

## The History of Coptic Monasticism

### Objectives

- Meaning and Honor of Monasticism
- Fathers of Monasticism and their Orders
- Development of Monasticism
- Women Monasticism

### References

- [http://www.suscopts.org/servantsprep/pdf/HIS/HIS101\\_christian\\_monasticism.pdf](http://www.suscopts.org/servantsprep/pdf/HIS/HIS101_christian_monasticism.pdf)

### Scriptural Verse

- “Jesus said to him: If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.” (Matthew 19:20-22)

### Lesson Outline

- Monachos – means alone: The monk practices asceticism as a mean of forsaking the body; out of love for God and developing self control while doing some form of manual labor.
- Monasticism is built on four principles: Chastity - Obedience - Poverty and Solitude (leaving the multitude to be with the one).
- Monasticism took a real form with St. Anthony when the Angel appeared to him and showed him the way of living. He used to live in solitude like all who preceded him and wanted to live a solitary Life with the Lord.
- The solitary life took place from the 1<sup>st</sup> century; some lived in tombs or small villages or went out to the desert while the virgins lived in their fathers’ house then in group homes.

### Type of Monasticism

**1- Antonian Monasticism:** “A group of disciples lived together under the guidance of a spiritual father. Each one lived in solitude and they gather on Saturdays and Sundays to confess, pray and have Communion and Spiritual Guidance and return back to their cells.

- St. Anthony’s group became the first monastic community and it was in the Eastern Desert in Egypt where his cave is and where the current monastery of St. Anthony is. Hence, St. Anthony became the “Father of Monks”.
- Pope Athanasius wrote his biography when he was in exile in France and his story influenced western monasticism. That’s why He is the father of all monks.
- The other monastic communities that developed were in the western desert under the Leadership of St. Macarius in Scetis (El Eskit) and St. Amoun in Nitrea.
- Other Monastic groups took place in Upper Egypt under the leadership of St. Palamon, St. Palladius, St. Jerome, St. John of Assiut and others.

**2- Cenobitism:** It is a communal order founded by St. Pachomius who saw that the harsh ascetic life was not meant for all monks. He established the first monastery and put rules for the communal life and put rules for abbots and abbesses.

- The Pachomian monastery was a little village protected from relations with the outside by a huge wall with only one door and a porter checking arrivals: this put a distance between it and the outside world. Thus it was a little world on its own and was well organized.
- In each house lived about forty brothers; all exercising the same craft; there was the house of bakers, the house of cooks, the house of cobblers; the house of scribes, etc.
- In each house the brothers lived under the authority of a housemaster, a 'superior' helped by a 'second'. Three or four houses formed a 'tribe'.
- A monastery was composed of 10 tribes; thus 30 or 40 houses each with 40 brothers adds up to more than a thousand monks in a monastery (1200-1400).
- At the head of each monastery there was an abbot and one or two stewards.
- There were 9 monasteries of men and 3 of women. Pachomius' sister Marie had founded a monastery for virgins near Tabennisi under his direction and was following the same rules. Two others followed, one near Tsmine and the other near Phbew.
- These 12 monasteries formed an Order governed by an Abbot General, St. Pachomius, and a head steward who lived at Phbew.
- Each year, all the monks gathered at Phbew to celebrate Easter, and in August to hold a sort of chapter of faults and reconciliation.
- By the time of his death in 345, there were 3000 monks living in Pachomian monasteries and by 400 AD there were 7000 monks.
- His form of monasticism was exported to Syria, Palestine, North Africa and Europe.
- It was adopted by St. Basil the great and also by St. Benedict who made modifications to it and took it to the West.
- He wrote his Rules in Coptic and they were translated by Palladius to Greek and by Jerome to Latin.

### **Some Aspects of Pachomian Spirituality**

- On his arrival in the monastery, the novice must first learn to read in order to learn certain passages of the Bible by heart so as to be able to meditate on them. The monk must meditate on the Word of God all the time, going to the Office, in the refectory or his cell, going to work and while at work.
- They shared everything in common - not only material goods but even one's own person by putting oneself at the service of others both concretely and physically.
- This idea of service - even of bondage - is the basis of Pachomian cenobitism and of its organization in houses with housemasters and subordinates. This bondage to one another also constituted the practical expression of a monk's imitation of the Lord Jesus Christ who became the servant of all.

- There were no privilege for the Abbot or any other superior or leader over any monk; they all serve and follow the same exact rules. This was the cause that there were no priests in the Pachomian Monastery from the monks because a priest must have a special honor.

**3- Anchoritism:** It was a mixture of the Pachomian and Antonian (Solitary life) and is founded by St. Shenouda the Archimandrite and had the following Characteristics

- Cenobitism was not mandatory, and solitude was encouraged.
- The novice spent a probationary period in certain houses outside the walls of the monasteries. A written undertaking was signed by the novice before he became a monk, and was recited by him before the brethren in the church.
- Every monastery was led by an abbot who answered to the Archimandrite, as the Abbot of all monasteries.
- Four general assemblies were held yearly where all monks, even the anchorites were present, to discuss the position of these institutions.
- Short prayers were recited by every group of monks before the beginning of their work. Private prayers consisted of psalms and Church hymns, which were recited in the cells under the guidance of the spiritual father. Common prayers were also performed by monks who assembled four times daily for this purpose, in the morning, noon, sunset, and at night. They assembled and departed in complete silence, thinking only of the prayers they have recited. Moreover, the Eucharistic liturgy was celebrated weekly.
- The families and all people who dwelt near the monasteries were permitted to visit the monasteries on Saturdays, attend the Vespers service, hear the sermon and participate with the monks in the Eucharistic liturgy on Sundays. The monks fed these multitudes and St. Shenouda himself preached to them.
- He established two schools in the White Monastery and encouraged the monks to be educated. Since he believed that education is the effective weapon against pagan customs, he felt responsible for the establishment of schools in the nearest villages.
- He made sure that each monk had some sort of profession that he used to serve the monks and laity such as teachers and doctors. They assisted in setting up farms, building churches and schools and educating them.
- They were seeing practical love is above all other monastic virtues: When the Blemye tribe raided and plundered the surrounding area of Akhmim capturing whole families, St. Shenouda went to the chief of the tribe and said to him, “Give me the people and you take the spoils”. The chief agreed and handed over twenty thousand people. He took them all into the monastery for three months and the monks looked after them. They paid special care to the sick, elderly and children. During their stay at the monastery 94 people died and 52 babies were born.

**The Women's Monastic Movement:** It went through three stages:

- Living an ascetic life at home: St. Phillips' daughters (Acts 21: 9).
- Houses of virgins under supervision: Pope Demetrius's wife, St. Anthony's sister.
- Nunneries; St. Pachomius' sister.

There were also examples of women who dressed up as monks to gain entry into the monasteries such as St. Hilary and St. Marina.

### **Monasticism Abroad**

- Many saints came to Egypt from abroad and met with the Egyptian monks and wrote about them. Their writings influenced western monks. e.g. Palladius, John Cassian, St. Jerome.
- Some Coptic monks went abroad to establish monastic life in Armenia, Persia, and northern Arabia, Ethiopia, and Cyprus.
- Coptic missionaries reached as far as the British Isles long before the arrival of St. Augustine of Canterbury in 597 AD.

### **Conclusion**

- Organized monasticism started in Egypt with St. Anthony (Father of all monks)
- Coptic Monasticism influenced the Monasticism of the whole Christian world. Stanley Lane-Poole, a historian, wrote: "We do not know yet how much we in the British Isles owe to these remote hermits. It is more than probable that to them we are indebted for the first preaching of the Gospel in England".

### **Activities / Discussion Points**

- Make a comparison between the Monasticism of St. Pachomius and that of St. Shenouda the archimandrite and try to find which regime is followed in these days.