The beginnings of Christian monasticism

During the first three centuries of the Christian era martyrdom by blood was regarded as the ultimate achievement, the highest crown that could be attained by a follower of Christ. When Christianity was legalised under St Constantine in 313 and martyrdom on a large scale came to an end, the ascetic life of world-renunciation became the loftiest ideal towards which a Christian could strive. Interestingly, the origins of Christian monasticism lay with the people and not with the clergy.¹

St Anthony the Great
The founder of Christian monasticism was St Anthony the Great, an Egyptian born around the year 250. At around 20 years of age he gave up his possessions and started living an ascetic life in his native town. After another 15 years he went into the wilderness, where he lived as a hermit for the rest of his long life – according to tradition he became more than 100 years old. He practised a rigid form of asceticism, consisting of utmost self-denial, prayer and fasting. Eventually he inspired other God-seekers to follow his example and retreat from the world. They would either live singly or in groups, with large monasteries arising at Nitria and Sketis.² The latter would one day become the refuge of St Moses the Ethiopian, where he became a Christian after a life of violence, and eventually one of the greatest African saints.

St Pachomius
As a soldier who became a Christian at around 20 years of age, St Pachomius adopted the life of a hermit but soon became dissatisfied with it. He therefore established the first Christian monastery at Tabennisi in southern Egypt between the years 315 and 320. All the monks living there were assigned work, regular worship, similar dress and cells close to one another. This common life under the guidance of an abbot was the beginning of cenobitic monasticism, as opposed to the hermetic monasticism of St Anthony. It was open to men and women, with a convent also having been founded by St Pachomius. At the time of his repose in 346 there were already 10 cenobitic monasteries in Egypt.³

² Walker, pp 125-126.
³ Walker, p 126.
St Basil the Great

From Egypt and Syria monasticism spread to Asia Minor, where it was popularised by St Basil the Great from around 360 until his repose in 379. He composed a Rule that entails even more a life in common than that of St Pachomius. St Basil taught monks the importance of work, prayer and study of Scripture. Emphasis was also laid on charitable works towards orphans and others. Extreme asceticism was discouraged, as befits healthy spirituality. The Rule of St Basil became the basis of Greek and Russian monasticism up to the present day, which serves as proof of its timeless balance of the spiritual and the practical.

St Athanasius

Monasticism was introduced into the Latin-speaking West by St Athanasius during his several exiles from his episcopate in Alexandria. For example, during his stay in Rome in 340 the saint took two monks from the Egyptian desert with him, named Ammonius and Isidore. The attitude of many in the Western imperial capital towards them soon changed from disgust to admiration, which was reinforced by a further two visits that St Athanasius made to Rome. This life story serves as wonderful testimony of how the Holy Spirit can employ even what appears as personal misfortune in the service of the Kingdom of God.

St Benedict of Nursia

Much of Western monasticism was in a bad state, swaying between the extremes of severe asceticism and laxity, by the time St Benedict began his reforms. He was born around 480 in Nursia, Italy and studied briefly in Rome. At around 20 years of age (like Saints Anthony and Pachomius) he withdrew to a cave in the mountains to the east of Rome, where he started living as a hermit. He was eventually offered the abbotship of a nearby monastery, and in 529 he founded his famous monastery at Monte Cassino. There the monks lived according to his Rule, and there he reposed in 547. Benedict’s Rule was marked by balance, moderation and good sense. The monastery should be self-supporting and headed by an abbot. Most important of the monastic duties was worship, each daily cycle being divided into seven periods. Of almost equal importance was work, with manual labour in the fields and daily reading being required. Each monastery thus became a centre of agriculture with its own library.

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4 Walker, p 126.
5 Florovsky, Georges. “The Influence of Egyptian Monasticism through St Athanasius”, in The Byzantine Ascetic and Spiritual Fathers (online), page unnumbered.
Benedictine monasteries in this way played a major role in the preservation of literature.   
Sadly, the original monastery founded by St Benedict at Monte Cassino was destroyed by American bombers in 1944, as part of the Allied liberation of Italy.

**Irish monasticism**

Monasticism reached the British Isles from the Christian East via Gaul, notably the ancient monasteries at Lérins and Poitiers. Celtic monasticism, of which the Irish type was most prominent, was characterised by mysticism, informality and asceticism – differing in all these aspects from Benedictine monasticism. A major divergence between Celtic and Roman monasticism was found in its church organisation: in the former the basis was monastic, with the abbot or abbess being the highest authority, even over the local bishop. In contrast the Roman system was diocesan in organisation, the bishop being the highest authority. The Irish system applied to men and women, like that of St Pachomius.

While most of Western Europe endured widespread ignorance during the early Middle Ages, the Irish monasteries became famous for their high levels of learning. They imported books from major Eastern Christian centres such as Alexandria and Antioch, thereby maintaining their spiritual link with Eastern Orthodoxy. Furthermore, the Irish monasteries created their own books in writing rooms called *scriptoria*. Among the most influential monastic schools were those at Inishmore (founded by St Enda), Bangor (founded by St Comgall), Clonard (founded by St Finnian) and Clonmacnoise (founded by St Ciaran). Greek, Latin and Hebrew were taught at these centres, although from the eighth century onwards the Roman Church would insist on only Latin being used.

The best-loved Irish female saint, St Bridget, lived in the late fifth and early sixth centuries. She founded her monastery in an oak grove at Kildare (‘church of the oak grove’ in Gaelic), where a sacred fire would be kept perpetually alight for nearly a thousand years after her death. It was a mixed monastery for men and women, headed by an abbot and abbess respectively. St Bridget reposed around the year 525. Her feast is celebrated on 1 February.

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6 Walker, p 127.  
8 Walker, p 128.  
11 Streit, p 98.
one day before the Feast of the Presentation of our Lord Jesus, with whose Holy Mother the Celtic saint has affinities.12

Another pioneer of Irish monasticism was St Enda, who was educated at Whithorn in Scotland. On his return to Ireland he established monasteries in the Boyne Valley, and around 484 he moved to the far west in order to found a monastery on Inishmore in the Aran Islands. It would become one of the leading monastic schools in Ireland. Here he received later saints such as Cieran and Brendan for instruction and advice. St Enda reposed on Inishmore in 530.13

One of the earliest Irish missionaries to the Continent was St Fridolin (also known as Fridolt). At first he was a bishop, who around 500 went via Scotland to Aquitania in Gaul. There at Poitiers St Fridolin converted the bishop and people from Arianism14 to belief in the Trinity. From Poitiers he went under royal protection to the Vosges and founded the monastery of St Avold. Further monasteries were founded by St Fridolin at Chur in Rhaetia and Säckingen in Germany. Everywhere he converted the heathens to the Christian faith.15 He is venerated as Enlightener of the Upper Rhine.

St Finnian was destined to become one of the great developers of a distinctive Irish monasticism.16 He was born in Leinster late in the fifth century and went to study monasticism in Wales. Upon his return to Ireland he founded two monasteries, and then around 520 the famous one in Clonard. At Clonard over the following centuries thousands of monks studied the scriptures, the Church Fathers and practical monasticism before setting out on their missionary journeys. St Finnian also drew up the first Irish penitentiary, thereby influencing St Columban in his better-known one. He reposed during an attack of the yellow plague over Ireland in 549.17 Almost fifteen centuries later the Russian Orthodox parish in Belfast, Northern Ireland would be named after this great Irish saint.

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13 Toulson, p 114.
14 Arianism is the heresy that Christ is a created being and therefore a lesser God than the Father. It was condemned at the first ecumenical council at Nicaea in 325, but it continued to receive support in parts of Western Europe for several centuries afterwards.
15 Streit, pp 176-177.
16 Walker, p 180.
17 Toulson, pp 50-51.
Conclusion
During its first two hundred years, from the early fourth until the early sixth centuries, Christian monasticism flowered into a movement of decisive and lasting importance for the Orthodox Church. In most cases, notably those following the Rules of St Basil and St Benedict, by emphasising the need for worship and work while avoiding extremes, these early monasteries made it possible for huge numbers of men and women to devote their lives to God, and to strive towards deification, or *theosis*.

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