Week Three:  
Monasticism in the Early Church

Discuss: What is the perfect Christian life? What would it look like? Can you be immersed in a non-Christian culture and stay pure? Should we withdraw from the world? Should we just live alone?

Changing Times

What are the heart issues of the 4th-5th-Centuries?

When we left off in our story, we discovered that when the Empire became aligned to Christianity, things began to change. Where once it was quite dangerous and risky to live as a Christian in the Empire, now it was quite advantageous. Where once, Christians met in small groups in people’s homes, now large ostentatious buildings, richly decorated, housing relics, were popping up housing great numbers, led by increasingly well-fed, and richly clothes bishops and priest.

Things had certainly changed for Christianity. Now, it could be financially beneficial for a person to be a Christian. And for some, all these developments were deeply troubling.

There grew an increasing cynicism towards the church and all that was happening, and with this a growing hunger for a life of devotion, that was more ascetic, and less preoccupied with the affairs of the world.

Now, when we look at monasticism, there are many important questions to consider:

- Was this an intensification of an asceticism that existed in the early church?
- Was this a revival?
- Was this a movement of social, political and religious reconstruction?

The key figure of monasticism was a fellow named...

St. Antony (251-356 AD)

The most famous person associated with monasticism is a fellow named Antony. Athanasius’ Life of Antony, when it was translated into Latin, had a huge impact on Western monasticism. He was from Egypt and was a forerunner to the desert monasticism that we will be exploring in class today.

Asceticism: “severe self-discipline and avoidance of all forms of indulgence, typically for religious reasons.”
“red martyrdom”
“white martyrdom”

Characteristics of Desert Monasticism

Early Monastic Spirituality and Rhythms

Liminal Living

Shift to Cenobitic Life

Over time, the solitary living of the hermits gave way to more communal living, forming eventually into monastic communities. Now, those who lived in these communities were still called “monks” which means “solitary”, but it now meant NOT that they were to live solitary lives by themselves, but solitary lives from the world.

Organizing the unorganized

Pachomius (292-348 AD)

John Cassian (360-435 AD)
Benedict of Nursia (ca. 480 – ca. 550)

Background

Characteristics of the Rule in its historical context

• Common sense and Flexibility:

• Community-focused:
  o “Above all, this evil practice [of private ownership] must be uprooted and removed from the monastery. We mean that without an order from the abbot [the leader], no one may presume to give, receive or retain anything as his own, nothing at all.”

• Authority:

• Opus Dei:

• Intellectual activity:

• Stability: Benedictine monasteries came to represent all that was solid and fixed in a turbulent world

• Integrated with Work, Ora et labora (Work and prayer):
• Hospitality:

• Equal opportunity:

• Clarity of vision: The goal of the Christian life was preparation for eternal life. The Rule concludes with these words, “Are you hastening toward your heavenly home? Then with Christ’s help, keep this little rule that we have written for beginners. After that, you can set out for the loftier summits of the teaching and virtues we mentioned above, and under God’s protection you will reach them.”
Benedict laid out seven services, or hours, in the day in which one would pray (he based this on Psalm 119:164 in which the psalmist wrote about praising God seven times a day) and then a single vigil in the middle of the night (see Psalm 119:62). For each hour, Benedict matched the prayer with the typical needs of that time of day. For example, during the vigil (Matins), the emphasis was on keeping watch and anticipating the coming of Christ. During the morning (Prime), the focus was on dedicating the upcoming workday to Jesus. Lauds is focused on praise (probably a good thing given the way some workdays proceed!). Terce, Sext and None (during the “third”, “sixth” and “ninth” hours of the day) are times to touch base with God in brief

### A Monk’s daily schedule under Benedict’s Rule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2:30 am</td>
<td>Rise for communal prayer, called “the divine office” (Vigils)</td>
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<tr>
<td>3:45-5:00</td>
<td>Private reading and prayer, learning psalms and other texts for the divine office</td>
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<tr>
<td>5:00-5:45</td>
<td>Communal prayer at dawn (Lauds)</td>
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<tr>
<td>6:00</td>
<td>Communal prayer at sunrise (Prime)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6:45-8:30</td>
<td>Work (housekeeping, crafts, gardening and field work)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:30</td>
<td>Communal prayer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:45-1 pm</td>
<td>Private reading (lectio divina)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:15</td>
<td>Meal together in the dining room in silence, with public reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:45-2:30</td>
<td>Siesta or reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:30</td>
<td>Communal prayer (None)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:45-6 pm</td>
<td>Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6:00-6:45</td>
<td>Communal prayer (Vespers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:00</td>
<td>Meal together in the dining room in silence, with public reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:00</td>
<td>Communal prayer (Compline)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:30</td>
<td>Retire in the dormitory</td>
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**A Summer Day**

**A Winter Day**

- Rise for communal prayer (Vigils with more prayers and readings in winter)
- Private reading and prayer, learning psalms and other texts for the divine office
- Communal prayer at dawn (Lauds)
- Communal prayer at sunrise (Prime)
- Private reading and prayer
- Communal prayer (Terce)
- Work (housekeeping, crafts)
- Communal prayer (Sext)
- Communal prayer (None)
- Meal together in dining room in silence, with public reading
- Private reading or prayer
- Communal prayer (Vespers)
- Communal prayer (Compline)
- Retire in the dormitory
prayers while we are working. **Vespers** (evening prayer) mark the closing of our work day. **Compline** (night prayer - before bed) helps us let go of the day and rest in Jesus.

**Legacy of Monasticism**

1. Created a drain on human resources within the church and within society

2. **Serve as a training ground to train tough Christians.** Produced vigorous Christians which helped the church

3. Effects on women.

4. **Dynamic movement not a static one.**

Can the monastic life offer anything beneficial to the church today?

Tension between Empire and Withdrawal - this is the place of creative learning. Prophetic power

Can the monastic life teach us anything about sexuality and celibacy?
We are considering the rise, the nature, and the impact of monasticism in the 4th-5th-Centuries. And we are going to come back to this, but while monasticism is developing, some other key events are occurring…

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>EVENT</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>330</td>
<td>Constantine Moves to Byzantium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>378</td>
<td>Battle of Adrianople</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>410</td>
<td>Visigoths Capture Rome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>451-52</td>
<td>Threat of Attila the Hun</td>
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<tr>
<td>455</td>
<td>Vandals attack Rome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>489-526</td>
<td>Theodore and his Ostrogothic Kingdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>536</td>
<td>Byzantine general Belisarius captures Rome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>546</td>
<td>Ostrogothic counterattack</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>552-553</td>
<td>Final Byzantine Attack</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>565</td>
<td>Lombard Invasion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>600</td>
<td>Population of Rome - 50,000</td>
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9-11 Moment: These Visigoths will then move from Adrianople and eventually reach the gates of Rome in 410 AD. Capture, plunder and burned the city. Rome, which had stood for 700 years, fell to barbarian wanderers.

“The world goes to ruin. Yes! But in spite of it, and to our shame, our sins still live and even prosper. The great city, the capital of the Roman Empire, has been devoured by a great fire, and all over the earth Romans wander in exile. Churches which once were revered are now but dust and ashes.” St. Jerome
The floodgates are opened for barbarians to impact all over Western Europe. These Visigoths continued their migration until they reached Spain.

This is the world of early monasticism. This is why monasticism in the 5th-6th-Centuries becomes an agency for social, political and economic reconstruction especially in view of the Fall of Rome and the Barbarian invasions.

**Impact of the Fall of the Roman Empire on the Church**

**St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430 AD)**

Now, factoring largely into our conversation is the person, ministry, and writings of St. Augustine. When figuring where he fits in the narrative thus far, I find that he fits practically everywhere. Next to St. Paul, no theologian has shaped the church as much as St. Augustine. Much of how we think about the Trinity, election, evil, sin, salvation have been influenced by Augustine. In terms of our conversation about monasticism and the Fall of Rome, Augustine's life intersects with both movements. Augustine actually founds a monastic order, and is the key voice when the Western empire was descending into chaos.
Augustine was a prolific writer whose writings very few people have the time and energy to read in their entirety. Let’s spend a few minutes outlining his remarkable life.

- Born 354 in little town of Numidia (Algeria)
- Born a Roman citizen
- Father, Patricius was a small land owner going bankrupt
- Age of 16 - father can no longer support him.
- Romanianus - patron who subsidized Augustine’s education for the next few years.
- Education - sitting with a series of individual teachers plying their trade in different towns.
  - Carthage - capital of Roman Africa (greatest city next to Rome)
    - emphasis on Latin (reads Cicero and Virgil - memorizes)
    - narrow - limited number of authors but know and live them out
  - Both pagan and Christians are in the habit of Lectio - take a text and you read that text out loud to yourself, repeat it in order to absorb it as fully as possible.
  - Think of what happens when you are converted and apply this practice of Lectio to the Bible. Ends up quoting the Bible from memory over 42,000 times! Imbued with the biblical text in his Christian life.
- Thagaste
  - By the time he is 32, he has taught in Carthage because students were so unruly. In Rome, students were better, they just left class without paying
- Gets an important appointment at the Imperial Court in Milan - like a consulate. [Shift of the centre of the Roman Empire from Rome to Constantinople in 330 AD]
- Professor of Rhetoric - Minister of Propaganda (Augustine gets this as an unconverted pagan (Augustine went from being a Manichee).
  - Meets Bishop Ambrose of Milan and is deeply impressed with him as a preacher, a hymn-writer, an intellectual, and as a pastor.
  - Augustine increasingly experiences a spiritual crisis, overwhelming sense of sin, hears children’s voices, “Take and Read”. Finds Romans, looks at Romans 13:13-14 and that marks his conversion. Reborn in 386 AD.
  - Tries to give himself to a life of prayer and study. Joins a semi-monastic community.
  - Writes his spiritual autobiography, Confessions between 397- 400 AD

Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee. Whoever does not want to fear, let him probe his inmost self. Do not just touch the surface; go down into yourselves; reach into the farthest corner of your heart.

Confessions
• Tries to organize one himself in Hippo in 391. Just so happens that the church he is attending needed a priest. Suddenly, he is grabbed, dragged forward, and ordained as priest to the church. [This kind of ecclesiastical kidnapping was quite common].

• Rises rapidly. In 395 AD, speaks to a large conference about true faith, and then not long after this, he is made Bishop of Hippo. He will remain here and labour here as a bishop for 33 years. Preaching, teaching and practicing litigation.

• Augustine writes…continuously. Rewrites his old material except *Confessions*.

• *City of God* - magnum opus (426 AD)
  • inspired by the collapse of Rome in 410 AD
  • Alaric and his Visigoths sack and plunder Rome in 410 AD
  • All Roman dreams of the past 700 years come to an end
  • Creates a crises - Christians in Rome pour into North Africa
  • Pagan writers are blaming the collapse of Rome on the neglect of the Roman gods
  • Behooves Augustine to comfort questioning Christians and to respond to critical pagans.
  • First Christian philosophy of history - earthly city vs. heavenly city.

• *Against the Writings of Pelagius* (401-405)
  • Augustine is concerned with sin and the freedom of the will.
  • Human being cannot raise himself by their own bootstraps. Human is free only to sin and sink lower. Is not even free to turn to God.
  • Only solution is a second birth which comes from God Himself. In God’s sovereignty and great mercy, God has ordained some for salvation and some for punishment.
  • Predestination is introduced into Christian vocabulary - Double predestination.
  • Irresistible grace. We will succumb to this and be saved by it.
  • Perseverance of the Saints. We can also be certain that we will persevere in the faith
  • Augustine is writing this in the midst of battle. Vs. Donatists.
  • Augustine is a lawyer - sometimes overstate evidence. Is Augustine overstating things because of the stakes in this theological battle?
  • Augustine is past 50 years old - life begins to look different
  • No longer speculating, but hardening his lines.
  • If you read the Confessions, Augustine is overwhelmed by the fact of God’s sovereignty in his own life.
  • Augustine is facing the collapse of the Roman world as he knows it. Turns to God’s sovereignty in the midst of the chaos all around you. Will not be anxious because his life is hidden with Christ in God.
  • Writes on predestination in his later years (428-429). Spread of the Vandals. Knocking on the gates of Hippo.
  • Augustine dies in 430 right when the Vandals take over.

By 476 AD, the Roman Empire had essentially come to a close. The Empire which had stood for centuries was no more. Europe enters into a period of darkness, roads, buildings and aqueducts fall into disrepair. Libraries are ransacked and art is destroyed. People live in fear of barbarian tribes which threaten to overrun their communities.
Most of these invaders were either pagan or Arian. The conquered were faced with the challenge of evangelizing their new masters. What is miraculous we will see is that most (if not all) the barbarian tribes which ran amok throughout Western Europe accepted the Christian faith, and from these converted barbarians emerged a whole new generation of leaders in the church.

How were they converted? Well, this is part of the story we will look at next week when we explore both the Celtic and Roman missionary efforts in the face of barbarian paganism.

Questions to Consider…

1. Are we living in an “Augustinian moment”? Are the changes we are experiencing in the world so great that things will look radically different for the next generation?

2. What will it mean for Christians to live in such tumultuous times? How do we need to change? What do we perhaps need to recover?