

ASCETICS OF THE 4TH CENTURY A.D.

Jesus said to him, “If you wish to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.”¹

—Matthew 19:21

The dictionary defines an “ascetic” as “one who leads a very austere and self-denying life.”² Within Christianity, the term refers to a person who forsakes earthly pleasures, in the belief that they distract a person from serving God. In the 4th century A.D., when Christian martyrdoms had all but ceased, many turned to asceticism in search of a deeper relationship with God. The most famous ascetics of this time were St. Anthony, St. Pachomius, St. Basil, St. Martin of Tours, and St. Jerome.

ST. ANTHONY (ca. 250 - 356 A.D.).

Anthony was an Egyptian from the upper Nile (southern Egypt), south of Memphis, the son of a wealthy farmer. Both of his parents were Christians. When Anthony was about 19, his parents died. In the days that followed, Anthony sought God’s guidance for his life through prayer and meditation. One day, he heard Matthew 19:21 being read in the village church: “ ‘If you wish to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.’ ” Anthony promptly sold his family farm and all his possessions. After keeping a small sum to provide for his younger sister, he gave the rest for the benefit of the poor. Soon thereafter, in response to the message of Matthew 6:34 (“Therefore do not be anxious for tomorrow. . .”), he gave away even the small sum he had held back and turned his sister’s welfare over to a community of virgins.

Anthony assumed the life of an ascetic under the supervision of an old hermit. For a time he lived near the village of his birth, working and giving most of the money to the poor. During this time he sought out hermits in the area, learning about Christian love, self-control, and prayer. Later he withdrew to an abandoned fort, living there alone for about 20 years.

Anthony’s life during these times consisted of manual labor, prayer, and memorization of Scriptures. Temptations to leave this difficult life abounded: memories of his former wealth; concerns about his younger sister and other family members; and even the temptations of women, married life, and children. Later, he had health problems and frightening visions, which he attributed to Satan. These also prodded him to give up the ascetic life. But Anthony held firm.

Gradually, Anthony's reputation for piety began to attract followers who, like himself, wanted a deeper relationship with God. Then came the Great Persecution (303-311 A.D.).³ Anthony went north to Alexandria to minister to Christians who had been imprisoned or exiled to the mines. He secretly hoped for martyrdom, but was unwilling to solicit it—and martyrdom did not find him.

After the Great Persecution, Anthony resumed his ascetic life of isolation on a mountain near the Red Sea. But his fame was now far too widespread for him to remain in obscurity. The affluent came to visit him; the poor came to follow him. Many came seeking healing or spiritual counseling. Even the Emperor Constantine and two of his sons sought, and received, Anthony's advice.

In the years that followed, Anthony used his considerable influence to support church orthodoxy—which was championed by Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria—and to contest various heresies, including Arianism, Meletianism, Manicheism, and paganism.⁴ Anthony became a devoted friend and follower of Athanasius, who would later write *Life of Anthony*, a biography of Anthony's life.

Anthony's form of asceticism was strict. He fasted often, and ate only once a day. His meals usually consisted of bread, salt, and water. He sometimes went all night without sleep. He spent as much time as possible in prayer and Bible study, forsaking the organized Church for solitude.

According to *Life of Anthony*, Anthony died in January 356 A.D., at the advanced age of 105. He bequeathed his most prized possessions—his tunic and mantle—to Athanasius.

ST. PACHOMIUS, a/k/a PACKOM (ca. 290 - ca. 345 A.D.).

Pachomius, the son of pagan parents in Egypt, served for a time in the Roman army. He was impressed with the kindness and charity of Christians, who brought food and drink to the soldiers, and upon his discharge from the army in 314 A.D. he converted to Christianity. He soon became a solitary hermit, much like Anthony, along the Nile River in Upper (southern) Egypt.

But while Anthony's asceticism was individualistic, God led Pachomius in a different direction. He heard a voice, which he interpreted as a divine command, telling him to go to the nearby Egyptian village of Tabennese (a/k/a Tabenne) and build a monastery that would attract others. He did so, and others came. By the time of his death in about 345 A.D., he had 9 monasteries and 2 convents (for women), with several thousand monks and nuns under his charge. Pachomius imposed organization and discipline upon his charges, and his monasteries became a forerunner of many of the monasteries of later times. Prayer, Bible study, and worship were of course emphasized, but extremes of asceticism were discouraged.

ST. BASIL (ca. 330 - 379 A.D.).

Basil apparently grew up in Athens. His mother and grandmother were Christians who practiced the asceticism of Origen. At age 27 or 28, Basil journeyed through the Fertile Crescent of Mesopotamia, Syria, Palestine, and Lower (northern) Egypt, studying the Christian hermits and the Pachomian monasteries he found there. These monks and hermits impressed him with their devotion to prayer, their endurance in work, and their self-restraint in morals. He sought to imitate them.

Yet he remained devoted to the Church, and therefore could not renounce his obligations to her. He became a deacon in 359 A.D., a priest in 362 A.D., and eventually served as bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia (in eastern Asia Minor). Like Pachomius, Basil sought a deeper relationship with God through community rather than solitude. But unlike Pachomius, Basil reached out to nearby residents. At Basil's direction, his monks established schools and hospitals, staffed by the monks themselves. Basil himself established a hospital and an asylum for lepers in Cappadocian Caesarea.

The rules St. Basil prescribed for his monasteries—known as *The Longer Rules* and *The Shorter Rules*—formed the basis for Greek and Balkan monasticism even to modern times, and also heavily influenced monasticism in western Europe. Under these rules, property was held in common, and everyone dressed alike. Food was simple and inexpensive. While Basil did not condemn marriage among Christians in general, he demanded celibacy from his monks. He also required vows of obedience and a lifelong commitment.

In daily life, the Rules emphasized useful work and prayer. The monks prayed eight times a day, and in between prayers they worked in the monasteries' schools and hospitals, and toiled on the monastic farm. Yet the Rules forbid extreme asceticism and discouraged individual fasting (community fasting was permitted). Basil kept the monasteries small, limited to 30-40 monks, and located them in both towns and rural areas.

Basil strongly opposed Arianism, and his efforts were instrumental in its defeat. He is said to have been an eloquent preacher, and also wrote extensively. St. Basil died at about age 50, in 379 A.D.

ST. MARTIN OF TOURS (316 - ca. 397 A.D.)

The child of pagan parents, Martin was born in the city of Sabaria, in the Roman province of Pannonia (in what is modern-day Hungary), in about 316 A.D. His father was a military officer assigned to the Roman garrison of the city. By age twelve, Martin had become a Christian catechumen,⁵ and was dreaming of becoming a monk. Perhaps hoping to end Martin's interest in Christianity, his father compelled

him to enter military service at about age 15. Martin spent the next 5 years in the Roman army.

He was more monk than soldier. He exhibited unusual humility, gave most of his pay to the poor, and helped people whenever he could. At the gates of the city of Amiens,⁶ Martin is said to have divided his military cloak with a beggar on a cold winter day, and then dreamed that night that he saw Christ, clothed with the beggar's half of the cloak and commending Martin for what he had done. When his military obligation ended, Martin resigned from the army. Soon thereafter, he received baptism as a Christian, and went to live as a monk, first in Italy and later near Poitiers, in midwestern France. In Poitiers, Martin joined up for a time with St. Hilary (also known as Hilary of Poitiers). Then after a trip back to Pannonia to try to convert members of his family—which was only partially successful—and short stops on the island of Gallinaria⁷ and at Poitiers, Martin eventually settled near Tours, France, about 55 miles north of Poitiers.

Martin at first lived as a hermit in a place called Leguge, but as his reputation spread others joined him. A community arose which would one day become a Benedictine monastery. Meanwhile, in 371 A.D., the bishop of nearby Tours died. The citizens invited Martin to fill the vacancy, but he repeatedly refused their entreaties. Finally, they lured him into the city by deception, telling him that a woman there was very ill and that they needed him to administer the “last rites.”⁸ Once he arrived at the city, the people joyously proclaimed him as their bishop and blocked the way out of the city. So Martin was persuaded—or forced—to accept the job.

Despite the honor of his post, Martin continued to live humbly. He wore shabby clothing, and lived as a hermit outside the city until he finished a monastery at Marmoutier, 2 miles away. Thereafter he lived at Marmoutier with 80 other monks. When judging disputes, he sat on a stool rather than the bishop's throne.

As bishop, Martin served the sick and the poor, providing food, clothing, and encouragement. He spread the faith in Gaul,⁹ and protested against the execution of heretics, refusing to believe that anyone was beyond God's grace. Many miracles were attributed to him, including the raising of three men from the dead. Martin traveled extensively on behalf of the faith, and died on November 8, 397 A.D. after one such journey—an effort to restore peace among the Church leaders of a nearby town.

One of his followers (who was also his biographer) described Martin in these words:

he judged none and condemned none and never returned evil for evil.
No one ever saw him angry, or annoyed, or mournful, or laughing. He

was always the same and presented to everyone a joy of countenance and manner which seemed to those who saw it beyond the nature of man. Nothing was in his mouth except Christ, nothing in his heart but piety, peace, and pity.¹⁰

Martin is one of the patron saints of France. 3,675 churches and 425 villages in France bear his name.

ST. JEROME (Eusebius Hieronimus Sophronius, ca. 342 - 420)

Jerome was born to devoutly Christian parents in about 342 A.D., in Strido, near the town of Aquileia, in northern Italy. They named him Eusebius Hieronimus Sophronius, which means “the reverend, holy-named sage.” He is known to us as Jerome, which is derived from the Anglicizing of his middle name.

He spent his youth in Rome, receiving a fine education in both the Latin classics¹¹ and the city’s vices. In his mid-20’s he was baptized, returned to Aquileia, and adopted an ascetic lifestyle among a community of ascetics. Perhaps disillusioned by the opulence and hypocrisy he had seen in the Church leadership in Rome, Jerome became a strong advocate of virginity, and acquired a reputation for impatience with, and intolerance of, the human frailties of the common man. He believed that monasticism was the purest form of Christianity, because only in the monastery could one be free of property and pride.

In 374, Jerome and a few followers entered a monastery in the Chalcis desert near Antioch, Syria. After almost dying from the harsh climate, Jerome left the monastery and went to live a Spartan life of study, alone in the desert. Since he had brought his library with him, he sometimes read the Latin classics, until he had a dream in which a harsh God chastised him and had him scourged for his devotion to pagan authors. According to Jerome, the dream left him black and blue, but with a newfound zeal for the Scriptures. In 379 A.D. he was ordained as a priest in Antioch.

After living for a time in Antioch, Palestine, and Constantinople, Jerome ended up in Rome in 382 A.D. as secretary to a church council, and later as secretary to Pope Damasus. The latter commissioned Jerome to begin a Latin translation of the Bible, which was to be Jerome’s primary claim to fame.

Despite his high position in Rome, Jerome continued to dress humbly and to follow the austere lifestyle of an ascetic. His harsh criticism of the excessive luxury of the city’s clergy won him many enemies among the Church leadership. This unpopularity within the Church undoubtedly contributed to him leaving Rome in 385 A.D., but two unrelated events probably had a more direct impact on that decision. First, a young ascetic named Blesilla died, and many Romans blamed her death on Jerome, from whom she had learned the ascetic lifestyle. Some pagans even

threatened to kill Jerome, along with all of his fellow monks in Rome. Second, Pope Damasus died in December 384, and his successor did not reappoint Jerome as papal secretary. For these reasons, and perhaps others, Jerome left Rome and returned to Palestine. He was accompanied by Blesilla's mother, a wealthy woman named Paula.

In Bethlehem, Jerome built a monastery, a convent (presided over by Paula), a church, and a hospice. He also opened a school, where he taught children free of charge. Jerome lived in a cave, devoting himself to writing commentaries on books of the Bible and completing his Latin translation of the Bible. The latter took 18 more years to complete. This translation—called the Latin Vulgate, or Jerome's Vulgate—became, with some minor modifications, the standard Latin Bible for the Roman Catholic Church even to modern times.

Jerome lived the final 34 years of his life in Bethlehem, dying of old age in 420 A.D.

Sources:

- (1) *The Early Church*, by W.H.C. Frend (Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1965, 1982).
- (2) *The Story of Civilization, Volume III: Caesar and Christ*, by Will Durant (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1944).
- (3) *A History of Christianity, Volume I: Beginnings to 1500*, by Kenneth Scott Latourette (Harpers and Row, New York, 1953, 1975).
- (4) *The Reader's Digest Great Encyclopedic Dictionary, including Funk & Wagnalls Standard College Dictionary* (The Reader's Digest Association, Pleasantville, New York, 1967).
- (5) *Lives of the Saints You Should Know, Volume 2*, by Margaret & Matthew Bunson (Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., Huntington, Indiana, 1996).

Endnotes for “Ascetics of the 4th Century A.D.”

¹ All Biblical quotations are from the *New American Standard* translation.

² *Reader’s Digest Great Encyclopedic Dictionary* (see “Sources” for complete cite).

³ For more on the Great Persecution, see “Roman Persecution of Christianity,” on this web site.

⁴ Arianism derived its name from Arius, an Egyptian priest (ca. 280-336 A.D.). Arius argued that Jesus was a created being, and therefore subordinate to the Father. In Arius’ view, Jesus was neither fully God nor fully human. This belief clashed with the orthodox Church’s view of the Trinity. Arius’ teachings also deviated from the Church’s position concerning Christ’s sacrificial death, which asserted that only the death of a fully divine being would be sufficient to purchase man’s eternal salvation.

Meletianism, like Arianism, grew out of Christianity, and was named for Bishop Meletius of Lycopolis (in Upper, or southern, Egypt). During and after the Great Persecution (305-311 A.D.), Meletius opposed what he viewed as the Church’s lenient attitude toward the readmission of Christians who had recanted their faith during the Persecution.

Manicheism sprang from the teachings and martyrdom of a Persian mystic, Mani of Ctesiphon (215-273 A.D.). (Ctesiphon was then an important city in Mesopotamia.) Mani, proclaiming himself a Messiah of God, advocated celibacy, fasting, and vegetarianism. He preached for 30 years, until the Persians crucified him.

⁵ A catechumen is a person who is being taught about the Christian faith in preparation for baptism.

⁶ Amiens is about 75 miles north of Paris, France.

⁷ Gallinaria is the modern-day Isola d’ Albinga, in the Tyrrhenian Sea.

⁸ In Catholicism, a person who is close to death is given the “last rites,” which is a final anointing in preparation for death.

⁹ Gaul was the Roman name for modern-day France.

¹⁰ *A History of Christianity, Volume I: Beginnings to 1500*, p. 231.

¹¹ Such classics included the Roman poet, Cicero, and Virgil, author of the *Aeneid*.