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THE SOCIAL ORGANIZATION AND DAILY LIFE OF MONKS IN EARLY CHRISTIAN MONASTICISM

Abstract. *This article examines the daily life and social organization of monks in early and medieval Christian monasticism, with particular attention to the Egyptian monastic tradition of the fourth and fifth centuries. It describes the regime of communal and individual worship, the canonical hours of prayer and the methods used to determine them, manual labor as a form of asceticism, the organization of monastic assemblies and discipline, the distinction between the anchoritic and cenobitic ways of life, and the monks' food, dwellings, health care, and burial customs. It concludes with observations on how Christian asceticism has changed in modern times.*

Keywords: *monasticism, monks, asceticism, monastery, canonical hours, worship, Psalter, anchorites, cenobites, Egypt, Christianity.*

INTRODUCTION

In early and medieval Christian monasticism, the monastery was not only a place of worship but also a complex social institution with its own rhythm of prayer, labor, discipline, and communal life. The present article surveys the principal features of monks' social activities – their devotional regime, their daily routine, and their forms of self-organization – drawing chiefly on accounts of Egyptian monastic life in the fourth and fifth centuries.

MAIN PART

In monasteries, a monk was required to devote his entire life to ceaseless worship. Worship could be communal (the liturgy and the reading of psalms) or individual. In monasteries that followed the Rule of St. Benedict or other traditions, particular attention

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was also paid to the monks' physical labor. Engaging in labor was not only a means of obtaining food for subsistence but also a form of asceticism that helped to overcome idleness and despair, which were considered among the chief dangers facing a monk.

Monks were required to eat and sleep at times fixed by the abbot. They were awakened for the night office by the sound of a bell. Such calls gathered them for prayer seven times a day. In the monastery the year, the week, and the day were arranged according to a particular division. The basis of the monks' worship was the Psalter², consisting of 150 psalms. A monk was required to complete the reading of all 150 psalms over the course of a week. The monks' daily schedule differed according to the season (winter and summer).

In general, the monks' hours of prayer were distributed as follows:

- matins (matutinae) – the office at midnight (beginning at 00:30);
- lauds (laudes) – at the time of the first rays of the sun;
- the first hour (prima) – after sunrise;
- the third hour (tertia) – around 9 a.m.;
- the sixth hour (sexta) – at midday;
- the ninth hour (nona) – around 3 p.m.;
- vespers (vesperae) – before sunset;
- compline (completorium) – between sunset and darkness.

To regulate the monks' life and the order of worship precisely, the determination of time was required. The most difficult was determining the time of the night office. During the day, time was determined by the sun and shadows, and in the evening by the stars; but in cloudy weather these methods did not help. Under such conditions, various devices were used to determine the time – sandglasses, complex water mechanisms (clepsydras), candles, and later the mechanical clock, which was regarded as a true revolution. The bells calling to prayer also varied: they were rung differently according to the assigned office – for example, once for the first hour and the night office, and three times for the third, sixth, and ninth offices. In addition, monasteries had a wooden board (tabula), which a monk struck to announce that someone was on his deathbed. Monks living in separate cells gathered for communal worship on Saturday and Sunday, and on the remaining days prayed in their own cells; yet every monk was obliged to read 12

² Psalter (Greek ψαλτήριον, from the name of a musical instrument; in Judaism, Tehillim, “to praise”) – a book within the Tanakh and the Old Testament, consisting of 150 or 151 psalms.

psalms in the evening and at night. These were the covenants of the ascetics who lived in the earliest periods of Christianity (Cassian, 2000, II.4–12). In the course of reading the psalms, a single “Alleluia”³ was sung after every six psalms. On Saturdays and Sundays the monks gathered in the church for the “sacred mysteries.” In the Egyptian monasteries, communal worship was held twice a day – in the evening and at night. The night office began before cockcrow and continued until sunrise; in the long nights of winter it continued until the fourth cockcrow. A total of 12 psalms were sung at the offices. If there were two singers, each sang 6 psalms; if three, 4 psalms each; if four, 3 psalms each – there were never more than four. The listeners sat on low benches. At the end of each psalm the singer recited a prayer, at which all rose, prayed standing, and bowed (Kazansky, 1872:26).

After the 12 psalms had been sung, readings were taken from the Old and New Testaments. At the Saturday and Sunday office, however, readings were taken only from the New Testament (the Epistles and Acts of the Apostles, or the Gospel). The office ended with a threefold prayer and genuflection. On Saturdays and Sundays the Eucharist (communion) was celebrated at the third hour. All the monks went to church barefoot, wearing the garments they had worn when first received into monastic life; as they entered, the deacons washed their feet in a special basin. During the Eucharist the monks removed their belts and mantle (milotion), and each was given separate bread (the body of Christ) and wine (the blood of Christ) by the deacon. To give communion to sick monks, the clergy came to their cells; monks who lived far from the church or who had set out on a journey took the Eucharist with them.

After the daytime office, special gatherings were sometimes arranged. At these, the food consumed included alms given to the monastery by lay people and produce such as the food that peasants donated to the monks at harvest time. The table was adorned; the monks offered some of their own belongings as gifts to those newly received into the community, and the belongings of deceased monks were distributed. Because the table at these gatherings differed from the monks’ usual fare, most monks preferred not to take part and returned to their cells once the office had ended (Kazansky, 1872:26).

On Sundays, assemblies of the monks were held in the monasteries. These were led by the monastery’s most senior presbyter, and matters concerning all the monks

³ Alleluia (Hebrew halelu Yah, “praise Yah”; Latin alleluia) – the call by the one leading the service for the congregation to praise God.

were discussed. At the monastery on Mount Nitria in the fourth century there were eight presbyters, but only one had the right to lead the assembly; the rest had no right to express an opinion or to make decisions (Palladius, 1965, ch. 7). The following matters, principally, were discussed at such assemblies:

- the appointment of a presbyter;
- questions relating to faith and doctrine;
- sometimes the assemblies were devoted to particular questions concerning fasting;
- passing judgment on monks deemed to have sinned.

The most severe punishment imposed on a monk was expulsion from the ranks of the monks. However, imposing such a punishment, or passing judgment on the faults of monks, was not favored by most of the founders of monasticism. For example, St. Anthony says: “My own remaining sins are many – shall I then judge and punish my brother for his slight sin? It is better that I beseech the Creator to forgive my own sins” (Kazansky, 1872:29).

Chroniclers of the fourth and fifth centuries distinguish two types of monastic life in Egypt: the anchorites and the cenobites. The anchorites separated from the monastic community and, withdrawing from everyone, lived for decades in the desolate, remote places of the desert without seeing a human being. They ate wild plants and obtained drinking water from the dew that fell on stones and plants. Most anchorites did not live permanently in one place but moved about. In the early period, the “fathers of the monastery” visited them from time to time to watch over them. Sometimes a state of temptation was observed among the anchorites; in such a case the monk was brought to the church, where the “fathers of the church” poured water into a basin, washed their hands in it, and poured that water over the monk – regarding this as a way of being freed from temptation.

Of the monks who lived in the desert, some made their dwelling in caves, others in ruins and tombs; but most built for themselves a small separate dwelling (cell, skete) from stones, brick, clay, or leaves. There are accounts that the cells of famous monks such as Macarius of Alexandria, Hilarion, and St. Anthony were very small – so narrow that one could not even stretch out one’s legs. Ordinarily, however, the monks’ dwellings consisted of several rooms, including an entrance passage and rooms for food and for storing tools.

Together with worship, the monks also engaged in physical labor. For example, apart from worship, the Egyptian monks wove baskets from rope and tree branches in order to meet their need for food and to avoid being a burden to anyone. Through manual labor they also helped travelers, the poor, and prisoners. Their occupations protected them from falling into various temptations as well. But the principal activity remained worship: even while working, they repeated prayers and invocations.

Monks living in communal monasteries had, in addition to their cells, belongings of their own and small holdings. Some saved up flour or other products as a yearly food supply, as well as work tools, books, and even a small amount of money; for this reason the sources mention that thieves plundered the cells (Kazansky, 1872:29). But these needs did not serve to bind the monks to the world. They tried to limit their needs and chose the simplest forms of manual labor: they wove baskets, sieves, and lattices from palm branches; some made pottery, others candles, and among them there were also scribes. There were likewise monks who engaged in farming. To sell their products, the monks sometimes went out themselves (Kazansky, 1872:48). When a need arose, they borrowed products from one another. On Sundays and on the days commemorating the martyrs, they did not engage in labor.

The monks' usual food consisted mainly of vegetables, greens, bread, fruit, and small salted fish. Liquid dishes were prepared from legumes, very rarely with oil or honey added. Soft bread was considered a sign of luxury, and large communities had bakeries; but in most monasteries paximadion (a dry, small bread made from barley flour) was consumed. Because it was hard, it had to be soaked in water before being eaten. Consuming two paximadia a day was considered the norm for a monk, and they could be stored for a long time. A monk was not permitted to eat before the ninth daytime hour; at the ninth hour, after the office and the singing of the psalms, they ate. On Wednesdays and Fridays they consumed no food at all. Most of the elders (startsy) did not eat cooked food. The monks' sleep usually lasted three to four hours.

Monks who fell ill made use of a physician's help; the monastery on Nitria had physicians of its own. When a monk fell ill, they went to his cell and gave the necessary care. A monk on his deathbed was surrounded by all the members of the community, who wished to hear his last words, and memorial gatherings were held for those who had died (Kazansky, 1872:48).

CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, it may be said that in early Christian asceticism the human body was regarded as an obstacle to spiritual perfection, and feelings of contempt and hatred toward it remained predominant until the medieval period. In those eras, mortifying the body was one of the principal aims of monastic life.

The modern way of life has also influenced Christian ascetic practices to a certain degree. Today, Christian asceticism focuses more on spiritual practice than on inflicting physical hardship on the body, and the monks of today attach greater importance to intellectual asceticism. For this reason, when present-day monks speak of asceticism, they have in mind more a treatment of the spirit and of spirituality.

Despite the changes described above, the basic principles of asceticism have been preserved in monastic life and still constitute the meaning of a pious life for the devout.

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