**Eglise Française du Saint Esprit**

***Spirituality Course April 8, 2020***

**II Monastic Spirituality**

Last week, when we looked at some of the underlying forces and themes that shaped spirituality in the early Christian Church, we mentioned the birth of the monastic movement. The word 'monk' comes from the Greek (monos), meaning 'single'.

These early monks or desert mystics were driven primarily by two instincts that in some ways are self-contradictory.

* Some of them wished to withdraw from the world and live a life of isolation concentrating on prayer and worship.
* Some of them wished to live a life that would imitate the life of Christ as closely as possible; and this might involve living in the world, or living in community with others.

According to the gospels, Christ himself practiced both these ways of living. He spent time alone (like the forty days in the wilderness, and the times that he withdrew from his disciples in order to pray) and he spent time with huge crowds (they followed him wherever he went, and he purposely lived an open life in Jerusalem).

There are many verses in the Bible that speak of the call to a monastic life, and one that was often quoted by the earliest desert fathers came from Matthew 19:21 "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven." This was the verse that inspired the greatest of the early advocates for a monastic existence, St. Anthony the Great.

**The beginnings of Monastic life: St. Athanasius' *Life of St. Anthony***

**St. Anthony (about 251 - 356 AD)** Often called Anthony the Great, Anthony of Egypt, Anthony of the Desert or Anthony of Thebes. He was born to wealthy parents in Alexandria Egypt, who died young and left him in charge of his little sister. Soon afterwards - about age 18, he took the words of Matthew's gospel literally and gave away some of the family estate to his neighbors, sold the rest, gave the money to the poor, put his sister in the charge of a group of Christian virgins (a proto - nunnery), and went off to be the disciple of a local hermit in the Egyptian desert. He is sometimes (erroneously) called 'The First Monk'. St. Athanasius' biography of Anthony became the most important and influential Christian book after the Bible for almost one thousand years. The biography talks about his motives and describes his imitation of the forty-day wilderness sojourn of Christ in prayer, self-denial, and the continual pondering of the passage of Matthew which compelled him to seek first the kingdom of God, promising that all else would then be added. The biography also gives details of 'the temptations of St. Anthony', and various stories associated with him (the plates of silver and gold, the fight with the demons in the cave, the letter from the Emperor Constantine, the story of the Satyr and the Centaur).

St. Athanasius says that monasticism began with Anthony's conversion and his search for God in the wilderness. As time went by, others came to look for Anthony and ask him to become their spiritual guide. From then on, his solitary search became a sort of corporate venture. It was a life of self-denial and constant prayer in a spirit of spiritual exploration that is one of the greatest experiments in human courage and endurance ever undertaken. Even though there had been anchorites and small holy communities before them, Anthony and his disciples' experience of monasticism became normative for the movement for years to come.

**Some of the spiritual principles of Monasticism**

**1. The imitation of Christ**

Jesus was driven into the desert by the Holy Spirit for a time of testing and learning. The early monks were compelled to imitate Christ and do the same thing. They were less concerned about fleeing from the world (fuga mundi) than they were to imitate Christ (imitatio Christi) in his perfect submission to God. They were looking for communion with God and peace with each other. Because they believed that Christ was perfect God and perfect human being, they were in search of perfection. They wanted to love God and their neighbor perfectly. They pushed themselves to the limits of their physical and psychological endurance in the process of their monastic experiment at theosis.

It wasn't just the temptation of Christ in the wilderness that inspired them. They also took as their model the life of the early followers of Jesus portrayed in the Acts of the Apostles, and attempted to re-create it in the Egyptian desert. They wanted to live the Christian life 'as it should be lived'; simple, focusede on the Lord and bearing the fruit of service to each other. They weren't trying to create an abnormal society, they were trying to live an 'ordinary' Christian life, without all the complications, distractions and compromises that life in Egypt in the Roman Empire of the 300's entailed.

**2. Solitude and community**

Athanasius emphasized Anthony's desire for solitude, where he initially finds the blessedness and peace of a hermitage (O beato solitudo!). But Anthony eventually and very reluctantly received the call to live in community. This is why monasticism traditionally takes two forms:

Eremitical monasticism (the monasticism of the solitary person)

Cenobitical monasticism (the monasticism of the holy community)

These two monastic impulses are sometimes in tension; but most monastic communities combine them with varying degrees of emphasis on one or the other. Both of them are termed 'monastic life'.

The history of the relationship between the two goes something like this:

* The solitary life was considered a 'higher calling' than life in community.
* People soon realized that the solitary life was arduous and required exacting preparation and difficult disciplines.
* the conviction arose that the proper training for a solitary life was learning to live in community; learning to live with others was a prerequisite for entrance into the solitary life.

Why was the solitary life so difficult? There was no social exchange. The life required an extraordinary personal discipline, otherwise people wasted time daydreaming or chasing their thoughts, or even going on self-indulgent flights of fancy. The work normally done in community had to be done by only one person (food, light, heat etc), and this was often to the detriment of reading, prayer and contemplation. It was easy to pass into an unreal and self-absorbed existence.

Cenobitic life involved some of the same challenges, but there were more structured safeguards - a monastic timetable, being observed by one's peers, being supervised by the abbot or superior.

**3. Obedience and spiritual parentage**

Accountability in the spiritual life remained a priority; even for those who took the eremitical path. The role of the spiritual leader remained central. People sought out spiritual guides, or their relationship was formalized in the office of abbess or abbot. Spiritual formation was centered in the relationship of obedience between the novice and the spiritual mother or father who would guide by word and example. A would-be monk or nun would have to open their mind and heart to the influence of the spiritual parent. It required a great deal of trust in which all secrets had to be laid bare - hence the emphasis on humility and community silence. The process imagined was putting off the old self, and putting on the new self in Christ - the 'new creation'. "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. Behold, the old has passed away and the new has come."

Obedience in this context was an expression of humility and lead to the fulfillment of love and intimacy with God. The capacity to do the will of one's superior in the community (even when it was against one's own wishes or even better judgment) was seen as an expression of Christ's self-transcendent love. Perfect obedience or surrender was the thing aimed for. This tradition of practical wisdom born from the daily struggles and the experience of many monks and nuns in the desert was handed on from generation to generation.

**4. Monastic life seen as a substitute for martyrdom in the early church.**

Unable to sacrifice their lives in actual physical martyrdom, early monks and nuns lived a daily life of sincere self-sacrifice. What a martyr achieved in one moment, the monk or the nun took a lifetime to achieve. Every day one's 'blood' was spilled in the rigors of fasting, lectio divina, nocturnal prayer and manual labor. They saw themselves as dying each day through humility, service and a forgetfulness of self that helped them to put on the mind of Christ. The conditions of a radical personal freedom were achieved precisely by the rigors and stabilizing rhythms of external activities.

**5. Virginity and the monastic life in the early church.**

Last weekd we looked at the 'martyrdom of virginity' in patristic spirituality. This was thought by some to be an essential part of the monastic vocation. Denying the natural impulse towards sexual intimacy and the creation of a family is a form of martyrdom. "To become eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom" reminded people that Christ was the principle love of their lives, and all other loves are measured by it. The call was to face squarely the impulses of greed, sexual desire, ambition and pride. It is a movement away from self-deception centered on the great commandment of love: love for God embodied in an intense and exclusive commitment and a love for neighbor that continually sought a way to diminish interpersonal hostility and develop authentic mutual forgiveness and acceptance.

**6. Monastic silence**

"A brother who shared a lodging with other brothers asked Abba Bessarion, 'what should I do?' The old man replied, 'Keep silence and do not compare yourself with others.'" (*Sayings of the Desert Fathers*)

Silence of the monastery wasn't meant to be the absence of external noise. It was supposed to promote an inner silence of the spirit in which a life of communion with God could be sustained, regardless of one's various occupations. Interi9or silence should produce self-knowledge and self-acceptance, which leads to inner peace and joy. Monks and nuns lived in silent enclosures in order to sharpen their ability to hear the Word of God.

A brief summary of the early development of monastic life

**Pachomius (290 - 346)**

Inspired by the Acts of the Apostles and the fervor and simplicity of the Jerusalem church. He emphasized the quality of life in community - a fellowship or koinonia of brothers rather than a group of silent disciples around a master.

**St. Basil (330 - 379)**

Emphasized the Law of Love (of God and of neighbor); modeled himself on Pachomius' conception of the early Jerusalem church. Once in the monastic enclosure, the monk or nun dedicates themselves to industrious work, occupied in their minds and hearts with prayer. He pioneered the idea of looking through the scriptures to give a rationale for every aspect of monastic life (regular prayer, industrious work, silence, reading the scriptures etc).

**St. Augustine (354 - 430)**

Founded urban monasteries, not just in the desert. His primary concern is the unity of the community. He gave a derivation of the word monk that no longer meant alone or solitary, but being of one mind and one heart in God. "Many bodies but not many minds; many bodies but not many heats; can rightly be called monos, that is, one alone." The primary relationship of the monk is not to the abbot but to the community. His vision was radically communitarian, and has inspired the Dominicans, the Augustinians and other orders. He didn't exactly produce a 'Rule'. He offers a series of guiding principles.

**John Cassian (360 - 345)**

Born in Romania, journeyed to Egypt to become a monk; instructed in desert cenobitism he moved to Palestine and then to France (Marseilles) to found a monastery there. He wrote two books to communicate to the Western church what he had learned - the Institutes and the Conferences. People still turn to these books for advice and guidance when trying to follow the monastic route. In the Conferences, he describes the vices that have to be rooted out of one's life, and lays down guidelines for liturgical prayer, dress, meals, work and silence. The goal is love. Everything else is secondary. Prayer, good works, reading, vigils, fasting, all may become in time, impossible because of sickness or old age. In the end it is the condition of the heart that dictates the meaning of one's life. "For all gifts are given for a time as use and need will require, but they will without doubt presently pass away: but love will never be destroyed. For not only does it work usefully in n us in this world; but also in that to come when, it will continue in far greater vigor and excellence and will never be weakened by any defect, but by means of its perpetual incorruption will cling to God more intently and earnestly." His aim was to strip everyone to the 'pure nakedness of Christ'. He gives a list of the main obstacles to this (gluttony, fornication, covetousness, anger, dejection, accedie, vainglory and pride) and then gives a list of their symptoms, causes and remedies. Desert Realism - a ruthless honesty about oneself and about one's relationship to God and nature. When problems arise, the first place to look is in oneself: no matter how objective the wrong or injustice done by another, the reason for the loss of inner tranquility can only be discovered within oneself. A stable mind and a psychological balance. Inspired Benedictines, Cistercians and Trappists. He is buried in Marseilles.

**St. Benedict (400 - 550)**

Wrote the first exhaustive Rule of Monasticism He saw his monasteries as a school for service, concentrating on obedience, silence, humility. Spiritual paternity of the abbot. He urged moderation in all things, prayer and work in balance and faithful attendance at offices.

**Monastic reform**

From 700 - 1000 the monastic communities founded or inspired by these people came to full flower and then began to break down because of social conditions changing. They began to lose their spiritual vitality and sense of urgency inherited from the early centuries of monastic life. Cluny in France was a center for the reform of monasticism They followed the rule of St. Benedict. A 'family' of Cluniac houses developed, and this family became a forerunner of the centralized 'orders' that only developed at a later date. Long and intricate monastic offices, austere and formally stylized way of life.