

MONASTICISM DURING THE TIME OF SAINT AUGUSTINE

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Some 50 years before the birth of Augustine (13 November 354) a movement began that was to be identified with that unique following of Christ. Monasticism, from the Greek word *monos*=*solitary*, originating on the southeastern periphery of the Roman empire in the deserts of lower Egypt towards the end of the great Diocletianic persecution (AD 303 -305) was inaugurated and charismatically guided by three great contributive patriarchs: Paul, the First Hermit (+342); Pachomius, called "the Great" and "the Father of Monastic Common Life" (+348); Anthony, likewise called "the Great" identified as "the Father of Christian Monasticism" (+356). However, the towering figure in eastern monasticism is, undoubtedly, that contemporary of Saint Augustine, Basil of Caesarea (+379), Archbishop in Cappadocia on the northern limits of Roman imperial rule(now northern Turkey). In order to understand Augustine's ideas on monastic life we will at the risk of generalisation consider the contributions of these important "founders" that were to inspire Augustine and his contemporaries on the western end of the Roman world.

The Egyptian Origins. Traditional monastic history always began with the shadowy figure of *Paul of Egypt*. The information we have is what Saint Jerome wrote. Born of a wealthy Christian family, he as a young man fled into the desert when an unscrupulous relative greedy for Paul's inheritance prepared to report him to the the Roman police enforcing some severe measures against Christians. There he remained a solitary hermit leading a life of prayer and penance.

Toward the end of his life which he sustained on a diet of figs and dry bread, he befriended Saint Anthony who after

his death buried his emaciated frame clothed in woven palm leaf. His feast day, 15. January was long celebrated by the early Hermits of Saint Augustine as a model of penance and prayer. Incidentally, Eusebius of Esztergom (Hungary), an Augustinian Canon founded in the early 13th century the *Order of Saint Paul, the First Hermit* following the Rule of Saint Augustine. It is, to my knowledge, the only Monastic order, strictly speaking to have the Augustinian Rule. *Saint Pachomius*, unlike Paul and Anthony, was a convert to Christianity while serving in the Roman army. Impressed by the the gracious hospitality of a Christian village then being occupied by abusive soldiers, he left the military and sought baptism. His great contribution to monasticism was his insistence on community life structured around the severe prescriptions of his Rule (known as the *Rule of Saint Pachomius*). He insisted on a gated enclosure, common meals, prayers, bi-annual chapters, a habit and severe beating, imprisonment or as a last resort for the truly incorrigible forceful expulsion. Pachomius's Rule never gained wide acceptance in monastic circles. His feast is celebrated on 15. May. The one figure who does stand out in history is the last of this triad, *Saint Anthony of Egypt*, who like his friend and fellow hermit, Paul, was born into a wealthy Christian family. Like Francis of Assisi, some thousand years later, heard the haunting invitation from the Gospel, 'Sell what you have, give to the poor and, come, follow me' (Matt. 19:21). Wrestling with this invitation, he gradually divested himself of his lands and material goods while insuring that his sister was taken care, he then retreated in to the desert embarking on a life of prayer, fasting and penitential exercises that would certainly discourage the faint-hearted. As time passed he, in spite of his reluctance, he would take on disciple and retreat further into the desert. But, he was not adverse to appearing in Alexandria when its Patriarch, Saint Athanasius, was

struggling with Arianism. During a persecution of the Church, Anthony again appeared and encouraged the faithful. His holiness was recognised even by his enemies and he was left unharmed. Emperor Constantine, the Great desired to meet the holy abbot and sent him several invitations. Anthony asked his followers what should he do. The response was laconic; 'If you go, Anthony will come back; if not, Anthony, the Abbot, will remain in his cloister.' However, the greatest influence that Saint Anthony exercised was after his death in the form of a first Christian 'best seller' ***The Life of Saint Anthony*** written by no other than Saint Athanasius of Alexandria (+373). The Patriarch fled to Europe pursued by his enemies. Through this book, composed ca. 340, the ideals of monasticism spread throughout the western Church. Saint Augustine was greatly impressed with this work. While not able to imitate the fierce penitential life of Anthony he did recognise his prayerfulness and openness to the defence of the Church that characterised the Saint's life.

Basil of Caesarea (+379) was born into a Christian family but was baptised at the age of 28 in the year 357. Desiring to follow Christ, he organised a monastic community in 370 and composed two rather lengthy Rules (called *Shorter and Longer Rules*) that have remained to this day the standard monastic observance for the majority of Orthodox and Eastern Catholic communities. For convenience, we will refer to these Rules simply as the *Rule of Saint Basil*. Known principally for its moderation in monastic observance when compared to the Egyptian-Palestinian regimen, it emphasised an openness to the world around. Unlike the semi-autonomous hermit or anchorite of the Antonine observance or the crowded often rowdy monastic settlements envisioned by Pachomius, Basil preferred smaller, manageable communities under abbatial guidance. He wisely proposed that monastic life be joined with some

form of apostolic work with travellers, orphans students and farm-hands. To insure stability, he insisted that a novice's commitment in form of promises be written down and signed. This pledge later developed into what would be called religious vows. It is unlikely that Augustine would have know of Basil's work as he himself admits that his Greek was faulty.