A Comparison between two forms of ascetical life in the development of early monasticism.

By Philip John Bewley, 2005

In this paper I plan to compare and contrast the cenobitical life of the Pachomian communities in Egypt and the cenobitic life developed by Benedict in the west two centuries later. Through such a process, I will show that, while Benedict was able to appreciate the systemization Pachomius brought to the eremitical life, he could, on the other hand, recognize its flaws, and through his own insights and experience developed instead a 'common' life in which the individual monk was 'immersed' within the community in his 'search for God'.

Pachomius is regarded by Church historians as the 'father' of Christian cenobitic monasticism, that is to say, the Christian life as lived in community with an organized rule of life and a regulated daily schedule. Although we cannot say that he was the founder of cenobitism, as there is evidence that other cenobitic communities were in existence around the same time, the sheer influence of his personality and the organization he imposed on his communities, make him 'the reference point' for emerging cenobitism.

Pachomius was born in Egypt, the son of pagan parents about 292, and joined the Emperor's army at the age of 20 years before becoming a Christian. He attributed his Christian conversion to the charity of some Christians he encountered while still in the army. After leaving military service, Pachomius was baptized in 314, and he soon became a disciple of the anchorite, Abba Palaemon. They both led a life of extreme austerity and dedication to God, devoting themselves to acts of manual labour, combined with unceasing prayer both day and night. In the early 320's, Pachomius felt called to build a monastery in the village of Tabennesi, near the River Nile, after hearing a voice speak to him in a heavenly vision. Palaemon lived with him for a while before returning to the hermitical life. Pachomius soon began to attract followers, and within a short time, some 100 monks had joined him. Pachomius organized their lives along the lines of communal coexistence and in time, there existed ten foundations for men and two for women. Before Pachomius' death in 346, there were approximately 7,000 monks and nuns in his monastic communities. Pachomius, it would seem, was the first monk to organize hermits into groups, and the first to write down a Rule of any kind for them. Pachomian cenobitism had a great influence in the Church, not so much because of its spirituality, which remains on the weak side, but rather because of its legislative system. In time, Benedict, writing his rule two centuries later, was to be influenced by the monastic rule of Pachomius, made known to him through a translation by Jerome.

Benedict, on the other hand, is regarded by Church historians as the 'father of western monasticism'. What we know of his life is gleaned from the second book of Gregory's *Dialogues* which serves more as a character sketch of the saint than an historical account of his life. From what we can gather, Benedict was the son of a Roman noble of Nursia, a small town near Spoleto in Italy. Tradition teaches that he was born around 590. He was sent to Rome for classical studies but he found life there too degenerate for his tastes. As a consequence, he fled to a town called Subiaco, southeast of Rome where he lived for 3 years under the direction of a hermit named Romanus. Word of his holiness began to bring nearby monks to prevail upon him for spiritual leadership. However, his regime became too strict for the monks, who in time attempted to poison him. Benedict therefore found himself on his own, but this did not last for long. The next group of monks to seek his counsel and

leadership were more sincere and soon he had established 12 monasteries in Subiaco. These monks lived in separate communities of twelve, each with their own superior. Ultimately, Benedict was to leave these monasteries when the envious attacks of another hermit made it impossible to continue the spiritual leadership he had undertaken. Later he moved to Monte Cassino, southeast of Rome, and founded the monastery that became the root of his monastic system. Learning from his experience, instead of founding small separate communities, Benedict gathered his disciples into one large community, and it was there that he wrote his famous Rule.

What we know of Pachomius and his communities has come down to us in the form of biographies, legal texts, sermons and letters written in Greek and Coptic dialects. Although they vary in detail about the life of Pachomius, they tend to agree on the essentials, and from them, we can reconstruct the life of his monastic communities and the code of life or Rules by which they lived. The Rules of Pachomius became widely known through their translation by Jerome from Greek into Latin in 404 (adding his own preface in the process), and as we will see, this had an influence on Benedict when he was compiling his own Rule many years later. It should be said that a reading of the Rules gives the appearance of a document which has gone through several stages of development – the gradual accretion of *ad hoc* rules as Pachomius and his successors saw fit, to instruct the fervent and control the unruly and weak. Technically, the Rules of Pachomius, which consist of 192 regulations, are not one book but four: the *Precepts*, the *Precepts and Institutes*, the *Precepts and Judgements*, and the *Precepts and Laws*.

The Rule of Benedict, on the other hand, appearing some two centuries later, became the most influential monastic rule in the Western Church. It can be compared to the size of the Gospel of Matthew and contains 73 chapters; therefore, the Rules of Pachomius seem small in comparison. A study of the Rule reveals both Benedict's debts to tradition and his own originality. Benedict appears to have unashamedly borrowed from earlier monastic rules, particularly that of an earlier rule, called 'the Rule of the Master', adding various sections to his own composition. John Cassian, who had lived some 15 years with Egyptian monks, and later set up a monastery in the South of France, wrote a series of *Conferences* and *Institutes* which too influenced Benedict greatly. "At times the effect is something like a house to which rooms have gradually been added".[1] And as we will see, Benedict appears to have borrowed a number of ideas from the Pachomian tradition as well. A comparison between the two rules will highlight similarities.

Unlike Benedict's Rule, when one reads the Rules of Pachomius, it becomes apparent that they are a collection of commandments in the form of "usages" with a minimum of spirituality; they read more like a list of do's and don'ts. And they do not appear to constitute an all-embracing set of enactments and rules after the manner of later monastic rules like that of Benedict.

The general plan of a Pachomian monastery is reminiscent of the military camps Pachomius was familiar with during his early life as a soldier in the emperor's army. A Pachomian monastic community was shut off from the world by an enclosing wall, and within these walls one would find a gate-house, a guest-house, an assembly hall for worship, a refectory, a kitchen, a bake-house, an infirmary, and a number of houses arranged like the barrack-blocks in a legionary camp, holding up to 40 monks in each. Within each house there appears to have been a common-room for prayer, instruction and communal activities, store-rooms, and originally separate cells for each monk (reminiscent of eremitical lifestyle), although with the growth of numbers in the communities, this grew to 3 monks per cell.

1 Terrance Kardong OSB, *The Benedictines*, (Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1988), p.11.

Similarly, a Benedictine monastic community was also a self-contained community in the cenobitic tradition, surrounded by a wall; within the wall there was a complex of buildings which opened onto a courtyard or 'cloister'. The monks worked, studied and prayed within the cloister. Within the enclosure there was a chapter-house, refectory, kitchen, warming-room, dormitory, lavatory and the 'night stairs' which led to the monastic church.

Once the Pachomian Order had grown into several monastic communities, it was put under the direction of a *chief*, a role which Pachomius reserved for himself and his successors. As the *chief*, Pachomius saw his role as one who trained his community by example, rather than precept, therefore he would prepare the table, work in the garden, and tend the sick himself. Pachomius, therefore, was at the head of a kind of 'Congregation' of many monasteries and several thousand monks. He and his successors would spend most of their time visiting the various monasteries to instruct the brethren. As the head *chief* of the Order, he saw his own role at the 'service of all' and on visiting a monastery, he would put himself under the local authority and do the hardest manual labour. Due, therefore, to the sheer size of the order, each monastic community was then placed under a local superior, and the individual houses within those communities were administered by a housemaster. Several times a week, the housemaster gave spiritual instructions to the monks under his care. The general rule too was to group the monks into the various houses according to particular trades or professions. There were houses for weavers, tanners, cobblers, stewards, locksmiths, joiners, etc. To this system of grouping was added another – monks were also allocated to houses according to their physical, intellectual and spiritual aptitudes. Outside the monastic enclosure, the monks cultivated, buried their dead, and conducted commercial business when necessary. Pachomian authority, therefore, did not appear to be vested in one central authority, as would be in the case of Benedictine communities. Although hierarchical, it was more a shared authority, many aspects of it being administered at the local level in the various houses – a case of subsidiarity rather than centralization. Benedict, however, for his community, was to have other ideas on this matter.

Benedictine communities were governed by an abbot – by one man – who exercised an authority which was in turn governed by the Rule. This was very much an innovation of the Benedictine tradition. The abbot was to be the ideal fatherly figure. Benedict's Rule says of the abbot: "To be worthy of the task of governing a monastery, the abbot must always remember what his title signifies and act as a superior should. He is believed to hold the place of Christ in the monastery, since he is addressed by a title of Christ, as the Apostle indicates: "You have received the spirit of adoption of sons by which we exclaim, abba, father" (Rom 8:15). Therefore, the abbot must never teach or decree or command anything that would deviate from the Lord's instructions".[2]

In the language of Benedict, therefore, the abbot was believed to hold the place of Christ in the monastery and any claims to power or wisdom were confined to Scripture. Like Pachomius, and the desert fathers before him, the Benedictine abbot, in his role as 'spiritual master', was expected to live with the monks and to teach them by example: "Anyone who receives the name of abbot is to lead his disciples by a twofold teaching: he must point out to them all that is good and holy more by example than by words, proposing the commandments of the Lord to receptive disciples with words, but demonstrating God's instructions to the stubborn and the dull by living example".[3]

Benedict seems quite clear that the abbatial role is primarily to assist each monk in their progress toward perfection in God. The authority of the abbot in a Benedictine community

2 Rule of Benedict: 2:1-4.
3 Rule of Benedict: 2:11,12.

ultimately exists solely with him, but that is not to say that others do not have a part in this authority. Benedict wants every monk to have the opportunity to offer counsel when an important decision is to be made: "As often as anything important is to be done in the monastery, the abbot shall call the whole community together and himself explain what the business is: and after hearing the advice of the brothers, let him ponder it and follow what he judges the wiser".[4] Unlike the shared authority in Pachomian communities, there is no aspect of cenobitic life which is removed from a Benedictine abbot's scope and responsibility.

In the Pachomian assembly hall, each morning every monk had his appointed place, bringing together all the monks of the monastic houses. The monks sat quietly plaiting reeds, while they took turns, beginning with the senior monk, reciting texts and sections of Scripture. Psalms were only ever sung on Sundays. Penances for any faults were often performed during this service. The Eucharist was the centre of their community worship on Saturday evenings and Sunday mornings. At the beginning of the foundation, monks attended the Eucharist in the local village church, but as the community grew, priests would come to the monastery to celebrate for them. Pachomius had no wish for his monks to be ordained priests: "When there was need for the Eucharist, he called in from the nearest churches a priest who made the celebration for them. For among them there was no one invested with the clerical office. He had deliberated on the subject and often told them that it was good not to ask for rank and honour, especially in the community, for fear this would be an occasion for strife, envy, jealousy, and then schisms to arise in a large community of monks".[5] For Benedict, nearly all the monks were laymen apart from the occasional priest who joined the community or the occasional monk ordained out of necessity in order to provide the sacraments. Benedict does not seem to have taken such a harsh line as Pachomius.

Within the Pachomian communities, after the morning service, the monks returned to their cells and awaited their instructions from the housemaster of their house. He would issue them with any materials they needed and informed them of any special instructions. They would then line up and leave for the day's work. The evening service was performed in a prayer room situated in each individual house, in which six prayers were recited, the nature of which is uncertain.

Benedict saw *opus Dei*, or formal communal prayer, as the chief work of monks, but this was also balanced by communal work. There is a long explanation in the Benedictine Rule, far greater than anything Pachomius produced, of how the liturgical life of the monastery is to be ordered. Benedict prescribes a programme of common prayer seven times each day: Vigils, a lengthy service of psalms and readings in the middle of the night; Lauds, a morning prayer at dawn; Prime, Terce, Sext, and None, brief gatherings for prayer at intervals during the day; Vespers, the evening prayer; and Compline, the final prayer of the day.[6] The daily life of a Benedictine monk was highly organized and regulated, far more so than the Pachomian monk, with variations in the timetable between the seasons. On average, three and a half hours was set aside for the singing of the daily offices; four and half hours for reading and meditation; an hour for food; eight and a half hours for sleep; and six and half hours for work in the fields.[7]

4 Rule of Benedict: 3:1,2.
5 *Pachomian Koinonia*: 1:314.
6 Rule of Benedict: 8-17.
7 Owen Chadwick, ed., *Western Monasticism - The Library of Christian Classics Vol. XII*, (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1958), p.28.

Pachomian spirituality was undoubtedly immersed in Scripture, and its study became an important factor in the life of the monastic community. The monks would recite scriptural passages they had learned by heart, when going to and from the daily services; similarly private recitation of Scripture took place constantly whenever a monk was on the road, or at their place of work. Pachomius too was famous for his biblical exegesis and teaching. He would arrange regular periods of instruction to the monks. In addition, the housemaster of each house was required to give three lessons in Scripture each week, one on Saturday and two on Sunday. Pachomius told his first followers: "Strive, brothers, to attain to that to which you have been called: to recite psalms and teachings from other parts of the Scriptures, especially the Gospel".[8] Hence, the life of the Pachomian monk was immersed in Scripture.

"Idleness is the enemy of the soul," writes Benedict, "therefore, the brothers should have specified periods for manual labour as well as for prayerful reading".[9] This prayerful reading is known in the monastic world as *lectio divina* and the Rule of Benedict sets aside several hours a day for this pursuit. This is not unlike the Pachomian example, but Benedict gives orderly instructions on when such *lectio divina* is to take place, adapting the timetable to the rhythms of nature and the liturgical year. Two senior monks are also allocated the task to do the rounds of the monastery to ensure no-one is neglecting their reading, so importantly did Benedict regard such matters. Pachomius does not appear to regulate his monks to this degree. We should remember that monks of this early period would fill their memories with scriptural texts which were then accessible for private use whenever their mind was not otherwise occupied. "The only atmosphere where reflection of this kind is even remotely feasible is one of essential silence. For the word of the Lord to dominate the consciousness, all competing distraction must be eliminated. Then the Bible can be fruitfully read in silence; pondered in silence; prayed in silence".[10]

In Pachomian communities, two meals appear to have been served each day. The main meal of the day was taken in the refectory in complete silence during the working day. Bread, cooked vegetables and fruit formed the substantial part of their diet; wine, meat and oil being banned. Whenever a monk required something at table, he would rap on the table. We read in the Rules: "If anything is needed at the table, no one shall be so bold as to speak, but he shall make a sign to the servers by a sound".[11]

The Rule of Benedict develops this idea a little further. While the monks in a Benedictine Community were to keep silence at meal time, Benedict laid down that reading was to always accompany the meals of the brothers. "Let there be complete silence. No whispering, no speaking – only the reader's voice should be heard there".[12] With regards to the needs of brothers at table, Benedict too further develops the Pachomian idea: "The brothers should by turn serve one another's needs as they eat and drink, so that no one need ask for anything. If, however, anything is required, it should be requested by an audible signal of some kind rather than by speech".[13]

The idea of reading at meals shows us how important for Benedict was the notion that the monk should be constantly listening to God. Silence in the individual facilitated this process. The corporate meal which the monks shared daily also gave an opportunity, not only for the monk to be aware of God's presence, but also to be aware of the presence of their

8 *Pachomian Koinonia*: 3:312.
9 Rule of Benedict: 48:1.
10 Terence Kardong OSB, *The Benedictines*, (Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1988), p.81.
11 Rules of Pachomius: 33.
12 Rule of Benedict: 38:1,5.
13 Rule of Benedict: 38:6,7.

neighbour next to them. Benedict shows a real sensitivity in the way monks should be aware of one another's wants and needs. Pachomius, on the other hand, would rather that his monks keep to themselves at meal times. This can be seen with regard to the legislation laid down by the Rules of Pachomius with regard to fasting. If a monk wished to fast, he could so; but in order to prevent ostentatious behaviour, Pachomius devised the plan of making monks wear capacious hoods, so that they could cover their plates and prevent other monks from seeing what they were eating, or not eating for that matter. These hoods also had the added value of preventing monks from glancing at others. The sight of lowered hoods in the refectory, therefore, became a sign of humility. In Pachomian community, it was the role of the server alone to minister to the needs of the monks at the meal table. For Benedict, all monks shared in the needs of others and became very much aware of the needs of others. The idea of a Benedictine monk keeping to oneself and not putting themselves at the service of others, went against the spirit of their Rule.

The Rules of both Pachomius and Benedict show a remarkable similarity in their treatment of those who wished to enter the community. Both demand proof of the applicant's sincerity and determination before they could be accepted into the community. In the Pachomian Rules we read: "When someone comes to the door of the monastery, wishing to renounce the world and be counted among the brethren, he shall not be free to come in. First the father of the monastery shall be told, and the candidate shall remain some days outside the door".[14] Benedict's Rule has something similar: "Do not grant newcomers to the monastic life an easy entry, but as the Apostle says, "Test the spirits to see if they are from God (1 John 4:1). Therefore, if someone comes and keeps knocking at the door, and if at the end of four or five days he has shown himself patient in bearing his harsh treatment and difficulty of entry, and he has persisted in his request, then he should be allowed to enter…".[15]

For both Pachomian and Benedictine Communities, the 'shutting of the door' in the inquirer's face and making him wait several days before being granted entry to the community, seems to have become a sort of ritual. The Pachomian enquirer was taught the Lord's Prayer and as many psalms as he could learn, and only then was he allowed to enter. On entry, he was "taught the other observances of the monastery, what he must do and to what he must submit himself, whether at the synaxis which brings all the brothers together, or in the house to which he is assigned, or in the refectory".[16] Then instructed and perfect in good work, he could join the brethren. Then he was "stripped of his secular garments and clothed in the habit of the monks".[17] Benedict's Rule has something very similar for the Postulant on entry: "Then and there in the oratory, he is stripped of everything of his own that he is wearing and clothed in what belongs to the monastery".[18]

From the Rules of Pachomius it is unclear how long this process of learning for the new monk took place. We know from Benedict's Rule that in his communities the process of entry was a slow one. He has a novitiate lasting a year, and this time frame is taken so that the final decision may be freely and carefully considered.

The Benedictine monk, before the whole community, makes promises of stability, conversion of life, and obedience.[19] This was a modification introduced by Benedict into the cenobitical life. The three promises of a Benedictine monk "perfectly well serve an all-embracing title for the whole enterprise, which is nothing less than a commitment to living a

14 Rules of Pachomius: 49.
15 Rule of Benedict: 58:1-4.
16 Rules of Pachomius: 49.
17 Ibid.
18 Rule of Benedict: 58:26.
19 Ibid., 58:17.

Godward life, seeking God and being found by him".[20] This development is not known in Pachomian communities. The Rule of Pachomius makes no mention of an explicit commitment by the new monk and it would appear that the change of dress or habit seemed sufficient to incorporate an individual into the life of the community. The habit itself seems to have bound a monk to the lifestyle, and to abandon that life was considered an apostasy, but they still appear not have been tied by 'actual' promises as later developed by Benedict. The promise of stability was by far the greatest contribution Benedict made to the monastic life. Under his rule, the monk was no longer at liberty to move from monastery to monastery. Benedict binds the monk to a particular monastery and thereby to a particular family for life. The Pachomian monastic communities, on the other hand, were far too big to be considered families, but instead were more like agricultural colonies, divided into houses, and organised by the different trades the monks carried out within each of those houses.

It is also interesting to compare the concept of rank in the monastery between the two rules, which have much in common. The Rule of Pachomius says: "The first to enter the monastery takes the first place sitting, walking, at the recitation of the psalms, being served at table and receiving communion in the church. It is not the age of the brothers, but the date of their profession which counts".[21] Benedict, however, in his rule seems to be more precise: "The monks keep their rank in the monastery according to the date of entry, the virtue of their lives, and the decision of the abbot… For example, someone who came to the monastery at the second hour of the day must recognize that he is junior to someone who came at the first hour, regardless of age or distinction".[22]

What both rules appear to be saying here is that what each member has brought to the community in terms of experience, status, education, wealth, etc, now in the monastery accounts for nothing. The moment of entry determines the place of the individual in this new order – a place where the love of Christ and gospel values will operate. For both Pachomius and Benedict, it is the moment of acceptance of the call which counts.

The Rule of Pachomius appears to set out to create a 'communal' kind of 'eremitical' life. Pachomius did not legislate minimal, ascetical practice, or place limits on an individual's penitential zeal, preferring to let the Spirit guide each as he willed. Prayer and contemplation were treated in similar fashion. This leads one to point out two defects regarding Pachomian monasticism: its quasi-military sense of order and discipline, and the solitude and spiritual independence in which its members lived. These two traits led to an absence of "true fraternity" in such large communities and may have added to their eventual downfall. Some recent scholarship has played down these faults, but one cannot escape the fact that a reading of the Pachomian Rules highlights the still 'eremitical character' in which the individual monk lived within the community. Added to this, the Rules did not appear to have a sufficiently solid theological and spiritual basis. They are merely a set of regulations and prescriptions which were too dependent on Pachomius himself. Benedict, no doubt, saw this system's flaws, and would in the future remedy them.

Benedict, however, stressed the "common" life as the most perfect instrument for salvation and perfection. It was the "mutual' support of brothers striving for the same end – union with God – which marks his Rule as different from Pachomius. This was a development from the Pachomian ascetic who, although he lived a common life under a rule, nonetheless led a voluntary life and a system of private venture. In short, "the fundamental idea of Pachomius' Rule was to establish a moderate level of observance which should be obligatory on all, and

20 Esther de Waal, *A Life-giving Way – A Commentary on the Rule of St* Benedict, (London: Mowbray, 1995), p.170.
21 Rule of Pachomius: 3.
22 Rule of Benedict: 63:1,8.

then to leave it open to each, and indeed to encourage each, to go beyond the fixed minimum, according as he was prompted by his strength, his courage, and his zeal".[23]

Benedict, in many respects, stood in the common monastic tradition and in effect did not create a 'radically' new thing. He drew heavily on the rules of his predecessors, including Pachomius, as we have seen. But in his effort to build a new society – 'a school of the Lord's service' – he was able to see the flaws he had inherited from the cenobitic tradition, undertaking to purge his form of monasticism with extremes associated with the eremitical life. He instead was to 'sink' the 'individual' monk into community life. In Benedict's observations, "there is always a flexibility such that, while he creates a firm structure, he never loses sight of the possible need for adaptation to circumstances; there is always room for the Spirit to flow".[24]

[23] Christopher Butler OSB, *Benedictine Monachism*, (London: Longmans Green & Co, 1924), p.15.
[24] David Parry OSB, *Households of God*, (London: DLT, 1980), p.xii.

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