

Theological Reflections on Cenobitic and Eremitic Monasticism

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There can be no question as to whether or not the early church recognized and valued both cenobitic (monasticism in community) and eremitic (monasticism in solitude or seclusion) vocations: alongside the famous rules intended to order the life of early monastic communities we find both in the East and in the West hagiographies of famous hermits.¹ By the time John Cassian composed his *Conferences* (c. 425-430), these two vocations were recognized as having distinct but complementary rationales: the perfection of the cenobite, Cassian suggested, was “to mortify and crucify all his desires and . . . to take no thought for the morrow,” while the perfection of a hermit was “to have his mind freed from all earthly things and to unite it, as far as human frailty allows, with Christ.”²

And yet, despite their common reverence for both vocations, those in the East and those in the West held different assumptions about the place of each vocation within the context of the wider monastic enterprise. While some in the Western church seemed to have held the eremitic vocation in higher regard than the cenobitic, some in the Eastern church seemed to have held the cenobitic vocation in higher regard and both understood the centrality of Christian community as the foundation for all Christian vocation.

For example, Cassian (a representative of the Western tradition, though he was by no means unfamiliar with Eastern faith and practice) held that the foundation of the monastic vocation could be built only in community: “men cannot be in a sound condition in solitude, unless they have first been healed by the medicine of the coenobium.”³ To leave the community before having achieved some mastery in that form of life is to risk the possibility of not advancing in the spiritual life once one is a hermit. The solitary vocation, then, was seen as a higher calling, but one reserved only for those who have first perfected themselves as members of a monastic community. Indeed, Cassian warns that it is likely that some, having quit the monastery for the desert, would find themselves “unequal to the system of anchorites and unworthy of the heights of such perfection,” and so find it necessary to return to the “infant school.” Life in community seemed to Cassian to be “an easier aim undertaken,” one that involved “less danger from venturing on the higher life of the humble solitary.”⁴ Many of the reforms Cassian sought to introduce into Western monastic practice followed from his desire to integrate “the essentials of *anchoresis*” into cenobitic life.⁵

On the other hand, Pachomius of Egypt serves as an example of at least one Easterner who seemed to hold the a different perspective: he saw the solitary life as a preparation for monastic life in community. The *Rule of Pachomius* (written earlier in the same century as Cassian’s *Conferences*, c. 404) includes a story in which an angel appears to Pachomius and instructs him to leave his solitude and form a community:

1. Paradigmatic examples of the latter include, from the Eastern church, Athanasius of Alexandria’s *Life of Antony* (c. 357) and, from the Western church, Jerome’s *Life of Paul* (c. 375-379), *Life of Hilarion* (c. 386-390), and *Life of Malchus* (c. 390).

2. John Cassian, *Conference XIX.8*, in *NPNF*, Second Series, vol. XI. Cf. Jean Gribomont, "Monasticism and Asceticism I: Eastern Christianity," in *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, ed. B. McGinn, J. Meyendorff, and J. Leclercq, *World Spirituality: an Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest 16* (New York: Crossroad, 1996 [1985]), 110-111.

3. Cassian, *Conference XIX.13*.

4. Cassian, *Conference XIX.2-3*; cf. op. cit., XIX.16.

5. Quasten, *Patrology IV*, 513. Cf. Jean Leclercq, "Monasticism and Asceticism II: Western Christianity," in *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, ed. B. McGinn, J. Meyendorff, and J. Leclercq, *World Spirituality: an Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest 16* (New York: Crossroad, 1996 [1985]), 119-122.

"You have successfully ordered your own life," the angel says, "so it is superfluous to remain sitting in your cave. Up, go out and collect all the young monks and dwell with them."⁶ For Pachomius, it was life in community that constituted the higher calling, the more advanced training in the spiritual life. Life in community not only would provide opportunities for the formation of younger aspirants, but would also provide the means whereby "every self-seeking, covetous thought in the very depth of the soul would be uprooted and severely chastised. Complete submission to the guidance of a spiritual father ... would become an integral part of the structure of communal life, closely tied to manual labor, prayer, and the struggle against all the vices."⁷ Basil of Caesarea seems to have encouraged a similar line of thinking when he pointed out the dangers that follow from excessive ascetic observance, and recommended instead the kind of "true self-denial, meekness, and Christian love" that is manifest only in submission to the members of a community and in care for those in need.⁸

Both those in the East and those in the West recognized the dangers that followed from pursuing a vocation as an eremite or a cenobite for the wrong reasons. Cassian, for example, warned that those who became hermits chiefly because of their desire to avoid other people typically manifest a certain brittleness and fragility: they are "always imperfect and easily upset" and "boil over impatiently at intercourse or conversation." Those who had not been "thoroughly trained in the coenobium" should not presume to embark on the life of a solitary.⁹ Similarly, Cassian recognized that the life of an anchorite is subject to "waves of spiritual pride and the deadly peril of vainglory," and so was not to be undertaken lightly.¹⁰ And yet, he maintained that he regarded the "system of the anchorites" with the "utmost veneration."¹¹ Of course, both those in the East and those in the West knew that monastics were especially prone to the temptation of both unreasonable observances as well as a restless questing after new and more intense spiritual experiences.¹²

Their differences notwithstanding, monastics both Eastern and Western recognized that their vocation was a potentially hazardous one, a path that led to at least as many dangers as it did to consolations. Great care was always needed in order to avoid self-deception and the spiritual pride that followed from presuming that one could advance in the life of prayer apart from the ministrations that could be found only in community. Their careful and thoughtful exposition of the various dimensions of the monastic enterprise make them an admirable model for those called to religious life even today.

6. Quasten, *Patrology III*, 156.

7. Gribomont, "Eastern Christianity," 96.

8. Gribomont, "Eastern Christianity," 100.

9. Cassian, *Conference XIX.10*.

10. Cassian, *Conference XIX.6*.

11. Cassian, *Conference XIX.3*.
12. See Gribomont, "Eastern Christianity," 101-102.

Postscript:

Dear Friends,

As The Reverend Dr. Grosso has thoughtfully observed in this essay, the early Church recognized and valued both monasticism in community and monasticism in solitude. Yet, I would suggest, these different expressions of monastic life were understood as an integrated whole and one was viewed as inseparable from the other. As we discuss the role of solitaries in the contemporary Episcopal Church, it is my prayer that we will be deeply informed by the ancient tradition which saw the solitary as either one preparing for life in religious community or as one who was deeply connected to life in religious community.

A seminary professor of mine once provocatively asserted that it was impossible to be a Christian outside the Body of Christ. If this is true, great attention and care should be paid to anyone seeking to pursue solitary engagement with the divine. The spiritual dangers of eremitic life were widely known and well documented by the fathers and mothers of the early Church. As modern bishops responsible for exercising spiritual care and oversight in our day, may we be as thoughtful and cautious regarding religious solitaries as those who have gone before us.

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