ASCETICISM AND SOCIAL HARMONY

BY

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I. Introduction

"The land of Egypt is fertile, not only for growing fruits that perish, but for people who bear fruit according to God. Yes, other lands bring different kinds of fruit to us and we find enjoyment in them, but our pride is in our own fruits, yes, in what our land has produced, the likes of which are not produced elsewhere ... St. Antony, says Athanasius, was Egyptian by birth. Where will the sun rise except in the East? And where do you wish St. Antony to shine forth except in Egypt? ... For most of the saints who have lived have been from Egypt or Egypt has attracted them from other places."1

It was this passage from an encomium written by the 6th century bishop John of Shmūn that I had been reflecting upon as I sat perched in front of the crevice that was once St. Antony’s abode, high up on Mount Clyisma in the majestic Galalah South mountain ranges in the Egyptian Eastern Desert. With its dramatic backdrop of rock, and vast, infinite blue sky spread out above, this place felt closer to heaven than earth, and I understood why “more than anything else, Antony loved spending time on his mountain.”2 My thoughts drifted to the Monastery core below; the alleged site where Antony’s monastic community grew up from the fourth century, and imagined how little daily life for the monks has


changed in more than sixteen hundred years: it continued to be a life of private contemplation, communal prayer, and manual labour. “People [coming] from foreign lands” continue to frequent the Monastery with curiosity; however, those who once arrived in litters and camelback coming across from Alexandria and Palestine, are now replaced with those bussed in from Cairo and the Red Sea resorts.

Today, Antony’s legacy lives on in his successors whose monastic practice continues to be based predominantly on a life of prayer and work – both to provide for their community as well as “those coming to visit [so they] might have a little relief from the hardships of that rugged journey.”

My thoughts returned back to John of Shmūn whose encomium served to glorify Antony some two hundred years after the saint had departed.

Aside from being a fantastic piece of late antique publicity, what struck me about John of Shmūn’s words, were three things in particular: 1. his exaltation that Antony was beyond compare; 2. his declaration that Egyptians were living exemplars of the scriptures, and 3. Egyptians by virtue of their Christian living, attracted the attention of those abroad.

Without a doubt, the effect of Antony’s life and legacy, as propagated by the illustrious Patriarch Athanasius of Alexandria in his famous Life of Antony, cannot be underestimated, for it fashioned the characteristics of the ideal monk which accordingly became the world’s reference for anyone seeking an ascetic life. As Gre-

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3 Life of Antony 88. 3.
4 In addition to all the monks who have succeeded Antony and inhabited his monastery since the 4th century to the present, Tim Vivian comments that “Eugrius, Cassian, Gregory and Benedict are the monastic children and grandchildren of Antony.” (Life of Antony, 2003: xxiv).
5 Life of Antony 50. 7.
7 Vincent L. Wimbush & Richard Valantasis (eds.), Asceticism. Oxford, 1995, p. 496. James Goehringer 1999: 20. Although Goehringer believes that the image of Antony as the father of Christian monasticism is due to the success of the Vita (1999: 20), Antony was considered the prototype both in Egypt and abroad long before the Vita (e.g. Life of Antony preface 3-4, 93. 5). In addition, the Emperor
gory of Nazianzus put it: “Athanasius in writing the Life of Antony had composed a rule for the monastic life in the form of a narrative.”

However, monasticism had already taken firm hold in Egypt and was flourishing some three decades before Athanasius wrote his Life in 357. According to JAMES GOEHRING, the success of Antony’s monastic discipline provided the basis from which all subsequent ascetic styles developed, namely the semi-anchoritic styles practiced in Scetis, Nitria and Kellia, and the coenobitic innovation of Pachomius practiced mainly in Upper Egypt. Imitating the life of Antony, the monks of Egypt became living exemplars that embodied the ideals that the scriptures described and soon set the standard for monks living elsewhere in the Roman Empire. Hence, Jerome refers to them as being “heaven’s family on earth.”

II. Historical Background

The reputation of Egyptian monasticism that spread throughout the Late Roman Empire, through writers and pilgrims such as Jerome, Rufinus, Palladius, John Cassian and Melania the Elder, transformed Egypt into a new paradise of spiritual perfection, en-

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Constantine and his sons often wrote to Antony addressing him as “Our father” (Life of Antony 81. 1).


9 JAMES GOEHRING, 1999: 19.

10 Macarius the Egyptian founded Scetis c. 330 and died in 390. Amoun founded Nitria c. 310 and together with Antony founded Kellia sometime later. It is not known exactly when Amoun died, but it was sometime before.


14 W.C. GRIGGS, Early Egyptian Christianity: From its Origins to 451 CE. Leiden, 1988, p. 103.

ticing many, including men and women of the aristocracy,\textsuperscript{16} to emulate Antony's ascetic life of renunciation, prayer, work and contemplation.\textsuperscript{17} Accordingly, the world experienced a major shift in paradigm: attributes that characterised the lowest classes in society, specifically those who worked at manual labour,\textsuperscript{18} now became one of the major attributes that categorised and differentiated Christian asceticism from other forms of 'philosophy.'\textsuperscript{19} Consequently, in Egypt, we find a monk who came from a senatorial background\textsuperscript{20} working with his hands side by side with an illiterate Egyptian peasant monk.\textsuperscript{21}

The Apostle Paul admonished Christians to "work with your own hands, that you may behave properly towards outsiders and be dependent upon no one."\textsuperscript{22} Thus, we learn that Antony "was accustomed to working hard"\textsuperscript{23} and had planted a vegetable garden to provide for himself and for visitors,\textsuperscript{24} Pachomius and his monks carried out "unceasing manual labour, weaving rope baskets,"\textsuperscript{25} Abba Or worked hard with his hands to make "provision for all the needs [of the brothers]."\textsuperscript{26} Poemen refused to stop plaiting ropes because of the burden on others; he might otherwise

\textsuperscript{17} WILLIAM HARMLESS, Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism. Oxford, 2004, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{18} DANIEL CANER, Wandering, Begging Monks: Spiritual Authority and the Promotion of Monasticism in Late Antiquity. London, 2002, p. 201.
\textsuperscript{19} ANTONY RICH, Discernment in the Desert Fathers: Diakrisis in the Life and Thought of Early Egyptian Monasticism. Eugene, 2007, p. 86.
\textsuperscript{21} For example: AP [G] Arsenius 5, 6.
\textsuperscript{22} 1 Thessalonians 4: 11-12.
\textsuperscript{23} Life of Antony 53. 1.
\textsuperscript{24} Life of Antony 50. 5-7.
cause, Agathon was "self-sufficient in all things: manual labour, food and clothing," Pambo claimed he had never eaten bread that he had not earned with his "own hands," the monks of Scetis often hired themselves out as farm labourers during harvest time, and even leaders such as Macarius the Egyptian and John the Dwarf worked during the harvest.

No doubt the dominant emphasis on manual labour was determined by scriptural exhortations such as those mentioned by the Apostle Paul, but it was also necessitated by difficulties that arose from communal ideals and economic needs. As Peter Brown explains, "In the Egyptian desert, to survive at all...the monk had to transplant into it the tenacious and all-absorbing routines of the village and ... earn his living from manual labour."

To participate in a community’s manual labours also served a sociological function. In settlements that brought together people of diverse economic backgrounds the notion that all members should perform manual labour provided a means of levelling out social differences and fostering social harmony. Privileged dependency, on the other hand, could be resented as entitlement and pride. Therefore, St. Antony explains that those who rely the support of others instead of themselves have failed to fully renounce the world and so the monk was losing the reward of his labours. He advises that the monk is a strong person and

29 For example: AP [G] Pior 1, Serinus 2.
30 AP [G] Macarius the Egyptian 7, John Colobos 6, 35.
32 For example: Psalm 128: 2; Matthew 6: 25-34; 1 Thessalonians 2: 9, 4: 11-12; and 2 Thessalonians 3: 6-12.
33 ELIZABETH CLARK, 2005: 33.
34 PETER BROWN, 1978: 110.
35 ELIZABETH CLARK 2005: 30.
37 ELIZABETH CLARK, 2005: 32.
38 DANIEL CANER, 2002: 46.
in no need of charitable support, and hence he is encouraged to embrace work.\textsuperscript{40}

Work was not an end in itself, but a means by which a monk could achieve spiritual contemplation.\textsuperscript{41} Antony teaches that the purpose of practical disciplines such as work is to bring the monk to perfection\textsuperscript{42} so that he may avoid the dangers of pride, excessive asceticism and self-righteousness.\textsuperscript{43} Or more precisely, practical disciplines such as manual labour were necessary to assist in developing inner spirituality and virtues.

The early literary sources highlight that while manual work was enforced as a necessary monastic discipline in Egypt, it was primarily practiced as a contemplative aid by which a monk might subdue his body and focus his mind on prayer,\textsuperscript{44} and hence was an essential part of the monk’s approach to seeking union with God. Thus, manual labour became such a mainstay of desert spirituality that some monks equated it with sitting in the cell and salvation itself: “An elder was asked, ‘What is necessary to do to be saved?’ he was making rope, and without looking up from the work, he replied, ‘You are looking at it.’”\textsuperscript{45} The ability to spend long hours weaving reeds into ropes; attributed to Macarius the Egyptian and John the Dwarf, was admired as a sign of spiritual energy\textsuperscript{46} and hence seeing Macarius’ work, Antony kissed his hands and said, “Great power comes out of these hands.”\textsuperscript{47}

\textsuperscript{40} Conferences 24. 12.


\textsuperscript{42} William Harmless, 2004: 61-62.

\textsuperscript{43} Conferences 2. 2. 1-4.

\textsuperscript{44} Tim Vivian, St Macarius the Spiritbearer: Coptic Texts relating to St Macarius the Great. New York, 2004, p. 21; for example, AP [G] Achilles 5; Isidore 5; and John Colobus 11.


\textsuperscript{46} AP [G] Macarius the Egyptian 4; John Colobus 11.

\textsuperscript{47} AP [G] Macarius the Egyptian 4.
III. Status Markers in Late Antique Society

In the Roman Empire, there were three main criteria for determining high social status: the antiquity of one's ancestors, the extent of one's wealth, and one's proximity to the distinguished of choice. On the other hand, the defining characteristics of the common people were the necessity to work for a living, especially by manual labour (those falling in this category are deemed 'the poor') and lack of literacy in Greek or Latin.

With the conversion of Constantine in 312 C.E., Christianity as a universal religion "appealed to the social realities of the Roman Empire" and soon monasticism was becoming a popular option for Christians. However, while Christianity violated many of society's cultural ideals, monasticism which attracted common people as well as men and women of privilege and was based not only on Biblical instructions but on renunciation, complicated the usual status markers even more. The monastic renunciation of marriage, sex and procreation is only one side. The other side was fulfilling Christ's call to the rich young man to "sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, and come, follow Me," and accordingly, accomplish the Apostle Paul's admonition, "forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead." Hence, as

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50 Elizabeth Clark, 2005: 27.
51 Peter Brown, 1978: 110.
52 William Harmless, 2004: 3.
53 With its Christological principles of humility, consideration for the poor (for example Matthew 5: 3), giving preference to others (for example Philippians 2: 1-4), loving and esteeming all people (for example Luke 6: 27-36), sacrificing oneself for the sake of others (for example John 10: 14-16), and having all things in common with all people (for example Acts 4: 32-34).
54 William Harmless, 2004: 3, e.g. Basil of Caesarea, Macrina, Melania, Jerome, Rufinus, John Chrysostom, Evagrius Ponticus, Paula.
55 Daniel Caner, 2002: 5.
56 Matthew 19: 21.
57 Philippians 3. 13.
DANIEL CANER remarks, "the downward social mobility of ascetics of high social birth who voluntarily embraced poverty despite family wealth and status, made them outstanding exemplars of Christ’s voluntary condescension;" a comment iterated by ELIZABETH CLARK who states how, "Christian writers lavish praise on the ‘high’ who became ‘low’."  

Renunciation meant austerity, distributing one’s possessions as alms, and in the case of aristocratic monks, mixing with social inferiors and according to Biblical instruction, working with one’s hands.

The wide variety of literary genres promoting monastic practice testifies to its importance in early Christianity. In addition to New Testament injunctions (found especially in the gospels and the Pauline epistles), there are theological treatises, hagiographies, monastic rules, letters, sermons and decrees of Church Councils.

Important for this paper’s discussion are the Life of Antony by Athanasius of Alexandria, the Rules of Pachomius, the Letters of Basil of Caesarea, the Shorter and Longer Rules of Basil of Caesarea, the Life of Martin by Sulpicius Severus and On the Work of Monks by Augustine of Hippo.

Egypt has long been considered the cradle of monasticism and Antony’s renunciation in the late third century provided a pattern for those who sought an ascetic life, particularly of the anchoritic type. Within a few decades after Antony had established his ascetic regime, communal monasteries living according to an estab-

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58 DANIEL CANER, 2002: 203.
59 ELIZABETH CLARK, 2005: 33.
60 ELIZABETH CLARK, 2005: 33.
61 2 Thessalonians 3: 10. As an indication of how much monasticism disrupted class structures by even the elite taking up an ascetic vocation, Emperor Theodosius I in 393 decreed that peasant tenants, "... shall be regarded as slaves to the very land on which they were born and shall have no right to take off wherever they like or to change their place of habitation.” (Codex Justinianus 11. 51.1; 11. 52.1 as quoted in: DANIEL CANER, 2002: 15).
64 TIM YIVIAN, 2003: xxv.
65 Specifically in Scetis, Nitria and Kellia. These monastic communities were founded by Macarius the Egyptian and Amoun of Nitria consecutively around 330, and were thriving communities by the mid fourth century in Lower Egypt.
lished rule, were formed in Egypt under the leadership of Pachomius and his successors.66

Hence, as BENEDICTA WARD asserts, by the middle of the fourth century, there were three _flourishing_ monastic styles in Egypt67 corresponding to three geographic areas:68 the anchoritic type practiced in the Eastern Desert where hermits lived separately but came together for prayer and instruction by a spiritual father; the prototype being Antony, the semi-anchoritic type practiced in Lower Egypt69 where monks usually lived alone or close to a spiritual father and came together on weekends for liturgy and meals;70 the founders being Macarius the Egyptian and Amoun of Nitria, the communal type practiced predominantly in Upper Egypt; pioneered by Pachomius who created an organised monasticism where the brothers were united in work and prayer.71 Whilst the varying geographic conditions72 may have influenced what was deemed appropriate for ascetic living regarding work, food and clothing,73 it was the desire to shape a life of more perfect devotion to God74 by imitating the life practiced by the early Christians,75 that lay at the heart of monastic renunciation and tended overall to strengthen the Christian notion of equality. Accordingly, no monk

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66 Pachomius was succeeded by Petronius in May 346. Petronius survived for only two months and was succeeded by Horsiesios who resigned in 350. Theodore succeeded Horsiesios and remained head of the community until his death in 368.

67 Emphasis is mine. Apart from the anchoritic, semi-anchoritic and coenobitic types of asceticism that flourished in the fourth century, there were in fact various types of ascetic life practiced in the late third and fourth century in Egypt, such as the village ascetics to whom both Antony and Pachomius in their early ascetic years apprenticed themselves, and the _sarrabaiæ or remnautæ_ who were city ascetics and lived together in small groups in the cities. But ‘true’ monasticism becomes limited in the literary sources to the anchoritic and coenobitic forms of the ascetic life.


69 Scetis, Nitria and Kellia.

70 ANTOINE GUILLAUMONT, (Coptic Encyclopaedia) vol. 5: 1662.


72 ROGER BAGNALL, _Egypt in Late Antiquity_. Princeton, 1993, p. 295.

73 _Institutes_ 1. 10.


75 As described in Acts 2, 4, 5.
was to deem himself better than others on the basis of social status, wealth, or place of origin.\textsuperscript{76}

The most common form of levelling required in monastic practice that was instigated by Antony's ascetic practice, was the need for monks to work with their hands – a marker of lowly social status –\textsuperscript{77} whether as an economic necessity to support themselves or their communities,\textsuperscript{78} or as a means to encourage spiritual contemplation,\textsuperscript{79} or simply as a sign of humility.\textsuperscript{80} Ascetics of the upper classes were exhorted to engage in manual work along with those for whom such work would have been their necessary lot in the world.\textsuperscript{81}

The majority of the population in Egypt were peasants to which manual labour was a fact of everyday life.\textsuperscript{82} With the exception of well-born Egyptians, such as Antony who was well-born and prosperous,\textsuperscript{83} Theodore the disciple of Pachomius who was from a prominent Christian family,\textsuperscript{84} Petronius the successor of Pachomius who had also come from a wealthy Christian family and turned his family estate into a monastery,\textsuperscript{85} Amoun of Nitria who was “of noble birth and rich parents,”\textsuperscript{86} Isidore the priest of Nitria who was rich and had met “the entire Roman senate and all the wives of the great men,”\textsuperscript{87} and Innocent the priest who served as a


\textsuperscript{77} WILLIAM HARMLESS, 2004: 61-62.


\textsuperscript{79} ANTONY RICH, Discernment in the Desert Fathers: Diakrisis in the Life and Thought of Early Egyptian Monasticism. EUCENE, 2007, p. 90.

\textsuperscript{80} ELIZABETH CLARK, 2005: 33.

\textsuperscript{81} ELIZABETH CLARK, 2005: 33.

\textsuperscript{82} PETER BROWN, 1978: 11.

\textsuperscript{83} Life of Antony 1-2.


\textsuperscript{85} BL 56.

\textsuperscript{86} HM 22.

palace dignitary during the reign of Constantius,⁸⁸ the literary sources tend to praise the great ascetic efforts of many Egyptian monastic leaders and ascetics who came from the peasantry of Egypt,⁸⁹ and as Augustine put it, "[became] honoured by those who would otherwise despise them."⁹⁰

IV. Monasticism: A Highly Aristocratic Enterprise

A. Outside of Egypt

Outside of Egypt, monks and monastic founders tended to come from either high or middle class backgrounds.⁹¹ Paulinus of Nola was a member of the senatorial aristocracy.⁹² Basil of Caesarea and his sister Macrina; founders of monasteries in Cappadocia, were members of the provincial aristocracy,⁹³ and Augustine of Hippo claimed that as Bishop and head of a monastic community, he controlled twenty times more property than he had derived from his own inheritance.⁹⁴ It is not uncommon to find how some monks from high status backgrounds, after lowering themselves by mo-

⁸⁸ HL 44.
⁹⁰ MARILYN DUNN 2003: 30. For example: Palladius' Lausiac History, the History of the Monks of Egypt and the Sayings of the Desert Fathers provide many examples of popular ascetics and monastic founders who came from lower-class backgrounds: Amoun of Nitria, a balsam grower; Macarius the Younger, Poeman and Apollo had been shepherds; Paul the Simple, who had been a herdsman; John of Lycopolis, formerly a builder or carpenter; and Moses the Ethiopian, a robber (HL 22.1; 35.1; 49.1; 8.3; 19.1). Paul and his brother Timothy, barbers; Paternuthius, a brigand chief and tomb robber; Silvanos, an actor (HL 15.1; AP [G] Apollo 2, Paul the Barber 1; HM 10.13; Paralipomena 2. 2 in: ARMAND VEILLEUX (ed. and trans.), Pachomian Koinonia: The Lives, Rules and Other Writings of Saint Pachomius and His Disciples, vol. 2. Pachomian Chronicles and Rules. CS 46. Kalamazoo, 1981.

⁹¹ PETER BROWN states (1978: 41) that the farmers of Upper Egypt were those who created the new monastic culture.
⁹³ ELIZABETH CLARK, 2005: 35.
nastic renunciation, were rewarded by becoming bishops, as Sulpicius Severus attests: “Many of them were said to be noblemen who had been brought up in a very different way but had voluntarily adopted this life of humility and endurance. Later we saw several of them becoming bishops.”

Elizabeth Clark suggests that wealthy aristocrats who became ascetics “retained their status capital in terms of influence (and sometimes portions of their real money as well) but acquired as surplus the symbolic capital that Christians bestowed on ascetic virtuosi.”

Nilus of Ancyra considered monasticism a highly aristocratic enterprise, to be elevated above the “common throng,” and displayed indignation at low social status monks who took up the ascetic vocation so that “they might evade burdensome obligations of service and obtain a license for relaxation.” In addition he was offended by these monks who aspired for leadership, stating, “Who would not ridicule the man who just yesterday fetched water for the tavern, when today he is seen accompanied by disciples as a teacher of virtue?”

Nilus believed that only high social status monks deserved to be teachers and leaders, and anyone other than high class who had such aspirations were simply “men who have no source of support from home.”

Nilus’ proclamation reflects the anxiety that certain Christian writers had about the “low” who adopt the ascetic life to inappropriately claim a newfound superiority.

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96 For example as mentioned in: Life of Martin 10. 6-9, and the monks from the ‘aristocratic monastery’ of Lerins in southern Gaul, as mentioned in: Marilyn Dunn, 2003: 82-84.

97 Elizabeth Clark, 2005: 32. She also suggests that ascetics from lower class backgrounds could acquire symbolic status, although for them it was not a matter of exchange or of surplus, but of simple acquisition. (2005: 32).


100 Nils, Ascent Discourse 22; as quoted in: Daniel Caner 2002: 185.


102 Elizabeth Clark, 2005: 33.
MARILYN DUNN, writing about the evolution of monasticism in the West, states that many were drawn to the monastic life to "resume more conventional aristocratic careers by becoming bishops." She then goes on to say that Gaul’s "remarkable role as a nursery of bishops in the fifth century underlines the elite nature of the community. The Western aristocracy had already replaced older aristocratic ideals of public service ... by the ideal of public service through the episcopate; and ... a monastic training became part of the *curriculum vitae* of a number of Episcopal aristocrats."  

B. In Egypt

As PETER BROWN asserts, in Egypt, however, "Monasticism did not stand aloof," for although the literary sources preferred rather to highlight the virtuosity of the monks, there is ample proof that had the opportunity for such promotion to the episcopate been encouraged, there would have been enough monastic candidates in Egypt to qualify. For example, in the *Life of Antony*, Athanasius declares that the desert became a city of monks, and he also affirms "that numerous soldiers and many wealthy people laid aside life's burdens and from that moment became monks." In the *History of the Monks of Egypt* we learn that in Oxyrhynchus in the Thebaid, "the city is so full of monasteries that the very walls resound with the voices of monks ... the city [was] bursting with monks ... The monks were almost in a majority over the secular inhabitants." Palladius in his *Laudiac History* writes how there

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103 Dunn, 2003: 83.
104 Peter Brown, 1978: 110.
105 According to Peter Brown, the character of many monastic dwellings in the desert points clearly to the presence of upper class monks: *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*. New York, 1988, p. 252, whilst Hugh Evelyn-White is of the opinion that all higher-class ascetics in Egypt were all foreigners and that there is no record, he claims, of an upper-class Egyptian – presumably as contrasted with a cosmopolitan resident of Alexandria – becoming a monk in this early period: *The Monasteries of the Wadi 'n Natrun*. vol. 2: *The History of the Monasteries of Nitria and of Scetis*. New York, 1932, p. 190.
107 *Life of Antony* 87.2.
108 HM 5, 1-4, On Oxyrhynchus.
were more than seven thousand monks living in Nitria and how Kellia was founded because the desert had “become too crowded.” John Cassian estimates there were five thousand monks living in the Pachomian communities, whilst Jerome claims there were some fifty thousand monks!

In addition, SAMUEL RUBENSON indicates that in late third century Egypt “new religious movements such as monasticism were not the products of people on the margin of society, but of intellectuals.” He elsewhere writes, “It becomes more difficult to imagine that the leading monks of the first generation were illiterate peasants; they were, rather, educated and prosperous leaders of a certain social standing. Their motive for leaving society behind was not flight from oppression or fanaticism, but the result of a philosophical or religious quest combined with an aversion to the disruption occasioned by the worldly concerns of property and social obligation.”

But advancement in one’s social position as a monk was considered, in the words of Pachomius, “suicidal arrogance.” Pachomius himself, when he was nominated to the episcopate, “refused and hid himself in order to avoid ordination,” believing that “it was not good to ask for office and glory,” because, “a clerical

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109 HL 7. 6.
110 HL 32. 8.
111 Institutes 4. 1.
114 SAMUEL RUBENSON. The Letters of St. Antony: Monasticism and the Making of a Saint. Minneapolis, 1995, p. 52. JAMES GOHRING suggests that second and third generations of leadership was to be found in the more educated and experienced upper class monks: The Roots of Egyptian Christianity. Philadelphia, 1986, pp. 242-43.
115 See C. WILFRED GRIGGS 1988: 147-153 for further discussion on this topic. He also highlights the fact that Antony was not ordained (1988: 105).
116 G130.
office is the beginning of contemplation of the lust for power."\(^{117}\)

Accordingly,

"[Pachomius] would not allow any of [the brothers] to perform the
duties of the clergy. He maintained that it was much more fitting
that monks should not seek for pre-eminent honour and glory, and
that opportunities of that sort should be rooted out of the coenobia,
for they are often sources of futile strife and jealousy among the
brothers. Just as a whole year's harvest can be destroyed if a spark
falling into the fields is not quickly extinguished, so a deadly
thought in the mind of a monk, ambitiously desiring leadership as a
cleric, can destroy the modesty he has acquired so laboriously, if he
does not forthrightly drive from his heart the incendiary nature of
such a suggestion."\(^{118}\)

As a result, there are many stories displaying resistance by
Egyptian monks to be ordained to the priesthood or episcopate.\(^{119}\)

Ambition for social advancement was also considered a weak-
ness in a monk's life and therefore Horsiesios, Pachomius' suc-
cessor, urges the brothers "not [to] seek through weakness to be
different from the other brothers by virtue of any tradition."\(^{120}\)

The fourth and fifth century writers of early Christian monastic
rules\(^{121}\) aimed to promote the ideal of equality within their monas-
teries,\(^{122}\) and they often incorporated into their Rules passages from
Acts 2 and 4 regarding the need to have all things in common.\(^{123}\)

According to Jerome's Preface to his Latin translation of the Rules of

\(^{117}\) G1 27.

\(^{118}\) G1 24.

\(^{119}\) For example HL 35.10; Socrates HE 4.23; Life of Evagrius 19, in: TIM VIVIAN, Four Desert Fathers. New York, 2004, p. 84; Dracontius the monk, in: C. WILFRED GRIGGS, 1988: 147. It is only after Chalcedon that an increasingly high proportion of bishops were recruited from the monks.


\(^{121}\) For example Pachomius, Basil of Caesarea, Augustine of Hippo and later in
the sixth century, Benedict of Nursia.

\(^{122}\) DERVAS CHITTY, 1966: 21.

\(^{123}\) For example Basil of Caesarea Shorter Rule 207 and Gregory of Nazianus,
Saint Pachomius, hierarchy in Pachomian monasteries derived not from family or class status but from the date of the monk’s entry into the monastery. Pachomius also dictated a common rule in regards to absolute equality in clothing and food, and compulsory manual labour for all monks for he and his successors believed that, “the unity of the Koinonia consists in a like measure for all, according to the saints’ way of doing.”

As monasticism, propagated by illustrious writers such as Jerome and Cassian, gained prominence in the ancient world and the reputation of the Egyptian monks caused eyes to turn towards Egypt, it was inevitable that many people from varying social classes and nationalities would take up an ascetic vocation in Egypt. Accordingly, one reads of Romans, Greeks, and Libyans inhabiting Pachomian communal monasteries, and in Scetis “... it was not only Egyptians who lived in that desert but people ... from other countries: Romania and Spain, Libya and the Pentapolis, Cappadocia and Byzantium, Italy and Macedonia, Asia and Syria and Palestine and Galatia.” Hence in order for harmony to be maintained amongst the brothers, equality in all things was a necessary requirement.

The author of the History of the Monks of Egypt narrates the story of Sarapion who had a community of more than ten thousand monks in Arsinoe “of many and diverse congregations, and all of them earned their bread by the work of their hands.”

125 Marilyn Dunn, 2003: 154. Jerome, Preface 4-6. However, the sick were exempt from partaking in manual labour.
126 Regulations of Hesydius 48.
129 DERWAS CHITTY, 1966: 27.
130 Paralipomena 11. 27.
132 Letter of Bishop Ammon 3.
134 HM xvii.
In Scetis we learn how Arsenius the Roman who had lived in the Emperor's palace for forty years, and of whom it was said, "None in the palace had worn more splendid garments than he," was not given preferential treatment but worked with his hands in the same way as the other monks. Likewise, when two foreigners of aristocratic background – Maximus and Dometius – came to Macarius asking that they dwell with him in Scetis, Macarius "saw that they were soft and had been raised in luxury." And yet he said to them:

"'Come you two, build a cell for yourselves, if you can.' I gave them a pickaxe and a spade with bread and salt. I showed them the rock of an abandoned quarry and said to them, 'Cut yourselves a place here and bring some wood for yourselves from the wadi, make a roof and thus you can live here.' ... They asked me, 'What kind of work is done here?' I said to them, 'Plaiting' and I got some palm leaves from the wadi and I showed them the rudiments of plaiting and how to weave, and I said to them, 'Make baskets, give them to the guardians and they will bring you bread.'"

Basil of Caesarea, after having visited the monks of Egypt and seeking "to emulate them," took up the monastic vocation and founding a community of monks, composed a rule of life, known as the Longer and Shorter Rules that were inspired by the common life of the early church and principles of already established monasticism. His aim was to see his monastic communities working both to support themselves and raise income for charity. He affirms that manual labour is a divine command and exhorts: "We must not treat the ideal of piety as an excuse for idle-

135 AP [G] Arsenius 32. Arsenius had lived in the palace of Emperor Theodosius I and was tutor to his sons Arcadius and Honorius.
137 AP [G] Arsenius 18, 24, 26, 33, 41.
138 AP [G] Macarius the Egyptian 33
139 330-379 C.E.
140 357 C.E.
ness or a means of escaping toil."143 Elsewhere in a letter detailing his precepts to his confidant Gregory of Nazianzus, Basil writes, "He who does nothing while being able to work should not eat either. But he who is busy with a task to be performed exactly ought to apply himself with all the zeal of which he is able, unto the glory of Christ."144

Accordingly, Gregory of Nazianzus praised Basil's Rules saying, "He reconciled most excellently and united the solitary and community life ... in order that the contemplative spirit might not be cut off from active life nor should the active life be unaffected by the contemplative."145

V. In the West

Yet, while Pachomius and his successors, and Basil of Caesarea sought through their Rules to put all monks on equal footing, the Western rules of Augustine of Hippo and the ascetic life propagated by Martin of Tours146 – by means of comparison – tell a different story.

It is assumed that monastic communities began in Gaul around 360 by Martin147 who because of his popularity became bishop of Tours in 370. Sulpicius Severus148 claims that while Martin was not an aristocrat himself, he had no difficulty in attracting monks from the upper classes: "What is all the more remarkable" says Sulpi- cius, "is that many of [the brothers] were said to be nobles who having being brought up quite differently, chose themselves to

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146 Peter Brown describes Martin of Tours and other Western monastic bishops, as, "Martin and similar holy men who are great landowner-bishops." (1978: 110).
147 335-397 C.E.
148 Sulpicius Severus is the author of the *Life of Martin*. He composed Martin’s biography while he was still alive.
bear with this humbling and demanding life.” Accordingly, he continues, “Later we saw several of them becoming bishops.”

It appears that the economic basis for Martin’s communities came from the revenues of his diocese as well as the resources of its well-born members, and therefore as Marilyn Dunn assumes, Martin did not formulate any rules for living because “rules were only composed for monasteries less prosperous than those in Gaul where the distribution of charity appears to have come from the wealth of its own recruits and not from manual labour.”

Hence, the monks of Martin’s monastic communities were still permitted some of the privileges of the upper classes of the later Roman Empire and were not expected to engage in manual labour, as did the Eastern monks. Martin’s Life suggests that only peasants performed the heavier tasks needed to maintain the community, and “no craft was practiced there, apart from that of the scribes; the young were set to this task while the older ones spent time in prayer.”

In the same year that Martin of Tours dies, Augustine becomes bishop of Hippo and shortly after composes the first Western monastic rule. It is a well-acknowledged fact that the major influence on Augustine’s conversion and decision to embrace the ascetic life was the Life of Antony. And yet, there is a considerable distance between Augustine’s monasticism and that of Egypt. Whilst his Rule preached the ideal of having all things in common, in practice there was a major disconnect that prompted Augustine to write his treatise On the Work of Monks in 401 C.E.:

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151 Marilyn Dunn, 2003: 63.
152 Marilyn Dunn, 2003: 92.
153 Life of Martin 10. 6-9.
154 397 C.E.
155 354-430 C.E.
156 Augustine, Confessions 8, 6.
“Necessity compelled me to write these things because when monasteries were beginning to exist at Carthage, some monks lived by supporting themselves through manual labour in obedience to the Apostle, but others wanted to live off the gratuitous offerings of pious people. Although they were not performing any work by which they might possess, or supply their necessities, they assumed and even boasted they were better fulfilling the gospel precept where the Lord says, ‘Look at the birds of the sky and the lilies of the field.’ For this reason heated quarrels arose even among persons who were of lesser character but hot with zeal, who troubled the church, some defending one view and some another.”\(^{158}\)

To resolve the situation, Augustine goes on to explain the proper distribution of labour in the monastery, specifying that monks who came from humble origins and are of robust physique should continue to perform the manual labours that characterised their former existence:

“For they do not require the special arrangements made for those from softer backgrounds. And so they should not grumble, but consider how much more the rich have renounced in order to embrace the monastic life. But those who come from affluent backgrounds must not be required to perform such physical toils.”\(^{159}\)

Therefore, instead of breaking down existing social categories to facilitate harmony and commonality, Augustine simply accepted and reinforced the distinctions of social rank, status, and privilege of the secular world within his monastic community, for as he justifies:

“It would in no way be decent that men of senatorial ranks who adopted monasticism should become labourers while workmen become idle, or that peasants should live luxuriously in monasteries where landed gentry had retired after renouncing such a life.”\(^{160}\)

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\(^{159}\) Augustine, *De Opere* 25. 33.

\(^{160}\) Augustine, *De Opere* 25. 33.
Augustine argues that the monastery would defeat its purpose, if while the wealthy engage in work, the poor become ‘pampered’\textsuperscript{161}.

As mentioned previously, the central distinguishing characteristic that separated the higher orders from the common people in antiquity was the necessity for the former to engage in manual labour.\textsuperscript{162} Within the monastic environment, manual labour therefore can become an important indicator for either disrupting class distinctions or maintaining them. In the West where the “monastic elite had an acute sense of superiority over the world,”\textsuperscript{163} hierarchies within monasticism were aligned with the class distinctions of the broader Roman world. “In the East” by contrast, “monasticism did not stand aloof,”\textsuperscript{164} and “in Egypt the leaders had the ability to make a community out of people of different backgrounds that did not simply replicate the social hierarchies of the world outside.”\textsuperscript{165} Hence their intention was to put everyone on an equal footing.

Writing some twenty to thirty years after Augustine wrote \textit{On the Work of Monks}, John Cassian composed two works about the monastic life – the \textit{Institutes} and the \textit{Conferences} – for the purpose of subjecting monastic formation in the West to established Egyptian tradition.\textsuperscript{166} As MARILYN DUNN observes, Cassian was a severe critic of the monasteries which had been established in the West; in particular the Gallic monasteries,\textsuperscript{167} and so his expressed intention in writing his works was for “the correction of our morals and the achievement of a perfect life” from the monks of Egypt whom he regarded as the exemplars of apostolic teaching.\textsuperscript{168}

He wrote in his \textit{Conferences}, “The whole human race relies on the charitable compassion of others, with the sole exception of the race of monks which, in accordance with the Apostle’s precept,
lives by the daily toil of his hands,” and hence ruled, in common with Pachomius and Basil, that the monks should support themselves by the work of their hands rather than live off family wealth. Antony had spoken of monks who rely on others for provisions instead of themselves as having failed to fully renounce the world. Poemen instructed disciples, “Do not go back to your relatives for what you need,” and the author of the History of the Monks of Egypt informs, “If one of them lacks his basic necessities, he does not turn to a city or village, or to a brother, a friend, a relation, or to his parents, children, or family to get what he needs.”

Hence, Antony had “worked with his hands, having heard, ‘Let the lazy person not eat,’ John the Dwarf wove ropes and baskets in exchange for provisions, and also worked during the harvest season for wages. Lucius made ropes to earn money with which he purchased his food, the two young foreigners Maximus and Dometius “who had been brought up in luxury” were instructed to make baskets after which they would be provided bread. Sisoes weaved so that he could eat “now and then,” and Silvanus sums up the situation by explaining, “When I work, I eat the fruit of my wages, but if I do not work, I eat charity.”

It appears, however, that the notion of an ascetic elite that was supported by others instead of their own efforts had become rooted in Western Christian ideology long before more Orthodox authorities like Cassian tried to initiate reforms. Indeed it

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169 Conference 24. 12.
171 Conference 24. 11.
173 HM Prologue.
174 Life of Antony 3. 6.
177 AP [G] Lucius 1.
183 MARILYN DUNN, 2003: 79.
seems that it is Cassian's promotion of the Eastern model of manual labour and self-sufficiency for all members of an ascetic community that must be considered the truly novel movement of this period in the Western Empire.\textsuperscript{184}

\textsuperscript{184} DANIEL CANER, 2002: 125.