

Writing the Life of a Saint, Building Up the People of God:

Hagiography and the Communal Practice of the Ascetic Life in the *Life of Pachomius*

Why Biographies Are Important

- The stories we tell say a lot about who we are and who we want to be.
- In every age of the church, there is a certain way of telling stories about people of faith.
- Who we select to tell stories about and what we say about them is significant because it creates a model of what the Christian life (well lived) is supposed to look like.

It might be easier to see how this works if we begin by thinking about the kinds of Christian biographies that have existed in the evangelical community, what they presuppose, and what kind of model Christian life they are trying to image and commend.

(1) Up until the 1950's, evangelicals used to produce a certain kind of biography, which followed the pattern of German (Halle) Pietism (1690-1750; the best known example being August Hermann Francke's account of supervising the orphanage at Halle, which was closely imitated by George Muller's autobiography).

a. In this kind of story, there is assumed to be a share structure/template for Christian religious experience. The narrator/biographer speaks of the person's

i. Remarkable conversion experience

1. sees themselves as a sinner suspended over the pit of hell;
2. sees the blood of Jesus on the Cross as availing for them;
3. breaks with and renounces

a. not only their past life of sin and rebellion,

b. but also the pursuit of worldly honor and glory

in favor of a downwardly-mobile life of dying to self and living as a witness to the Gospel.

4. receives a supernatural peace and an assurance that his/her sins have been forgiven and that he/she has been adopted as a child of God.

ii. Looking away from material resources and human processes, making one's need known to God alone through prayer and seeing God supernaturally answer these prayers.

1. In the narration of the events of life, the focus is on God's acting directly and providentially toward believers in all the events of their lives.

iii. Committing oneself to working with the poor so that they might have the means of life (both spiritually and temporally).

b. Between 1890 and 1950, a new subtype of this literature developed, with the faith missions movement encouraging the development of the evangelical missionary biography. E.g. the life of Hudson Taylor or Elisabeth Elliot's *Shadow of the Almighty*

(2) Contemporary evangelical biographies/autobiographies are somewhat different and often tend to emphasize different values and a different pattern of life.

a. For example, if we were to consider some of Donald Miller's recent books (e.g., *Blue like Jazz: Nonreligious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality* or his recent *A Million Miles in a Thousand Years: What I Learned While Editing My Life*).

i. This kind of literature also narrates a religious quest with real earnestness, but includes a lot more ambiguity and discontinuities and also questions whether religious experience is not more of a peculiar private pilgrimage (i.e. something different people will experience in different ways peculiar to their own situation, without there being a common template or structure which necessarily shapes how all believers will experience God/the life of faith).

1. Story is episodic, rather than linear.

2. Narration is

a. evocative and

b. aims at being honest and personally revealing, rather than rationally ordered and

c. does not claim to solve all problems.

3. Focus is on the narrator and the narrator's spiritual journey (including
 - a. doubts,
 - b. anger at the institutional church , its dysfunctional practices, and its tendency to point fingers at those
 - i. who don't exhibit conformity to the group pattern and
 - ii. whose lives don't fit in some pre-fabricated box,
 - c. near loss of faith, before finding a more relevant understanding of Jesus' relation to everyday life and contemporary culture).
 - i. Search for a gentler, more inclusive faith which allows people some room to experiment with different flavors of spirituality.
 - ii. The question of how we treat people who are marginal (especially the homeless and impoverished) is still important in this quest, but there is a search for new models of living in grassroots, intentional Christian communities, where one can find a new style of life that doesn't depend on all the material markers of membership in the American middle-class .

1. Examples:

- a. Shane Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical* and
- b. Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *The New Monasticism and What It Has to Say to Today's Church*

Hagiography in the Early Church

The lives of the saints in the early church also tell a certain type of story that has certain predictable features and is intended to model a certain account of the best Christian life (and what simplicity, prayer, spiritual warfare, etc. might look like).

Translated in Latin by Jerome and also read by John Cassian and taken back to the West (France), where it influenced western monastic communities.

- To set up the saint as a model of faithful Christian living which to be respected, a continuity is drawn with the martyrs (see pp. 23-24; compare p. 39).
- The account of the saint's childhood is also selectively narrated, with a preference for stories that contain foreshadowing of
 - Pachomius' departure from Egyptian religion and his conversion to Christ (p. 25; cf. his living in an abandoned Egyptian temple on p. 28 [other texts give not "place of Serapis" but "place of the baking of bricks," i.e. a brick kiln])
 - Distraction, temptation and assault by demonic powers (pp. 25-26; compare later pp. 44-45).
 - Note also that spirits cause confusion, so that people do not hear what is said or misunderstand it (p. 88)
 - The spirits who tempt are even pictured as speaking in the first person in pp. 88-89!

(Some of this editing of Pachomius may have been by Pachomius himself (p. 26) but it also serves the later editor's purposes.)

- Hospitality and charity of Christians emphasized as the part of the witness of the Gospel/ Pachomius' conversion (and the practice of monastic communities) (p. 27; compare pp. 28 [feed the poor, hospitality to the stranger, encourage other believers], 29 [care for the sick]; 63: the gifts of food given to visitors as a sign of brotherly love)
 - Note later the building of churches, not only in the monastery but also in the village (p. 47), which was too poor to build and maintain a church and may also still have been thinly Christianized at this point.
- Seeks guidance from an older person who is more experienced in prayer and more knowledgeable concerning the Word of God (the idea being that without a spiritual father,

one cannot come to know oneself and will remain self-deceived and prideful and will never truly advance in the life of faith) (pp. 30-32). Note also that after a seven year apprenticeship is over, Palamon still works out an arrangement to visit him regularly (p. 40).

- Note that training also has a dark side (e.g. on pp. 35-36, the competitiveness of the neighboring ascetic, who fails to ask for counsel and is instead deceived by pride and even made able to do something supernatural by demonic intervention; p. 36, his pride makes him a target for further temptations and afflicts and unbalances him, leading him to give in to self-destructive tendencies [the effect of giving oneself over to evil by consent]; compare the extreme yet inwardly prideful devotions of the brother in pp. 84-85, where thwarted pride leads to violent action, showing the devotion to be rooted in sin).
- Visions concerning what God has called him to do (p. 45, 71, 73, 77, 78: gather and care for a monastic community [the Lord's will is to serve the race of men and to call unite them to himself]; compare Theodore on pp. 58-59; p. 63: wheat provided) and warnings of future temptations that will imperil this community (pp. 87 [community in danger of dissolution after death of Pachomius]; 94-95 [Pachomius learns the fear of the Lord, which will be needed by the community after his death]).
 - Pachomius' first attempt to found a community is in fact a disaster because he not only treats all the brothers (each responsible for his own support, rather than having all things in common) as his equals, but even makes himself their servant while exempting them from work and not requiring them to live in accordance with a common rule of life (compare pp. 46-47 with pp. 431-433, 436-438). (The power of holy example doesn't work; so also sometimes for today's pastor!) These first brothers treated Pachomius with contempt, refused to follow a rule of any kind and, when Pachomius expelled them, they complained to the local bishop.
 - Note also that Pachomius tries simultaneously to maintain a certain degree of equality among the brothers under the rule, avoiding special treatment for monastic leaders (pp. 70, 71) or having members of the clerical hierarchy in his monasteries. (An alternative source of power, which is part of the structures of power in the broader society, can give feed jealousy, pride and vainglory and can give credibility and force to factionalism/people with schismatic tendencies) (pp. 47-48 and also p. 52, where Pachomius hides to avoid being ordained to ecclesiastical rank;

- Note also the following other conflicts based on natural or institutional/ societal authority from outside the monastic/ascetic system:
 - p. 78 he is opposed by a local bishop;
 - p. 64 his policy is criticized by an elderly confessor who had suffered in the persecution and has authority because of that;
 - Note also the conflicts with his older brother John over whether to let others join them (John stubbornly refuses to agree; his role as older brother also imports something from the secular past into this new Christian relationship) (pp. 42-43).
 - Compare the old man who has recently become a monk and complains about having to do the hard work of cleaning out a cistern and murmurs and grumbles against Pachomius (p. 86).
 - Compare the old ascetic (housemaster) who thinks Pachomius is excessively concerned about people falling into sin and talks too much about this at the monastic conference (pp. 89-91).
 - When Pachomius has Theodore teach at the monastic conference, when he is only 33, other older men refuse to listen (pp. 91-92; compare later p. 99, when Pachomius leaves the monastic conference to meet Theodore).
 - Theodore in fact proves himself worthy of this trust by profiting the brothers by teaching and spiritual direction, while refusing to value or desire power for its own sake (p. 92), so is worthy to be presented by Pachomius to God during a visionary experience as a future leader of the community (p. 100).
 - p. 65 is saddened that he has become known as a person with peculiar healing power but on p. 67 is willing to participate in healing if the person is brought to repentance and a better life [cf. p. 69 on the priority of spiritual healing and p. 90 on bringing an erring monk to confess and repent for having stolen])

- Pachomius' humility in receiving rebuke from a brother concerning the making of mats (p. 93).
- A similar problem arises with people from wealthy, influential backgrounds (p. 55 on hesitation concerning Theodore; p. 60 on Theodore's mother using the bishop's letter to get an audience with her son); cf. the problem of assertive professionals in lay leadership today.
- Has to organize the spiritual and temporal oversight of the community (pp. 48-49: preparing the food, setting the table, cleaning up, caring for the sick, dealing with visitors and people who wanted to join the community, and producing, selling certain goods while purchasing others, etc.)
 - Note the role of the housemaster/guestmaster.
 - Each house (group of cells) worshipped together, had a trade and contributed to the support of the monastery as a whole.
 - Each house took turns with basic tasks (cooking, cleaning, care for the sick, dealing with visitors) (see pp. 165, 168-169)
 - Visitors could also stay in the visitor's lodging and become aspirants, learning psalms and prayers (pp. 164-165, 168)
 - Note the times of formal instruction in Scripture and the life of prayer (i.e. monastic conferences).
 - Voluntary spiritual direction (e.g. Theodore on pp. 57-58) necessary for defects to be recognized and combated (we cannot stand/persevere by ourselves (see p. 167—outgrowth of idea that we all need the counsel of others; cf. p. 170 and p. 171 Abba Arsenius asking for advice from an Egyptian). Spiritual direction necessary not only for reproof, but also to maintain the desire to be cured in the directee;
 - Pachomius to Theodore on need to limit fasting to appropriate levels; sometimes more is less and weakens one in unhelpful ways (p. 60)
 - Pachomius sometimes has to deal with people who are unhappy with his direction and abuse him (pp. 65); he adapts himself by silence and a certain indirection to help them arrive at repentance and a better way (pp. 66-67).

- Note also the use of indirection in pp. 81-82, 84 and the adaptation to what the other person needed in pp. 82-83.
- It is interesting that one aspect of this indirection is to affirm (particularly where the person being addressed has been given authority) that the other person is *strong* and therefore has certain responsibilities toward the *weak*, which demand a more flexible and generous approach (p. 91).
 - Note that a person in whom pride has displaced is capable of being led by the Spirit in an expanded way and may have supernatural insight (clairvoyance) into hidden things (what people are trying to hide which are obstacles to them and which they need to confess and give up) (p. 92)