



IDAHO KNIGHTLY NEWS

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Upcoming 2022 Events:

Special Conclave, GEKT March 12
Grand York Rite of Oregon April 7-9
Easter..... April 17
Grand York Rite of Idaho April 21-23

What is Monasticism: Part 2

By Barry E. Newell

To understand how Christian monasticism came about and evolved, I will briefly discuss the earliest years of Christianity following the Crucifixion and Ascension of Jesus Christ. With the Apostolic Age (years between the ascension of Christ to the death of the last of the 12 Apostles) came a great amount of missionary work and the spread of Christianity throughout and beyond the Greco-Roman Empire. By the end of the First Century, 40 known churches were established. Originally considered a sect of Judaism, a decade after Jesus, the term "Christianity" was used to describe this movement and Christian converts included not just Jews but gentiles.

Originally, persecution of Christians by the Roman Empire was sporadic, but the first recorded act of persecution by an Emperor was in 64 AD by Nero who blamed the Great Fire of Rome on Christians. It was during the first year of the reign of Emperor Trajan Decius that the most fierce persecution occurred, but his reign was short-lived. However, with the outbreak of a plague, Christians in several areas of the Roman Empire were blamed and persecuted. Persecutions of Christians also occurred under Emperor Valerian and Emperor Diocletian, the latter had Christians arrested, tortured, burned, starved, and used as a sport in gladiatorial games. With the rise of Constantine to the imperial Tetrarchy in 306 AD and then becoming sole Emperor in 324 AD, policies and edicts much more tolerant to Christians were issued such as the Edict of Milan (313 AD) which occurred after Constantine's vision before the Battle of Milvian Bridge. A year after Constantine became sole Roman Emperor, the Council of Nicaea convened to determine the formal beliefs of and to unify Christianity. While Constantine was tolerant to Christians, he did not convert until his deathbed in 327 AD. It wasn't until the Edit of Thessalonica (380 AD) was issued during the reign of

Theodosius I that all pagan worship was outlawed, and Christianity took over as the religion of the empire.

The end of persecution and the legalization of Christianity meant that martyrdom was no longer a primary option for one to prove their piety and faith in Christ. Rather than being persecuted and tortured as the Savior and the Apostles were, some Christians took to the ascetic life as a "long-term martyrdom." Once Christianity became mainstream or an accepted religion within the Roman Empire, some saw laxity among the common worshipper and so sought to seclude themselves therefore to dedicate themselves solely to God and maintain a rigid orthodoxy.

While there are examples of what could be called "proto-monasticism" and secluded monks, monasticism as we know it today didn't exist until the end of the 3rd Century. Some early Christians chose to imitate the Savior and his 40 Days in the Desert by secluding or isolating themselves from society and living in the desert, but Jewish Prophets and Patriarchs like Enoch, Melchizedek, and Elijah were important role models for Christian monasticism.

At first, these "Desert Fathers" (as they are known now as) lived ascetic lives as hermits which is the first form of monasticism "eremitism". The etymological root of "Hermit" is the Greek word "eremites" which means "person of the desert." Some of the earliest practitioners of eremitic monasticism were Paul the Hermit, Pachomius of the Thebaid, and St. Anthony the Great, the latter of which is called the "Father of Christian Monasticism." These Desert Fathers lived a solitary life, though sometimes they had visitors who adored them and wished to emulate them.

This eremitic monasticism focused more on a rigorous, but contemplative life. It was a tough life to live as you had to protect and provide for yourself. Depending on the location, nearby villages would furnish the hermit with food and provisions, but that wasn't always the case.

St. Anthony the Great (251 AD to 356 AD) was a native of Alexandria (Egypt). At the age of 15, he chose the life of the hermit and remained in the desert for the next 90-years of his life. Purely hermit-like in the beginning, he eventually established a colony that allowed for their protection and to better organize them. These early communities though were loosely organized and had no hierarchies nor administrative links to a mother institution. It is interesting to note that the Monastery of St. Anthony in Egypt (334 km southeast of Cairo) is the oldest Christian monastery in the world.

To be continued next month...

Editor's Note

If anyone would like to submit an article for the Idaho Knightly News, please email me your article using Microsoft Word. Keep it between 1 page and 1.5 pages.