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**A STUDY OF THE ROOTS,
DEVELOPMENT AND INFLUENCE OF
BASILIAN MONASTICISM
IN THE FOURTH CENTURY A.D.**

JOHN McLAREN SPIERS

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and influence of Basilian Monasticism
in the fourth century AD.

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Summary of Thesis

Brought up in a devout Christian family, which knew the cost of bearing witness to Jesus Christ within a pagan society, Basil of Caesarea forsook the things of this world for the things of God. Although his aristocratic upbringing and academic ability led him to study in the major centres of learning, and to accept the chair of rhetoric on his return home from Athens, Basil never forgot the early stirrings within him for the life of the monk.

The influence of his sister Macrina played no small part in his decision to undertake journeyings to Egypt, Palestine, Syria, and Mesopotamia to visit the monastic life in these countries. His encounter with the desert monks of Egypt affected him greatly and he returned to his homeland convinced that he was called to follow in their way of seeking after union with God through the ascetic life.

Basil however did not adopt the eremitic life of Antony, nor did he embrace the form of cenobitic life of Pachomius, but rather adapted the cenobitic life to suit the country and the age in which he lived. In his time Christianity had become the official religion of the empire. The result was an increase in nominal Christianity and a consequent diminution of its witness. Basil, who believed that Jesus Christ was the supreme example of the ascetic life, felt that the monastic life had a vital role to play in influencing both the Church and society.

In order to ensure that this influence would be effective Basil wrote much for the spiritual and social upbuilding of his monks. In this thesis a number of his Ascetical Works, his Letters and his two sets of Rules have been considered. They dealt with every aspect of the monk's life and regulated the order and discipline of Basil's monasteries. They also revealed Basil's close adherence to Scripture in his understanding of the ascetic life and of the life lived out by the early Church.

In their witness Basil's monks practised the twofold command of Christ, to love God and to love one's neighbour. Their life was no escape from the world but rather a separation from the world to meditate upon the things of God so that they could be of service to the world through acts of loving service. This social dimension was of great importance to Basil and so his monastic communities were involved in education, caring for the needy and nursing the sick.

Before Basil, monks had tended to isolate themselves from the world as they pursued their own spiritual journey towards perfection. They had come to see themselves as spiritually superior to the Church which they saw as tainted by the world. Basil was himself a Churchman and as a bishop he was able to draw the Church and monastery closer together. This was a challenge to the Church to reflect more closely the life of the early Church as witnessed to by his monks. It also enabled the monasteries, which were known for their defence of orthodoxy, to be supportive of the orthodox stance within the Church in its struggle against heresies.

The impact made by Basilian monasticism in the fourth century AD was due in no small measure to the stature of its founder. Basil was a man of intellect, organising ability, administrative skills, and deep spirituality and he used them all in the service of Jesus Christ. In all that he did it is clear that the teaching and example of Christ was of major importance and in the formulation of his Ascetical Works it is equally clear that the teaching of Scripture was the guiding influence.

Recognised as the father of ecclesiastical cenobitic monasticism in the East Basil's influence upon monastic life waned after his death. It would appear that the East preferred the eremitic life. His influence, however, was felt again in the sixth century when Benedict of Nursia, the acknowledged founder of cenobitic monasticism in the West, adopted many of

Basil's ideals and encouraged his monks to read the Rules of Basil. His contribution, however, to the cenobitic monastic life, with its emphasis upon being in the world and yet not of the world, and its commitment to Christ's command to love God and to love one's neighbour, has been considerable and this study has shown that he deserves the name Basil the Great.

Introduction

I. Aim

The purpose of this thesis is to examine how Basil of Caesarea, ascetic, monk and bishop, developed the monastic life founded in Egypt into an organised, disciplined rule which, under his guidance and leadership influenced the Church and society of his day. Affected by encounters with the ascetic life in Cappadocia in his youth and by his later travels in Egypt and other lands Basil took what he had experienced and developed it for his own culture and age. He believed that the Church had abandoned the life of the first century Church and in particular the life of Christ who had revealed the servant nature of the Christian faith. Basil longed to see the Church re-capture this life of service, and we shall discover how important Scripture and in particular the two-fold command to love God and to love one's neighbour was to him.

With the passing of martyrdom as the supreme sacrificial witness for the Christian, the life of the monk became the exemplary life of sacrifice within the Christian community. Following the example of Jesus Christ, of a life given up "even unto death," the monk became the new living martyr. Many faithful men and women therefore sought to follow this life and so, during the third and fourth centuries, the monastic life grew. In this thesis we shall see how the life of the monk evolved under the leadership of Basil of Caesarea. We shall discover how he believed that the communal life, rather than the eremitic life, more closely reflected the life of Christ and that of the primitive Church. Desiring to see such a way of living influence the Church and society, Basil encouraged his monastic communities to be places of mutual support as well as places of prayer, to be places of openness to the needs of the outside community as well as places of personal spiritual growth. For Basil the monk's closer "walk with God" should

lead to a commitment to and an awareness of the needs of his neighbour.

This thesis will also show how important a disciplined and ordered life was for the outworking of Basil's commitment to the spiritual and social aspects in his monk's life. Many had followed the monastic life before Basil but none had formulated detailed rules or written so fully about the life of the monk as he did. He believed in the importance of a disciplined spiritual life and of caring relationships within his communities. Loving one's neighbour was not just confined to monastic colleagues, it also involved philanthropic work in the wider community. It was, Basil felt, impossible to be obedient to Christ's two-fold command while living in solitude or in an exclusive community.

II. Basil and the ascetic tradition

Basil, brought up within an aristocratic family with a long Christian heritage, turned his back upon a life of academic pursuits to follow the life of the ascetic. He had been influenced in his Christian life by his family background and in particular by his mother and his sister Macrina. According to their brother Gregory, it was Macrina who was the chief influence in Basil's decision to forsake the things of this world for the monastic life. Another immediate influence was Eustathius of Sebaste, who had gathered around him a following of monks who found the current standards of the Church lax, and sought to influence it spiritually and morally.

It should be noted that withdrawal from the world had been practised by many holy men long before the Christian era. In the world of philosophy the acceptance of a dichotomy between spirit and matter had caused many to abandon the world of the "flesh" in the search for the perfect state which was to be found through self-denial and abstinence from all carnal or worldly pursuits. Similar ideals were found in the holy men of Judaism, such as John the Baptist and the mystics of the Judean

Desert, the Essenes and the Therapeutai. This search for holiness was also seen in the life of Jesus Christ and his followers. Jesus' life of self-denial and his disciples' desire to follow in his footsteps gave further impetus to the pursuit of the holy life. In the life of Jesus Christ was to be seen the supreme example of one who sought to "walk closely with God". This searching after perfection was a central original feature of Christianity, although not unique to it, and some abandoned the things of this world in pursuit of communion with Christ.

It was not until the third century that the life of the ascetics became a marked feature in the life of the Christian community. Many men and women in Egypt had left cities and towns and gone out into the desert in the search for tranquility and a journey towards union with God. In their pursuit of holiness they left behind the things of this world and strove to overcome the temptations of the flesh. They began to attract disciples and as the movement grew the leaders of the movement, men like Antony and Pachomius, exercised an influence which led many to follow the ascetic life.

The examples of Antony, who followed the life of the hermit monk, and of Pachomius, who favoured a more communal life, were followed in Syria, Palestine and Asia Minor. This was most frequently due to travellers discovering these lifestyles and taking them back to their own countries. One such person was Eustathius of Sebaste who founded a monastic movement which challenged the standards of the Church in Cappadocia in the fourth century. His early influence upon Basil was considerable.

In addition to him, Basil was also influenced in his pursuit of the ascetic life by the piety of his family, and in particular that of his sister, Macrina. Even while he was at the Academy he had discussed with his friend Gregory of Nazianzus the possibility of sharing with him in a life of solitude. However,

on leaving the Academy, worldly acclaim as a rhetor caused him to abandon such thoughts until the challenge came again from Macrina. Basil abandoned his secular concerns, embarked upon a life of asceticism and journeyed to Egypt, Palestine, Syria and Mesopotamia to visit the monastic settlements there. It was his encounter with the desert monks in Egypt and in particular the cenobitic (common) life as lived out by the Pachomian monks that influenced him most.

On his return, Basil settled across the river Iris from the community begun by his mother and sister at Annesi. For a time he shared his ascetic life with his friend Gregory. The ascetic life favoured by Basil was cenobitic for he believed it followed more closely the desire of Jesus Christ to create a community of believing people who had all things in common and who sought to live a life of mutual support and caring. Basil believed that the Christian called to love God was also called to share God's love with others.

A man of great academic ability, Basil was inevitably influenced by the philosophical culture of his day although without doubt the greatest influences - in his mind - upon his pursuit of the ascetic and monastic life were Scripture, the life of Jesus Christ, and the lives of the early Christians. It is noteworthy that his major works on the monastic life, his Ascetic Writings, and his Rules reveal these strong influences upon his thinking. His Letters too, when dealing with monasticism, reveal this background. This did not infer the abandonment of intellect or reason but rather his acknowledgement that Scripture was the Word of God and that the guidance given in it regarding the Christian life should be obeyed. In the course of this study we shall demonstrate his argument that the cenobitic life was more faithful to the Christian way of Jesus Christ and his disciples than the life of the hermit monk.

Unlike many monks, Basil had no desire to isolate himself from the life of the ordinary Church. Early in his monastic life he had sought ordination to the priesthood and had frequently left his retreat at Annesi to take part in theological debate or to speak out against the leading heresy of his day, Arianism. A man of such academic prowess was almost inevitably destined to play an ever increasing role in the life of the Cappadocian Church. And so Basil found himself assisting bishops until, in time, he became bishop of Caesarea. In gaining this see Basil revealed ambitious traits which caused a breach, for a time, between himself and his great friend Gregory of Nazianzus.

Basil was most anxious to see the life of the early Church, as portrayed in the Book of Acts, relived in his day. He believed that the life of the ascetic was not exclusive to the monastery but should be lived out in the life of every Christian. This Basil felt was essential for the spiritual life of the Church and crucial for her effect upon society at large. For this reason, Basil saw the importance of monasteries being placed in towns and cities so that the monks' holy influence would touch the lives of Christian people in the world. Rather than the monastic life being seen as outside the Church, Basil worked to see it integrated with the Church and play an important role in drawing the Church back to her Scriptural roots.

For Basil, the monastic life was not an escape from the world but rather a community of men or women seeking communion with God to share God's love with the world. Monasteries, therefore, must share in practical ways the social concerns of Jesus Christ for the widow and the orphan, the outcast and the stranger. This was a vital social ingredient in the monastic life of Basil and it caused even a pagan Emperor, Julian, to question why the Christian cared so generously for all people.

To enable his monks to bear fruit in the world it was essential that their spiritual journey was not hindered. To this end Basil formulated Rules which gave guidance to monks and to

superiors of monasteries. A disciplined life of prayer, study of Holy Scripture, daily community worship, and work were required and the monk was expected to follow faithfully a life of obedience, chastity and poverty. His Rules and his monastic disciplines were such as did not promote a spirit of elitism but rather encouraged others to follow the monk's life of holiness. The contribution made by Basil to an organised and disciplined monastic life was considerable and we shall discover how his Rules and Ascetical Works greatly assisted in the training of his monks. Under the leadership of superiors his monks became living examples of the Christian life which Basil used for the good of the Church and society.

III. Method

In order to gain a clearer picture of Basil we shall study the Letters which deal with the monastic life and reflect upon his Ascetical Writings. Basil's Rules and his writings will enable us to see his perceived dependence upon Scripture and his desire to see the monks live out the life of obedient service as revealed in Jesus Christ. Although it can be said that Basil's world was different from the world of Jesus Christ, we shall discover that the command of Christ to love one's neighbour was reinterpreted radically in the world of Basil. His ideal was, in his mind, no new way but rather a faithful following of the way of Jesus Christ in an age when the Church had lost her zeal, where her influence was rarely felt, and where her voice was seldom heard. In the fourth century, under the leadership of Basil, the monastic movement tried to steer Christianity back to what were seen as its original authentic roots.

We shall also examine the roots of monasticism in Egypt through the lives of two of the founders of the monastic movement, Antony and Pachomius. It was experiencing the ascetic life through encounters with Antonian and Pachomium monks during his journeyings in Egypt that greatly influenced Basil's

understanding of the monastic life. From his writings we see the impact that the followers of these men made upon him.

IV. Plan of Thesis

1. Sources, editions, Basil-reception and interpretation.

This chapter is a survey of the primary sources used and all are in an English translation. The editions are highlighted and an overview of Basil in the light of history is given.

2. The roots of the monastic life.

Here the pre-Christian, philosophical and Judaistic influences together with the influence of the life of Jesus Christ upon the monastic movement are considered.

3. Early monastic developments in Egypt.

Christian monastic life took root in Egypt by the middle of the 3rd century AD and had a major influence upon its future development. This chapter considers the influence of Antony, Pachomius and to a lesser extent the communities at Wadi Natrun in Egypt.

4. Basil's family roots and early development.

Basil's Christian life was influenced by his family background, his education and his journeyings to Egypt, Palestine, Syria and Mesopotamia and through his contact with the ascetic life within Cappadocia. This chapter deals with this period of Basil's life.

5. Basil's understanding of the ascetic life in its religious context.

This chapter looks at the Christian and non-Christian influences upon Basil's understanding of asceticism. The

influence of members of his family, and in particular his sister Macrina, the influence of pagan philosophy and his understanding of the life of Christ are the major contributors.

6. The monastic life according to Basil.

Basil did not see the monastic life as an escape from the world but rather as a community seeking to be obedient to the two-fold command to love God and to love one's neighbour. This chapter considers how Basil sought to do this in the light of Scripture and his own writings.

7. The monk's life according to the Rules.

Considered firstly will be the principles in the Rules governing Basil's interpretation of the monastic life in respect of the following aspects: discipline, worship, work, service and vocation.

Considered secondly will be matters of food and drink, dress, the place of women and the education of children.

8. The wider influence of Basil and his monks.

Basil's outstanding intellectual and administrative qualities could not be confined to the monastery. This chapter assesses the impact of his ascetic concept and practice on the Church and society, in his time and beyond.

9. Conclusion - Reflections on a great life.

This draws together the various strands in Basil's life. It highlights the importance to Basil of the community life. It was within community that the spiritual and social dimension of the monastic life should be lived out. The influence of Basil's monastic movement within Church and society will be underlined.

CHAPTER 1

Sources, Editions, Basil-reception and Interpretation.

I. Sources and basic content

All original sources in the study of Basil of Caesarea's contribution to the monastic movement will be considered in their English language versions.

In order to learn about the significant development of the monastic movement in Egypt in the third century we are dependent on the Life of Antony by Athanasius.¹ Athanasius published this in AD 357, while he was in the desert during his third exile.

This was only one year after Antony's death at the age of 105. This work was widely circulated in the Greek-speaking world as well as in the West by means of Latin translations circulated during Athanasius' lifetime.² It publicized the ideals of ascetic withdrawal throughout the Christian world. The desert of Egypt became the goal of pilgrims and the subject of a flourishing literature: in Greek the History of the Monks in Egypt and the Lausiac History of Palladius; in Latin, the works of Jerome, Rufinus and John Cassian. Later the Apophthegmata Patrum (Sayings of the Fathers) were assembled and published.

The Life of Antony is coloured by the important and unswerving support which the Egyptian monks gave Athanasius. It is an idealised picture of ascetic life and is a curious blend of tradition and legend with Athanasius' own theological and ecclesiastical ideals. Nothing in the book, however, conveys the darker side of Antony's asceticism. The nourishing of human pride which his successes would inevitably do is not mentioned, nor is there any reference to the inner conflict caused by his break with the world.

This is a different picture from the one given to us by the monks as recorded in the various collections of Apophthegmata Patrum or Sayings of the Fathers, assembled in literary form in the 5th and 6th centuries. In this the monks recalled an Antony who did the impossible to escape temptations, who found himself frequently on the verge of despair, and who at times lost the strength to pray. Also one who recognised his comparative ignorance of Scripture. This is a much more realistic picture of a man who sought by ascetic discipline true virtue and union with God but in so doing knew the pain and temptation of the flesh.

The Apophthegmata originated in a non-literary milieu in which books, writing and dogma took second place to attitudes and way of life. The contents of the Apophthegmata give graphic impressionist pictures of life in the Egyptian desert, revealing the excesses and the graces of the heroes of the faith. This enables us, to some extent, to lift the curtain of idealism and culture and view the bald simplicity of the oral traditions. These traditions must also have served as source material for the writings of Palladius and others. ³

The Apophthegmata contains sayings of some of the leaders of early monasticism like Antony, Amun and Pachomius and is classified into two main types, the Alphabetic and the Systematic. The former was followed in the Greek text in which the arrangement of sayings was made alphabetically, according to the name of the particular ascetic, while the Latin version follows the latter whereby the material is classified under headings of the twenty or so monastic virtues e.g. "of quiet", "of patience", "that a monk might not possess anything", "of humility", and so on. ⁴

Although these oral sayings may have been modified and added to to meet the needs of the various communities we have here

source material which enables us to understand the spirit and history of the monastic communities.

Two further accounts of the early monks in Egypt are the Historia Monachorum and the Lausiaca History of Palladius. Modern researches have revealed that both these works have a very complicated textual history. ⁵

The Historia Monachorum by Rufinus is now pre-dated by a Greek text (now recognised as original) which corresponds to the bulk of Rufinus' Latin work. This Greek original is referred to as the Historia Monachorum in Aegypto. Its author is a matter of much speculation. The only known fact is that it was by monks connected with Rufinus' community on the Mount of Olives. This could explain Rufinus' use of the material in his Latin account.

Rufinus' Historia Monachorum and the Lausiaca History are similar in content although the style is different. The former (probably written c. AD 400) describes a visit to the great monastic centres of Egypt by a party of seven pilgrims in AD 394-5, whereas the latter (written c. AD 420) is arranged in the form of a travelogue, describing one after another the ascetic centres passed on a journey northwards along the Nile. It would appear that although the content is very similar, the Historia Monachorum and Palladius' Lausiaca History are independent witnesses which largely confirm each other.

In the Lausiaca History (named after Lausus, the imperial chamberlain to whom the work is dedicated) Palladius records the stories of the Fathers, those he had seen and others he had heard about through his own life and travels in the great monastic centres.

These sources help us to gain a picture of the monastic life Basil of Caesarea encountered when he undertook his journeys to the monasteries of Egypt.

Basil's own writings dealing with the pursuit of the ascetic life and his understanding of monasticism are contained in his Letters and his Ascetical Works.

He was a prolific letter writer (over three hundred and sixty letters) and four of them in particular reveal much of his thinking concerning the monastic life. They are numbers 2, 14, 22 and 223. The first three were written between the establishment of the monastery at Pontus and the beginning of his Ascetical Works. In them we find similarities with the Ascetical Works. The fourth letter was written many years afterwards yet deals retrospectively with the very beginning of his ascetical life.

Letter 223 provides information regarding Eustathius' early influence upon Basil and of his visits to the monastery at Annesi on the river Iris. It also reveals the break in their relationship, a break which was never healed.

One important feature of Letter 2 is Basil's preference for cenobitic monasticism. This preference for communal monastic life, in the tradition of Pachomius, is highlighted in his Ascetical Works.

Letter 14, although not at all definitive about the ascetic life, does give us a fine detailed picture of Basil's retreat at Annesi. The closing part of his letter reveals a severity of thought and insensitivity in Basil.

The letters so far cited reveal Basil as the ascetic while the final Letter 22 reveals him as a legislator. In this letter we see Basil's basic conception of the ascetical life, that of renunciation both external and internal so that the monks, living in community life, can more closely imitate the life of Christ. The chief legislator for Basil is Scripture and in this letter he claims to demonstrate how completely he follows

Scripture in his ideal of the monastic life. The letter contains over fifty regulations governing the monk's personal and relational life and nearly all are abstracted from Scripture.

Basil's chief reflections on the monastic life appear within his Ascetical Works, comprising thirteen writings including his Longer and Shorter Rules. Some of these works are unlikely to have been written by Basil, ⁶ and of the thirteen works the following are related to monastic life: 'An Introduction to the Ascetical Life'; 'Preface on the Judgement of God'; 'Concerning Faith'; 'An Ascetical Discourse and Exhortation on the Renunciation of the World and Spiritual Perfection'; 'A Discourse of Ascetical Discipline: How the monk should be equipped'; the Moralia and his Rules. They were written at different stages of his life. The Moralia was composed while he was at his retreat in Pontus around AD 360. The character of this work, however, suggests that it could be a pastoral work belonging to the years of his episcopate. ⁷

From his Ascetical Works we see how firmly Basil was convinced that the communal life was closer to the life of the early Christian community as conveyed through Scripture.

Before leaving his Ascetical Works we ought to make a brief comment on the formation of his Rules. Today we have two sets, the Longer Rules (55 in total) and the Shorter Rules (313 in total). In them Basil appears to be giving guidance to ascetic communities regarding questions raised by them when he visited them. These visits would seem to have taken place after he left his retreat in Pontus (c. AD 361) and as a priest-ascetic, visited brotherhoods not founded by him. ⁸ These questions and answers were first collected into 203 Questions, the Small Asketicon, which has survived in a Latin and a Syriac translation. The Latin version was made by Rufinus (c.397) and it is this version that is referred to by Saint Benedict in his Rule of the sixth century. As Basil's visits to ascetic

communities continued new questions arose requiring answers and these he added to the Small Asketicon to form the Large Asketicon (c.370). Many recensions followed and of these, the most important was constituted about the end of the fifth century. It alone was printed and is now accessible to all. ° It presents Basil's Large Asketicon under two numberings: 55 long Questions and 313 short Questions. These form the 55 Longer Rules which discuss the fundamental principles of monasticism and the 313 Shorter Rules, also in the form of question and answer, which provide brief applications of monastic principles to the daily life of the monk living in a community.

Gregory of Nazianzus' Funeral Oration on St. Basil gives us a picture of the saint through the eyes of his closest friend. It is written in the style of a pagan Greek funeral oration which had many hundreds of years of tradition behind it. It had developed out of the formal laudation or encomium of those who had fallen in battle for their country. Christians adapted the Greek form with its rather impersonal arguments based on reason to suit the more personal aspects of the Christian religion. Gregory was a master of the pagan school of rhetoric, as was his friend Basil, and he used this skill and adapted the pagan funeral oration to Christian use. It is an oration full of praise for Basil's life beginning with his illustrious ancestors and continuing through his early years of education; his life as a priest and ascetic; his care for the poor and sick; his gifts of administration; his attempts to establish unity in the Church; his struggles with Church leaders and emperor; his moral and intellectual qualities; his writings and teachings; refutation of the charge of arrogance and praise for his holiness and pious acts. It is a glowing picture full of extravagant language acclaiming a great life. In it Gregory compares Basil's life with some of the great characters in the Old and New Testaments. Towards the end of the oration he says, "He imitated the zeal of Peter, the energy of Paul, the faith of both of these men famous in name, the

sublime eloquence of the sons of Zebedee, and the frugality and the simplicity of all the disciples." ¹⁰ A little later Gregory says, "In his progress through all the virtues he was superior to all the men of our day." ¹¹ This is no critical appraisal of Basil's life for the funeral oration was no vehicle for such an approach. Rather, it fulfils admirably its chief purpose of glorifying its subject's life, a life of holiness and acts of piety, a life lived in the service of others and in obedience to Jesus Christ.

II. Editions used

1. The Life of Saint Antony by St. Athanasius, translated and annotated by Robert T. Meyer. This edition is in Ancient Christian Writers, The Works of the Fathers in Translation. It will be cited in the notes as LA. It was published in 1950. The biography of Antony was written by Athanasius as early as AD 357, within a year of Antony's death. Contemporaries and near-contemporaries of Athanasius never hesitated to ascribe the authorship to him. Post-Reformation Protestant writers sought to discredit the authenticity of the authorship whereas Roman Catholic writers maintained Athanasius' authorship. However, according to this present edition, today no-one denies the authorship of Athanasius. Its unique importance for the development of monasticism and for monasticism's earliest history is recognised. It also recognises that the introduction of The Life of Saint Antony to the West, around the middle of the 4th century, played a significant role in introducing the monastic movement to the West. ¹² The Life of Saint Antony was translated into Latin by Evagrius about the year AD 370 and this version enjoyed an existence and fame quite apart from the Greek original. Later in the 13th century, it was incorporated, in somewhat abbreviated form into the Legenda Aurea of Jacobus de Veragine. In succeeding centuries this edition served as the source of many vernacular translations in

Western Europe. A Syriac version was made very early, perhaps as early as the Latin version by Evagrius.

The Greek text of The Life of Saint Antony which appeared in the Benedictine edition by Bernard de Montfaucon in Paris in 1698 has never been superseded. This edition as reprinted in Migne's Patrologia Graeca 26 (1887), col. 835-976 has served as the text for this translation.

2. The Lausiac History by Palladius, translated and annotated by Robert T Meyer. This edition is in Ancient Christian Writers, The Works of the Fathers in Translation. It was first published in 1964. It will be cited in the notes as LH. The Lausiac History was composed about the year AD 419 or 420 by Palladius. Little is known of his immediate family but Palladius (born in AD 363 or 364) himself embraced the monastic life when he was 23 as a disciple of Innocent on the Mount of Olives. A few years later, about the year 388 he set out to become acquainted with the Egyptian hermits. His Lausiac History contains straightforward accounts of what he saw and experienced and of what he received from others. It describes monastic life not only in Egypt but also in Palestine, Syria and Asia Minor. The Lausiac History contains the names and experiences of people who also appear in the anonymous Historia Monachorum in Aegypto and in the various collections of unknown authorship entitled the Apophtegmata Patrum. Some of the people he writes about are well known, Jerome of Striden, Athanasius, Pachomius and Evagrius of Pontus, while others are known only to Palladius. Palladius travelled much and listened much. The History has long been recognised for its importance as a source for the history of early monasticism. However in the 19th century the veracity of Palladius was, for a time, questioned. The Coptic scholar E. Amelineau approached this question from the stand-point of Christian archaeology of Egypt and vouches for the accuracy of Palladius. He does however warn that caution is necessary where Palladius depended upon hearsay.

The popularity of the Lausiac History resulted in it being copied and reworked many times. Dom Cuthbert Butler, whose work on Palladius replaced textual confusion with order, wrote of Palladius' History: "So popular was it that no respect whatever was felt for its text: it was re-written, re-arranged, enlarged, shortened, paraphrased, combined with kindred works, without any scruple. Thus every known process of corruption, revision, interpolation, inter-mixture of texts has had free play among the MSS. both of the Greek texts and the versions."

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From very early times there existed two Greek recensions, a long and a short redaction, entirely contradictory in parts. The picture was further complicated by the existence of many versions in Latin. Many oriental translations from the Greek had also been made. The textual picture, confused for years, was clarified only around the turn of the last century through the work of Butler. He proved conclusively that of the two Greek recensions, the larger, which he called B, was the metaphrastic (changed) text, an enlarged and greatly ornamented redaction of a briefer text, which Butler called G. This G text, shorter and simpler in form, is found in only a very few of known Greek manuscripts. It is, however, the basis of the principal early versions. Until better Greek manuscripts of the G type are found, Dom Butler's text must be considered the best text available and the basis for any future new work on the Lausiac History.

In Meyer's translation there are full critical notes on each of the lives recorded in the Lausiac History.

3. The Desert Fathers, translated by Helen Waddell, first published in 1936. The Latin original of these translations is known as the Apophthegmata Patrum, found in the Vitae Patrum, a vast collection of the lives and saying of the Desert Fathers first edited in Antwerp in 1615. It will be cited in the notes

as AP. This book is only a fragment of its vast original, which runs in the 1628 folio to more than a thousand pages in double column. This book contains only a selection of the sayings of the Desert Fathers. They remind the reader of the austerities of the monks as they sought to overcome the sins of the flesh in their defeat of the devil as they journeyed towards perfection. Helen Waddell uses as her source the text of Rosweyde, in his second revised edition of his Vitae Patrum, published in Antwerp in 1628. The text is non-critical. There is a modern edition of the Alphabetical Collection of the Sayings of the Fathers in: The Desert Christians: Sayings of the Desert Fathers: the Alphabetical Collection, translated by Benedicta Ward, published in 1975.

4. Funeral Orations by Gregory Nazianzen, translated by Leo P. McCauley et al., published in the Fathers of the Church series, Vol 22, in 1968. It will be cited in the notes as FO. This translation is based on the reprints of the old Benedictine editions available in Migne, PG 35-36 and PL 16. An earlier translation is that by Charles J. Brown and James E. Swallow in Select Orations of Saint Gregory Nazianzen (New York 1894), in: A Select Library of Nicene and post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, 2nd ser. F. The text is non-critical.

5. Saint Basil: Ascetical Works, translated by Monica Wagner, the text is non-critical, 3rd ed., 1970. It will be cited in the notes as AW. The Migne reprint of the Benedictine edition was used as the text. This translation has a helpful Introduction on Basil's background and understanding of the ascetical life.

6. Saint Basil: Letters 1-185, 186-368, translated by Agnes Clare Way with notes by Roy J. Deferrari, republished 1965-69. This is a modern critical edition in English. The translation is based on the Garnier and Maran edition and the modern edition in the Loeb Classical Library by Roy J. Deferrari. The chronology of the letters and their order and arrangement into

three classes according to Benedictine editors have been retained. Lastly an older translation by Blomfield Jackson in the Nicene and post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church 2nd ser. Vol. VIII pp. 109-327. The Way translation will be cited in the notes as Letters. When the other edition is used Letters (Loeb) will be cited.

III. Basil-reception and interpretation

The influence of Basil of Caesarea upon the monastic movement in the Eastern Church during the century immediately following his death was much less than one might have thought. It appears from literature soon afterwards that his monastic ideals spread slowly and Sozomen ends his account on monasticism by saying that the manner of life of the monks in Cappadocia and the neighbouring provinces was peculiar to those countries. ¹⁴ The general tendency was for the eremitic life to be regarded as the higher form of asceticism and that the *cenobium* was regarded as the place where the monk prepared himself for the higher life of solitude. To leave the cloister for the cell was to go "from glory to glory". ¹⁵

There was, under the influence of Theodore of Studium, a revival in the Basilian form of monasticism in the eighth century. Theodore's main inspiration came from a study of the monastic Fathers and especially the ascetic works of Basil. ¹⁶ Under his guidance the common life was revived and provision was made for education and the care of the sick. Theodore also encouraged philanthropic work such as providing for the poor and the visiting of invalids and prisoners.

Within the Eastern Church, however, Basil's ascetic work has not been the dominating influence in monasticism. It is clear that the eremitic life has been regarded as the higher form and the life to which every monk seeks to attain. One aspect of Basilian monasticism which has however proved to be of permanent worth to the Eastern Church was the alliance between

the Church and the monastery. ¹⁷ Even today the episcopate is recruited from the monasteries, while the married parish priests are debarred from the highest orders of the Church.

It was within the Western Church that Basil found his greatest followers. At the end of the 4th century Rufinus returned to Aquileia after his travels in the East and at the request of Urseius, abbot of Pinetum, translated the Rules of Basil into Latin. This was the channel by which the Basilian system reached the West. The main advocate of Basilian monasticism was Benedict of Nursia who, around AD 500, resolved to become a monk. He founded Benedictine monasticism and based some of his thoughts and ideas on the Rules of Basil. Although Basil's ideals were only partially realised in Benedict they have been vindicated by the course of later Church history. The most fruitful developments of western monasticism have been akin to the ideals of Basil as cenobitic monasticism has become the one recognised type of monastic life in the West and the solitary life has almost ceased to exist.

Writing about the life of Basil, both Lowther Clarke and Morison ¹⁸ wrote in a somewhat hagiographical style. They highlight his major contribution to the development of cenobitic monasticism and his ability to adapt what he had experienced in Egypt to the needs of Cappadocia. He was a man of great intellect and administrative skills and these he used for the benefit of his monastic movement and for the Church. His monasteries offered education, medical care and support for the poor and the monastic life was regulated and ordered through the formulation of his Rules and some of his Ascetical Works. These aspects of his life are commended by Lowther Clarke and Morison. Little of his life is looked at critically. The main flaw was Basil's "abuse" of his friend Gregory of Nazianzus and of his brother Gregory of Nyssa in appointing them to bishoprics in the recently divided province of Cappadocia without prior consultation with them or consideration for their personal feelings. Basil made these

appointments to further his own ends. His qualities are however seen as being exemplary for the life of the Church and he is praised for this.

In the more recent books and articles about Basil's monasticism he is still recognised as the chief shaper (after Pachomius) of cenobitic monasticism. Wilken ¹⁹ views him as one of the most appealing of the Fathers. He highlights his personal holiness and his ability as an administrator and organiser. In 'Word and Spirit', ²⁰ written in honour of Saint Basil we again have a laudatory picture of a most gifted man whose personal devotion to Scripture and to a life of holiness were clearly evident. Basil truly gave up the things of this world for the things of God as he journeyed towards a life of devotion to God and in the service of others. His life was viewed as that of a disciple who sought to live a life honouring to God.

Frances Young highlights the importance of Scripture in his ascetic journey. She writes, "For him, scripture was the only rule." ²¹ She also recognises Basil's support for community. He saw that it was impossible to practise the law of love in solitude. For Basil the monastery was to be situated within reach of suffering humanity and provide education, medical care and support for the needy. She does not, however, view Basil's life uncritically. Commenting upon D. Armand's view that: "The rule of obedience was perhaps his most original contribution to the development of coenobitic monasticism" she writes, "Basil was obedient to none. He was domineering as a bishop, and insensitive to the scruples of his friend and his brother." ²² Young sees Basil as ambitious for his see and jealous of his authority.

In recent scholarship, Basil is acknowledged as one of the founders, with Pachomius, of cenobitic monasticism. ²³ The social thrust of his monastic ideals is highlighted ²⁴ as is his desire for a close association between the monastic community and the Church. ²⁵ It is acknowledged that Basil

wanted to see society Christianised and this he endeavoured to do through his writings, letters, orations and the founding of monasteries and the formulation of monastic rules. ²⁶

Even a brief survey such as this reveals that Basil is still viewed as the co-founder, with Pachomius, of the cenobitic form of monastic life. It is recognised that by the formulation of his Rules his was a more organised form and that he desired to use the life and witness of his monks to influence the Church and society. More recent writers are more critical of Basil's personality which caused him to appear haughty, domineering and proud. Although the recipient on at least one notable occasion of Basil's domineering spirit, his friend Gregory of Nazianzus in his Funeral Oration defends his character: "But the steadfastness and firmness of his character is, I imagine, what they have termed pride." ²⁷ However real the defects in his character were, Basil was the leader of monastic life within Cappadocia and in the words of Frances Young, "Basil sought to resuscitate and perpetuate the fervour of the early Church in his monastic communities." ²⁸ In this thesis we shall see how effectively he did this.

Notes to Chapter 1

1. Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twentieth Century ed. by Bernard McGinn et al., p.66.
2. Idem.
3. Frances M. Young, From Nicaea to Chalcedon: A Guide to the Literature and its Background, p.44.
4. Ibid., p.45, n. 139.
5. Ibid., p.38ff.
6. Ibid., p.106.
7. Idem, n. 55.
8. Adalbert de Vogue, 'The Greater Rules of St. Basil - a Survey' in Word and Spirit: A Monastic Review 1, In Honor of St. Basil the Great, p.50.
9. Ibid., p.51, n. 5.
10. See FO, p.94.
11. Idem.
12. See LA, p.10.
13. See LH, p.9, n. 25, quoting C. Butler, The Lausiatic History of Palladius, vol.2. iiif..
14. Sozomen, Ecclesiastical History Comprising a History of the Church from AD 324 to AD 440, trans. from the Greek by Edward Walford, chap. XXXIV p.301.
15. W.K. Lowther Clarke, St. Basil the Great: A Study in Monasticism, p.130.
16. Ibid., p.134.
17. Ibid., p.141.
18. E.F. Morison, St. Basil and his Rule: A Study in Early Monasticism.
19. Robert L. Wilken, 'The Spirit of Holiness: Basil of Caesarea and Early Christian Spirituality' in Worship, Vol. 42, no.2 (1968), p.80.
20. Word and Spirit: A Monastic Review 1.
21. Young, From Nicaea to Chalcedon, p.106.

22. Ibid., p.100.
23. Boniface Ramsay, 'Christian Attitudes to Poverty and Wealth,' in Early Christianity: Origins and Evolution till AD 600, ed. by I. Hazlett, p.262.
24. Idem.
25. Philip Rousseau, 'Christian Asceticism and the Early Monks,' op. cit., p.118. See also Rousseau's Ascetics, Authority and the Church, pp.82 and 237.
26. Frances Young, 'The Greek Fathers' in Early Christianity, p.145.
27. See FO, p.82.
28. Young, From Nicaea to Chalcedon, p.108.

CHAPTER 2

The Roots of the Monastic Life

A study of Basil of Caesarea's influence on the monastic movement in the fourth century and beyond must begin by examining the roots of the ascetic life. It must also consider the impact upon the young Basil of his encounters with the monastic life in Cappadocia and his later encounters with the monastic life in Egypt. All these influences played their part in causing Basil to forsake the world for the life of the monk.

I. The influence of pagan philosophy

Many and varied are the supposed sources of the monastic ideal. One clear source is within the world of pagan philosophy where the ascetic ideal of seeking after perfection and purity of heart can be found. The Platonist view of matter and spirit/soul, the former being inferior and the latter superior, and the need to cultivate the things of the spirit to achieve mastery over matter, was adopted by the early Christian ascetics. ¹ Rejection of material things enabled the spirit to soar higher and higher on its flight to the divine. Many philosophers, such as Pythagoras, Appollonius and Plotinus, in their pursuit of virtue and knowledge, were among the forerunners of the ascetic life with its need for isolation from the things of this world. ² They believed this to be necessary so that the spirit might journey unhindered towards perfection. Stoicism, with its emphasis on interior detachment and tranquillity and the Epicurean delight in withdrawn companionship, also had their part to play in the formation of the Christian ascetic. ³

Perhaps, however, the foremost pagan influence came from the Pythagorean tradition with its stress on community, a life of physical simplicity, silence, detachment from possessions, prayerful intimacy with the divine, and a desire not only to encourage new followers but to influence proper conduct in public life. Certainly the cenobitic form of monasticism,

favoured by Pachomius and by Basil, had much in common with the precepts and practice of Pythagoras and his followers at Croton. ⁴

It was to be expected that all these influences would have an effect since the theological thought of the early Church was, to some extent, affected by the then current philosophical culture. We see these influences in the writings of Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria and Origen. The latter had no small influence upon the Christian life of Cappadocia through his disciple Gregory Thaumaturgus and also upon Basil himself. Origen's adoption of Plato's view of matter and spirit/soul led him to believe that man's spiritual aim was to raise the soul stage by stage towards God. This could only be achieved as the Christian gained mastery over his mind, affections and body. Such thinking influenced the development of the monastic life in the third and fourth centuries.

II. Judaistic/Christian influences

In the world of Judaism people like Elijah (1 Kings 17, 1 Kings 19) and John the Baptist (Matthew 3:1-4) were examples of the ascetic life. The vocational ascetic life, however, was never something that took root within mainstream Judaism. We hear little of it after John the Baptist, apart from the first century Essenes of Qumran near the Dead Sea and the Therapeutai of Alexandria.

For the Christian ascetic the greatest influence was the life of Jesus of Nazareth and also the life of John the Baptist. Those who played leading roles in the development of monasticism in the third and fourth centuries, like Antony, Pachomius, Macarius and Amun, saw in Jesus the ascetic "par excellence". For many, the monastic life gave them the opportunity to recapture the perfect life of Eden before the Fall. ⁵ It was this seeking after perfection (recalling the words of Jesus, "You, therefore, must be perfect (teleioi), as your heavenly Father is perfect." - Matthew 5:48) that

played such an important part in the lives of those attracted to the ascetic lifestyle. The use of the word "teleioi" was understood, crucially, as referring to the limits of what was humanly possible - indeed "god-like".

III. The search for perfection

This searching after perfection was an important feature within the life of the early Church. In order to achieve it the Church had imposed high demands and strict discipline. As the Church became more and more affected and tainted by society the desire to come apart and be perfect grew among some Christians.

Perfection, for the Christian, was not only characterised by the example of Jesus Christ but, as already mentioned, by the philosophical thinking of the age. Perfection was to be achieved through repudiation of the things of this world; hence the low estimate of personal property, and the repression of the desires of the flesh, both of which were associated with man's fallen nature. It was necessary to seek after purity of body and mind which, it was believed, could only be achieved through a life of celibacy. The celibate state, the abstinence from all sexual activity, enabled a person to retain within them the "pneuma", the vital spirit believed to be carried in the sperm and blood. ^e This in turn improved a person's ability to contemplate the divine. This life of repudiation of earthly possessions was a familiar sight during the first century of the Roman Empire as the followers of various philosophical schools, clad in rough cloaks and carrying begging bags and thorn sticks, wandered from town to town preaching to the people. Such a picture was reflected in the life of some early Christians and, in time, in the life of the monks. Here we can see the similarity in lifestyle of the Christian ideal of denying the world for the sake of the kingdom of God and the philosophical ideal of despising the world for the sake of personal freedom.

Ascetics believed that the "world" was inherently sinful and hence in their own pursuit of perfection they must isolate

themselves from the temptations of the world. These temptations, which were the result of our fallen nature, were almost always equated with the sins of the flesh. Because the root cause of these sins was believed to be the sexual impulse, the subduing of the flesh was bound up with sexual continence and a life of celibacy. Ancient classical thought, when taken into the life of the early Church, said that sexual continence, and freedom from sexual desires and practice, made the monk more fit for godly office. John Cassian in his Conferences states that the experience of nocturnal emissions should cause a monk to refrain from receiving the sacrament that day. Such a happening, according to Cassian, revealed that the monk was still struggling against the powers of the flesh whereas its absence was evidence of a life at peace with itself and with God. ⁷ The semen was believed to contain blood, which was equated with the life force, and if this was contained within man he would live longer and be of higher intelligence. The monk's longevity and higher intelligence could be offered to the glory of God in his pursuit of perfection. ^e

It was also held that procreation added to the worldly and social responsibilities of man and detracted from his responsibilities to God. This thought comes to the Church through the First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians 7:32-33, "The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided". For the monk the life lived in union with God as revealed in man's relationship with God before the Fall was the perfect state. By taming and overcoming the temptations of the flesh the monk believed he could recapture man's pre-Fall state, a state in which body and soul were in perfect harmony. This desire, and the means used to achieve it, inclined the monastic life towards spiritual pride and superiority and hence distanced it from the life of the Church.

IV. The place of women

A corollary which played a part in the development of monastic life was society's low estimate of women. A woman had few rights and was normally married off at an early age. No thought was given to her feelings and she was very much the chattel of her husband. As the monastic life developed, communities of virgins sprang up as women, very often to relieve their family of dowry payments, were dedicated to the Church. As Basil of Caesarea wrote, "Parents and brothers and other relatives bring forward many girls before the proper age, not because the girls have an inner urge towards continence, but in order that their relatives may gain some material advantage from so doing." ⁹ In time, the virgin life attracted many, including well-to-do women, who saw it as liberation and escape from the restrictions of marriage. It was seen as an alternative to the married state. Many of these women influenced others, including men, in following the ascetic way. One such, whom we shall encounter later, was Basil's sister Macrina.

V. Christian asceticism

The further Christianity spread into the countries with a Greek culture the more vigorous was the Christian ascetic's desire for his perfection to be seen to surpass that of the Greek sages. Asceticism was the hallmark of those pseudo-gnostic Christians who saw themselves to be spiritually endowed (pneumatics), and they believed themselves to be superior, not only to the weaker married Christians (psychics), but also to the clergy. ¹⁰ These spiritually endowed Christians claimed that their self-control gave them insights through divine revelation and made them superior even to the authority of the bishop. Believing themselves to be the spiritual men "par excellence" caused division between themselves and the Church. It was not until Basil of Caesarea, in the fourth century, saw the possible influence for good within the life of mainstream Christianity, that monastic life was integrated with the ecclesiastical establishment. No doubt Basil's able theological defence of the orthodox faith and his own stature in the life

of the Church gave his monks the confidence to venture from the security of the monastery. Within its confines they had been kept secure from heresies of Gnosticism and Manichaeism which were seen as threats to the numerical advance of Christianity.

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Before we reach the time of Basil, however, it is of interest to examine the Judaeo/Christian roots of the ascetic life. Elijah and John the Baptist both appeared to forsake worldly pursuits to spend time in contemplation in desert places. Their mode of dress and their denial of worldly things in pursuit of a closer walk with God were seen to be the archetypes of the ascetic way. It is worth noting, however, that, "the Jewish spirit was not ascetic and it was believed that prosperity was an outward sign of the Divine favour".¹² Marriage was, and always has been, the duty of the adult Jew. Even before the Babylonian exile the Jew continued to delight in the good things of life and accepted them gladly as gifts of God. The solitary life in the desert was not part of mainline Judaism. When one considers the life of Elijah and the life of John the Baptist it is not possible, due to lack of evidence, to say if their mode of life was either accepted or copied by many. Perhaps the Essenes of Qumran and the Therapeutai of Alexandria were the exception. One reason for the ascetic strand within Judaism, albeit very rare, may have been a desire by some devout younger Jews to revert to the simple life of the desert, as a protest against the temptations to apostasy within their own people.

The most important figure in Christian asceticism is, without doubt, Jesus of Nazareth. Much can be said about the influence he has had on the development of asceticism and monasticism within Christianity.

According to Lowther Clarke, the Church Fathers saw in Christ the typical ascetic.¹³ Within a culture where marriage was universal, Jesus chose the celibate life; and within a culture

where property was an outward sign of the divine favour Jesus had "nowhere to lay his head" (Matthew 8:20). Often he exhorted his followers to a life of simplicity and charged them to travel light, "Take no gold, nor silver, nor copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor a staff" (Matthew 10:9-10). He also said to them, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26). Jesus had much to say about the hindrance of riches in the search for God. To the rich young man who was obedient in keeping the Law yet lacked the assurance of eternal life Jesus said, "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me" (Matthew 19:21). In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Matthew 6:19-21). Jesus also said to his disciples, "Truly I say to you, it will be hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (Matthew 19:23-24). We are told in the Gospel narratives that his disciples left everything to follow him (Matthew 19:27-28). In Acts 2:44 and 4:32 we learn that the first Christians in Jerusalem renounced all their possessions to lead a life in common; and it may be that the four daughters of Philip (Acts 21:8-9) renounced marriage for religious reasons. There was also the belief among the primitive and early Church that the "eschaton" or "end-time" was near and this too was a factor in the development of the Christian ascetic movement. Forsaking the things of this world in order to prepare for the "eschaton" was another reason why people adopted the ascetic life. Those who did so believed they were being faithful to the teaching of Paul who believed that

the second coming of Christ was imminent (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 and Titus 2:11-14).

Although there is limited evidence it does appear that Christian asceticism was there from the early days of Christianity. It resulted from a deep love of Christ, a desire to follow him more closely, and an eagerness to possess the spiritual rewards offered to those who left everything to follow him. Jesus said, "And anyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and inherit eternal life" (Matthew 19:29). The ascetic life was not only about renouncing the things of this world but also about a battle with demons and demonic powers. The experience of Jesus in his wilderness temptations is an example of this aspect of the ascetic life. In later times when people heard the inward voice calling them to a life of celibacy and hardship, renouncing the ways of this world, they recognised in their calling the spirit of Jesus Christ.

Notes to Chapter 2

1. Philip Rousseau, "Christian Asceticism and the Early Monks" in Early Christianity, p.120.
2. Anthony Meredith, "Ascetism: Christian and Greek" in the Journal of Theological Studies N.S. 27 (1976), pp.318, 320, 323.
3. Rousseau, art. cit., p.120.
4. Meredith, art. cit., p.324.
5. Jean Gribomont, "Eastern Christianity," in Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twentieth Century ed. by Bernard McGinn et al, p.93.
6. Aline Rousselle, Porneia: On Desire and the Body in Antiquity trans. by Felicia Pheasant, p.15.
7. Kenneth C. Russell, "John Cassian on a Delicate Subject," Cistercian Studies Quarterly Review Vol. XXVII, 1 (1992), pp.1-12.
8. It is interesting to note that the ecclesiastical episcopate within the Eastern Church has always been celibate.
9. Peter Brown, The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity, p.261, n. 9 quoting letter 119.18.
10. Hans Lietzmann, "The Era of the Church Fathers," in A History of the Early Church, Vol. IV, pp.129-130.
11. Kurt Rudolph, "Gnosticism," in Early Christianity p.193, cf. id. Gnosis, pp.367-77.
12. Lowther Clarke, p.5.
13. Ibid., p.8.

CHAPTER 3

Early monastic developments in Egypt

The first major ascetic movement within the life of the Church can be traced to the lives of the Egyptian Fathers, Antony and Pachomius. ¹ In these two men we have the foundation of the two structures of monastic life, eremitic and cenobitic (i.e. the solitary and the communal life respectively). Each man received the call to a desert life in a different way and each became the focus of a large number of disciples. Their influence spread furth of Egypt. When Basil made his journeyings in Egypt the Christian ascetic life had already taken root in his native Cappadocia ² through the witness of Eustathius of Sebaste and his followers. ³

To understand the development of Christian monasticism and its subsequent influence upon Basil of Caesarea, it is necessary to know something of its growth through a study of the lives of Antony and Pachomius. Much of what we know of Antony comes to us from Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, whose Life of Saint Antony ⁴ gives us the first great manifesto of the monastic ideal.

I. Antony

The Life of Antony is an idealised picture intended as a pattern of ascetic discipline. In it there is a curious blend of traditional and legendary material together with Athanasius' own ideological and ecclesiastical ideals. As a defender of orthodoxy, Athanasius states that Antony, also on the side of orthodoxy, never had dealings with the heretical views of Meletians, Manichaeans or Arians and that he always observed the rule of the Church and submitted to the clergy. ⁵ In this idealised picture, of the ascetic's victory over demonic forces, one sees the influence on Athanasius' work of the lives of people like Plotinus, Apollonius and Pythagoras. In his Life of Antony he showed that the course of Antony's life as an ascetic followed the example of Pythagoras as depicted in the

models of Philosophy. ⁶ The Life of Antony is, therefore, a mixture of high cultural tradition and Athanasius' belief in Christ's victory over the powers of evil which he portrays through Antony's victory over the demons on their own territory (namely, the tombs and the desert) through the power of the victorious Christ. ⁷

It is worth noting that the predominance of the "devil" and the "demons" hardly appear elsewhere in Athanasius' writings. Belief in demons, however, was common at that time. Antony was confronted with their forces which, it was believed, hindered the devotee's progress towards regaining the lost *imago dei*. ⁸ Athanasius was only reflecting popular piety in giving so much attention to his hero's struggle with demonic forces. Such imagery was used to reveal Antony's intense struggle with these evil powers and his defeat of them through a life of extreme asceticism lived in the power of Christ.

It is, as already said, an idealised picture; for Athanasius wishes to portray Antony as the ascetic who has overcome the forces of evil in his pursuit of perfection. Because of this victory he is greatly revered for the power of his prayer and for his miracles. Athanasius, following the philosophical ideal of Pythagoras, emphasises the self-imposed silence, freely chosen poverty, superhuman wisdom, and psychological stability of Antony. He eliminates any suspicion of bitterness or inner conflict caused by his break with the world. Evidence from the Sayings of the Fathers reveals an Antony who did the impossible to escape temptation, who found himself frequently on the verge of despair, who at times lost the strength to pray, who recognised his total ignorance of the Scriptures and whose supreme value was love towards his neighbour. ⁹ This surely is the picture of a man who triumphed over the forces of evil in his journey towards union with God. It was an example which inspired countless imitators. ¹⁰

Antony was born c. AD 251 in the *reign* of Decius and it was during the reign of Aurelian that, as a young orphan of about twenty, he heard in Church the words that provided the key to his life's aim: "If thou wilt be perfect go and sell all that thou hast and give to the poor, and come and follow me." ¹¹ Responding to this call, Antony gave away his money, entrusted his sister to a community of virgins, and devoted himself to the ascetic life near his own home.

Although there were in Egypt other solitaries, ¹² to some of whom Antony could look for advice, there was not a monastic movement as such in Egypt. None of them had ventured into the distant desert and their place of solitude was never far from their own village. At this stage there is little to differentiate the "devotees", as they were called, from the rest of the Christian community. ¹³ Antony, however, sought out these pious men and subjected himself to them, for he wanted to make his own what he saw in them and had received from them.

His desire in all things was "purity of heart." In Coptic, the word for "heart" and "mind" are the same. Antony sought, therefore, to cast out the temptations of his own thoughts until the demons, whom he believed were responsible for them, were expelled from within him. The demons, believed to be either fallen angels or lesser pagan gods, did not give up the fight against the Christian easily. Bent on destroying Antony, these evil forces would attack him again in external ways in the form of beasts and reptiles. Antony's battle with the demons comes to a climax when he enters a tomb and is locked in. So ferocious was the attack of the demons that when a friend came with bread he found Antony lying on the ground as though he was dead. Antony was carried to the village church and many of his friends sat around him believing him to be dead. About midnight he regained consciousness and awoke and asked his friends to carry him back to the tombs. Attacked this time with even greater ferocity by the demons Antony withstood

their attacks until they departed and the pain in his body ceased. Athanasius records Antony's final victory,

"And here again the Lord was not forgetful of Antony's struggle, but came to help him. For he looked up and saw as it were the roof opening and a beam of light coming down on him. The demons suddenly were gone and the pain in his body ceased at once... Antony, perceiving that help had come, breathed more freely and felt relieved of his pains. And he asked the vision: 'Where were you? Why did you not appear at the beginning to stop my pains?' And a voice came to him: 'Antony, I was right here, but I waited to see you in action. And now, because you held out and did not surrender, I will ever be your helper and I will make you renowned everywhere.'" ¹⁴

This story illustrates Athanasius' idealised picture of Antony. In his desire to become perfect Antony, now about thirty-five, crosses the Nile and shuts himself in a deserted fort on the borderland of the desert, for twenty years of solitude, where bread is brought to him twice a year. When some of his friends come, forcibly break down the door and remove it, Antony comes forth, as out of a shrine, as one initiated into sacred mysteries and filled with the spirit of God. ¹⁵ In all his strivings he was seeking to overcome the desires of the "flesh"; for the perfection he sought was man's sinless state before the Fall.

Belief in demons and demonic powers was common to Eastern Christians. In his Life of Antony chapters 16-43, ¹⁶ Athanasius deals with demonic temptations in the life of a Christian. Antony's mastery over the demons resulted in him having miraculous powers. His example persuaded many to choose the solitary life. Ascetic groups sprang up and people enrolled themselves in this heavenly citizenship. ¹⁷ Many quasi-monasteries were set up in the neighbourhood of Antony's own

enclave and all looked to him as their father. There is, however, no mention of formal rules or vows or even of common worship. ¹⁸ Their life was solitary, and it is advisable to understand the word "monastery" in the strict etymological sense, of a solitary cell, rather than the house of a group of monks.

Desirous of finding even greater solitude, Antony took himself further into the desert and his journeyings brought him to what he called his "Inner Mountain". Here he remained in complete isolation and found at last the consummation of all that he had striven for. It was here that he died aged 105 in the year AD 356. According to Lietzmann "the place remains till the present time a grateful monument of monasticism and is marked by a cloister of the greatest antiquity". ¹⁹ In the words of Antony, having left the mountain to address a military commander, "Just as fish exposed for any length of time on dry land die, so monks go to pieces when they loiter among you and spend too much time with you. Therefore we must be off to the mountain, as fish to the sea. Otherwise, if we tarry, we may lose sight of the inner life". ²⁰ For Antony, the desert was the natural home of the monk for it was far from the temptations of the world and the consequent sins of the flesh. Only in such an atmosphere could he seek after the perfect life and the resultant union with God which was his goal.

Although Antony was brought up in comparative comfort he was illiterate. ²¹ According to De Lacy O'Leary, Antony knew Coptic and there is a Greek translation by St. Athanasius of letters or rules composed by him in Coptic. ²² It may have been that these letters or rules were dictated by Antony to a scribe. When a philosopher asked him how he could endure his long solitude without books Antony pointed to the mountainous wilderness around him saying, "My book, O philosopher, is the nature of created things and it is present when I will for me to read the words of God". ²³ Many of those who followed him were also illiterate. During this ascetic wave in Egypt,

thousands of Egyptians crowded their way into the desert to escape from the intolerable burdens of taxation and the uncertainties of the world.²⁴ For those who became monks it meant security, protection against hunger and the provision of a home. It was also a means of labour even if that labour was very monotonous. Most of the monasteries produced woven goods of every kind and traded their produce with the markets in Alexandria. This outside trade was always carried on through specially approved brethren since the life of the monk involved separation from the world with all its temptations.

We shall see below the qualified and even critical response to this phenomenon by Basil.

II. Pachomius

The other leading figure within Egyptian monasticism was a young conscript soldier named Pachomius.²⁵ Brought up as a pagan in the Thebaid he was, according to received tradition, touched by the generous spirit of Christians who brought food and drink to him and his fellow soldiers, while shut up one night in a prison at Luxor. He asked why they had done this and he was told that "Christians were merciful to strangers and to all men". He further asked, "what would a Christian be?", and was told,

"'They are men who bear the name of Christ, the only begotten Son of God, and do all good to all men, hoping in Him who made heaven and earth and us men'. Hearing of such grace his heart was fired with fear of God and with joy. Withdrawing apart in the prison he stretched out his hands to heaven to pray and say, 'O God, the Maker of heaven and earth, if indeed Thou wilt visit my abasement, since I do not know Thee, the only true God, and wilt release me from this affliction, I will serve Thy will truly all the days of my life; and loving all men, I will serve them according to Thy commandment'." ²⁶

Soon after this Pachomius was released from the army, returned to the Thebaid and was baptised in the village of *Sheneset*. He felt called to become a monk and sought the help of an old anchorite called Palamon. He wanted to withdraw with him but Palamon warned him of the hardships of his ascetic life, with daily fasts in summer, food every other day in winter, and that consisting of only bread and salt. His spiritual life regularly involved spending half the night and often the whole night in prayer and meditation on the Word of God. ²⁷ When Pachomius still insisted that, with the help of God and Palamon's prayers he would endure all this, Palamon opened the door, led him in, and (apparently at once) clothed him in the monk's habit.

Pachomius' training with Palamon was essentially that of a solitary but his call was to the cenobitic life. In the light of his conversion experience and his promise to obey the will of God, to serve and to love men, his was to be a life lived with others. A pericope relates that, "One day, while wandering in the desert, Pachomius came to the deserted village of Tabennesis and there he heard a voice telling him, 'stay here and make a monastery, for many will come to thee to become monks'." ²⁸ So began the monastic life of Pachomius at Tabennesis. This was not the solitary life of Antony but the cenobitic life or communal life of the monastery. Because the cenobitic life was rooted in the individual ascetic life, it adopted its language so that very soon the words "monk" and "monastery" came to be used, in spite of their etymological meaning, for the cenobite and his convent rather than the anchorite and his cell or cave. ²⁹

As with Antony, spiritual warfare against demons played its part in Pachomius' ascetic journey. The stages of this journey are described by Derwas Chitty, "there is first the inner conflict with his own thoughts, then the stage of demonic onslaught from without, then the victorious growth, in which

the wonder-working stage of perfect faith gradually gives place to the calm of perfect knowledge, wherein Pachomius is, 'as seeing the invisible God in purity of heart in a mirror'".³⁰ While he was on an island cutting rushes for mats, and spending time in prayer, an angel appeared to him and told him that the will of God for him was to minister to mankind and so cause them to be reconciled to God.³¹ So began the development of the Pachomian cenobitic monastic movement. From three disciples numbers grew to one hundred and went on growing until a second monastery was formed a few miles down river at another deserted village called Pavau. By the time of his death in AD 346 there were eleven monasteries under his rule, nine for men, and two for women. An elderly monk watched over the women and acted as a link with the men's communities. The total number of monks was around three thousand.³²

Pachomian monasteries were built round a central church to which the monks came four times a day. The Eucharist was celebrated on Saturday and Sunday by a priest from one of the neighbouring churches. Pachomius did not want any of the monks to seek ordination, for he felt that ordination was the beginning of the love of command.³³ The great number of monks in each monastery (c. 300) necessitated a strict discipline and a military rather than a family system.

Monks lived three to a cell and they were required to come together to eat their meals in one place at mid-day and again in the evening. Allowance was made if a monk wished to eat in his cell for one or two days and in such cases his food was bread and water only. At the common meal, flesh and wine were forbidden but there seem to have been no other *prohibitions*. The community fasted entirely twice a week, on the fourth and sixth days.³⁴

Work and prayer were the two master ideas of Pachomius and so the monks were assigned to a trade, to agricultural work, or to the care of the monastery. Mat-making and basket-making ranked

with agriculture as the most important trades, although other work was also undertaken including carpentry, shoe-making, and weaving. Each trade was under the direction of a foreman and the sale of the products was in the care of a steward. Week by week an account of each trade's work was submitted to the superior of the monastery. The monks wore a "Lebiton", a sleeveless linen under-garment, a "Melates", a garment made of white sheepskin, a girdle and a hood. Before a monk was admitted he had to serve three years' probation and, on admission, no formal vows were taken although his renunciation of the world and its possessions was assumed to be for life. ³⁵

Below, we shall also assess how much of the Pachomian tradition was adopted by Basil.

III. Other Influences

As well as the monastic influence of Antony and Pachomius, a brief word should be added about the influence of the monasteries which grew up in the Delta at Wadi Natrun, some sixty miles north west of Cairo. ³⁶ They began at Nitria, when a young man called Amun (c. AD 330) convinced his bride on his wedding night that they should not consummate their marriage but devote themselves to a life of chastity. She consented, but made the condition that they should share the house as brother and sister. They did this for eighteen years until she came to recognise the excellence of the solitary life. He left her and went off to build himself two domed cells in the mountains of Nitria, coming back to visit twice a year. Another settlement was at Scetis, whose founder was Makarius of Alexandria (born c. AD 300). ³⁷

These monastic settlements became famous as the source of the Apophthegmata Patrum or Sayings of the Fathers. ³⁸ During these early prosperous times in the Natrun Valley, the beginnings were made of writing a document which came to be of great significance for the whole monastic movement. This document recorded the words (retained by oral tradition)

uttered by the holy men of the monasteries, those who had attained perfection and were held to possess the Holy Spirit. It gave a vivid picture of the monks in the Wadi Natrun as regards their habits of life and more particularly of their religion. These sayings were used for the devotional exercises of monks in both the East and the West. ³⁹

Before going on to consider the early life of Basil it is worth reflecting on the lack of theological sophistication among the Egyptian monks. For the most part, the Antonian monks remained illiterate and therefore spent no time in the study of Scripture. Pachomius, on the other hand, insisted that all who entered the community must learn to read and must learn considerable portions of Holy Scripture by heart. In fact, a person wishing to become a monk had to learn by heart the Lord's Prayer and certain Psalms. At a later stage these regulations were extended and the novice was required to learn by heart twenty Psalms, and either two Epistles from the New Testament or some other equivalent part of the Bible. ⁴⁰ The Bible occupied a prominent place in the practical life of the monks. Faithful monks would make every effort to increase the number of passages they knew. There are recorded instances where monks were said to have known the whole Bible by heart. It was, according to Lietzmann, a purely mechanical memorising and nothing more than a superficial accomplishment, disciplinary in character, "a kind of weaving of mental matting". ⁴¹ Inevitably it must have represented the appropriation of the Word of God by the mind and heart.

Visions also played their part in the spiritual life of the desert monks. However, they were not granted to ordinary monks but only to those who had, through ascetic discipline, reached the "perfect" state. To them God revealed things supernatural or future. ⁴² The prophetic and supernatural powers of those who were "perfect" were very much part of the Christian experience of Egyptian monachism. It was in these visions that the world of the Bible came alive. As previously

mentioned there was no theological study of the Bible by the monks, and a study of the Sayings of the Fathers reveals a dearth of quotations from the Bible. ⁴³ In the Rule of Father Amun we discover the instruction given to a monk on visiting a neighbour in his cell. On such a visit they must not discuss anything "external" (i.e. having to do with the outside world). Asked whether they were to use sayings from the Bible when they conversed or the Sayings of the Fathers, Father Amun replied, "It is preferable to use the 'Sayings of the Fathers' and not passages from the Bible; it is very dangerous to quote from the Bible". ⁴⁴ Egyptian monachism regarded the Bible as a book of divine origin. For that reason it was to be held in high honour and learned by heart as a matter of duty but for the most part it was incomprehensible. No effort was made to understand it and it was not seen as a means of intellectual enhancement. It was simply there to be revered and learned. No theological evaluation of, or "development" on the basis of the study of Scripture was thought necessary, let alone essential, to the spiritual life of the Egyptian monk.

In spite of their lack of theological finesse, the monks were the defenders of Christian orthodoxy, always hostile to any form of heresy and never willing to question or search for a greater understanding of dogma themselves. They simply adhered to certain accepted teachings laid down by the bishop of Alexandria, Athanasius, without question. This is evidenced in his struggle against the Arian heresy when Athanasius could always count on the support, and at times the protection, of the desert monks. ⁴⁵

For the monk his sole goal was union with God. This he sought to achieve through the seeking after perfection, by a life of self-denial and self-discipline, as he wrestled with and hoped to overcome the sins of the flesh. By repudiation of the world and by a life of prayer the monk believed he could reach his goal.

He believed that prayer was a defence against the attacks of the demons who tried to entice him away from the way of God. Through prayer his soul was lifted Godward and thus far above the sphere where the demons were active. Prayer not only protected the monk's soul on its journey but also provided food for the soul on that journey. It was, however, not spontaneous personal talking with God but rather the repeating of prayers taken from the Psalms or other books of the Bible, or formulated by a Church Father. Frequent use was made of the Lord's Prayer. It was thought of by the monk as an ascetic exercise which helped him on his journey towards union with God. 46

The monk's other defence against the powers of evil was his withdrawal from the world and his repudiation of the things of the world. The victory over these powers was no easy matter. The monk believed that victory was only possible within the security and discipline of the monastic life. The strict rigours of the ascetic life were necessary if the sins of the flesh were to be defeated. This naturally led to the belief that the true Christian life could only be lived within the monastery. It resulted in a feeling of spiritual superiority among those who lived the ascetic life. They believed themselves to be above reproach from the bishops of the Church and to be superior to the Christians in the world.⁴⁷

We shall see that it was Basil, realising the valuable contribution that the monastic movement could make to the life of the Church in Cappadocia, who brought his monks closer to the life of the Church. He believed that their influence for good could not be ignored. It was essential, he felt, for the spiritual and practical well-being of the Church that the monastic witness should be shared with the Church. The monks' "walk with God" was not only in the monastery but also in the world.

Notes for Chapter 3

1. Lietzmann, The Era of the Church Fathers, p.133.
2. Lowther Clarke, p.16.
3. Ibid., p.24.
4. Ibid., p.30.
5. Young, From Nicaea to Chalcedon, p.82.
6. Lietzmann, p.136.
7. Young, p.82.
8. Lietzmann, p.138.
9. Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twentieth Century
ed. by Bernard McGinn et al., p.93.
10. Ibid., p.92.
11. Derwas J. Chitty, The Desert a City, p.2.
12. Idem.
13. Idem.
14. Athanasius, The Life of Antony in Ancient Christian Writers, p.29.
15. Ibid., p.32.
16. Ibid., p.34ff..
17. Chitty, p.5.
18. Idem.
19. Lietzmann, p.135.
20. Athanasius, The Life of Antony, pp.90-91.
21. Young, p.81.
22. De Lacy O'Leary, The Saints of Egypt, p.77.
23. Chitty, p.6.
24. Mackean, Christian Monasticism in Egypt, pp.63-65.
25. Lowther Clarke, p.34.
26. Chitty, p.7, quoting from "Les Vies Coptes de S. Pachôme et de ses premiers successeurs", p.54.5 (S³), 80.6 (B^o), ed. Lefort (Louvain, 1943).

27. Ibid., p.9, quoting from Sancti Pachomii Vitae Graecae, c.6, ed. E. Halkin, Subsidia Hagiographica 19 (Brussels, 1932).
28. Ibid., p.10, quoting from Sancti Pachomii Vitae Graecae, c.11.
29. Ibid., p.11.
30. Ibid., p.10.
31. Idem.
32. Lowther Clarke, p.35.
33. Chitty, p.23.
34. Lietzmann, p.145.
35. Ibid., p.143.

36. *Ibid.*, p.138.
37. Idem.
38. Ibid., p.139.
39. Ibid., p.141, without source reference.
40. Ibid., p.143.
41. Ibid., p.153.
42. Ibid., p.156.
43. Ibid., p.153, without source reference.
44. Ibid., p.154, quoting Apophthegmata Amun 2, p.128.
45. Young, p.66.
46. Lietzmann, p.154.
47. Palladius, Lausiac History, p.53.

CHAPTER 4

Basil's Family Roots and Early Development

I. A new kind of martyr

With the "conversion" of Constantine and the official recognition of Christianity in the early fourth century,¹ the previously persecuted Christian minority now faced new difficulties and responsibilities.² Not least among these difficulties was the decline of the martyr. As a persecuted minority the Church had given much prominence to the martyr whose spilled blood, according to Tertullian, was the seed of the Church.

It was the martyr who reminded the Church of the costliness of Christian discipleship, exemplified by a willingness to die for the faith. With a more general acceptance of the Christian faith it was essential that Constantine, and post-Constantine Christians, were reminded of this costly inheritance and of their link with the heroes of the faith, or "athletes of God" as they were called. The martyr of the persecuted Church now gave way to a new martyr. With the threat of persecution gone, the monk, with his willingness to forsake all to follow in the way of Christ, took on this mantle. Through his desire to live a life of self-denial, chastity and separation from the things of this world, the monk became the new soldier of the faith. His battle was against the temptations of the flesh, pride, avarice, and the delights of the world. The costly personal sacrifice which the pre-Constantine martyr had offered willingly for the sake of the Gospel was now offered by the monk. Virginitiy and self-denial, lived out in the life of the monk, "became the mould into which the old ideal of the martyr would now set".³ The martyr had walked in the way of Christ, who had been obedient unto death, and now the monk revealed the same obedience in denying himself and so sharing in the death of Christ. The monk and the martyr became entwined. The concept of martyrdom had taken a firm hold upon the continuing witness of Christianity in and to the world, and veneration of

a martyr was an important aspect of Christian worship. In the fourth century the call of the martyr was still loud and clear and many who heard responded by entering the monastic life.

As the new official cult of the State, Christianity was embraced by many for political and social reasons, and their inclusion caused a dramatic increase of nominal Christians within the life of the Church. The actual influence of Christianity, however, if not its official status, varied according to the Emperor of the day. Within the period of Basil's life (AD 329-379) the pendulum swung from the toleration and patronage of Constantine through the paganism of Julian, to the Arianism of Valens. The whole of Basil's adult life was passed under governments which varied from unfriendly opposition to actual persecution. For more than thirty years Arian or semi-Arian rulers wielded the civil authority in the regions connected with Basil. Throughout this period the Church had a scholar, a theologian and an outstanding Churchman in Basil, who defended the orthodox faith against the heretical teachings of Arianism. ⁴ Before we begin to consider Basil's contribution to the monastic life we must reflect upon his background and preparation for the life of a monk.

II. Basil's family background

Born into a Christian family in the year AD 329, Basil grew up against a family background of martyrdom and persecution. His family knew the personal cost of bearing witness in times of persecution. His maternal grandfather had been martyred during the persecution of Diocletian. His paternal grandfather, a landed proprietor near Neo-Caesarea, had lost most of his property as he and his wife Macrina had fled from Cappadocia to Pontus to escape the anti-Christian persecutions of Maximinus. These grandparents had been influenced by the witness of Gregory Thaumaturgus, the bishop of Neo-Caesarea in Pontus. Through him they had been introduced to the Christian teachings of Origen, who established a school of theology at Caesarea in Palestine c. AD 231. Gregory Thaumaturgus (the Wonder Worker) ⁵

was born of a high ranking pagan family at Neo-Caesarea in Pontus c. AD 213. After studying rhetoric and law in his home town, he planned to leave, with his brother Athenodorus, for Berytos in Phoenicia to complete his education. He was, however, invited to Caesarea in Palestine by his sister, whose husband had been appointed the Imperial governor of Palestine. While he was there Gregory attended some of Origen's lectures and this changed his life. The impact of Origen and his lectures is clear from the following quotation:

"And thus, like some spark lighting upon our inmost soul, love was kindled and burst into flame within us,- a love at once to the Holy Word, the most lovely object of all, who attracts all irresistibly toward Himself by His unutterable beauty, and to this man, His friend and advocate. And being most mightily smitten by this love, I was persuaded to give up all those objects or pursuits which seem to us befitting, and among others even my boasted jurisprudence,- yea, my very fatherland and friends, both those who were present with me then, and those from whom I had parted. And in my estimation there arose but one object dear and worth desire,- to wit, philosophy, and that master of philosophy, this inspired man." 6

Gregory and his brother remained in Caesarea for five years (AD 233-238) in order to take Origen's whole course, and both of them embraced Christianity. Some years later Gregory was consecrated the first bishop of his native city, Neo-Caesarea. He preached the Gospel with great zeal in town and countryside so that by his death (c. AD 275) only a handful of pagans remained in all Pontus. Basil, Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus (known as the Cappadocian Fathers) venerated him as the founder of the Church of Cappadocia. 7

The influence of his grandparents affected the life of Basil and it was through his paternal grandmother, Macrina, that he

was introduced to the teachings of Origen. Basil and Gregory of Nazianzus (his life-long friend, apart from a short breach) compiled, while at the retreat at Annesi, the Philocalia, a collection of the most attractive extracts from Origen. This not only acted as a textbook of Origen's teaching but also helped to establish Origen's true doctrine against Arianism.

Basil's family ultimately regained much of their land and property and his father was a respected member of the Bar at Caesarea and a teacher of rhetoric. Basil's parents, Basil and Emmelia, "showed much generosity in their extensive charities and dedicated to God a fixed proportion of their property, which was still large in spite of losses during persecutions".⁸ They had ten children, nine of whom survived to adulthood. Four daughters were married, three sons including Basil became bishops (Gregory of Nyssa and Peter of Sebaste) and the eldest daughter Macrina devoted herself to a life of virginity. An account of her life, by her brother Gregory, reveals a woman of saintliness and godliness whose influence as an ascetic affected profoundly the lives of Basil, Gregory and Peter. After the death of her fiancé she committed her life to God and was the spiritual mentor of her young brother, Peter. Her influence also, in time, led her mother to adopt a life of asceticism in the family retreat at Annesi in Pontus. Emmelia's withdrawal from the world closely followed the death of her son Naucratus. It is clear, therefore, that Basil's family background was of a deeply Christian nature and that their faith profoundly affected their lifestyle.

III. The land of Cappadocia

Cappadocia was not the most cultured region of the Empire. Gregory of Nyssa tells us that, "We Cappadocians are poor in well-nigh all things that make the possessors of them happy, but above all we are badly off for people who are able to write".⁹ Its capital Caesarea was, "one of the only cities in this large and very fertile area"¹⁰ and was of considerable size. One source suggests 400,000 people at Caesarea although

the figure has been emended to 40,000. ¹¹ It rose to wealth and importance as the manufacturing and business centre of a large province which was almost destitute of towns. According to Gregory of Nazianzus, Caesarea was, "a city of literary distinction" and he calls it, "this illustrious city of ours". ¹² Caesarea was a centre of Greek influence and Basil and his family were people of letters. They were equally at home in the study of philosophy and rhetoric as they were in the pursuits of their country estates. His family wore the mantle of the aristocracy in the province with an ease of bearing and considerable administrative powers. Some of the differences between Pachomian and Basilian monasticism can be attributed to the climatic variations between Egypt and Cappadocia/Pontus, ¹³ and also to the different social background of the Egyptian and Cappadocian monks. ¹⁴

The bishop of Caesarea was head of the Cappadocian Church. This position was made all the stronger because the bishops of the province were few in number and the towns over which they presided of little importance. The exception was the town of Tyana in western Cappadocia. As we shall see later during the reign of Valens, Cappadocia was divided by him to undermine the ecclesiastical influence of Basil, bishop of Caesarea at the time. The bishop of Caesarea claimed metropolitan rights over Pontus and Lesser Armenia.

IV. A search for truth

In the fourth century, with the dramatic change in the position of Christianity within the Empire, there began a renewed search for an understanding of the Christian faith which would enable it to be communicated more clearly. Supported by the Emperor, the Nicene Creed was formulated at the Council of Nicaea in AD 325. This was a statement of orthodox Christianity which, rather than satisfying everyone, led to many, in their search for a theological understanding of the relationship within the Godhead, being considered heretics. It was a period of theological and political fluidity. Emperors came and went and

the hoped for unifying influence of Christianity as the State religion did not materialise. In the search for truth many were branded as heretics.

In his defence of Nicene orthodoxy, Basil was much influenced by the teaching of Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria. Because of Imperial agreement with the Arians, Athanasius, on more than one occasion, suffered exile for his courageous defence of the orthodox faith.

V. Years of study

Basil, who suffered much from health problems in adult life, ¹⁵ seems not to have been too strong from infancy. He reveals that as a child he was cared for by a family other than his own and nursed by the women of the household. ¹⁶ When he was stronger he was sent to his grandmother Macrina to be brought up on the family estate at Annesi near Neo-Caesarea. From Macrina he received Christian teaching based on what she had learned from Gregory Thaumaturgus; and so from an early age Basil was introduced to the thinking of Origen. At this time it appears that his father was teaching at Neo-Caesarea; and so from his father he received the foundations of his general education. In many ways Basil reveals in his life a thoroughly Hellenistic temperament: he was active, restless and full of organising and ruling ability, which no doubt began with the breadth of education he received, firstly from his father and subsequently at Caesarea, Constantinople and Athens.

Basil was to undergo studies in Caesarea from the age of about fifteen. He then continued his studies in Constantinople and finally in Athens from AD 351 to 356. All the evidences of Athens' literary glories were still visible and the paganism which had produced them was still flourishing. For five years Basil was part of this academic world and his studies included grammar, poetry, history, rhetoric, dialectics, metaphysics, astronomy, geometry and medicine. ¹⁷ It was in Athens that Basil renewed his friendship with Gregory of Nazianzus, whom he

had known at Caesarea, and who had reached Athens some time before him. Both these young men, in their devotion to and passion for study, spent most of their time in the lecture room or in the Church. At Athens, Basil acquired a broad classical and philosophical education and his writings show, "that he retained a lifelong intimacy with Plato, Homer and the historians and rhetors and they certainly influenced his style".¹⁸ While at Athens Basil felt no embarrassment in his contacts with pagans. He knew the famous orator Libanius and the future pagan emperor Julian. He was, however, never an enthusiast for the culture of Athens, like his friend Gregory and he apparently looked back somewhat critically on his time there.¹⁹

VI. A changed life

Basil returned to Caesarea in AD 356 as one of the most distinguished sons of that town. He was content to accept the adulation with which he was received. His return to his home town was in accord with Menander's Handbook for Orators. This told young students what to say when taking their leave of their home towns to undertake further studies, "They should praise the great city to which they were going but they must praise their own city more strongly and promise to share with it their new fruits of learning."²⁰ This Basil fulfilled and on his return he became Professor of Rhetoric in Caesarea. The former dedication to a life of spiritual devotion seemed somewhat forgotten as Basil enjoyed the praise and glory of his life as a rhetorician. Though Gregory his friend denies it,²¹ Gregory of Nyssa, his brother, declares expressly, "that Basil's head was completely turned by his success".²² In his Life of Macrina he writes,

"After the mother had skilfully arranged what seemed best for each of Macrina's sisters, her brother, the distinguished Basil, came home from school where he had had practice in rhetoric for a long time. He was excessively puffed up by his rhetorical abilities and

disdainful of all great reputations, and considered himself better than the leading men in the district, but Macrina took him over and lured him so quickly to the goal of philosophy that he withdrew from the worldly show and began to look down upon acclaim through oratory and went over to this life full of labours for one's own hand to perform, providing for himself, through his complete poverty, a mode of living that would, without impediment, lead to virtue." ²³

To Macrina he owed his conversion to the religious life of the monk. It is interesting to note that "a new word 'monachos' (monk) occurs as a casual fact of life in a pagan papyrus in AD 324". ²⁴ Basil was baptised and set off from Caesarea to undertake a tour of the eremitic settlements in Egypt, Palestine, Syria and Mesopotamia in order to study the life of asceticism to which he felt called. His journeyings took him two years.

VII. The influence of his travels

In Egypt Basil saw both the tendency displayed by the Antonine hermits to gather round a local leader while maintaining their solitary life, and also the cenobitic life, as founded by Pachomius, where they met together for meals, regular worship, and work at certain trades. The monasticism of Palestine had been brought to that land by a disciple of Antony named Hilarion in the fourth century so the form encountered by Basil would be eremetical. ²⁵ It was later in the fourth century when cenobitic monasteries took root in Palestine. In Syria and in Mesopotamia, Basil encountered the life of the hermit. Cenobitic life was commonly only the first stage of a monk's pilgrimage. The ultimate goal was the higher solitary life of the hermit. ²⁶ Egyptian monks practised austerities and mortifications of the severest kind such as prolonged abstinence from food and sleep, exposure to cold and heat, heavy labour and physical fatigue. (In Syria, at a later date, the

austerities were of a much more extraordinary character, such as pillar hermits who lived on the top of pillars for years, and monks who continually carried great stones fastened to their backs.) Basil found many monks in Egypt, Palestine, Syria and Mesopotamia whose manner of life he admired. He writes,

"And in truth, I found many in Alexandria and many throughout the rest of Egypt, and others in Palestine and Coele Syria and Mesopotamia, the self-discipline of whose manner of living I admired. I marveled, too, at their endurance in toil; I was amazed at their attention at prayers, their victory over sleep, being overcome by no physical necessity, always preserving lofty and unconquered the resolution of their soul, in hunger and thirst, in cold and nakedness, not paying attention to the body nor consenting to waste any thought on it, but, as if living in flesh not one's own, they showed by their deeds what it is to dwell among those on this earth and what to have their citizenship in heaven. I admired these things and I considered the life of the men blessed because they show by their works that they bear around in their body the dying of Jesus. And I prayed that I, also, as far as was possible, might be a zealous follower of those men." ²⁷

VIII. The ascetic life begins

On his return from his travels (c. AD 359), Basil retired to a lonely spot near Neo-Caesarea in Pontus and there began to lead a monastic life. He describes his spiritual awakening:

"After I had wasted much time in vanity and had spent nearly all my youth in the vain labor in which I was engaged, occupying myself in acquiring a knowledge made foolish by God, when at length, as if aroused from a deep sleep, I looked upon the wondrous light of the truth of the Gospel and saw the futility of the

wisdom 'of the rulers of this world who are passing away,' having mourned deeply my piteous life, I prayed that guidance be given me for my introduction to the doctrines of religion." 28

The spot Basil chose to live was on his family estate at Annesi. It was on the opposite bank from where his sister Macrina and his mother Emmelia had retired to found their own retreat some years earlier. He wrote inviting his friend Gregory to join him in the monastic life. Gregory replied that he had to look after his old parents but suggested that they should divide their time, living together first near the relatives of the one, then near those of the other. Evidently Basil did at some point visit Gregory at Tiberina, and tried to found a monastery there, for Basil jokes about the Tiberina mud which evidently annoyed Gregory. 29

Tiberina, however, didn't work; hence Basil's choice of a lonely part of his family estate to begin his monastic life. The place was close to where Macrina and Emmelia lived with their household in a life of mutual sharing and worship. Undoubtedly Macrina's influence upon Basil played a major part in his decision to forsake the world for the life of the monk. It is clear, however, that other influences also contributed to this. From an early age, in common with many Christian families, he had shared in family devotions and had learned from family experience the costliness of the Christian life. In Athens, with his friend Gregory, he had devoted much time to the pursuance of Christian things. In the study of philosophy the student would learn to spend time in meditation and self-denial, and so the life of the philosopher and the life of the ascetic had much in common. This is considered more fully in Chapter 5 on asceticism. In his journeyings in Egypt, Palestine, Syria and Mesopotamia, Basil saw at first hand the life to which he felt called. Far from discouraging him, his experiences confirmed his call and contributed to the development of his monastic life.

IX. The influence of Eustathius

Before we leave this period of Basil's life mention must be made of the influence of Eustathius of Sebaste. ³⁰ Eustathius had introduced the ascetic movement into the northern province of Asia Minor in the fourth century. The little we know of this movement comes from a synod assembled at Gangra (c. AD 340) in which the bishops of the neighbouring churches criticised and condemned the Eustathians. They were guilty of a spirit of insubordination towards the local church authorities. They despised the married clergy, they refused to attend the services held in the local churches, and they disrupted many Christian homes by preaching the impossibility of salvation in the married state. Eustathius left no writing of his own from which we could glean first-hand information on his views and the practices of his followers. On the evidence, however, of some of Basil's Letters we are able to discover the influence of Eustathius upon the young Basil. Writing to Eustathius concerning his encounter with the monks of Egypt Basil explains,

"So when I beheld certain men in my own fatherland striving to copy their ways, I felt that I had found a help to my own salvation . . . And though many were for withdrawing me from their society, I would not allow it, because I saw that they put a life of endurance before a life of pleasure; and, because of the extraordinary excellence of their lives, I became an eager supporter of them." ³¹

Basil wrote in very complimentary terms about Eustathius' asceticism and bore witness to the close bonds that existed between them in his early years. ³² One aspect of the Eustathian system which Basil seems to have copied was the attachment to his brotherhoods of schools, for children of both sexes, with the primary aim, "to train the children that at a later age they might choose the monastic life as their own

career".³³ These early fascinations with Eustathian asceticism had lasting consequences for Basil. As Gregory of Nazianzus reports, while in Athens they often discussed their future and even promised to join one another later in a life of "philosophy" (asceticism).³⁴ Shortly after his return from Athens, writing to Eustathius, Basil expresses a "passionate longing"³⁵ to put himself under the guidance of this admired master of asceticism. It is impossible to quantify the influence of Eustathius upon Basil's ascetic life. However, neither the brilliant teachers of Athens, nor the extraordinary exploits of the Egyptian and Syrian monks, made Basil forget the early stirrings of these encounters with Eustathius and his monks.

The friendship of these early days, based almost entirely on Basil's attraction to the ascetic life lived out by Eustathius and his followers, did not last. By c. AD 372 Basil was beginning to mistrust his friend.³⁶ When Basil was elevated to the episcopate in AD 370 Eustathius, "showed great joy and expressed an earnest desire to aid his friend in his new and responsible office".³⁷ Sadly it would appear that Eustathius was fired with love of power and his motives for desiring to help Basil were coloured by this. He also appears to have been able to express a variety of opinions on theological matters, first siding with one party and then with another. This naturally resulted in him being regarded with suspicion by them all. Basil expresses this very clearly when speaking about Eustathius and his followers. He writes, "Men are like clouds which with the changing of the breezes are borne to one part of the air at one time and again to another. And these especially of whom our discourse treats appear to be the most fickle of all who have come within our experience."³⁸ From supporting Basil's defence of orthodoxy Eustathius distanced himself from the stance taken by Basil. Basil recalls Eustathius' early influence upon his desire to follow the monastic life and of his (Eustathius') visits to Basil's retreat at Annesi.³⁹ In spite of these former days of friendship, Eustathius now (c. AD

375) accuses Basil of unorthodox views on the divinity of the Holy Spirit. ⁴⁰ These views were expressed, according to Eustathius, in a letter written by Basil to Appollinarius, who himself held unorthodox views on the Holy Spirit, "twenty years and more ago". ⁴¹ Basil again expresses his deep hurt at Eustathius' attack on him. In a letter ⁴² Basil was charged "with deception and want of principle, corruption of churches, and destruction of souls, and - truest of all in their opinion - with having made that exposition of the faith insidiously, not as a service to the Nicopolitans, but contriving treacherously to obtain a confession for ourselves". It would appear that Eustathius even effected a separation of a part of the coastal land of Pontus from the Church of Caesarea, in pursuit of his own personal aggrandizement, and to the deep hurt of Basil. ⁴³ Theological differences, personal betrayals, and personal hurt ultimately caused an irreconcilable split ⁴⁴ which was maintained until Basil's death in AD 379. Eustathius died soon after.

Basil, now settled at Annesi, divided his fortune among the poor. It does appear, however, that he retained an income from family lands which he used for the relief of those in need. His commitment to this was evident at the time of a severe famine which affected Cappadocia in AD 368. At Annesi he was joined for a period by Gregory, when they prepared the Philocalia. The two Rules which had a decisive influence on the expansion of the monastic life *began to be formulated* during this period, AD 359-362. He was joined by others who shared the cenobitic life with him and, in time, he had founded a number of monasteries. The public life of Basil as a monk had begun.

Notes for Chapter 4

1. Lane Fox, Pagans and Christians, pp. 613-614, 622-623.
2. F.F. Bruce, The Spreading Flame, pp.186-187.
3. Robert Markus, The End of Ancient Christianity, p.72.
4. W.H.C. Frend, The Early Church, pp.183-184.
5. Quasten, Patrology Vol II, p.123.
6. Gregory Thaumaturgus, The Oration and Panegyric addressed to Origen, p.54.
7. *Quasten, op. cit.*, p. 124.
8. Lowther Clarke, p.19.
9. Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa, Letter 12, p.534.
10. Lane Fox, p.47.
11. Idem.
12. Lowther Clarke, p.17.
13. Morison, p.117.
14. J.W.C. Wand, Doctors and Councils Part II, pp.34, 38-39.
15. Letters (186-368), p.65, note 203.
16. Letters (1-185), p.83.
17. Letters (Loeb) Vol.I, p.xix.
18. Hans von Campenhausen, The Fathers of the Greek Church, p.86.
19. Idem.
20. Lane Fox, p.519.
21. Lowther Clarke, p.23.
22. Idem.
23. Gregory of Nyssa, Ascetical Works in The Fathers of the Church, the "Life of Macrina", pp.167-168.
24. Lane Fox, p.601.
25. Lowther Clarke, p.41.

26. Ibid., p.42.
27. Letters (186-368), p.128.
28. Ibid., p.127.
29. Letters (1-185), p.48.
30. Lowther Clarke, p.24.
31. Jonathan Fedwick, The Church and the Charisma of Leadership in Basil of Caesarea, p.159.
32. Idem.
33. Ibid., p.160.
34. Idem.
35. Idem.
36. Letters (1-185), p.247, note 1.
37. Ibid., p.184, note 1.
38. Letters (186-368), p.198.
39. Ibid., p.131.
40. Ibid., pp.130-131.
41. Ibid., p.131.
42. Ibid., p.195.
43. Idem.
44. Ibid., p.65, note 1.
45. Letters (1-185), pp.269-271.

CHAPTER 5

Basil's Understanding of the Ascetic Life in its Religious Context

I. The issue of Basil's "conversion"

Returning to Caesarea from his studies in Athens, Basil found himself feted by his fellow citizens, and it appeared for a time as though the things of this world would blind him from the things of God. He returned in much honour and acclaim, and his brother Gregory records that he was filled with conceit. He accepted the chair of rhetoric and very quickly established himself among the outstanding citizens of Caesarea. It is not easy to determine one clear factor which led to his change of heart and his decision to leave worldly pursuits for the ascetic life. Always conscious, however, of his family background Basil must have been influenced by the example of his elder sister, Macrina, and her decision to devote her life to virginity and the service of God. According to Gregory, it was she who confronted Basil with the spiritual dangers of following the things of this world, and witnessed to him of the far better way. Perhaps, too, the death of his brother Naucratus and the subsequent decision of his mother, Emmelia, to join Macrina in her life of asceticism on the family estate at Annesi, caused a stirring within him. His was a family of deep and courageous commitment to the Christian faith. During this period of worldly pursuits, perhaps Basil would reflect upon the witness of his family in far from easy circumstances, and also upon the years of Christian fellowship he had shared in the company of his friend Gregory during their studies in Athens. There was also the influence of his encounters with the founder of Christian asceticism in Cappadocia, Eustathius of Sebaste. On his return from Athens it might have been Eustathius' continuing influence which led Basil to journey to Egypt, Palestine, Syria and Mesopotamia to see for himself the life of the monks to which he felt more and more drawn.

All these influences and more, together with his own personality, caused Basil to leave behind the things of this world and seek after that which leads to perfection. The sharpness of his mind, together with his single-mindedness, had given Basil the appearance of a remoteness in his relationship with others. In Athens, he rarely mixed socially with other students, and he and his friend Gregory spent their time in the pursuit of religion and in serious study. Gregory writes, "Two ways were familiar to us: the first and more precious leading us to our sacred buildings and the masters there; the second and the one of less account, to our secular teachers. All else - festivals, spectacles, assemblies, and banquets - we left to those with a taste for such things." ¹ Even in his relationship with Gregory he could be dominant and selfish, ² and at times unfairly demanding when striving to get his own way. ³ Although the friendship between the two men was deep and lasting Basil was able to live his life independently of others. It must be said that this apparent aloneness did not cause him to be insensitive to the needs of others. On the contrary, Basil found that being alone with God caused him to seek after the wellbeing of others. For him the model of Jesus Christ was to be his hallmark. Basil, therefore, followed his sister to Annesi and on the other side of the river Iris, he founded his own retreat and began his life of asceticism.

II. The influence of the world of philosophy

The ascetic ideal was not just something that resulted from Basil's Christian background or experience. His interest in and pursuit of pagan philosophy would have contributed in no small measure to his decision to sell all that he had and follow Christ. Within the schools of Greek philosophy the Greek word "askesis" had its roots. It meant discipline or training, and stood for the life of discipline and training designed to help men overcome the weakness of their bodies, and to cultivate the perfect life. In order to enable a man to grow towards the perfect state, it was essential that he overcame

the obstacles which stood in his way, and these obstacles were the result of human weakness.

According to Robert L. Wilken ⁴ we can see, for example, in the words of Seneca and Marcus Aurelius how Hellenistic moralists sought to train followers to cope with lust, anger, desire, fear of death, ambition, hate and worldly goods. For the philosopher all these temptations and ills were encountered in the midst of life. In order to overcome them it was necessary to discipline one's mind and body. For many this was made possible by withdrawing from the "world" into the schools of reason and knowledge. Within these schools, the philosopher sought to train his followers to cope with the cruel fate of life and the obstacles which stood in man's way of achieving the perfect state. In some schools of philosophy, the process of salvation was likened to the liberation of the imprisoned self from the body through knowledge, similar to the teachings of Gnosticism. Therefore, as his knowledge increased, so too did his ability to cope with his human emotions, the cruel fate of death, and his continuing journey towards perfection.

The spirituality of Basil was, therefore, rooted in part in the spirit of the ancient world of philosophy. His own philosophical training would have contributed to his desire to seek the ascetic life of the Christian monk. Basil observes that "the desires, wraths, fears and griefs, the venomous evils of the soul, if they have been lulled to sleep by silence and have not been kept aflame by constant provocation, are more easily overcome by reason." ⁵ Like the philosophers, Basil believed that in the midst of the temptations of life man lost sight of the divine and turned his back on the perfect way. It was necessary to withdraw from the world to a life of solitude so that the passions, so often equated with the desires of the flesh, could be quieted through the pursuit of reason, fasting and self-discipline. Here the influence of Neoplatonism is evident. Its creator Plotinus believed that man's return to the source of all being (the One) is not achieved easily. It

requires the life of asceticism - restraining from actions and desires and purifying the self from the influences of the finite world. Such union with the divine is the result of prolonged effort by the will and understanding. ⁶ Unlike the philosophers, however, Basil believed that it was more than the pursuit of reason (fasting and self-discipline continued to play an important part in the ascetic life of the monk) which liberated man's imprisoned soul. For him it was intimately bound up with an understanding of and belief in God's love for man in Jesus Christ, and a seeking after the God in whom man lives and moves and has his very being. For Basil, the means was the ascetic life lived in response to God's love and the goal was union with God. As we seek to understand Basil's understanding of the ascetic life we shall discover that the journey towards perfection was a journey towards knowing God. Knowing and loving God was, for Basil, not something to be pursued on its own. It was intricately linked with knowing and loving one's neighbour in obedience to the words of Jesus Christ in Matthew 22:35-40. In answering a lawyer's question regarding the great commandment in the law, Jesus tells him that the love of God and the love of one's neighbour are one. This social dimension of the Christian pilgrimage towards perfection was a major element in Basil's understanding of Christian asceticism. It was firmly based upon his understanding of Scripture.

III. The imitation of Christ

Although the asceticism of the followers of philosophy played its part in Basil's renunciation of the world in his own journey towards perfection, there was one other major factor in this journey which we must examine. As a follower of Jesus Christ, the influence of Christ's life as recorded in the Bible had a profound effect upon him. Constantly the questions raised in his Rules find their answer from Scripture for in it Basil found the basis of his teaching on the spiritual life. According to Lowther Clarke, Basil discusses the authority of Scripture in the first of his Shorter Rules and in nearly all

the Longer Rules. In many of the Shorter Rules he appeals to proof texts to support his teaching. Often he is "slavishly literal" and thus requires of his monks behaviour identical to that of Jesus and his disciples. Just as Jesus was "obedient unto death" so the monks were required to be obedient to their superior even unto death. ⁷

The community life of Basil's monasteries was modelled on the pattern of the first century Christian community which, like the example in Acts 2:44, "had all things in common". Basil's understanding of the community life and of its superiority over the eremitic life was also based on Scripture. He saw, in the example and words of Jesus, the need for sharing faith with others, and the importance of mutual help in the journey towards perfection. He saw this in the episode recorded in John 13 when Jesus gave his disciples the example of humble service by washing their feet. Such a life, following the example of Jesus, could not be lived in solitude. Paul's concept of the Church as the body of Christ with all the variety of spiritual gifts making up the wholeness of the body (1 Corinthians 12), was also used by Basil to emphasise the importance of Christian interdependence and mutual responsibility. Basil in his Longer Rule 7 says, "How can we properly sustain our relation to Christ the Head, unless we are in union with our brethren, all living as members of one another". ⁸ Central to Basil's ascetic ideals was Scripture and his understanding of its teaching played an important part in his preference for the cenobitic life over the eremitic life. Basil was himself committed totally to the *cenobium*, for he believed that only within the community life could the life of Christ be recaptured and faithfully lived out.

IV. The importance of solitude and involvement

The ascetic life which Basil sought to live was not to be developed outside or on the margins of the Church, for he wanted it to influence the Church from within. Ever conscious of the contemporary Church situation, with the increase of mass

Christianity and the Church's inability to reflect the life of the first century Christian community, he sought to see the ascetic life of the monks influence and transform the contemporary Church. Basil's form of asceticism was therefore influenced by the unity of spirit and the bonds of brotherly love which were seen within the early Christian community, and lacked the harsh personal disciplines of Egyptian monachism. According to Roy J. Deferrari, regardless of the rigours he visited upon his own body, Basil insisted that true continence is the avoidance of all excess, whether of indulgence or abstinence. ⁹ Although the means differed from the strict rigours of Egypt the goal of the Basilian ascetics remained the same as those of Egypt. For all Christian ascetics the goal was perfection both physically and spiritually and this perfection was found in mystical union with God. Basil writes to his friend Gregory concerning the spiritual life and states that the only way to sustain the journey towards perfection is through "a complete separation from the world".¹⁰ Such thought highlights the paradox within the life of one who sought the solitary place and at the same time firmly believed that the pursuit of perfection necessarily required commitment to and involvement with one's neighbour. For Basil it became clear that the desert place and an encounter with fellow monks and the world outside the monastery were essential in the monk's ascetic journey. Although Basil had lived most of his life in the city he moved to a place of solitude on the river Iris for the purpose of cultivating the spiritual life. He does, however, say that although he believes that such a pastoral setting is conducive to the spiritual life it is not really a matter of city versus country. He admits that the simple transfer from city to country is not enough. Basil writes, "although I have left the distractions of the city, which are to me the occasion of innumerable evils, I have not yet succeeded in forsaking myself". ¹¹ He compares himself to someone who is seasick and who, when he leaves the ship, continues to be dizzy on the land for he writes, "Since we carry around with us our innate passions, we are everywhere

subject to the same disturbances. Therefore, we have not profited much from this solitude". ¹²

Basil reveals that man's dilemma is not his physical location but his internal disorder. Solitude may facilitate the journey towards perfection but it cannot succeed without the personal disciplines of fastings, meditation upon Scripture, privations, and watchings which, according to Abbot Moses, are the instruments of perfection. ¹³ Basil believes that wherever we are the inner temptations remain and these temptations which relate to the will, desire, passions, and emotions, are the evils which beset the soul. These temptations are slowly mastered by the ascetic as he journeys towards perfection which is for him union with God. Asceticism is not therefore an end in itself but rather the means to an end, union with God. It is the renunciation of all that hinders the process of growth and development towards perfection thus enabling the ascetic to grow in holiness. It has therefore both negative and positive elements. Owen Chadwick writes, "Eastern and western spirituality as a whole conceives the ascetic life as a slow progress upward toward God, a climb up a hill by spiritual exercises - prayer, mortification of the carnal lusts, growth in the knowledge of God - until the soul has become Christ-like, God-like". ¹⁴

In order to overcome the obstacles which stand in the way of growth, the monk had to cultivate a life which would enable him to reach this goal. Basil dwells at length on the discipline required and the means to be employed in overcoming the obstacles. In keeping with the spirit of the ancient world, which believed that when men lived in the midst of the temptations of life they lost sight of the divine, Basil urged his monks to live a life of solitude in order that they might free themselves from all outside influences. Basil writes,

"We should try to keep the mind in tranquillity. For, as the eye which is continually gazing about... must

fix its gaze firmly on that object, if a clear image of it is to be obtained - so, too, the mind of man is incapable of perceiving the truth clearly, if it is distracted by innumerable worldly cares. Wild desires, unruly impulses, and passionate yearnings greatly disturb him who is not yet united in the bonds of wedlock; and a tumultuous throng of different cares awaits him who already has taken a wife: the longing for children, if he is childless; the solicitude for their training, if he has children; the watchfulness over his wife, the care of his home, the protection of his servants, the losses on contracts, the contentions with his neighbours, the lawsuits, the business risks, the farm work. Each day, as it comes, brings its own shadow for the soul, and the nights, taking over the troubles of the day, beguile the mind with the same phantasies." 15

V. Seeking God

In order that man might find his true self, set free from all that hinders and burdens him on his journey to perfection, he must not only seek solitude but also seek God and know him. Basil believed that the mind (*nous*) was capable of perceiving and knowing God. It was this that distinguished man from other creatures and made it possible for him to turn naturally to God, to know him, and to have fellowship with him. When man's mind has been freed from all obstacles its sole desire is to contemplate God. Thus liberated, the ascetic slowly grows nearer and nearer to God, for the crown of his asceticism is union with God. As he journeys so he achieves a good and virtuous life, for Basil draws a direct line between the contemplation of God and the life of a good man. It is interesting to realise that this view of God, as the end or goal, differs from our view of God as the provider of grace, which enables man to live a godly life. Here God is seen as standing in front of man beckoning him on, rather than standing beside him or in him providing the means for man's progress.

Salvation is therefore seen as a goal to reach rather than a present reality.

Basil and the other Cappadocian Fathers had a glorious vision of the attractiveness of God. According to Wilken, "God is frequently viewed as standing in front of man beckoning him on by beauty and attraction".¹⁶ To them God is not an abstract metaphysical being who sits alone in heavenly isolation. He is alive and is always revealing to man more than man can imagine or conceive. Gregory of Nyssa compared God's unfathomable self-revelation to the endless flow of gushing waters, which the Bible tells us rose from the earth at the beginning of creation. The water keeps flowing, and it is impossible to say that you have seen all the water for it never stops flowing. It is the same with the infinite beauty of God. As God continues to reveal himself, man continues to marvel and wonder and his desire to see more is never exhausted. Like the gushing waters God's continuing self-revelation is never static, always fresh and surprising, always revealing new things about himself which are forever new and more exciting than previously seen.¹⁷ This picture of God, held by the Fathers, gave asceticism a glorious goal to reach for. The monk was not called to contemplate some abstract deity but rather to contemplate and cultivate an ever new and exhilarating relationship with a living God of infinite beauty and splendour. In him the monk lived and moved and had his very being and He was the goal to which he journeyed. This searching after the living God, who was for ever revealing more of himself, gave vitality to the spirituality of Basil's ascetic ideals.

VI. In the world for the world's sake

It was not only this vision of God which made Basil's monks' spiritual journey so alive and relevant. Intimately bound up with his seeking after perfection was his relationship with his neighbour, for Basil believed that there was no separation between loving God and loving one's neighbour. Here again we

see the paradox of coming apart from the world and involvement with the world. Basil believed that rather than being contradictory they were essential in his monks' pursuit of a life of holiness. In this we realise that Basil's ascetic life was not lived as an escape from the world, but rather as the instrument through which his monks and he were set free from the snares of the world to be of service to the world. Just as the disciples of Jesus were in the world yet "not of the world" (John 17:16) so Basil desired to see his monks follow that example.

He believed that the journey towards knowing and loving God, which the monk travelled in separation from the world, had also to be revealed within the context of community, both the monastic and the wider community. Love of God and love of one's neighbour were inseparable. One of the features of the early Church which caused stirrings among her opponents was the Christians' love for one another. Basil sought to see this aspect of the early Church's life lived out in his monasteries and through their influence with the world beyond. His communities were therefore places where human needs were considered and the inter-relationship of the monks an important factor. Concern for individuals was not confined to the monastic life but also shown to the community at large. The monasteries became places of help and healing for all who were in need. Financial aid was given through those monks who, on entering, had been men of financial means. Education was offered to the young, and medical care was available through hospitals staffed by the monks.

Basil's monastic communities were places where spiritual growth necessitated loving God and loving one's neighbour. The outward signs of this not only influenced the contemporary Church but was also seen by the pagan emperor Julian as a challenge to the state's less than caring attitude towards others. Through a life of renunciation of the things of this world and a striving after the things of God through self-discipline, fasting,

spiritual training (prayer and meditation upon Scripture) and a love of the brethren within and outwith the religious community, Basil and his monks lived out the life of asceticism. Their life made a significant influence upon the Church and the wider community. In Basil's own words, "Faith working through love is the distinguishing mark of the Christian".¹⁸

Notes for Chapter 5

1. See FO, p.45.
2. Ibid., p.48.
3. Anne Freemantle, "St Basil" in The Month, pp.157-158.
4. Wilken, p.83.
5. Letters (1-185), p.7.
6. Everett Ferguson, Backgrounds of Early Christianity, pp.367 and 369.
7. Lowther Clarke, p.106.
8. Idem.
9. Letters (Loeb) Vol.I, p.xxiii.
10. Letters (1-185),p.6.
11. Ibid., p.5.
12. Idem.
13. Dom E.C. Butler, "Monasticism," in The Cambridge Medieval History, Vol.1, p.525.
14. Owen Chadwick, John Cassian: A Study in Primitive Monasticism, p.77.
15. Letters (1-185),pp.5-6.
16. Wilken, pp.85-86.
17. Ibid., p.86.
18. Morison, p.30.

CHAPTER 6

The Monastic Life According to Basil

I. The community life preferred

Before Basil, the life of the monk had been patterned either on the eremitic life of Antony and his followers or on the more community based life of Pachomius and his monks. The former withdrew from society to live the life of the hermit, whereas the latter, with large monastic settlements around a central church, encouraged the monks to gather in the church for worship, to eat together and to share in the common life of the community. It must be stressed, however, that even within this form of monachism there was a tendency for the monk to be guided by a spirit of individualism, and to believe that the hermit was the true monk. It was the commonly held belief that this was the life to which all monks should aspire. ¹ Although Basil had been influenced in his early years by the asceticism of Eustathius and his monks in Cappadocia, it was his journeyings in Egypt and the living experience of these monks, which convinced him of his calling, "as far as in me lay (to) imitate them". ² Basil, however, sought to found a monastic life influenced by, but not identical to, either of the forms he encountered in the Egyptian desert. Neither the solitude of the hermit, with his excessive ascetic rigours, nor the feeling of "second best" by the monks of Pachomius, was to be Basil's model. Conscious of the need to recapture the life and zeal of the first century Christians within a society where increasing numbers were nominal Christians, Basil founded his monastic life upon his understanding of the life of Christ with its emphasis on love of one's neighbour.

In Basil's view the greatest advantage community life had over the individual life was that it gave opportunity for emphasising love towards one's neighbour which is fundamental to the way of the Christian. It is however worth observing that Basil did not abandon those who felt led to live the life of the hermit and so he made provision for them side by side

with the community. Each was to be of mutual benefit. What he did comes to us in Gregory of Nazianzus' *Panegyric* on Basil,

"He caused hermitages and monasteries to be built, not far from his cenobites and his communities of ascetics. He did not divide and separate them from each other by any intervening wall, as it were. He brought them close together, yet kept them distinct, that the life of contemplation might not be divorced from community life or the active life from contemplation, but, like the land and the sea, they might interchange their blessings and be united in their sole object, the glory of God." ³

The example of the Christ, who came not to be served but to serve and to give his life for others, was to characterise the life lived by Basil's monks.

Aware of the social needs of his age and of the great gulf between the contemporary situation and the original spirit of Christianity, Basil saw his monks as instruments of Christian service. By their life and witness Basil believed that the life of the Church would be influenced for good. To enhance this he took measures to see that his form of the monastic life was accepted by the church leaders. Through this, and through his gifts of oratory in preaching, the lives of many ordinary Christians were spiritually enriched and socially challenged. To enable the influence of his monks to be maximised, Basil's monastic communities came to be centred much more in towns and cities, thus placing the life and witness of his monks where the people were. Any charge of escapism which might have been made against the desert monks, could not be levelled at Basil's monasticism with its strong emphasis on loving one's neighbour.

The importance of sharing God's love led Basil to believe that the life of the *cenobium* was superior to the life of the hermit. The development and influence of his monastic movement

must be understood within that context. Basil makes his position clear in Longer Rule 7 where he answers a question concerning solitary or community life:

"I consider that life passed in company with a number of persons in the same habitation is more advantageous in many respects. My reasons are, first, that no one of us is self-sufficient as regards corporeal necessities, but we require one another's aid in supplying our needs... Again, apart from this consideration, the doctrine of the charity of Christ does not permit the individual to be concerned solely with his own private interests. 'Charity,' says the Apostle, 'seeketh not her own.' But a life passed in solitude is concerned only with the private service of individual needs... Furthermore, a person living in solitary retirement will not readily discern his own defects, since he has no one to admonish and correct him with mildness and compassion... Moreover, the majority of the commandments are easily observed by several persons living together, but not so in the case of one living alone; for, while he is obeying one commandment, the practice of another is being interfered with... Who then would choose this ineffectual and unprofitable life in preference to that which is both fruitful and in accordance with the Lord's command?" ⁴

Basil's conviction that the cenobitic life was superior to the eremitic life, a conviction premature in that age, is clearly stated by Basil in these words, "If you live alone, whose feet will you wash?" ⁵

II. Basil's own writings considered

To discover more of the monastic life according to Basil, it is necessary to consider Basil's own writings which deal with his pursuit of the ascetic life, his Ascetical Works and some of

his Letters. Basil was a prolific letter writer (over 360) and four of them reveal much of his thinking concerning the monastic life. They are numbers 2, 14, 22, and 223. The first three were written between the establishment of the monastery at Pontus and the beginning of his Ascetical Works.⁶ In them we find similarities with the Ascetical Works. The fourth letter was written long years after the Ascetical Works yet deals with the very beginning of his ascetical life.

III. Early stirrings in the ascetic way

Although written at a later date we shall consider Letter 223 first. Here Basil describes his pursuit of the ascetic life in his defence of his one time friend Eustathius of Sebaste's declaration that he, Basil, is guilty of heresy. Basil unfolds his spiritual journey, forsaking worldly pursuits and renouncing possessions to follow the life of asceticism. We learn of the "vain labour" of his youth and of the importance of Scripture upon his decision to seek the way of perfection. His central argument is supported by many references from Scripture.⁷ Almost immediately following the experience described in this letter Basil entered upon his new life in the retreat at Annesi. This letter provides information regarding Eustathius' early influence upon Basil and of his visits to the monastery at Annesi on the river Iris. It also reveals the break in their relationship, a break which was never healed.

It was from Annesi that Basil wrote Letter 2 to his friend Gregory of Nazianzus whom he invited to join him in the practice of asceticism. Here Basil reveals himself as the ascetic, constantly aware of the need for withdrawal from the world, seeking solitude, removed from association with men, so that nothing from outside would interrupt the constant practices of the ascetic life. "A life of piety" according to Basil, "nourishes the soul with divine thoughts."⁸ "When the mind is not engaged by external affairs, nor diffused through the senses over the whole world, it retires within itself. Then it ascends spontaneously to the consideration of God."⁹

Basil lays down in this letter essential elements in the monastic life. They include meditation upon the divinely inspired Scriptures and he even highlights lives to study e.g. Joseph (with regard to a life of perfect chastity), Job (with regard to fortitude) and Moses (with regard to anger against those offending God and a spirit of meekness towards those who slandered him). Prayer too is essential as it encourages the mind to concentrate on and contemplate upon God. Monks should not be boorish in conversation but should question simply and answer without self-display. A moderate tone of voice is to be preferred and he must at all times avoid harshness, even when there is need of censure. ¹⁰

IV. Monastic lifestyle: Concept and practice

In Letter 2 the monk's dress and diet are discussed. "Clothing should be used for the sole purpose of covering the body fittingly for winter and summer. Brilliancy of colour should not be sought, nor delicacy and softness of material. The tunic should be drawn close to the body by a belt. Sandals should be inexpensive but sufficiently fulfil their purpose."

¹¹ The monk's diet should be bread and water together with products of the land which can preserve the strength of the body for necessary duties. One regular hour is to be assigned for meals so that the remaining hours can be wholly occupied by the ascetic in the activities of the mind. On the matter of sleep Basil states it should be light and easily broken and it should be deliberately interrupted for meditation on lofty subjects. Within this letter Basil makes plain the need for personal discipline in the monk's pursuit of perfection and of the need to be ever on guard against practices which could lead the monk away from his contemplation of God. One important feature of this letter is Basil's preference for cenobitic monasticism. In it he clearly talks about a monk's involvement with other monks in conversation, however limited, and in the partaking of a daily meal. Although Basil emphasises the need for solitude in the pursuit of union with God it is clear from this letter that this life of discipline should be pursued

within the companionship of other monks. This preference for communal monastic life will be highlighted in his Ascetical Works.

Letter 14, although not at all definitive about the ascetic life, does give us a fine detailed picture of Basil's retreat at Annesi. Reminding his friend Gregory of their hope of following the ascetic life together Basil goes on to describe the natural beauty of his chosen retreat. Nothing could be more different from the austerity of the desert monks with their caves, tombs and cells. Here we read of

"a lofty, densely wooded mountain, watered on the north by cold transparent streams. A forest of trees of every colour and variety, a spontaneous growth around this plain, has become almost an enclosing wall, so that even Calypso's Isle which Homer seems to have admired more than all the others for its beauty is insignificant in comparison. The greatest praise we can give of this place is that, besides being suited, because of its singularly apt location, for the production of every kind of fruits, it nourishes the sweetest of all fruits to me - solitude." ¹²

Here in this idyllic place Basil reveals his preference for the lush beauty of Pontus over against the stark severity of the Egyptian desert. This surely reveals something of Basil's spirit for moderation which he sets out in his Rules for the monastic life. The letter also shows Basil's interest to be beyond the monastic life for he speaks of his need to leave his retreat to attend to business matters. This too becomes more and more a part of his life as the demands of and commitment to the Church lays claim upon his skills as an administrator and bishop. The closing part of his letter reveals a harshness of thought and insensitivity in Basil (cf. Letter 2, the monk "should maintain the refinement of gracious speech. He must at all times avoid harshness, even when there is need of censure")

¹³ as he describes Tiberina (a district near his friend Gregory of Nazianzus' home where the two men had thought about founding a retreat) as "the pit of the world". ¹⁴

The letters so far quoted reveal Basil as the ascetic while the final Letter 22 reveals him as a legislator. In this Letter we still see Basil's original conception of the ascetical life, that of renunciation both external and internal so that the monks, living in community life, can more closely imitate the life of Christ. The chief legislator for Basil is Scripture and he shows in this Letter how completely he follows Scripture in his ideal of the monastic life. The Letter contains over fifty regulations governing the monk's personal and relational life and nearly all are taken from Scripture. ¹⁵ It starts by stating that the Christian ought to think thoughts befitting his heavenly calling (Hebrews 3:1) and to live a life worthy of the Gospel of Christ (Philippians 1:27). ¹⁶ The Letter also deals with worship, a negative analysis of God's law, a negative analysis of the law of charity to one's neighbour and regulations for personal conduct which strike at the vice of self-love. Basil then deals with the role of the superior as head of the community and the monk's obedience to him. There are regulations concerning the practice of charity towards an erring brother and regulations regarding the acceptance of punishment. He also has regulations concerning repentance, concerning an unrepentant brother and a negative analysis of the law of temperance.

From these Letters it can be seen that Basil conceived of the ascetical life as a life prefigured in Scripture. Those called to it were required to live a life of renunciation, both internal and external, in their seeking after perfection. For Basil the external form of this life was the *cenobium*, and not the solitary life of the hermit, with its fulfilment of the twofold law of love towards God and neighbour and its suppression of the spirit of individualism.

Basil's major writings on the monastic life appear within his Ascetical Works which were written at different stages of his life. These are thirteen works including his Longer and Shorter Rules. Some of the works are unlikely to have been written by Basil, and of the thirteen the following, all thought to be by Basil, are related to monastic life: 'An Introduction to the Ascetical Life'; 'On the Judgement of God'; 'Concerning Faith'; 'An Ascetical Discourse and Exhortation on the Renunciation of the World and Spiritual Perfection'; 'A Discourse of Ascetical Discipline: How the monk should be equipped'; the 'Moralia,' and his Rules. Although the 'Moralia' was composed while he was at his retreat in Pontus around 360, from its breadth of interest it might easily have been the result of his pastoral involvement over many years as a presbyter and bishop. As chapters 70-79 deal with the proper duties of ministers of the word, married people, parents, slaves, soldiers and magistrates it can hardly be seen as written solely for monks. It does confirm however the fact that Basil saw the ascetic movement as a movement for reform within the life of the Church and that the way of renunciation was the way for all Christians. They are a collection of eighty precepts or rules founded upon the teaching of the New Testament. They are Gospel ethics and show us how Scripture lies at the root of all Basil's moral theology. In all his Ascetical Works we see Basil's devoted submission to the authority of Scripture and it is of particular interest in the study of his monastic ideals to be aware that the Bible is the foundation upon which all his monastic thinking and legislation rests.

The two factors in monastic life which must always be considered are mysticism (the longing of the soul for union with God) and asceticism (the desire for a purification of the soul by renunciation and self-denial in order to contemplate and journey towards union with God). To discover the form of monastic life advocated by Basil we must consider what position each of them occupies in his writings. From them we see that

asceticism is not an end but a means and that the aim of all Christians is union with God. He therefore does not stress the need for mortification of the flesh as rigorously as demanded by the asceticism of the desert solitaries. From his own experiences there he had observed that such excesses could result not in a spirit of humility but in a spirit of pride. Humility, following the example of Christ, was for Basil essential in the life of the monk and for all Christians. The asceticism of Basil's monks was to further not hinder the ultimate goal. Therefore, the mystical element is the dominant feature in his monastic ideal. He stresses the dual love of the monk which Basil believes cannot be separated, the love of God and the love of our neighbour. They are the chief motives of the Christian life, whether in the monastery or in the world. In Longer Rule 2 he writes, "The love of God is, therefore, demanded of us as a strict obligation, and for a soul to fail in this is the most unendurable of all evils." ¹⁷

For Basil Christian asceticism involves social activity as well as individual moral effort. For him the love of God is inseparably bound up with love of our neighbour,

"It is, accordingly, possible to keep the second commandment by observing the first, and by means of the second we are led back to the first. He who loves the Lord loves his neighbour in consequence. 'If anyone love me,' said the Lord, 'he will keep my commandments.' (John 14:23), and again, he says: 'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.' (John 15:12)" ¹⁸

It is clear from his writings that Basil believed that the life of the monk lived in community was more faithful to the teachings of Scripture than the life of the solitary monk. It is within the community life that the monk is perfected. There his life of renunciation "makes possible the uninterrupted practice of the presence of God and of the imitation of

Christ." ¹⁹ The imitation of Christ is important in Basil's understanding of the life of the monk and is spoken of by him in 'An Ascetical Discourse and Exhortation on Renunciation of the World and Spiritual Perfection', "Knowledge of holy living is knowledge of meekness and humility. Humility is the imitation of Christ; high mindedness and boldness and shamelessness, the imitation of the Devil. Become an imitator of Christ, not of Anti-Christ; of God and not of the adversary of God." ²⁰ In his Longer Rule 43 dealing with the type of persons superiors should be he writes,

"To consider first, then, that which is first in importance - he should be, by the love of Christ, so conformed in humility that, even if he is silent, the example of his actions may afford more effective instruction than any words. If, indeed, the goal of Christianity is the imitation of Christ according to the measure of his Incarnation, insofar as is conformable with the vocation of each individual, they who are entrusted with the guidance of many others are obliged to animate those still weaker than themselves, by their assistance, to the imitation of Christ, as the blessed Paul says, 'Be ye followers of me, as I also am of Christ.'" ²¹

The humility, self-denial, the obedience and the love of Christ are all to be imitated by the monks as they continue their journey towards perfection.

On this journey Basil draws our attention to the importance of solitude. This does not mean solitude from our neighbour but from the distractions of the world. This was a vital element in the monk's spiritual ascent and was emphasised by Basil in Letter 2 which he wrote to Gregory of Nazianzus. Here in his Ascetical Works he again stresses its importance in Longer Rule 6, "A secluded and remote habitation also contributes to the removal of distraction from the soul" ²² and,

"It is impossible to gain proficiency in this meditation and prayer, however, while a multitude of distractions is dragging the soul about and introducing into it anxieties about the affairs of this life. Could anyone, immersed in these cares, ever fulfill that command: 'If any man will come after me, let him deny himself?' For, we must deny ourselves and take up the Cross of Christ and thus follow Him."

23

Separation alone from the world was not sufficient, according to Basil, to achieve the life of perfection. He writes in 'On the Renunciation of the World and Spiritual Perfection',

"Do not think that all who live in a cell are saved, the bad as well as the good, for this is not true. Many, indeed, take up the life of virtue, but few bear its yoke. The kingdom of heaven is the prize of the violent and the violent bear it away - these are the words of the Gospel. By 'violence' is meant the affliction of the body which the disciples of Christ voluntarily undergo in the denial of their own will, in the refusal of respite to the body, and in the observance of Christ's precepts. If, then, you wish to bear away the kingdom of God, become a man of violence; bow your neck to the yoke of Christ's service. Bind the strap of the yoke tightly about your throat. Let it pinch your neck. Rub it thin by labor in acquiring virtues, in fasting, in vigils, in obedience, in silence, in psalmody, in prayer, in tears, in manual labor, in bearing all the tribulations which befall you at the hands of men and demons." 24

The monk therefore must lead a life of discipline, actively aware of his need to die to self through a life of obedience. He must renounce everything that hinders his spiritual journey.

Longer Rule 8 states, "Perfect renunciation, therefore, consists in not having an affection for this life and keeping before our minds the 'answer of death, that we should not trust in ourselves'". Basil quotes the examples, "James and John left their father Zebedee and the very boat upon which their whole livelihood depended. Matthew left his counting house and followed the Lord." ²⁵ Renunciation is therefore not an end in itself but a necessary condition for the attainment of Christian perfection. Only through it can the monk pursue untroubled the path of perfection, for it provides the freedom for him to seek his highest goal, the love of God, through the practice of virtues.

Solitude, renunciation and lastly continence were the requisites for the life of Christian perfection. Basil saw continence as the development and completion of renunciation. The continent man gained mastery over all passion (apatheia). It was, according to Basil, essential for the one who would lead the religious life. He highlights this in Longer Rule 16 where he states,

"It is evident that the practice of continence is essential (for one who would lead the religious life); first, from the fact that the Apostle includes continency among the fruits of the spirit and, second, from his saying that a blameless ministry is achieved through this virtue, in these words: 'In labors, in watchings, in fastings, in chastity';... Chastisement of the body and bringing it under subjection are achieved by no other means as successfully as by the practice of continency; for the effervescent fires of youth, whose leapings can scarcely be controlled, are held in restraint by continency as with a bridle." ²⁶

Although continence is frequently associated with sexual desires Basil clearly intends monks to gain self-control through "abstinence from pleasures which aim at the thwarting

of the will of the flesh for the purpose of attaining to the goal of piety." 27

It is obvious from Basil's thoughts in his Longer Rule 16 that he saw continence as almost, if not, the most important of the three requisites for the life of perfection highlighted by him. The following quotation from his letter makes this clear:

"In general we who are instructed in the devout life are bound to abstain from these pleasures which they enjoy who lead a self-indulgent life. The practice of continency, therefore, does not have to do only with the delights of the table, but extends also to the avoidance of all that represents an impediment to us... Thus, he is humble who is continent regarding worldly glory, and he meets the evangelical standard of poverty who is master of himself with respect to worldly goods. He abstains from anger who exercises control over wrath and indignation. Perfect continency also sets limits for the tongue, boundaries for the eyes, and enjoins upon the ears an avoidance of curiosity in the use of hearing. Any one who does not observe these restraints is incontinent and undisciplined. Do you see how all the other precepts cluster about this one and are intertwined with it?" 28

From his Ascetical Works we see how firmly Basil was convinced that the communal life was more representative of the life of the early Christian community as conveyed through Scripture. Again we should remind ourselves of how thoroughly scriptural Basil's treatment of the ascetic and monastic life is. Although there is no biblical evidence of Jesus Christ being involved in or advocating monastic life many of his sayings and his lifestyle reveal him to be someone who favoured the life of asceticism both for himself and for his disciples. In a culture where marriage was the norm Jesus chose a life of celibacy and he said, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air

have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Matthew 8:20). He lived a life of self-denial humbling himself and being obedient unto death (Philippians 2:8). He told his disciples to give up everything including their family (Luke 14:26), to deny themselves and follow him (Matthew 16:24). He even told them to live the simple life and to travel light (Matthew 10:9-10); and to have their treasure in heaven where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal (Matthew 6:20). The life which the disciples of Jesus were called to live was not to exclude responsibility towards their neighbour. It was a call into community as is clear from the life of the early Christian community described in the Book of Acts, "they had all things in common and sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need" (Acts 2:44-45) and, "the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common" (Acts 4:32). Although Jesus Christ had no part in forming or even advocating the common life he did call people into a relationship with God and with one another. He expected his followers to be aware of their neighbour's needs.

Although Basil believed that it was impossible to follow the true ascetic life in the midst of the world with all its temptations, he equally believed Scripture taught that the ascetic's true goal, union with God, could not be found solely through a life of solitude. Human relationships were necessary if the life of asceticism was to be followed. Basil, therefore, clearly favoured the life of the *cenobium* over against the life of the hermit's cell. As we have already noted, in Longer Rule 7, in his answer to the question: "On the necessity of being in the company of those who are striving for the same objectives - that of pleasing God - and the difficulty and hazards of living as a solitary," Basil gives a very full and detailed exposition, setting down his preference for the community life. In concluding this Longer Rule Basil states,

"This kind of life has as its aim the glory of God according to the command of our Lord Jesus Christ, who said: 'So let your light shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven.' It maintains also the practice characteristic of the saints, of whom it is recorded in the Acts: 'And all they that believed were together and had all things in common,' and again: 'And the multitude of believers had but one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that aught of the things which he possessed was his own, but all things were common unto them.'" 29

It is in this Longer Rule that Basil records Jesus Christ's supreme act of humble service.

"Consider, further, that the Lord by reason of His excessive love for man was not content with merely teaching the word, but, so as to transmit to us clearly and exactly the example of humility in the perfection of charity, girded Himself and washed the feet of His disciples. Whom, therefore, will you wash? To whom will you minister? In comparison with whom will you be the lowest, if you live alone? How, moreover, in a solitude, will that good and pleasant thing be accomplished, the dwelling of brethren together in one habitation which the Holy Spirit likens to ointment emitting its fragrance from the head of the high priest?" 30

In his Letter 295 Basil commends monks both to believe in and to live out the common life. Here the importance of praxis is stressed. He writes,

"Since, then, that spoken by us was not mere words but instructions which should pass into action for the

advantage of you who accepted them" and again, "For, I desire greatly both to see you united and to hear concerning you that you do not like the life without witnesses, but, rather, that you all are pleased to be not only guardians of each other's exact discipline, but also witnesses of the works accomplished." ³¹

In his own words Basil states, concerning his preference for community life over the eremetical life, "Community life offers more blessings than can be fully and easily enumerated. It is more advantageous than the solitary life both for preserving the goods bestowed on us by God and for warding off the external attacks of the Enemy." ³² It was to this life that Basil's monks were called.

Notes for Chapter 6

1. Owen Chadwick, p.11.
2. Quasten, Patrology Vol III, p.205.
3. See FQ, p.80.
4. See AW, pp.248,249.
5. Wand, *The Greek Doctors*, p.40.
6. Sister Margaret G. Murphy, p.13.
7. Letters (186-368), pp.127-128.
8. Letters (1-185), p.7.
9. Idem.
10. Ibid., pp.8-9.
11. Ibid., p.10.
12. Ibid., p.46.
13. Ibid., p.9.
14. Ibid., p.48.
15. Ibid., pp.55-60.
16. Ibid., p.55.
17. See AW, p.235.
18. Ibid., p.240.
19. Morison, p.27.
20. See AW, p.30.
21. Ibid., p.319.
22. Ibid., p.245.
23. Ibid., p.246.
24. Ibid., p.30.
25. Ibid., p.254.
26. Ibid., pp.268-269.
27. Ibid., p.270.

28. Ibid., pp.270-271.
29. Ibid., p.252.
30. Idem.
31. Letters (1-185), pp.286-287.
32. See AW, p.250.

CHAPTER 7

Living the Monk's Life According to the Rules (1)

Convinced that the cenobitic life was more closely representative of the life of Christ and the life of the early Christian community Basil formulated his two sets of Rules as a guide to those who sought to live the life of the monk. In them Basil deals with practically the same subjects, although the Shorter Rules are generally more detailed in their treatment of these subjects. They were *begun* during a four year period (AD 359-362) at his retreat at Annesi on the river Iris and are not rules as we would normally understand them. The Longer Rules contains the principles of the monastic life as understood by Basil, and the Shorter Rules give the application of these principles to the daily life of the monk living in the community. Both are arranged in the form of question and answer and are thought to have been devised by Basil himself. They come from his own experience of monastic life and are, in consequence, of practical help to those who enter and live in a monastic community. The Rules contain many scriptural quotations, for it was from the life and teaching of Christ and the Apostles as revealed in Scripture that Basil drew the principles upon which he founded his monasteries. As Frances Young states, "They do not really establish a monastic rule in the sense of a legalistic code of practice. Rather, they trace out an ascetical way of life on the basis of the New Testament." ¹ In the two sets of Rules we are made aware of the principles of discipline, worship, work, service and call.

I. A life of discipline

In all things the monk's goal was "union with God". His life therefore had to be ordered with this clearly in mind. Commitment to the monastic life was intended to be for life. In his spiritual journey he was to be sustained by a life of prayer, the study of Scripture and regular diets of worship. Spiritual discipline, although of great importance, was to

be married to the other facet of the monastic life, namely work. This could take the form of manual work or work in the service of others. The discipline was strict although the spirit and atmosphere of Basil's communities, usually not larger than 30-40 and created on the basis of a Christian family, was much less severe than the large Pachomian

monasteries with their ^{more} strict military form of discipline. *It would be believed that this difference was because Pachomius came from a non-Levitical military background knowing only the harsh regime of the army whereas Basil knew the reality of the Levitical family. Scholars now know that in fact Pachomius never served as a soldier and that he learnt his Leviticism from local people at Sheneset, where he was baptised, and from Salomon his ascetic teacher.*

The discipline in Basil's Rules always seems to be tempered with a spirit of tolerance and realism. Although obedience was absolute his monks were allowed to exchange views and, at regular meetings, they were able to raise various desires, problems, and questions quite freely. Concern for the individual was recognised and so each monk was able to have his own spiritual counsellor, and it is thought that the regular practice of monastic confession began with Basil. ² It does seem, however, to have been more for consultation and direction rather than a penitential system.

In Basil's world, civil and ecclesiastical authority were weak. The Civil and Imperial Government did not inspire feelings of loyal or willing obedience given the low morals of the Imperial families. Also, the doctrinal dissensions and moral laxity within the Church led to a lack of respect for church leaders. Because of this, many Christian people gladly welcomed the ordered, disciplined life of the monastic community. Obedience to the superior, who was elected by the senior monks in the community, was central to the ordered life of the monastery. It was, however, clearly recognised that the superior was himself a man under authority, the authority of Jesus Christ. It was, therefore, an authority tempered by this realisation. If the superior should be guilty of wrongdoing he was to be admonished

by the senior monks, and should he have to be absent from the community the senior monks chose a superior pro tem. Although there appears to be a certain gentleness in Basil's attitude to discipline and obedience, he was very definite in his desire to see proper order within his monasteries. This is illustrated in the reason for the appointment of a superior pro tem, "lest a democratic state of things prevail in the brotherhood".³ Although it appears that in reality supreme control lay in the hands of this one man, Basil seemed anxious to emphasise that, in the exercise of his autocratic powers, he must not forget his responsibility towards the other members of the community. This is made clear in Longer Rule 30:

"His rank should not arouse feelings of pride in the superior, lest he himself lose the blessing promised in humility or, 'lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the judgement of the devil.' (1 Timothy 3:6) On the other hand, let him be assured that added responsibility calls for greater service."⁴

Because he lived under the authority of Jesus Christ, the superior's role was tempered by his Master's life and his Master's command, "to love one another even as I have loved you" (John 13:34). To us, the discipline might appear strict, but in Basil's day it was an enlightened discipline compared with the harsh rigours endured by the desert monks of Egypt. His was the discipline of the Christian family whose head was the superior whose head was Christ.

II. A life of worship

Central to the life of the monk was the life of prayer and this was no less true of Basilian monasticism. The chief desire of every monk was to seek union with God, and so within the monastic life he learned to practise the presence of God. For the monk prayer was not just a spasmodic effort or an occasional expedient. Rather, it was a constant and continuous

communing with God so that it became a natural and spontaneous habit of mind. Basil writes, "Thus mayest thou pray without ceasing, not in words, but by the whole conduct of thy life, so uniting thyself to God that thy life is one long unceasing prayer." ⁵ The monastic life provided ample opportunity for this continuity of prayer and for a close communion with God. Prayer for the monk was to be both a private devotion and a community-based assembly at divine service at fixed times of the day. This coming together for daily corporate worship was an important feature of Basilian monasticism. It bound the brethren together and reminded them that they belonged to a community with responsibilities towards God and one another. Although Basil gives little indication about the actual form of worship, it would include psalms, prayers and the reading of Scripture. At each divine service suitable brethren were chosen to lead both the singing and the prayers. Within the monastic day eight separate services are mentioned by Basil as being obligatory for, according to him, "Each hour of prayer brings its own special remembrance of God's benefits to us." ⁶ The eight separate services were; Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, Compline, Nocturnes and Lauds. It was Basil's wish that none of these times of prayer be neglected by those resolved diligently to live for the glory of God and his Christ. ⁷

There is no mention by Basil of intercessory prayers. Prayer for him was petition and meditation, an opening up of the monk to the presence of God, and through this a closer awareness of and walk with God. The Basilian monk was also required to devote himself to the reading of Scripture as a devotional exercise. Through the reading of Scripture he was able to discover the mind of Christ, in whose footsteps he was called to follow. Mention should also be made of Basil's great reverence for the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. In one of his Letters he writes,

"Now to receive Communion daily, thus to partake of the holy Body and Blood of Christ, is an excellent and advantageous practice; for Christ himself says clearly: 'He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has life everlasting.' (John 6:54) Who doubts that to share continually in the life is nothing else than to have a manifold life? We ourselves of course, receive Communion four times a week, on Sundays, Wednesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays; also on other days, if there is a commemoration of some saint." e

This frequent receiving of communion was not something Basil adopted from Pachomian monachism where the monks communicated on Saturdays only.

III. A life of work

Although the monk's life was to be centred upon devotion to God through prayer and meditation, he was also called, following the example of Christ, to a life of service. Monks were encouraged to spend time in work in obedience to the words of Scripture. This Basil emphasises in his Longer Rule 42:

"This we must also keep in mind - that he who labors ought to perform his task not for the purpose of ministering to his own needs thereby, but that he may accomplish the Lord's command: 'I was hungry and you gave me to eat,' (Matthew 25:35) and so on. To be solicitous for oneself is strictly forbidden by the Lord in the words: 'Be not solicitous for your life, what you shall eat, nor for your body, what you shall put on,' and He adds thereto: 'For after all these things do the heathens seek.' (Matthew 6:25,32) Everyone, therefore, in doing his work, should place before himself the aim of service to the needy and not his own satisfaction. Thus will he escape the charge of self-love and receive the blessing of fraternal

charity from the Lord, who said: 'As long as you did it to one of these, my least brethern, you did it to me.'" (Matthew 25:40) ⁹

The monk's day was to be so ordered that work and prayer might have their proper place. Work in Basilian monasteries was to be such as did not interfere with, or distract from, the ordered quietude of the monastic life. Should a monk be involved in work which prevented him from attendance at one of the Hours of Service, Basil, forever realistic and practical, stated that he could at least seek to praise God in his heart with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs (Colossians 3:16). ¹⁰ Basil held the view that all of the monk's work was an offering to God because all things: his strength, his skills, his mind, even his tools, and the matter he works with, are from God. God is praised in toil as in prayer and the monk's work is placed in the context of the life of prayer. ¹¹

The monk's labour was to be productive in the sense that it was to minister to the needs of the community or the needs of the poor. They were to work, not to make themselves comfortable, but to keep themselves from being a burden to others, and to have something to help others. The rule of simplicity, utility and cheapness was important; and so we find weaving, shoe-making (carried out solely to provide essential apparel), building, carpentry and agriculture. All these were necessary for the conduct of life within the community. In the choice of his work the monk was ordered by his life of obedience and must accept the work given to him. As in the Pachomian monasteries, there were appointed monks to make contact with the outside world in matters of trade, since more was produced than was required by the monks.

"All commerce shall be under supervision. All goods are to be sold, if possible, within the confines of the monastery, even at the risk of pecuniary loss. But if it should be necessary to go outside, both

customers and markets are to be carefully selected. The fairs and markets which are held at the shrines of the martyrs are to be avoided, and the monks are not to assist in perpetuating such abuses, for our Lord Himself in great indignation cleansed the temple of its traffic". ¹²

Other work was also undertaken by the monks within the life of the community. This included work in the kitchen, attendance at the table, the care of visitors, nursing the sick, and the instruction of children.

As the social background of those who entered monastic life was varied, and Basil's desire was to unite them in brotherly love, so the common involvement in manual work, various crafts, and social care bonded them into a community. Each needed the other and each task contributed to the well-being of the whole. The thought in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians of the Church as a body, and the importance of each part, aptly describes Basil's idea of the inter-dependence of the brethren within the monastery. Some entered the monastic life for security from unemployment, while others came with personal wealth which they had to hand over to the superior for the caring work of the monastery. For the former, work, no matter how menial, restored their dignity, while for the latter, it stressed the oneness of the community and banished any sense of social superiority. The unity of the body was all important.

IV. The life of service

Because Basil's monastic life was based upon the life of Christ, who came not to be served but to serve, his monastic communities had a clear social dimension. Hospitality to visitors was offered, and this would often prove an effective means of recruitment to the monastic life. Guests, however, could not interrupt the work or devotions of the monastery and, if their sojourn extended for more than a few days, they were

expected to share in the work of the community. All guests were invited to share in the prayers of the community. Within the life of the community, hospitality and charity (for the poor frequently called for help) were important. Jesus said, "When you do it to one of the least of these my brethren you do it to me" (Matthew 25:40), hence the service offered to others was service offered to Christ himself. Conversation with visitors was not permitted by the community. When necessary, it was carried out by the superior or, in his absence, by another monk chosen by him. The ordered life of the monastery must suffer no interference.

Basil's monks were to make their love of the poor proof of their great devotion to God, for in the contemporary world such care was not common. All too often within a society caught up in selfish pursuits the needs of the poor were neglected.

"In situations like this (i.e. famine), nothing is so distressing as the cruelty and avarice of those who enjoy plenty. They watch for occasions of trafficking in want and they reap a harvest from misfortune. They do not heed: 'He that hath mercy on the poor lendeth to the Lord' (Proverbs 19:17) and 'He that hideth up corn, shall be cursed among the people.' (Proverbs 11:26).... Such are these buyers and sellers of gain, having no regard for their fellow men or thanks to God, by whose benefit they enjoy plenty when others are in distress." ¹³

Morison tells us that Basil complains, "that the rich cover the bareness of their walls with tapestries and do not clothe the nakedness of men. They adorn their horses with rich and costly trappings, and despise their brothers who are in rags". ¹⁴ The economic conditions under the Imperial administration, with high taxation and usury swelling the ranks of the destitute, always left scope for private charity and Basil's monasteries undertook this willingly and gladly. Many who joined the

communities came from the wealthy class, and the riches they brought with them were devoted to the care and help of those in need. The distribution of monies for the poor and needy was in the hands of a monk specially appointed, and no monk was permitted to give to the poor on his own responsibility. Within each diocese the bishop had to undertake the care of the poor. Often, when he was a bishop, Basil intervened in cases of excessive taxation and other situations of injustice and need. When a severe famine hit Cappadocia ¹⁵ (AD 368) he came to the rescue of many, and according to Gregory of Nazianzus,

"By his word and exhortations he opened up the storehouses of the rich and brought to realization the words of Scripture: 'he dealt bread to the hungry' (Isaiah 59:7) and 'he satisfied the poor with bread', (Psalm 131:15) and 'he fed them in famine' (Psalm 32:19) and 'he has filled the hungry with good things.' (Luke 1:53) He collected through contributions all kinds of food helpful for relieving famine. He set before them caldrons of pea soup and our salted meats, the sustenance of the poor. Then, imitating the ministry of Christ, who, girded with a towel, did not disdain to wash the feet of His disciples, and employing his own servants or, rather, his fellow slaves and co-workers in this labor, he ministered to the bodies and the souls of the needy, combining marks of respect with the necessary refreshment, thus affording them relief in two ways."¹⁶

Because the ordinary diocesan administration of relief was insufficient, Basil was dependent upon his monks, with their vow of poverty and their obligation to charity, to undertake the real care of those in need. Therefore, in the midst of economic injustice the monastery became a centre for the distribution of relief to the poor.

As well as caring for the poor Basil also wanted the monastery to show its social concern through the care of the sick. Throughout his life Basil was in poor health and therefore had much sympathy with medical work. Monks were involved in the nursing care of the sick although of equal importance to Basil was the care of the sick person's soul. His philanthropic work led to the foundation of what Gregory describes as, "the new city, a storehouse of piety, the common treasury of the wealthy, where superfluous riches, sometimes even necessities, thanks to the exhortations of Basil, are laid up".¹⁷

Sozomen speaks of, "the Basileias, the most celebrated hospice for the poor, founded by Basil from whom it received the name which it still bears".¹⁸ According to Ramsay, "the new city caused the gradual concentration of the entire population of Caesarea round the ecclesiastical centre, and the abandonment of the old city".¹⁹ The Basileias was visited often by Basil and within it many lepers were cared for.²⁰ It was not the only hospice for the poor and the sick created by Basil's monks. Basil speaks of other such homes and seeks, from the Imperial accountants, immunity from taxation for them.²¹ In all his work for the poor and the sick Basil, according to his friend Gregory of Nazianzus, "neither gained nor expected any personal profit, his services entirely gratuitous".²² Basil, in ministering to the needy, saw his service as a direct expression of his Christian faith.

V. The calling

To become a Basilian monk a person must enter a community. It rested upon the other members of the community to decide whether that person should be admitted or not. The superior could not admit a novice into the community without the knowledge and consent of the whole community. The novitiate was a period of probation, when the person intending to become a monk became familiar with the routine of prayer and work. He must learn the full meaning of renunciation of the world and

the disciplines of the monastic life. Inquiry was made into his past life and he was required to make confession of his sins. A novice was required to learn by heart passages of Scripture, to keep silence, and only to do such work as was approved by the superior. The reception of a new brother was an occasion for joyous thanksgiving and fervent prayer, and his admission was in the presence of the whole community. It is uncertain whether he took specific vows or whether his vocation was for life, although it does appear that the ceremony began with a series of questions which were put to the novice, after which he made his profession. ²³ Basil insisted that at a monk's profession "ecclesiastical officials should be called in as witnesses of the decision, so that through their presence, as well, the consecration of the person as a kind of votive offering to God may be sanctified and the act ratified by their testimony". ²⁴ By this means Basil sought official Church recognition of the monk's act of profession. This was important to him for he desired to see the monastic life accepted by the Church in order to have a spiritual influence upon it. It does appear that Basil intended the vocation to be for life, although it would be difficult to enforce such a vow. Basil states,

"Surely, everyone who has been admitted to the community and then has retracted his promise should be looked upon as a sinner against God, in whose presence and to whom he pledged his consent to the pact.... The brethren are justified in never again opening their door to these persons, even if they should apply for shelter on some occasion when they are merely in transit." ²⁵

The monk's life, so ordered by submission to the principles of discipline, worship, work, service and call, became a witness to the Church of the life of Christ, and to society of the importance of selfless love. Clearly Basil saw the importance in the life of his monks of a spiritual discipline and a

devotion to human relationships to enable them to be faithful to the command of Jesus Christ of the two-fold love. As the monk lived out this life it was clear to Basil that it could only be fulfilled within the community life. It was a conviction that led Basil to believe that to be faithful to the life of Christ and to the early Church the cenobitic life had to be preferred.

Living the Monk's Life According to the Rules (2)

Basil's Rules covered every aspect of the monk's life. Through them the monk discovered that Basil was not only concerned with general principles but also with the details of food and drink, dress, the place of women and the education of children. With such comprehensive detail it is little wonder that Basil became known as the founder of organised monasticism. If cenobitic monasticism was felt by Basil to be more faithful to the teaching and example of Jesus Christ, he equally felt that such a life should be well ordered, thus the necessity for guidelines on every aspect of the monk's daily life.

I. Food and drink

For Basil, the monk did not live to abstain, rather he abstained to live and so subordinate the physical to exalt the spiritual. Asceticism was a means not an end. Thus in the realm of food and drink the monk was guided by the principles of necessity and simplicity. There was disapproval of the excessive abstentions of the desert monks. Eating was regarded as a necessity not a pleasure and food was to be sustaining yet inexpensive. Fasting was to be observed but must not make a monk unfit for the regular work of the monastery, and must never be a matter of private enterprise which Basil felt encouraged competition. ²⁶ In Basil's Rules a monk's age, health, and the nature of his work were considered, as were sickness and fatigue, as the result of overwork or long journeys. ²⁷ In this we recognise Basil's realism and concern

for human need. At the eating of meals the monks observed silence and listened to the reading of a book. ²⁸ In Longer Rule 2 Basil states,

"Bread will satisfy the actual need; water will relieve the thirst of a healthy person; and the products of the land can preserve the strength of the body for necessary duties.... Prayers which are due for the gifts of God, both those He is now giving and those stored up for the future, should be said before meals, as also after, including a thanksgiving for the gifts received and a petition for those promised. One regular hour is to be assigned for meals, so that of the twenty-four hours of the day and night just this one is devoted to the body, the remaining hours to be wholly occupied by the ascetic in the activities of the mind." ²⁹

II. Dress

The monk had one piece of clothing. Basil, like Pachomius and Eustathius, felt it was important for the monk to have distinctive clothing. He followed the dress of the Eustathian monks who were distinguished by "the coarse mantle, the girdle and the sandals of untanned hide". ³⁰ The monk's tunic was of a dark colour and fastened to the body by a girdle. It had to be thick enough to keep the body warm, especially in the severity of the Cappadocian and Pontus winters. ³¹ The same clothing served the monk for day and night. His shoes had to be cheap but serviceable. As with his food so in his dress the monk had regard for that which was necessary. Basil, however, reveals his concern and humanity for the special needs of his monks by allowing the monk whose role was to distribute clothing, to give out warm clothing if the rigours of the winter so required. The picture of a monk in ragged and dirty habit was not very attractive, but it did testify to the monk's sincerity in discarding the things of this world in the service

of God and man. For many from the wealthy class this sacrifice was indeed great.

III. A new role for women

The monastic life for Basil was not be confined to men. As we have seen, a major influence in his decision to follow the monastic life was his sister Macrina who, with her mother Emmelia together with the family servants and many women from the best families in Cappadocia and Pontus, had established a convent at Annesi in Pontus. To say 'no' to marriage and 'yes' to a life of virginity in the service of the Church was a new option for women. This was a courageous decision for, as Gillian Clark says, "A woman who did not marry renounced her only social role and might come under great family pressure".³² In an age when marriage and child-bearing was the planned future for all young women the offer of an alternative way of life was extremely radical. According to Clark, "For the first time, women could reject marriage and child-bearing, and live at home with their mothers, or in solitude, or in a community of women".³³ The fact that not a few women chose this life was evidence of a desire to be free from being the property of their husbands. Although asceticism was an important factor in the improvement of some women's roles³⁴ we have observed that many women were unable to make a choice and were placed in convents to relieve their families of dowry payments.³⁵

Basil believed that his monastic regulations should apply equally to men and to women. Much care, however, was taken to ensure that the convent and the monastery had only disciplined contact. An elderly monk, of tried character, was placed in charge of the temporal interests of the nuns, and the superior of a monastery had always to exercise the greatest discretion and must never enter into any conversation with a nun without the presence of her superior. Monks could not converse with nuns on their own, and there had never to be less than two persons present on either side. As monasticism was still on

trial, it was important for its reputation in the Church and in the world, that great care be taken in the relationship between monastery and convent. Basil expresses his feelings on this matter,

"However, I wish you to know that we profess to have orders of men and women whose conduct of life is heavenly, who have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires, who are not solicitous about food and clothing, but, being free from distractions and constantly waiting on the Lord, continue in their prayers night and day. Their mouths do not speak idly of the works of men, but they chant hymns to our God continuously, working with their hands in order that we may be able to share with those who are in need."³⁶

IV. A place for children

One of the aspects of Eustathius of Sebaste's monasticism which Basil adopted was the education of children. Some children had been orphaned, others were without education, while others might have shown an early interest in entering the monastic life. To all these Basil and his monks offered an education, not based on his own classical education with its possibilities of leading the young in immoral ways, but solely confined to moral and scriptural education. Ever conscious of people's needs, Basil had separate regulations governing vigils, sleep, times of meals, and quality and quantity of food for the children in the care of his monasteries.³⁷ From these young men and women (Basil included education for both sexes) many were won for the monastic life. Although there appears to have been no pressure put upon them, and the decision to enter the novitiate was their own, it would be foolish to disregard the daily influence of living in close proximity to the monks, and the breathing in of the atmosphere of monastic life. Also, the offer of security of work and of food, however menial and

spartan, would be a strong incentive for many to adopt the monk's habit.

The life of Basil's monk was not, therefore, to be one of devout selfishness. He was called to share his love of God with others, and to demonstrate through his care for the poor and the sick, his commitment to his Lord. In all his work, the spiritual needs of people were not neglected. Through the education of children, the exercise of hospitality, the relief of the poor and the care of the sick, Christ was shared.

Although Basil fixes the centre of monastic life in the love of man for God, and the desire for union with him, his monastic ideal always had this clear social implication. Through the twofold commitment of his monks to love God and to love their neighbour Basil sought to influence the Church for good. He also longed to see the monastic life of his monks, with its clear witness to orthodox Christianity, accepted by the Church and brought within its embrace. For too long monastic life had been on the outside of church life and appeared almost to be divorced from it. Basil believed that, with theological dissension and advancing secularism, the time had come to use it as leaven within church life. In Basil's day many lay Christians adopted the hours of prayer and sought to share in the monks' compassion for the needy in society. The leaven seemed to work.

Perhaps the greatest compliment paid to Basil's monastic movement, was the desire of the pagan Emperor Julian to emulate the social work undertaken by the monks. As Julian wrote,

"The Christians supply not only their own but also our poor; but we leave ours unhelped. Those of Greek sympathy, therefore, must be trained to similar acts... It is matters like this which have contributed most to the spread of Christianity: mercy to strangers, care for burying their dead, and the obvious honourableness of their conduct. Therefore

numerous hostels for pilgrims should be established in all cities, and strangers and beggars fed at the expense of the state. And people must learn to give part of their possessions to others; to the better placed - generously; to the indigent and the poor - sufficient to ward off distress; and strange though it sounds to give food and clothing to one's enemies it is a pious duty, for we give to men as men, not to particular persons." 38

Although Julian was opposed to the Christians and sought to destroy them, he saw in their conduct an example worth copying.

Notes for Chapter 7

1. Frances M. Young, p.81.
2. Lowther Clarke, pp.95,96,97 and 120.
3. Hans von Campenhausen, p.87.
4. See AW, p.293.
5. Morison, p.60.
6. Ibid., p.63.
7. Ibid., pp.65 and 66.
8. See Letters, p.208. N.B. Note 3: the Greek meanings are literally; Lord's Day, the Fourth, Preparation and Sabbath.
9. See AW, p.317.
10. Basil Pennington, "Working with Saint Basil," in Word and Spirit: A Monastic Review I, In Honor of Saint Basil the Great, p.90.
11. Idem.
12. Morison, pp.84-85.
13. See FO, p.57.
14. Morison, p.123, n. 4 Hom. in Divites, 4.
15. See FO, p.57.
16. Ibid., p.58.
17. Ibid., p.80.
18. Morison, p.128.
19. Idem.
20. See FO, p.81.
21. See Letters (1-185), pp.291-292.
22. See FO, pp.58-59.
23. See Letters (186-368), pp.49-50.
24. See AW, p.267.
25. Ibid., pp.263-264.

26. Morison, p.111
27. See AW, p.275.
28. Lowther Clarke, p.88, quoting Shorter Rule 180.
29. See AW, p.11.
30. See Letters (186-368), p.129.
31. Sozomen, Ecclesiastical History, p.301.
32. Gillian Clark, Women in Late Antiquity, p.131.
33. Ibid, p.140.
34. Elizabeth A. Clark, Women in the Early Church, p.18.
35. See Chapter 1, p.32.
36. See Letters (186-368), p.83.
37. Morison, p.103.
38. Leitzmann, From Constantine to Julian, pp.278-279.

CHAPTER 8

The wider influence of Basil and his monks

Although Basil was, "an ascetic body and soul", ¹ because of his personal qualities he could not expect the privileges of the monastic life to last. The demands and needs of the wider Church called him away from his retreat at Annesi.

Although physically absent from the monastery, Basil continued to see the immense worth of the monastic life as leaven and light to the world. His motives for entering the ascetic life remained with him, as he continued to exercise the personal disciplines of fasting, prayer, and the study of Scripture in his journey towards perfection. United with this was his desire to reveal, in acts of loving kindness, the reality of Christ's command "to love your neighbour", and to see the perceived life and example of the first century Church lived out in Cappadocia. The demands of the Church might have caused him to leave the monastery, but his monastic ideals remained with him as he was challenged and called to serve the Church in the world.

As one trained in the art of rhetoric, Basil used his gift as a communicator to further his monastic ideals. He also used it to instruct the laity in the Christian life to be lived in accordance with the example of the early Church. Those attending his sermons included architects, lawyers, builders, soldiers, merchants, and large numbers from the poorer classes, as well as members of the clergy, and ascetics from both family and organised communities. Basil believed that the Church should reflect the life and witness of the first century Church whose members were united in the one faith and in brotherly love. In this regard he saw the example of his monks playing an important role, as the laity saw in their mode of life a living witness to these early Christians. Many therefore, within the laity, were encouraged to live a life of spiritual discipline within the world. There was a greater observance of the hours

of prayer, and an eager willingness to live closer to the simple teachings and example of the early Christians in Jerusalem. Basil writes,

"Among us the people come early after nightfall to the house of prayer, and in labor and affliction and continual tears confess to God. Finally, rising up from their prayers, they begin the chanting of psalms. And now, dividing into two parts, they chant antiphonally, becoming master of the text of the Scriptural passages, and at the same time directing their attention and the recollectedness of the hearts. Then, again, leaving it to one to intone the melody, the rest chant in response; thus, having spent the night in a variety of psalmody and intervening prayers, when day at length begins to dawn, all in common, as with one voice and one heart offer up the psalm of confession to the Lord, each one making His own the words of repentance." ²

This quotation reveals the impact which both the life of his monks and the preaching of Basil made upon the life of the ordinary Christians living in Cappadocia and in Pontus at this time. It is interesting to appreciate that, although Basil became a monk and achieved so much as a legislator of eastern monasticism, he felt the ascetic ideal was applicable to all Christians. Thus, according to Fedwick, Basil urged all Christians to consecrate their possessions, so that what was above necessity might be shared with the poor and the needy. In this he felt they would show unconditional obedience to God and his commandments as imitators of Christ, always seeking what was of benefit for others. ³ The Christian life for Basil was the imitation of Christ whether one lived in the monastery or in the world.

Always anxious to see the fruits of the faith Basil encouraged the continuing spiritual, social, and moral witness of his

monasteries. He also encouraged the laity to follow more closely the life of Christ and challenged the rich to give to the poor. When a terrible famine occurred in Cappadocia in AD 370 Basil sold his remaining property to buy food for the needy, and made eloquent and successful appeals to the rich citizens to follow his example. ⁴ Also during this time he saw the development of his *cenobium* and hospital at Caesarea. Writing in Letter 94 to Elias the governor of the province Basil says,

"Nevertheless, I wish that those annoying your honest ears be asked what harm the state suffers from us, or whether public interests either little or great have suffered loss because of our administration of the Churches - unless someone might say that it brings harm to state affairs to raise up to our God a magnificently constructed house of prayer, and around it a dwelling, a stately residence reserved for the bishop and inferior quarters assigned to the servants of God according to rank. Moreover, the use of these is free to you, the officials, and to your followers. And whom do we wrong by building inns for guests, both those visiting us on their journey and those needing some treatment in their illness, and by appointing for them the necessary comforts - nurses, doctors, beasts of burden, and escorts?" ⁵

This description of his *cenobium* and hospital, together with further details of other buildings necessary for a variety of livelihoods and daily living, support the view that Basil was developing a new city of no mean size. At the heart of this city was the living out of his faith in a loving God who calls his disciples to share his love with others. It is also apparent from this letter that there were those who were opposed to what he was doing. The power of the Church was seen as a threat to the secular powers and many who suffered from the social decline within society sought refuge within the life

of the Church. This resulted in many of the most capable civil servants putting their skills at the service of the Church, and a subsequent influx of academic and professional people into the ranks of the monks. The Church, and in particular the monasteries, undertook many of the services now neglected by the state and in so doing achieved major independence from the state. The letter of Emperor Valens to the civil authorities⁶ challenging them to consider providing social welfare for all citizens, similar to that of Basil's great hospital, was further evidence of the Church's threatening role, as viewed by the state.

When Eusebius, bishop of Cappadocia, died in AD 370 Basil felt, with some justification, that the interests of the Church demanded his succession to the vacant see. For a number of years he had been the power behind the throne. Any unbiased observer could see that he was the ablest candidate and the most capable of continuing the defence of orthodoxy against the Arian heresy. After his election as bishop (as bishop of Caesarea he was metropolitan, i.e. ecclesiastical primate of the province of Cappadocia) Basil set about enforcing the orthodox decisions of the Council of Nicaea.⁷ Although opposed by some of the *chorepiscopi* (country bishops) and the priests with Arian tendencies, he was able with the support of the monasteries to make Cappadocia a place of orthodoxy. In all of this he was greatly helped by his own qualities as a leader, a rhetorician and a monk. Basil not only controlled the monasteries but also influenced people by his preaching, his Letters, his travelling throughout his province, and the organising of the supporters of orthodoxy. His single-mindedness in the defence of orthodoxy did not go unnoticed by the State. The Emperor Valens, himself a supporter of Arianism, disliked both the Cappadocian clergy's orthodox beliefs and the support given to them by the people. To undermine the power of the Church, and in particular the orthodox stance of Basil, Valens decreed in AD 371 that the province of Cappadocia should be divided by the creation of a new province of Cappadocia

Secunda, with a civil and ecclesiastical centre at Tyana. The bishop of Tyana, Anthimus, claimed the rank of metropolitan, and seized on revenues which had belonged to the Church of Caesarea. Basil, in the defence of his province and orthodoxy, appointed his friends to bishoprics in strategic places. This included the appointment of his brother Gregory to the see of Nyssa, and his friend Gregory, against his own will, to the new see of Sasima in disputed territory. Gregory describes Sasima as, "a detestable place, filled with dust, noise, and travellers, without natural charm and without society".^s However, as it was already in the control of Anthimus, Gregory never actually took possession of the see. This was an unfortunate and unhappy episode in an otherwise close and enduring friendship, and appears to have had no lasting negative effect upon the relationship between the two friends.

The dividing of the province did not cause Basil to draw back in his defence of orthodoxy, nor in his determination to stand up for the Church in her relationship with the state. An episode in AD 372 gives clear evidence of his courage and of the state's inability to withstand him. The Emperor was again planning to visit Caesarea to quell the supporters of orthodoxy. His visit was heralded by an advance guard of courtiers and one of them, Modestus, the praetorian prefect, soon discovered the personal qualities of Basil. When they met he stood his ground even when the prefect threatened him with, "confiscation, exile, tortures, death". Basil is scornful:

"Think of some other threat - these have no influence upon me. He runs no risk of confiscation who has nothing to lose, except these poor garments, and a few books. Exile is no threat to one who is at home wherever he is, or rather who dwells everywhere in God's home, whose pilgrim and wanderer he is. Tortures cannot harm a frame so frail as to break under the first blow. If you struck me once, I would be dead. And that would but send me sooner to Him for whom I

live and labour, for whom I am dead rather than alive,
to whom I have long been journeying." ⁹

Modestus complained that no one had ever spoken to him like this before. Basil is said to have answered "that is because you have never met a bishop before". ¹⁰ Whatever the exact details, Modestus was overwhelmed by the stature and courage of Basil. It appears that Modestus and the Emperor, who may have himself encountered the same courage when he met Basil in the great church of Caesarea, retired from Caesarea without causing Basil further trouble.

It was not only from the state that Basil faced difficulties. As archbishop he faced difficulties from among the clergy. Many of his bishops were uneducated and some of the clergy had been appointed on the payment of bribes.

Chorepiscopi were accepting money for ordinations ¹¹ and had ordained men whose character had not been properly investigated. ¹² Some were unsuitable to hold positions of authority, others were less than committed to the cause of orthodoxy, while others, who were married, refused to live the celibate life. By the time of his death in AD 379 the clergy and the laity were more committed to the orthodox faith and the standard of his clergy was greatly enhanced. Much of this was due to his own example of godliness, his desire to see ecclesiastical regulations enforced, his willingness to travel throughout his diocese and his skills as a rhetorician and administrator. Always before him was a picture of the first century Church and his constant desire was to see her life of commitment to Jesus Christ lived out in the church of Cappadocia. The influence of his monks was effective in this regard as the laity could see a living example of early Church life in the lives lived by Basil's monks. Their commitment to the cause of orthodoxy, their high moral standards, their devotion to worship and their social concern all influenced the Christian community and contributed to the improvement in Christian standards within Cappadocia. Such was the raising of

standards within the clergy that bishops would send to Basil for priests whom they might nominate as their successors. His own support of orthodoxy and that of his monks must have been effective for within two years of Basil's death, at the Council of Constantinople in AD 381, the victory over Arianism was secured. Orthodoxy had won the day.

The victory, which Basil never lived to see, was something which he had striven for during his life as bishop and monk, administrator and ascetic. He believed that in order to be faithful to Jesus Christ faith and works could not be divided, hence the orthodoxy of his faith was not some theological theory to be won by debate alone, but was the very essence of biblical truth incarnated in the life of Jesus Christ. His life as a monk enabled him to seek after and to live in the footsteps of Christ, and to draw around him communities of men and women who sought to live the same life of obedient service. His monasteries enabled the monks to seek after the things of God and to continue, separated from the things of this world, to journey towards the perfect state. Their journey was not the selfish asceticism of the anchorite but was intimately bound up with love for the brethren and for the world. The words in the Epistle of James 2:17, "faith without works is dead" lay at the heart of Basil's understanding of the monastic life.

In faithfulness to Christ, Basil believed that the community life: having all things in common, bearing one another's burdens, and loving one's neighbour in action, was a true reflection of the witness of Christ and of the first century Church. In developing this form of the monastic life he was able, not only as a monk but also as a bishop, to use his monks and his monasteries to influence the Church in a variety of ways. The spirituality of the monks caused a deepening of the Church's spiritual life, with many of the laity committing themselves to the discipline of the monks' prayer life. The monks' caring for the oppressed and the sick alleviated the

misery and suffering of many. The defence of the orthodox faith by the monks was a source of support to Basil, and an encouragement to those within the Church who sought to see Arianism defeated. The moral standards of the monks acted as an example, to the laity and to the clergy, of the life to be followed by those who bore the name of Christ. No doubt all was not perfect, but in the second half of the fourth century Basil and his monks challenged and influenced the Church for good, and caused her to reveal more of the fruits of first century Christianity.

Although many of the important aspects of his monasticism, such as the common roof, the common table, common work, and common daily prayer are seen in the cenobitic monastic life of our time, it is clear that his impact upon the monastic development in succeeding centuries after his death was not very great. It appears that in spite of Basil's clearly thought through reasons, mainly based upon Scripture, for the superiority of the cenobitic life, it was the eremitic life to which monks felt called. It was this form of monastic life which prevailed in succeeding centuries. This is supported by the fact that, although there was movement in the fifth century between Cappadocia and Palestine, with a constant stream of pilgrims to the holy places, the influence of Basil was not great.

For a time the cenobitic and eremitic systems lived side by side and apparently on good relations with each other. It was also not unknown for a *laura* (a complex of hermit cells) to become a *cenobium*; but the evidence points to a continuing movement in favour of the eremitic life. The *cenobium* came to be regarded as the school in which a monk could prepare himself for the higher life of the hermit. According to the Life of Theodosius, "to leave the cloister was to go 'from glory to glory'".¹³ Further evidence of this attitude is seen in the words of Sabbas, the head of the anchorites, to Theodosius, the head of the cenobites, "My lord abbot, you are a Superior of children, but I am a Superior of Superiors, for each of those

under me is independent and therefore Superior of his own cell." ¹⁴ An Order of monks bound together under one roof did not have the same appeal as the monk seeking union with God through the solitary life, and this led to the rejection of the Basilian ideal.

There was, however, a movement back towards the Basilian monastic life by Theodore of Studios in the eighth century. Like Basil he was a leading figure in Greek speaking monasticism and, like Basil, he came from a noble family. Renouncing the world he embraced the ascetic life and entered a monastery, firstly at Saccudium and then at Studios at Constantinople. Theodore became abbot of Studios in AD 799 and he brought new life to the monastery. He introduced a new rule based on that of Basil in which manual work played an important part and the common life, with its attendant responsibilities, was furthered. Care of the sick and education were also provided, as was the visiting of invalids and prisoners. Theodore, like Basil, was not willing to accept the superiority of the solitary life over the cenobitic life and, in protesting against it, he reflected the mind of Basil.

To a far greater extent the influence of Basil has been felt in the West. The monastic life was introduced there through the visit of Athanasius to Rome in c. AD 339. He introduced the West to the life of Antony and this became the recognised model for monks. Monasteries of the Antonian type grew rapidly. Among the most famous were Ambrose's foundation at Milan and the monastery at Aquileia where Rufinus and Jerome received their training in the ascetic life. Later other influences asserted themselves. Rufinus returned to Aquileia after his travels in Egypt and translated the Rules of Basil into Latin. It was through this that the Basilian system reached the West. In Rufinus' translation he reduced the original 55 Longer and 313 Shorter Rules to 203 Rules. Perhaps the fact that Ambrose was a great admirer of Basil caused his Rules to have a major influence on the West at this time.

The most important figure in the development of western monasticism in the sixth century was Benedict of Nursia. It is interesting to observe that Benedict began his life as a monk in the eremitic traditions of Egypt, living in solitude in a cave, enduring the personal hardship associated with the rigours of a desert hermit monk. To his lonely place disciples came and it is possible that their coming, and their sharing his life, caused him to consider the life of the *cenobium* or common life. Whatever may have been the cause it is certain a change took place. In his Rule, written at Monte Cassino, for the life of his own monastery and for those who might adopt his Rules, Benedict reflected much of Basil's preference for the cenobitic form of monasticism. Both favoured the common roof, the common table, common work and common daily prayer and their monks' time was divided between prayer, work, and the reading of Holy Scripture. In addition, in Benedict's monasteries, the writings of the holy Fathers were read and he expressly names 'the Rule of our holy Father Basil'. ¹⁵ Basil is the only Father named. Both sets of Rules also declared obedience to the superior, the practising of silence, humility and regulations for the reception of newcomers into the community.

Benedict's commitment to the *cenobium* is clearly stated by him in the first chapter of his Rule. He lays it down that he writes it for cenobites and for cenobites only. "After speaking of other kinds of monks, both good and bad, he said in conclusion: 'Let us proceed to legislate for the strongest and best kind, the cenobites'". ¹⁶ Like Basil, Benedict was opposed to the personal strivings and rigours of an individualistic piety which was at the heart of the eremitic life. He describes his monastery as "a school of the service of God". ¹⁷ He saw his monasteries as a community bound together in a common purpose, the service of God. In this he emphasised the importance of self-discipline, prayer and work. In many ways he recaptured the ideals of Basil.

These ideals held sway for more than five centuries until a tendency set in, during the eleventh century, to revert to the eremitic life. Two evidences of this eremitic and contemplative tendency manifested themselves in the foundation of the Carmelites (AD 1245) and the Augustinian Friars (AD 1246). Throughout the ensuing centuries, however, the western monastic pendulum has swung back in favour of the cenobitic life preferred by Basil and Benedict; and it may not be wrong to say that the stronger preference has been for the socially motivated cenobitic life of Basil.

Notes for Chapter 8

1. von Campenhausen, p.87.
2. See Letters (186-368), pp.83-84.
3. Fedwick, The Church and the Charisma of Leadership in Basil of Caesarea, pp.163-164.
4. See FO, pp.57-58.
5. See Letters (1-185), p.210.
6. Lietzmann, From Constantine to Julian, pp.278-279.
7. See A New Eusebius ed. by J. Stevenson, pp.358-368.
8. R.J. Smith, St Basil the Great, p.26.
9. See FO, p. 68, *translation as used by Anne Fremantle pp. 161-162.*
10. *Ibid.*, p. 69, *translation as used by Anne Fremantle pp. 161-162.*
11. See Letters (1-185), p.140.
12. *Ibid.*, p.142.
13. Lowther Clarke, p.130, quoting *vita Theodosii*, p.12.
14. *Idem*, quoting *vita Theodosii*, p.14.
15. *Ibid.*, p.151.
16. Dom E.C. Butler, Benedictine Monachism, p.26.
17. *Ibid.*, p.300.

CHAPTER 9

Conclusion - Reflections on a great life

The monastic ideals of Basil of Caesarea were influenced by many factors, not least by the desire to follow closely the teachings and life-style of Jesus Christ. Of course, he was influenced by his encounters with Eustathius of Sebaste, by his training in philosophy, by the discipline and other worldliness of the philosophical schools and by his travels in Egypt, Palestine, Syria, and Mesopotamia. It was, however, his desire to reflect in his own life, and in that of his monks, the life of Jesus Christ which influenced him most in his pursuit of the ascetic life. The ambience in which he grew up gave him a clear picture of Christian discipleship, for his family knew well the costliness, as much as the joy, of following Jesus Christ. The words of Jesus, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24) were very much a reality to a family that had lost property, status and life in witnessing to and serving Christ. The seeds of the Christian way had been sown in him from an early age. It is also apparent, from all accounts of his years of academic study in Athens, that Basil and his friend Gregory of Nazianzus remained steadfast in their Christian discipleship.

For a short period after his return from Athens the pursuit of the academic life and the kudos of public acclaim caused him to follow the way of the world. The influence of family, however, and in particular that of his sister Macrina, caused him to reflect upon his life, and to embark upon his travels to visit the monasteries of the East. The close bonds uniting his family did, in no small way, influence his thinking about the monastic ideal. As we have seen, his monasteries were based upon the principle of the Christian family with the superior as the head of the household. In his journeyings he saw and experienced both the solitary life of the hermit, who followed the life of Antony, and the more community-based life of those who followed Pachomius and the Nitrian monks. As someone who had known the

family aspect of Christianity within his own family, where mutual bonds of love were real, Basil never appears to have favoured the solitary life.

The faith of Basil's family was shared with one another and this sharing was also extended to the servants. When Macrina founded her religious community on the banks of the river Iris she was joined in time by her mother Emmelia together with members of their household. Within her community all the duties were shared and they had all things in common (cf. Acts 2:44-45 and Acts 4:32). For Basil the community life was a clearer reflection of the Christian life spoken of and lived out by Christ and by the early Church. It embodied both mutual responsibility and mutual accountability. It was a safeguard against the more extreme excesses in personal rigours practised by the solitaries of the desert, as they sought to discipline and overcome the temptations of the flesh, in their search for perfection. Basil upheld the community nature of Christianity, and believed that the journey towards perfection, rather than being hindered by human intercourse, was enriched by loving one's neighbour. Within a community the monk was required to bear his brother's burdens, be chastened by him and not seek his own way. Basil believed that growth in humility and growth in love (two essentials of Christian life) could not be realised in solitude. As he wrote, "If you live alone, 'whose feet are you going to wash?' How will you learn patience without the irritation of having people around resisting you or disagreeing with you?" ¹

Without this practical dimension, absent from the life of the hermit, monastic life was the personal pursuit of holiness with no regard for the needs of others. Such an attitude led to the belief among the hermit monks that their way was spiritually superior and that those who entered the cenobitic life, if spiritually able, would in time, graduate to the more pure spiritual state of the hermit. On this understanding the eremitic life became the spiritual life "par excellence" and

was to be the goal for all monks. Writing in his Collations c. AD 415 (composed for the guidance of the first abbots of Lerins, and of his own monastery at Marseilles) John Cassian, one of the leading exponents of the eastern monastic life in the West, states, "going from the monastery to the eremitical life is as passing from a primary school to a secondary" and "the cenobium is a preparatory school".² This was certainly not Basil's goal with his much broader understanding of personal holiness. For Basil, following Jesus Christ was community based and community orientated. It was not a call to the solitude of the desert, but rather a call to a life of personal holiness in the companionship of others, and for the good of others.

Many aspects of Church life in Cappadocia were enriched by Basil of Caesarea but in this thesis his contribution to the monastic life has been central. Without doubt he favoured cenobitic monasticism because he believed it to be more faithful to the teaching of Scripture and it is clear that Basil's understanding of the monastic life was governed by his dedication to Scripture. Community life meant a life lived with others and for others. In such an environment any possibility of spiritual pride, present among the solitaries as they sought to outdo one another in ascetic austerities, was greatly reduced. The common roof, the common table, common work and common daily prayer encouraged both a humble spirit and a willingness to serve as Christ himself had served.

The monks in Basil's communities were made aware that their caring of one another was not for the monastery alone. His life was no escape from the world and the founding of monasteries in towns as well as in the country changed the perception of the monk as a person who lived in isolation from the world. Basil believed that loving one's neighbour necessarily involved his monks in contributing to the well-being of those in need within the wider community outside the

monastery. Thus we have seen the creation of hospitals, the education of children and centres of caring for the needy.

The work and witness of his monks was not only in the area of social care. Basil also believed that through their faithful walk with Jesus Christ, recapturing much of the lifestyle of the early Church, his monks would influence the Church spiritually as well as socially. Through their devotion to prayer and the study of Scripture we have seen how the spiritual life of the Christians living in the world was enriched as men and women sought to follow the monk's example. We have also noted how the monk's support for the orthodox faith contributed to the defeat of Arianism and the triumph of orthodoxy.

A life lived for God and for others in fulfilment of the command of Jesus Christ to love God and to love one's neighbour was the foundation of Basil's monasticism. His desire was to make the monastery a place of brotherly love, where the monks, living a life of discipline and obedience as they journeyed towards perfection, recognised the vital ingredient of human relationships within that journey. Of course his monks sought a closer walk with God but only through the chastening and challenging of fellow monks could this walk be fulfilled. For Basil, the athlete of God, as the monk was sometimes called, ran his race of faith in the companionship of others. The relational and social dimensions of monastic life were dominant in Basilian monasticism.

Coming from a well educated and wealthy family Basil could have remained aloof to the needs of the Church and society. We have found this not to be the case. Instead, he forsook public acclaim as a rhetor of outstanding intellect and followed the ascetic life. He made use of his intellectual and administrative skills through his many writings both in defence of the orthodox faith and in the formulation of an organised monastic discipline. Many of his Ascetical Works, some of his

Letters and his Longer and Shorter Rules laid down clear guidelines for his understanding of the monastic life. From these writings his strong preference for the cenobitic life is clear.

With such personal ability it was almost inevitable that his life would be drawn into the centre of church life and so we have seen how, as a bishop, Basil continued to promote his monastic ideals. During his episcopate he challenged the rich to give to the poor, he challenged the magistrates and most powerful men in the city to respond to human need and he stood firm when his stand for orthodoxy was challenged even by an emperor. We have seen how his concern for people in need is recorded by Gregory of Nazianzus in his Funeral Oration: "There was a famine, the most severe within the memory of man. The city was in distress, but there was no help forthcoming from any quarter, nor any remedy for the calamity." and, "By his [Basil] word and exhortations he opened up the storehouses of the rich." ⁴ We have also seen another outstanding example of Basil's leadership in support of the poor and the sick with the foundation of the new city, some little distance from Caesarea. This was a hospital or hospice for the poor and the sick where according to Gregory of Nazianzus, "sickness is endured with equanimity, calamity is a blessing, and sympathy is put to the test." ⁵ It is, however, worth noting that although much was achieved to alleviate human suffering through the influence of Basil and his monks it did not change the accepted social order of their time. Slaves remained slaves, women remained the property of their husbands and the poor remained poor. Such changes in society remained a very long way away.

Great indeed was Basil's dual commitment to God and to his neighbour. He had been endowed with many gifts. We have seen how he used them particularly through the development of the monastic life, to challenge and renew the life of the Church. When a young scholar forsook public acclaim, responded to the call of God (and the wise counsel of his godly sister) and left

everything to follow Christ, so began an influence upon the monastic life which guided, moulded and challenged the religious life of the Church. Even today his name is revered and his writings read in worship, and the liturgy which bears his name (although almost certainly not written by him) sung in churches. Basil, the academic, the legislator, the administrator, the bishop, the ascetic and the monk sought to be obedient to Jesus Christ, who lived a life of humble obedience to God and selfless service to his neighbour. That example directed Basil away from the eremitic life of the desert monks to the cenobitic life with its common bonds of love for God, the brethren and the world. The foot-washing episode, recorded in John 13, in the life of Jesus Christ had a profound and creative impact on Basil and on his understanding of the monastic life. This simple act of selfless self-giving evoked from Basil the response which led him to be the father of ecclesiastical cenobitic monasticism and, in measure, contributed to him being called Basil the Great.

Notes for Chapter 9

1. Rowan Williams, The Wound of Knowledge, p.99.
2. Butler, Benedictine Monachism, p.19.
3. See FO, pp.57-58.
4. Ibid., p.80.

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