

The Rise of Monasticism

Did you ever feel the need to be left alone? Many times our lives are filled with noise and distractions making it impossible to concentrate on things that are important to us. So we look for a special place to go where we can find peace and tranquility. Do you have a secret place where you go?

Many years ago there lived a man who needed to find such a place. He searched for a spot where he could pray and live in harmony with God, and become closer to God. This man's name was Anthony. It was the year 285 when Anthony decided to go into the desert to live. He found a cave in the side of a mountain and set up his humble abode. His solitary retreat lasted about 20 years until people learned of his whereabouts. At this time in history, the Roman Empire was persecuting Christians in great numbers. The people were looking for an end to suffering and a renewal of spirituality in their lives. So they became curious about Anthony's life-style, and the peace that surrounded him.

People began moving into the desert to live, and dedicated their lives to God through prayer, meditation, and fasting. This was the beginning of the monastic movement. These people who sought a

solitary, prayerful life became known as "monks." The word "monos" means "alone, lonely." The monks lived in caves, abandoned forts or huts. They called their home the "monastery." Many monasteries became known as great centers of learning because the monks were learned men, spending many hours reading books from all over the world.

Every monastery had a head person known as the Abbot or, in Armenian, Medzavor. It was the Medzavor's responsibility to see that the monks adhered to their vows of simplicity, chastity, poverty, and obedience. Total obedience to the Abbot was a rule the monk had to follow. St. Nersess the Great changed the rigid life-style of the monks to one based upon charitable deeds.







ST. JAMES OF MEDZPIN

St. James of Medzpin lived in the 4th century. He was a contemporary of St. Gregory the Illuminator. In his youth he lived alone in caves in the mountainsides eating leaves or berries. He de-

voted his life to God in prayer, fasting, and worship.

St. James became active in the church in Medzpin and eventually was ordained bishop of that diocese. He was known for his preaching and miraculous feats. People came from all over to hear him speak of God; others came because St. James was gifted with the power to heal the sick. A number of miracles are attributed to him earning him the title of "skantchela-kordz" which means "wonder worker."

The legend of his search for Noah's Ark is what people most remember about him.

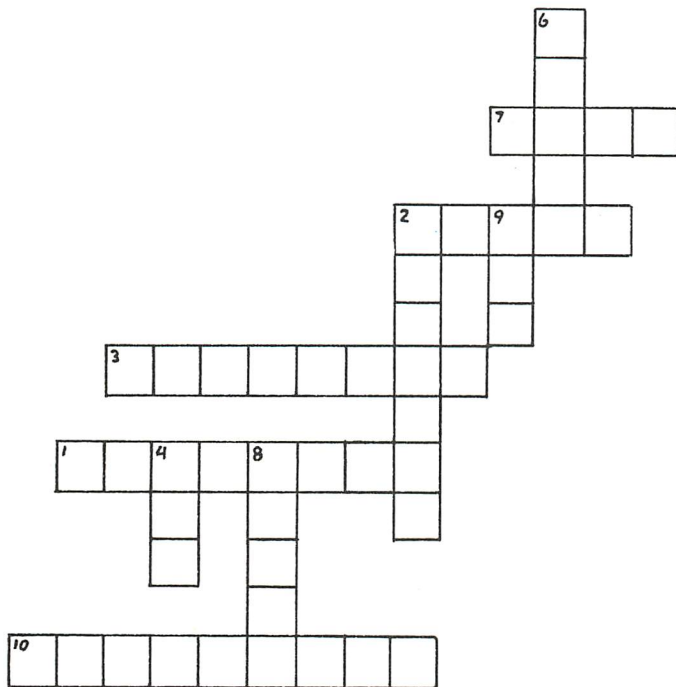
He was always impressed with the biblical story of the Ark and became obsessed with proving true the tradition that it rests on Mt. Ararat.

St. James started up Mt. Ararat one cold snowy day. He stopped along the road and fell asleep. Legend has it that he dreamt that an angel came to him and gave him a piece of wood from the Ark.

That piece of wood is today among the relics of Holy Etchmiadzin.



CROSSWORD PUZZLE The Monastic Movement



DOWN

2. Monks combined monastic life with works of _____ .
4. St. Hagop of Medzpin searched for Noah's _____ .
6. Meaning of the Greek word "monos."
8. The head of the monastery.
9. Chastity, poverty, obedience.

ACROSS

1. Place where the Ark rests.
2. Place where desert monks originally lived.
3. The desert monks lived _____ lives.
7. A person who chooses a solitary life of prayer.
10. The monks lived here and it became a great center of learning.

move on to another part of the country to teach others the Christian message of God's love, how would you make sure that your friends would remember the prayer and be able to teach it to their children? (You could work at translating it into their language for them and writing it in a book.)

h. Many years ago a similar thing happened with the Armenian people. Christianity was a new religion spreading to all parts of the world. In order to Christianize the people it was important to place in their hands the writings of the Church Fathers and the Holy Bible. The Armenian people were in great need of an alphabet so the Bible and many beautiful prayers and hymns could be translated for them. In this way, the people could teach their children about Jesus in their own native language.

i. Does anyone know the names of the two famous men who invented the Armenian alphabet and translated the Bible into Armenian? (St. Sahag and St. Mesrob.)

j. How long do you think it took Sahag and Mesrob to translate the Bible into Armenian? (It took about 30 years. All the books were written in Greek or Syriac and there was a great need for the Armenian people to have a written language of their own.) (20 min.)

4. Sahag and Mesrob formed a group of priests whom we call the Holy Translators, or Soorp Tarkmanitchk. These people worked on translating the Bible and other writings and teachings under the guidance of Sahag and Mesrob. What level of difficulty do you think their job entailed? Does 30 years seem like a long time to have taken to translate the Bible from one language into another? Did you ever make up your own secret language as a child?

Let's try a short exercise in translating. We will pretend that we are all priests under the guidance of Sahag and Mesrob. In your student text turn to "Disciples of the Holy Translators." It is your job to decode the passages in this lesson. (10 min.)

5. *Activity*: "Translating fun."

- Divide the class into small working groups of 2 or 3 pupils.

- The object of this exercise is:

- a. To show the student what a difficult job it was inventing symbols for an alphabet.

- b. To expose the students to as many prayers as possible.

- Tell the class that they will be inventing their very own alphabet. Each group will be responsible for inventing symbols for an alphabet so they can communicate with their classmates.

Instruct the students to first choose a prayer they wish to teach the rest of the class. Devise a symbol for each letter in the prayer, with a "Key Code," in order to enable other students to decode the prayer.

Make copies of all the codes and prayers to be distributed to the class. Now the class has a small

prayer book which can be used at home or in Sunday School. (20 min.)

6. *Homework*: Parent/pupil worksheet. Read "St. Sahag and St. Mesrob" in student text and answer questions at the end.

"Disciples of the Holy Translators": Answers for students.

AW IS ESO NACCE PTS HI SFAT HE RSDI SCI PLI NE
(A wise son accepts his father's discipline. Proverbs 13:1)

AG OO DNA ME ISTO BEM ORE DE SIR EDT HANG REAT RIC HES

(A good name is to be more desired than great riches. Proverbs 22:1)

TH EFE AR OFT HELO RDL EA DST OLI FE

The fear of the Lord leads to life. Proverbs 19:23)

AGE NT LEAN SWERT URNSA WA YWR ATH BUTA HAR SHWO RDS TI RSU PAN GER

(A gentle answer turns away wrath but a harsh word stirs up anger. Proverbs 15:1)

Session 4—The Rise of Monasticism

Key Concepts

1. In the 3rd and 4th centuries the monastic movement arose out of man's need to become closer to God.

2. The monks lived a solitary life of prayer, fasting, and meditation.

3. St. James of Medzpin is an example of a contemplative monk whose influence reached outside the walls of the monastery.

Objectives

Students will

1. Write a spiritual autobiography on key moments in their lives when Jesus was especially close to them.

2. Write a letter to a seminarian asking questions about his life-style as compared to that of monks (like St. James of Medzpin and St. Nersess).

Background for Teacher

In the 4th century many monasteries were in existence. There were some Christian monasteries and many Buddhist ones. The monastic movement began in 270 A.D. with St. Anthony who gave up his fortune and moved to the desert. Though this saint was not the only one to do so at the time, he probably was the first one whose fame spread wide enough throughout the Christian world to induce large numbers of people to follow him. As many of these peo-

ple chose to lead solitary lives, it was natural for them to set up a community. The first person to set up a monastic community was Saint Pachomius who died in 346 A.D. Next to St. Pachomius the greatest founder of monasteries in the Eastern Church was St. Basil, a man of initiative and an original thinker. He combined the monastic life with works of charity and learning, as opposed to early monastic life which was completely solitary and very severe. St. Basil made the monasteries socially useful.

St. Nersess the Great gave monasteries their first great impetus. He helped to build more than 2,000 monasteries, whose purpose was to do charitable deeds along with becoming great centers of learning.

The Armenian Church remembers St. James of Nisibis (St. Hagop of Medzpin) annually. He lived in the 4th century and was a contemporary of St. Gregory the Illuminator. In his early life he lived alone in caves in the mountains eating whatever was available. He read by day and prayed by night, searching for wisdom and seeking help from his Creator to illuminate his mind that he might see and understand the wonders of the world where, in his mortal flesh, he was destined to live, and prepare his soul for eternity.

After this ascetic period of his life, he became active in the church of Medzpin and was eventually ordained bishop of that diocese. St. Hagop is credited with certain doctrinal and moral-ethical writings; St. Gregory of Narek in the 10th century wrote an oration dedicated to him.

We remember him most for his search for Noah's Ark. In spite of his advancing age he made the attempt to find the Ark on Mt. Ararat. Exhausted, cold, and hungry he fell asleep and, legend has it, dreamt that an angel came to him and gave him a piece of wood from the Ark. That wood today is among the relics of Holy Etchmiadzin.

Materials Needed

- Plain white paper
- List of seminarians at St. Nersess Seminary
- Bible

Procedure

1. Review, in student text, last week's lesson on St. Sahag and St. Mesrob. Discuss the questions to be answered at the end of the lesson. (5 min.)
2. Worship Service—Suggested Bible Reading: "Jesus Walks on Water" (Matthew 14: 22-27); pray the "Hayr Mer" together. (5 min.)
3. *Discussion*
 - a. Have you ever felt really close to God so that his presence surrounded you? Have the class give some examples. (When praying at night; during Holy Communion; in church when Hayr Mer is being sung, etc.) Or do you find that your particular life-style does

not include God, or have time for God?

Listen for a moment to something I would like to read to you: It is called, "I Didn't Have Time." (author unknown)

I got up early one morning and rushed right into the day; I had so much to accomplish that I didn't have time to pray.

Problems just tumbled about me and heavier came each task. "Why doesn't God help me?" I wondered. He answered, "You didn't ask."

I wanted to see joy and beauty, but the day toiled on, grey and bleak. I wondered why God didn't show me. He said, "But you didn't seek."

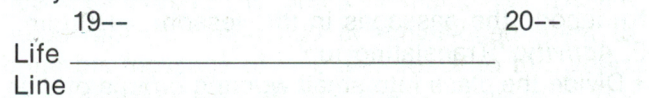
I tried to come into God's presence; I used all my keys at the lock. God gently and lovingly chided, "My child, you didn't knock."

I woke up early this morning and paused before entering the day. I had so much to accomplish that I had to take time to pray.

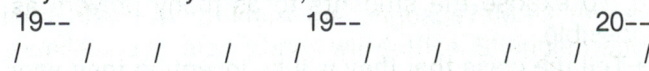
b. Why is it important to feel close to God or have personal encounters with God? (Try to get the students to respond in the following way: It is important for us to have God as a central part of our lives. We can do this through communicating with God in prayer and receiving the sacraments. When we feel close to God, it is easier for us to model our lives after Jesus and live according to the Commandments.)

c. We have all had personal encounters with God at one time in our lives. This morning we are going to be writing our own spiritual autobiography. It will look like a time line of our personal encounters with God.

Distribute plain white paper to the class. Instruct the students to draw a straight line across the center of the paper: On the left hand side of the paper, put the year in which you were born; on the right hand side of the paper, put the year in which you will be 50 years old.



Now put the current year at the appropriate point on your time line. Divide up the first part of your time line into 11 pieces if you are 11 years old; 10 pieces if you are 10 years old, etc.



Each line on your chart represents a particular time in your life. What we will attempt to do is chart the times in our lives when God was especially close to us. God is an important part of our lives every minute of the day, but today we will chart only those extra special moments we can remember when God was very close to us.

Instruct the class to put an asterisk (*) on their lines for two or three of the happiest times in their

lives. Label the event (6th birthday; visit from a special cousin; my favorite Christmas). Whether we realize it or not, God was an important part of our lives during these happy periods.

Can anyone think of other special times in his life when God did something for him? Put this on your time line. Label the approximate time when this occurred. (For example, when we receive the sacraments, God is doing many things for us as members of the Christian community. Label baptism, Holy Communion.)

God is also close to us when we are in trouble or sick. Do you reach out to touch God during times in your life like this? Label it on your time line if you do.

Finally, let's add any other times when God seemed very real to us, times when we felt very close to him. For some of us it might be while praying, or meditating in church, looking at a beautiful starry sky or watching the waves hit the shore at the beach.

Look at the pattern on your chart. Were you more aware of God being involved in your life when you were younger? Or are you getting more aware of his presence as you get older? How do you think your line will look in the future? (20 min.)

4. Do you think the people who lived in the third and fourth centuries had the same problems we have today trying to find quality time with Jesus? What type of personal encounters did they have with God. Well, surprisingly enough, they did have the same problems we have in finding time to share with Jesus and be close to him. How did they solve this problem? Can anyone think of the name of a group or community of people who lived in the third and fourth centuries who were able to escape from the real world and live a solitary life of prayer so they could become closer to God? These people were called monks. What kind of people were these men who chose to live in seclusion praying, fasting, and meditating?

Let's close our eyes and imagine we are in a desert. It is very hot, the sand is coarse and dry, and there seems to be no sign of life. Your eyes come upon a mountain of rock. In the side of the rock appears an opening to a cave. Suddenly, there appears a fragile bent-over man, a solitary man, a desert monk.

Open your eyes, and I will read you pairs of words and phrases. Write down the one in each pair that you think best describes a desert monk.

isolated/involved

has hope for mankind/has little hope for mankind

aware of world events/unaware of world events

leader/loner

(You will probably see that students' answers reveal they have a misconception of monks and see them as isolated, unaware loners with little hope for mankind.)

Contrary to the feeling most of you have about monks, these people led very public lives. In fact, they could have been celebrities! For example, did you know that a monk invented the pretzel! Legend has it that in the year 610, an Italian monk baking bread took left-over dough and twisted it to form children's arms folded in prayer. He quickly baked the dough and then gave it to waiting children as a reward for having learned their prayers.

There is another monk who is quite famous. The legend of Noah's Ark is what people most remember him for. Does anyone know the name of this person? (St. James of Medzpin.)

Let's open our student texts to the story on the "Rise of Monasticism" and the life of "St. James of Medzpin." (20 min.)

5. *Activity*: Have the class do the crossword puzzle on the monastic movement. (10 min.)

6. *Homework*: Write a letter to a seminarian. Take the next five minutes to prepare a list of questions you wish to ask your seminarian. For example: Do you take any vows? What are they? Did you ever live in a monastery? What is it like? Where is it located? Who is your superior? How do you think you can become closer to God? What can I do to become closer to God?

Parent/pupil worksheet: "Charity Begins at Home."

Answers to crossword puzzle: "The Monastic Movement."

DOWN

2. Monks combined monastic life with works of *charity*.

4. St. Hagop of Medzpin searched for Noah's *Ark*.

6. The Greek word "monos" means *alone*.

8. The head of the monastery is the *abbot*.

9. Chastity, poverty, obedience, *vow*.

ACROSS

1. Place where the Ark rests: *Mt. Ararat*.

3. The desert monks lived *solitary* lives.

5. Place where desert monks originally lived: *caves*.

7. A person who chooses a solitary life of prayer: *monk*.

10. The monks lived here and it was considered a great center of learning: *monastery*.

Notes _____