

Medieval Monasticism – A Light in the Dark Ages

A summary of early medieval life:

- “From the fifth to the eighth century western Europe was swept by a series of invasions that brought chaos to the land, and destroyed a great deal of the learning of antiquity. The invaders brought with them two religious challenges that until then could have seemed to be a matter of the past: paganism and Arianism. Eventually, both pagans and Arians were converted to the faith of those whom they had conquered. This was the Nicene faith, also called “orthodox” or “catholic.” In the process of that conversion, and also in the effort to preserve the wisdom of ancient times, two institutions played a central role, and thus were strengthened. These two institutions were monasticism and the papacy.” (*The Story of Christianity*, p. 238)
- Invaders to Italy and Rome (the heart of the Western Christian Empire) came from all sides and each brought their own challenges of differing religious beliefs, political turmoil, and disruptions to the life of the church and how people were able to practice their faith in God.

The changing landscape of power and control:

- As invading tribes took control, their established religious beliefs became the *de facto* religion of the region.
 - Arianism – belief that Christ (God’s Incarnate Word) was the first creation of God and was not co-eternal with God, questioning the Trinity and the divinity of Christ
 - Donatists – belief that only righteous and faithful bishops/ministers could ordain others and confer sacraments to the people
 - Religious questions between the Western and the Eastern Churches (schism – 1054)
- General population “inherited” the religious beliefs of the conquerors:
 - Charlemagne’s victories and baptisms: “By 785...the final resistance of the Saxons was broken, and thousands were forcibly baptized. This was an important step, for many Saxons seem to have believed that in accepting baptism they were forsaking their gods, who in turn would forsake them. Thus, once baptized, one had no god to turn to but the Christian God. In any case, these forced baptisms had such results that soon there were Christian leaders among the Saxons, who then employed similar methods for the conversion of their own neighbors.” (*The Story of Christianity*, p. 267-68)
- Papacy:
 - The Bishop of Rome also experienced times of great power (probably the most powerful under Leo the Great and Gregory the Great); and times of great corruption and decay of influence (the least powerful during the 9th and 10th centuries)
 - Complicated to explain, but the power of the papacy and the centrality of Rome led to many people desiring to control this power, some with success and some without success

Importance of the monasteries:

- Centers of learning during times of illiteracy (even among the ruling classes)
 - Example: “Since Ireland was bypassed by the wave of invasions that swept Europe, her monasteries became one of the main sources from which the territories within the ancient Roman Empire regained much of what had been lost during the invasions.” (*The Story of Christianity*, p. 235)
- Monasteries were susceptible to corruption as well, particularly some of the larger monasteries that held vast amounts of land (land = power)
 - However, there were often reforming movements that continued to “cleanse” the monastic system and continue to ideals of the movement
 - Cluny (eastern France): a reform movement founded by Duke William III of Aquitaine and its first abbot, Berno, in 910 and continued its reform measures well in to the 12th century. Influence continued to decline through the Reformation and the French Revolution.
 - Benedictine ideals led to stability during the tumultuous times of medieval period.

Benedict’s Rule

- Benedict of Nursia (480-547)
- Monasticism existed for centuries prior to Benedict, but his *Rule* prescribed a manner of life that encouraged community and recognized that living under harsh, ascetic rules did not open the monastic way of life to those who might otherwise embrace following Christ in this way
- Important aspects to Benedict’s Rule:
 - Permanence
 - Obedience
 - Physical labor
 - Prayer (8 times throughout the day: Matins, Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, and Compline)
 - Spirit of monastic life (community, rules and hospitality to others)
- Guidelines for Christian living (Chapter 4)
 - Love the Lord your God; love your neighbor and your enemies
 - Self-discipline in life; avoid excesses of life and give to the needy
 - Humility, repentance and simple living
 - Place your hope in God and always remember you do not know when you will be called to meet God...keep your mortality in front of you always
 - Delight in reading Scripture and live life by fulfilling God’s commandments
 - Live with steady perseverance and stability in community life (*Wisdom from the Monastery*, p. 21-24)
- Ch 72 “*The good spirit which should inspire monastic life*” (*Wisdom*, p. 96-97)
 - “It is easy to recognize the bitter spirit of wickedness which creates a barrier to God’s grace and opens the way to the evil of hell. But equally there is a good spirit which frees us from evil ways and brings us closer to God and eternal life. It is this latter spirit that all who follow the monastic way of life should strive to cultivate, spurred on by fervent love. By following this path they try to be first to show respect to one another with the greatest patience in tolerating weaknesses of body or character. They should even be ready to outdo each other in mutual obedience so that no one in the monastery aims at personal advantage but is rather concerned for the good of others.

Thus the pure love of one another as of one family should be their ideal. As for God they should have a profound and loving reverence for him. They should love their abbot or abbess with sincere and unassuming affection. They should value nothing whatever above Christ himself and may he bring us all together to eternal life.”

Some recommendations for developing a *Personal Rule* based on the Benedictine Rule

- Understand the elemental precepts of the Benedictine Rule and prayerfully understand your life and your circumstances
 - Stability – finding a time in your day that contributes to your success
 - Obedience – striving to remain committed to your desire to follow your *Rule*
 - Physical labor – finding God in activity (gardening, cooking, walking, cleaning, etc)
 - Prayer – quiet time with God through a practice of prayer (see below)
 - Spirit of monastic life – community, hospitality, finding God in all things of life
- Prayer
 - Reading Scripture – spending time reading through selected texts or Daily Office
 - Lectio Divina – a four-part practice of prayerfully meditating on Scripture
 - Prayer Beads
 - Many additional forms of prayer – find a practice that is practical and spiritually nourishing: you need both aspects of prayer to remain committed to the discipline

Information obtained from the following sources:

The Story of Christianity, Vol. 1: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation, by Justo L. González. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1984).
ISBN: 9780060633158

Wisdom from the Monastery: The Rule of St. Benedict for everyday life, by Patrick Barry, Richard Yeo, Kathleen Norris, and others. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005).
ISBN: 9780814631539