



Questions & Answers

What is the suitable age to seek Monasticism?

Whoever is seeking monastic life, should be of a mature age, as well as differentiating all the required spiritual characteristics. However, the monastic history is full of many examples of those who were very young:

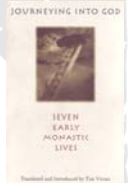
- ♦ Saint Theodore - St. Pakhomious's disciple - and Saint John the short, each of them was guiding others at the age of nineteen, and probably both sought monasticism at the age of fourteen.
- ♦ Saint Misaeel the hermit, joined the monastic life at a very young age, and became a hermit at the age of nineteen after he had spent few years with the monks.
- ♦ Saint Shenouda, the first hermit, sought monasticism when he was only nine years old, and many had prophesied about him.
- ♦ Saint Abba Zacharias, was a young boy. The sayings of desert fathers tells us, that many elders like St. Moses and St. Macarius the Great, were seeking a words of benefit from him.
- ♦ Perhaps all those Saints are very young, but they were mature at an early age.
- ♦ On the other hand, we have some other people who sought monasticism at a very late age, as Saint Paul the Simple - St. Anthony's most righteous disciple.

In general we say that the suitable age is when the grace of the Lord touches your heart.

Further Readings:



C. S. Lewis, "**The Problem of Pain**", Harper Collins Publishers
Whatever your philosophy of life, it will be tested at some point when you encounter or endure suffering. Why do people have to suffer pain, especially if there is a God? C.S. Lewis sets out to disentangle this puzzle with a wealth of compassion and insight, offering hope, wisdom and true understanding of human nature.



Tim Vivian, "**Journeying into God: Seven early monastic lives**" Fortress Press
This book tells the fascinating stories of seven male and female monks, and their quest to imitate Christ and live the gospel fully. Saint Antony, Abba Pambo, Syncletica of Palestine, Saint George of Choziba, Abba Aaron, Saint Theognius, and saint Onnophrius come to life through translations of biographical documents from Greek and Coptic.



Published by
Saint Shenouda
the Archimandrite
Coptic Orthodox
Monastery
Sydney, Australia

Address
8419 Putty Rd,
PUTTY, NSW 2330

Phone or Facsimile
(+612) 65 79 7093

Email
pimonakhos
@copticmail.com



PI MONAKHOS THE MONK

ΠΙ ΜΟΝΑΧΟΣ

A monthly newsletter with monastic issues for today's youth

Vol: 1 Issue: 1

Tute 1724 / Sept 2007

Monastic Life



Monasticism is a way of life to rid the inner self of materialism. Our saintly fathers lived angelic lives. Monks are 'earthly angels and heavenly humans'. They are people who deprive themselves of everything, live humbly, practice contemplation at its highest level and execute the word of the Holy Bible, "Do not love the world or the things in the world" (1John 2:15-17).

In the Gospel of St John, speaking about our Lord Jesus Christ states; "When He had made a whip of cords, He drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen, and poured out the changers' money and overturned the tables. And He said to those who sold doves, "Take these things away! Do not make My Father's house a house of merchandise!" Then His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for Your house has eaten Me up." (John 2:15,17). In the same way our saintly monastic fathers rid themselves of all the worldly desires such as money, material possessions, positions or fame. They left everything so that God may be their world. They no longer desired worldly ways or its positions but they choose poverty, exactly like their hero St Anthony who fulfilled the word of the Bible, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have a treasure in heaven; and come follow Me" (Matthew 19:21). So he went and gave away all of his possessions to the needy before he began his monastic life and he lived as a poor monk in the ascetic life.

It is true that monasticism and wealth are complete opposites which cannot travel in the same path of life. It is also true that monasticism and luxury do not correlate, because luxury is a easy way of life, to which poor people, not only monks, are not exposed to. Monks leave the world to live in the desert, mountains, and caves in order to live with God... the God they consecrated their lives to. How deep is the everlasting expression which defines monasticism as, "**a total withdrawal from every person and every material thing to be united to the One and Only "God", who fills the heart, mind and time**". The



monk shall never achieve this spiritual level if he still desires worldly things. Here we remember what Jesus Christ said to Martha, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed and Mary has chosen that good part which will not be taken away from her." (Luke 10:41-42).

The goal of true monasticism is a continuous life filled with prayers. A life of continuous prayer is the main feature of a monk's life, which ordinary people cannot fulfill because of their worldly tasks and interests. He who begins a monastic life trains himself to a continuous life of prayer. When he succeeds, he then begins a life of isolation, in order to help him in his prayers and contemplation.

This is why monasticism is the life of solitude. From loneliness, originated the name of 'monk'. The word in Greek (*monakes*) means alone. In French (*moine*) means a monk...etc. In solitude a monk may continue a life of prayer, contemplation and praise without hindrances or distraction of any kind. A true monk escapes people to be with God. This is what St Arsenius practiced and when St Macarius of Alexandria once asked him saying, "Father why do you flee from us?" He answered saying, "The Lord knows that I love you all, But I cannot speak with God and people at the same time." This is why the Spiritual Elder stated this deep and marvellous expression, **"The love of God made me a stranger to humans and their ways."**

By: H.H. Pope Shenouda

Those who aim at ascending with the body to heaven, indeed need violence and constant suffering, especially in the early stages of their renunciation, until our pleasure loving disposition and unfeeling hearts attain to love of God and chastity by manifest sorrow.

St John Climacus
The Ladder of Divine Ascent

Abba Macarius said to Abba Zacharias, 'Tell me, what is the work of a monk?' He said to him, 'How is it that you are asking me, Father?' Abba Macarius said, 'Zacharias, my child, you inspire me with confidence. It is God who urges me to ask you.' Then Zacharias said to him, 'Father, in my opinion, he is a monk who does violence to himself in everything.'

Abba Zacharias
The Sayings of the Desert Fathers



functioning. For . . . this system cannot work unless the demand for non-necessaries is not merely kept up, but continually expanded; and of course it cannot be kept up and expanded except by incessant appeals to greed, competitiveness and love of aimless stimulation. Men have always been a prey to distractions, which are the original sin of the mind; but never before today has an attempt been made to organize and exploit distractions, to make of them, because of their economic importance, the core and vital centre of human life. ...'

Early monasticism, represented well by the *Life of Antony*, offers a striking and uncompromising opposition to the "greed, competitive-ness and love of aimless stimulation" that Huxley so presciently warned us about: i.e. asceticism. But today asceticism often conjures up images of dirty and emaciated men wearing hair-shirts and flogging themselves. The monks themselves, however, defined asceticism very differently. For them asceticism was really very simple: working and spending something even *The Wall Street Journal* would approve! But it was working and spending as defined by the gospel, not by Wall Street. Antony worked with his hands, and "he would spend what he earned from his handiwork rightly, he would spend part on bread and part on those in need." Monasticism directs the monk inward *and* outward. Most importantly, Antony "prayed all the time, having learned that it is necessary to pray without ceasing (I Thess 5:17)." The action of the monastic life, then, is prayer, prayer without ceasing, prayer not divorced or cordoned off from work and the rest of life, prayer as life and life as prayer. Some monks prayed even while seemingly asleep. Others, in obedience to the gospel, had others pray in their stead while they slept.

The demons did and do wage war, silently and noisily, quietly and violently, relentlessly. As Huxley pointed out, and as we can read in the newspaper each morning and witness in our homes and neighborhoods each day, the demons have only intensified their efforts in the modern era. But the *Life of Antony* offers a vision of the demons defeated, the community and its citizens at peace. This vision, based as it is on Luke's depiction of the early Christian community in Acts 4:32, is an idealisation, but it is an idealisation with its roots planted deeply in the desert earth, where nothing grows. That earthly paradox lies at the heart of the *Life of Antony*, and the lives of the first desert monks that it portrays envisions the desert "filled with monks". Only those filled with the love of God could imagine and live such an impossibility. They continue to offer possibility to us.

By: Tim Vivian
Journeying into God



Journeying into God

The Antony who lives and breathes in these pages is true, demons and all to the way these early monks lived, thought, and believed. He is also true to the way the monks saw and understood their (*vocation*) and as a way of antony's calling to the monas- ginning of the *Life* does pre- child-adult, too serious to But after his parents' death, realistic: left in charge of his Antony one day is walking walking, he considered how thing and followed the Sav- This thought leads him to munity depicted in Acts, their possessions and gave 35). "Pondering these into church and it hap- being read; he heard the Lord saying to the [rich man], "If you want to be perfect, go and sell all your possessions and give them to the poor, and come and follow me, and you will have treasure in heaven" (Mt 19-21). Antony does as the gospel asks: he gives up everything to follow Christ.



vocation, both as a calling life (*politeia*). Central to Antic life is scripture. The be- sent Antony too neatly, a play like the other children. the story becomes more home and younger sister, to church. "While he was the apostles gave up every- ior" (see Mt 4:20, Lk 14:33). think of the Christian com- where everyone gave up to those in need (Acts 4:34- things in his heart, he went pened that the Gospel was

Such renunciation and embracing certainly had a wider social context than *the Life* presents. But Antony's central motivation in the pas- sage is simple: he obeyed, literally, the words of Christ. As Armand Veilleux has pointed out: "All the motivations that [the monks] themselves revealed to us in their writings came from scripture. Do we have a right to pretend we know their secret motivations better than they did?" Hearing the gospel, really hearing it, prompts Antony to act. "All his desire and all his at- tention he directed to the great effort of asceticism".

The rest of the *Life of Antony* is really a telling of this single mindedness: Antony's goal is to be a "lover of God"; in order to do this, he must not allow himself to be distracted or drawn away from God." The myriad demons are distractors they draw us away from God. Whether they are "physical" or "psychological" is irrelevant; they are real. Sometimes the whole purpose of our modern era whether expressed in commu- nism, capitalism, materialism, consumerism, scientism, seems to be to draw us away from God. Television has only exacerbated the situation observed so acutely by Aldous Huxley fifty years ago:

But it is upon fashions, cars and gadgets, upon news and the advertising for which news exists, that our present industrial and economic system depends for its proper



Monasticism: The Love of Pain ?

Many have looked towards the path of monasticism and seen in it an over-exaggerated self-denial. That is, to the modern mind, monasticism is an exercise of pain, to some, a love of pain, and in the extreme, the elevation of pain. Perhaps you would think that I would like to discount this view. But I do not think this is necessary, for pain is not always a negative experience, and at times may even be greatly beneficial.

For a moment let us consider this concept of self imposed suffering, in short, pain. Think back to your last experience of pain, in particular, physical pain. No doubt it was a recent experience, given the prevalence of pain in day to day life. Think of the experi- ence of this pain, think of its duration, and the effect on your mind, heart, and body. Holding that previous experience of pain in your mind, now consider the cause of this pain. Why were you experiencing pain? To what aim did your body pain you?

In the majority, your reply, as is mine, is that the cause of pain was a rather dubious looking falafel sandwich, or perhaps a cold night with inadequate clothing, or if you are more adventurous, a fall off a cliff. In each case, at least one thing becomes extremely clear: Pain indicates that something is wrong.

Now, let us assume that God was "good", and there was no concept of pain, as many would wish. Then without experiencing the above mentioned pain, you would continue eating your next falafel sandwich, or if lucky and you weren't fasting, a kebab. You would continue enjoying the cold nights with next to nothing on, and perhaps you would continue falling onto your broken bones.

My point should now be clear. Without pain, there is no indication that something is not right. There is no indication that your small intestine is inflamed and suffering from a contaminated falafel, there is no indication that your body is suffering from a cold, and there is no indication that the bones in your arm are fractured and are obstructing blood vessels. Without pain, there is no alarm that my body is suffering. There is no alarm that I should stop doing what I'm doing. And there is no indicator that I should do something to alleviate the particular damage that is harming my body.

Pain is the inbuilt mechanism, courtesy of the apparently "unkind" God, that reveals to man that something is wrong and that something needs to be done about it. Should there be no pain, my finger would remain firmly adhered to the boiling oil on my moth- ers stove, and I would be none the wiser. So now, I would hope that you agree that pain really isn't that bad.

Many years ago a great man by the name of C.S. Lewis (the same man that authored the Chronicles of Narnia), wrote a book by the name of "The Problem of Pain". This book, for me, above all others, transforms the concept of pain in the modern mind. Pain is not to be scorned, but rather it is to be humbly listened to, for pain communi- cates truth to its hearer. Pain does not lie.



For Lewis, the greatest problem with man is that man forever seeks to escape pain, running instead to pleasure. For interest's sake, consider the last time you were in pain. This time let us consider emotional pain, so that we may be fair to all sufferers of pain. We do not have to imagine, for the media grants us a telling truth: when you're down eat ice-cream, chocolate or anything else that is bound to clog your arteries. Food, a pleasure, then becomes our home whenever our hearts are troubled. Alcohol is a more grown-up pleasure, and drugs are a more devastating pleasure.

Thus, plagued by pain, we run to pleasure. Unable to face the truths in our lives, whether it is a broken arm or a broken heart, we turn to our accessible distractions, our pleasures. Whereas had we paid heed to the words that we had discovered earlier, we would have known that pain is trying to tell us something, and that by escaping from pain we remain ignorant of this particular and important message. If I ignore the fact that my stomach is hurting and instead take some aspirin, yes I may no longer feel pain, but my stomach is sure to continue suffering, and no doubt my next meal will worsen the situation. If my heart breaks and I run to food, alcohol, shopping, sex – pick your pleasure – then my pain will be ignored, but the heart break persists. If I am down because I have sinned and distanced myself from God, and seek pleasure instead of facing my pain, then I remain in sin, and more than likely increase in my sin. It is by listening to my pain, to my indicator that something is wrong, that I am able to address my problem, and hopefully seek help for my problem. Ignoring the pain only ignores the problem.

To seek out the obvious parallel, let us look to the lives of martyrs. Theirs was a pain that was physical, a pain that was strong enough to tear a man away from his soul. And yet they did not escape their pain, but rather they ran towards it in the hope of meeting their Master. For if the Master suffers, then likewise must His servants. By escaping pleasure, and meeting their deaths, the martyrs were able to partake in the sufferings of their Lord, purging all that was imperfect within them.

With the “seal of the martyrs”, and the edict of Milan in 313 AD, the Emperor Constantine declared religious tolerance and Christianity was no longer illegal. However with freedom came spiritual laxity and Christianity became fashionable (perhaps similar to today). The life of pain was no more, and in its place, the life of pleasure. From this scenery grew the “new martyrs” – the beginnings of monasticism: Men and women who distanced themselves from pleasure and drew near to the wisdom of pain.

It is in this aim, that monks leave the world, leave pleasure, and instead run to their Lord, and by doing so, run to their pain. No longer willing to escape from pain, they travel towards pain. They humbly kneel before suffering, seeking its truth. If there is something wrong, then instead of running to pleasure, they choose to face the cause of pain in their lives, and hence fix the cause of that pain. They pay heed to the message of pain, becoming masters in the subtleties of pain, identifying each of their flaws, all in the hope of attaining perfection by the grace of God, so that



they might dwell with Him who granted them the gift of pain.

Monasticism is the reversal of what is wrong in man; they no longer escape from pain, but rather escape from pleasure, and no longer run to pleasure, but rather run to pain. It is because we are negative in our view of pain, that we have forgotten its benefits, and likewise, have forgotten the benefits and purpose of the God-given tool of asceticism.

By: One of the youth



Procession of the relics of saints on the feast of St Shenouda.



Fr Bishoy Botros praying the liturgy on the feast of St Shenouda.



Procession of the relics of saints on the feast of St Shenouda.