

Athletes for the Lord

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[0 : 00] Well, I will speak very loudly and therefore very slowly, so we will now be here until 11 o'clock. I do apologize for the change in title.

This is an amended title. The first title that was given for this talk was bestowed upon me by our great leader, Bill Chandler, and the second on John Cassian by myself.

Well, this morning I will still be in the age and the spirit of the age of John Cassian, but I have been working in the desert tradition for the last couple of weeks, and I say I've found there a great deal of material to work through and more to the point, challenges for us to keep us occupied this morning. I am teaching this material at Regan College and this term, and any of my students who may be here this morning, you do not get credit for attending today. I do hope that my title, I hope, will allow me to do a great deal of bragging about the amount of exercise I do.

And you can see that I'm very lean. I'll say no more. It has been pointed out to me that I try to work references to weight training and cardio and the gym and do every sermon that I did, and this is quite right, too.

[1 : 27] But we are going to go into the desert. We are going to go into the third and fourth centuries with men and women who made a very peculiar choice.

These are people who chose to withdraw from the normal intercourse of daily life and society to live alone.

Not in complete isolation, but physically remote, in the desert, for a purpose and for a reason.

Frequently when I come to Learner's Exchange, I will speak in glowing terms about some aspect of monasticism.

Here we are, because this is the subject that I do research into. And now we're coming here to the very origins, to the very beginning of it all. We want to look right back to the very first impulse in the desert in the third and fourth century, which made Christian men and women make this choice.

I've been quite... I was trying to conversation with someone who's recently left a monastery, and I wanted to share that with you, because I do often talk about how wonderful it is.

[2 : 38] And after Learner's Exchange, several people come up to me and say they're ready to join the National House tomorrow. Which I consider a mixed thing, I guess. And it was just simple. Talking to someone who's recently left a monastery because they just couldn't stand all the bickering that was going on.

And all the trying to toady up with the abbot. And I thought that was a wonderful correction. These are very human institutions, just like St. John's is a very human institution, just like marriages.

All these relationships are very human places, none more ideal than the other. We often say in monastic humor, you know, in the monastic house they have what's called the chapter of faults, which happens once a week.

And in marriage you have a chapter of faults, and it happens every day. And these are very... These relationships are all challenging places. And there are places where our Christian life is often, you know, rubbed bare, challenged.

It's where we grow. It doesn't happen in an ideal kind of setting. Nonetheless, these people chose to withdraw. And in doing so, began a movement which in various ways is with us today.

[3 : 57] Physically remote. In the desert. For a reason. Men and women have made this kind of choice in different ways. To do this kind of thing throughout the Christian millennia.

And continue to do so today. Some in an imitation of these ancient Christian ancestors. Some in other ways. But for Christian men and women, there is something about their faith.

Something about what they're looking for that compels them to explore that faith in a way that is perhaps more radical, that is more strikingly pronounced.

And that is ascetic. And I want to introduce you to three words today. Asceticism, hermits, and canobites. We're going right back to the question.

Another word for a greedy monk or community. Asceticism is kind of the overarching theme for this kind of expression of the Christian faith.

[4 : 59] And then hermits and canobites are two expressions of it. In putting that before you, I want to think just a little bit about why these people did this.

And look at the history of how this developed. But challenge us also. Not in some idealistic way to go and join a community. And not necessarily to become hermits.

Although some of you who are reading students might think you are hermits. But to consider the example of those who felt that their faith was so compelling that it involved the whole of their lives, body and mind.

And that it was worth living out to the full. And then, are there ways we might do that in our own lives too? In our own setting here.

Is it worth more than giving a chocolate for Lent? Athletes for the Lord. I take that title because I think it helps to focus us upon what they were doing.

[6 : 04] The Apostle Paul uses the image of running a race to the end. Receiving a crown. A gold medal if you like. But I take it also from this word, asceticism.

Ascetic. Because the word has a number of meanings, which include exercise, training, practice, discipline. Now let me brag.

Physical exercise is something that I've come to enjoy very much over the years. I started because when I became diabetic 20 years ago, at an extremely young age.

And, uh... Well, I'm not as young as I'd like to admit. But now I exercise, mainly because I, um...

Well, I like it. It's part of my life.

Now you cannot build up muscle, or physical endurance, or any kind of fitness by going to the gym once a week. Making New Year's resolutions, and then not seeing it through, will not lead you to, uh, increase your weight.

[7 : 12] You have to exercise, or decrease your weight. It might need you to increase your weight. You have to exercise daily, and you have to exercise progressively.

You have to lift more and more weight better, as your capacity increases. You have to push your heart rate higher and higher, as your capacity increases.

The great problem, of course, with fitness is that you never really arrive at the goal, and that's why everybody keeps going all the time. But the discipline of being an athlete, in a healthy sense, is similar, I think, to the discipline of being an ascetic.

And that is what I want to call us to today. Is there a way in which we can properly, within our lives here, be ascetic?

It's not about outdoing the other person with spiritual exercises. And when we think of asceticism, we tend to think of people with unkempt beards, and very long hair, and not wearing any clothes, and not eating very much.

[8 : 21] It is about, at its heart, exercise. Training. Practice. Practice. And these Asian people felt sufficiently motivated to dedicate not just part of their lives, but the whole of their lives to their Christian faith.

For that growth in the perfection of prayer was such an overpowering motivation, it caused them to devote their lives to it. Now, while we might want to criticize ascetic practices and culture, this is not to say that this is wonderful and perfect in all its ways.

We might not choose to leave behind everything as they did, and as some still do. But the challenge I want to put before us, as we think about this this morning, and look at the emergence of this culture in the Christian ethos, is that devotion to your faith in Jesus Christ.

These people thought it was worth everything, and they practiced it, mind and body. That the growth in prayer, that the overcoming of vices, was so important, it becomes an overpowering priority.

Is it worth the effort in our Christian lives to exercise and be disciplined in our Christian faith? I think the last remaining piece of asceticism in our Christian lives tends to be giving up chocolate for lunch, and we consider ourselves very hard done by.

[10 : 02] This isn't necessarily about extremes. Asceticism is about practice. And is there something about that that calls out to us today, here in the 21st century at Lerner's Exchange?

Well, let's think about this a little bit. I want to think a bit about now this word, asceticism. The source that we have for this information are the sayings of the Desert Fathers. Anyone read the sayings of the Desert Fathers, or have Benedicto-Ward's books on the sayings of the Desert Fathers? Well worth having. Very readable. You can get it at Regent or probably online. The sayings of the Desert Fathers translated by Benedicto-Ward. Who was my supervisor as well, and a terrifying person to know. So we have this oral material, this is an oral culture. We do not have an established spirituality and a program.

[11 : 02] We have sayings. And the essential relationship is that of a seeker coming to see a father, an advocate. Some of the things we might react against, but we come from a Bund-based culture.

Which is good. We have access to written material. We read our Bibles. We can afford to have Bibles. They are mass-produced. Third and fourth century, that is not the case. We are in the desert. This is oral. And I think right there it sets up an essential relationship we are so often lacking in our much more individualistic kind of society today.

Which is that I choose who my authorities will be, because I read them. So you might be reading Richard Foster, who is a great person to read, or someone else. Or Richard Baxter.

I mean, they are wonderful sources to read. It's a wonderful thing. But there is something I think important about an essential relationship with an elder.

[12 : 01] A relationship that involves humility and obedience. Where we are taught. Where we place ourselves under someone. Where we submit.

Asceticism. Now, as I said, as soon as we think of the word, we think of hair, shirts, and unkempt beard. But ascetic, the word comes from the Greek *ascesis*, which means exercise, training, or practice.

And as I say, it's a word that can even take athletic overtones. Practice, training, exercise. So it's really, originally, any form of disciplined practice.

It is a term that is not confined to Christian tradition. In Christianity, it becomes associated, though, with the practices of spiritual exercises performed for the purpose of acquiring the habits of virtue.

Spiritual exercise performed for the purpose of acquiring the habits of virtue. St. Jerome said this.

Be on your guard when you begin to mortify your body by abstinence and fasting.

[13 : 14] Lest you imagine yourself to be perfect and a saint. For perfection does not consist in this virtue. It is only a help. A disposition.

A means. A means. And you can imagine out there in the desert, there's all sorts of young guys going out there. It's like in the club when you're working out. You see the guys lifting far more weight than they can possibly lift, and their backs are swaying back and forth, and they're falling all over the place.

It's like that as well spiritually, isn't it? You can imagine people out in the desert going over the top, doing more than they can do. There's a wonderful story you might have heard about. There's people going over the top.

The stylites. You know, someone sitting on top of a pillar for 35 years. Or the red pieces who, you know, locked themselves into a cave and never came out. Or there's one I heard about.

This is an ancient one. A guy who condemned himself to stand still for 40 years. What's hard is how that can be helpful in your spiritual life. Now, asceticism is not mysticism.

[14 : 20] This has to do with the practices of the acquisition of virtue. It is spiritual practice involving your body as well as your mind and your heart.

It is about your life of prayer, but it does integrate the physical part of your life. But in our society, of course, the thought of giving up anything, comfort-wise, is repugnant to us.

Anyone who's got the garbage piling up around their house will amend to that. They've all got fruit flies flying everywhere. Amazing, isn't it? Did you ever find if the water gets turned off in your house?

How very quickly we reduce ourselves to barbarianism. The idea that more so that we should really give up food or sleep or have imperishable sex is beyond the pale.

And that that should be considered a healthy part of a spirituality is not on the radar screen any longer. Indeed, we live in a denomination, for the time being, anyways, that tells us we should indulge and enjoy.

[15 : 29] And that we need to be ourselves. We need to express ourselves. Well, maybe we do. But the Bible and Christian tradition also tell us that there is a place for denying ourselves.

The biblical foundations, the Greek word for ascetic, only appears once in the New Testament in 1 Corinthians 9.25. And Paul says, There's that image again.

At least, at least. At least. But here he's saying, we strive. We control ourselves. And the goal is an incorruptible ground.

See, the Christian life, we are told, is like that race that needs to be run. We might consider ourselves, therefore, Christian ascetics, as athletes for the Lord.

People running a race. I think that speaks to us against, really, the instant nature of our society.

Food is increasingly instant, isn't it?

[16 : 48] I've been spending the last week at the diabetic clinic at St. Paul's Hospital. And food has become a big issue for me in the last week. And I realized, not that the diabetic diet is so restricted, it's that the Western diet is so unhealthy.

Because so much food is instant. You can't eat it. It's not good for you. And I think our spirituality is often instant. We put people through courses for seven weeks, and then shoot them out the other end.

And we think, okay, you're done. But of course, they're just beginning. And all of us in our own lives might reflect upon the race that we're running. Because while God does fill us with his Spirit, and he gives us his Word, and he works in us, yet is it not true that we also have to continue every day in that journey?

We have to walk it out. We have to run it out. And that involves combat with devices in our lives.

And that involves practicing and acquiring the habits of virtue.

And that involves persisting in prayer. Watching for the Lord. Spending time with him. Other biblical references include Mark 8.34. Jesus states that whoever would follow him should deny himself and take up his cross and follow him.

[18 : 14] And so we have a picture there of negative self-denial. We do have to deny ourselves. And positive picture of following Christ.

Other biblical references fill out this picture emphasizing the importance of watchfulness, fasting, the renunciation of earthly possessions, and chastity.

It is shocking to us to discover that the Bible says we can live without these things. Also important in St. Paul's teaching is the struggle against the old man or the flesh.

Now of course the flesh really means our fallen human nature. Now in the very primitive church, especially during times of persecution, this kind of asceticism is expressed in preparation for martyrdom and in the ideal of virginity, the complete consecration of soul and body to God.

By the 3rd and 4th century, the ascetic idea as a way of life began to emerge in Christianity, which leads us into the desert and the beginning of monasticism.

[19 : 33] The spirituality we find, we pull together the sources of the desert. As I say, we're not looking for one program. We're looking at the sages of the desert fathers.

But we do see a pattern of withdrawal from ordinary society to seek solitude in the desert.

Withdrawal from society or solitude in the desert.

And essential elements of the ascetic life are, as I say, withdrawal from the world, chastity, abstinence, unceasing prayer, and manual work.

I see they're talking a lot. Withdrawal from the world, chastity, abstinence, unceasing prayer, and manual work.

Now, you see right there already, we're not talking about sitting around in a cave, meditating all day long. There's something bigger happening here. There's something about the whole of life.

[20 : 31] This is not separate from manual work. This is not separate from your relationships with other people. And then you think of the desert. It's not like there were one or two weird people here and there.

It became a very large movement. Very large communities of monks going out and living in the desert in caves. And they tended to group together and live within proximity to one another, even at the Hermits, and gather together on Sunday for a church.

So it's not total isolation. But it is this withdrawal from the world. They placed themselves under spiritual fathers.

As I mentioned, this was an oral culture, and the teaching was orally passed on. After that, their daily life was their prayer, and it was a radically simple life.

A stonet with a root, a branched reed, a mat for a dad, a sheepskin, a lamb, a vessel for water or oil. Very little. Food was reduced to the minimum.

[21 : 37] Sleep also. Find in the text a sense of horror of extra possessions. Anyone who's tried to clean their house can comment to that. I think when I was going through my house, I looked at the port with extra possessions we acquired.

We found that the very hard reaches of the house filling things. It is a horror. It was a period in the 3rd and 4th century of experimentation, especially with fasting.

They came to the conclusion that for a man of prayer, one meal a day was sufficient. The desert was regarded as a place of constant battle against demonic attacks.

The monk must always be on the watch to guard against the temptation for sin. The life of withdrawal is regarded as, in some sense, an imitation of Christ's withdrawal into the desert after his baptism in order to face the devil's temptations.

We see this in particular in the life of St. Anthony. St. Anthony is regarded as the father of monasticism in the 3rd century.

[22 : 46] And we get a vivid account of a life which was by no means dull, for Anthony is kept on his toes by the devil who is constantly trying to catch him out to surprise him by means of cunning and terrifying attacks.

But the idea was not subhuman, but superhuman, the angelic life, but to be interpreted in the most practical and common sense way.

A life of exercise, of continual striving, but not a tough effort all the time. Not a gigantic gymnasium, although I'm using the athletic image, where athletes simply tried to buy with each other for endurance tests.

When one of the fathers went in disguise to a monastery during Lent, he outdid all of the fathers, all of the other monks, in asceticism. His name was Macarius the Egyptian, and he was very tough.

At the end of the week, the Abba led him outside and said, You have taught us all a lesson, Father, but now please, would you mind going away, lest my sons become discouraged and despair.

[24 : 01] We have been edified enough. The monks went without sleep because they were watching for the Lord. They did not speak because they were listening to God.

They fasted because they were fed on the Word of God. It was the end that matters. The ascetic practices were only a means. What are the means in our own lives?

The cell was of importance, central importance, in their asceticism. Sit in your cell, they said, and it will teach you everything.

The point is that unless a man could find God here, in this one place, in his cell, he would not find it by going somewhere else. There's a real wisdom there in our individualized society where we church hop and go from community to community and make choices about what works for me.

And the Desert Fathers had this understanding of the connection between a person's spiritual and a natural life. And so this gave them a concern for the body that was part of their life of prayer.

[25 : 20] Much of their advice was concerned with what to eat and where to sleep, where to live and what to do about demons. A hunter in the desert saw Abba Anjanin join himself with the brethren and he was shocked.

Wanting to show him that it was necessary sometimes to meet the needs of the brethren, the old man said to him, put an arrow in your bow and shoot it. So he did. The old man said, shoot another.

And he did so. Then the old man said, shoot again again. And the hunter replied, if I bend my bow so much, I will break it. Then the old man said to him, it is the same with the word work of God.

If we stretch with brethren beyond measure, they will soon break. Sometimes it is necessary to come down and meet their needs. When he had heard these words, the hunter was pierced like compunction and greatly edified by the old man, he went away.

As for the brethren, they went home strengthened. Someone asked Abba Agatha, which is better, bodily asceticism or interior vigilance?

[26 : 32] The old man replied, man is like a tree. Bodily asceticism is the foliage. Interior vigilance is the fruit. According to that which is written, every tree that bringeth forth not good fruit shall be cut down and cast into the fire.

It is clear that all our care should be directed towards the fruit, that is to say, guard of the spirit. But it needs the protection and the embellishment of the foliage, which is bodily asceticism. I think there's a real wisdom there in all our Christian lives. See, it's not about the asceticism per se. This is not about outdoing one another. This is not about going to the extreme. This is about the fruit. But the fruit doesn't happen in our lives just by chance. And it doesn't grow and is not nurtured and nourished automatically. We need to protect that. We need to guard ourselves.

[27 : 38] And we need to grow. Now, in fanatic history, the ascetic idea came to be expressed in two main ways which can be grouped under two main characters, the hermit life and the community life.

The first is associated with St. Anthony and the second with St. Pacomius, a friend who became an Orthodox monk and named himself Pacomius. which is, I think, a crazy thing to do. Hermits. Now, I'm sure any of the recent college students in the room think they are living the hermit life already. And certainly anyone who's done a PhD probably has. Or any, you know, study has got a hermit component to it. The word hermit also is a Greek word and it just comes from the inhabitants of a desert. We refer to the Greek word erinos, which means lonely, lone, or desert.

Solitary. Desolate. So the hermit life precedes the community life. And so hermits are really the first monks that we find out in the desert.

[28 : 44] Now we might think of John the Baptist or even Christ who both went out into the desert but also retired to the mountains to pray. The hermit life emerges during the first persecutions.

But it is St. Antony who really brings this into the vogue in the 4th century. There are many experiments and many excesses but these are not in the main. Now the main evidence we have for this is from the life of St. Antony which was written by Athanasius.

Antony the Great he is a Coptic layman inspired a large following in his desire for solitude. And he is still regarded as the father of the monks. His dates are around 251 to 356.

Hermit. We know that around 269 Antony gave away his possessions and devoted himself to this life of asceticism. And I am not struck by the vulnerability of that.

People are in 30 ages have been inspired by this thing. If you would follow me sell everything and give it to the poor Christ calls us to. It's a real vulnerability there.

[29 : 56] You actually give up your economic well-being. You don't just put it into trust for later. You give it away. Around 285 he retires to the desert and he is said to have fought with demons under the guise of wild beasts.

The holiness and order discipline of his life are seen in contrast to the wickedness of the contemporary world and also compared to the more eccentric austerities of other solitaries and so attracted many disciples.

Now the hermit life does not mean a complete withdrawal away from any form of human interaction. Rather the gathering of disciples around an Abba are the origins of the first kind of monastic communities.

They are not regular communities but they are a common life. around 305 Antony came out of solitude to organize his followers into a community of hermits who lived under a rule but with little common life comparable to that of later orders.

Later on Antony retired again into solitude but exercised its influence to support the Nicene party and the Aryan controversy. Toward the end of his life the numbers of those who turned to the solitary life of the desert increased as a result of the secularization of the church and his authority grew correspondingly.

[31 : 25] A monastic culture begins with the hermit experience. Main sources we have here as I say is the life of St. Antony the saints of the desert fathers and later John Cassin who I was going to speak about would go to the desert to learn and he would take this oral material and write it down thus giving us the beginning of a monastic spirituality.

What we have here are disciples gathered around an abbot. Men seeking solitude in the desert. Men submitting to a spiritual elder.

And I think that while we might not all seek to go into the desert, we might not agree that it is necessarily healthy to just withdraw from society.

But do we find those places of solitude in our lives? Do we seek out solitude? A place of withdrawal? A place of prayer?

I find my life just starts in the morning when the alarm goes off and the coffee pot starts and it doesn't start until the end of the day. And I think something is lost when our spiritual life does not take the form of some kind of submission to an elder.

[32 : 47] And I'm not necessarily going, talking about going to a spiritual director as we think about it today. I had someone call me up and ask me to be their spiritual director. I said no.

Because they've been going to the Christchurch Cathedral group of spiritual directors and they couldn't afford it any longer. And, you know, a lot of spiritual direction courses nowadays involve things like, you know, doing Myers-Briggs tests and personality profile.

And I just like the desert attitude towards that, actually. Which is, if someone asks you to say no. But rather, the people would gather around these Abbas and persist and stay.

See, the role of a spiritual elder, an Abba, was essential. The Abba was the one who, truly knowing God in his own experience, could teach his sons.

His words gave life. Now, remember, this is an oral culture. God in his life. But also, perhaps, one that is not as obsessed with individuality as we are. One that actually places a value in surrendering your freedom of initiative, your independence, to someone else.

[34 : 12] See, the key phrase is, speak a word, Father. Father. The word sought was not a theological explanation, nor was it counseling or any kind of a dialogue in which one argued a point.

It was a word that was part of a relationship, a word which would give life to the disciple if it was received. The Abbas were not spiritual directors in the later western sense of the word.

They were fathers to the sons whom they begot in Christ. The Abbas had only one Abba, and he was not continuously discussing his spiritual state with him.

The Abba is not a teacher or a scholar. Many people, as well as their own monastic disciples, came to the fathers for their life-giving word.

There's a very dynamic thing going on here. But there were plenty of opportunities for theological and philosophical discussion in the town. So the fathers distinguished, between genuine hearers of the word, whom they called the visitors from Jerusalem, and the superficial and curious, whom they called the visitors from Babylon.

[35 : 26] The latter were given a bowl of soup and sent away. The former were welcome to stay all night in conversation. The model of it all was that of Christ and his disciples gathered around him.

And I wonder if there's a place for that in our lives as well. We do gather. We gather at the foot of the pulpit, and that is right.

Do we gather in submission to an elder? We see here the beginnings of monastic culture in the hermit life, marked by withdrawal, solitude, simplicity, chastity, and relationship to an abbot.

And later on, St. Benedict will define a monk as someone who lives under a rule, and an abbot. And monastic life continues to be marked by these characteristics.

Essential people. Is there a place for that in our own journey as Christians today? Not necessarily going out to the desert, but, finding the desert places in our lives, finding the places of solitude, but also doing that in relationship to an elder.

[36 : 46] So we have hermits, and it's perhaps not as extreme as we might think. We too might find something of a hermit life helping us in our Christian life.

But we also have tenabites, and this really becomes the mainstream of monastic culture, and it comes from the Greek word, you know, which means common life.

And so this emerges because actually it is a bit difficult to go out on their own. It's very challenging, and you are liable to get into problems. And so they are finding that community is a very helpful and important component of the aesthetic life.

So this is a kind of anastacism in which a community gathers united together in work and prayer.

And so I put munched in here. Munched actually comes from the word monos, meaning alone.

The first munches really are hermits. That's where it starts. But we really, this develops because it's just too hard for most people to do on their own, gathering together in a community of munches.

[37 : 52] And the person who really we associate this with is Pacomius. And his date is 290 to 346.

We're very, very early here. We see him as something of the founder of this kind of monasticism.

Now it's very difficult to, you know, separate back from fiction and the source material, but he seems to have been the son of wealthy pagan parents, born in Upper Egypt.

And he served in the army, and after his release was converted and baptized. And apparently he was put in prison at Thebes.

And as a young man, because he was being taken out of the Nile with some other soldiers, and he was brought some food by some Christians. And it was their kindness. It was very impressed him. So as he asked what Christians actually were. And he was converted on the spot, and resolved to dedicate his life to Christ. So around the year 313, he gets out of the army and is baptized.

[39 : 04] Now, after that, he goes out to the desert. He seems to have spent some time learning the austerities of the solitary life in the Antony mode. But one day, in a deserted village called Tabanisi, a voice came to him telling him to stay there and construct a monastery where many would come to be monks.

So in obedience to this voice, Pacomius began to build, and in this way, the word for a single cell came to be applied to a community of monks. Monos, a monastery.

He starts building a monastery. Gradually, the disciples start arriving, and this monastery comes to life. By the time of his death, 346, there were nine monasteries counted from the first, two of which were for women.

So he experimented with this way of life and organized an influential monastic community and composed one of the first rules for a community. Although there are few sayings that survive from this experiment, the Pacomian form of monasticism, canobitic monasticism, became the most influential through St. Benedict, and thus the dominant way of life for monks in the West, and it persists to this day.

These communities that he started followed a pattern of liturgy and manual work, both *communio*. Originally, the main service was just the *synaxis*, which consisted of readings and silent reflection and praying the Our Father together.

[40 : 39] They would gather for communion for the Eucharist on Sundays. This is not a community of priests. Second, they worked, manual work together in teams, mainly on agriculture.

Of course, that is partly economic necessity. Monasteries were, from the beginning, self-sufficient communities. And part of that is just economic and security reality. society. You know, society is not actually making enough food, producing enough food, to allow a large section of society not to produce any.

And they can't do that. They need to make their own food. They need to be self-sufficient. And thirdly, they ate communally. Communally. So it was a life marked by collaboration and intimacy. It was a daily round of prayer, work, refreshment, and sleep, which encircled and nourished an inner life for each month.

[41 : 43] The safeguard of it all was obedience to the elder, to the Abba, to the Abbot. Strikingly different from earlier groups of hermit cells, Pachomius Monastery was not built in the desert, but on a cultivated land near the Nile.

It was a walled community, with not only a hall for communal worship at certain times of the week, but a refectory, a guest house, a bakehouse, a hospital, and a number of houses in each, of which there lived up to 40 monks in shared or separate cells.

The community had a leader, and each house had a house master. But it's easy to see how influential this kind of communal life would become. And about, by the year 352, there were around 600 monks in the area.

An expansion would continue even after Pachomius' death. And so he leaves us the first rule, the first set of precepts put together over the years.

It is influential, and we find it influencing the rule of St. Benedict. St. Benedict writes his rule. We're getting a rounded picture of a monk out of the monastic life.

[43 : 07] The cenobitic life builds upon the hermit life. A monk is defined as someone who lives under a rule and an habit. The ascetic life is lived in the context of a community under the relational authority of an abbot.

a life of structure and community, combining prayer, study, liturgy, work, and life.

And so I just want to put before us a challenge as we think about all of our own Christian journeys. Because as you can see, it is something that Christians have for centuries seen as worth living out. As more than just giving up something at length.

As a race that needs to be run. And some of the things that are involved in that involve not just what we think, but what we do. And not just what I feel, but the relationships I am in.

[44 : 16] Our Christian life is something that needs to be lived. Now, while we might be critical of aspects of this society, of what they've done, life.

And yet I think there is something compelling in it, which calls out to us today, in a society of excess and individuality. In the end, the aim of the monk's life was God, and the way to God was charity. The gentle charity of the desert was the pivot of all their work, and the test of their way of life.

Charity was to be total and complete. St. Anthony the Great said, my life is with my brother. He himself returned to the city twice, once to relieve those dying of plague, and once to defend the faith against heresy. They might live austerely themselves, but when visitors came, they hid their austerity and welcomed them.

There are numerous stories about desert hospitality. One of the marks of this charity was that the fathers did not judge. There was a story of Moses, a man who had been a robber, who heard one day that a brother had been to be brought before the council and judged.

[45 : 35] So he came also, carrying a basket full of sand, and he said, how should I judge my brother when my sins run out behind me, like the sand in this basket?

Well may some of that spirit be with us today. Thank you very much for listening to me. So, deal, how were advocates chosen?

How did that become an advocate? I don't know, they didn't have a strong organizational thing. Later on in the Middle Ages, they had legislation in a couple of seconds. I think often it was just, they gathered around one person, they were recognized elder.

And then, you know, you'd be the more experienced one, the elder one. How would you separate mysticism from this? Mysticism is prayer itself.

Asceticism are the things we do. You can talk about people being in a mystic state. Asceticism is that. So, you know. So, you know. Well, that might be, yeah, that might be part of it.

[46 : 52] But this is what we're doing, fasting. All of you. In modern days, we have retreat. Yeah, this is about probably looking to be one really part of my nasty part.

we do, yeah, we go away every weekend every week. Bill? Let's bump into the Great Commission. It really says that the apostles were on the move all the time. Yeah. We know that Paul went out into the desert for a while, but I'm pretty sure he was examining the Old Testament again to see Christ in there and bring that for our benefit.

But doesn't it bump into the Great Commission? I went out to mission once and I saw these characters walking around and I thought to myself, you know, why don't you go out and get a life? Yeah. So I wasn't impressed, but this is where the rubber hits the road.

[48 : 06] being around people like yourself. So, if the abbot doesn't have a good theology, look at the temperature of that.

Yeah. Look at these tables. Yeah, I mean, that's true. The Great Commission calls us out into the world. And my point is not to say, this is all wonderful.

But how might we be aesthetic in our lives? We can be so very active-oriented sometimes forget the other side. So, that's not us. Yeah. So, they went at the back.

I think my question is the same as Bill, except he traced it better. But I'm just concerned at this point, too. why wasn't the example of Jesus or all the apostles more dominant than I think when you think of Jesus as life and ministry and service interaction and centers punctuate, of course, with private times, intense prayer, meditation.

It's hard to be the picture of why that wasn't more a model than exclusively private concentration. That's not total withdrawal, right?

[49 : 18] There's a sense of withdrawal with access. Certainly withdrawal from centers, wasn't it? Well, withdrawal from the city. Yeah. But people, you know, it's not like they went off into complete isolation.

There was a lot of chewing and throwing. People went there, you know, and it was back and forth. But I think that's true. There is that. We're not supposed to be out.

But I would say we're not also supposed to be people in prayer. Are we not also supposed to be people who are growing in Christian virtue? And what are the things we should be doing?

See, I think what we take from this has to do with our own prayer life and our own common life together here as we seek to serve the world. But what are we doing to grow as Christians? Do we put people through Christianity exploring and just think that's it?

Do we think, well, I've been a Christian for 30 years, I'm done? Or, you know, what are we doing? What are the things we do that help us continue to grow? Do we struggle with the vices that assail us?

[50 : 19] Do we seek to run the race? So that's my point is about what we do now and here. That's certainly not saying we should all go into a cave, although it feels like it sometimes. What did society at the time think of them?

Were they persecuted or were they more or less treated as a curiosity? people went out there. Kind of like people still do go, you know, looking for spiritual directions.

People would go out, go back and forth. So they went there to be taught. I would recognize the perception of those taught the great commission, but I would go back and look a bit further even and look at the creation of land and women and commission that they were to be fruitful and multiply.

And I believe that at some point society was disrupted by this huge movement because we have Christians that are living in isolation.

We are not functioning as intended. And therefore there was actually a fear of Christians dying out. You can convert so many, but we are not populating the identity as well.

[51 : 51] I believe that there was not something there in particular there was women going into a romantic lifestyle and not wishing to future the direction of husband.

Can you comment on that? That's true. Yeah, that's true. I'm not sure the question of what you're saying about people going into isolation.

Well, there was a concern that society was not functioning as it should, as it was created to function.

There was a concern there. Yeah, perhaps. I'm going to blank now. I'm going to enter here. But there was a troll.

Yeah, there was. And I think that I'm not sure that menaceous is the right way for us today, but I do think at points when St.

[53 : 00] Benedict wrote his rule, the world was a very insecure place. You can imagine if all authority really collapsed and you had barbarian hordes at the gates going around.

It's not secure. The cities are not secure places. I mean, why is it that the monastery is originally designed as an enclosure? The reason is to keep barbarian out is protection.

It's not really about keeping the world. Benedict called the monastery a school of the Lord's service. It's a place of trading. But I think economic and security reality really conditioned that.

I think visiting now is like part of tradition to make these enclosures. But then I think part of it is security. I mean, look at Monte Casino. Anyone been to Monte Casino? way a fine amount and it's been scaled many times by armies over the years, including the Germans and then the Americans in World War II.

I mean, people are and we might not today in our economic situation feel the need to do that. We don't need to be a self-supporting agrarian community.

[54 : 08] But I think we should be a community of service and prayer. And I think the Bible, you know, the Bible does say to us you don't need to live with so much. And the Bible even holds out the possibility that it's okay to be single.

people who are single today worship virgins. Artists consider the lowest of below. I'll think you must be completely warned. The Bible says the opposite. And that's a valid expression of life and a way of serving God.

I think it's what can we take away from that for ourselves today that matters. It would be different. Sure. I'm ready to do a can of rent here.

Thank you. Can you try? Well, I hope that you're going to bring back something of this at some point in a few years so we can kind of take it further. I'm thinking in a way of the societal context in which this developed.

And if those dates are significant at all, it's significant to me that Christians were being assailed by a number of different herpes or individuals. Are these people who may have been reacting to that and looking for a virtual director that was solvent and that was trustworthy and I think about it were only what would you say three hundred and something.

[55 : 32] Yes, really important. Right. Well, I mean, this was barely launched when suddenly there are a pile of different versions of what this is about.

and we ought to know that because we are a sales in the file of different versions of that today. So the idea of thinking of a trustworthy spiritual director for black or different things would seem to me to be a good idea.

We have people searching out for which church they will go to, who are they going to hear from, are they going to put them or not. But when you talk about submission, I want to see the guy's resume. You know, I mean, I don't know how you decide that. Now, in a monastery, and the Benedictines, somebody asked how did they get to the United but the Benedictines are less than that.

Yeah, and they're all kind of disappearing, you know. I think I read something in the Plain 21 that there are only something like 4,000 people living under a rule in the United Kingdom and the places that were still building churches when I visited 50 years ago have sold sites.

[56 : 50] For example, you know, the rest of the kingdom once gone. Some of them are going to turn into hotels. I mean, it must sell a lot of the field is little little, isn't it? But, I think the idea of a spiritual director and how we work at that in our society would appeal to me to hear more about it sometimes.

The other thing, too, is that the idea of self-sufficiency, which is way different from the hermits, who kind of really has been looked after by other people, especially the guy on top of the pillar.

Well, you don't need it. The food up and waste products down is just crazy. But, the, well, I mean, how anybody could think that that was the thing that you bought, it lost my mind.

But, the Benedictines, and I think they are the basics of a lot of monastic monastic monologies, and it came later, are the word spin-off. You know, the motto is work and pray, and even people who teach theology in the school of admission have to spend some time mending dents, and it's a new, you know, they do.

and so it means they are working together, as well as praying together, and I think that that is nice, that's hard to find in our society outside of a monastic life.

[58 : 04] One last thing, because I've just come from the Black Sea area, the place that tourists now visit as a mosque was, was modeled on a Christian monastery that is called the Soleimani Mosque, in Istanbul, and it is enclosed, and it has a school called hospital, called hospital, place to be, in the morning when they come, and of course the built-in model of praying five times a day that is the one from God to prayer.

So there were people outside of the Christian community that saw self-valuing in it. They had nothing resembling monks and menas, I think, they're not elected, I don't know about them.

But it's obviously got several points of appeal for people, and your challenge to us, and I hope it's going to come back to tell us how to do this, is how to incorporate the best of the ideas into a life that is not separate, is not logged in, doesn't get to elect a spiritual director, and how do we find one in our congregation?

how can we operationalize it, including the mechanism for spiritual exercise and building those muscles into our lives?

Can you answer that? Okay. Yes! The word obedience really comes from the root to listen to, and I think that means that obedience starts what we listen to something.

[59 : 43] Great. I'd much prefer the word mentor than the spiritual director, because I think there's some sort of control in that definition of spiritual director, or the equipment, so you've got to make sure that the person who you're coming under the direction of is, as I think Bill mentioned, well, has good knowledge of scripture, and is leading the life themselves.

Yes. The other thing that I thought about was quiet time with prayer, with the Lord.

It's essential that in one's quiet time, that you pray up first, pray first. I mean, that is the purpose of coming against powers and principalities, because in our quiet time, that's when the enemy usually does his little work, and even in like yoga, for instance, people think it's quite okay to do yoga, and more and more people are going into the conflict.

As you go on and you study what yoga is living in that, it's very dangerous space to be especially in the meditation time. So, a lot of that does go on in the meditation time, even what you've been teaching as well.

Yes. And I think it's part of that, you know, repentance and so forth. And again, that's where sometimes that relationship with someone is very helpful. It's funny to repent five, and it's another thing that you get out.

[61 : 35] like Jesus that go into the world, don't retreat from the world, not meaning that you should never go away, of course, not to be afraid of the world.

It's a perfect law to have that figure. So, if you're afraid to control the world, with all the spices, then where is the power, you know, for the spiritual apocalypse, maybe they took that to the extreme where they thought they could escape, not realizing maybe in the beginnings that wherever the people are going to be issued and consequences.

So, they might escape a little bit, but not, and that wasn't the point, maybe, because one is supposed to go into the world with what they know.

Yeah, I think that's true. But where also are those places that we go out and pray? Pardon?

Just what's a, what we thought about? Maybe you've got that in a desert, maybe you've got a sort of precursor. Well, it's a little bit of a point.

[62 : 57] Benny and I were on holiday once, or twice, and we were in the bar of the hotel that we were staying at, and we got onto the subject of Christianity, or something, as you do places like that.

and suddenly one of the people we were talking said, I resent you. So they said, so he said, what's the problem?

So he said, what are you doing in a hotel like this if you call yourself a Christian? him? So he amazingly said, I'll enjoy myself.

But I said, well, there's no virtue in seeking poverty. There's no dignity in poverty, and there's no virtue to seek it.

Was that clever? Or was that, what's that? You're clever by half, I think. Well, to Francis, that was his, that was his word, wasn't it? And so he does have to become another god.

[64 : 21] And the danger, of course, yeah, we seek, you know, we forget what the real purpose of all is. That's always the danger. We ourselves are we in honor at St.

John's in some way, becoming a community set apart radically, in some striking ways different from what's going on around us.

It's frighteningly different. And we don't engage in that conflict very often with the city. We might one day around us, but we are in a way.

And you know, there is this element in our own life together. We are becoming this. We're here in the middle of things, but we are gathered together. And I think we need to be people of prayer as well in our action.

I think one time is up now. Thank you very much for having me. Thank you. Thank you.