

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 36

St. Benedict, Part One – Background to Monasticism

Matthew 13:1-23 records Jesus telling the “Parable of the Sower” and then explaining it to his disciples. In the parable, a farmer sows seed and the seed lands in four different places. Some seeds land on a path where birds eat it immediately; some seeds land on rocky places where healthy roots cannot grow because of insufficient soil. This seed sprouts quickly but dies just as quick. Other seed falls in an area full of thorns that choke out the sprouting plants. Lastly, some seed falls in good soil resulting in a prolific crop.

Jesus explained that his parable concerned the kingdom of God. Some hear the gospel but do not accept it. These are the ones who are on the path where birds devour the seed. Others are lacking roots. These hear the word, accept it, but fall away when trouble and persecution set in. Those who hear the word but are in the thorny ground have the truth choked from them by worldliness and as a result bear no fruit. Those who hear and understand the word like good soil receiving seed, become fruitful in the kingdom. That parable, of course, applied to people living at the time Jesus taught it. We can also see that the parable applies to us today. Similarly, as we study church history, the parable clearly applies as well.

Unfortunately, as Christianity became legal and then the official religion of the Roman Empire, many who were “of faith” seemed to live, in parable terms, in the three poorer soil conditions. How do we explain this in terms of the parable? Certainly, there are people who claim the faith, but never really accept the word (Jesus). It became easy to call one’s self a Christian with all its new social benefits without ever entering into a relationship with God through Christ. Of course, many others accept Christ, but choose either not to live in his truth, or live unfruitful lives because they hold to a truth too diluted by worldliness.

In some ways, these problems became more pronounced in Roman times because a great deal of the world, which had previously been pagan, and was coming to faith from a pagan background. The concepts of right and wrong were vastly different. Idolatry and polytheism were not easily supplanted overnight! The Roman world valued as virtues and rights much that Christianity recognized as sin. After conversion, there was a lot of mentoring and discipling needed.

This week, our goal is to establish the background for understanding St. Benedict and his contributions to the church. To do fairness to Benedict, we must first put him into his historical context. In that regard, we will consider the effects of the “secularization of the church,” meaning that God’s church was becoming more

and more a part of the Empire and a worldly institution as opposed to something strictly set apart from culture and government.

We will then briefly bring Benedict into his historical context within the monastic movement. We will go back to the time of St. Antony (covered a number of lessons ago) and trace the further developments of monasticism up to Benedict.

This week, our goal will be to understand Benedict specifically in both his life and his legacy.

SECULARIZATION OF THE CHURCH

The secularization of the church had many effects, both good and bad. If we focus on the secularization arising after Constantine gave legal authority to the church, then we see some great strides for society as Constantine and others sought to bring the Empire into the same path as the church. Perhaps, this is no where more evident than in the laws passed.

It is not surprising that Constantine the Great as the first Christian Emperor was the first to pass a significant number of laws that showed a Christian influence on the state. For example, in 321, Constantine passed the laws making Sunday a day of rest. Under Constantine, most activities were made illegal on Sunday out of respect for the resurrection of Jesus and the recognition that people should spend Sunday in worship rather than work. There were exceptions to the rule, including farming and tending vineyards, where Sundays were considered critical work days that could not be lost. But, Sunday readily became a day for people to spend in worship and consideration of the resurrection of Jesus.

There was a general set of very important laws not clearly traced to faith that came about as a result of Christianity's influence on the government and the people. These laws centered on the treatment of people with justice and equality. Before the influence and teaching of Christian ethics, equality existed for Roman citizens, but that was about it! Certain races of people and people of ignoble birth were considered truly inferior, both physically and intellectually. There was no concept or idea that people are the same, regardless of birth or station in life. Before Christian ethics, it was not unseemly to place people into gladiatorial fights where they would lose their life because those fighting were considered only as valuable as other animals. Similarly, the courts were not available for all people, but only for those in an adequate status in life to justify fair treatment. It was the Christian faith that brought into the Roman world the idea that one God created all people and made them in his image. As such, all people are inherently valuable and entitled to justice and fairness.

An extension of this came in the way women were treated. In the non-Christian, Roman world, as well as the heathen world, most considered women property. Now, there were always exceptions to this notion. There were a few women who stood out and some who even asserted themselves (usually through some male) as rulers. As a gender, women were not respected nor had they any legal rights. Again, it was Constantine who gave women the right to hold property. He also stopped the law allowing women to be brought before a public tribunal to address the modesty of their dress. Constantine introduced death as punishment in certain rape cases (of widows and of virgins consecrated to God). He also made adultery laws significantly broader¹ and eliminated the legality of multiple wives (concubinage). The later Christian Emperor Theodosius was the first to allow women limited guardianship rights over children. He also tried to interrupt the profitable prostitution trade (though unsuccessfully).

Also in the family area, Constantine changed the laws on the rights of fathers over their children. For example, Constantine took away a father's right to kill his own child. Fathers were still allowed to abandon their children and sell them into slavery, however. It took several more centuries before these atrocities were stopped.

In this vein, the whole area of slavery is worth mentioning. Once Christian ethics began to take hold, many started to question the propriety of slavery. It is worth noting that a number of influential teachers in the church not only freed their own slaves, but also taught others to do so.² Unfortunately, many powerful people in the church saw things differently and actually were large slave owners. To these

¹ Prior to Constantine, adultery was defined only as illicit intercourse with a woman who was married to a free citizen. Its punishment stemmed not as much from the idea of an extra-marital affair as from the interference with the property of a Roman citizen. Under Constantine, the definition was broadened considerably.

² None of these early church fathers came out and taught against slavery as an institution. The closest was probably John Chrysostom (whom we studied in an earlier lesson). Chrysostom taught that all men were made equal, and before the fall, there was nothing that would justify any type of slavery. But, even Chrysostom believed that the fall brought about three areas of discipline and punishment that changed the rights of people. He taught that people fell under governing authority, women became subject to men, and slaves came into subject to masters, all as a divine discipline. At least Chrysostom went the extra step and asserted that Christ taught that the fullest responsibility of the one in authority is to love the one in service fully. This view results in liberation of the slave as well as responsible behavior toward women and the governed. While Chrysostom never outright called for Christians to release all slaves, he did rail against those who held slaves for "luxury" reasons. He also taught that the New Testament church in Jerusalem freed all of their own slaves. Other church fathers we have studied who argued and taught that Christians should responsibly free slaves include Ambrose and Augustine.

people, Christian virtue was found in one's treatment of slaves, not in the absence of slavery.

Another area where Christianity changed the culture and the laws concerned the gladiatorial combats. Of course, where entire races and groups of people are considered so alien, so inferior in intellect and soul that they are really thought of no differently than animals, one can see how those people might be put into animal roles in fighting and arena shows. It was the Second Century when the Church fathers began teaching against this atrocity. Even Constantine, however, put on displays of human death in public spectacle, although this was early in his reign. However, in 325 (the same year he convened the Council of Nicea to issue orthodoxy on the divinity of Christ), Constantine issued a law that put restrictions on gladiatorial combat. Finally, in 404, Honorius abolished the bloody combat of human versus human in gladiator shows for good. He did so after a monk named Telemachus threw himself into the arena from the stands to protest the bloody spectacle. The monk, to the horror of those watching, was torn limb from limb. The final end of human versus beast shows was never passed in the Western Empire. In fact, it still lives on today in the form of bull fights in the Spanish portion of Western civilization.

In addition to the ways the secularization of Christianity permeated the legal system and brought about good changes, there were other advantages that secularization brought to the church itself. The church became treated as a corporate entity. As such, the church could own property and exist, in a sense, as its own person. This is a right that has continued into Western civilization today.

Under Constantine, there was an initial release of clergy from a number of normal obligations of other people in the Empire. For example, clergy were not required to pay most taxes. Nor were clergy pressed into military duty or lower manual labor jobs. Certain of these rights were removed (especially that of limited taxes) when it became apparent that many were joining the clergy not because of "calling" but rather as part of a tax dodge!

Constantine gave a number of properties to the church. He also built a great number of buildings which were given to the church as well. During this time, the church became a major property holder.

A number of these advantages to the church while seemingly positive on their face, actually had negative results. As already referenced, the tax laws produced a number of "clergy" who were no more interested in the matters of God than the man in the moon! More subtlety, however, even the laws that enriched the church through property holdings had negative implications. For example, many saw no

need to tithe because the church had a great deal of wealth from the state itself or from large benefactors such as Constantine.

As the clergy started receiving benefits (as well at times outright funding) from the state, we see a number of people who, as Augustine would write, sought Jesus for profit rather than for Jesus. On a larger scale, we also see a number of churches famous for their opulence, rather than their austerity and service to mankind. A number of the wonderful people we have studied so far tried to rein this in, even selling unnecessarily extravagant property of the church to feed and tend the sick and poor.

As the church took on its new role in society, perhaps the most distressing, yet logical effect, came from the increases in “professors” as opposed to those truly faithful. By “professors,” we are not concerned with college teachers! We are talking about those who profess a faith they do not genuinely possess. For example, in the military, starting with Constantine, soldiers were to proclaim the following prayer by memory on a certain signal:

You alone we know as God, You are the King we acknowledge, You are the help we summon. By you we have won our victories, through you we have overcome our enemies. To you we render thanks for the good things past, you also we hope for as giver of those to come. To you we all come to supplicate for our Emperor Constantine and for his God beloved Sons: That he may be kept safe and victorious for us in long, long life we plead.³

As more and more people came into the church out of society’s prompting, a clear dilution in devotion and actions among the churched is historically apparent.

What would biblically be considered rampant sin was often commonplace among many who called themselves “Christians.” We can readily see the warning of Jesus about many who will come to him and call him “Lord,” yet truly never knew him (Lk 6:46).

RISE OF MONASTICISM

Against this background of verbal affirmation of faith, with lives of sin and disregard for the holy, comes the rise of monasticism. We have already set out the life of St. Antony in an earlier lesson. As a father of monasticism, Antony withdrew into the desert and attempted to live a life of purity, struggling against the demons of his life usually in solitude from the world. While Antony would

³ Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, Book 4, 20. Cameron and Hall translation (Clarendon Press 1999).

engage the world and teach, he spent most of his life in isolation rather than interaction.

We call the lifestyle Antony chose as one of a “hermit.” Our word “hermit” comes from the Greek *eremites* (ερημιτης) which means “desert.” Another term used frequently in writings about hermiting is “anchoritism.” This comes from the Greek *anachoreo* (αναχωρητης) which means “to retire” (from human society).

Antony is considered the founder or father of “eremitical monasticism.” By that it is meant that he is the founder of that aspect of monasticism where most time is spent in isolation. This branch of monasticism was geographically located in the early church in areas where one could live alone more readily, especially the desert regions of northern Egypt and the Middle East. Many of these eremitical monastics would live apart from others and come together on Saturdays and Sunday for worship. Others would meet daily to recite scripture and sing hymns together. They would also periodically participate in general conferences where they would share and fellowship together in worship, as well as discussion of certain issues that were important to the church.

Gradually, more and more of those who chose to find greater purity for themselves from isolation rather than in the frustrating secularized world of the church, started to band together. These people joined a common life (in Greek we have the words *koinos* (κοινος) for “common” and *bios* (βιος) for “life.” Put together, these words become what in English is “cenobitism” or a cloister life.⁴

These cloisters were gathering of men (monks⁵) under a common structure, in a common location, seeking to live lives of purity that set aside the extravagances of the world, seeking instead simplicity and godly focus. Just as there were cloisters springing up for men, there were also cloisters of women (nuns⁶). These men and women sought to live the charge from John:

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the

⁴ Technically, “cloister” comes from the Latin *claustrum* which is the Latin word for the Greek *monasterion* (μοναστηριον) or “monastery.”

⁵ “Monk” comes from the Latin *monachus* which comes from the Greek *monachos* (μοναχος) meaning “to live alone”.

⁶ “Nun” comes from the Latin *nonna* which means “chaste.”

world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever (I Jn 2:15-17).

Over time, these monasteries/cloisters banded together somewhat under common leadership and rules. A major founder of this branch of monasticism was St. Pachomius. Around 318 he founded his first monastery in Egypt. By the time he died (around 345), several hundred monks in eight monasteries under his care. The monasteries had an organization similar to a military unit. The meals were held in common; and the members lived in military-style barracks. Pachomius had his monks do manual labor, not only to feed themselves, but also to have money to give the poor.

Not all monasteries were so organized. Many of them (and therefore, many of the monks/nuns) were less able to find meaningful work and schedules. At times it would certainly prove true the maxim, idle hands are the devils workshop. This will be the area where Benedict brought about significant reform and direction. Before we get to Benedict himself, however, we should mention some additional people and movements that came between Antony and Benedict in the monastic tradition.

Monastic movements sprung up over the idea that there was great holiness that could come from a contemplative life. Time spent in devout contemplation of God, Jesus, and spiritual life was seen as good for the individual, and ultimately, the church at large. These contemplatives were often people uniquely in a position to pray for and teach others about holiness and the divine.

In its purist form, the monastic vows of simplicity and poverty were seen as means to an end. The end purpose was to grow in loving God. The ascetic idea was removing all possible obstacles to loving God. In a sense, these people were seeking to lay down their own lives of self-fulfillment out of love and devotion to God.

Biblical basis for the monastic approach to life was set forward using examples of Elijah, Elisha, and John the Baptist. The monastics would typically take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience to the abbot or abbess⁷ (who had a role as a superintendent of sorts over the cloister). The New Testament passages that speak of property renunciation (Mk 10:17-31; Lk 18:18-30), dangers of wealth (Mt 13:32; Lk 6:20) family renunciation (Mt. 10:37-39; Lk 14:26-28), and chosen singlehood rather than marriage (1 Cor. 7:8, 25-35), were also seen as a basis for the monastic life.

⁷ “Abbot” comes from the Syriac *abbas*, meaning “father.” “Abbess” likewise is from the Syriac *ammās* meaning “mother.”

As we examine the lives of monastics and the movements associated with them, we see many living in self-denial moved by a spirit of humility and love. Others live incredible lives of self-denial, but they do not always have the right motives! We do well to note here the comment of Philip Schaff, “Without love to God and charity to man, the severest self-punishment and the utmost abandonment of the world are worthless before God.”⁸ Augustine himself said that among monks and nuns he found the best and the worst of mankind.

As we look at the different manifestations of the hermit/monastic life before Benedict, we see many examples of lives that inspire, discourage, amaze and appall! Consider just a few of the more extreme manifestations of this life of denial and contemplation.

Paul the Simple was one who prayed 300 times a day, keeping track with pebbles he kept for that purpose. Isidore of Pelusium wore only clothes of animal skins and refused to eat any meat. Macarius the Egyptian (also called “Marcarius the Elder”) would eat only once a week for a long time. He would also sleep either standing or leaning on a staff.

One of the most austere and unusual was Simeon the Stylite. Simeon spent 36 years on a pillar that was 30 to 40 feet high. He would eat only once a week. Though beset by disease, worms, and innumerable problems, Simeon denied himself any pleasure of life and stayed atop his pillar, preaching to those who came out to see him, and otherwise living in self-denial.

Some of the less impressive feats include Macarius the Younger who supposedly lay for six months naked in the desert being incessantly bit by the African gnats. Supposedly, this was a self-inflicted punishment for his earlier arbitrary killing of a gnat. Many in Mesopotamia lived much like animals eating grass for sustenance.

Many of those who choose a monastic or hermitting lifestyle lived active lives that brought them a certain victory over spiritual battles redounding to the benefit of many others. At the same time, there were many who found that withdrawal seemed to produce more sin, not less!

Into this world, came Benedict. As we will see next week, Benedict brought rules of living that aided those in a monastic setting to more clearly walk with God.

⁸ Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, volume 3 at 163 (Eerdmans 1994 printing).

The same rules were used by those outside the monastic life to aid them in their walks as well.

POINTS FOR HOME

A great difficulty in the Christian walk is how to find the balance – the balance to being in the world but not being of the world; the balance of living in affluence (America versus much of the third world), yet not failing to conscientiously help those in need. How do we take the leaven and work it through the dough so that our lives grow in love of God and man?

1. Balance – “Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever” (I Jn 2:15-17).
2. Pay Attention to God – “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort. Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep” (Lk 6:10-25).
3. Find a way to sacrifice for others less fortunate. So let’s figure you are not a monk or nun, what can you still do to set aside some measure of worldliness and center your life more fully on loving God and mankind?