

Desert Fathers and Monasticism

Even from the time of the Apostles there were men and women who consecrated their lives to the service of God and their neighbor. St. Paul makes special mention of holy women who spent their time in prayer and good works. These "widows and deaconesses," as they were called, lived in their own homes during the times of the persecutions, and served the churches and the poor. Among these were St. Agnes, St. Cecilia, St. Dorothea, and St. Agatha.

Later on, in order to be free from worldly cares, many Christians withdrew into solitude, each living in a separate cell near some town or village. These were called Anchorites.

But it was in the third century, during the persecution of Decius, 250, that monastic life really originated. Christians no longer free to exercise their religion fled in great numbers into the deserts, principally of Egypt, either to give themselves entirely to God or to escape the torture. These were called hermits, the most famous of whom was **St. Paul the Hermit**. At an early age he retired into the desert, and for nearly a hundred years he was fed by a raven, which brought him half a loaf daily.

When St. Paul was one hundred and thirteen years old, another hermit, **St. Anthony** directed by God, came to visit this venerable recluse. While they were conversing the raven flew down and dropped a whole loaf of bread between the Saints. They ate together this heaven-sent loaf and gave thanks to God. After a night spent in prayer, St. Paul informed St. Anthony that his life was about to close, and requested him to bring for his shroud a cloak which **St. Athanasius** had given to him.



When St. Anthony returned he found St. Paul dead. Hardly had St. Anthony enveloped the remains of his friend in the cloak when two lions approached and began to dig a grave for the body of St. Paul.

The sanctity of St. Anthony drew a large number of disciples around him. These solitaries lived in little cells, and the community was called a "Laura." Soon monasteries were founded wherein the monks lived under a common rule and were governed by one superior. The first rule was drawn up by **St. Pachomius**. Convents for women were also established. The religious of these convents and monasteries spent their time in prayer and hard work.

Monasticism spread from Africa into other parts of the world. **St. Hilarion** introduced it into the East. St. Ambrose, St. Augustine, and St. Jerome founded monasteries in the West, but it was **St. Basil** who gave the final perfection to the religious congregation by causing the members to take vows with the sanction of the Bishop.

Desert Fathers and Early Monks

Paul the Hermit (d. 345)	Young man who fled to the desert during the persecutions of Decius. He lived on fruit and water for more than 100 years in a cave.
Anthony the Great (d. 356)	Renowned hermit and founder of eastern monasticism. (aka Anthony of Egypt, Anthony of the Desert)
Ammon (d. 357)	Egyptian disciple of Anthony the Great who founded a monastery for hermits in the Nitrian desert.
James of Nisibis (d. 338)	Monk who is credited with many miracles, including the protection of the city of Nisibis from the army of the Persian Sapor II.
Pachomius the Great (d. 348)	Associate of Anthony the Great who gathered desert hermits together and wrote the first rule for monks living in common.
Hilarion (d. 371)	Anchorite hermit who spent most of his life in the desert. With St. Anthony of the desert, helped to establish eastern monasticism.
Basil of Caesarea (d. 379)	Influential theologian and doctor of the church who encouraged monasticism, and helped define a balance of work, prayer and penance for monks living in common.
Macarius of Egypt (d. 391)	Egyptian hermit who became a disciple of Anthony the Great. His spiritual writings and homilies influenced Eastern monasticism.
John of Egypt (d. 394)	Hermit who lives the last fifty years of his life in solitude. He was said to be a miracle work and had the gift of prophesy.
Mary of Egypt (d. 421)	Woman who lived a dissolute life for twenty years before repenting of her sins. She lived the rest of her life as a hermit in the desert.
Simeon Stylites (d. 459)	Syrian Hermit who lived for many years on top of a pillar practicing penance.
Gerasimus (d. 475)	Fifth century monk who established a monastery near the Jordan river. Famed from taming a lion by removing a thorn from its foot.
John Cassian (d. 435)	Theologian monk who traveled in Egypt and the Holy land before founding a monastery in Gaul. His writings on Eastern monasticism greatly influenced Benedict.