

## Focusing on Jesus: The Rise of Monasticism

### Overview

How can Christians follow Jesus faithfully in a fallen world? In light of the many evil influences around us, how can we maintain our pursuit of righteousness? The temptations of materialism, sensuality, fame and power threaten all of us. In addition to this, the church frequently struggles with internal problems that seem inconsistent with Christianity. How can we effectively deal with these challenges and enigmas in order to serve Jesus?

By the fourth and fifth centuries, Christians were confronting similar issues as their world was threatened by the invasion of Germanic tribes. Some Christians tried to resolve the dilemma by withdrawing from society. Over time they began to band together in monasteries and convents with the sole focus of worshipping and serving God. Eventually, their philosophy and approach became a significant force in shaping the church and medieval culture.

What can 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians learn from the monastics? Were their beliefs, assumptions, and lifestyle consistent with scriptural teaching? What can we learn from their approach to spiritual disciplines and from some of their extreme practices?

### Understanding the Setting

200	251-356	Anthony (founder of monasticism)
	290-346	Pachomius
300	312	Constantine becomes emperor; tolerance of Christianity
	320	Pachomius organizes first monastery
	325	Council of Nicea
	390-459	Simon the Stylite
400	432	Patrick, missionary to Ireland
	480-543	Benedict of Nursia
	490-583	Cassiodorus
500	529	Benedict founds monastery at Monte Casino (Rule of Benedict)

# Focusing on Jesus

## Step 1: Grasp the Issue

### Sound Bites

“Scripture teaches that there are two dangers to avoid—separatism and worldliness—and church history teaches how easily we can fall into either.” – Michael Horton

“It’s hard to remain clean when you live in a swamp.”

“Antony would eat only once a day after sunset, and sometimes he did not taste food for two or frequently four days. His food was bread and salt: he drank only water.”

– Athanasius regarding the first monk

“We are saved by grace. Fasting, ascetic lifestyles, and self-denial are just part of a misguided human effort to earn salvation on our terms.”

“My central claim is that we can become like Christ by doing one thing—by following him in the overall style of his life he chose for himself . . . solitude and silence, prayer, simple and sacrificial living, intense study and meditation upon God’s Word and God’s ways, and service to others.” – Dallas Willard

“Christianity has not so much been tried and found wanting, as it has been found difficult and left untried.” – G.K. Chesterton

### Case Studies

You first met Alma and Richard Moore when you moved into their neighborhood. They are warm, vibrant Christians whom you admire greatly for their commitment to the Bible and purity. They switched to their current church five years ago after concerns arose over some “liberal tendencies” in their previous church. They have become actively involved in Sunday School, midweek Bible studies and children’s ministry on Thursday. Richard attends the men’s prayer group and Alma participates in the Mother’s Day Out program. Concerned by the loss of moral focus in public schools, they home school their three children. Their social network is almost entirely made up of church friends. Appalled by the abysmal fare provided by the entertainment industry, they have thrown out their TV, stopped attending movies, and listen almost exclusively to Christian music.

When having supper with another Christian couple, the Wilsons, you begin to discuss the lifestyle of the Moores. Your spouse says, “I really admire them. They are completely

focused on the Lord, and have eliminated everything that could threaten their relationship with God. Like Paul wrote, they have thrown off everything which could hinder them.”

Mrs. Wilson shakes her head. “I don’t know. I’m a little concerned. Jesus wanted us to be salt and light and be in the world. Hiding in our little Christian ghetto seems to miss that point. I think we are called to live boldly, not running in fear of sin.”

“But” Armand, her husband, responds, “Who says you can’t serve God in this way. Christians today are so lost in the world that they don’t have any discipline or integrity.”

What do you think? What perspectives do Scripture and church history provide you?

On a recent flight, you had the opportunity to sit next to a monk returning to the United States for medical care. Although American by birth, for the last five years he has lived in a monastery on an island off the coast of Greece. As you conversed with him you found yourself moved by his passionate description of a life devoted completely to glorifying God. He shared the details of his life of prayer, study, and service in a communal setting. He described the contribution monasteries such as his had made over many generations in translating and preserving Scripture. More than that, he described the mission of the convent and monastery as a ministry of prayer and worship. Since that flight you have thought about that meeting.

What do you admire about lives of monks and nuns? What concerns might you have about their choices? What perspectives from Scripture and church history could help you in your understanding?

**What are some questions we need to explore as we seek to gain a better understanding of this issue?**

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## Step 2: Study the Scriptures

Jesus' life and teaching provides a basis for understanding how we are to relate to the world. In the following passages, notice that Jesus often makes very strong statements—even to the point that there seems to be tension between some of them.

### **Matthew 11:18-19**

### **Matthew 16:24-26**

### **James 1:27; 4:4**

James uses very strong language in addressing believers' relationship to the world.

- What does James mean by “polluted by the world?”
- How can we ensure we aren't “polluted by the world?”
- Is it even possible to live in the world without being a friend of it—even just a little?

## Step 3: Consult Other Sources

The monastic movement cannot be confined to a specific time or place. It evolved over the centuries, and differed from one location to another. The following articles should help you gain a better understanding of the origin and progression of monasticism and of with some of the major themes and contributions associated with the movement.

To better understand the monastic movement we will look at it from several perspectives. Reading 1 provides an overview of this movement including some of its strengths and weaknesses. Reading 2 provides an excerpt from some of the instructions for the monastic life. Finally, Reading 3 looks at four fundamental elements of their thinking about the way to serve and follow Christ.

As you read try to answer these questions: Why did believers choose to be monks or nuns? What did they hope to accomplish? What effects did they have on the church and the world around them? What do you find admirable? What concerns you?

“The Christianity of the Cloisters,” by Earle Cairns.

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“Life in Benedict’s Monastery,” selections from Benedict’s *Rule*.

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“Spiritual Pragmatists,” by Dennis Martin.

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## The Christianity of the Cloisters

by Earle Cairns

Throughout history men have renounced society in times of worldliness and institutionalism and have retired into solitude to achieve personal holiness by contemplation and asceticism apart from the society they believe to be decadent and doomed. During the period of the gradual internal decay of the Roman Empire, monasticism made a powerful appeal to many, who renounced society for the cloister. This movement had its origins in the fourth century, and laymen in increasing numbers retired from the world from that time on. By the end of the sixth century monasticism had deep roots in the Western as well as in the Eastern sections of the church. A second era of greatness for monasticism occurred in the monastic reforms of the tenth and eleventh centuries. The era of friars in the thirteenth century was a third period. And the emergence of the Jesuits in the Counter-Reformation of the sixteenth century constituted the final period in which monasticism deeply affected the church. This countercultural movement still has an important place within the life of the Roman Catholic church.

## The Causes of Monasticism

Several influences contributed to the rise of monasticism within the ancient church. The dualistic view of flesh and spirit, with its tendency to consider flesh evil and spirit good—so characteristic of the Orient— influenced Christianity through the Gnostic and Neoplatonic movements. Retirement from the world would, it was thought, help the individual to crucify the flesh and to develop

the spiritual life by meditation and ascetic acts.

One should also remember that some Scriptures seem to support the idea of separation from the world. Paul's apparent advocacy of the celibate life in I Corinthians 7 is a case in point. The early church fathers such as Origen, Cyprian, Tertullian, and Jerome urged celibacy as the correct interpretation of such Scriptures.

Certain psychological tendencies strengthened the desire for a monastic life. In periods of crisis there is always a tendency to retreat from the harsh realities about one. The late second and third centuries saw the beginning of civil disorder that was to become so prevalent in the later history of the empire. Many left society for the monastery as a means of escape from harsh reality and the moral contamination of the times. With the union of church and state the possibility of martyrdom was lessened, but those who desired martyrdom as a pledge of their faith could find a psychological substitute in the ascetic practices of monasticism. Monasticism also offered a more individualistic approach to God and salvation than the formal corporate worship of the times.

History also played a part in the decision of many to accept the life of the cloister. The increasing number of barbarians crowding into the church brought many semi-pagan practices within the church, and puritanical souls revolted against them. The increasing moral deterioration, especially in the upper classes in Roman society, caused many to despair of social reform. Monasticism became a haven for those in revolt against the growing

decadence of the times. It was a living criticism of the society of the day.

Geography merits some consideration as a factor responsible for the rise of monasticism. It would have been much more difficult to carry on the monastic life in areas where the climate was more severe than in Egypt, where the monastic life had its beginnings. The warm, dry climate and the multitude of caves in the hills along the banks of the Nile were conducive to separation of the individual from society. Small gardens, along with the resources of food provided by the nearby Nile, made securing of food by the individual fairly easy. Nearness to the desolate, forbidding scenery of the desert stimulated meditation.

## The Development of Monasticism

Monasticism went through four main stages during the period of its emergence in Western civilization. At first, ascetic practices were carried on by many within the church. Many later withdrew from society to live as anchorites or hermits. The holiness of these hermits attracted others, who would then take up residence in nearby caves and look to them for leadership in what was called a *laura*. A cloister for common exercises might be built. In the final stage organized communal life within a monastery appeared. This process had its beginnings in the East in the fourth century, and from there it spread to the church in the West.

**In the East.** Anthony (ca. 251-ca. 356) is usually regarded as the founder of monasticism. At the age of twenty he sold all his possessions, gave the money to the poor, and retired to a solitary cave in Egypt to lead a life of meditation. His life of holiness gave him such a reputation that others also went to live near him in numerous caves that were not far

from his habitation. He never organized these followers into a community; rather, each practiced the ascetic life of a hermit in his own cave.<sup>1</sup> Athanasius wrote Anthony's biography, *The Life of Anthony*.

Not all the hermit monks were as sane as Anthony and his followers. One, known as Simon the Stylite (ca. 390-459), after having lived buried up to his neck in the ground for several months, decided to achieve holiness by becoming an ecclesiastical "pole sitter." He spent over thirty years on the top of a sixty-foot pillar near Antioch. Others lived in fields and grazed grass after the manner of cattle. A certain Ammoun had a particular reputation for sanctity because he had never undressed or bathed after he became a hermit. Another wandered naked in the vicinity of Mount Sinai for fifty years. These, however, were only the fanatic fringe of the movement and were to be found in the East more than in the West.

The communal or social type of monasticism, often called cenobite monasticism, also made its appearance first in Egypt. Pachomius (ca. 290-346), a discharged soldier, after living twelve years with a hermit, organized the first monastery about 320 at Tabennisi on the east bank of the Nile. He soon had several thousand monks under his direct control in Egypt and Syria. Simplicity of life, work, devotion, and obedience were the keynotes of his organization.<sup>2</sup>

Basil of Caesarea (ca. 330-79) did much to popularize the communal type of monastic organization. Having had an excellent education in Athens and Constantinople, at the

<sup>1</sup> Athanasius, *Life of Anthony in A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 2d series (New York: Christian Literature, 1892), 4:195-221.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Ayer, Jr., *A Source Book for Ancient Church History* (New York: Scribner, 1913), 402-5; Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.13.

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age of twenty-seven he gave up worldly advancement for the ascetic life. He was made a bishop of a large area in Cappadocia in 370, a post he held until his death. He gave a more utilitarian and social expression to the monastic spirit by insisting that the monks under his rule work, pray, read the Bible, and perform good deeds. He discouraged extreme asceticism. The monasticism of the church in Eastern Europe today owes much to the rule that he developed for the guidance of his monks.<sup>3</sup> More and more people were swept into the movement until there were nearly a hundred monasteries in Europe at the accession of Justinian to the throne of the Eastern empire.

**In the West.** Monasticism in the West differed considerably from that in the East. The colder climate made communal organization much more essential in order that warm buildings and food might be provided. Monasticism was also much more practical in its expression. It rejected idleness and deplored purely ascetic acts. Work as well as devotion was emphasized.

Athanasius is traditionally credited with the introduction of monasticism to the West during one of his periodic exiles from Alexandria. Pilgrims to Palestine came in contact with it there and in Syria and were attracted to it. Martin of Tours, Jerome, Augustine, and Ambrose wrote in favor of it and helped to popularize it within the Roman Empire. Jerome's writings on asceticism ranked next to the Bible and Benedict's Rule in the medieval monk's library.

The greatest leader of Western monasticism was Benedict of Nursia

(ca. 480-543). Shocked by the vice of Rome, he retired to live as a hermit in a cave in the mountains east of Rome about 500. About 529 he founded the monastery of Monte Casino, which survived until World War II, when it was destroyed by bombardment. Soon several monasteries were under his control and following his plan of organization, work, and worship—that is, his Rule. Each monastery was considered a self-sufficient, self-supporting unit or garrison of the soldiers of Christ. The day was divided into periods in which reading, worship, and work had important roles. The regulations that Benedict drew up provided little meat for the monks but allowed plenty of fish, oil, butter, bread, vegetables, and fruit in their diet. This Rule, which emphasized poverty, chastity, and obedience, was one of the most important in the Middle Ages.<sup>4</sup> By the seventh century it was carried to England, Germany, and France and became almost universal in the time of Charlemagne. It was the standard rule in the West by the year 1000.

## Evaluation of Monasticism

Casual students of church history often dismiss the work of the monk as of little value or evince a hostility that does not take into account the contribution made by the monk in his own day, a contribution that still affects modern civilization.

The local monastery often served as the medieval equivalent of a modern experimental farm in demonstrating better methods of agriculture. The monks cleared the forests, drained the marshes, made roads, and improved seeds and breeds of livestock.

<sup>3</sup> Ayer, *Source Book*, 405-6.

<sup>4</sup> Henry Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church*, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), 116-128.



Nearby farmers often emulated the better techniques that they saw the monks using.

Monasteries helped to keep scholarship alive during the Dark Ages between 500 and 1000, when urban life was disrupted as the barbarians took over the Roman Empire. Monastery schools provided education on the lower levels for those nearby who desired to learn. Monks busied themselves copying precious manuscripts, which were thus preserved for posterity. In the middle of the sixth century, Cassiodorus (478-573), a high government official under the Ostrogoths, retired from government service to devote himself to the task of collecting, translating, and copying patristic and classical literature. He was aided in this task by the monks of a monastery that he founded. The Book of Kells, a lovely illuminated manuscript of the Gospels in Latin, done about the seventh century by Irish monks, is an example of the beauty of the monks' work. Monks, such as Bede, Einhard, and Matthew Paris, wrote historical records, which are primary sources of information concerning the history of the period.

Monks, particularly from Britain, became the missionaries of the medieval church. They went out as fearless soldiers of the Cross to found new monasteries, and these became centers from which whole tribes were won to Christianity. Columba, a monk from Ireland, won the Scots; and one of his followers, Aidan, won the people of northern England. Unfortunately, much of their missionary work was marred by their mass methods of conversion. If a ruler accepted Christianity, he and his people were baptized whether or not they fully understood the meaning of the act or the implications of Christianity

for their lives.

The monasteries provided a refuge for the outcast of society who were in need of help. Those in need of hospitalization would usually find loving care in the monastery. The weary traveler could be sure of food and bed in the hospice of the monastery. Those who tired of the worldliness of their day could find in the monastery a refuge from the cares of life. Some of the best leaders of the medieval church, such as Gregory VII, came from monasteries.

But there is also a debit sheet that must be considered in any evaluation of early medieval monasticism. Too many of the best men and women of the empire were drained off into monasteries, and their abilities were lost to the world, which was so badly in need of such leaders. Moreover, the celibate life kept these able men and women from marriage and the rearing of able children. This led to one standard of morality for the monks (celibacy) and another for the ordinary individual.

Too often monasticism merely pandered to spiritual pride as monks became proud of ascetic acts performed to benefit their own souls. As the monasteries became wealthy because of community thrift and ownership, laziness, avarice, and gluttony crept in.

Monasticism aided in the rapid development of a hierarchical, centralized organization in the church because the monks were bound in obedience to superiors who in turn owed their allegiance to the pope. We can but deplore these tendencies while at the same time we admire the fine contributions that the monks made to medieval life.



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## Life in Benedict's Monastery

In every aspect all shall follow the Rule as their guide: and let no one depart from it without good reason. Let no one in the monastery follow his own inclinations, or brazenly argue with his abbot . . . The abbot, for his part, should do everything in the fear of the Lord and in obedience to the *Rule*, knowing that he will have to account to God for all his decisions.

If a brother is insubordinate or disobedient, proud or a grumbler, or in any way acting contrary to the holy *Rule* and despising the orders of his seniors, let him, according to the Lord's commandment, be privately warned twice by his seniors. If he does not improve, let him be publicly rebuked before them all. But if even then he does not correct himself, he should be excommunicated, if he understands how severe this penalty is. If, however, he is beyond conviction, he should be physically punished.

The brothers shall take turns to wait on each other so that no one is excused from kitchen work, unless prevented by sickness or taken up with some vital business . . . An hour before each meal the week's servers are to receive a cup of drink and a piece of bread over and above their ration, so that they can wait on their brothers without grumbling or undue fatigue.

At the brothers' meal times there should always be a reading . . . There shall be complete silence at table, and no whispering or any voice except the reader's should be heard. The brethren should pass to each other in turn whatever food is needed so that no one needs to ask for anything. If anything should be wanted, ask for it by sign-language rather than by speech.

Above all, care must be taken of the sick . . . Baths should be available to the sick as often as necessary: to the healthy, and especially the young, less often. The eating of meat shall also be allowed to the sick and the delicate to aid recovery. But when they have got better, they shall all abstain from flesh, as is normal.

In winter, that is from 1 November until Easter, as far as possible they must get up at the eighth hour of the night, so that they rest for a little over half the night, and rise when they have had a good sleep. But the time that remains after 'vigils' shall be spent in study . . .

As the prophet says, 'Seven times in the day do I praise thee.' We will complete this sacred number seven if, at lauds, at the first, third, sixth, ninth hours, at vesper time and at compline we carry out the duties of our service.

Idleness is the enemy of the soul. Therefore, at fixed times, the brothers should be busy with manual work; and at other times in holy reading. We believe these ought to be arranged in this way: from Easter until 1 October, on coming out of *Prime* they shall do the work needing attention until the fourth hour. From the fourth hour until about the sixth, they should concentrate on reading. After the meal on the sixth hour, they shall rest on their beds in complete silence; anyone who wishes may read to himself as long as he does not disturb anyone else. *None* shall be said a little early, about the middle of the eighth hour; after that they shall work at their tasks until evening.

A mattress, woolen blanket, woolen under-blanket, and a pillow shall be enough bedding. Beds are to be searched frequently

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by the abbot for private belongings. And, if anyone is found to possess anything he did not receive from the abbot, he shall be very severely disciplined. To abolish private property everything necessary shall be given by the abbot: a hood, tunic, shoes, long socks, belt, knife, pen, needle, handkerchief, tablets, so that they can have no excuses about needing things.

A monastery should, if possible, be built so that everything needed—water, mill, garden, bakery—is available, so that the monks do not need to wander about outside.

For this is not at all good for their souls.

We intend to found a school to train men in the service of the Lord, but where we shall not make rules too strict and heavy . . . If we seem to be severe, do not get frightened away. The entrance to the path of salvation must be narrow, but as you progress along the life of the Faith, the heart expands and speeds with love's sweetness along the pathway of God's commandments.



## Spiritual Pragmatists

by Dennis Martin

After being released from conscription in the early 300s, a 20-year-old Egyptian named Pachomius became a disciple of an old hermit and learned the monastic life. When his older brother John heard of it, he traveled down the Nile to join him. As reported in the *Life of Pachomius*, “They practiced together a great *ascesis* [discipline], carrying the cross of Christ according to the word of Paul, ‘At all times we carry the death of Jesus in our body, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh.’”

They gave away everything, shared a single tunic and mantle between them, barely slept, and kept only enough food on hand for a single day.

“Thus they fulfilled the word of the Gospel, ‘If anyone wants to come after me let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me,’” the *Life* summed up.

Early desert monks, like Pachomius (the founder of communal monasticism) and his brother, practiced a spiritual theology, a practical plan for personal spiritual growth—in contrast to the more speculative theologies of Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Gregory of Nyssa. Though influenced by (and influencing) such nuanced thinkers, the desert monks were more interested in discerning the nuances of the human heart and will, to the end that they might become like their Lord.

Their spiritual theology can be thought of as having four dimensions.

## Back to the Bible

Obedience to God’s Word is the first mark of the spiritual theology of the early monks. Like

Pachomius and his brother, they set out in a simple and childlike way to take Scripture literally, obeying without hesitation even Christ’s “hard sayings.” They trusted God’s word not only in its commands but in its hope for the coming kingdom.

The prologue to the *History of the Monks of Egypt* begins by linking the first and second advents of Christ: “In Egypt I saw many fathers living the angelic life as they advanced steadily in the imitation of our divine Savior.... While living on earth in this manner, they live as true citizens of heaven. One can see them scattered in the desert waiting for Christ like loyal sons watching for their father, or like an army expecting its emperor, or like a sober household looking forward to the arrival of its master and liberator.”

Meditation on Scripture was the method by which these monks took Scripture seriously. They tried to literally “pray without ceasing” by chanting the Psalter, and other Scripture passages, as they wove baskets throughout the day. Many memorized large portions of the Bible in this way: Abba Ammonius is said to have memorized the entire Old and New Testaments plus thousands of lines from Origen, Didymus the Blind, and other early writers.

## The need for discernment

The second theme in desert theology is *discretio*, that is, discernment or guidance from a wise senior monk. When a young monk sought entry to a hermit community, he approached a senior monk and said, “Abba, give me a word,” thereby entrusting himself to

the guidance of this spiritual father. John Climacus (d. c.649), a monk of St. Catherine's in the Sinai, advised monks to choose their spiritual father carefully, but, having chosen, not to second-guess him.

Spiritual fathers, for their part, were careful in their guidance. One ancient account says that Abba Pambo, when asked about a scriptural phrase or some other problem, "would never answer on the spur of the moment but used to say: 'I have not found it.' Often a period of three months would go by and he had not given an answer, saying that he had not comprehended it. So they accepted his answers as though they were from God himself, approved and shaped by his will."

Discernment extended to all matters, from interpretation of Scripture to the seemingly small aspects of daily life—which sometimes became parables for larger spiritual truths (some of which are lost on modern readers).

For example, a story is told of Abba Agatho, who was on a journey with his disciples when they came across a little bundle of green peas on the road. One of his disciples said to Agatho, "Father, if you will, I shall lift that."

The old man looked at him quizzically and said, "Did you put it there?"

The disciple replied, "No."

To which Abba Agatho said, "How could you wish to lift up that which you did not put down?"

Discernment was not a luxury but a matter of spiritual life and death. In the words of sixth-century Dorotheus of Gaza, "I know of no fall that happens to a monk that does not come from trusting his own judgment.... Do you know someone who has fallen? Be sure that he directed himself. Nothing is more grievous than to be one's own director, nothing is more pernicious."

## The role of discipline

What one might have expected to be the main theme in the desert fathers' theology was actually third in importance to them: asceticism. For the monks "the discipline" proceeded from a commitment to the Bible and the need for discernment.

Plotinus and other pagan sages treated the body as if it were a transient and accidental adjunct to the self. Not the monks. For them, the body was grippingly present. One spoke of it as "this body, that God has afforded me, as a field to cultivate, where I might work and become rich."

John Climacus, using running as a metaphor for bodily self-discipline, put it more strongly: "We must run, brothers, we must run. We have to run very hard because we have fallen behind our holy company. So let us run, driving on this foul and wicked flesh of ours, killing it as it has killed us."

Though Climacus sounds harsh, the early monks did not believe that matter or the body was evil—after all, it was created by God, and nothing God made could be evil in and of itself. The "flesh" the desert fathers sought to subdue was not merely their physical bodies but their sinful "flesh," in the New Testament sense of the word.

Historian of the ancient world Peter Brown said, "Seldom, in ancient thought, had the body been seen as more deeply implicated in the transformation of the soul, and never was it made to bear so heavy a burden."

Desert monks believed that the passions of body and heart were unruly and disordered as a result of sin, and that the body needed to be disciplined to make it obedient so that the soul could rejoice in Christ.

In spite of the stereotype, this required a certain amount of moderation, as most monks were well aware. A hunter once came across

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Antony “talking gladly” with other monks, and he questioned the great ascetic about his seeming lack of rigor (one monastic discipline was to live in silence).

Antony replied, “Put an arrow in your bow, and draw it.” When the hunter did so, Antony told him to draw it further.

Again he obeyed but then said, “If I draw it too far, the bow will snap.”

Antony answered, “So it is with God’s work. If we go to excess, the brothers quickly become exhausted. It is sometimes best not to be rigid.”

What constituted “moderation”? We need to recall that these monks lived in a world in which, by modern Western standards, the average peasant’s life was involuntarily ascetic. The poor, rural or urban, lived on the simplest of diets and in houses we today would call shacks. The “extreme” nature of the desert monks’ asceticism must be seen in this context.

It is true that, on occasion, discretion failed spiritual fathers, but criticism of extreme asceticism was never lacking. *The History of the Monks of Egypt* says that Abba Apollo “severely censured” those who wore iron chains and let their hair grow long: “For these make an exhibition of themselves and chase after human approbation,” he said, “when instead they should make the body waste away in fasting and do good in secret. Rather than do this, they make themselves conspicuous to all.”

In the end, asceticism was designed to help monks achieve *apatheia*, which has nothing to do with “apathy” and everything to do with reordering the disordered “stirrings” of the soul caused by sin. The Latin equivalent would be *puritas cordis*, a clearly focused, pure, “single” heart.

“Whatever can guide us towards purity of heart is to be followed with all our power,”

said Abba Moses. “Whatever draws us away from it is to be avoided as hurtful and worse. It is for this end—to keep our hearts continually pure—that we do and endure everything.... If we do not keep this mark continually before the eyes, all our travail will be futile waste that wins nothing.”

### Back to the world

Despite the appearance of abandoning the world, the monks’ flight into the desert ultimately allowed them to reintegrate with society, serving it in unexpected ways.

Their renunciation of sex, marriage, and property lifted them out of kinship and property networks. This, combined with their reputation for sanctity, made them favorite arbitrators for quarreling villagers. Abba Apollo more than once resolved conflicts over land boundaries between pagan and Christian visitors by performing miracles. In another instance, he converted a group of pagan priests by a miracle, catechized them, and turned them over to the local parishes.

Another example is John of Lycopolis, profiled in the *History of the Monks of Egypt*, who counseled Emperor Theodosius, as well as generals, tribunes, and wives of military officers.

The early monks were also integrated into the life of the church. Some writers have portrayed the early monastic movement as an anti-ecclesiastical layman’s protest against an increasingly institutional church. Not so. Saturday and Sunday eucharistic worship in the nearest parish church, for example, was a regular feature of the earliest hermit and cenobitic communities.

Integration into the church extended all the way to the top: Pachomius advised Athanasius, the great bishop of Alexandria. And the traffic also went the other way: Archbishop Elias repeatedly sent Sabas to

Constantinople to plead with Anastasius on behalf of the church. Theodoret of Cyrrhus tells of a hermit named Abraham who was drafted to become bishop. And many of the early bishops of Gaul, including Martin of Tours, were chosen from monastic-hermit ranks.

### Preparing for the end

These early monks perceived more clearly than most the disorder sin causes in the soul and in society— as well as its ultimate consequences. They were driven ultimately by a vivid realization of Christ’s coming judgment.

“Go and meditate like the criminals in prison,” said Abba Ammon to one of his disciples. “For they keep asking, where is the judge, and when will he come? And because they await him, they lament their punishment. The monk ought always to be awaiting his trial and to chide his soul, saying, ‘Woe is me, how shall I stand before the judgment seat of Christ? How shall I give an account of my actions?’ If you always meditate like this, you will be saved.”







## Step 5: Discuss the Issue

1. What exposure, if any, have you had to the concept of monasticism? What images does it evoke in your mind?
2. What has been your personal experience with the disciplines of prayer, fasting, solitude, simplicity, poverty or abstinence?
3. John the Baptist, Jesus and Paul all engaged in spiritual disciplines as part of their lives. What scriptural teachings can serve to guide believers?
4. The monastic movement involved a move away from society to focus solely on worshipping God. Do you think this movement was in harmony with the spirit and teaching of Christ? Why?
5. Can you serve God without being around non-Christians or ministering directly to other Christians? Why?
6. Dallas Willard argues that having beliefs without the disciplines of the faith results in weak tormented Christians. Do you agree or disagree? Why?
7. How has this lesson changed your perspective on the disciplines of the Christian life? Has it led you to any conclusions?

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# Focusing on Jesus

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## Step 6: Take Steps to Obey

Based on your study, what commitments, if any, would you like to make? List them in the form of prayers:

“Lord, with your help, I would like to . . .

## Issue Evaluation Form

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**Please make brief comments on any of the following aspects of this issue:**

**Sound Bites and Case Studies** (Were any of these particularly helpful or unhelpful? Are there any quotes or scenarios you think we should add?):

**Study the Scriptures** (Were the passages selected appropriate? Are there other passages you might have added?):

**Consult Other Sources** (What were your overall impressions of the articles? Did they hold your interest? Were they instructive? Are there any you would drop or add?):

**Form a Response & Take Steps to Obey** (Were the exercises helpful and meaningful? Are there any you would drop or add?):

**Discuss the Issue** (Were any of the questions particularly unhelpful or especially helpful? Were they clear? Did your group discuss any issues that could be added to our list of questions?):

**Overall Impression of this Issue** (Please rate the issue 5= Outstanding, 1= Poor. Also include any general impressions or comments regarding this issue.):

1      2      3      4      5

**Corrections** (typos, grammatical errors, wrong passages, etc.):