

“These Truths We Hold” (Part XXII)

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The Torment of Saint Anthony. painting of Michelangelo c. 1487--88

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5. Orthodox Monasticism.

It is generally accepted that monasticism began in Egypt towards the end of the Third Century, though its origins may have been older. Indeed, some form of monasticism may have existed almost from the birth of the Church. As the word monastic implies (in Greek monos — alone), the Monk was one who went into the desert to live alone with God. (Such were also called hermits (or anchorites), which

means solitaires.) The first recorded hermitic Orthodox Christian literature was St. Paul of Thebes († 341) who lived over sixty years in a cave in the Egyptian desert. But the greatest of these hermits, often called the Father of Monasticism, was St. Anthony the Great († 356). Yet, even in the life of this father of monasticism, the desert solitude was gradually modified by the appearance of disciples. These men wished to pursue the monastic life under the guidance of one who was already experienced. A soldier marching into battle would much rather be commanded by an experienced officer than an inexperienced one, no matter how educated the latter may be. Nor, if he himself is inexperienced, would he wish to enter the battle alone.

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