

## ***Monasticism - a brief history and landmarks of monasticism***

'The best way to penetrate Orthodox spirituality is to enter it through monasticism'

*Paul Evdokimov, L'Orthodoxie (Paris 1959)*

✠ **The monastic life first emerged as a definite institution in** Egypt and Syria during the fourth century, and from there it spread rapidly across Christendom. It is no coincidence that monasticism should have developed immediately after Constantine's conversion, at the very time when the persecutions ceased and Christianity became fashionable. The monks with their austerities were martyrs in an age when martyrdom of blood no longer existed; they formed the counterbalance to an established Christendom. People in Byzantine society were in danger of forgetting that Byzantium was an image and symbol, not the reality; they ran the risk of identifying the kingdom of God with an earthly kingdom. The monks by their withdrawal from society into the desert fulfilled a prophetic and eschatological ministry in the life of the Church. **They reminded Christians that the kingdom of God is not of this world.**



Monasticism has taken three chief forms, all of which had appeared in Egypt by the year 350, and all of which are still to be found in the Orthodox Church today. There are first the *hermits*, ascetics leading the solitary life in huts and caves, and even in tombs, among the branches of trees, or on the tops of pillars. The great model of the eremitic life is the father of monasticism himself, St Anthony of Egypt (251-356). Secondly there is *community life*, where monks dwell together under a common rule and in a regularly constituted monastery. Here the great pioneer was St Pachomius of Egypt (286-346), author of a rule later used by St Benedict in the west.

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**...in Orthodoxy a monk's primary task is the life of prayer, and it is through this that he serves others.** It is not so much what a monk *does* that matters, as what he *is*.

Finally there is a form of the monastic life intermediate between the first two, the *semi-eremitic life*, a 'middle way' where instead of a single highly organized community there is a loosely knit group of small settlements, each settlement containing perhaps between two and six members living together under the guidance of an elder. The great centers of the semi-eremitic life in Egypt were Nitria and Scetis, which by the end of the fourth century had produced many outstanding monks - Ammon the founder of Nitria, Macarius of Egypt and Macarius of Alexandria, Evagrius of Pontus, and Arsenius the Great. (This semi-eremitic system is found not only in the east but in the far west, in Celtic Christianity.) From its very beginnings the monastic life was seen, in both east and west, as a vocation for women as well as men, and throughout the Byzantine world there were numerous communities of nuns.

Because of its monasteries, fourth-century Egypt was regarded as a second Holy Land, and travellers to Jerusalem felt their pilgrimage to be incomplete unless it included the ascetic houses of the Nile. In the fifth and sixth centuries leadership in the monastic movement shifted to Palestine, with St Euthymius the Great († 473) and his disciple St Sabas († 532). The monastery founded by St Sabas in the Jordan valley can claim an unbroken history to the present day; it was so this

community that John of Damascus belonged. Almost as old is another important house with an unbroken history to the present, the monastery of [St Catherine at Mount Sinai](#), founded by the Emperor Justinian (reigned 527-65). With Palestine and Sinai in Arab hands, monastic pre-eminence in the Byzantine Empire passed in the ninth century to the monastery of Studios in Constantinople. St Theodore, who became Abbot here in 799, reactivated the community and revised its rule, attracting vast numbers of monks.

Since the tenth century the chief centre of orthodox monasticism has been Athos, a rocky peninsula in North Greece jutting out into the Aegean and culminating at its tip in a peak 6,670 feet high. Known as 'the Holy Mountain', Athos contains twenty 'ruling' monasteries and a large number of smaller houses, as well as hermits' cells; the whole peninsula is given up entirely to monastic settlements, and in the days of its greatest expansion it is said to have contained nearly forty thousand monks. The Great Lavra, the oldest of the twenty ruling monasteries, has by itself produced 26 Patriarchs and more than 144 bishops: this gives some idea of the importance of Athos in Orthodox history.

There are no 'Orders' in Orthodox monasticism. In the west a monk belongs to the Cartusian, the Cistercian, or some other Order; in the east he is simply a member of the one great fellowship which includes all monks and nuns, although of course he is attached to a particular monastic house. Western writers sometimes refer to Orthodox monks as 'Basilian monks' or 'monks of the Basilian Order', but this is not correct. St Basil is an important figure in Orthodox monasticism, but he founded no Order, and although two of his works are known as the **Longer Rules** and the **Shorter Rules**, these are in no sense comparable to the **Rule** of St Benedict.

A characteristic figure in Orthodox monasticism is the 'elder' or 'old man' (Greek **gerōn**; Russian **starets**, plural **startsy**). The elder is a monk of spiritual discernment and wisdom, whom others - either monks or people in the world - adopt as their guide and spiritual director. He is sometimes a priest, but often a lay monk; he receives no special ordination or appointment to the work of eldership, but is guided to it by the direct inspiration of the Spirit. A woman as well as a man may be called to this ministry, for Orthodoxy has its 'spiritual mothers' as well as its 'spiritual fathers'. The elder sees in a concrete and practical way what the will of God is in relation to each person who comes to consult him: this is the elder's special gift or **charisma**. The earliest and most celebrated of the monastic **startsy** was St Antony himself. The first part of his life, from eighteen to fifty-five, he spent in withdrawal and solitude; then, though still living in the desert, he abandoned his life of strict enclosure, and began to receive visitors. A group of disciples gathered around him, and besides these disciples there was a far larger circle of people who came, often from a long distance, to ask his advice; so great was the stream of visitors that, as Antony's biographer Athanasius put it, he became a physician to all Egypt. Antony has had many successors, and in most of them the same outward pattern of events is found - **a withdrawal in order to return**. A monk must first withdraw, and in silence must learn the truth about himself and God. Then, after this long and rigorous preparation in solitude, having gained the gifts of discernment which are required of an elder, he can open the door of his cell and admit the world from which formerly he fled.

†Bishop Kallistos (Timothy) Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (New York 1983)