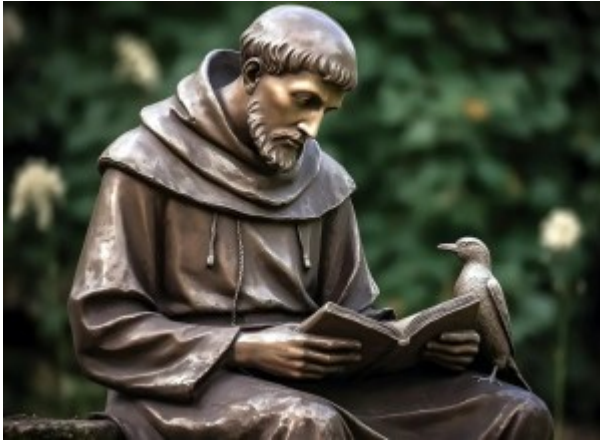


The Papal System – XXXIX. The Four Great Founders of Monkish Institutions



Continued from [XXXVIII. The Scriptures.](#)

It is certain that in the second century some began to accept the doctrine that to give up business, society, and matrimony, and lead a solitary life, in meditation and prayer, was the holiest earthly state. And from that time the conviction spread with amazing rapidity, and fell, with overpowering force upon the consciences of men. In the beginning of the fourth century there were many thousands of monks in the deserts of Egypt, and in the caves along the banks of the Nile. The life of an Eremite (a religious recluse) in that day was regarded as possessing an order of sanctity beyond anything else in the Church of God.

Antony the Great, of an illustrious family of Coma, near Heraclea in Egypt, was the great chief of all the monks in and around his country in the commencement of the fourth century. His influence over these singular beings was unbounded; and though they were under no law to obey him, yet his example and his instructions had almost the authority of a direct revelation among the entire unmarried brotherhood. Under his leadership their principles spread into churches; seized and hurried off to the caves the young and frivolous and fashionable; triumphed over all obstacles and habits; over all the countries where Christianity was supreme; and over the strongest instincts of human nature itself.

And had it not been for Paphnutius, an Egyptian monkish bishop in the Council of Nice, Antony's celibacy would have doomed the whole Christian clergy to a single life.

Antony was left an orphan when young; he never could read or write; he gave his inheritance to his native village; and his personal effects to the poor; he became acquainted with the most eminent men of his time, and even the emperor, who had frequently heard of his fame, wished to enjoy his society; his food was bread and salt; his drink was water; and he never breakfasted before sunset. He often fasted for two or three successive days; he watched most of the night, and continued in prayer till daybreak; he sometimes lay

upon a mat, but generally upon the floor; he never bathed himself; he never suffered himself to be idle; he zealously defended the oppressed, and frequently left the solitude for the city in their defense; he could foresee the future; he was honored by the whole people wherever he went, but he returned to the desert as soon as ever he could; he was accustomed to say that "as fishes are nourished in the water, so the solitude is the world prepared for monks." He was said to have contended with devils openly; he performed many miracles; Athanasius, of Trinitarian fame, was his warm friend, and wrote his biography. Antony the Great established the monks on a foundation from which fifteen hundred years, and torrents of their iniquities, have only partially dislodged them. Antony was the first great leader in the Christian Church, in the monastic crusade against the divinely planted instincts of human nature.

BENEDICT OF NURSIA.

This famous father of monks was born in Italy, A.D. 480. When fourteen, he was sent to Rome for his education, but soon ran to Sublacum forty miles off, where he lived in a gloomy cave for three years. The monks of a neighboring convent elected him their abbot, but soon becoming wearied with the severity of his discipline, they made it desirable for him to relinquish the position. He returned to the cave, where he was speedily joined by many monks, who submitted to his rule; and in a comparatively short time, he established twelve monasteries. After twenty-five years spent at Sublacum, he located on Mount Cassino, about fifty miles from Naples; here he laid the foundations of an order that soon spread over all Europe, and carried the name of Benedict to the extreme limits of western civilization. There were many monks in the Latin Church before his day, but they were without system and had no element of permanence in their institutions. Benedict supplied what was lacking, and soon superb houses, filled with his sons, dotted every center of Christian population among the western nations.

Benedict's Rule.

In the winter, his monks arose at two A.M. and went to the church, where, after spending some time in vigils, they continued till morning, committing psalms, reading, and in the exercise of private meditation. At sunrise, they assembled for matins; after which they labored four hours, read two hours, then they dined and read in private till half-past two, when they met again for worship; then they labored till vespers. Their work was agriculture, gardening, and various mechanical trades. They ate twice a day at a common table, first at noon, and then in the evening. To each was allowed one pound of bread, and a little wine for the day. On the public table there were two kinds of porridge, but no meat. Flesh was always allowed to the sick. At meals, conversation was prohibited, and some one always read aloud. They all served as cooks and waiters, each discharging the duty for a week at a time. Their clothing was coarse; each was furnished with two suits, a knife, a needle, and other necessities. They were allowed no conversation after they retired, nor any jesting at any time. They had no correspondence with anyone except through the abbot. They slept in separate beds without undressing, in rooms accommodating ten or twenty, with a light burning, and an inspector in each room. These were the leading, though not all the precepts of St.

Benedict's rule. And while it was observed faithfully, his monks must have been like angels to the reckless, thieving, licentious, and even moderately moral people in whose midst they dwelt.

Benedict, according to Gregory the Great, broke a glass with poison in it by making the sign of the cross over it; the poison being intended by some monks to kill him. He made the iron of a spade which fell into the water come up again and join the handle, These are but samples of the prodigies (extraordinary wonders) performed by this wonderful monk.

ST. DOMINIC.

On the supposition that the title of Dominic was properly earned we have sometimes felt that similar deeds required us to confer it upon a well-known Roman emperor; and to speak of him as *Saint Nero*. Dominic was born A.D. 1170, at Callahorra, in Spain. He was descended from the illustrious house of Guzman, received his education in Valencia, and his first appointment was a canonry in Osma, Dominic had some mind, untiring activity, fierce cruelty, and astern faith in a ferocious God. He gathered around him men of a spirit like his own, and instituted a new order of monks. Innocent III. promised to confirm his fraternity, but died before the documents were perfected. The papal approbation was given to Dominic's monks by Honorius III., A.D. 1216. The new fraternity had great prosperity. Many learned men have flourished in its cloisters; and were it not for the favorite child of Dominic and his monks, the inquisition, the world would have thought more favorably of him and his friars.

ST. FRANCIS.

This singular being came of a good family; when he was converted, he renounced his paternal possessions, and laying aside his shoes, he put on the cowl and sackcloth. According to the monk Paris, he appeared at Rome, A.D. 1227, to obtain the recognition of an order of friars which he proposed to establish. Francis at that time had a sad countenance, untrimmed hair, and a dirty, overhanging brow. Innocent, if Paris was correctly informed, said to the future saint: "Go to the pigs, brother, roll with them, and to them present your rules." Francis rolled with the swine, until completely covered with dirt, and returning, claimed the pontiff's approval of his monks, on the ground of his obedience, The pope astonished at his appearance, and apparently caught by his reasoning, ordered him to cleanse himself, and soon after he gave his approval to the new monastic institution.

Francis was a very zealous, if not a very cultivated preacher; in Rome, they regarded his oratorical efforts with contempt; to rebuke them on one occasion he went to the suburbs of their city and gathered the "crows, kites, magpies, and some other birds, and commanded them to keep silent while he proclaimed to them the Word of the Lord; and they drew near, and without chirping, listened to him for half a day." This circumstance, according to the same authority, gave him immediate and unbounded popularity in the Eternal City, throughout Italy, and all over Europe.

St. Francis was twenty-five years of age when he was converted by a dream.

His acts after this change were often like those of a lunatic. On one occasion, he broke a fast in his hunger, for which he had himself dragged naked through the streets and scourged, the announcement being made as he went along: "See the glutton who gorged himself with fowl unknown to you."

Francis had a method in his madness; and his order soon became one of the most powerful instruments in the papal Church.

Antony, Benedict, Dominic, and Francis were the founders and fathers of all the leading monastic systems in the East, and in the West.

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