

## **Topic 7: The Monastic Journey, Part 2**

**Overview:** In this segment, we will look to some of the impulses and movements towards monasticism that would climax in the rule of St. Benedict. The beginnings of the coenobitic (community) life were with Pachomius. He institutionalized monasticism, giving it a structure and form. The Life of Pachomius was a paradigm for the components of monastic spirituality. It was John Cassian who transmitted to the West the monastic practices of the East and the teachings of Eastern monks. The Conferences of John Cassian are still an important text for contemporary monastic life.

### **Pachomius and Cenobitism**

- Pachomius lived in the 4th century and served as a model for the coenobitic or community life.
- Pachomius transformed the monastic impulse by institutionalizing it. The abbot became the official head of the community.
  - 1) This structure gave rise to the cenobitic life, which supplanted more ancient forms of monastic life in the West.
  - 2) In the East, these two modes of monasticism continued to coexist.
- Pachomius was a convert, baptized in 307. At that time, he made a vow to live his life in service of others.
- He began to form a monastic community and imposed a more structured way of life under his leadership. Initially, Pachomius was unsuccessful. Eventually, a new group came and embraced the rule.

### **The Institutionalization of Monasticism**

- Pachomius's community marked the beginnings of structured religious life.
  - 1) The community was organized hierarchically.
  - 2) Pachomius set out definite rules and regulations.
  - 3) The formal promise of obedience set the monk apart from the rest of society.
    - (a) Obedience dominated their whole way of life and functioned as the basis for their asceticism.

- There are two major objections to the reduction of monasticism to organized cenobitic life:
  - 1) Especially in the East, monasticism was seen as spiritual liberty. A true monk did not conform to external ideals but to internal realities.
  - 2) It is necessary to leave everything to God alone. Solitude, rather than the common life, is essential.

**John Cassian:** John Cassian transmitted to the West the monastic practices of the East and the teaching of the Eastern monks. In the person of John Cassian, we see a synthesis of East and West, balancing humanness and ascetic ideals.

- He transmitted the best of the Egyptian monastic experience, enlightened by a balanced version of Evagrius and Origen.
- John Cassian presented a series of conferences that laid out the principles for monastic life.
  - 1) He based his vision based on three key concepts:
    - (a) Prayer
    - (b) Perfection
    - (c) Purity of Heart
  - 2) Asceticism is useless unless it bears fruit in charity. John Cassian emphasized the notion of purity of heart that leads to action. Purity of heart is the foundation and goal of monastic life.
  - 3) Cassian's most original contribution was the notion that asceticism leads to the perfection of charity. He held that charity was the best way to reach union with God.
  - 4) Cassian discussed a progression in monastic spirituality in the form of successive renunciations.
    - (a) The renunciation involved in asceticism
    - (b) The renunciation of vices
    - (c) The renunciation of everything that is not God

## **Lectio Divina**

- John Cassian stressed that contemplation should flow from the scripture.
- When we engage in the Lectio Divina:
  - 1) We become impregnated with the word of God.
  - 2) We begin to be enlightened.
  - 3) The soul becomes totally absorbed in God and God becomes absorbed in the human spirit.
  - 4) The divine presence is established within the human heart.

## **Review Questions**

1. Seeking purity of heart is the monastic ideal. In what ways is your heart divided? What are the weaknesses that you would like to bring to the Lord in your prayer?
2. Climbing a mountain or a ladder were common symbols for the spiritual life in the monastic literature. Think of a symbol that captures your experience of the spiritual journey.