



*Saint Mark's Church
Sunday School*

St Pachom (Pachomius) and his monastic System

Code: 10/SA/4

1. Aim

To better understand the life of St Pachomius, and why he is considered a pillar not only of the Coptic Church, but also Christian monastic life around the world.

To know why St Pachomius is considered the Father of the Spiritual Communal Monastic life (Cenobitic life)

2. His Life:

He was born in 292 in Thebes (Luxor, Egypt) to pagan Egyptian parents, who forced him to worship idols. This was during the 'era of martyrs' in Egypt during the reign of Emperor Diocletian.

He was swept up against his will in a Roman army recruitment drive at the age of 20, a common occurrence during the turmoils and civil wars of the period. He received hostile treatment and was imprisoned. It was to these inmates that local Christians would daily bring food and comforts to them and talk to them about Christ the Saviour. This made a lasting impression on Pachomius, and he vowed to investigate Christianity further when he got out. As fate would have it, he was able to get out of the army without ever having to fight, was converted and baptized (314). He then came into contact with a number of well known ascetics and decided to pursue that path. He sought out the hermit Aba Palaemon and came to be his follower (317).

After studying seven years with the Aba Palamon, St Pachomius mastered the ways of the monastic life and set out to lead the life of a hermit near St Anthony of Egypt, whose practices he imitated. Whilst in Tabennisi an Angel of the Lord appeared to him and told him to build a communal and holy monastic life. An earlier ascetic named St Macarius had earlier created a number of proto-monasteries called cells, where holy men would live in a community setting who were physically or mentally unable to achieve the rigors of St Anthony's solitary life. St Pachomius set about organizing these cells into a formal organization. Perhaps his military training and experience assisted him in developing a talent for order and discipline.

Up to this point in time, Christian asceticism had been solitary. Male or female monastics lived in individual huts or caves and met only for occasional worship services. Pachomius introduced the community or *cenobitic* (a word derived from the Greek 'common' and 'life') organization, in which male or female monastics lived together and had their possessions in common under the leadership of an abbot or abbess. Pachomius himself was hailed as "Abba" (father) which is where we get the word Abbot from.

St Pachomius formulated a formal written code of behaviour and practice to govern the lives of these monks in communal monasteries. According to the rule, each monk had a

room, and those of special trades were grouped into 'houses' each with its own supervisor. There were communal facilities such as kitchens, bakeries, water cisterns, wine-presses and workshops. A schedule of activities was drawn up to govern each hour of day and night. Food was served in a special refectory once a day. Soon these monasteries became self-sufficient and set an example to others. They provided services to surrounding settlements and villages, offered alms to the poor, cared for widows and orphans, ministered to the ailing, gave brotherly love, and aided the bereaved by praying and blessing their dear departed.

He established his first monastery in Tabennisi, Egypt, between 318 and 323. The first to join him was his elder brother John, and soon more than 100 monks lived at his monastery. He came to found nine monasteries in his lifetime. From his initial monastery, demand quickly grew and, by the time of his death in 346, one count estimates there were 3000 monasteries dotting Egypt from north to south. Within a generation after his death, this number grew to 7000 and then moved out of Egypt into Palestine and the Judea Desert, Syria, North Africa and eventually Western Europe.

He was visited once by Basil of Caesarea who took many of his ideas and implemented them in Caesarea, where Basil also made some adaptations that became the ascetic rule, the rule still used today by the Eastern Orthodox Church, and comparable to that of the Rule of St Benedict in the West.

Though Pachomius sometimes acted as lector for nearby shepherds, neither he nor any of his monks became priests. Pachomius did not allow this so as not allow his monks to fall into the vainglory of this world, and be distracted from the purpose of their monastic life which is being away from the world. Rather a priest from the neighbourhood would visit once or twice during the week to celebrate the Holy Liturgy. St Athanasius visited and wished to ordain him in 333, but Pachomius fled from him. Athanasius' visit was probably a result of Pachomius' zealous defence of orthodoxy against Arianism.

He remained abbot to the cenobites for some forty years. When he caught an epidemic disease (probably plague), he called the monks, strengthened their faith, and appointed his successor. He then departed on 14 Pashons. (9 May 348 A.D.)

It is said that when Pachomius' sister Mary came to see Pachomius, he refused her entry. He sent a message with the gatekeeper: "You know that I am living, therefore grieve not that you did see me. But, if you would renounce the world and find mercy with God, you shall possess your soul. And I trust the Lord to call unto you many who would join you..." Inspired by her brother's words, Mary chose a cave near his monastery and women of similar inclination joined her. Pachomius appointed a teacher, an aged monk noted for his piety and devotion, to instruct them in the same rules as those laid down for the men.

One day his disciples asked him: 'Is there anything we can do to have the power of making miracles?' He answered with a smile:

‘If you desire to continue on the spiritual way to the Kingdom of Heaven, do not ask for this power because it brings pride to beginner monks; pray and seek for the divine power for making spiritual miracles. Should there be a man who resists god’s way and you bring him back to the real knowledge of God, then you have already raised the dead; if you bring a heretic back to the Orthodox, the right way, then you have already opened the eyes of one born blind; if you could change a money-lover’s hand to open it to the poor, or can make a lazy person active in spiritual work, then you have already cured a paralysed man; if you can cause an adulterer to repent, then you have already extinguished flames and fires; if you make the mad calm and humble then you have already got an evil spirit out of him. Do you think there is anything greater than these we can look forward to.’

3. Conclusion

Let us learn from the life of St Pachomius, his humility, love, leadership, and desire for organization and discipline to apply the same characteristics in our lives so that we may also be an example to others.

4. References

Coptic Sinaxarium
Christianity in the Land of the Pharaohs, Jill Kamil