

IV.4.b
Monasticism

Development of Monasticism

Monasticism, at one and the same time, is both the best and the worst of the institutions of the church. Obviously this involves something of a contradiction which, hopefully, we can resolve before too much water passes under the bridge.

The ideal:

Monasticism as an ideal is much older than the church and the oldest and earliest Christian monastic groups most likely patterned themselves after the Hebrew monastics. The ideal was to live a life of purpose in following spiritual pursuits and to be unhindered by fleshly rudiments that inhibit such purpose. The purpose will, of course, depend on the monastic set of the community. Some will seek to be simply meditationists, some will orient to community service, some will move towards preserving learning, etc. Within the ideal a number of forms occur:

--solitaries, hermits, flagellants.

The idea is to remove oneself totally from what is bad in the societal setting and so be able to totally live for God.

--cenobites,

Companies of people that live together in a classless and sex-divided societal arrangement.

--communals

family structures living in a monastic way but as a civil unit.

And no doubt there are other expressions like these or overlapping these but that is a good start.

Historical notes:

The foundation of Christian monasticism as we know it was laid by Paul of Thebes (d. 334) and St. Anthony (d. 356), both Egyptian recluses who were legendary in their time although they undoubtedly were not the first. The life of Anthony had been written by