

Topic 6: The Monastic Journey, Part 1

Overview: In both the East and the West, monastic communities began to emerge out of the solitary desert experience. The need for community began to emerge in order to augment the experience of silence, solitude, and withdrawal from life that occurred in the desert. In a sense, monasteries were destined to become “hot houses” of prayer. They are places that the monk, the monos (to be alone) sought in order to find God. One might measure the health of the Church in any given age by the vibrancy of the monasteries. These continue to be places of prayer and renewal for individuals within the context of community.

Monte Cassino: Climbing the Monastic Mountain

- The monastery was a light on the hilltop for the world.
- Monasteries and monastic spirituality are very important in the development of the Christian life. Monastic life includes all that came before it - its biblical foundations and desert spirituality - while also transcending its past.
- You can measure the health of the Church by the health of its monastic communities in any given time period.
- Monasteries were preservers and transmitters of Western civilization. They became centers for spiritual life.

Monastic Spirituality: There are significant parallels between monastic and desert spirituality.

- 1) Every one of us is called in some way to do what monks do and to emulate the rhythm and wisdom of monastic life.
- 2) How does monastic spirituality call us to go deeper?

Nuns and monks are people who have gone apart to be alone with God.

- 1) “Monk” comes from Monos: to be alone, to be apart.
 - 2) Monastic spirituality means living the solitary life in communion with others.
- Those who embrace monastic life want to live the Christian life to the fullest, with an emphasis on the hidden life of Jesus.
 - Monks and nuns seek union with the world through communion with God.
 - Going into the monastery is no guarantee of freedom from distraction. The solitude sought in monastic spirituality is a preparation for the solitude that leads us to truer and deeper relationships with God and other people.

Historical Development : Monastic spirituality is rooted in Judaism, specifically the Qumran community.

1) The Qumran community was a monastic community located around the Dead Sea.

2) It is speculated that John the Baptist was a part of this community. Whether or not this is true, both John the Baptist and Jesus were influenced by the monastic spirituality of the Qumran community.

3) They concentrated on the expectation of the Messiah.

- The early life of the Church was communal. The Monastic tradition preserved this way of life after the persecution of the early Church ceased.
- There was a transition from the ideal of martyrdom as prepared for by asceticism, to the ideal of asceticism as the equivalent to martyrdom.

1) The movement into the desert and monasteries signifies the post-martyrdom experience of the early Church.

2) Monks and nuns sought life separate from the world in order to bring themselves deeper into the needs and concerns of the world.

- The great monastic fathers wrote rules for the communal lives of their followers.

1) St. Benedict of Nursia's Rule became a paradigm for the West.

2) John Cassian brought Eastern monasticism to the West.

- Monastic spirituality continued to develop over the centuries. Reforms brought various changes to the monastic tradition.

1) Cistercian

2) Camaldolese

3) Carthusian

Most monastic communities came to the United States from other countries in the 19th century.

Monastic Spirituality in General: There are certain characteristics of monastic spirituality that can be found across all monastic communities, though there are different points of emphasis.

- 1) Opus Dei: the purpose of monastic life is to seek God. The work of God must be the center of their lives.
- 2) Monastic obedience: monks and nuns are taught to listen more deeply in the context of solitude and of community.
- 3) Monastic silence: monks and nuns have important rules and customs regarding silence in the monastery. Silence is practiced so that the human spirit can quiet down and listen to the voice of God.
- 4) Moderation: moderation in all things is key. St. Benedict avoided extremes and embraced human nature.
- 5) Lectio Divina: holy reading is highly emphasized in monastic spirituality.
- 6) Monastic peace: monks and nuns have been advocates of peace throughout history.

Review Questions

1. Write in your journal your struggles with solitude in your life. Think about the role of community in your life. What leads you to community, and what leads you to withdraw from community?
2. Do you think monastic life was an escape from the world? Why or why not?