

## Hermits

(*Eremites*, "inhabitants of a desert", from the Greek *eremos*), also called anchorites, were men who fled the society of their fellow-men to dwell alone in retirement. Not all of them, however, sought so complete a solitude as to avoid absolutely any intercourse with their fellow-men. Some took a companion with them, generally a disciple; others remained close to inhabited places, from which they procured their food. This kind of religious life preceded the community life of the cenobites. Elias is considered the precursor of the hermits in the Old Testament. [St. John the Baptist](#) lived like them in the desert. Christ, too, led this kind of life when he retired into the mountains. But the eremitic life proper really begins only in the time of the persecutions. The first known example is that of St. Paul, whose biography was written by St. Jerome. He began about the year 250. There were others in Egypt; St. Athanasius, who speaks of them in his life of St. Anthony, does not mention their names. Nor were they the only ones. These first solitaries, few in number, selected this mode of living on their own initiative. It was St. Anthony who brought this kind of life into vogue at the beginning of the fourth century. After the persecutions the number of hermits increased greatly in Egypt, then in Palestine, then in the Sinaitic peninsula, Mesopotamia, Syria, and Asia Minor. Cenobitic communities sprang up among them, but did not become so important as to extinguish the eremitic life. They continued to flourish in the Egyptian deserts, not to speak of other localities. Discussions arose in Egypt as to the respective merits of the cenobitic and the eremitic style of life. Which was the better? Cassian, who voices the common opinion, believed that the cenobitic life offered more advantages and less inconveniences than the eremitic life. The Syrian hermits, in addition to their solitude, were accustomed to subject themselves to great bodily austerities. Some passed years on the top of a pillar (stylites); others condemned themselves to remain standing, in open air (stationaries); others shut themselves up in a cell so that they could not come out (recluses).

Not all these hermits were models of piety. History points out many abuses among them; but, considering everything, they remain one of the noblest examples of heroic asceticism the world has ever seen. Very many of them were saints. Doctors of the Church, like St. Basil, [St. Gregory of Nazianzus](#), [St. John Chrysostom](#), St. Jerome, belonged to their number; and we might also mention Sts. Epiphanius, Ephraem, Hilarion, Nilus, Isidore of Pelusium. We have no rule giving an account of their mode of life, though we may form an idea of it from their biographies, which are to be found in Palladius, "Historia Lausiaca", P. L., XXXIV, 901-1262; Rufinus, "Historia Monachorum", P. L., XXI, 387-461; Cassian, "Collationes Patrum; De Institutis coenobitarum", P. L., IV; Theodoret, "Historia religiosa", P. G., LXXXII, 1279-1497; and also in the "Verba Seniorum", P. L., LXXIV, 381-843, and the "Apophthegmata Patrum", P. G., LXV, 71-442.

The eremitic life spread to the West in the fourth century, and flourished especially in the next two centuries, that is to say, till experience had shown by its results the advantages of the cenobitic organization. [St. Gregory the Great](#), in his "Dialogues", gives an account of the best-known solitaries of central Italy (P. L., LXXVII, 149-430). [St. Gregory of Tours](#) does the same for a part of France (Vitae Patrum), P. L. LXXI, 1009-97). Oftentimes those who helped most to spread the cenobitic ideal were originally solitaries themselves, for instance, St. Severinus of Norica and St. Benedict of Nursia. Monasteries frequently, though by no means always, sprang from the cell of a hermit, who drew a band of disciples around him. From the beginning of the seventh century, we meet with instances of monks who at intervals led an eremitic life. As an example we may cite St. Columbanus, St. Riquier, and St. Germer. Some monasteries had isolated cells close by, where those religious who were judged capable of living in solitude might retire. Such was especially the case at the monastery of Cassiodorus, at Viviers in Calabria, and the Abbey of Fontenelles, in the Diocese of Rouen. Those who felt the want of

solitude were advised to reside near an oratory or a monastic church. The councils and the monastic rules did not encourage those who were desirous of leading an eremitic life.

The widespread relaxation of monastic discipline drove St. Odo, the great apostle of reform in the sixth century, into the solitude of the forest. The religious fervour of the succeeding age produced many hermits. But to guard against the serious dangers of this kind of life, monastic institutes were founded that combined the advantages of solitude with the guidance of a superior and the protection of a rule. Thus, for example, we had the Carthusians and the Camaldolese at Vallombrosa and Monte Vergine. Nevertheless there still continued to be a large number of isolated hermits, and an attempt was made to form them into congregations having a fixed rule and a responsible superior. Italy especially was the home of these congregations at the beginning of the thirteenth century. Some drew up an entirely new rule for themselves; others adapted the Rule of St. Benedict to meet their wants; while others again preferred to base their rule on that of St. Augustine. **Pope Alexander IV** united the last into one order, under the name of the Hermits of St. Augustine (1256). Three congregations of hermits were called after St. Paul, one formed in 1250 in Hungary, another in Portugal, founded by Mendo Gomez de Simbria, who died in 1481, and the third in France, established by Guillaume Callier (1620); these last hermits were known also by the name of the Brothers of Death. Eugene IV formed into a congregation, to be called after St. Ambrose, the hermits who dwelt in a forest near Milan (1441). We may mention also the Brothers of the Apostle (1484), the Colorites (1530), the Hermits of Monte Senario (1593), and those of Monte Luco, who were in Italy; those of Mont-Voirion, whose constitutions were drawn up by St. Francis de Sales; those of St-Sever, in Normandy, founded by Guillaume, who had previously been a Camaldolese; those of St. John the Baptist, in Navarre, approved by **Gregory XIII**; the hermits of the same name, founded in France by Michel by Michel de Sainte-Sabine (1630); those of Mont-Valérien, near Paris (seventeenth century); those of Bavaria, established in the Diocese of Ratisbon (1769). The Venerable Joseph Cottolengo founded a congregation of hermits in Lombardy in the middle of the nineteenth century. Some Benedictine monasteries had hermitages depending on them. Thus we have the case of St. William of the Desert (1330) and the hermits of Our Lady of Montserrat, in Spain. The latter were well known from the sixteenth century, from their connexion with García de Cisneris. They disappeared in the eighteenth century. At the present time there exists a body of hermits on a mountain near Cordova.

We see, therefore, that the Church has always been anxious to form the hermits into communities. Nevertheless, many preferred their independence and their solitude. They were numerous in Italy, Spain, France, and Flanders in the seventeenth century. **Benedict XIII** and **Urban VIII** took measures to prevent the abuses likely to arise from too great independence. Since then the eremitic life has been gradually abandoned, and the attempts made to revive it in the last century have had no success. (See AUGUSTINE, RULE OF SAINT; CAMALDOLESE; CARMELITE ORDER; CARTHUSIAN ORDER; HIERONYMITES; also under GREEK CHURCH, Vol. VI, p. 761.)

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