The development of monasticism from just prior to St. Anthony the Great (of Egypt) to St. Benedict of Nursia.

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Monasticism has played a decisive role in the religious life of both Byzantium and all Orthodox countries. Often described as the best way to penetrate Orthodox spirituality, the monastic life first emerged in Egypt and Syria during the fourth century, spreading rapidly across the whole of Christendom. They developed subsequent to Constantine’s conversion and the end of the persecution of Christians, and were seen by many as the new martyrs, forming a counterbalance to established Christendom.

The word monasticism derives from the Greek monachos (μοναχός), which means solitary [Walker, 153]. Yet this etymology describes only one aspect of monasticism, as many monastic persons live in communities. Still, living alone is an appropriate descriptor given the fact that monastics remain unmarried.

Three chief forms of Monasticism emerged in Egypt around the year 350, and all continue to exist within the Church today. The first are the hermits, leading a solitary life in caves or huts, tombs, among branches of trees or on the tops of pillars. St. Anthony of Egypt is the great model of the eremitic life and is considered the father of monasticism itself. The second form is the community life, where the monks dwell together following a common rule in a normally constituted monastery. The author of this form of monasticism was St. Pachomius of Egypt who authored the rule later used by St. Benedict of Nursia in the west. In his ascetic writings, St. Basil the Great exercised a formative influence on monasticism, and he was a strong advocate of community life. He gave a social emphasis to monasticism insiting that the monasteries care for the sick, the poor, maintain hospitals and orphanages, and help society. In general, however, the monasteries of the east place less emphasis on active works than their counterparts in the west. The primary emphasis of an Orthodox monk is the life of prayer, and through this, he serves others. Finally, there is intermediate form monasticism, the semi-eremitic life, a
middle way where loosely knit groups of small settlements under the guidance of an elder exist rather than a single community. The great semi-eremitic centers in Egypt were Nitria and Scetis, which produced by the end of the fourth century many renowned monks.

Monasticism originally arose among the peasantry that Christianity had only begun to touch. It expanded with the conversion of the non-Hellenized populations of the Egyptian and Syrian interior. It was a movement of withdrawal and retreat. Instinctively, it sought the desert, far from village, town or city life and far from the normal life of the church. Such withdrawal reflected a quest for solitude, was a gesture dramatizing the rejection of worldly goods, and can even be considered contempt for civilization and culture [Walker, 153].

One of the earliest monks and a religious hermit, St. Anthony of Egypt is revered as the founder of organized Christian monasticism. The Life of St. Anthony, written by Athanasius of Alexandria, can be said to reflect the spirit of monasticism and was used as propaganda for adherents in both the East and West alike. Having sold his inheritance at the age of twenty, he took up the hermit's life at the edge of his hometown, with the guidance of an elder. Moving farther into the desert, he spent twenty years in solitude at an abandoned ruin near the Red Sea. He constantly struggled against demonic powers, but through prayer, fasting and invoking the name of Christ, he was able to overcome the forces of evil. Emerging from his retreat in the early fourth century, others viewed him as a hero and a holy man who represented the deification that all wished to attain. Eventually others gathered around him forming a hermetic community with St. Anthony as their spiritual trainer. More and more communities sprang up throughout the Nile Delta so that by the time of his death in 356, there were thousands of hermits following Christ in the desert [Walker, 154-155].

Under the leadership of St. Pachomius of Egypt, the community life or “coenobitic” monastery developed. In stark contrast to the style of St. Anthony, these coenobitic monasteries advocated a strict common life: following common prayer, work and meditation schedules; communal dining and
community property treatment; and they observed their spiritual elders guidance without question [Walker, 155]. These elders used his Rule, which was developed over time. These communities grew to compose both male and female communities that supported themselves through their work, and they were dedicated to mutual help and encouragement as the way to salvation.

In Asia Minor, coenobitism spread due to the efforts of a Cappadocian Father of the 4th century, St. Basil the Great. St. Basil of Caesaria, whose conviction that full Christian life demanded both the love of God and of neighbour. His monk’s mission was to imitate the Apostolic community in Jerusalem where “all who believed were together and had all things in common” [Walker, 156]. St. Basil disapproved of the extreme asceticism he found in the desert, and, like St. Pachomius, he added obedience to the list of monks needed virtues. He also encouraged the establishment of monasteries on the outskirts of cities so they could serve the people, offering them example and instruction, hospitality to travelers, and care for the sick. His instructions were written, edited, and eventually compiled as his Longer Rules and Shorter Rules which continue to be the basis for monasticism today [Ibid.].

The tradition of monasticism was introduced to the West by St. Athanasius and his Life of St. Anthony the Great, which appeared in Latin translations around 360 [Walker, 157]. The first western monastery is attributed to St. Martin of Tours who founded a community at Liguge and later in his capacity as Bishop of Tours. Throughout the remainder of the 4th century, monasteries sprang up in Milan, Gaul, Spain and throughout Italy. This continuing growth of monastic communities, and the need to regulate their life, led to the multiplication of formal rules. The work that emerged as the norm for monastic communities in the West became the Rule of St. Benedict of Nursia. He drew upon his experience with the rules of St. Basil and St. Pachomius to define his order for monasticism.

Having begun his ascetic life as a hermit who dwelt in a cave near Subiaco, St. Benedict later embraced the coenobite model of monasticism by organizing his followers into small communities. His notion of a monastery was a self sufficient, stable community devoted to the following of Christ. Members
renounced all possessions, practiced celibacy, and remained with the monastery for life. The abbot, who was head of the community, was to be obeyed implicitly and would consult with the community on matters of concern. Monks had three jobs: communal worship of God in seven daily offices; working in the fields; and study of scripture. As all the monks needed to read to be able to perform their tasks, Benedict’s monasteries became centers for learning throughout the Middle Ages [Walker, 158].

The Benedict Rule spread slowly throughout Europe, even under the patronage of Pope Gregory the Great who used monks as missionaries, bishops, and ambassadors with greater frequency throughout his Papacy [Ibid.]. New influence by the Irish Monk Columbanus, whose Rule for Monks, introduced to govern the monasteries of Annegray, Fontaine, and Luxeuil mirrored the life of his home monastery of Bangor. The roots of this Irish monasticism lay with St. John Cassian and his eastern tradition. However, by coming into contact with that of St. Benedict, the Rule of Columbanus was modified. The end result being that St. Benedict’s Rule became the standard norm for all of European Monasticism [Ibid.].

Works Cited: