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ABSTRACT

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REFORM, AND THE SEARCH FOR GOD

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This thesis tracks the development of monastic thought in the western Mediterranean by examining Saint Jerome and Saint John Cassian's competing approaches to fasting. First this work places each man into his historical context, including the audience he was writing for, a mostly female mixed audience for Jerome, or the male audience of Cassian. Ultimately Cassian's more practical and moderate approach that centered on communion with god proved to be more influential than Jerome's approach that focused on preserving sexual purity, through extreme mortification of the flesh. Finally, this thesis asks a question, given the prevailing attitudes of the period would St. John Cassian been as moderate, had he written for women?

TAMING THE DESERT: FASTING, REFORM, AND THE SEARCH FOR GOD.

By

David Cunningham.

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
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Dedication

For my wife, Christine: without your constant love and support I would not have been able to make this journey. Thank you, and without you this would not have been possible. For my daughter Morgaine, for being a constant inspiration when the going got tough. For my parents who instilled in me a deep and abiding love of history. Finally, Chai and Olive who often slept and dreamed doggie dreams while I wrote. Ad maiorem dei gloriam.

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Introduction:

The abnegation of self is central to monastic practice. Regardless of the religion, those who seek to cast off the secular world in search of the divine almost always lead lives of the strictest discipline and self-denial. The Christian monastic movement is no different; as it spread out from the deserts of Egypt and the Levant, and made its way west, the language of self-denial went with it. By the late fourth and early fifth centuries, the monastic movement that had been established in Gaul and the Latin west stood at a crossroads. Before it stood two approaches to the monastic life represented by the writings of St. Jerome, and the reforming voice of St. John Cassian. By examining each of their approaches to self-denial in the form of fasting, it will be possible to demonstrate that St. John Cassian's more flexible and holistic approach to fasting would eventually become more influential and would steer western monasticism down a path that would lead to St. Benedict of Nursia. Benedict, inspired partially by St. John Cassian, would write the Rule of St. Benedict, the foundational document to the monastic Order of St. Benedict, one of the first great monastic orders of the Latin west.

In the fourth century, monasticism in the Latin west in general, and in Gaul in particular, had a bad reputation, partially for the poor behavior of its participants and overall anarchic mentality.¹ One reason for this is the long distance that separated the monastics in Gaul from the centers of ascetic thinking in the Greek east. In Egypt, Syria and other places in the east, monastic thought was burgeoning with great thinkers, such as Pachomius, John Chrysostom, and St. Basil. In direct comparison,

¹ Owen Chadwick, *John Cassian* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 33-35.

Gaul only had two major monastic writers, the biographer of St. Martin of Tours, Sulpicius Severus, and St. Jerome. So, when John Cassian traveled west, he came as a monastic reformer.²

My thesis contrasts the monastic writings of St. John Cassian with those of St. Jerome on the topic of fasting. These two men, at first glance, seem to be a study in opposites. Based on the writings he left behind, the public facing personality of St. John Cassian is everything that St. Jerome was not. Where St. Jerome was proud, Cassian was self-effacing. Where Jerome was brash, Cassian was thoughtful, and finally, where St. Jerome was a prolific writer, St. John Cassian left only three works that remain extant. Yet, with that said, the comparison of the writings of these two men is logical, because of their status as rough contemporaries with similar backgrounds. Both were fluent in both Latin and Greek, and more important, each had experience in the desert, St. Jerome in Syria, and John Cassian in Palestine and Egypt, and therefore could claim spiritual authority as a monk. Each of these two men would offer a differing pathway of monastic thought.

While St. Jerome and St. John Cassian each had a similar goal, the search for God, they offered very different roads to get there. St. Jerome focused on the ideal of a solitary life, and extreme mortification of the flesh. Meanwhile, St. John Cassian's system of fasting was a much more flexible, and practical, approach to fasting as part of a systematic approach to sin and temptation.³ By focusing on the contrasting

² Chadwick, *John Cassian*, 33-35.

³³ Practical and moderate does not mean easy! To see what the system of fasting proposed by John Cassian looked like, I performed an experiment in the early phases of writing this thesis. For a week, I followed John Cassian's directions on fasting. I adapted his fifth century diet (discussed in greater detail below) to twenty-first century standards I did not have many of the ingredients that Cassian discussed, so I made do with what I had available. I had two small meals of bread, supplemented by lentils and an otherwise vegetarian diet, totaling not more than a combined 1100 calories a day. I had

approaches to fasting that both St. Jerome and St. John Cassian offered, this study seeks to demonstrate that Cassian's work served as the beginning of the reformation of monastic thought.

This study's aim is to analyze how each of these two men took monastic themes and came up with two very different approaches to monastic thought. Then I will seek to determine which of the very different approaches, whether the eremitic proposed by Jerome, or the cenobitic proposed by St. John Cassian, would eventually prove to be more influential in the nascent monastic movement in the Latin west. The significance is clear. In the larger history of the Church, St. Jerome's and St. John Cassian's writings were very influential. St. Jerome was named a Father of the Church, and was considered a leading light of ascetic thinking by both the medieval and early modern Catholic Church. Meanwhile, John Cassian would prove to be, perhaps, just as influential, if not as well known, for his direct influence on Benedict of Nursia, Pope Gregory the Great, and St. Thomas Aquinas.⁴ This study expands our understanding of the development of fasting as part of the larger monastic discourse in the Latin west.

Literature Review:

The scholarly conversation necessary for this thesis cuts across three themes, which will structure this literature review. The first will cover the literature on St. Jerome and St. John Cassian, to allow me to establish each man's monastic theology, and their place in the larger monastic context. The second thematic category will

enough to survive but I was almost constantly hungry but otherwise felt no other ill effects. The temptation to break this fast was almost overwhelming, especially with the easy abundance of calorie dense food on hand. I discovered, that Cassian's method of fasting, although more moderate than St. Jerome's, was extremely rigorous, and required intense self-discipline.

⁴ Chadwick, *John Cassian*, 153-156.

focus on renunciation, particularly sexual. The final thematic area will explore the scholarship on fasting itself, especially as it relates to the views of St Jerome and St. John Cassian.

Since St. Jerome came first chronologically, and the scholarship that focuses on him is substantial, I begin with biographies of St. Jerome. Two scholars provide a strong foundation for the study of St. Jerome: J.N.D. Kelly, and Stefan Rebenich.⁵ Both Kelly and Rebenich reached the same general conclusion that St. Jerome was a brilliant fourth century *novus homo* who helped shape the literary tradition of the Latin Church. Both scholars agree that much of St. Jerome's actual theology was often rushed and sloppy, if not plagiarized from earlier theologians. They do disagree, however, on the example of Jerome's stay in the desert. Kelly takes St. Jerome's claims at face value about the harshness of the desert, while Rebenich believes that St. Jerome lived in relative comfort near the estate of his benefactor. They do disagree in several different places. One such instance is of Jerome's stay in the desert. Kelly takes St. Jerome's claims about the harshness of the desert at face value, while Rebenich argued that St. Jerome lived in relative comfort near the estate of his benefactor, using the incident as a method of illustrating Jerome's self-aggrandizing streak.

Since my argument focuses on ascetic thought and practice, the scholarship that examines St Jerome's work in those realms is of particular significance. The scholarship of Phillip Rousseau, Steven D. Driver, and Andrew Cain are foremost in

⁵ J.N.D. Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1975). and Stefan Rebenich, *Jerome* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

this regard.⁶ To Rousseau, St. Jerome was a radical transitional figure in monastic thinking whose thought would straddle east and west. Driver, who builds heavily on Rousseau, notes St. Jerome's evolving views on monasticism would mirror that of the Latin west, going from the extreme eremitic and moderating. Cain, expanding on threads within Rebenich, takes a much more critical approach to St. Jerome, arguing that St. Jerome used his ascetic writings for self-promotion, first to establish himself as a spiritual authority, and to attract wealthy patrons, then later as damage control from the various religious controversies he involved himself in.⁷ The picture that emerges from this scholarship is that Jerome was an inveterate self-promoter. My thesis agrees with this scholarly assessment of the self-aggrandizing nature of Jerome's ascetic writing. This conversation on St. Jerome's ascetic thinking will lay the groundwork for the comparison with the ascetic thinking of St. John Cassian.

There is one scholar whose work on St. Jerome is particularly helpful, Ralph Mathisen, because he questions St Jerome's actual influence.⁸ Mathisen pushes back other scholars like Rebenich, who have long argued that outside of Rome, Gaul was St. Jerome's most important place of influence. Mathisen argues that while St. Jerome was influential in Gaul, he was not as influential as scholars like Rebenich had thought. The argument is based on a number of different factors. For example, Mathisen argues that some of St. Jerome's theological positions, and attacks on

⁶ Phillip Rousseau, "Jerome" in *Asceticism, Authority, and the Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 99-135. and Steven D. Driver, "The Development of Jerome's Views on the Ascetic Life" *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale* vol. 62. (1995): 44-70. and Andrew Cain, *The letters of Jerome: asceticism, biblical exegesis, and the construction of Christian authority in late antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁷ Dr. Stephen Cannon has called St. Jerome the patron Saint of irascible, morbidly sensitive old curmudgeons.

⁸ Ralph Mathisen, "The Use and Misuse of Jerome in Gaul during Late Antiquity" in *Jerome of Stridon: His Life, Writings and Legacy* Ed. Andrew Cain and Josef Lössl (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2009), 191-209.

popular Gallic figures, would have alienated parts of his Gallic audience. Further, he questions how extensive St. Jerome's Gallic correspondence actually was by examining the recipients of said correspondence.⁹ While this question of ascetic influence is not yet settled, the work on it is of critical importance to this study, because Gaul in the fifth century is the setting for this thesis. The field of Hieronymian studies is currently very active, and this study fits in nicely to establish a larger context for St. Jerome's monastic thought by examining how his thoughts on fasting would influence the developing monastic tradition in the west.

St. John Cassian, who was an extraordinarily influential thinker whom very few outside of small academic and monastic circles have ever heard of, enters the historical picture. After his move to Marseilles John Cassian wrote *The Institutes and Conferences* that would influence later monastic thinkers such as St. Benedict. The scholarship of Owen Chadwick benefits my thesis enormously by laying a strong base for the study of St. John Cassian.¹⁰ Aside from teasing as much of a biography as he can from St. John Cassian's writings, he is able to trace his theological influences from writers such as Origen and Evagrius of Pontus.¹¹ More importantly Chadwick holistically analyzes St. John Cassian's monastic thought, going so far as to compare him with St. Augustine, the leading light of western Christian thought. His conclusion is that St. John Cassian was an influential, if flawed, theologian, who did introduce several important concepts to the west, including what would become the seven

⁹ Mathisen, "The Use and Misuse of Jerome in Gaul during Late Antiquity" in *Jerome of Stridon: His Life, Writings and Legacy*, 194-195.

¹⁰ Owen Chadwick, *John Cassian* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1960).

¹¹ St. John Cassian was extremely reticent to talk about himself in his writings so not much is known about him before he came to Marseilles.

deadly sins, the Liturgy of the Hours, and compunction which would figure prominently in the Rule of St. Benedict.¹²

However, two scholars are especially critical for my argument because of their unique views. First is the scholarship of Columba Stewart, which perhaps would be the most useful for this study, due to Stewart's intended monastic audience: because he is a monk, writing for other monks, he can be very detailed in his analysis since he is not writing for laymen.¹³ Stewart limits his analysis to St. John Cassian's monastic theology. Stewart's granular approach allows me to look at the theological basis of St. John Cassian's *Institutes and Conferences*.

Augustine Casiday takes a different path when he argues that St. John Cassian must be examined in his own right outside of the influence of ancient writers.¹⁴ He critiques other historians and theologians for having their perceptions of St. John Cassian colored by Prosper of Aquitaine and other ancient writers.¹⁵ Casiday raises some good questions about the study of St. John Cassian but his scholarship suffers from some serious flaws; he often crosses the line into polemic. For example, Casiday launches into personal attacks on some of his subjects, most notably Prosper of Aquitaine, and other scholars like Owen Chadwick. Casiday has an axe to grind and it shows. Even with all the issues with his scholarship, Casiday's study is a valuable addition to the body of knowledge surrounding St. John Cassian.

¹² The Liturgy of the Hours is simply a set of prayers marking the hours of the day. Compunction according to Cassian is sorrow as a mystical state of being, or a conversion experience. Every single scholar reviewed agrees that Cassian brought these concepts west.

¹³ Columba Stewart, *Cassian the Monk* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

¹⁴ Augustine M. Casiday, *Tradition and Theology in St. John Cassian* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹⁵ A disciple of St. Augustine that accused Cassian of semi-pelagianism.

While the above scholars were focused on either St. John Cassian or St. Jerome, my argument will also utilize a body of work that puts each man's theology into the wider context of monastic thought, particularly in fifth century Gaul and the Latin west.¹⁶ Rousseau's study seeks to trace the shift in authority away from the charismatic holy man, and into established church hierarchy as the western monastic tradition developed. Rousseau's book is particularly useful in that it puts St. Jerome and St. John Cassian into a wide context in monastic thought. Leyser's article also puts St. Jerome and St. John Cassian into conversation as it pertains to the use of the language of the desert in the development of monastic thought in the Latin west. Most importantly, Leyser focuses on St. John Cassian's use of the desert in the cause of reforming existing monastic tradition.

Beyond Rousseau and Leyser, is a group of scholars that seek to place both St. John Cassian and St. Jerome into the bigger picture of monastic thought. Marilyn Dunn's book provides a good general road map to the overall topic.¹⁷ Dunn traces the evolution of monastic thought from the deserts of third century Egypt to seventh century England. Due to the nature of the topic, this is a necessarily broad survey that nevertheless helps inform my thesis in several important ways by placing each man into a wider historical context.

Since the two men featured in this study are contemporaries, it is not surprising that scholars compare them. St. John Cassian wrote later than Jerome, and his writings have often been framed as a reaction to Jerome. For instance, Chadwick

¹⁶ Phillip Rousseau, *Asceticism, Authority, and the Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978). and Conrad Leyser "Uses of the Desert in the Sixth Century West" *Church History and Religious Culture* Vol. 06. No 4 (2006): 113-134.

¹⁷ Marilyn Dunn, *the Emergence of Monasticism* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2000).

states that St. John Cassian complements the monastic writings of Jerome.¹⁸ Other scholars are much harsher in comparing the two.¹⁹ Richard Goodrich is a good example of this when he argues that St. John Cassian arrived in Gaul as a reforming force in asceticism, in a world that had previously allowed Roman aristocrats to continue to act like Roman aristocrats while calling themselves ascetics. St. John Cassian's arrival heralded a much stricter belief in renunciation of wealth and family than writers that had gone before.²⁰ Goodrich is the sole scholar who directly compares the writings of St. Jerome and St. John Cassian, arguing that in his *Institutes and Conferences*, St. John Cassian was directly responding to Jerome. As the only direct comparison between the two men, this is a valuable addition to this study. I will expand on Goodrich's work to show that St. John Cassian proved to be a reforming voice in Latin monastic thinking.

There are two additional scholars who take up the question of the spread of St. Jerome and St. John Cassian's influence beyond the late fourth and early fifth centuries. First Eugene Rice tracks how St. Jerome's posthumous influence grew from the ninth century to the Renaissance, from exile to a Father of the Church.²¹ Meanwhile Adalbert de Vogüé shows how St. John Cassian influenced later monastic thinkers such as St. Benedict by introducing the concept of the Divine Office and

¹⁸ Chadwick, *John Cassian*, 34-36.

¹⁹ Richard Goodrich *Contextualizing Cassian: Aristocrats, Asceticism, and Reformation in Fifth Century Gaul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

²⁰ Goodrich does talk about fasting, very briefly. He noted that Cassian was far more of a theorist than Jerome.

²¹ Eugene F. Rice, *St. Jerome in the Renaissance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

Compunction, both of which can be found in the rule of St. Benedict.²² These works allow me to trace each man's legacy after the fifth century.

Since this study centers on how both St. John Cassian and St. Jerome approached renunciation in the form of fasting, the current scholarship on renunciation is key. With that said, in the scholarly conversation, the topic of monastic renunciation of food is intimately linked to the renunciation of sex. The scholarship of Peter Brown is perhaps central to this thought.²³ Brown argues that, in effect, in the classical world the body was considered the building block of society. As Christianity spread, it first subverted, then transcended this view until the body became a place of sin and redemption. For the purposes of this thesis, Brown's work ties together the concepts of fasting and sex because early Christians believed that through the body the two are intricately linked: By controlling the food intake one can control the body.

While Brown's take is certainly authoritative and well cited, it's not the only argument on the subject. This study will make use of Aline Rousselle's work, in which she comes to somewhat different conclusions from Brown.²⁴ Rousselle argues that while early Christianity took notions of the body in radically different directions, their ideas had to come from somewhere. Rousselle argues that much of early Christian thought on sex and fasting was based on antique medical and legal texts.

²² Adalbert de Vogüé, *A Critical Study of the Rule of St. Benedict*. (New York: New city Press of the Focolare, 2013).

²³ Peter Brown, *The body and society: men, women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

²⁴ Aline Rousselle, *Porneia On Desire and the Body in antiquity* Trans. Felicia Pheasant (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988).

Rousselle is valuable to my thesis as it gives the possible pagan roots for Christian bodily practices.

For a more detailed analysis of the patristic era thought on sexual renunciation, Elizabeth A. Clark's scholarship is central.²⁵ Clark argues that the early Christian ascetic writers, in order to craft a coherent message of renunciation, used biblical exegesis to supplement biblical passages that were deeply contradictory to renunciation. Clark's work is extremely valuable to my thesis in that it gives a strong underpinning to the exegetical method that both St. Jerome and St. John Cassian used to craft their differing messages of renunciation.

On the subject of fasting itself, my study relies on the scholarship of Teresa M. Shaw. Shaw examines the intersection of fasting, sexual renunciation and gender in the patristic era.²⁶ Shaw's contribution is central to my thesis because while she does not compare them directly, she puts St. Jerome and St. John Cassian into a scholarly conversation over fasting. Shaw ably points out the commonalities between the two men, in that patristic era writers like St. John Cassian and St. Jerome relied on Galenic physiology to support their theories on fasting.²⁷ She also points out their differences. St. Jerome sought to use fasting as a method to preserve female chastity, as to St. Jerome chastity is impossible without fasting.²⁸ On the other hand, St. John Cassian sought to use fasting to control male desire and sexuality, particularly in the form of nocturnal emissions.²⁹ Shaw's work is part of the bedrock of my thesis when

²⁵ Elizabeth A. Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

²⁶ Teresa M. Shaw, *Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1988).

²⁷ Shaw, *Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity*, 53.

²⁸ Shaw, *Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity*, 99.

²⁹ Shaw, *Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity*, 116-117.

it comes to fasting. Shaw's work is not the only study of fasting. There is a much larger scholarly conversation on the topic that starts with Veronika Grimm.

Veronika Grimm argues that the ideas of food and sexuality became particularly entwined in the first five centuries of Christianity.³⁰ Grimm argues that fasting solely became a means to control sexual desire in Christians. There are some flaws with Grimm's scholarship. First, she only focuses on the extreme voices like St. Jerome, while ignoring the more moderate voices like St. John Cassian. Secondly, she uses anachronistic language in her rather strong attacks on Jerome and other writers. For instance, she refers to fasting as anorexia, and ascetic writing as propaganda. Like Casiday above, Grimm's work crosses the line into polemic.

Despite these caveats Grimm's study serves as an introduction to a larger historical debate within the medievalist community. This debate between Caroline Walker Bynum and Rudolph Bell's work takes place outside of the period of my thesis, yet it still touches on themes that I intend to cover within my thesis.³¹ In essence, the debate between Bynum and Bell centers on why female ascetics fasted to the extremes they did. Bynum takes the position that the motive was cultural, arguing that food was a powerful symbol in their ascetic practice. Bell, on the other hand, argues that the extreme fasting was psychological, comparing the medieval ascetic women to those of modern anorexics and bulimics. While not directly involved in this debate, my thesis will still draw important context from it.

³⁰ Veronika Grimm, *From Feasting to Fasting, The Evolution of A Sin: Attitudes to food in late antiquity* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

³¹ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987). and Rudolph Bell, *Holy Anorexia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

Examination of the current scholarship on Cassian and Jerome suggests that there are plenty of spaces for an academic intervention. From the strong foundation of secondary literature on the development of western monasticism, this thesis compares the differing viewpoints of St. Jerome and St. John Cassian when it came to fasting. It demonstrates that St. John Cassian's more moderate approach was a reforming response to the more extreme view espoused by St. Jerome. Secondly, it provides an intellectual history on this part of monastic thought as it evolved in the Latin west. Thirdly, it adds to the ongoing historiographical re-evaluations of both St. Jerome and St. John Cassian. Finally, it serves as a window into a period of monastic history that is understudied.

Methodology:

If there is one thing the early church fathers did, it was to leave behind a surfeit of writings. This is particularly true of both principals of my thesis, St. Jerome and St. John Cassian. In conversation with scholarship I discussed in the earlier section, their writings provide a strong foundation from which to build my own arguments. Below is how I approached my research.

This study draws on a variety of sources written by both of my principals. First, St. Jerome's letters, hagiographies, and writings on religious controversies are critical. For these works, St Jerome was writing for an audience made up of largely Roman and Gallic aristocrats, particularly female aristocrats. For St. John Cassian, on the other hand, I analyze selections from his *Institutes*, which provided advice and guidelines on a monastic life. Further, I incorporate selections from St. John Cassian's *Conferences*, which provided a theological underpinning for the advice

given in the *Institutes*. While St. Jerome was writing for largely female aristocrats, St. John Cassian was writing for a male monastic audience.

Determining the context for these writings is especially important. Otherwise for a topic as esoteric as mine it would be easy to render both Jerome and John Cassian as abstractions. I have established them as real people, who did real things. I needed to make the late antique world in which they lived clear, so that I could establish that both men, and their ideas on fasting, were rough contemporaries. This permitted me to demonstrate why John Cassian was a reforming voice in pre-Benedictine monastic thought.

This approach has allowed me to determine the fasting methodology each man preached. Beyond that, and even more importantly, I explore the justification behind the methodology that each man preached. for Jerome, this was in pursuit of eternal virginity, or in the case of St. John Cassian, it was the first step in the total surrender of the self to God. Finally, this study determines the audience that each man was writing for. St. Jerome, for example was writing for a largely aristocratic, female, audience in Rome and Gaul, whereas St. John Cassian was writing for a Gallic male monastic audience. These are the building blocks for the comparison on which this study rests.

Finally, this study is attentive to the metaphor of the desert each man used to support their arguments for fasting. This approach helps measure the competing influence each man had in the monastic community, by tracing how each in their writing used their experience in the east to craft a metaphor based on the experience and ideals of the monastic communities of the Egyptian and Syrian desert. This

metaphor of monastic life, denial, restraint and service, informed their monastic writings in different ways: Highly penitential for St. Jerome, and a place of learning and contemplation for St. John Cassian. Perhaps more importantly, each man used his ties to the desert to give their arguments spiritual authority, meaning how closely their arguments went to those that went before them, and was a mark of influence within their monastic writing.

Chapter Summery:

My aim with this study is to analyze how each of these two men took monastic themes and came up with two very different approaches to monastic thought. Then I will seek to determine which of the very different approaches, whether the eremitic proposed by Jerome, or the cenobitic proposed by St. John Cassian, would eventually prove to be more influential in the nascent monastic movement in the Latin west. My thesis is one of the first academic works to go beyond putting St. Jerome and St. John Cassian into just a conversation about fasting. Instead it will offer a point by point break down of not only the methods they proposed, but the theology behind the practice, and what they hoped to achieve. By doing this, this thesis will prove that St. John Cassian arrived in the west as a reforming voice and ultimately became far more influential in western thought, though certainly less well known outside of academic and monastic circles.

The first chapter provides a biographic study of each man and an overview of each man's writings on fasting. I analyze their monastic writings to measure what their message on fasting was. This includes their audience and how each man used the metaphor of the desert to buttress their arguments. St. Jerome's work establishes

a baseline which allows me to demonstrate how St. John Cassian came in as a reformer to influence later monastic thinkers.

The second chapter continues the approach of the first as it places St. Jerome and St. John Cassian into a conversation. This conversation shifts to the role fasting played in the larger picture of their monastic thought. For instance, St Jerome used fasting in his monastic thought as both a method of penitence, and a way to both purify and retain purity. Compare this to St. John Cassian, for whom fasting was one of several tools to help clear the mind in order to prepare for a more perfect contemplation of God.

In the epilogue I move away from the comparison of St. Jerome and St. John Cassian, to ponder a lingering question, would Cassian have been as moderate if he had been writing for a mixed gender audience? To at least provide the parameters of the problem, I perform a thought experiment that places the writings of Cassian and his mentor in the attitudes towards women of their day. Hopefully this will set the stage for a scholar that will come after me.

This study is an attempt to track the development of monastic thought in the western Mediterranean. By the conclusion of the last chapter, I hope to have demonstrated how St. John Cassian's more flexible, yet theologically sophisticated, view on fasting would prove to be the more influential of the two. This study is a chance to work on a perhaps little understood topic, and, add a new voice to the scholarly choir on the subject.

Chapter One: Audience and Methodology

Introduction

For Christian ascetics the search for God begins with the purification of self. Imitating Christ's crucifixion on Calvary, ascetics mortify their flesh to conquer bodily desires. This mortification can take many forms, such as wearing hair shirts, vigils, hard work, and most importantly for this thesis, fasting. Fasting, simply put, is a reduction of or a complete abstinence from food, in an attempt to overcome the sin of gluttony, and other desires. Modern ascetic monastic rules such as the Rule of St. Benedict offer a methodology that is moderate, relatively speaking. The forty-first rule states that a monk's diet should consist of two meals a day in normal time, and reduced to one in the Lenten season.³² For ascetics of fifth century Rome and Gaul, however, Benedict and his rule were another century away, and they had no clear picture of the right way to fast. St. Jerome and St. John Cassian offered Latin ascetics competing methodologies of fasting. The first is the almost heroic methodology of St. Jerome, which was an extreme struggle against both the body and desire. The second was the much more flexible and pragmatic approach of St. John Cassian.

The key to understanding the methodology for fasting that each man offered can be found in the historical context in which each man lived. This context shaped not only the methodology, but the audience, and serves to establish the basis of comparison between the two men. For instance, both men had similarities that

³² St. Benedict *The Rule of St. Benedict* Ed. Jan M. Ziolkowski (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 143.

naturally lend themselves to comparison. Aside from being rough contemporaries, Jerome and John knew Latin and Greek, so they were deeply familiar with the works of the Greek east. Perhaps more importantly, each had claims to, and used the language of, the desert to provide experiential and spiritual authority to their claims. Because each in their own way served as bridges between east and west, an examination of their approaches to fasting will demonstrate how the monastic movement began to evolve in the west as the world transitioned from the antique to the medieval.

St. Jerome context, audience, and methodology:

The life of St. Jerome began promisingly enough. Jerome was, in 331 CE, born to a wealthy Christian family (though he was never baptized) from the town of Stridon which is believed to be in what is now Dalmatia. At the age of thirteen, Jerome was sent to Rome to attend the finest grammar school in the city, if not the western empire. After he finished school, Jerome's life took a surprising turn. After arriving at the imperial court at Trier, Jerome abruptly left the government service to become a monk.³³ Jerome was oddly taciturn about his conversion experience, but certain things are known.³⁴ Jerome was baptized in Rome and started to gain a more than passing interest in Christianity. Scholars speculate that he transcription of Christian works like the *Life of Anthony* for the imperial court was a cause of his conversion.³⁵ Whatever the cause of his conversion, Jerome's path was set, much to his family's dismay.

³³ J.N.D. Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1975), 20.

³⁴ Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies*, 26.

³⁵ Stefan Rebenich, *Jerome* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 7.

Jerome's monastic career began in earnest, where so many others had before him, in the desert. Possibly fleeing a disagreement in the monastic community, he in which he was living, and his disappointed family, Jerome set out on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. He made it as far as Chalcis in the Syrian Desert where he settled in a monastic community.³⁶ By Jerome's own account of his time in Chalcis, his stay in the desert was a mixed experience of the joys of ascetic life and penitential suffering.³⁷ It is important to be somewhat skeptical of Jerome's account of his stay in Chalcis, due to his penchant for exaggeration, and tendency towards self-promotion. Jerome probably lived in relative comfort near the estate of his patron at the time.³⁸ Whatever the case, while he was in Chalcis, he began to write. Then something of a pattern started developing in Jerome's life. He found himself the target of opprobrium and abuse at the hands of the other monks in the community for taking on the orthodox position on the Trinity.³⁹ This again is if we take Jerome at his word.⁴⁰ The hostile reaction from his monastic community, and the isolation and other rigors of monastic life, caused Jerome to admit defeat and leave his monastic community.⁴¹

After leaving Chalcis, Jerome began to carefully craft his image to attract a specific audience. He sought to make himself the spiritual and ascetic authority for the Latin aristocracy. In Antioch, Jerome composed his answer to Athanasius's *Life of*

³⁶ Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies*, 46.

³⁷ St. Jerome, "Letter XXII" in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series Volume VI. The Principle works of St. Jerome*. Trans. W.H. Freemantle, Ed. Philp Schaff (Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), 36.

³⁸ Rebenich, *Jerome*, 13

³⁹ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series Volume VI*, 21.

⁴⁰ This is a relatively common trope in Christian writings. Peter Abelard is one example he uses this in his disagreement with William of Champeaux for example.

⁴¹ Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies*, 55-56.

Anthony, the almost certainly fictional *The Life of Paul the First Hermit*.⁴² Jerome crafted his hero, Paul of Thebes, to appeal to a newly pious Roman aristocracy hungry for an ascetic example to whom they could relate. Paul was that example. Not only was Paul a classically educated Roman aristocrat, he was pure to the point that St. Antony, in their meeting marveled at his purity and holiness.⁴³ Needless to say, this went over extremely well with the audience Jerome sought to cultivate, and this work became a smash hit.

While in Constantinople, Jerome spotted other opportunities to build on his reputation. Fluent in both Latin and Greek, Jerome spotted a need in the Latin west for Greek theological works. Starting with Origen's commentaries on the *Song of Songs*, Jerome began translating theological works for a Latin audience that was hungry for them. Along with his translations, Jerome began producing his own biblical exegesis.⁴⁴ As his reputation grew he attracted attention and patronage from powerful members of Constantinople's ecclesiastic elite, and he studied under such lights as Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa.⁴⁵ All of this left him well positioned when he returned to Rome in 382.

Rome in the late fourth, and early fifth centuries was an obvious destination for Jerome. Even though it had declined in influence and power after Constantine had split the empire, it was still the shining jewel of the late antique western Mediterranean. After the legalization of Christianity, it spread like wildfire through

⁴² A fact that was pointed out by some of his contemporaries much to Jerome's annoyance, see St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series Volume VI*, 303.

⁴³ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 299.

⁴⁴ Rebenich, *Jerome*, 27-29.

⁴⁵ Rebenich, *Jerome*, 23.

the Roman aristocracy. The newly Christianizing aristocracy of Rome offered Jerome a pool of educated, urbane, and perhaps most importantly, wealthy converts who were hungry for the word of God, and authentic Christian experience. Jerome presented himself to this hungry audience as uniquely prepared to give them what they were seeking..⁴⁶ Jerome believed he had found his place.

Through his writings and preaching, Jerome cast an eye towards his intended audience, the Latin aristocracy. In his writings, as a way to curry favor, he wedded traditional Roman class consciousness to Christian belief systems.⁴⁷ He wrote in his letter to Eustochium, the daughter of one his wealthiest supporters, Paula, that she should “Learn in this respect a holy arrogance; know that you are better than they.”⁴⁸ In this respect, Jerome, of course, was not really that unique among the Latin writers of his day. Others, like Sulpicius Severus, Hilary of Arles, and even John Cassian sought in one way or another to attract the Latin aristocracy. What made Jerome unique, though, was his forward and obvious self-promotion in his attempt to establish himself as biblical and ascetic authority to the rich and famous of Rome.

Jerome’s audience was not just confined to the city of Rome and its environs. Jerome’s readership encompassed much of the Latin world, but Gaul was of particular importance. Roughly fifteen percent of his entire corpus of correspondence was to and from Gallic individuals. Gaul was important to Jerome’s readership in his

⁴⁶ Rebenich, *Jerome*, 29-34 and Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies*, 90-91.

⁴⁷ Rebenich, *Jerome*, 36.

⁴⁸ There is a small variance in translation here, depending on source it’s either arrogance or pride. St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 28.

bid to establish himself as a biblical and ascetic authority.⁴⁹ Jerome's influence went far beyond Rome, to the entire Latin speaking world of the early fifth century. He was established as a leading light of monastic thought in the west before Cassian.⁵⁰

The makeup of the audience that Jerome cultivated is interesting, in that he attracted Roman aristocratic women. Jerome could not have found a more welcoming place than the newly Christianized Rome of the late fourth century. Newly converted aristocratic Roman women rushed to offer patronage to Christian thinkers. One such example is Melania the Elder, who financed Jerome's one time friend turned enemy Rufinus as spiritual advisor.⁵¹ A full discussion of this is beyond the scope of this thesis, but Rome, partially because of old pagan attitudes that upper-class women should live up to the stature of their birth, produced a grouping of highly educated, and influential elite Roman women. For instance, Marcella, one of Jerome's earliest supporters and friends to whom he wrote often, was as fluent in Greek, if not more so, than many of her male contemporaries, and Marcella owned an extensive Greek and Latin library. Paula, and her daughter Eustochium, were equally educated and devout.⁵² Possibly because of Origen's influence, and obvious fiduciary gains, Jerome welcomed and encouraged his female followers' efforts to learn Greek, and to study scripture. All of this would provide eager readers for his thoughts on fasting.

⁴⁹ Ralph Mathisen, "The Use and Misuse of Jerome in Gaul during Late Antiquity" in *Jerome of Stridon: His Life, Writings and Legacy* Ed. Andrew Cain and Josef Lössl (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2009), 191-209.

⁵⁰ Owen Chadwick, *John Cassian* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 35.

⁵¹ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 396-370.

⁵² Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, 373.

In his early career, Jerome was an admirer of Origen, the great Alexandrian theologian of the second century. In fact, Jerome, in his early career, provided translations of certain of Origen's work, such as his commentary on the Song of Songs from Greek into Latin. Jerome went so far as to plagiarize Origen's work on several different occasions. For his readers in the west St. Jerome was trying to position himself as a late fourth century Latin Origen, going so far as to praise Origen as an immortal genius.⁵³ This praise had potentially disastrous consequences later in Jerome's life.

In 393 CE Jerome's hero Origen had been denounced for heresy. To make matters worse for Jerome, his lifelong friend Rufinus had cited Jerome favorably in his own translation of Origen. This left Jerome in a terrible dilemma. If Origen was denounced in the west, so too would Jerome be, and the money from grateful travelers that stopped by his monastery would dry up.⁵⁴ However, if Origen was not denounced in the west, his old friend Rufinus, who had not been exiled like Jerome, would take over as the spiritual guru for the influential Latin world.⁵⁵ Jerome was in it up to his neck and there was really only one way out.

Jerome reacted to this mess by going on the attack. Jerome had always tacitly, though never fully, embraced Origen's notions of a fully spiritual afterlife. Part of the more problematic teachings of Origen was a neo-Platonic understanding of scripture, that allowed for the physical body to be transcended after death in unity with Christ. This is where Jerome turned on his former idol, Origen. He launched a series of

⁵³ Peter Brown, *The body and society: men, women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 379.

⁵⁴ Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies*, 225-256.

⁵⁵ Brown, *The body and society: men, women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, 379.

blistering attacks not only on his former childhood friend, Rufinius, but Origen as well. Jerome concluded that Origen's transcendent view of the eschaton put the immediacy of the rewards of an ascetic life in doubt.⁵⁶ What good would fasting, or any mortification of the flesh do, if one would rise in the corporeal form of angel? As a result of this controversy, Jerome backed away fully from the resurrection of the soul alone, into a full bodily resurrection. This reversal would have a pronounced effect on Jerome's view on fasting.

For Jerome, the ascetic life was beset from all sides by the inequities of sin and the tyranny of temptation.⁵⁷ It is with this thought in mind that Jerome developed his fasting methodology. Jerome cast fasting and other forms of mortification of the flesh as some sort of heroic struggle against vice, particularly lust. As it stands, Jerome really did not leave a coherent systematic methodology for fasting, unlike monastic writers who would come after him. Instead his instruction on fasting, and other parts of monastic life, can be highlighted in generalized advice and exemplars, which were often at odds with each other. For instance, the advice would be moderate while the exemplar extreme. Still, perhaps due to the nature of his audience, or following in the footsteps of patristic orthodoxy, Jerome focused his writings mostly on fasting as a way of controlling sexual desire.⁵⁸ This control was key to the metaphor of the desert that was bound up in his views on fasting.

The reason Jerome was so extreme in his asceticism was due to his views on virginity and its preservation. Jerome held that preserving chastity and virginity relied

⁵⁶ Brown, *The body and society: men, women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, 380

⁵⁷ Ezek. 25:17 paraphrased.

⁵⁸ Teresa M. Shaw *Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1988), 97.

on mastery of the body, and that meant in a very real sense that attaining salvation is patently impossible without fasting.⁵⁹ We can see this in Jerome's advice to Eustochium: he stated that "Not that the Creator and Lord of all takes pleasure in a rumbling and empty stomach, or in fevered lungs; but that these are indispensable as means to the preservation of chastity."⁶⁰ Control of the body through fasting gave the soul mastery over the other five senses from which temptation may enter.⁶¹ For Jerome's work, fasting is the key to defeating lust, as every other sin a monk could cast off easily.⁶²

In a further departure from other patristic writers, St. Jerome held that virginity was not something that should be celebrated; instead, it should be guarded carefully. Jerome does not share other patristic writers' thoughts that the ascetic body can somehow transcend lust. Instead he returns to a theme he hits again and again; struggle, against sin, temptation and most importantly, lust. In light of this he wrote that, "We must proceed by a different path, for our purpose is not the praise of virginity but its preservation. To know that it is a good thing is not enough: when we have chosen it, we must guard it with jealous care."⁶³ Virginity was such a precious commodity that the monk had to struggle mightily to protect it because once it was lost it was gone forever. Writing of Eustochium's sister Blesilla, who had taken a husband, he claimed that "She has lost, at once, the crown of virginity and the pleasures of wedlock... still can you not imagine the continual crosses which she has

⁵⁹ Shaw, *Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity*, 97.

⁶⁰ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 26.

⁶¹ Shaw, *Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity*, 97.

⁶² St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series* 31.

⁶³ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 31.

to bear, daily seeing in her sister what she has lost herself.”⁶⁴ The key then for preserving virginity lay within mastering the body, and mastering the body lay in fasting.⁶⁵

Fasting for Jerome seemed to be reasonable. His initial instructions for fasting were relatively moderate, in that he sought to remove from young men and women the sensual desire that comes with ingesting food and supplant the desire for food with a desire for God.⁶⁶ In his letter to Eustochium, Jerome wrote:

A meagre diet which leaves the appetite always unsatisfied is to be preferred to fasts three days long. It is much better to take a little every day than some days to abstain wholly and on others to surfeit oneself. That rain is best which falls slowly to the ground. Showers that come down suddenly and with violence wash away the soil.⁶⁷

If Jerome’s writings on fasting were to stop here, there would be absolutely no basis to compare him with monastic writers. He writes that “It is idle to carry an empty stomach if, in two or three days' time, the fast is to be made up for by repletion.”⁶⁸ These words are echoed by many others of his ascetic contemporaries, such as John Cassian, who writes almost the exact same advice in his *Institute* on fasting.⁶⁹ This seeming moderation is deceptive though, in that Jerome expected his audience to use this as a bare minimum when it came to fasting.

⁶⁴ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 27.

⁶⁵ A more in depth analysis of St. Jerome and virginity will come in the next chapter.

⁶⁶ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 27.

⁶⁷ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 106.

⁶⁸ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 28.

⁶⁹ John Cassian “Institute 5” in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series Volume XI. Sulpitius Severus, Vincent of Lerins, and John Cassian* Trans by Henry Wace, Ed. Phillip Schaff Ed. (Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), 235.

As his advice on fasting continued, his extreme interpretation of the desert metaphor became far more manifest. Until very late in life, he almost neglects to speak about what foods a monk should eat. Instead, for most of his life he writes on what foods to avoid, and that one should avoid satiety.⁷⁰ Jerome based his writing on foods to avoid on the Galenic view of human physiology. Like Galen, Jerome held that foods that increased the body's heat also increased the body's sexual desire. Thus, such foods should be avoided at all costs. Jerome wrote "Because natural heat inevitably kindles in a man sensual passion, he is praised and accounted happy who, when foul suggestions arise in his mind, gives them no quarter, but dashes them instantly against the rock."⁷¹ Further, Jerome was particularly hostile to meat eaters. He often quoted the Apostle Paul when he wrote that "Meats for the belly and the belly for meats, but God shall destroy both it and them."⁷² For Jerome, meat was associated not only with raising the body's temperature, but eating it lead to the most lustful of behavior.⁷³ Beyond that, Jerome did not write until late in life on what exactly a monk should eat.

Jerome would describe this in his work *The Life of Hilarion*, Where he laid out an idealized diet of a monk beyond bread and salt. Some scholars hold that this is a sign of his moderating position on fasting but that does not hold up under scrutiny.⁷⁴ Jerome writes the following about St. Hilarion's diet:

From his twentieth to his twenty-seventh year, for three years his food was half a pint of lentils moistened with cold water, and for the next three dry

⁷⁰ Shaw, *Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity*, 102.

⁷¹ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 24.

⁷² St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 26.

⁷³ Shaw, *Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity*, 105

⁷⁴ Shaw, *Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity*, 109

bread with salt and water. From his twenty-seventh year onward to the thirtieth, he supported himself on wild herbs and the raw roots of certain shrubs. From his thirty-first to his thirty-fifth year, he had for food six ounces of barley bread, and vegetables slightly cooked without oil.⁷⁵

This is an extreme diet. The half pint of lentils that Jerome mentions are roughly 300 calories a day; a modern grown man needs at least four times that in order to avoid starvation.⁷⁶ With this said, Jerome's exhortations to extreme fasting really come to the fore in his exemplars.

Despite the paucity of guidance given to his readers, Jerome continued to exhort extreme fasting. For instance, in his first great work, *Life of Paul, the First Hermit*, Jerome, in order to describe Paul's superior purity, wrote that he lived on half a loaf of barley bread and muddy water, while another monk in the area lived on naught but five figs per day.⁷⁷ Even though this was his first major theological work, certain themes regarding fasting began to appear. Aping Athanasius, Jerome couches his examples of fasting in terms of a heroic struggle against sin. Regarding his friend Bonosus, St Jerome wrote that Satan "will come, it may be, when the limbs are weary with fasting, and rack them with the pangs of disease; but the cry of the apostle will repel him: When I am weak, then am I strong, and my strength is made perfect in weakness."⁷⁸ This is a theme and a saying that he would continue to expound on.

This trend of exhortation to extreme asceticism continued upon his entry into Roman society. He writes glowingly of Asella, a teenager when she began living an ascetic life at slightly older than twelve, and for whom "Fasting was her recreation

⁷⁵ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 303.

⁷⁶ Lentils USDA <<https://ndb.nal.usda.gov/ndb/foods/show/303689>> (accessed 3/15/2019)

⁷⁷ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 299

⁷⁸ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 36.

and hunger her refreshment. If she took food it was not from love of eating, but because of bodily exhaustion; and the bread and salt and cold water to which she restricted herself sharpened her appetite more than they appeased it.”⁷⁹ He goes on to write that, “All the year round she observed a continual fast, remaining without food for two or three days at a time; but when Lent came she ... fasted nearly from week's end to week's end with a cheerful countenance. What would perhaps be incredible, were it not that with God all things are possible, is that she lived this life until her fiftieth year without weakening her digestion or bringing on herself the pain of colic.”⁸⁰ He ends the letter praising Asella's heroic fasting with an exhortation that she be an example to the women of Rome: “Let widows and virgins imitate her, let wedded wives make much of her, let sinful women fear her, and let bishops look up to her.”⁸¹ Jerome's usage of Asella as an exemplar of extreme fasting demonstrates his *modus operandi* when it comes to fasting. His more moderate instructions to his readers were in fact the bare minimum of ascetic life. What his readers should be doing is aspiring to the same ascetic heights as Asella.

The next example is perhaps the one for which Jerome is most famous: Blaesilla, the daughter of one his staunchest supporters, Paula, and sister to Eustochium. Blaesilla had already been previously chided by Jerome for not living up to the life of a consecrated virgin, noting that she had “lost her crown” and was

⁷⁹ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 43.

⁸⁰ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 43.

⁸¹ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 43.

secondary to her sister for taking a husband and losing her virginity.⁸² When her husband had died, she was struck with an severe illness, converted upon recovery and zealously took to the ascetic life. Jerome wrote glowingly of the lengths that she went to in giving up her old life of aristocratic privilege, and taking on a life of extreme ascetic zeal. Jerome wrote glowingly of the extreme fasting and mortification regime that she was undergoing in the pursuit of the chastity of sanctified widowhood.⁸³ Several months into this extreme ascetic regimen, Blaesilla was dead; she had starved herself to death.⁸⁴ In a revealing passage to her mother, Jerome praised Blaesilla for being free of the “burden of the flesh” and in heavenly glory.⁸⁵ What becomes telling then is Jerome’s reaction to Blaesilla’s death.

Jerome’s reaction to Blaesilla’s passing was complicated. It is true that he did mourn her, after a fashion. He wrote that, “For her sake I do not grieve, but for myself I must; my loss is too great to be borne with resignation.”⁸⁶ He would go on further to praise her zeal, intelligence, and self-abasement. He praised the fact that she grieved more from the loss of her virginity, rather than the loss of her husband. Interestingly, he even praised the fasting that killed her. Jerome wrote that “Indeed, her self-abasement was so perfect that she dressed no better than her maids and was only distinguished from them by the greater ease of her walk. Her steps tottered with weakness, her face was pale and quivering, her slender neck scarcely upheld her

⁸² St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 27.

⁸³ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 48.

⁸⁴ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 48.

⁸⁵ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 48.

⁸⁶ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 49.

head.”⁸⁷ In all of this mourning that Jerome was performing for Blaesilla, he was not mourning her as human being. Instead Jerome’s eulogizing served as a call for imitation. Jerome’s reaction to those who grieved beyond that was telling.

The rest of the letter Jerome wrote after the death of Blaesilla served as a chastisement for Blaesilla’s mother Paula. During Blaesilla’s funeral, Paula had become so overcome with grief, she had fainted.⁸⁸ This was too much for Jerome, even though he claimed that, “this entire letter is written in tears.”⁸⁹ He wrote to Paula that instead of grieving for Blaesilla, she should be celebrating her because she has passed from darkness into light, as all good Christians must. Jerome told Paula that while he understands her grief as a mother, he urged her to be stoic in the face of grief. Finishing with “What crosses and tortures, think you, must not our Blaesilla endure to see Christ angry with you, though it be but a little! At this moment she cries to you as you weep: If ever you loved me, mother, if I was nourished at your breast, if I was taught by your precepts, do not grudge me my exaltation, do not so act that we shall be separated forever.”⁹⁰ In this chastisement of Paula on the topic of fasting, Jerome tipped his hand slightly.

In her grief, Paula had, at least in Jerome’s eyes, been causing a scene. One of the things that she had been doing was refusing food, not in resistance to sin or temptation, but out of grief. Jerome’s criticism was savage. He wrote that “Have you no fear, then, lest the Saviour may say to you: Are you angry, Paula, that your

⁸⁷ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 49.

⁸⁸ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 49.

⁸⁹ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 49.

⁹⁰ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 51.

daughter has become my daughter? ... You deny yourself food, not to fast but to gratify your grief; and such abstinence is displeasing to me. Such fasts are my enemies. I receive no soul which forsakes the body against my will.”⁹¹ Jerome’s reaction was so harsh because in his view, this was a selfish display of grief, rather than fasting as a method of self-abnegation. Further, Jerome tipped his hand on how Paula’s behavior was affecting his reputation in Rome, when he told her that after she had fainted:

whispers such as these were audible in the crowd. Is not this what we have often said. She weeps for her daughter, killed with fasting. She wanted her to marry again, that she might have grandchildren. How long must we refrain from driving these detestable monks out of Rome? Why do we not stone them or hurl them into the Tiber? They have misled this unhappy lady; that she is not a nun from choice is clear. No heathen mother ever wept for her children as she does for Blaesilla.⁹²

Jerome was wise to think this was catastrophe; shortly after Blaesilla’s death and in the controversy that followed he was exiled from Rome.

The entire episode with Blaesilla represents what is perhaps the most dangerous part of Jerome’s language on fasting. With his examples of Asella, Paul the first hermit, and others, Jerome notes that although their method of fasting is extreme, but through God all things are possible. This equation to success in fasting with holiness can be disastrous especially with Jerome’s focus on chastity in which he labeled the virginal and chaste, as “brides of Christ.” This sets up for Jerome’s largely female readers a trend towards self-destructive behavior as the episode with Blaesilla

⁹¹ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 54.

⁹² St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 53.

reveals. Interestingly, among historians there are two competing schools of thought as to why this is so.

The first school of thought is very direct and provides a simple answer. In short, extreme fasting such as what Jerome preached, can lead to an *anorexia nervosa* like state which historians such as Rudolph Bell and others call Holy Anorexia.⁹³ Bell's argument is simple: that women in particular turn to anorexia in order to gain control over their lives. What makes the anorexia holy, is purely cultural in that instead of latching onto thinness as a desired trait, women attempted to become holy instead⁹⁴. This connect can be clear to see in Blaesilla's case. Within a few short months she'd married, become widowed, then became deathly ill. All the while Jerome was in her ear preaching extreme asceticism. Blaesilla fits neatly into Bell's argument because the causes of her death can be interpreted in the framework Bell constructed.

It is not necessarily that clear cut, however. There is another school of thought among historians, championed by Caroline Walker Bynum, who argued, like Bell, that fasting was a form of bodily control.⁹⁵ However, Bynum and others argue that a modern diagnosis of anorexia, though the symptoms may fit to some degree, does not fit late antique and medieval women like Blaesilla.⁹⁶ Bynum gives several reasons for the rejection of a pat analysis of anorexia. First, Bynum argues that the scholarly knowledge of the lives of women like Blaesilla is far too fragmentary for a concrete diagnosis of anorexia. Indeed, what we know of Blaesilla's life is discussed only in

⁹³ Rudolph Bell, *Holy Anorexia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 19.

⁹⁴ Bell, *Holy Anorexia*, 20.

⁹⁵ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast the Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1987), 5.

⁹⁶ Bynum *Holy Feast and Holy Fast the Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, 204.

three of Jerome's letters. Furthermore, Bynum continues that Bell and the others have a reductionist tendency to ignore the symbolic and cultural relationship that late antique and medieval women had with food and its consumption, instead labeling everything as a symptom.⁹⁷ Bynum's solution is more symbolic, and it fits the situation with Blaesilla just as well.

Like Bell, Bynum argues that the extreme fasting that women like Blaesilla undertook was a matter of control. Through fasting women could control themselves and their environments.⁹⁸ There was a distinctly symbolic aspect as well to fasting. Bynum writes "Food was flesh, and flesh was suffering and fertility. In renouncing ordinary food and directing their being toward the food that is Christ, women moved to God not merely by abandoning their flawed physicality but also by becoming the suffering and feeding humanity of the body on the cross, the food on the altar."⁹⁹ For Bynum, fasting was a symbolic union of the theological *Imitatio Christi* and medieval views of women's bodies. Through fasting, women sought to merge with Christ. It is a much more nuanced and cultural view of women's extreme fasting. This much more nuanced view of is what make's Bynum's theory ultimately superior to Bell's. Bell's theory ultimately reduces the complex web of cultural, theological, and symbolic relationships medieval, and late antique, women had with food to a psychological disorder.¹⁰⁰ Further Bynum's theory takes into account the limited information available on women like Blaesilla. Finally, consider that the *Imitatio*

⁹⁷ Bynum *Holy Feast and Holy Fast the Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, 206.

⁹⁸ Bynum *Holy Feast and Holy Fast the Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, 5.

⁹⁹ Bynum *Holy Feast and Holy Fast the Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, 6.

¹⁰⁰ Bynum *Holy Feast and Holy Fast the Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, 206.

Christi was the an end goal of Jerome's extreme ascetic preaching, which will always be tied to Blaesilla's death.

Jerome's writing on fasting is perhaps the last gasp of the solitary ascetic superhero struggling mightily against sin. It is certain that his ascetic vision attracted many Latin speaking aristocrats, both male and female, to the ascetic life. That said, its lack of overall direction, and extreme nature, would lead many would be monks to failure. There would have to be another way, and that way was offered by John Cassian.

St. John Cassian context, audience, and methodology:

John Cassian is an enigma. There is so little concrete information about him that even his full name is uncertain. There's a high degree of confidence that his first name is Iohannes, the Latinized version of John, because he mentioned it three times in his work.¹⁰¹ His last name, Cassian, is less certain, a derivation of the common Roman name of Cassius only attributed to him by contemporaries.¹⁰² The same is true of where he was born. Cassian only left a few clues as to where he was born, namely that it was forested and cold. Once again Cassian's contemporaries probably fill in the blanks giving many theories as to where he was born. From textual clues in Cassian's writing and information from his contemporaries, the most plausible is that he was born in Scythia Minor, now modern-day Romania.¹⁰³ Of the rest of his life tantalizingly little is known besides passing hints. One hint was that he had a sister.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Columba Stewart, *Cassian the Monk* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 4.

¹⁰² Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 4.

¹⁰³ Owen Chadwick, *John Cassian* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 9.

¹⁰⁴ John Cassian, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 279.

Another was that he was classically educated.¹⁰⁵ Beyond that, nothing of any substance is known.

Like Jerome before him, John Cassian got his monastic start in the desert. In approximately 380 CE Cassian, with a friend and countryman Germanus, settled in a Greek speaking cenobitic community near the Cave of the Nativity in Bethlehem. It is believed that he arrived and left the community before Jerome formed his own monastery because they made no mention of each other. A conversation with another monk, who would turn out to be an abba of his own community of monks, ignites the fire of curiosity in the two monks, and Cassian and Germanus decided, after promising to return, to tour the monastic communities of Egypt.¹⁰⁶ They never returned to Bethlehem, and spent the next seventeen years travelling Egypt.¹⁰⁷

In 399 CE the Bishop of Alexandria, Theophilus, sent a letter anathematizing the Origenist monks in the Egyptian deserts who were on the losing end of a controversy on whether to anthropomorphize God.¹⁰⁸ In the rioting and violence that followed Cassian and Germanus, though never explicitly Origenist, were forced to flee their beloved Egypt.¹⁰⁹ They eventually found themselves under the protection of the bishop of Constantinople, John Chrysostom. Chrysostom himself ordained Germanus to the priesthood, and Cassian to the diaconate.¹¹⁰ Eventually, in 403, with the Origenist controversy still rumbling on, Chrysostom would be deposed as bishop of Constantinople, and Cassian and Germanus were chosen to be part of the

¹⁰⁵ John Cassian, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 441.

¹⁰⁶ Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 4.

¹⁰⁷ Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 4.

¹⁰⁸ The Origenist monks argued against the personification of god.

¹⁰⁹ Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 12.

¹¹⁰ Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 13.

delegation to bring Chrysostom's appeal to the Pope, which was ultimately denied.

Cassian disappeared from the historical record for a time afterward.

Cassian then re-appears in Marseilles twelve years later. Upon the invitation of the bishop Castor of Apt, Cassian would establish two monasteries; one, the Abbey of St. Victor for men, and another for women apparently called Saint-Sauveur.¹¹¹ Then in 420 Cassian wrote *The Institutes*, a book of practical advice for the running of a monastery, and *The Conferences*, which was a book of ethical divinity which contained the underlying monastic theory.¹¹²

John Cassian's re-appearance in Marseilles was fortuitous. The monastic movement in Gaul was in poor shape with an even worse reputation in the beginning of the fifth century. Monks were held in very low esteem by the still aristocratic pagans. The pagan Rutilius wrote of the island monastic community of Lérins that it was a, "A filthy island of men who flee light" and said of a relative that had gone to join the community, "mad folly of the demented brain."¹¹³ Further, monks held wide reputations for poor behaviors, while demeaning themselves in public, and were referred to as pigs in black robes.¹¹⁴ To make matters worse, the Gallic country side was filled with small anarchic bands that held to no rule but their own.¹¹⁵ In Spain, it got to the point that after the condemnation of Priscillian, that the monastic

¹¹¹ Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 14

¹¹² These works present an interesting problem. Ostensibly they contain lessons that Cassian learned at the feet of Egyptian Abbots. His work should not be read as either a history or a triptych of the monasteries of Egypt in the late fourth century, but neither is it completely fiction. What Cassian does is wrap biographical details of accounts of his time in Egypt, and historical events to highlight and give authenticity to salient points in his complete system of Ascetic theology. See Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 17-18. And Chadwick, *John Cassian*, 18.

¹¹³ Rutilius Namatianus "De reditu suo" in *Desert Christians An Introduction to Early Christian Literature* Trans. William Harmless (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 466.

¹¹⁴ Eunapius of Sardis "Vita Sopitarum" in *Desert Christians An Introduction to Early Christian Literature* Trans. William Harmless (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 466.

¹¹⁵ Chadwick, *John Cassian*, 35-36.

movement was effectively banned in Spain, and Spanish monasticism was delayed for a generation. Something needed to change in the world of Gallic monasticism which ran the same risk. It was in desperate need of reform, and John Cassian was the right man for the job.¹¹⁶ To demonstrate this, we should examine Cassian's methodology of fasting.

John Cassian's approach to fasting was almost the polar opposite of Jerome. First, instead of vague advice and radical examples, Cassian offers a detailed methodological approach to fasting which seeks to guide the male monk on the road to perfection. In a sense, and especially compared to Jerome, that's what made Cassian's work so revolutionary: He provided a methodology in the first place. It was, for the Latin west, possibly the first proto-rule for monasticism. Instead of Jerome's laser like focus on virginity and chastity, Cassian held to a more holistic view of monastic life. This differed from Jerome, for whom fasting was written in terms of struggle. To Cassian, it was only the first step in the search for God.

John Cassian agrees with Jerome in general when it comes to fasting, in that a monk should generally avoid fasting for two or three days, if he eats until repletion at the end of the fast. For Cassian, like Jerome, continence, and mastery of the body, was the primary goal of fasting. Where John Cassian starts to diverge from Jerome is that he recognizes that while a monk must chastise his body to overcome gluttony, he also at the same time must maintain his health. Cassian writes that:

And so it is a very true and most excellent saying of the Fathers that the right method of fasting and abstinence lies in the measure of moderation and bodily chastening; and that this is the aim of perfect virtue for all alike, viz.: that though we are still forced to desire it, yet we should exercise self-restraint in

¹¹⁶ Chadwick, *John Cassian*, 35-36.

the matter of the food, which we are obliged to take owing to the necessity of supporting the body.¹¹⁷

The message then is clear: a monk needs to be moderate in his fasting so that he may balance the chastisement of his body while preserving his health.

This highlights the flexibility in John Cassian's approach to fasting. He recognizes that there is not a one size fits all approach to fasting. In particular Cassian recognized that not everyone would be able to hold up to the same fasting regimen. Cassian wrote that, "For it is impossible for everyone to prolong his fast for a week, or to postpone taking refreshment during a two or three days' abstinence."¹¹⁸ He continued that health concerns can and would prevent others from making the same multiday fasts that Jerome found so agreeable. Further, he allowed for the fact that not everyone could share the same diet. Noting that "The sickly food of moistened beans does not agree with everybody: nor does a sparing diet of fresh vegetables suit all, nor is a scanty meal of dry bread permitted to all alike."¹¹⁹ At the same time he warns specifically that each person in the monastery takes a differing amount of food to reach repletion, and thus engage in the sin of Gluttony. Unlike Jerome who was writing for monks on a very high level Cassian recognized that all monks are not the same and had different needs.

Another way he differs from Jerome is that John Cassian provides three concrete instructions on how to fast. The first instruction is rather simple: that a monk should fast between determined meal times. The second instruction is that a

¹¹⁷ John Cassian, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 236.

¹¹⁸ John Cassian, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 235.

¹¹⁹ John Cassian, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 235.

monk should only avoid delicacies and only eat food that can be obtained cheaply and in great quantities. The final instruction is that a monk should only eat what his body needs to survive and to avoid satiation.¹²⁰ What is interesting is that each of these particular instructions corresponds with a monastic virtue. In this case, Cassian links obedience, humility, and temperance, as central values to a monastic life. Obedience is linked to fasting by eating at a certain time of day, humility by eating common food, and temperance by limiting the intake of food.

In a final, interesting bit of guidance, John Cassian gives guidance for the breaking of a fast, mainly for the purposes of hospitality. Cassian notes that through the virtue of charity that monks are expected to receive guests and honor the Egyptian tradition of hospitality. He wrote that:

The opportunity for fasting is always with me. But as I am going to conduct you on your way, I cannot always keep you with me. And a fast, although it is useful and advisable, is yet a free-will offering. But the exigencies of a command require the fulfilment of a work of charity. And so receiving Christ in you I ought to refresh Him but when I have sent you on your way I shall be able to balance the hospitality offered for His sake by a stricter fast on my own account. For 'the children of the bridegroom cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them:' but when he has departed, then they will rightly fast.¹²¹

This is in direct contrast to Jerome whose ascetic superheroes never broke their fasts under any circumstances. Cassian recognized that sometimes other virtues can trump the gain from fasting.

Cassian's approach to fasting is that it is inherently sustainable. The practices listed above are pragmatic approaches that were based on a lifetime of experience translated to the Latin west. Cassian was not really interested in an overarching

¹²⁰ John Cassian, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 235.

¹²¹ John Cassian, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 243.

struggle with sin, or super heroic methods of subduing the body. Instead Cassian cares more about making monastic life sustainable. Even though he does praise the lifestyle of the eremitic or solo monk, he recognized that their time had passed and instead was writing for the world as it was.¹²²

John Cassian was suspicious of heroic fasting of the type that Jerome preached. Cassian was very much a man of moderation. Just as he warned against excessive consumption of food, here he too he warned against excessive fasting. What mattered to Cassian was the concept of discretion. On this he wrote “For discretion is the mother of all virtues, as well as their guardian and regulator.”¹²³ The concept was so important to Cassian that he devoted the entirety of his second *Conference* to discretion.¹²⁴ Discretion is in effect the examination of one’s own thoughts to determine their origin. Cassian holds that thoughts come from three different sources, God, the Devil and ourselves, and discretion, which is in effect Grace, is the key for determining the correct path. Cassian calls discretion the eye and the lamp of the body which keeps the monk on what Cassian calls the “Royal Road” between falling into sin and excessive zeal.¹²⁵

When writing about discretion, John Cassian uses examples of extreme fasting as warnings to other monks, in direct contradiction to Jerome. For instance, Cassian cites the example of a brother who, while practicing a form of extreme asceticism, convinced of his own righteousness, was tricked by Satan into casting himself down a

¹²² Shaw, *Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity*, 119.

¹²³ John Cassian, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 310.

¹²⁴ Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 73.

¹²⁵ John Cassian, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 309.

well.¹²⁶ Another example that Cassian gives is of two brothers on a journey who took no food but what the Lord would provide. One of the brothers wound up starving to death because his lack of discretion lead him to turn down offered food.¹²⁷

Throughout the *Conference*, John Cassian hits on the same theme, that it was a lack of humility that caused each man to lose discretion.¹²⁸ With this taken into consideration, it appears that the “Holy Arrogance” that Jerome wrote of would have eventually led to destruction due to lack of discretion.

With this advice on fasting John Cassian offered what exactly the diet of a monk should look like. Couched within the suggested advice on fasting above, he did not give his suggested diet the force of a monastic rule as such but he recommended that the monks in Gaul follow the diet of their Egyptian counterparts. Following this diet, the monks ate two small loaves of bread weighing not more than a pound every day during the ninth hour.¹²⁹ This comes out to roughly 1100 calories a day.¹³⁰ On Saturday and Sunday, monks were allowed to relax their fasts so that that they may recover from the fasting of the week before. Also Cassian noted that monks of Egypt had supplemented their diet with lentils, fruits, vegetables, and the delicacy boiled Cherlock plant, which is a member of the mustard family.¹³¹ This is a simple diet that

¹²⁶ John Cassian, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 310.

¹²⁷ John Cassian, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 311.

¹²⁸ John Cassian, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 310.

¹²⁹ John Cassian, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 318.

¹³⁰ Multi-Grain Bread USDA < <https://ndb.nal.usda.gov/ndb/foods/show/3065051> > (accessed 3/16/2019).

¹³¹ John Cassian, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 222.

is held with the memory of his ascetic masters in the east, yet with a pragmatic eye towards his flock in the west.

John Cassian shared a rationale for fasting with Jerome and other patristic authors in that it could assist in controlling lust. Cassian, however, had a different focus from his peers. He is one of the few, if not the only, patristic author concerned with only controlling male desire with a focus on nocturnal emissions.¹³² Interestingly enough, Cassian held that in and of itself, nocturnal emissions were not sinful, if they did not come from lustful thoughts and dreams. Because Cassian recognized that there was a distinction between body and mind, fasting was proposed as part of the solution along with prayer, and vigils. The fasting piece, in a move that would reference Galen, was used to dry and cool the body, and reduce its humors, a build up of which was believed to cause said nocturnal emissions.¹³³ This was just one part of a six month test in which the monk could see whether or not perfect chastity was available. Abba Chaeremon told Cassian that if a monk withdrew from the world, fasts, holds vigils, and refrains from anger he will know if perfect chastity is indeed possible for him.¹³⁴ Again this highlights Cassian's systematic approach to the monastic life.

Intriguingly, this discussion on chastity revealed another difference in focus between John Cassian and Jerome in their wider approach to sin. Jerome's approach to fasting and mortification of the body is so severe, because he understood the body as the locus of sin. In stark difference to Jerome, Cassian made a distinction between mind and body, and so his approach to mortification is designed to address both. For

¹³² Shaw, *Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity*, 121.

¹³³ Shaw, *Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity*, 122.

¹³⁴ Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 74.

Cassian a man's sole focus on mortifying the flesh would not help him achieve perfection. The monk's mind must be turned to the contemplation and love of God.¹³⁵ This distinction between body and mind gets to the entire heart and beyond of John Cassian's monastic argument and marked a shift in emphasis in the monastic west. Prior to Cassian, much of the monastic writing, such as that done by Jerome, had focused on the solitary heroic struggle against sin and temptation. Cassian would take the discussion in a different direction.

As the discussion on fasting and chastity demonstrates, John Cassian began to shift the focus of monastic writing. To be sure, Jerome's work featured contemplation, but the focus was completely different. For Jerome contemplation was a means of resisting temptation. For Cassian this was almost precisely the opposite. A monk needed to resist sin and temptation to free the mind in order to contemplate God. Cassian invoked the parable of Martha and Mary.¹³⁶ Cassian stated that, "You see then that the Lord makes the chief good consist in meditation; i.e., in divine contemplation: whence we see that all other virtues should be put in the second place, even though we admit that they are necessary, and useful, and excellent, because they are all performed for the sake of this one thing."¹³⁷ This shift had to do with the purpose of a monk in which fasting could wind up being a distraction. Cassian stated that:

Therefore fastings, vigils, meditation on the Scriptures, self-denial, and the abnegation of all possessions are not perfection, but aids to perfection:

¹³⁵ John Cassian, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 298.

¹³⁶ St Jerome also had a reference to Martha and Mary this will be explored in greater detail next chapter.

¹³⁷ John Cassian, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 298.

because the end of that science does not lie in these, but by means of these we arrive at the end. He then will practise these exercises to no purpose, who is contented with these as if they were the highest good, and has fixed the purpose of his heart simply on them, and does not extend his efforts towards reaching the end, on account of which these should be sought: for he possesses indeed the implements of his art, but is ignorant of the end, in which all that is valuable resides. Whatever then can disturb that purity and peace of mind — even though it may seem useful and valuable — should be shunned as really hurtful, for by this rule we shall succeed in escaping harm from mistakes and vagaries, and make straight for the desired end and reach it.¹³⁸

Here Cassian reinforced the notion that mortification is only a tool, and that a monk had a much greater purpose than to solely mortify his flesh and resist sexual temptation.

For John Cassian a monk had both a goal, and a purpose. The goal he held in common with Jerome and others was the kingdom of heaven. To achieve this, Cassian gave prospective monks a goal, the kingdom of heaven, and a purpose, to attain purity of heart. Purity of Heart, which Cassian defines as charity, is a deep abiding love for God and his fellows, humanity. Purity of heart was based on the tranquility which comes from the freedom from sin, quoting the beatitude “Blessed are the pure of heart for they shall see God.”¹³⁹ To achieve purity of heart, one must devote the monastic life to pure contemplation, compunction, and unceasing prayer. The end result is the hoped-for vision of God. For Cassian, sin is distraction from the contemplation of god.¹⁴⁰

Cassian provided a much greater definition of sin than Jerome did. Jerome held that a monk could cast off other sins besides lust with ease, but Cassian was not so sanguine on the subject. Because the highest purpose of a monk was the

¹³⁸ John Cassian, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 298.

¹³⁹ Matt. 5:8

¹⁴⁰ Purity of heart will be discussed in greater detail next chapter.

contemplation of God, sins were distractions from that contemplation.¹⁴¹ He held that monastic life was a process towards perfection. He compares the monk to an athlete training to compete.¹⁴² Dealing with sin and temptation was part of that process. As part of that process, Cassian divides sin into the eight vices, of which six, Gluttony, Lust, Avarice, Wrath, Sadness, and Sloth, are bodily, and the last two, Vainglory and Pride, are mental.¹⁴³ For the six bodily sins, Cassian writes that they are all linked, and must be overcome in order “For from superfluity of gluttony fornication is sure to spring, and from fornication covetousness, from covetousness anger, from anger, dejection, and from dejection, accidie. And so we must fight against them in the same way, and with the same methods: and having overcome one, we ought always to enter the lists against the next.”¹⁴⁴ So for Cassian, since all of the sins were linked, a methodological approach was needed to defeat them.

In a further separation from Jerome on penance from sin, this fasting was not an answer to every sin. It was important to match the virtue with the vice. For instance, fasting could not cure anger, only charity could. This is a theme that Cassian hit on again and again throughout his works: “For the gain from fasting will not balance the loss from anger, nor is the profit from reading so great as the harm which results from despising a brother. Those things which are of secondary importance, such as fasting, vigils, withdrawal from the world, meditation on

¹⁴¹ John Cassian, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 388.

¹⁴² John Cassian, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 240.

¹⁴³ John Cassian, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 240.

¹⁴⁴ John Cassian, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 343.

Scripture, we ought to practice with a view to our main object.”¹⁴⁵ So with that understanding gluttony and lust must be met with chastity, anger was met with charity and so on. Like his approach to fasting Cassian’s view of sin was just as systematic.

On the whole, this comparison of the methodologies between these two fathers is enlightening. It demonstrates that John Cassian brought a definite inward-looking shift to monastic thought. As compared with Jerome, he was more concerned with the search for God, as compared with the resistance to sin and temptation. Also, Cassian’s approach to fasting is far more humble than anything Jerome could have imagined. This goes back for whom Cassian was writing. Unlike Jerome’s Roman aristocrats, who would learn “Holy Arrogance” in what can best be described as a super heroic struggle against the flesh, Cassian’s approach was a much more humble and sustainable model for the Monks of Gaul in the fifth century. The question is, then, how did fasting fit in the context of both Jerome and Cassian’s larger monastic picture, as it relates to sexual purity versus purity of heart? The next chapter will propose a solution.

¹⁴⁵ John Cassian, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 297.

Chapter Two: Dueling Concepts of Purity

Fasting for the early Christian Church is not an end unto itself. Instead, in the monastic context, it is a start of a much larger journey. In a very real sense, fasting and mortification of the flesh are central to St. Jerome's and St. John Cassian's overarching monastic goals. At a cursory glance, each man's end point is the same: purity. This, however, does not hold up under scrutiny. A closer examination of each man's concept of purity reveals the beginnings of a shift in western monastic thinking from the heroic resistance to sin and temptation, to the very purpose of monasticism itself and key to the idea of the desert that both men were trying to instill in their readers.

This study of purity as it relates to fasting will touch on all facets of monastic life as both men conceived it. St. Jerome's definition of purity was purely sexual in nature. A great deal of his monastic thought went into preserving virginity, particularly that of women.¹⁴⁶ Mastering the body through extreme measures was critical for St. Jerome, because the only sins that a monk could not cast off easily, lust and gluttony, were both bodily in nature and needed to be defeated in order to preserve virginity.¹⁴⁷ Purity for St. John Cassian had a different critical focus, purity of heart. Purity of heart was the tranquility that comes from sinlessness and the contemplation of God.¹⁴⁸ Purity of Heart was the search for God and perfection on

¹⁴⁶ Peter Brown, *The body and society: men, women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 369.

¹⁴⁷ St. Jerome "Letter XXII" in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series Volume VI. The Principle works of St. Jerome.* Trans. W.H. Freemantle, Ed. Philp Schaff (Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), 31.

¹⁴⁸ Columba Stewart, *Cassian the Monk* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 24.

earth and fasting is but the first step on that journey.¹⁴⁹ Despite their different foci, the shadow of Origen hung heavily over both of Jerome's and Cassian's thoughts and writing, and this provided some common ground.

St. Jerome:

Preserving sexual purity in the form of virginity was central to Jerome's ascetic program, monastic writing. Of the virtues, continence and chastity were the primary virtues he emphasized. Jerome's understanding of virginity and the body was profoundly eschatological in nature, and was formed both from an understanding of, and reaction to, the teachings of Origen. Jerome placed sexual purity at the heart of his ascetic writing that touched every part of his view of monastic life.

Preservation of virginity was so important that St. Jerome even denigrated marriage in favor of virginity. When Jerome's audience of largely aristocratic Roman women are taken into consideration his views on virginity paint an interesting picture of sexual politics within the Christian church of the late fourth and early fifth century.

His writing on virginity, aside from his translation and biblical exegesis, was one of Jerome's greatest contributions to the history of thought in the Catholic Church. An argument over the virginity of Mary is partially how he made his name upon his entry to Rome.¹⁵⁰ A lay man named Helvidius wrote a tract that admitted that while certainly Mary had been a virgin when she gave birth to Jesus, she and Joseph had sexual intercourse after Jesus's birth thus explaining the mentions of Jesus's brothers and sisters. This enraged Jerome, and he launched into an impassioned, tortured, defense of the eternal virginity of Mary. Jerome, amidst a

¹⁴⁹ Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 24.

¹⁵⁰ J.N.D. Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1975), 104.

torrent of abuse, argued that instead of siblings, Jesus had cousins. He continued on to argue that in essence, Joseph was also an eternal virgin along with Mary.¹⁵¹ In effect, Jerome was successful, and banished Helvidius, and was extraordinarily successful in consecrating the virginity of Mary and modern Catholic Mariology.

For Jerome's writings on virginity, this episode had a much deeper message. Helvidius represented a strain of pagans and normal Christians who were becoming uncomfortable with efforts of Jerome and others to present the extreme ascetic life as authentic Christianity.¹⁵² Helvidius's tract pushed back, against equating the states of marriage and virginity.¹⁵³ Stances like this enraged Jerome because of the emphasis Jerome placed on virginity as the natural state of ascetic and Christian life, which for Jerome was the same thing.

It is important to understand that for Jerome, the definition of virginity was profoundly eschatological. Jerome held that before the fall, men and women were virginal. It was only after the fall that men and women began having sex. In a very real sense, virginity and mortification of the flesh, for Jerome, was a prelude to what was to come after the resurrection.¹⁵⁴ Jerome wrote that "I do not despise the flesh in which Christ was born and rose again, or scorn the mud which, baked into a clean vessel, reigns in heaven."¹⁵⁵ Here Jerome ties in the extreme mortification of the flesh, particularly fasting. Jerome wrote that "I love the flesh, but I love it only when it is chaste, when it is virginal, when it is mortified by fasting: I love not its works but

¹⁵¹ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 335.

¹⁵² Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies*, 105.

¹⁵³ Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies*, 105.

¹⁵⁴ Teresa M. Shaw *Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1988), 211-213.

¹⁵⁵ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 180.

itself, that flesh which knows that it must be judged, and therefore dies as a martyr for Christ, which is scourged and torn asunder and burned with fire.”¹⁵⁶ This is the understanding of the nature of virginity that drove Jerome’s extreme ascetic views.

Jerome differed from other patristic writers when it came to virginity. Unlike writers like Ambrose and others who held that virginity was transcendent, Jerome was not so sanguine on the issue. Jerome mentioned that “It is this angelic purity which secures to virginity its highest reward, and the Apostle might have seemed to despise a course of life which involves no guilt.”¹⁵⁷ While Jerome did from time to time mention that we would be like angels, he never mentioned that we would actually become angels, unlike other patristic writers of his era.¹⁵⁸ Jerome stated instead that “likeness to the angels does not imply a changing of men into angels, but their growth in immortality and glory.”¹⁵⁹ Jerome had a different view of the nature of perfection in mind, one that focused on the nature of the human body. It is impossible to understand Jerome’s position on fasting and perfection, without seeing it through his rejection of Origen.

Jerome’s turn toward bodily resurrection re-emphasized the importance of virginity in the end of days. Jerome based this new conclusion on the resurrection of Christ himself.¹⁶⁰ It is here that Jerome explicitly denies the transcendent angelic nature that was a favorite of so many other patristic authors such as Ambrose or

¹⁵⁶ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 180.

¹⁵⁷ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 345.

¹⁵⁸ Teresa M. Shaw *Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1988), 212.

¹⁵⁹ St. Jerome ” To Pammachius Against John of Jerusalem” in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series Volume VI. The Principle works of St. Jerome*. Trans. W.H. Freemantle, Ed. Philp Schaff, 440.

¹⁶⁰ Shaw, *Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity*, 212.

Tertullian. Instead of becoming angels in the afterlife, Jerome argued, we become like angels instead with bodies purified.¹⁶¹ Jerome carried it much further than that.

He held that not only do we rise in purified bodies, but we rise in our own bodies:

And if we knew Him after the flesh, let us no longer know Him according to the flesh. The substance of our resurrection bodies will certainly be the same as now, though of higher glory. For the Saviour after His descent into hell had so far the selfsame body in which He was crucified, that He showed the disciples the marks of the nails in His hands and the wound in His side. Moreover, if we deny the identity of His body because He entered through the doors were shut, and this is not a property of human bodies, we must deny also that Peter and the Lord had real bodies because they walked upon the water, which is contrary to nature. In the resurrection of the dead they will neither marry nor be given in marriage but will be like the angels. What others will hereafter be in heaven, that virgins begin to be on earth. If likeness to the angels is promised us (and there is no difference of sex among the angels), we shall either be of no sex as are the angels, or at all events which is clearly proved, though we rise from the dead in our own sex, we shall not perform the functions of sex.¹⁶²

This eschatological about face of St. Jerome's had a deleterious effect on gender relations going forward into church history.

One of the interesting side effects of this turning on Origen, was the betrayal of some of his closest followers. When Jerome was a devotee of Origen, and held that humans could transcend the flesh, his theology removed a gender-based barrier to women and men existing equally within the eyes of the church. In this world women could and did exist in study groups of scripture with men. Indeed, his followers Paula and her daughter Eustochium did exactly that.¹⁶³ When Jerome turned on Origen, he in effect slipped a knife into his female followers' backs. Jerome wrote scornfully:

¹⁶¹ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 440.

¹⁶² St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 374.

¹⁶³ Brown, *The body and society: men, women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, 382.

The present is not a time to speak rhetorically against a perverse doctrine. Neither the rich vocabulary of Cicero nor the fervid eloquence of Demosthenes could adequately convey the warmth of my feeling, were I to attempt to expose the quibbles by which these heretics, while verbally professing a belief in the resurrection, in their hearts deny it. For their women finger their breasts, slap their chests, pinch their legs and arms, and say, What will a resurrection profit us if these frail bodies are to rise again? No, if we are to be like angels, we shall have the bodies of angels. That is to say they scorn to rise again with the flesh and bones wherewith even Christ rose.¹⁶⁴

Since women could no longer transcend their female bodies after death, Jerome's writings cemented female roles in Christian life. With his decision to emphasize eschatological importance of the body, it is not surprising that St. Jerome found sex to be a source of massive anxiety.

In his writings, Jerome expressed a deep torment over his own sexuality and experience. Jerome famously wrote of his own experience in the desert regarding missing the temptations and pleasures of Rome.¹⁶⁵ Sexual temptation haunted him, and no amount of mortification of the flesh could still his fantasies that, "I often found myself amid bevvies of girls. My face was pale and my frame chilled with fasting; yet my mind was burning with desire, and the fires of lust kept bubbling up before me when my flesh was as good as dead."¹⁶⁶ While this is most certainly exaggerated for effect, St. Jerome was certainly no virgin himself, and seemed to regret the fact deeply, unhappily lamenting his sins before he took on the monastic life in Rome.¹⁶⁷ It's apparent that Jerome was sexually experienced, but how

¹⁶⁴ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 178.

¹⁶⁵ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 25.

¹⁶⁶ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 25.

¹⁶⁷ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 6.

experienced is up to some debate.¹⁶⁸ It was also clear that he also, because of his convictions, was deeply repressed sexually.¹⁶⁹ In a way, he seemed to take pride in this fact, or at least offer justification. He wrote that “Some people may be eunuchs from necessity; I am one of free will.”¹⁷⁰ Jerome carried this repression of sexual desire into his monastic writings and thoughts at large.

Jerome expressed this anxiety throughout of his monastic writing. Recall that St. Jerome wrote about the preservation of virginity and sexual chastity. Those two concepts were at the heart of just about everything Jerome wrote about monastic life, and they went far beyond simple mortification of the flesh. For instance, his interpretation of the parable of Martha and Mary on its face is a standard call to monastic contemplation, which mirrors the one made later by John Cassian.¹⁷¹ A deeper look, however, placed in the larger context of the piece, makes the intent clear. The section that contained the call to contemplation was bookended by the warning that going out into the world was to face the danger of seduction. For example, Jerome wrote: “Go not from home nor visit the daughters of a strange land, though you have patriarchs for brothers and Israel for a father. Dinah went out and was seduced.”¹⁷² For Jerome, this emphasis was extremely important, considering the risk at hand.

¹⁶⁸ Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies*, 91. and Elizabeth A. Clark "Theory and Practice in Late Ancient Asceticism: Jerome, Chrysostom, and Augustine" *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 5 no. 2 (1989), 26.

¹⁶⁹ Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies*, 91

¹⁷⁰ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 29.

¹⁷¹ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 32.

¹⁷² St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 32.

The reason for Jerome's heroic efforts on the preservation of virginity, was that while it was hard to maintain, it could be easily lost. Sex for Jerome could only be seen in a negative lens: Virginity could be lost. It could be lost from immodest dress and behavior. Perhaps most shocking to modern sensibilities, and as a justification for some of his more extreme ascetic practices, Jerome wrote that virginity could be lost if, "Whosoever looks on a woman, the Lord says, to lust after her has committed adultery with her already in his heart. So that virginity may be lost even by a thought."¹⁷³ In short, to Jerome, virginity could be lost in a thought. Then once virginity was gone, it was gone forever, and not even God could restore virginity once it had been taken.¹⁷⁴ This urgency to protect virginity becomes much clearer when placed in the larger picture of his theology and connection with Christ.

For Jerome, virginity was central to maintaining a connection to the divine, thus its preservation was paramount. Through an often-used metaphor of the period, Jesus was the bridegroom. Jerome used this metaphor to express the connection between the divine and humanity. Due to the scriptural prominence of this metaphor, which was used in everything from the Song of Songs, to the gospel of Matthew, many patristic authors picked up on its usage. Jerome differed, in the vehemence of his usage in his writing on virginity, which at times became disquieting to say the least. Consider from his treatise on virginity:

Ever let the privacy of your chamber guard you; ever let the Bridegroom sport with you within. Do you pray? You speak to the Bridegroom. Do you read? He speaks to you. When sleep overtakes you He will come behind and put His hand through the hole of the door, and your heart shall be moved for Him; and

¹⁷³ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 31.

¹⁷⁴ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 24.

you will awake and rise up and say: I am sick of love. Then He will reply: A garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse; a spring shut up, a fountain sealed.¹⁷⁵

This image painted a softer and kinder, more intimate relationship to the divine than what is the now commonly held lord and servant model of today.¹⁷⁶ In a very real sense, Jerome had used the late Roman concept of marriage as a framing device for his discussion of ascetic virginity.¹⁷⁷

This metaphor helps explain the extremes that Jerome went to in order to mortify the flesh. In this metaphor, he portrayed Jesus as the jealous husband and lover to his brides.¹⁷⁸ This led to some novel interpretations of scripture from Jerome. For instance, an example in his treatise on virginity, Jerome cites Matthew 25:1-13, the parable of the foolish virgins. This parable is generally interpreted as one of spiritual readiness waiting for the return of the Lord.¹⁷⁹ Jerome does something quite different with it, when he related it to the protection of virginity. Because Jerome had conflated life of the ascetic with the nominative Christian life, the wise virgins were those Christian women who had taken up the ascetic life he preached. The wise virgins, for Jerome, fasted and engaged in other mortification of the flesh; they held vigils and generally lead the ascetic life he envisioned.¹⁸⁰ The foolish virgins, or

¹⁷⁵ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 24.

¹⁷⁶ Elizabeth A. Clark "The Celibate Bridegroom and His Virginal Brides: Metaphor and the Marriage of Jesus in Early Christian Ascetic Exegesis" *Church History* 77, no. 11 (March 2008), 1.

¹⁷⁷ Clark "The Celibate Bridegroom and His Virginal Brides," 2.

¹⁷⁸ Clark "The Celibate Bridegroom and His Virginal Brides," 3.

¹⁷⁹ Clark "The Celibate Bridegroom and His Virginal Brides," 3.

¹⁸⁰ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 24.

virgins in flesh only, were essentially everyone else. Physical virginity was only the start, but it was nothing without spiritual virginity.¹⁸¹

Jerome's conflation of the Christian life with the ascetic life left him with something of a problem, what to do about actual earthly marriage. To get around this issue Jerome held that there were three separate degrees of chastity, consecrated virgins, consecrated widows, and chaste marriages. Given the importance of virginity for Jerome's ascetic worldview, marriage was at best of dubious value to him. That said, on its face Jerome's view was not completely antithetical to marriage. He held that "Not that married women are as such outside the pale; they have their own place, the marriage that is honorable and the bed undefiled."¹⁸² This is because Jerome was writing for a largely mixed audience of those who were ascetics and not, he had to tackle the distinction between marriage and virginity. Jerome held that in God's eyes being virginal was categorically superior to being married. Consider when he wrote to Eustochium about virginity, he discussed her elder sister Blaesilla who had been recently widowed. He pitied not only the loss of her husband, but perhaps more importantly that she had lost the crown of virginity, which Eustochium, a consecrated virgin, had retained.¹⁸³ At best, marriage was a distraction from the divine. Jerome cites St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians in that "She that is unmarried is careful for the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit: but she that

¹⁸¹ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 24.

¹⁸² St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 23.

¹⁸³ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 23.

is married is careful for the things of the world, how she may please her husband.”¹⁸⁴

St. Jerome further bemoans the distractions from the Lord. He told Eustochium to “recount the drawbacks of marriage, such as pregnancy, the crying of infants, the torture caused by a rival, the cares of household management, and all those fancied blessings which death at last cuts short.”¹⁸⁵ The second and third degrees of chastity dealt with everyone else.

Second to virginity was consecrated widowhood. Jerome held that widows should not in fact remarry. In a letter to a woman called Furia, he presented his attitude toward marriage in rather startling terms.¹⁸⁶ In praising her decision not to remarry, Jerome compared the married life to vomit, writing that “your mouth has been filled with the gall of bitterness; you have expelled the indigestible and unwholesome food; you have relieved a heaving stomach. Why will you again swallow what has disagreed with you?”¹⁸⁷ He further attacked those who criticized those widows who chose not to remarry.¹⁸⁸ Jerome praised the length the daughter of his follower Paula, Blaesilla, for the lengths she mortified her own flesh, in order to remain chaste. Jerome frankly held marriage held in low esteem, mainly because of the expectations of sex.

A chaste marriage for Jerome was the final and least degree of chastity.

Jerome foreshadowed the modern Catholic view that sex after marriage was tolerated

¹⁸⁴ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 344.

¹⁸⁵ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 23.

¹⁸⁶ Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies*, 191.

¹⁸⁷ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 103.

¹⁸⁸ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 103.

solely for procreation alone, if then barely. Recall that for Jerome the “I praise wedlock, I praise marriage, but it is because they give me virgins. I gather the rose from the thorns, the gold from the earth, the pearl from the shell. Does the plowman plow all day to sow? Shall he not also enjoy the fruit of his labor? Wedlock is the more honored, the more what is born of it is loved.”¹⁸⁹ Here, he touched on a familiar theme that sex did not exist before the fall, and that marriage came from a place of guilt. Jerome continued to argue that the commandment to go forth and multiply was given only after the expulsion from the garden. Further, Jerome openly wondered if the time for this commandment had passed. He stated that “The reason why the wood grows up is that it may be cut down. The field is sown that it may be reaped. The world is already full, and the population is too large for the soil. Every day we are being cut down by war, snatched away by disease, swallowed up by shipwreck, although we go to law with one another about the fences of our property.”¹⁹⁰ So even in the light of this commandment, virginity, was still superior to marriage.

To return to an earlier thread, it should be clear now why any suggestion equating marriage and virginity infuriated Jerome. Helvidius raised this possibility in a roundabout way, by questioning the virginity of Mary.¹⁹¹ Jovinian took on positions that were guaranteed to set Jerome into an apoplectic rage. Jovinian held that not only was the married state equal to virginity in the eyes of God, which would have been bad enough. Further, he held that fasting held no benefit over eating food,

¹⁸⁹ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 30.

¹⁹⁰ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 345.

¹⁹¹ Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies*, 105.

all sins were equal, and finally those baptized in the spirit could not sin¹⁹². This really was too much for Jerome to bear. He reacted in a savage attack on Jovinian, that he turned into an attack on marriage itself. For instance, remarriage for Jerome was just one step above prostitution and whore mongering. The mask had slipped and Jerome had outraged Roman society with his extremism, again.¹⁹³

Virginity was the main centerpiece of Jerome's ascetic program. Thus we must consider the reasoning behind such extremes in his mortification of the flesh. Jerome held that sexual purity was necessary for salvation. Eventually, in terms of monastic thought Jerome was ultimately supplanted in the Latin west. Later monastic thinkers would take the concept of purity beyond the sexual to an entirely different level. This expansion of thought is demonstrated in the work of John Cassian.

St. John Cassian:

In John Cassian's theology, fasting was central to a much broader conception of purity, which he termed purity of heart, rather than Jerome's narrow focus on sexual purity. Purity of heart for Cassian, was a deep abiding love for God, based on the tranquility which comes from the freedom from sin. The biblical foundation for this concept rested on the beatitude "Blessed are the pure of heart for they shall see God."¹⁹⁴ John Cassian used purity of heart as the hub around which he built both his monastic thought and community. Yet contained in his definition of purity of heart is a contradiction. On the one hand, it offered a far more abstract thought than Jerome's vision of sexual purity based on a neo-platonic understanding of the relationship to

¹⁹² Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies*, 187.

¹⁹³ Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies*, 190

¹⁹⁴ Matthew 5:8

God, inspired by Origen and his mentor Evagrius.¹⁹⁵ On the other hand, because of his systematic approach to the monastic life and thought, it ultimately proved to be far more accessible for a monastic community than Jerome's simpler but far more extreme views on virginity. Cassian declared seeking purity of heart as the very purpose of monasticism, and it was central to his concept of prayer. To achieve purity of heart, monks had to devote their monastic life to pure contemplation, compunction, and unceasing prayer. The quest for purity of heart was both the purpose of, and means to, the goal of monastic life which is attaining the Kingdom of Heaven. In short, purity of heart was the first step on the road to unity with God, or *theosis*.

As this brief description demonstrates, John Cassian's conception of purity of heart was far more complex and abstract than the simple sexual purity of Jerome. It is based on the concept of *apatheia*. Interestingly there is no good single word translation of *apatheia* from Greek into English, as it is more of a concept than a single definition. The closest and easiest definition of *apatheia* is freedom from the passions or passionlessness. This concept was severely misunderstood in the Latin west, and Evagrius and his treatment of *apatheia* were savagely attacked by Jerome because he thought that it meant monks could achieve a state of sinlessness.¹⁹⁶ Cassian's correction to Jerome pointed out that while man never could be sinless he could receive tranquility based on the freedom from distraction caused by sins.¹⁹⁷ Because of this confusion, Cassian's decision to reframe *apatheia* as purity of heart

¹⁹⁵ Owen Chadwick, *John Cassian* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 83.

¹⁹⁶ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 45.

¹⁹⁷ John Cassian "Conference 23" in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series Volume XI. Sulpitius Severus, Vincent of Lerins, and John Cassian* Trans by Henry Wace, Ed. Phillip Schaff Ed. (Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), 519-531.

made it far more palatable for his western readers and in a round about way gave it the best conceptual translation to the Latin west.

For John Cassian, purity of heart is the journey of the soul. It starts with ascetic purification, moves to the tranquility of freedom from sin, and ends finally with the soul standing at the gateway of the virtue *caritas*.¹⁹⁸ Consider this from Evagrius:

The fear of God, my child, strengthens faith, and abstinence in turn strengthens the fear of god, perseverance and hope render abstinence unwavering, and from these is born impassibility (*apatheia*), of which love is the offspring.¹⁹⁹

This of course is a far cry from Jerome's contention that fear, whether of lust, sin, or temptation was at the heart of his monastic regimen.²⁰⁰ By basing his teaching on purity of heart and on love, Cassian moved the monastic discussion towards a more profoundly mystical dimension in that a monk is striving for the likeness of God, in life.²⁰¹ Cassian wrote that "Love your enemies, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that persecute you and slander you. And so it will be vouchsafed to us to attain that reward which is subjoined, whereby we shall not only bear the image and likeness of God, but shall even be called sons."²⁰² This quest is at the core of Cassian's monastic thought, in it that purity of heart is really but the first step on the road to perfection outside of the Eschaton.

¹⁹⁸ There is some real problems with translations here. English translation the word is charity, but the modern definition does not match what Cassian is going for. Instead the archaic definition fits better, an almost existential love for God and fellow man.

¹⁹⁹ Evagrius "Praktikos" in *Evagrius of Pontus* Trans. Robert E. Sinkewicz (New York: Oxford University Press.2003), 96.

²⁰⁰ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 45.

²⁰¹ Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 45.

²⁰² John Cassian, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 419.

To get there, John Cassian broke the monastic life into two halves, the active and the contemplative. Each half of monastic life, though separate, was deeply intertwined with the quest for purity of heart at the core of both.²⁰³ For Cassian the active monastic life set the stage for the contemplative, and the contemplative, guided the active.²⁰⁴ This split served as the beginnings of a shift in western monastic thought, in that it served to mark a move away from Jerome's vision of the monk in a super heroic struggle with sin and temptation, to a more mystical life of contemplation. Jerome's teaching on contemplation implicitly served the goal of resistance to sexual temptation.²⁰⁵ Cassian, on the other hand, took the opposite approach: the active life of a monk, the fasting, the vigils, and so on, freed the monk to achieve a more perfect contemplation of God. Purity of heart was critical to this.

Purity of heart was so central to Cassian's monastic teaching that he made it the purpose of monastic life. Cassian generally agreed with Jerome and other monastic writers of the period on the overall goal of the monastic life, which was to achieve the kingdom of heaven. That said, Cassian recognized that focusing on just the end of monastic life, or the Eschaton, was ultimately self-defeating. Cassian realized that unless a monk had something in front of him to work towards on a daily basis they would ultimately fail.²⁰⁶ To counter this Cassian wrote that, "The first thing, as I said, in all the arts and sciences is to have some goal, i.e., a mark for the mind, and constant mental purpose, for unless a man keeps this before him with all

²⁰³ Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 43.

²⁰⁴ Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 43.

²⁰⁵ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 45.

²⁰⁶ John Cassian, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 295.

diligence and persistence, he will never succeed in arriving at the ultimate aim and the gain which he desires.”²⁰⁷ Cassian held that to succeed in the monastic life, monks needed “mark for the mind”, without which they became disillusioned with the strict life of self-denial. To buttress this argument Cassian drew a metaphorical comparison between the life of a monk and that of the farmer and business man.

Cassian wrote that:

For, as I said, the farmer who has for his aim to live free from care and with plenty, while his crops are springing has this as his immediate object and goal; to keep his field clear from all brambles, and weeds, and does not fancy that he can otherwise ensure wealth and a peaceful end, unless he first secures by some plan of work and hope that which he is anxious to obtain.²⁰⁸

That day to day purpose for Cassian was purity of heart.

This innovation allowed Cassian to turn monastic life into a Journey rather than a struggle. Unlike Jerome, for whom purity could be lost in literally a thought, Cassian’s purity of heart was something that a monk strived and worked for every day of his monastic life. Cassian draws upon another metaphorical comparison such as an Olympic athlete in training, or perhaps more effectively, to an archer trying to hit his target. The metaphor is a rather simple one. Without a target to aim for, an archer cannot advance in skill, just like a monk without purity of heart cannot advance towards perfection. Cassian wrote that “when this object is set before us, we shall always direct our actions and thoughts straight towards the attainment of it; for if it be not constantly fixed before our eyes, it will not only make all our toils vain and

²⁰⁷ John Cassian, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 296.

²⁰⁸ John Cassian, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 296.

useless, and force them to be endured to no purpose and without any reward.”²⁰⁹ The goal of purity of heart became a real metric to track the monk’s journey on the path to perfection.

The quest for purity of heart was far more than just some abstract principle. Cassian constructed his entire active portion of a monk’s life around achieving this one purpose. For John Cassian every active part of a monk’s life; the mortification of the flesh, the vigils and constant prayer were aimed at attaining purity of heart.²¹⁰ In a far cry from Jerome, for whom mortification of the flesh was purely eschatological in nature, everything in Cassian’s monastic program had a specific purpose in mind from the clothes the monks wore, to the amount a monk ate.²¹¹ It was all directed to the purpose of a monastic life. Cassian reduced it to a rather simple formula:

The beginning of our salvation and of wisdom is, according to Scripture, the fear of the Lord. From the fear of the Lord arises salutary compunction. From compunction of heart springs renunciation, i.e. nakedness and contempt of all possessions. From nakedness is begotten humility; from humility the mortification of desires. Through mortification of desires all faults are extirpated and decay. By driving out faults virtues shoot up and increase. By the budding of virtues purity of heart is gained. By purity of heart the perfection of apostolic love is acquired.²¹²

This formula was setting the stage, for the active bodily life was only part of the picture. In a stark evolution from Jerome, who focused salvation solely on the body,

²⁰⁹ John Cassian, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 296.

²¹⁰ Chadwick, *John Cassian*, 92.

²¹¹ Chadwick, *John Cassian*, 93.

²¹² John Cassian, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 233.

for Cassian the body was really only a prelude.²¹³ For Cassian, purity of heart was the key to the perfect contemplation of God.

In John Cassian's conception of monasticism the contemplative life of a monk was so important that he made it a center piece of his monastic theory. Others, including Jerome, and other monastic writers, also wrote about contemplation in their monastic writing, but the emphasis is completely different. For Jerome, contemplation was the means by which an ascetic man or woman could leave the world, in avoidance of the seducers and temptations that lay around every corner.²¹⁴ Then the third of the great Gallic monastic writers, Sulpicius Severus, the hagiographer of St. Martin of Tours, depicted contemplation as part of St. Martin's daily practice, between miracles of course.²¹⁵ What each of these three men had in common is that each held contemplation as a part of the active day to day monastic life, alongside of mortification of the flesh and other monastic practices. One of Cassian's great revolutions to monastic thought, was that he made a distinction between the active life of a monk, and the contemplative. This can be demonstrated by the interpretation a parable.

Consider for a moment, the parable of Martha and Mary, which we had occasion to think through above. Both Jerome, and John Cassian use this verse as a call to contemplation. For Jerome, contemplation was the means by which an ascetic man or woman could leave the world, in avoidance of the seducers and temptations

²¹³ Shaw, *Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity*, 109

²¹⁴ Note this is a slight exaggeration of Jerome's position, but still the point remains. St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 24.

²¹⁵ Sulpicius Severus "On the Life of Martin" in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series Volume XI. Sulpitius Severus, Vincent of Lerins, and John Cassian* Trans by Henry Wace, Ed. Phillip Schaff Ed. (Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), 5.

that lay around every corner.²¹⁶ John Cassian had a far loftier interpretation of this verse. Cassian judged that while the active life was necessary and even praiseworthy it was subordinate to the contemplative. Yet at the same time the contemplative life gave context and meaning to the active.²¹⁷ His argument was this:

You see then that the Lord makes the chief good consist in meditation; i.e., in divine contemplation: whence we see that all other virtues should be put in the second place, even though we admit that they are necessary, and useful, and excellent, because they are all performed for the sake of this one thing. For when the Lord says: You are careful and troubled about many things, but few things are needful or only one, He makes the chief good consist not in practical work however praiseworthy and rich in fruits it may be, but in contemplation of Him.²¹⁸

So, it is very clear that the active life is subordinate to the contemplative. Cassian reminds the reader that the active monastic life ends in death. Cassian has yet another and perhaps more obscure point here. To emphasize the importance of contemplation and meditation, Cassian argued that it was the foundation of all good within the monastic community. He rhetorically asked “What then is that one thing which is so incomparably above those great and innumerable good things, that, while they are all scorned and rejected, it alone should be acquired ?... Meditation on God, is the one thing, the value of which all the merits of our righteous acts, all our aims at virtue, come short of.”²¹⁹ So contemplation and meditation on God is the focal point of the monastic life. The question is, how to contemplate God?

The pathway to successful contemplation lies in purity of heart. Cassian noted that the opportunity to contemplate God existed throughout the entirety of his

²¹⁶ St. Jerome, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 32.

²¹⁷ Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 92.

²¹⁸ John Cassian, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 298.

²¹⁹ John Cassian, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 24.

creation.²²⁰ Cassian stated that “We not only discover God by admiring His incomprehensible essence, a thing which still lies hid in the hope of the promise, but we see Him through the greatness of His creation, and the consideration of His justice,”²²¹ The problem was that, and worldly affairs, distracted and prevented ascetics from fully turning their minds toward God. With purity of heart, however, by gaining the tranquility that comes from the freedom from sin, a monk would be free to contemplate God to the fullest extent.²²² This was critically important because without purity of heart, a monk could not achieve unity with God, which was a second goal that Cassian had integrated into to the monastic life.

Cassian was clever. In assigning a purpose to monastic life, he gave the monks something to work towards. That said, he also gave not only an eschatological goal to strive for, the kingdom of heaven, but an earthly one as well, which was a mystical communion with God while the monk still lived as defined as perfection.²²³ In light of the quest for perfection the remarkable unity between the earthly purpose and goal Cassian laid out for his monastic readers is revealed fully. In order to reach the goal of the monastic life, attaining the kingdom of heaven, the monk must strive to attain the tranquility that comes from the freedom from sin, so that a monk may strive to attain union with God on earth. To recapitulate, it is his full interpretation of the verse from which he drew this conception, Matthew 5:8, which points to this

²²⁰ Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 48.

²²¹ John Cassian, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 302.

²²² John Cassian, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 383.

²²³ Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 53.

unity, “Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see god.”²²⁴ This notion of perfection reveals the philosophical foundations of his work.

In this quest for perfection, this *theosis*, Cassian reveals the Neo-Platonist underpinnings to his monastic work. From his mentor Evagrius, he inherited the Platonic understanding that often heart is synonymous with mind. So, when he emphasized the phrase purity of heart, he was also talking about purity of mind.²²⁵ For Cassian, the practical monastic life was meant to clear the heart and mind from sin, and subdue the flesh so the spirit may be free.²²⁶ So if the pathway to contemplation and unity with God was purity of heart, then the method to achieve success on the pathway for Cassian was unceasing prayer.

Like everything else Cassian wrote, unceasing prayer and purity of heart are deeply interconnected. Cassian stated that “The aim of every monk and the perfection of his heart tends to continual and unbroken perseverance in prayer, and, as far as it is allowed to human frailty, strives to acquire an immovable tranquility of mind and a perpetual purity, for the sake of which we seek unweariedly and constantly to practice all bodily labors as well as contrition of spirit.”²²⁷ The problem is, since we are fallen, we are distracted by sin and worldly affairs. Cassian defines these as anxieties, that for a monk to pray, and turn his mind to God effectively, must be gotten rid of. This is where Cassian had purity of heart come into the picture. Purity of heart gave a monk a way through all of the anxieties that would distract him from prayer. Cassian, again stated that:

²²⁴ Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 53.

²²⁵ Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 48-49.

²²⁶ Chadwick, *John Cassian*, 101.

²²⁷ John Cassian, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 387.

First all anxiety about carnal things must be entirely got rid of; next we must leave no room for not merely the care but even the recollection of any business affairs, and in like manner also must lay aside all backbitings, vain and incessant chattering, and buffoonery; anger above all and disturbing moroseness must be entirely destroyed, and the deadly taint of carnal lust and covetousness be torn up by the roots.²²⁸

Purity of heart was critical because freeing the mind from the distraction of sin allowed the mind of the monk freedom from worldly anxieties so that they were then able to successfully turn their minds to God. There is an important note of distinction here. For Cassian a mind must not be completely empty, else it can be filled with images that can distract from God. Instead Cassian turned to the commandment for unceasing prayer.

The command to pray unceasingly was a very important part of monastic life. Like Cassian, Jerome also advised constant prayer, though unlike Cassian, he once again did not provide directions on how a monk should pray.²²⁹ Consistent with the other aspects of his monastic practice Cassian offered a systematic approach to prayer that was built on levels. The first level for the novices, and even more advanced in the monastic life included several minor types of prayer that were to be said at different times for different reasons.²³⁰ These were prayers for penitence, intercession and thanksgiving, and Cassian demonstrated the types of each with an examination of the Lord's Prayer. Though undoubtedly important for monastic life, for Cassian these prayers were but the lowest level of prayer. They were in effect the basics of prayer, and the beginning of a spiritual path.

²²⁸ John Cassian, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 388.

²²⁹ Either he figured they already knew, or more likely just couldn't be bothered.

²³⁰ Chadwick, *John Cassian*, 105.

For John Cassian there was a second level of prayer, called the prayer of fire. The prayer of fire did not require active seeking on the part of the monk. Rather it was something that he experienced by encountering the Spirit of God.²³¹ This mystical experience was something that a monk could not even describe. Cassian wrote of the experience thusly:

Sometimes however the mind which is advancing to that perfect state of purity and which is already beginning to be established in it, will take in all these at one and the same time, and like some incomprehensible and all-devouring flame, dart through them all and offer up to God inexpressible prayers of the purest force, which the Spirit Itself, intervening with groanings that cannot be uttered, while we ourselves understand not, pours forth to God, grasping at that hour and ineffably pouring forth in its supplications things so great that they cannot be uttered with the mouth nor even at any other time be recollected by the mind.²³²

So as the monk moved toward perfection, he would open himself even more fully to God.

There was one final level of prayer in which the purpose of the monk would be realized in full. In Cassian's monastic practice, unlike some of the later and more elaborate prayers, it was a simple prayer made from the combination of Psalms 31:2, 38:22, 40:17, and 70:1. The pure prayer of John Cassian was just "O God, make speed to save me: O Lord, make haste to help me."²³³ Cassian designed it to be simple, and able to be repeated so that a monk could drive out all thoughts, images, and anxieties that turned their minds from God. Cassian wrote of the pure prayer:

This formula then shall be proposed to you of this system, which you want, and of prayer, which every monk in his progress towards continual recollection of God, is accustomed to ponder, ceaselessly revolving it in his

²³¹ Chadwick, *John Cassian*, 105.

²³² John Cassian, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 392.

²³³ John Cassian, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 406.

heart, having got rid of all kinds of other thoughts; for he cannot possibly keep his hold over it unless he has freed himself from all bodily cares and anxieties.

It was in effect a mantra to be repeated ceaselessly. Cassian told his followers that this prayer should never leave them, "Whatever work you are doing, or office you are holding, or journey you are going, do not cease to chant this. When you are going to bed, or eating, and in the last necessities of nature, think on this."²³⁴ By freeing the mind and constant repetition of this simple mantra, contemplation of God was achieved.

The full unity with God was the ultimate purpose of purity of heart while the monk lived on earth. This was, for the Latin west, a staggering innovation in thought. Prior to this and in writers such as Jerome, the quest for purity was restricted only for eschatological purposes. Instead, Cassian's achievement shaped monastic thought in the west by providing monks the means for which they not only could seek admission to the kingdom of heaven but unity with God as well.²³⁵ Cassian called this perfect bliss and described it thus:

And this will come to pass when God shall be all our love, and every desire and wish and effort, every thought of ours, and all our life and words and breath, and that unity which already exists between the Father and the Son, and the Son and the Father, has been shed abroad in our hearts and minds, so that as He loves us with a pure and unfeigned and indissoluble love, so we also may be joined to Him by a lasting and inseparable affection, since we are so united to Him that whatever we breathe or think, or speak is God, since, as I say, we attain to that end of which we spoke before, which the same Lord in His prayer hopes may be fulfilled in us.²³⁶

It was this that John Cassian described as the end result of purity of heart on earth.

²³⁴ John Cassian, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 407.

²³⁵ Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 110-112.

²³⁶ John Cassian, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, 404.

After examining the concepts of purity espoused by these two men, it is plain to see why Cassian's work provides an evolution in monastic thought. While his program did of course require sexual continence like that espoused by St. Jerome, it did not stop there. While certainly defeating lust was important, it was done for a much larger purpose than simply looking forward to the kingdom of heaven. Cassian gave the monks of the west a purpose, obtaining purity of heart. He offered the goal of attaining the Kingdom of Heaven by striving for heavenly perfection on earth. More importantly he gave the monks, through his accessible systematic approach to mortification of the flesh, a means to achieve these goals.

Conclusion: Transitions

The sixth century historian and bishop, Gregory of Tours, in his *History of the Franks*, related the tale of Vulfilac. In it, Vulfilac the Lombard, inspired by St. Martin of Tours and tales of the desert monks took on an ascetic life. In a parallel to the eastern monks, Simon the Stylite in particular, Vulfilac stood on top of a pillar for many years until a group of bishops, alarmed by his behavior, convinced him to climb down and enter a monastery.²³⁷ Whether or not it was intentional by Gregory, the tale of Vulfilac meant that in the west at least the desert had been tamed, and the days of the wild eremitic monks had passed into history.²³⁸ The regimented life of the coenobium had begun to reign supreme.

Ultimately, in the argument over fasting between Jerome and John Cassian, the sixth century tale of Vulfilac represented the ultimate victory of John Cassian

²³⁷ Gregory of Tours *History of the Franks*, Trans. by Ernest Brehaut (New York: Octagon Books. 1965), 194-195.

²³⁸ Conrad Leyser "Uses of the Desert in the Sixth Century West" *Church History and Religious Culture* Vol. 06. No 4 (2006): 113-134.

over Jerome. It's an almost perfect metaphor for the shift in monastic thought was shifting in the late antique fifth century. For a time, Jerome offered an idealized vision of the monastic as waging heroic struggle against sin and temptation. Jerome's ascetic vision was a key to draw many Christians, both men and women into the ascetic life. That said, Jerome's message of extreme fasting, was ultimately unsustainable. It was a vision in desperate need of reform.

That reform came in the writings on John Cassian. Ultimately Cassian became more influential, and won the argument with Jerome and others, because he offered a realistic, rather than idealized monastic vision. Where Jerome was extreme, Cassian was moderate, and backed with explicit advice and monastic theory. Further he turned the monastic life away from the struggle against sin, into the search for god on earth. Cassian's monastic thought was very much like the bishops that convinced Vulfilac to climb down from his pillar.

Practicality was the key to Cassian's victory. It was not because Cassian was holier, more intelligent, or wiser than Jerome; instead it was in the end because he was more practical. What drove Cassian to victory was not some miraculous divine purpose, it was something far less grand, it was process. It was a method by which a monastic life could sustainably be lived. As compared to Jerome's extreme practices of fasting, and single minded focus on virginity, Cassian's far more moderate approach to fasting, and giving the monks under his care something to work towards instead of simply waiting for the End of Days, was part of the blueprint for a sustainable monastic community.

Even though he had won the argument over Jerome, that fact was not immediately apparent. There are no extant Cassianiac monasteries, or orders of monks.²³⁹ While there were attempts to turn his *institutes* and *conferences* into a monastic rule, the *Regula Cassiani*, they ultimately failed to gain traction.²⁴⁰ Even though Cassian's writings and ideas spread like wildfire across the Mediterranean, even gaining him the sole honor of being the only Latin father to have his work translated into Greek, and inclusion into the *Apothtegma Patrum* (the Sayings of the Fathers) it would be a century until his ideas were put into true practice.²⁴¹ That is until an Italian monk, Benedict of Nursia wrote his famous rule, and founded the first of the great western monastic orders: the Benedictines.

Even though he is not well known, John Cassian was the monastic forefather of later Latin monastic thinkers, and his *Institutes* and *Conferences* heralded the coming of the great monastic rules of the Latin west. All of this was through the influence John Cassian held on St. Benedict and his Rule. Cassian provided the monastic DNA from which Benedict built his rule and his influence can be felt throughout the work.²⁴² For example it is possible to see Cassian's influence on Rule 41 on fasting.²⁴³ Cassian's influence also appears on Benedict's instructions on how to pray.²⁴⁴ Then again on humility.²⁴⁵ It is important to note that the Rule of St Benedict is not a theological treatise, instead it is a handbook on how a to run a

²³⁹ Richard Goodrich *Contextualizing Cassian: Aristocrats, Asceticism, and Reformation in Fifth Century Gaul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 210.

²⁴⁰ Chadwick, *John Cassian*, 152.

²⁴¹ Chadwick, *John Cassian*, 157.

²⁴² Chadwick, *John Cassian*, 176.

²⁴³ St. Benedict "Chapter 41" in *The Rule of St. Benedict* Trans. Bruce L. Venarde (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 149.

²⁴⁴ St. Benedict *The Rule of St. Benedict*, 93.

²⁴⁵ St. Benedict *The Rule of St. Benedict*, 45-55.

sustainable monastic community. He leaves the theoretical heavy lifting to others, namely John Cassian. Benedict acknowledged his debt to Cassian in the final chapter, when he orders Cassian's *conferences* to be read nightly at every meal.²⁴⁶ With this instruction, wherever the Rule of St. Benedict went, John Cassian went with it, and thus did John Cassian pass into history.

²⁴⁶ St. Benedict *The Rule of St. Benedict*, 229.

Epilogue: A Lingering Question.

Outside of the discussion of fasting, and its wider uses in the monastic context between Jerome and John Cassian, lingering questions remain. Congruent with themes of audience and gender that I have touched on throughout my thesis, the question of if Cassian had been writing for a mixed audience, would he have been stricter in his approach to fasting? Or would this have made him less influential on Benedict? I do not know if this question is even answerable with the documentary evidence available. I am, however, intrigued and I want to try. To even get close to answering this question, I will conduct a thought experiment that will move beyond Cassian's own writings, to incorporate those of his mentor. I consider this both within the prevailing zeitgeist of the era when it comes to gender, and the limitations of women. By doing this I am framing the question for future consideration.

Originally, I had intended my thesis to be an examination of the development of monastic thought in the western Mediterranean, a sort of charting the intellectual history of how we got to Benedict of Nursia from Jerome and John Cassian. As I started to examine the works of Cassian and Jerome the difference in their audiences struck me. Jerome was writing for a mixed, though mostly female Roman aristocratic audience, while Cassian was writing for a strictly monastic male audience. It was here that this question of audience struck me. Jerome's stance on fasting and gender is very easy to determine because he was writing for a mixed to mostly female audience. John Cassian was another matter entirely.

Part of the problem is a hazard of being a medievalist who studies the Late Antique period. The extant documentary record is incomplete at best. At this time

there are only three known works of Cassian's to survive from the fifth century, his *Institutes*, his *Conferences*, and *On the Incarnation*. None of them address women directly.²⁴⁷ Yet scholars have established when he arrived in Marseilles, the second of the two monasteries he established, apparently called Saint-Sauveur, was for women.²⁴⁸ What amazing questions this raises. How was it governed? Did he adapt his writings for men to the female population of that monastery? If so how and what did it look like? Or did he write an entirely new rule specifically for the women of that monastery based on his observation of communities of female ascetics in Egypt? Unfortunately, if it existed, it did not survive and we can only make educated guesses based on what we know from his writings and the general attitudes towards female sexuality expressed by other authors in the patristic period.

Interrogating Cassian's extant body of work is also of limited use because he mentions women so rarely. Because he was writing for a community of monks, he positioned women as objects of male desire. Cassian based his ascetic practice on controlling that desire, and the less sexual response to a woman a man had, the farther along he was on the path to perfection.²⁴⁹ Cassian did mention one woman directly, his own sister, in a commandment that monks should avoid women and secular authority in the form of bishops. Cassian wrote that:

Wherefore this is an old maxim of the Fathers that is still current — though I cannot produce it without shame on my own part, since I could not avoid my own sister, nor escape the hands of the bishop, that a monk ought by all means to fly from women and bishops. For neither of them will allow him who has once been joined in close intercourse any longer to care for the quiet of his

²⁴⁷ Owen Chadwick, *John Cassian* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 35.

²⁴⁸ Owen Chadwick, *John Cassian*, 34.

²⁴⁹ Teresa M. Shaw *Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1988), 122.

cell, or to continue with pure eyes in divine contemplation through his insight into holy things.²⁵⁰ John Cassian seems to be unusual in the patristic era, that he did not concern himself with female sexuality in the slightest.²⁵¹ He only wrote about women in term of how they related to male desire, and thus served as a distraction from God.

Moving beyond the text to Cassian's influences and wider cultural experience makes the picture still more unclear. Upon examination, Evagrius of Pontus emerged as the man whose thought directly influenced Cassian's monastic writing more than others. Some of the earliest scholarship on Cassian such as that of Owen Chadwick held that John Cassian merely translated and expanded on Evagrius's works for a western audience.²⁵² Modern scholarly consensus such as the work of Columba Stewart rebuts this claim, but there is very little disagreement that John Cassian is clearly Evagrius's pupil.²⁵³ It is possible to get a picture on how Cassian might have approached writing for women by looking at Evagrius's works. Unlike John Cassian, Evagrius wrote for ascetics of both sexes, including advice on fasting.

Though the date is unknown, Evagrius produced a proto-monastic rule for women, the *Sententiae ad Virginiem* or sentences to a virgin. The details regarding how or when this rule was written are unknown, and it exists as a series of proverbs concerned with how a group of consecrated virgins, should exist.²⁵⁴ The advice Evagrius gave in the *Sententiae* was relatively practical and reasonable, considering

²⁵⁰ John Cassian "Institute 11" in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series Volume XI. Sulpitius Severus, Vincent of Lerins, and John Cassian* Trans by Henry Wace, Ed. Phillip Schaff Ed. (Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), 279.

²⁵¹ Shaw, *Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity*, 113.

²⁵² Owen Chadwick, *John Cassian* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 92-93.

²⁵³ Columba Stewart, *Cassian the Monk* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 36.

²⁵⁴ Susanna Elm, "Evagrius Ponticus' "Sententiae ad Virginiem"" *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 45, (1991): 102.

it was written for women, especially compared to his contemporaries and later writers such as Jerome. For example, while he held that fasting quenched lust, he also advised women to approach fasting with a concern for their overall health.²⁵⁵

Evagrius wrote, “Do not say that ‘Today I shall eat and Tomorrow I shall not eat,’ because you are not doing this with prudence; this will result in harm to your body and pain in your stomach.”²⁵⁶ Furthermore he advised women not to despise other women who did not fast, because they would not know who would stand before God.²⁵⁷ In sum Evagrius left behind a practical monastic program that is not that much different than for men.

That said, while Evagrius did not advocate the extremes of mortification of other writers, he held attitudes towards women that were in line with other writers of his age. For instance, he was far more concerned with maintaining virginity. Several of his proverbs are injunctions against contact with men. Much like Jerome he used the bride and bridegroom metaphor to describe a relationship between woman and God.²⁵⁸ Evagrius held that even the slightest contact with men could put a woman’s virginity in danger. For Evagrius, if a virgin simply touches a man she is guilty of lust, and if she laughs at a joke a man tells effectively, she puts a noose around her neck endangering her virginity. Further Evagrius was far more concerned with the female ascetics maintaining proper standards of stereotypically female behavior. One of his proverbs on female behavior reads “The insolent virgin will not be saved, the

²⁵⁵ Evagrius of Pontus “Sentences to a Virgin” in *Evagrius of Pontus* Trans. Robert E. Sinkewicz (New York: Oxford University Press.2003), 134.

²⁵⁶ Evagrius *Evagrius of Pontus*, 134.

²⁵⁷ Evagrius *Evagrius of Pontus*, 134.

²⁵⁸ Evagrius *Evagrius of Pontus*, 135.

indulgent will not see her bridegroom.”²⁵⁹ Given as much inspiration as he drew from Evagrius, it is highly probable that John Cassian would have addressed women in a similar manner.

One of the things that could have held Cassian back from including women in his audience was his association with Evagrius. By the time Cassian wrote his three major works, his mentor Evagrius, had been denounced as part of the condemnation of Origen, and Origenism.²⁶⁰ John Cassian carefully masked the Evagrian influence in his works by streamlining some of the concepts and putting Evagrius’s words into the mouths of his characters.²⁶¹ John Cassian was walking a fine line with his writing by keeping Evagrian ideas and while masking their origin., and challenging gender norms may have gone too far. The gender norms of the Latin western audience that Cassian was writing for were hardening quickly, especially after the condemnation of Origen. This is the same western audience that warmly received Jerome’s views on gender, and only pushed back when Jerome went to extremes.²⁶² Recall that Jerome was not a theological innovator, so what he did was take existing attitudes towards gender and synthesize them, and carry them to extremes.²⁶³ Jerome’s stance towards women were already in circulation within the Latin west.

These attitudes can be seen in the works of Tertullian. Tertullian was an early church writer, who was highly influential on later Christian thinkers such as Cyprian, Jerome, and even St. Augustine. Tertullian was one of the first to push back against

²⁵⁹ Evagrius *Evagrius of Pontus*, 135.

²⁶⁰ Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 11-12.

²⁶¹ Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 11-12.

²⁶² Peter Brown, *The body and society: men, women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 335.

²⁶³ Steven D. Driver, “The Development of Jerome’s Views on the Ascetic Life” *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale* vol. 62. (1995): 50.

the notion that baptism and sexual renunciation would allow people, particularly women, to transcend the sexual shame inherent in human nature.²⁶⁴ He tied human sexuality to the body, and cast women in particular as aware of their own sexual nature and sexual power over man starting with puberty. Tertullian wrote that “from the time when she begins to be self-conscious, and to awake to the sense of her own nature, and to emerge from the virgin's (sense), and to experience that novel sensation which belongs to the succeeding age.”²⁶⁵ From the very beginning of the Church in the Latin west restrictive notions of women's sexuality and the stiff measures needed to control it were very much in force.

This line of thinking went beyond Tertullian. The extremity of Jerome when it came to women's fasting did not arise in a vacuum. The strands were already there, and he took them to extremes. For instance early Christian writers held women were more suited to fasting than men.²⁶⁶ Also the extremity of fasting that early Christian women underwent were used to shame men into stricter renunciation.²⁶⁷ This was a fact that was used to great effect by preachers such as John Chrysostom, who in his sermons on sexual purity shamed the men of Antioch in that young female ascetics were out doing them in their devotions and mortification of the flesh.²⁶⁸ from this

²⁶⁴ Brown, *The body and society: men, women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, 81.

²⁶⁵ Tertullian “On the Veiling of Virgins” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers The Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325. Fathers of the Third Century: Tertullian Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second* Trans by A. Cleveland Cox, Ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donoldson (New York: Charles Scribner's Son, 1980), 34.

²⁶⁶ Shaw, *Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity*, 222.

²⁶⁷ Shaw, *Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity*, 181.

²⁶⁸ John Chrysostom “Homilies on Ephesians XIII” in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Volume XIII. Homilies on Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*. Ed. Phillip Schaff Ed. (Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), 116.

fertile ground grew one more difficulty for John Cassian, which was the lengths to which women would go to on their own to mortify their flesh.

Finally there was the notion in the early Christian church, that part of what drove women to extreme mortification of the flesh was the notion that they could transcend their gender; through fasting, women could become more male.²⁶⁹ A most illustrative example likely from the fourth century is *The Life of St. Pelagia*. St. Pelagia was at a wealthy woman of Antioch who had converted to Christianity.²⁷⁰ She had distributed her wealth to the poor, and fled the city to live the life of a hermit. When her hagiographer caught up to her he found her living as a man going as far as to change her name to Pelagius, and her appearance had become more masculine because of the extreme fasting:

I went and found him on the mount of Olives where he used to pray to the Lord in a small cell which was closed on all sides, with one small window. I knocked on the window and at once she appeared and she recognised me, though I did not recognise her. How could I have known her again, with a face so emaciated by fasting? It seemed to me that her eyes had sunk inwards like a great pit. She said to me, 'Where have you come from, brother?' And I replied, 'I was sent to you by the order of the holy bishop Nonnus.' At once she closed the little window on me, saying, 'Tell him to pray for me, for he is a saint of God.' At once she began the psalms of the third hour. I prayed beside the cell and then left, much helped by the sight of her angelic face.²⁷¹

When he returned the next day she had died, presumably from her fasting. This of course presaged the fate of Jerome's follower Blaesilla, and later female ascetics such as St. Teresa Avila. Further it returns us to the argument between Bynum and Bell discussed in more detail in the first chapter.

²⁶⁹ Shaw, *Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity*, 253.

²⁷⁰ Deacon John "Life of Saint Pelagia the Harlot." in *Women in Early Christianity: Translations From the Greek Texts* Ed. Patricia Cox Miller (Washington DC: Catholic University Press, 2005), 245.

²⁷¹ Deacon John "*Women in Early Christianity*", 246.

So, I return to the question at hand. Would John Cassian, and later Benedict, have been as moderate if they were writing for women as well as men? I cannot know for certain. One on hand there is the practical and pragmatic nature of Cassian's ascetic thought guided by Evagrius and Origen which argued in favor of a more measured approach to fasting. On the other hand, church politics, entrenched ideas about gender, and even the concept of femaleness itself point the other way. Even if Cassian had written a more moderate fasting guide for women would anyone would have even read it? These are hard questions that I do not have answers for and, I leave them for those scholars who will come after me to ponder.

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