

# Basil of Caesarea and His Influence on Monastic Mission<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Abbot Cuthbert Butler in *Benedictine Monasticism* (1919) makes the claim that Benedict owed the ground plan of his rule to Basil of Caesarea (c.330-379).<sup>2</sup> Given the recent scholarship over the last few decades on Benedict's sources, the *Rule of the Master* (RM) is a more likely candidate, but there is no doubt that many of the themes in *The Rule of St Benedict* (RB) echo those of Basil. In support of the priority of RB over RM, whereas RB does not mention the RM, it certainly makes explicit mention of Basil.<sup>3</sup> In this paper I am going to make the assumption that Benedict did have access to a reduction in Latin of Basil's 'Asceticon.' My particular focus is to explore the influence of Basil of Caesarea on monastic mission, especially Benedictine monastic mission. In the light of the overall theme of our conference I think it would be interesting to do this for a number of reasons. First, from its foundation, missionary enterprise has been an integral part of the Christian Church's activity. The mandate to go and make disciples of all nations (Mt. 28:19; Lk. 24:47) is one of the final commands that Jesus gives to the apostles before his Ascension into heaven. As we know from the Acts of the Apostles and Paul's Epistles, the gospel spread quickly and it was not long before other dedicated evangelists followed. In the West, the Celtic monks, especially Patrick and Columba, were important exemplars of monastic missionary activity. Pope Gregory I (c.540-604) was instrumental in sending Augustine (d.604 or 605), later to become Archbishop of Canterbury, and other monks to England, thereby initiating the Christianisation of southern England. Benedict's establishment of Monte Cassino was itself a missionary initiative.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Since presenting this paper I am grateful for corrections and suggestions made by Dame Anna Brennan, Dame Laurentia Johns and Dame Margaret Truran of Stanbrook Abbey, also Abbot Geoffrey Scott of Douai and Abbot Paul Stoneham of Belmont.

<sup>2</sup> Cuthbert Butler O.S.B., *Benedictine Monasticism* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1919). p.16. However, more recent scholarship suggests that the Egyptian tradition as mediated by RM and Cassian (c.360-435) was the main influence, closely followed by Augustine of Hippo (c. 354-430). See Timothy Fry, ed., *RB 1980: The Rule of St Benedict in Latin and English with Notes* (Collegeville, Minnesota, USA: The Liturgical Press, 1981). pp. 79-96

<sup>3</sup> Without quoting directly from a particular source, it was not uncommon for early Christian writers to cite other authoritative works in order to place it in the same literary genre or give orthodoxy to the writers own work.

<sup>4</sup> See Justin McCann O.S.B, ed., *Saint Benedict by Saint Gregory the Great* (Rugby: Princethorpe Priory, 1941). In Book II (Ch 8) of his *Dialogues* Pope Gregory recounts how Benedict consecrates a pagan site of Apollo and establishes Monte Cassino. Thus he becomes involved in local missionary activity.

In our EBC tradition 'mission' has generally been understood in terms of the parish apostolate. Even though monks were involved in mission activity before Benedict composed his rule (RB) Benedict is lukewarm to the idea of monks leaving the cloister, let alone getting involved in mission activity. Neither does Benedict ever use the word 'mission.' In so far as he envisages serving the needs of others outside the monastery, Benedict confines this to offering physical and spiritual hospitality to those who come to the monastery, namely pilgrims, travellers and the poor (RB 53).<sup>5</sup> Down the Benedictine centuries there has been tension between monks being 'on the mission' or 'in the monastery' and disagreement about what the appropriate balance between the 'vita contemplativa' and the 'vita activa' should be. However, I would like to suggest that in spite of Benedict's reservation about 'mission,' the ongoing debate about what is appropriate missionary work for monks and our EBC tradition, we adopt a wider understanding of mission that embraces more than parishes, schools and hospitality.

A second reason I would like to look at Basil's influence is that as I said earlier he is the only monastic author that Benedict explicitly mentions by name (RB 73).<sup>6</sup> This 'Rule of Basil' was a Latin translation of Basil's 'Little Asceticon' made by Rufinus of Aquilea (345-410) from the Greek in about 396/397.<sup>7</sup> Curiously, Benedict says nothing about why he singles out Basil's Rule other than to make the general comment that, 'for observant and obedient monks, all these (i.e. Holy Catholic Fathers, Conferences, Institutes and Lives), are nothing less than tools for the cultivation of virtues.' We might also want to reflect on the fact that by the time of Benedict there had been an influx of Greek monks into Southern Italy. How much did this migration influence the development of monasticism in Benedict's Italy? Ambrose of Milan (339-397) is also credited with introducing Basil's works into Italy. Furthermore, there may have been earlier Latin versions of the 'Asceticon,' no longer extant, that Benedict and others were familiar with.<sup>8</sup>

Thirdly, Benedict displays a degree of caution when speaking about priests, either those already ordained who seek admission (RB 60) and those who are

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<sup>5</sup> Despite Benedict's misgivings about monks leaving the cloister he obviously intended that they should be free to relocate and establish new monasteries and engage with the local community. The *Dialogues* have a number of references to such contacts.

<sup>6</sup> Although Benedict mentions the *Conferences* and *Institutes* the authorship is never attributed to Cassian.

<sup>7</sup> When Rufinus returned to Italy from the East in 347 Urseius, Abbot of Pinetum, near Ravenna, asked for information about Eastern monasteries. The translation of the 'Little Asceticon' was the result. It is the first edition of questions and answers formed while Basil was a priest. See Holmes p.47

<sup>8</sup> See introduction to St Basil of Caesarea, *The Ascetic Works of Saint Basil*, trans. W.K.L. Clarke (London: S.P.C.K., 1925). trans. W.K.L Clarke pp.28-35

chosen within the monastery to be priests and deacons (RB 62). Unlike Basil and the majority of monastic founders Benedict was not a bishop. Neither is it certain even that Benedict was a priest. So there is an interesting point here. Do the work and responsibilities of being of a monk-bishop involved in mission inevitably throw a different perspective on monasticism and ascetic life?<sup>9</sup>

Finally, the spiritual and monastic teaching of Basil of Caesarea deserves to be better known and disseminated in the West, especially in regards to the formation of monastics. There are a limited number of English translations but there is no single comprehensive critical edition.<sup>10</sup>

### Formative Influences in the Life of Basil of Caesarea

First, some background to the life of Basil of Caesarea. There are a number of formative experiences which are important for our examination. First, family background. Born around 330 in the region of Pontus, near the Black Sea coast of Asia Minor (now part of Turkey),<sup>11</sup> Basil's family were wealthy and privileged. They came from a line of fervent Christians and martyrs.<sup>12</sup> One of several children including five boys, Basil's younger brother, Gregory was to become Bishop of Nyssa.

Second, education. Like many young men from such a background, Basil received a comprehensive classical education which included Greek philosophy and rhetoric, first in Caesarea, then in Constantinople and finally in Athens, where he spent some six years before leaving the city at the age of around 26. This intellectual formation was important for preparing Basil's mission as a monk, priest and bishop. It was in Athens also, that Basil met Gregory of Nazianzus. Together with Basil's younger brother Gregory, they were to form the influential Cappadocian trio.

Third, a conversion experience. With his studies finished, the young Basil returned to Caesarea in 355 and began to teach rhetoric. His sister Macrina found that like many young men with their newly acquired learning, Basil

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<sup>9</sup> Augustine of Hippo (354-430) and Martin of Tours (d. 397) are examples.

<sup>10</sup> Although not comprehensive, an excellent introduction can be found in Augustine Holmes O.S.B., *A Life Pleasing to God: The Spirituality of the Rules of St Basil* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000). Also, a useful summary of Basil's monastic spirituality can be found in Luc Bresard, *Monastic Spirituality*, Three vols. (Stanbrook Abbey, Worcester: A.I.M., 1996).

<sup>11</sup> There are doubts about the date of Basil's birth which is traditionally held to be 1 January, 330. Also, Basil may have died as early as September 377. This debate is examined in more detail in Appendix III of Philip Rousseau, *Basil of Caesarea* (Berkeley, California, USA: University of California Press, 1994).

<sup>12</sup> Both his father Basilus, who was a teacher and rhetorician, and his mother Emmelia had known persecution by the pagans. One of Basil's grandfathers had died a martyr.

was rather full of himself. Neither was he living earnestly enough as a Christian. Taking what his sister said seriously, Basil was touched by grace and embraced the Christian faith whole heartedly. In 357, still in his mid 20's, he was baptised and shortly afterwards ordained as a reader.

Fourth, mentors and influencers. By this time Basil had started to come under the sway of the ascetic Eustathius (c.300-377). Eustathius, who became Bishop of Sebaste, had studied in Alexandria under Arius (c.250-c.336) and introduced the coenobitic life into Eastern Asia-Minor. His reputation was overshadowed, however, when he got himself and his followers into deep trouble with the ecclesiastical authorities for adopting severe ascetic practices and dress which were condemned at the Council of Gangra.<sup>13</sup> Eustathius presented celibacy and total poverty as the ideal conditions for the Christian life. Although Eustathius moderated his asceticism, especially when he became a bishop, there was a fundamental 'falling out' between Basil and Eustathius. Nonetheless Eustathius' influence lasted. One of Basil's more important initiatives, the establishment of the *Basileiados*, (a 'soup kitchen' as Gregory of Nazianzus called it), was inspired by an earlier venture undertaken by Eustathius. When the time came for Basil to initiate a similar project two of Eustathius' monks came to help with practical 'know-how.'

Fifth, travelling. After his 'conversion experience' Basil took a spiritual 'gap year' and journeyed to Egypt, Palestine and Syria. This exploration brought him into contact with the important centres of learning at Antioch and Alexandria, especially Origen (185-254).<sup>14</sup> Although he was not impressed by everything that he saw and heard the experience of desert monasticism had some positive impact.

Sixth, experimentation and development. Following this travels he returned to his family property at Annisa where an informal monastic community had developed. Here with his family and some friends, he lived a retired life apart from the world. The inspiration for adopting an extreme ascetical life-style had a first come from his intimate knowledge of Greek philosophy. Basil clothed his ascetic ideal in philosophical themes and concepts very rarely quoting Scripture. He wanted to show that this ascetic ideal had its precedents in the wise men of Greece and corresponded to what they called *paideia*. This experience of living in community was to have a significant influence on Basil. During this time Basil wrote to his friend Gregory Nazianzus to persuade him to join his informal group of ascetics. Refusing at

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<sup>13</sup> There is dispute about the date of the Council of Gangra. Between 335 and 345.

<sup>14</sup> Rousseau. p.83

first Gregory eventually gave in and joined his friend. It was during this period that the two compiled the *Philocalia*, a collection of Origen's writings.<sup>15</sup>

As an enthusiastic convert to the ascetical life Basil soon came to realise the weaknesses of the exaggerated asceticism of his mentor Eustathius. Going back to basics he turned to the New Testament to find out what being a Christian truly meant and then wrote down the texts from the which answered his question. This became Basil's 'Moral Rules' or 'Moralia' which was to form the first part of the 'Asceticon.' It was addressed to all Christians for he believed that the New Testament was the 'Rule of the Christian.'<sup>16</sup>

Seventh, in that period what were the key historical happenings in that part of Asia Minor and beyond? In regards to the Church, in spite of the Council of Nicea in 325 and the endeavours of Athanasius (c.296-373), Arianism still flourished. Together with his brother Gregory of Nyssa and friend Gregory of Nazianzus, they were later to prepare the way for the defeat of Arianism at the Council of Constantinople in 381. The plight of the needy, sickness, disease and poverty were prevalent. This was to be exacerbated by a great famine in 369. Slavery continued to remain an integral part of the economic system. It was also the century in which the Church was able to draw increasingly on the support of the Roman Emperors.<sup>17</sup> But religious recognition meant political interference, factions and the inevitable exiles. Finally, monasticism, never without its political influence became an important part of Church life and society as a whole.

#### Basil: Priest and Bishop

Unfortunately, Basil did not enjoy the solitude of his informal community for long. Eusebius, his bishop, had noticed him; he ordained him priest (c. 362) and soon after made him his coadjutor bishop (365). As Basil went about his pastoral duties, visiting and preaching, communities of Christian ascetics started to form and grow. In order to ensure some conformity of practice Basil realised that there was a need for a rule of life. One of Basil's objectives was the reform of monastic asceticism, moving it to a more moderate observance than that of Eustathius.

Expounding on 'The Morals' Basil composed in the form of improvised dialogues the second part his tripartite work called the 'Little Asceticon'

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p.66

<sup>16</sup> Holmes O.S.B.pp.34-60.

<sup>17</sup> Although Constantine was the first emperor to recognise Christianity, it was not fully embraced until the orthodox Emperor Theodosius I (379-95).

probably about 364, before he became a bishop.<sup>18</sup> The 'Little Asceticon' consists of 203 answers to questions put by Christian communities as Basil travelled and ministered around the diocese, either as a priest or auxiliary to his bishop. It is this text that Benedict was familiar with through Rufinus' Latin translation.

As these communities grew they became large fraternities with their own internal organisation and stability which set them apart in a definitive way for the broader Christian community. Basil's accumulated experience in dealing with these groups, and living an ascetic lifestyle himself, resulted in the final treatise, the 'Great Asceticon.'<sup>19</sup> Although it is not possible to date with any certainty it was probably composed in the early stages of Basil's episcopate. It consisted of 55 Longer Rules and 313 Shorter Rules, 192 of which were taken from the 'Little Asceticon.' In 370 Eusebius died and Basil succeeded him as bishop of Caesarea. He found himself contending with many difficulties due to the religious and political climate.<sup>20</sup>

#### Characteristics of Basil's Asceticon

Basil's monastic writings have two key characteristics. As already indicated his departing point is always scripture, especially the New Testament. Hence the first part of the 'Asceticon,' the *Morals*, was an indispensable groundwork. Second, Basil wanted to reform an ascetic movement and remedy its weaknesses. Believing themselves to be superior, earlier ascetic movements such as that of Eustathius, had set deliberately themselves apart from the Church. For Basil a monk was not a being apart, but a Christian who wanted to live his faith to the full. Consequently Basil never uses the word 'monk' to describe the members of ascetic communities. He always spoke of 'brothers' or 'Christians.' Basil also saw that besides a structure communities needed a leader. Although we never find the word 'abbot' Basil gives a theology of the superior particularly in the 'Longer Rules' of the *Great*

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<sup>18</sup> Basil's Letter 22 written about 364 articulates Basil's conception of the religious life based on scriptural foundations. Basil identifies the monastic life with the ideal Christian life. 'Since in the divinely inspired Scriptures many directions are set forth which must be strictly observed by all who earnestly wish to please God, I desire to say, necessarily in the form of a brief reminder, a few words based upon the knowledge which I have derived from the divinely inspired Scriptures...By doing so I shall leave behind me, in a form easy to apprehend, their testimony on every point for those who are too much occupied for reading.' See pp. 129-130 of St Basil of Caesarea, *Saint Basil: The Letters*, ed. E Capps, T.E. Page, and W.H.D. Rouse, trans. Roy J Deferrari, Four vols., Loeb Classical Library, vol. 1 (London: William Heinemann, 1926).

<sup>19</sup> The 'Longer Rule' contains 55 rules and was composed some 8-10 years after the *Little Asceticon*. The composition and structure of Basil's *Asceticon* is covered in detail by Bresard pp. 84-89.

<sup>20</sup> Basil became co-adjutor bishop to Eusebius c. 365 and Bishop of Caesarea in 370.

Asceticon<sup>21</sup> In order to combat the extremes and ostentation of earlier ascetics Basil says relatively little about poverty and proposed a moderate asceticism.

Basil defines the life his readers are to live in a variety of ways. The most common is that of 'piety' or 'religion.' In his 'Longer Rule' Basil speaks of the piety or exercise of religion (τή ἀσχήσει τῆς εὐσεβείας)<sup>22</sup> He also uses the term 'godly men' (θεοσεβούντων)<sup>23</sup> as a synonym. Ασκήσις is an important term for Basil. He speaks of the brothers as people who train (τῶν ἀσχομένων)<sup>24</sup>, or 'athletes of the commandments of Christ' (ὅτι ἀθλητῆς ὄντως ἐστὶ τῶν ἐντολῶν τοῦ Χριστοῦ)<sup>25</sup> Emphasis on community life is reinforced by the use of the prefix 'συν' as in 'συνασκήσεως'<sup>26</sup> to indicate the 'coming together.' Individual effort becomes a community activity.

The ascesis of being well-pleasing (ἐυρεστήσεως) to God according to the Gospel of Christ illustrates another key concept.<sup>27</sup> One becomes pleasing to God by keeping his commandments and renouncing one's own will. A life pleasing to God is one of strictness or exactness (ἀκριβεία)<sup>28</sup> and 'the strict life and knowledge of God' (θεογνωσιας)<sup>29</sup> 'The life of the Christian is consistent (μονότροπός) and has one aim (σχοπον), namely the glory of God.'<sup>30</sup> Here we see the key description of the ascetic. He is a Christian rather than a monk and is called brother (ἀδελφος) and his community is a brotherhood (ἀδελφωτής). Using the model of the saints Basil extols the virtue of self-control or temperance (ἐγκρατείας).<sup>31</sup>

It has already been emphasised that Basil started from Scripture especially the New Testament. It should not be surprising then if we find that the first four Long Rules in the Great Asceticon focus on the evangelical commandments. The lawyer asks Jesus, Teacher, which is the first commandment of the Law? And Jesus answers him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And a second is like it, you

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<sup>21</sup> See LR 24, 28 where the superior is accorded the place of the 'eye' of the body of the community and 43 which legislates for a superior to be appointed by other brotherhoods.

<sup>22</sup> J.P. Migne, ed., *Patrologia Cursus Completus, Series Graeca*, vol. 31 (Paris: J P Migne, 1858). Cited in Holmes OSB pp.53-54, PG *Regulae Fusae Tractatae*, Col. 1017, Interrogatio 38

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. Col 1133, *Regulae Brevius Tractatus*, Interrogatio 74

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. Col 968 *Regulae Fusae Tractatae* Interrogatio 19

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. Col 964 Interrogatio 17

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. Col 988 Interrogatio 26

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. Col 920 Interrogatio 5

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. Col 978 Interrogatio 22

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. Col 945 Interrogatio 10

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. Col 973 Interrogatio 20

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. Col 957 Interrogatio 16

shall love your neighbour as yourself'<sup>32</sup> Firstly Basil, who is concerned with 'right order,' wants to get the sequence of commandments right. He also wishes to emphasise that these two evangelical commandments have their origin in the Law of Moses from Old Testament. Thus it is the same Lord who speaks in both. But, reminds Basil, the second commandment not only follows the first but completes it. In stressing love of neighbour, Basil is implicitly putting the Christian life into a community context. Hence the solitary life is alien to his purpose. It is not surprising therefore that Basil's conception of monastic life envisaged a strong pastoral and missionary aspect.

In his second rule Basil introduces the important concept of 'seminal reason' (λογος σπερματικος). Although a philosophical term Basil develops this idea in a specifically Christian direction.<sup>33</sup> He establishes this new meaning in relation solely to human beings and to their natural tendency to love God, which the Creator placed in them at their creation.<sup>34</sup> It is clear from this rule that Basil has a positive view of human nature and its potential. Humans are born to be good. To practice virtue is to use things rightly according to our conscience and the commandments. Virtue is natural and our nature is from God, we have received at creation the power to keep the commandments.

We love our neighbour, says Basil in Longer Rule 2, because it is in our nature as created by God. Such love is natural. Basil does not see love of neighbour as a challenge to nature but as its fulfilment.<sup>35</sup> He uses the same argument to demonstrate that man is a social rather than a solitary animal. In the first five Longer Rules the Gospel of John is particularly significant for Basil in the context of loving God and neighbour. John 13:35 has love as the sign of the true disciple. In keeping the first commandment we keep the second and vice-versa. This attitude towards God and neighbour has implication for the importance of work. Work is seen as one of the manifestations of love for neighbour through service, distribution of goods, and alms giving. Work is as much a matter for the inner disposition as for the outer. It also is a manifestation of the social nature of man and his solidarity with the Body of Christ.

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<sup>32</sup> Matthew 22:37-39

<sup>33</sup> This term is of Stoic origin where it was usually used in the plural. It is also found in Plotinus (c. 204-270) and was taken up by earlier Christian thinkers such as Justin Martyr (c.100-165), Origen (c.185-254), Methodius of Olympus (d. c. 311), Athanasius (c.296-373) and Augustine of Hippo (c.354-430) variously adapted to their purposes. See Holmes O.S.B. p.71

<sup>34</sup> Holmes O.S.B. pp.70-73

<sup>35</sup> Anthony Meredith S.J., *The Cappadocians* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1995).p.29



### Basil's 'Rule' and its Relationship to Monastic Mission

At the start of this paper I said that my aim was to determine whether Basil of Caesarea's Rule has had any influence on monastic mission. As I have pointed out I am making the assumption that Benedict had knowledge of it. By the turn of the ninth century the Rule of Basil had been included in Benedict of Aniane's *Codex Regularum*. But it was not until the twelfth century that the whole of the 'Asceticon' became available to western readers in a Latin translation. Knowledge of Basil's monastic writings undoubtedly spread through Europe and beyond. I think we can see why Abbot Butler enthused about Basil's Rule. In many ways it is far more 'in tune' with EBC thinking and practice about mission activity than the RB and certainly more so than RM. Although this examination has been necessarily brief I think we can see some interesting themes emerge.

Firstly, ascetic retirement, in the classical tradition, is challenged and interrupted by a sense of responsibility towards the pastoral needs of the Church. Although Basil envisages some form of 'enclosure' it is not established to give the monk the opportunity to shirk his Christian duties. Rather, it is there to provide some shelter from the danger of over-involvement in charitable works. The continual reaffirmation of the evangelical counsels can be seen as a constant reminder to the monk and all Christians where their priorities lay.

Secondly, we see the monastic movement developing its political and social influence in the local community and beyond. Due to his family background Basil wielded considerable influence with the civil authorities, the wealthy and those who had the political clout. For instance, the famine of 369 precipitated a large-scale relief effort spearheaded by Basil and his monks. This emergency relief later became institutionalised in the form of the 'Basileidos.' Basil initiated radical social change in Cappadocia and beyond. Furthermore, he believed that the chief and visible social sign that a necessary conversion had taken place in people's inner lives would be economic in form, not just spiritual. No one, therefore, was exempt. Basil reminds us that absence of generosity is a major sin.

Finally, monastic and pastoral practice appear to have developed on parallel tracks. The first provides the moral and interior dimension of the second. Thus, we can see that moral and social aspects of Christianity are interwoven. However, Basil does not appear to place a strong emphasis on sacramental activity. Perhaps this is because mission was the responsibility of all the baptised and not just those who were ordained. What we have in Basil's rule is a framework of pastoral theology. I think this is clear in the way the Asceticon develops through its different stages. Each subsequent maturation

represents, in a unique way, Basil's experience and concerns as a pastor, bishop and monastic leader. What Basil does, as he assumes greater pastoral responsibility, is to enlarge and develop his thinking on the relationship of the monk with the outside world and the part played by the monk in evangelisation and mission.

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