

# **“Church History: Heroes, Heretics & Holy Wars”**

## **Sunday School Notes**

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### **CLASS 6 – Monasticism**

The word “monk” means solitary. Many initially leave society to be alone, but then join groups and live in communities. Hindu writings contain legends about holy monks and their ascetic rules from 2,400 BC, so the idea of monasticism certainly didn’t originate with Christianity.

Following Constantine’s protection of Christianity, the model Christian was no longer the courageous bishop dragged before wild beasts in a Roman arena. He was now a lonely hermit in the forsaken Egyptian desert defying the devil. Many of their stories were written down and they are referred to as the “desert fathers.”

**Antony of Egypt is considered the first monk, the father of Christian monasticism, born in 250.** Trying to obey Christ’s words to the rich young ruler to “sell your possessions & give to the poor”, at 20 yrs. of age he gave away all his wealth, and lived in a tomb for 15 years before moving to an abandoned fort where he lived on scraps that people threw over the wall to him. He believed possessions, family and anything else besides God, got in the way of loving God. For the last 40 years of his life he set up a community at Mount Colzim; he lived to the age of 105. Athanasius wrote *The Life of St. Anthony*. Hundreds of men imitated him.

Monasticism became very attractive because of the decline of commitment and piety after Constantine’s legalizing of Christianity. Hermits often fled the corrupt institution of the church.

**320 – A Former soldier named Pachomius instituted the first Christian monastery.** He had been a companion of Anthony’s, though much younger. He established a regulated common life with the goal of the group to be self-sufficient. Set times for monks to eat, labor and worship. Strict discipline. Kind of like a lifelong mission trip (without the fast food and basketball). Eleven communities following his rule when he died in 346. His followers are the first “Christian monks.”

**Fourth Century – Basil (died on 379)** – designed the Rule of Discipline that Greek Orthodox monasticism is organized with to this day.

**The pioneer in Monastic Scholarship is Jerome (340-420).** Began as a hermit in the Syrian desert, but needed intellectual discipline to keep his mind off sexual temptation.

**405 – Jerome Completes the Vulgate** (*vulgas* = common). Not a purely scholarly endeavor: Pope Damasus wanted the Western Roman church to gain power over the East, so he wanted Latin to dominate over Greek. Jerome was his secretary, and one of the greatest living scholars, began working on it in 382, finished his task 23 yrs. later. He originally used the Greek version of the Old Testament, called the Septuagint, but then decided to work from the original Hebrew. He translated the Apocrypha, but made it clear he did not believe they were canonical.

Highly regarded, used for a century, even Luther used. But became so sacred that translating to other common tongues became prohibited (which makes the “Vulgate = vulgar tongue” ironic).

**Benedict of Nursia** was born in the late 5<sup>th</sup> century about 85 miles NE of Rome. Disgusted at Roman immorality when he went to study there, he left and lived as a hermit high in a lonely cave for 3 years just studying Scripture. A local monastery chose him as their abbot, but he was so strict that some of the monks tried to poison him! @530 – he moved SE of Rome and started the most famous monastery in Europe at Monte Cassino, and wrote his Rule organizing monasticism for men and women- a good mix of discipline and labor (make your own clothing & furniture, grow your own food), but with an appreciation for people’s weaknesses. He started the Benedictine order of monks- one could try out the lifestyle for up to a year and leave anytime freely, but after a year you took the 3 vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and bound yourself to that life permanently. 7 worship services during the day, including a 2 am vigil. He was called “The Great Reformer of Western Monasticism.”

**909 – Monastery Established at Cluny.** As we studied the corrupt papacy of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, at the same time there was a monastery at Cluny in France that pushed for piety, reform and peace. Though monasteries had been largely independent, Cluny became the head of a large group of monasteries.

**1115 Bernard Finds the Monastery at Clairvaux.** Out of the Benedictine monks, Bernard took 30 monks with him to start a new monastery at Clairvaux (France). From there he established 65 new houses. He strongly encouraged orthodoxy & piety in the medieval church & countered men like Peter Abelard who were doubters. He even chose between 2 popes & vigorously supported the 2<sup>nd</sup> Crusade. Wrote the hymn “O Sacred Head Now Wounded.”

TWO GROUPS THAT SPRANG UP AT THE SAME TIME:

**1170-1221 – Dominic, founder of Dominicans.** The formation of the Dominicans sees monasteries being formed as missionary/evangelistic groups. A group called the Cathars had split from the RC church; too hard to describe right now except that they were very moral and the Catholic church hated them immediately. But Dominic thought if he would win them back to the Catholic church, he needed to be as moral as they were. He formed his order in southern France, then sent Dominicans all over the place as missionaries and teachers at universities.

**1181-1226 – Francis, founder of Franciscans.** The son of a wealthy cloth merchant in Assisi, Italy. Captured in a battle with a neighboring town, held as a prisoner of war for a year; became very ill. After his release, he passed a leper, whom he had previously detested; now he saw the face of Christ. Jumped down from his horse, kissed the leper, gave him money and took him home. He renounced his wealth and walked away from his family, dedicating himself to a life of poverty. Began to preach in deserted chapels, gathered a following (up to 3,000 at one point). Drew up ground rules for the Franciscan order. He even went to Rome for papal blessing. They were missionaries too- travelling in pairs. Though Luther would later criticize Franciscans for teaching salvation by good works, they were fighting the same enemy - a church that had forgotten the Scriptures and just preserved it’s own status and wealth. Wrote the hymn “All Creatures of our God and King.”

Dominicans emphasized learning and doctrine, Franciscans emphasized obedience.

**1182-1253 – Clare, founder of The Poor Clares.** She was a friend of Francis’ and her’s was the 2<sup>nd</sup> Franciscan order established on Palm Sunday, 1212. The Rule of St. Clair was written and followed, approved the day before her death in 1253 by the Pope. There are still 20,000 Clare nuns in 75 countries today. Not the first monastery for women, but the most extreme in poverty.

The Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century argued against monasticism. Martin Luther, who had been an Augustinian monk, got married and declared war on the cloister. Luther and the Reformers criticized monasticism for making two roads to God, a higher and a lower. But the only way to God is by faith in Christ.

Scriptures that seem to support monasticism:

I John 2:15-17 – the world is evil

Romans 12:2 – do not be conformed to this world

John 17:15-16 – Jesus' followers not to be of the world

But Monasticism is built on a Platonic, false view of humanity: the soul is chained to the flesh as a prisoner to a corpse. Marriage and material things are evil, keep you from God, rather than being blessings that can be used to glorify God.

The extremes of monasticism do not teach the Christian life well. To reject greed and opulent wealth, we need to have a Biblical understanding of good & godly stewardship, not declare poverty. To reject sexual immorality does not need to lead to forsaking marriage, but to finding a godly marriage and establishing Christian families.

Positives of Monasticism: preserved the writings of the Latin Church Fathers and masterpieces of Roman literature; was the only place for study during the Middle Ages when there weren't many schools. Also places of protection and rest in the middle of constant warfare.

Quote from *Turning Points* by Mark Noll, p. 79:

"If we read the Scripture in our native languages, we benefit from a tradition of biblical translation inspired by the monk Jerome. If we sing together the praises of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we follow where the hymn-writing monks Gregory and Bernard of Clairvaux led the way. If we pursue theology, we inevitably find ourselves indebted to the monks Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. If we pray for the success of Christian missions, we ask for blessing upon enterprises pioneered by the monks Patrick, Boniface, Cyril and his brother, Methodius, and Raymond Lull. If we are interested in the past record of Christianity in English-speaking areas of the world, we cultivate a historical concern begun by a monk, the Venerable Bede. If we glory in the goodness that God imparted to the created world, we follow where the friar Francis of Assisi blazed the trail.

Monasticism was never a perfect answer to the question of how to live the Christian life. Its impact, nonetheless, cannot be underestimated. And that impact has been largely for the good."

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