**Church History 101**

**Lesson 18**

**The Rise of Monasticism**

**Key Concepts:** Monasticism, or the living of Christians in religious communities, is one of the oldest traditions within the church. While originally designed for individual spiritual enlightenment they eventually became places of learning, compassion and social significance.

**The Story:** The precedent for the monastic life can be found in the New Testament, in the life of John the Baptist and Jesus’ 40 days in the wilderness. The “wilderness” was seen in these stories as a place of spiritual testing, purification and growth. In addition the Old Testament contains the stories of God’s people wandering in the wilderness (the Exodus) and of prophets such as Elijah who encountered God there. Thus, for those who chose the monastic life, they saw themselves not as creating something new, but as following in a great Biblical tradition.

The monastic movement began with individuals who chose the life of the hermit. These were men and women who committed themselves to ascetic lifestyles. Though they lived in close proximity to larger communities, they maintained a life apart. This tradition slowly transitioned into the more familiar hermit like life in which individuals lived completely apart from civilization. The earliest known hermit of this kind was Paul the Hermit. In the face of Roman persecution (c. 250 CE) he fled to the desert and lived in a cave close to a spring and palm trees, which provided his food. The transition toward monastic communities began with Anthony of Egypt (252-356) who gathered followers in the desert, even though they still lived apart.

The first monastery (a community of monks who live together) was founded in Egypt in 346. This community was one in which monks lived in individual rooms (cells) but shared common meals and worship. Over time the monasteries developed special daily spiritual practices, divisions of internal labor and specific industries by which they provided for their members. Virtually every kind of industry was covered by the monastics, including shipping. What this meant was that many monastics moved away from being isolated from the world around them and simply became men or women living in a Christian community, guided by rules.

The importance of the monasteries cannot be overstated. As the western Roman Empire collapsed the monasteries became some of the few places where education was not only treasured but passed on to others. Within their walls the children of the poor and wealthy alike could learn alongside men or women seeking a religious vocation. The monks learned and taught everything from Greek and Latin, to mathematics, grammar, natural science and the Scriptures. By the turn of the 8th century Irish monastic schools were attracting students from throughout Europe. Some of these schools eventually evolved into universities. Additional areas of monastic achievement included advances in medicine (they had infirmaries for treating the monks) and agriculture (including wine and beer making).

One final note about the monasteries is that they also served social purposes. Dethroned monarchs would live in them rather than being executed or imprisoned. Second sons would be sent there in order that they not attempt to steal the inheritance of the first born son. Others were created in order to care for lepers and prostitutes. They were also used as safe havens for wealthy families to send their daughters to be educated prior to their arranged marriages.

**Questions**

1. How do you think you would fare in the monastic life?
2. Why do you suppose the monastic life was one that was often sought out rather than resisted?
3. Do you know of any examples of this kind of community still in existence today?