



The Works of John Cassian

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Cassian was a monk and ascetic writer of Southern Gaul, and the first to introduce the rules of Eastern monasticism into the West, b. probably in Provence about 360; d. about 435, probably near Marseilles. Gennadius refers to him as a Scythian by birth (natione Scythia), but this is regarded as an erroneous statement based on the fact that Cassian passed several years of his life in the desert of Scete (heremus Scitii) in Egypt. The son of wealthy parents, he received a good education, and while yet a youth visited the holy places in Palestine, accompanied by a friend, Germanus, some years his senior. In Bethlehem Cassian and Germanus assumed the obligations of the monastic life, but, as in the case of many of their contemporaries, the desire of acquiring the science of sanctity from its most eminent teachers soon drew them from their cells in Bethlehem to the Egyptian deserts. Before leaving their first monastic home the friends promised to return as soon as possible, but this last clause they interpreted rather broadly, as they did not see Bethlehem again for seven years. During their absence they visited the solitaries most famous for holiness in Egypt, and so attracted were they by the great virtues of their hosts that after obtaining an extension of their leave of absence at Bethlehem, they returned to Egypt, where they remained several years longer. It was during this period of his life that Cassian collected the materials for his two principal works, the "Institutes" and "Conferences". From Egypt the companions came to Constantinople, where Cassian became a favourite disciple of St. John Chrysostom. The famous bishop of the Eastern capitol elevated Cassian to the diaconate, and placed in his charge the treasures of his cathedral. After the second expulsion of St. Chrysostom, Cassian was sent as an envoy to Rome by the clergy of Constantinople, for the purpose of interesting Pope Innocent I in behalf of their bishop. It was probably in Rome that Cassian was elevated to the priesthood, for it is certain that on his arrival in the Eternal City he was still a deacon. From this time Germanus is no more heard of, and of Cassian himself, for the next decade or more, nothing is known. About 415 he was at Marseilles where he founded two monasteries, one for men, over the tomb of St. Victor, a martyr of the last Christian persecution under Maximian (286-305), and the other for women. The remainder of his days were passed at, or very near, Marseilles. His personal influence and his writings contributed greatly to the diffusion of monasticism in the West. Although never formally canonized, St. Gregory the Great regarded him as a saint, and it is related that Urban V (1362-1370), who had been an abbot of St. Victor, had the words Saint Cassian engraved on the silver casket that contained his head. At Marseilles his feast is celebrated, with an octave, 23 July, and his name is found among the saints of the Greek Calendar.

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