

# Monasticism

## HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

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### Before Monasticism

Historians have meticulously accounted for ten waves of extensive persecutions that occurred during the reign of various Roman emperors. These emperors, including prominent figures such as Nero, Domitian, Trajan, Marcus Aurelius, Severus, Maximus, Decius, Valerian, Aurelian, and Diocletian, played a significant role in the persecution of early Christians. The martyrdom of Saint Peter, which transpired in 311 AD during Diocletian's rule, marked the final act of this persecution.

To this day, the Coptic Orthodox Church maintains a unique calendar that commemorates the martyrs who perished during this challenging period, commencing with the reign of Diocletian in 284 AD. This calendar serves as a testament to the enduring legacy of the Coptic martyrs, who made immeasurable sacrifices for their faith.

In 220 AD, the renowned theologian Tertullian made a profound observation. He stated that “if the martyrs throughout the world were to be put on one side of the scale and the Coptic martyrs alone on the other side of the scale, the latter would outweigh the former.” This remarkable statement underscores the astounding number of Coptic Christians who willingly gave their lives for their faith during the period of persecution.

The Church of the Martyrs stands as a solemn testament to the myriads of martyrs, encompassing men, women, and children from all walks of life. These courageous individuals willingly sacrificed their lives, unwavering in their commitment to their faith. Their stories serve as a powerful reminder of the strength and resilience of the human spirit, even in the face of adversity and persecution.

In the year 312 AD, a significant event unfolded that marked a turning point in the history of Christianity. King Constantine, a Roman emperor, issued an edict legalizing Christianity, thus putting an end to the relentless persecution of Christians that had persisted for centuries. While the legalization of Christianity was undoubtedly a momentous occasion for many, it also brought about an unexpected reaction among certain devout Christians. For those who had long yearned to shed their

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blood as martyrs, witnessing for Christ and enduring persecution had been a cherished aspiration. However, with the sudden cessation of active persecution, these individuals felt a sense of loss and disappointment.

It was during this period of transition that monasticism, an emerging spiritual movement, captured the attention of the Church. Monasticism provided a unique path for Christians seeking a life of perfection and purity of heart. Monasteries, often situated in remote and solitary locations, offered an environment conducive to deep contemplation, prayer, and self-denial. For those who desired martyrdom, monasticism presented a new means to sacrifice themselves for the love they had for Christ. Instead of seeking physical death through persecution, they embraced a life of spiritual death, renouncing worldly possessions, desires, and ambitions. Through rigorous asceticism, prayer, and meditation, they sought to mortify their flesh and bring their spirits into union with God.

Thus began the era of the “white martyrdom”. This form of spiritual martyrdom, often referred to as the “white martyrdom,” became a popular choice for Christians who yearned to offer their lives to God in a profound and transformative way. Monasticism allowed them to embrace a life of sacrifice and devotion, channeling their energies into practices that purified their hearts and minds, ultimately bringing them closer to the divine presence. The era of “white martyrdom” marked a significant chapter in the history of Christianity, as countless individuals found solace and purpose in monastic life. They embraced a path of self-denial and spiritual growth, seeking to attain a state of purity and perfection through their unwavering commitment to God. Their lives served as a testament to the enduring power of faith and the human spirit's capacity for sacrifice and devotion.

## White Martyrdom

Abba Daniel of Scetis says, “The soul prospers in the measure in which the body is weakened.” One of the most striking aspects of the desert fathers’ asceticism was their detachment from material possessions, particularly money. They grasped that the love of money had the power to enslave the soul, binding it to the pursuit of wealth and possessions. By willingly relinquishing their attachment to money, they severed the chains that held them captive. This renunciation was not merely a symbolic gesture but a profound transformation that reshaped their inner landscape.

Imagine a finger that is tied up and rendered immobile for an extended period. Over time, the finger atrophies, losing its strength and flexibility. In the same way, the desert fathers understood that by detaching themselves from the desire for money, they were allowing that desire to wither and die. They sought something deeper and more enduring—a freedom that transcended the limitations of the material world.

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Through their unwavering commitment to asceticism, the desert fathers experienced a profound transformation. They discovered that by denying themselves bodily pleasures, they were not depriving themselves of joy but rather cultivating a deeper and more authentic form of happiness. They understood that true freedom lay not in the accumulation of wealth or the indulgence in sensual pleasures but in the liberation of the soul from worldly attachments.

Their example serves as a testament to the power of asceticism as a means of spiritual growth and personal transformation. By embracing a life of simplicity and self-denial, they unlocked the potential for true freedom and inner peace. Their legacy continues to inspire individuals seeking a deeper connection with the divine and a life lived with purpose and meaning. In Colossians 3:2-3 it states, "Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God."

## **The Monastic Life - An Internal Rule**

### **Monastic Life: A Deeper Dive into its Principles and Practices**

Monastic life, a centuries-old tradition, is centered around a unique "internal rule." This rule emphasizes that true discipline and spiritual growth stem from within an individual. The focus is on aligning one's life with the teachings of Christ, fostering an environment where faith becomes an active, lived experience rather than a mere set of beliefs.

### **The Internal Rule: A Contrast to External Regulations**

The internal rule stands in contrast to the external rules and expectations that often govern our lives. In the monastic context, the emphasis is on cultivating a deep, personal relationship with God. This internal focus requires individuals to constantly evaluate their thoughts, actions, and motivations to ensure they are in harmony with their spiritual goals.

### **Faith as Work: A Life of Devotion**

For a monk, faith isn't just a belief system; it's a way of life. Every aspect of their daily routine, from prayer and meditation to manual labor and service, is infused with a sense of devotion. This integration of faith and action creates a holistic approach to spiritual growth.

### **The Pursuit of Divine Love**

A modern monk's reflection beautifully captures the essence of monastic life: "When you give yourself to God, the desire for other things falls away." This sentiment highlights the transformative

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power of monastic devotion. As individuals deepen their connection with the divine, their attachment to worldly possessions and desires diminishes, replaced by a yearning for a deeper relationship with the Creator.

## Challenges and Community Support

The monastic path is not without its challenges. Monks often grapple with internal struggles, such as temptations, doubts, and distractions. Additionally, they must navigate the complexities of maintaining some connection to the world while remaining committed to their spiritual pursuits. Seeking guidance from experienced spiritual mentors and fostering a supportive community are crucial for navigating these challenges.

## The Three Pillars: Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience

Monastic life is traditionally built upon the three vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. These vows represent a commitment to a life of simplicity, self-discipline, and surrender to God's will.

- **Poverty:** Monks renounce material possessions and embrace a life of simplicity, recognizing that true wealth lies in spiritual riches.
- **Chastity:** Monks abstain from sexual activity, focusing their energies on spiritual growth and service to others.
- **Obedience:** Monks practice obedience to their spiritual superiors and the rules of their monastic community, cultivating humility and a willingness to submit to a higher authority.

## A Life of Purpose and Devotion

Monastic life, with its emphasis on internal discipline, faith-based action, and the pursuit of divine love, offers a unique path to spiritual fulfillment. While challenging, the monastic journey provides individuals with the opportunity to deepen their relationship with God, cultivate inner peace, and contribute to the betterment of the world through service and prayer.

## Monastic Vows - Poverty

### Deepening The Understanding of Poverty in Monasticism: Insights from St. Clement

St. Clement's profound teachings on poverty resonate deeply within the monastic tradition. He elucidates how embracing poverty is not merely an act of material renunciation but a transformative spiritual path that leads to inner freedom and alignment with divine will.

“That many of us are called poor, this is not our disgrace, but our glory. For, as our mind is relaxed by luxury, so is it strengthened by frugality? Yet, who can be poor if

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he does not want - if he does not crave for - the possessions of others? Who can be poor if he is rich towards God? He, rather, is poor, who, although he has much, desires more....wealth, when not properly governed, is a stronghold of evil. Many, because of casting their eyes upon it, will never reach the Kingdom of Heaven. For they are sick for the things of the world, and are living proudly through luxury...Love of money is found to be the stronghold of evil, which the apostle says, 'is the root of all evils.' But the best riches is poverty of desires. And the true magnanimity is not to be proud of wealth, but to despise it."

### Poverty as a Catalyst for Spiritual Growth

- **Easing the Burden of Material Concerns:** St. Clement observes that poverty liberates the monk from the anxieties and distractions that accompany the pursuit and maintenance of worldly possessions. By detaching from material attachments, the monk's mind becomes more receptive to spiritual pursuits.
- **Focusing the Mind and Heart:** Poverty fosters a focused and intentional life. When the monk is not preoccupied with material concerns, their attention naturally gravitates towards the contemplation of God and the pursuit of salvation.
- **Cultivating Unity of Faith:** Poverty helps to dismantle the ego's barriers and opens the monk to a deeper experience of faith. This experience transcends intellectual understanding and leads to a profound union with the divine.
- **Unveiling God's Glory:** Through the lens of poverty, the monk glimpses the ineffable glory of God. This experience is not about material abundance but about recognizing the infinite riches of God's presence.

### Poverty as a Means of Overcoming Temptation

- **Severing the Roots of Struggle:** St. Clement emphasizes that poverty strikes at the very heart of temptation. By voluntarily embracing a life of simplicity, the monk weakens the allure of worldly desires and reduces their power to ensnare the soul.
- **The True Nature of Poverty:** St. Clement challenges the conventional understanding of poverty. He argues that true poverty is not about lacking material possessions but about being free from the craving for them.
- **Poverty as a Spiritual Treasure:** In contrast to the "stronghold of evil" that wealth can become, St. Clement presents poverty as a form of spiritual wealth. It is a treasure that enriches the soul and draws it closer to God.

### The Dangers of Wealth and Materialism

- **The Illusion of Wealth:** St. Clement warns against the deceptive nature of wealth. It promises happiness and security but often leads to spiritual emptiness and alienation from God.
- **The Obstacle to Salvation:** The pursuit of wealth can become an insurmountable obstacle on the path to salvation. Those who are captivated by material possessions may never attain the Kingdom of Heaven.
- **The Love of Money as the Root of Evil:** Echoing the words of the Apostle Paul, St. Clement identifies the love of money as the source of all kinds of evil. This love breeds greed, envy, and

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a host of other vices that corrupt the soul.

### Embracing True Magnanimity

- **Despising Wealth, Not Flaunting It:** St. Clement contrasts true magnanimity with the pride associated with material wealth. True magnanimity lies in recognizing the fleeting nature of worldly possessions and placing one's trust in God alone.
- **Poverty of Desires as the Greatest Riches:** In a paradoxical turn, St. Clement declares that the greatest riches are found in poverty of desires. This is the state of inner freedom and contentment that comes from detachment from material things.

St. Clement's teachings on poverty offer a profound challenge and invitation to all who seek spiritual growth. They remind us that true wealth lies not in material possessions but in the riches of the soul. By embracing poverty, we can overcome the tyranny of worldly desires, cultivate inner freedom, and open ourselves to the transformative power of God's grace.

### Monastic Vows - Chastity

Chastity and virginity held a profound symbolism in the early Church, representing unwavering faithfulness to God. This emphasis, however, was only evident in a small portion of the Old Testament in Israel, where procreation and the expansion of the Israelite people were paramount. The concept of celibacy as a pathway to spiritual elevation gained prominence in the early Christian era.

St. Cyprian, an early Church Father, elucidated this shift in perspective. He acknowledged that during the earlier epochs of human history, when the world was still "rough and void," procreation was essential for the growth and flourishing of humanity. However, as the world became populated and settled, a new spiritual paradigm emerged. Cyprian posited that those who could embrace celibacy were, in a sense, becoming "eunuchs unto the Kingdom." This concept did not imply a literal physical emasculation but rather a voluntary renunciation of worldly pleasures for the sake of spiritual advancement.

“While the world was still rough and void, we were propagated by the fruitful begetting of numbers. We increased, to the enlargement of the human race. However, now that the world is filled and the earth is cultivated, those who can receive celibacy - living after the manner of eunuchs - are made eunuchs unto the Kingdom. The Lord does not command this, but He exhorts this... When He says that in His Father's house there are many mansions, He indicates there are dwellings of better habitation. You (virgins) are seeking those better habitations.” - St. Cyprian

While St. Cyprian acknowledged that celibacy was not a divine commandment, he extolled its virtues as a pathway to a higher spiritual plane. He referenced the Lord's teaching about the "many

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mansions" in His Father's house, suggesting that those who embraced celibacy were seeking a more exalted dwelling place in the afterlife.

St. Methodius, another influential early Church Father, offered a similarly lofty view of virginity. He described it as a "supernaturally great, wonderful, and glorious" state of being. Methodius connected virginity directly to the concept of immortality, asserting that it was the "root, flower, and first fruits" of eternal life. This connection was grounded in his interpretation of the Lord's promise that those who made themselves "eunuchs" for the Kingdom of Heaven would inherit eternal life.

“virginity is something supernaturally great, wonderful, and glorious. To speak plainly and in accordance with the Holy Scriptures, this best and noblest manner of life is alone the root of immortality—as well as its flower and first fruits. And for this reason, the Lord promises that those who have made themselves eunuchs shall enter into the Kingdom of Heaven...Celibacy among humans is a very rare thing and difficult to attain...For we must think of virginity as walking upon the earth—yet also reaching up to Heaven.” - St. Methodius

Both Sts. Cyprian and Methodius recognized that celibacy was a challenging path, requiring significant discipline and self-denial. St. Methodius described it as a "rare thing and difficult to attain." However, they both emphasized its transformative potential, suggesting that it enabled celibate individuals to transcend earthly concerns and draw closer to God.

## **Monastic Vows - Obedience**

St. Irenaeus, a prominent theologian of the early Church, emphasized the profound significance of obedience in the Christian life. “...we will give an account to God not only of deeds but even of words and thoughts. For under liberty, a man is more severely tested as to whether he will reverence, fear, and love the Lord...God desires obedience, which renders His worshippers secure—rather than sacrifices and burnt offerings, which avail men nothing towards righteousness.” His assertion that we are accountable to God not only for our actions but also for our words and thoughts underscores the all-encompassing nature of our relationship with the Divine. This concept is particularly relevant in an era where casual speech and fleeting thoughts often go unchecked. St. Irenaeus reminds us that true liberty lies not in unrestrained expression but in the conscious alignment of our thoughts, words, and deeds with the will of God.

Furthermore, St. Irenaeus highlights the superiority of obedience over mere ritualistic observance. Sacrifices and burnt offerings, while part of the Old Testament tradition, are ultimately meaningless if they are not accompanied by a heart that is truly surrendered to God. Obedience, in contrast, is a dynamic and ongoing expression of our love and reverence for the Lord. It is through

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obedience that we cultivate a deep and abiding relationship with God, one that is characterized by trust, humility, and a willingness to submit our own desires to His perfect will.

### **St. Ephraim's Portrayal of Monastic Life**

St. Ephraim offers a vivid and realistic portrayal of monasticism. He challenges the romanticized notion of monastic life as a path of ease and tranquility. Instead, he presents it as a journey of intense struggle and self-denial. The saints, he reminds us, did not attain their crowns of glory without enduring immense hardships. They faced torture, mockery, imprisonment, and even martyrdom. Their lives were marked by constant self-discipline, unwavering faith, and a deep longing for the eternal rewards that awaited them in heaven.

"we do well to admire the blessedness of the saints and desire to be crowned as they are, but we are unwilling to imitate their labors and combats. Do you think that they were crowned without labors and afflictions in the same manner as you desire to be? Will you hear what kind of rest the saints had in this life? Some of them were tortured, others had trials of cruel mockings and scourgings, yes, even more of bonds and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword, they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted and tormented. The world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. Lo, you have heard a few particulars out of many. Such were the accommodations and repose of the saints in this life; and they bore these things with all joy because they looked for those eternal good things which are laid up for them in the heavens, which eye has not seen nor ear heard, neither have they entered into to heart of man."

St. Ephraim's words serve as a powerful reminder that the pursuit of holiness requires sacrifice and perseverance. The monastic path, while not for everyone, offers a unique opportunity for individuals to dedicate their lives entirely to God. It is a call to radical discipleship, a life of prayer, contemplation, and service. While the challenges are great, the rewards are even greater – a life of profound intimacy with God and the promise of eternal life in His presence.

The teachings of St. Irenaeus and St. Ephraim offer profound insights into the nature of obedience and the monastic life. They challenge us to examine our own lives and consider the ways in which we can deepen our commitment to God. Whether we are called to the monastic life or to a life of service in the world, we are all called to live lives of obedience, sacrifice, and unwavering faith. It is through these virtues that we can attain true freedom, experience the fullness of God's love, and ultimately achieve the eternal destiny that He has prepared for us.



## *Review Questions*

11. What is the internal rule? (A: It's the idea that discipline comes from within and that one must prevent anything that inhibits one from coming close to God.)
12. Monastic life encircles around three principles. What are they? (A: Poverty, chastity, and obedience.)
13. King \_\_\_\_\_ legalized Christianity. (A: Constantine)
14. Copts now follow the calendar of the \_\_\_\_\_. (A: Martyrs)
15. The calendar began in the reign of \_\_\_\_\_. (A: Diocletian)



## *Books & References*

1. *The Angelic Life: A Vision of Orthodox Monasticism*. Accessed 25 March 2023.  
<https://www.stnilus.org/sample.pdf>.