁷⁹ Monks up until that point had done a great job living in poverty, but their vows of poverty had done little to benefit the poor.

Basil, being greatly concerned with social justice, imagined a new form of monasticism. He saw an unused potential use for monasticism. He did not want coenobitic monasteries in the desert and rural areas, but instead wanted to move them from the village outskirts into the middle of cities.¹⁸⁰ This combined the ideals of monastic practice with serving the greater needs of the city. As Pachomian monks had already started to do, Basil required monks to develop a trade. Being that monks had renounced wealth and taken vows of poverty, all the income earned from their work was to be used to assist the poor and needy.¹⁸¹ It was to be just as Jesus said in the Book of Matthew:

For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'¹⁸²

¹⁷⁷ Robert Louis Wilken, *The First Thousand Years*, 105.

¹⁷⁸ Matthew 19:21

¹⁷⁹ Marilyn Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism*, 37.

¹⁸⁰ Basil, *On Social Justice*, 36.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸² Matthew 25:35-40

Basil described love your neighbor as the mother of all commandments.¹⁸³ He was foundational in institutionalizing Christian charity. He instructed monks that along with practicing asceticism, they needed to practice service. As he started building monasteries in cities he also started the building of soup kitchens, hospices, and hospitals next to, or in conjunction with, monasteries. It was here where the hungry were fed and the sick cared for.¹⁸⁴

Along with this new role for monks, they still held on to many of their previous duties, continuing to act as patrons, arbiters, and a legal mediators like the Syrian monks.¹⁸⁵ For example, during food shortages Basil often got the local elites to release grain from their storage and in 372 Basil petitioned the state to reduce taxation on certain mining villages.¹⁸⁶ He also solicited aid for the poor, tax exemption for hospices, clergy, and monks, and lower taxes on those in poverty.¹⁸⁷

One of the most influential ideas that Basil argued for was that individuals that hold church offices should practice ascetic ideals. Basil encouraged monks to seek offices in the church and he started promoting the idea of a monk-bishop.¹⁸⁸ He also started giving monks responsibilities that would make them ideal candidates for church office. Basil was rather successful with this goal. A direct result of Basil was that in Asia Minor there was an increasing amount of bishops who were themselves monks.¹⁸⁹ Because of Basil, monasticism started to embed itself within the wider church's structure.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸³ Basil, *On Social Justice*, 24.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁸⁵ Andrea Sterk, *Renouncing the World Yet Leading the Church*, 67.

¹⁸⁶ Peter Brown, *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire*, 57.

¹⁸⁷ Andrea Sterk, *Renouncing the World Yet Leading the Church*, 67-68.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 91-92.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.

IV – Development of Monasticism in the West

Gaul: Martin and Cassian

By the 5th century, the Roman Empire had weakened immensely. As the presence of Roman rule in Gaul started to decrease, so the role for the Christian church in the public sphere started to increase.¹⁹¹ Because of this role reversal the amount of aristocrats entering the clergy in Gaul surged in during the 5th century.¹⁹² Monasticism was a way that people could increase their social standing.¹⁹³ One of the people who did this was a man named Hilary. Hilary, who would later serve as a mentor for Martin of Tours, was brought up in a wealthy pagan family who provided him with a good education. Through his studies, Hilary eventually converted to Christianity. He became so well renowned that he was unanimously chosen to be the bishop of the city Poitiers.

Martin of Tours (316-397) was born in Savaria, but moved shortly after because his father who served in the Roman military and was reassigned to Italy. His parents were devout pagans and named Martin after the Roman god Mars.¹⁹⁴ Disobeying his parents, Martin started attending a Christian church at a young age. He sought out the renowned bishop Hilary and became a catechumen. Not long after Hilary was exiled during an Arian controversy.¹⁹⁵ However, since Martin was the son of an officer he was required to join the military when he was fifteen. It is not known exactly how long Martin remained in the military, but after leaving he became an anchorite and lived in a cell near Milan.

¹⁹¹ Jill Harries, "Christianity and the City in Late Roman Gaul," in *The City in Late Antiquity*, ed. John Rich (New York: Routledge, 1992), 82.

¹⁹² Mark Humphries, "The West (1): Italy, Gaul, and Spain," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, ed. Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 293.

¹⁹³ Daniel Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks*, 16.

¹⁹⁴ Christopher Donaldson, *Martin of Tours*, 12.

¹⁹⁵ Philip Rousseau, *Ascetics, Authority, and the Church: In the Age of Jerome and Cassian* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 149.

During this same time, the exiled Hilary spent time in Asia Minor learning about the monastic practices that had developed there.

Eventually Hilary received permission from the Emperor to return to Pointers where he promptly founded an ascetic group.¹⁹⁶ As Hilary's reputation grew Martin heard that he was no longer banished and left Milan for Gaul so Hilary could be his mentor.¹⁹⁷ Eventually Martin founded a monastery just outside of Pointers, which was the first monastery in Gaul.¹⁹⁸ Martin's own reputation started to grow and after the death of the bishop in Tours, a city about 60 miles south of Poitiers, Martin was selected to secede him. Martin was very reluctant to become a bishop but accepted the calling.¹⁹⁹ This made him the first western monk-bishop.²⁰⁰ However he did not abandon his ascetic roots and he continued to live the life of a monk.²⁰¹ For the first few months Martin lived in the *secretarium*, or bishop's cell, of the church.²⁰²

After being made bishop, Martin ordered the destruction of pagan temples and the building Christian churches over them.²⁰³ Many pagans were so moved by the charisma and teachings of Martin that some even willingly participated in the destruction of their own temples.²⁰⁴ Even after becoming a bishop, Martin continued to found and instruct monasteries. Though the monasticism that first formed in the west was unlike the east. The area surrounding Tours, and much of Gaul, was abundant in natural resources. It had

¹⁹⁶ C.H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism: Forms of Religious Life in Western Europe in the Middle Ages* (New York: Person Education Limited, 2001), 12.

¹⁹⁷ Marilyn Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism*, 62.

¹⁹⁸ Sharon Farmer, *Communities of Saint Martin: Legend and Ritual in Medieval Tours* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 14.

¹⁹⁹ Philip Rousseau, *Ascetics, Authority, and the Church*, 148.

²⁰⁰ Marilyn Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism*, 62.

²⁰¹ C.H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, 12.

²⁰² Christopher Donaldson, *Martin of Tours*, 77.

²⁰³ Sharon Farmer, *Communities of Saint Martin*, 16.

²⁰⁴ Philip Rousseau, *Ascetics, Authority, and the Church*, 154.

fertile soil, vine-covered hills, rivers, and forests.²⁰⁵ The people in Gaul were fairly wealthy so Martin's monks did not need to work because they could live entirely off of donations. The life of ease that Martin's monks lived certainly did not sit well with many people. One monk who purposely sought to reform Martin's monasticism was John Cassian.

John Cassian (c. 360-c. 435) was born to a wealthy family and received a quality education.²⁰⁶ When he was about 20 years old he left home to become a monk in Bethlehem.²⁰⁷ Upon arrival he trained with and eventually joined a coenobitic monastery. While living there he shared a cell with a monk that had previously lived in Egypt.²⁰⁸ After learning more about Egyptian monks Cassian desired to go visit them. He got permission to leave Bethlehem after only a few years to go and tour the Egyptian monasteries.²⁰⁹ While he was there he spent time with both coenobitic and anchoritic monks. Cassian eventually joined an Origenist monastic community.²¹⁰

Theophilus, the Coptic Pope of Alexandria, condemned Origenism and Cassian left shortly thereafter. The total time Cassian spent in Egypt was about 15 years.²¹¹ He had brief stints in Constantinople and Rome where he experienced political unrest and continual Origenist controversies. Eventually he made his way to Gaul. He chose to settle in Massilia, modern day Marseilles. Massilia was port city and a center of trading for the eastern Mediterranean.²¹² Massilia was fairly stable because it was far enough south that

²⁰⁵ Sharon Farmer, *Communities of Saint Martin*, 13.

²⁰⁶ Columba Stewart, *Cassian the Monk* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 4.

²⁰⁷ Marilyn Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism*, 73.

²⁰⁸ Columba Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 6-7.

²⁰⁹ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity*, 315.

²¹⁰ Columba Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 8-10.

²¹¹ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity*, 315.

²¹² Columba Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 11-15.

invasion by barbarians was not a constant threat. This political and economic stability allowed the church to expand its influence and spread monasticism.²¹³

The bishop of Massilia was friendly towards monasticism.²¹⁴ But Cassian was very dissatisfied with the monks that were already there. Martin's influence was so vast that his order reached Massilia that is some 500 miles southeast of Tours. Cassian viewed the monks as unorganized and undisciplined. The monks had many possessions, and what made it worse was that they were not even self-sustaining. They did no manual labor since they relied on financial support. The only work that was done was manuscript copying, and many didn't even do that.²¹⁵ Cassian sought to improve the laziness of the monks that followed Martin.²¹⁶ Like Pachomius, Cassian demanded that monks support themselves through work.²¹⁷

"Cassian... wanted to give human beings a sense of responsibility for their progress toward God, and Augustine's picture stranded helplessly in heir 'lump of lostness' threatened this possibility."²¹⁸ Being an Origenist, Cassian was optimistic about humans overcoming sin to develop a spiritual relationship with God.²¹⁹ Seeing the worldly influence on monasticism in the Gaul, Cassian sought to bring the ideals of Egypt to the west. Since the people were financially better off in the west, being an ascetic was more difficult because there was a greater ability for indulgence. Given these circumstances, Cassian viewed coenobitic monasticism as necessary so there would be

²¹³ Jill Harries, "Christianity and the City in Late Roman Gaul," 83.

²¹⁴ Marilyn Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism*, 73.

²¹⁵ Columba Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 17.

²¹⁶ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity*, 315.

²¹⁷ Marilyn Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism*, 62.

²¹⁸ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity*, 316.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 315.

social pressure to keep the monks pure.²²⁰ Cassian founded two monasteries in Massilia; one male and the other female. He originally thought that being an anchorite was the highest form of the Christian ideal, so he founded coenobitic communities to prepare monks for eremitism.²²¹ Realizing that even after preparation many cannot live as a hermit, Cassian focused solely on coenobitic monasticism.

Cassian also wanted to make an institutional system that could continue to perpetuate itself beyond its founder. He wrote *Institutes* and *Conferences* as instructions for communal living.²²² He started to move authority in monasticism from the charismatic founder to the institution, a move that the wider church had already done.²²³ Furthermore, monks needed to be involved with and directly serve the community in which they resided. This served the dual purpose of maintaining asceticism through service and social pressure since the community would now place demands on the monks.²²⁴

Italy: Chalcedon and Benedict

The popularity of monks, like the east, continued to grow in the west. Monks were seen as fulfilling the proper ideal of Christianity, which made them perfect candidates for clergy. Basil's idea of the bishop-monk started to take hold in the west. The new bishop-monks often valued asceticism practice over the institution of the church.²²⁵ This posed a further challenge to the church. Since monasteries operated

²²⁰ Philip Rousseau, *Ascetics, Authority, and the Church*, 186.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 177.

²²² Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity*, 317.

²²³ Philip Rousseau, *Ascetics, Authority, and the Church*, 189-194.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 197-199.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 210-216.

independent of the church, they had to support themselves.²²⁶ However, this did not have much impact on the growth and influence of monasticism. Monasteries started accumulating a vast amount of material wealth because monk-bishops were actually much better at collecting donations because of their vows of poverty.²²⁷ They had renounced wealth so their hands were metaphorically clean. Philanthropists had a greater trust in monk-bishops over the institutional bishops.²²⁸

The success of monasteries made the Church of Rome very nervous. Monasticism was a serious competitor for religious donations. Rome tried to ensure that money and loyalty would flow directly to them. In 370, Pope Damasus I got a decree from Emperor Valentinian I that monks were not to be permitted to solicit donations. This was to prevent anyone from forming his or her own ventures. Money was to be donated directly to the bishop to become part of the church's wealth. However, this decree did not do much to suppress the monasteries and in many places local churches still struggled to continue if there was a local monastery nearby.²²⁹ In 380 it was taken one step further. Emperor Theodosius I issued the Edict of Thessalonica that made Nicene Christianity the only authorized religion in the Empire. Everyone was ordered to obey any profess faith in the bishops of Rome and Alexandria.²³⁰

By the 5th century, bishops of Rome were asserting authority based on apostolic succession.²³¹ But as a result of Cassian, in Gaul the power and prestige of monks were on the rise. In 428, Pope Celestine condemned "the brotherhood of wanderers and

²²⁶ Robert Louis Wilken, *The First Thousand Years*, 107.

²²⁷ Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, 299.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 424.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 280-281.

²³⁰ Tony Honoré, *Law in the Crisis of Empire 379-455 AD: The Theodosian Dynasty and Its Quaestors* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 5.

²³¹ Mark Humphries, "The West (1): Italy, Gaul, and Spain," 286.

outsiders.”²³² The ascetic communities now garnered wealth and support that rivaled the church. Their legitimacy as leaders came from the ascetic life that they lived, not the office they held. “By its very nature it existed as a critique of the wealth, power, and enmeshment in the world of the fourth-century bishops; consequently, bishops worked in a variety of ways to incorporate ascetic power.”²³³

Even though the monks who were loyal to the institutional church were a great asset, others wielded a disruptive influence. In 426 there were violent attacks between Christian groups. Those deemed heretical were both attacked and led attacks against other rival groups. The clergy from many Gallic cities flooded Rome with anti-monastic petitions.²³⁴ These building tensions between Christian groups led to the Council of Chalcedon in 451.²³⁵ While there was far more discussed and decided at this council than monasticism, one ruling was that all monasticism was now officially under the ruling of the church.²³⁶ Monasteries were now brought under the legal authority of the local bishop. Monks were strictly forbidden from colluding against the standing bishop and they could no longer establish monasteries without the consent of the bishop.²³⁷

After a rough transitional period, the Council of Chalcedon was actually successful. By the 6th century monasticism was more institutionalized than it had ever been. It was more diverse having gone through a period of social unrest and change, but it was also able to settle because it was no longer in constant competition with the wider

²³² Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, 426.

²³³ Karen Jo Torjesen, “Clergy and Laity,” 396.

²³⁴ Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, 425.

²³⁵ Averil Cameron, *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity*, 64.

²³⁶ Marilyn Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism*, 111.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 98.

church.²³⁸ Having been so well incorporated into the church, monasteries were located throughout the entire Italian peninsula and they also provided the liturgical services at all the major churches of Rome.²³⁹

Benedict of Nursia (c. 480 – c. 546) was a monk that grew up in the newly merged culture of monasticism and the Orthodox Church. He wrote what became known as *The Rule of St. Benedict* that served as the foundation of Western monasticism for over 1500 years.²⁴⁰ In spite of his influence, his life is somewhat of a historical enigma.²⁴¹ The only source about his life is a biography by Pope Gregory the Great that was written roughly 45 years after Benedict's death.²⁴² Benedict was born in the Italian province of Nursia, and while pursuing an education, Benedict became disenchanted with the immorality of many people he went to school with. He did not see his education making people better. He left school and traveled to a deserted area about 20 miles from Nursia, where he then lived in a cave for the next three years. There was a nearby monastery that provided him with food and teachings about the ascetic life. Eventually Benedict started gaining a following of his own and had a coenobitic monastery built on the hilltop Monte Cassino.²⁴³ There is not a lot more known about Benedict, which is interesting because his influence is possibly greater than any other monk.

As stated earlier, Benedict's influence was not so much centered on his life, but rather is in the rules that he established for the monastic disciple. *The Rule of St. Benedict* contains spiritual doctrines and practical advice for daily life. Many parts of Benedict's

²³⁸ Ibid., 97.

²³⁹ Ibid., 111.

²⁴⁰ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity*, 317.

²⁴¹ Marilyn Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism*, 132.

²⁴² Lawrence, C.H. *Medieval Monasticism*, 18-19.

²⁴³ Ibid., 20.

Rule was influenced by, and often a direct expansion of, Cassian's *Institutes*.²⁴⁴ It states how a monastery should be organized, the Abbott's relation to the other monks, monasteries relation to the world, and the necessary virtues of humility, obedience, and restraint of speech.²⁴⁵ Benedict wanted all monasteries to support themselves.

Benedict, unlike Cassian and most other monks that have been covered, was not an Origenist. He was greatly influenced by the competing theology of Augustine.²⁴⁶ Augustine thought most people were incapable of living an ascetic life, but even if they could it would not solve the problem of sin because humans are in a fallen sinful state and will remain that way regardless of what they do. However, Augustine was not against asceticism, he was just not optimistic about people abilities to live it. Many of Augustine's notions are influence by Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians when he said, "But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion."²⁴⁷ Also since Augustine viewed the body as having a diving origin he did not draw as hard of line when it came to bodily pleasures. Sex, food, and sleep could be permitted under the right circumstance if enjoyed in moderation. Nevertheless, he did state this with the qualification that it is better to be without them. It was better to be a monk, but if one could not, it was better to be a non-ascetic Christian than to burn.²⁴⁸

Monasticism informed by this notion could be part of the mainstream church because it made a place for both ascetics and commoners. It did not try and force everyone to live an unobtainable ideal. So while seeking to become perfected through

²⁴⁴ Columba Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 25.

²⁴⁵ Benedict, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, ed. Timothy Fry (New York: Vintage, 1998).

²⁴⁶ Jean Besse, "Rule of Saint Augustine," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 2 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1907) Accessed 4 May 2014 <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02079b.htm>>.

²⁴⁷ 1 Corinthians 7:9

²⁴⁸ Willemien Otten, "Augustine on Marriage, Monasticism, and the Community of the Church," *Theological Studies*, vol. 59 (1998), 394.

ascetic practices is a noble and worthwhile goal, given the fallen state of man, the monk is no closer to perfection than the commoner.²⁴⁹ Therefore monks that adopted this position did not condemn the average person for failing to live the ascetic life like Eustathius and his monks.

V – Impact of Monasticism

We have seen why the church finally decided to accept monasticism, but the question is why did monasticism accept the church? How did the Council of Chalcedon effectively end a conflict that had been going on for over 300 years by one party claiming dominion over the other? It seems more likely that this would have caused a greater conflict than anything else. But one needs to understand what was going on in the Empire at the time. This happened at a time of great economic instability, the Empire was slowly falling apart, and there was an increasing frequency of Barbarian raids. Romans defined the Barbarians as anyone who did not live within the empire.²⁵⁰ It was only 25 years after the Council of Chalcedon that the Roman Empire in the west fell.

There are many competing views about what exactly caused the fall of the Roman Empire. Some have argued that it was their flawed economic policies that were discussed earlier. Others have argued that the way Christianity changed the culture of society bankrupted the Empire from within; the changing practice of social elites donating to the church instead of the state. And others have argued that it was the invading Barbarian tribes that led to Rome's fall. But what cannot be disputed is that the Roman Empire actually fell. The last Roman Emperor in the west was forced to abdicate in 476.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 402-404.

²⁵⁰ Michael Maas, "Barbarians: Problems and Approaches." in *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, ed. Scott Fitzgerald Johnson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 61.

In the face this societal unrest monasticism continued to grow. By the year 600 there were over 200 monasteries in Gaul and about 100 in Italy.²⁵¹ Monasticism did not have the promise of a luxurious life, but it provided a stable life that many desired after the social and economic conflicts surrounding the fall of the Roman Empire.²⁵² Benedict's *Rule* had such a wide influence because it was both strict, yet flexible enough that it could be adapted to local circumstances.²⁵³ If there were not many resources to go around, it was often easier to just desire less.

But even before the fall of Rome, starting in the 4th century cities were increasingly dominated by the church; physically and politically. The most prominent buildings were church structures and the bishops were becoming community leaders.²⁵⁴ The church was already one of the most powerful influences and with the fall of the Empire, the church was only going to get stronger.²⁵⁵ All land that had been donated to monasteries was forever removed from the regular economy. Monastic land was usually never sold again so the monasteries grew progressively wealthier over time. Even though monks in principle were to live a life of self-denial and self-sacrifice, in practice monasteries often became places of great wealth.²⁵⁶ So when the Empire fell, Christianity was the single largest landowner in the west.²⁵⁷ The lack of a centralized power led to a decline in urban cities and more suburban cities. Many cities even disappeared because

²⁵¹ Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, 221.

²⁵² Mark A. Noll, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 83.

²⁵³ Mark A. Noll, *Turning Points*, 87.

²⁵⁴ Humphries, Mark. "The West (1): Italy, Gaul, and Spain," 291.

²⁵⁵ Wolfgang Liebeschuetz, "The End of the Ancient City," in *The City in Late Antiquity*, ed. John Rich (New York: Routledge, 1992), 19-23.

²⁵⁶ James J. O'Donnell, *The Ruin of the Roman Empire* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008), 309.

²⁵⁷ Eamon Duffy, *Saints & Sinners: A History of the Popes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 64.

there was not an infrastructure organized well enough to support large populations. Cities had to be more independent than ever before.²⁵⁸ Smaller kingdoms replaced imperial rule, this meant that there was less taxation but there was also less trade.²⁵⁹

Given the newly fractured civilization, if the church was going to emerge as the dominant power it needed to build a society that was going to be self-sustaining. When the Empire fell, there was a very organized religious system left intact. This was in large part due to monasticism. "Discipline, in fact, proved to be one of the chief attractions of Benedictine monasteries, in an age enmeshed in terrifying lawlessness which longed for the lost order of Roman society."²⁶⁰ Monasticism had labored on being sustainable almost since its inception. *The Rule of St. Benedict* provided an excellent structure to monasticism that started to extend to the rest of the church. Also since bishops' role in political life was also going to be ever increasing over the next several hundred years, monasteries proved to be excellent training grounds. Nearly every ecclesiastical authority would be chosen from monks. This is why monasticism accepted the decree of Chalcedon. It was this change in culture that made it so the monks did not resist too much the merge of monasticism and the church. By the 8th century virtually every bishop had once been a monk. This would permit the bishops to exercise some control over the monasteries, but not so much that they felt taken over because it was the monks who were chosen to be the bishops. Therefore, this gave monks and monasticism

²⁵⁸ Christina La Rocca, "Public Buildings and Urban Change in Northern Italy in the Early Mediaeval Period," in *The City in Late Antiquity*, ed. John Rich (New York: Routledge, 1992), 161-162.

²⁵⁹ Allen E. Jones, *Social Mobility in Late Antique Gaul: Strategies and Opportunities for the Non-Elite* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1.

²⁶⁰ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity*, 318.

institutionalized power and authority to be the driving force behind the institution, to steer the church towards asceticism.²⁶¹

To summarize what this paper covered; how monasticism, a practice that began as a countercultural movement that initially opposed the church, became the driving force behind the institution. Given economic uncertainty and persecution, many Christians chose to drop out of society and live in uninhabited lands. But this practice continued even after persecution stopped and the economy stabilized because it offered a solution to many of the internal problems Christians were facing. It became a popular and prevalent practice because it offered a reinterpretation of the *Parousia* and martyrdom. It served as a way to reject the world and the Church for becoming a widespread and inclusive organization. It also provided one with a structure to live the life of a Christian in peace and avoid sin. For this edifice to continue it had to become self-sustaining and consequently developed into a communal system. With this system in place, monks started taking on more roles because their asceticism made them trusted members of society. They became legal mediators and arbiters and eventually moved into the cities. Once in the city their roles increased further and they provided society with food, shelter, and healthcare. With a life devoted to serving, monks then became ideal candidates for members of the clergy. Given the services that they provided and their perceived virtue, they were able to better compete for monetary donations. Monasticism eventually gained wealth, power, and influence that rivaled the church. At this point monasticism posed a great threat to the institution. The church had to decide whether to accept monasticism or else risk losing to monasticism. Once the church accepted monasticism, the orthodox

²⁶¹ Arietta Papaconstantinou, "Egypt," 206.

position of Augustine started to overtake Origenist notions. Monks could now live in peace with the wider church because instead of condemning non-ascetics, they could be sympathetic. Monasticism no longer pushed back against the institution because the church incorporated monasticism in a manner that gave monks the power to steer the institution in the direction they wanted.

Monasticism continued to have a long lasting effect even after the 6th century. It was monks that led the missionary effort in Europe that turned the Christian barbarians into true believers.²⁶² Charlemagne, an admirer of monasticism, wanted all monasteries to follow the Benedictine order and decreed that monasteries should provide education.²⁶³ This led to formal schools being established at monasteries. These schools eventually turned into the modern university. Monastic rules also served as the foundation for canon law.

²⁶² Mark A. Noll, *Turning Points*, 91.

²⁶³ James Wiseman, "Benedictine Order," in *The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, ed. Richard P. McBrien (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 1995), 153.

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