

ROBERT C. JONES



*Monks and  
Monasteries*  
A Brief History

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# A Brief History of Western Monasticism



Written by Robert Jones  
Acworth, Georgia

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# Christian Theology and History Adult Sunday School Courses

Robert Jones

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I've always been a strong believer in adult Sunday School classes and Bible studies in our churches. And many churches have quality, Biblically-based adult-focused programs. Unfortunately, just as many churches tend to downplay adult education, focusing on children's education (not a bad thing in itself), or focusing on the needs of the "unchurched", where topics such as church history and theology are often purposely ignored.

Yet there is a strong need for adult education focused on both the Bible and the basic tenets and history of the Faith. Among the reasons:

- Not all adults come from a strong childhood background in the church – adult Sunday School classes/Bible studies may be their first serious introduction to what Christianity is all about
- Christianity (and especially Evangelical Christianity) is under constant attack from the media and popular culture (movies, music, etc.). We need to give fellow Christians the tools to defend the Faith against attack (or to provide a "ready defense" as Peter says in 1 Peter 3:15)
- Even adult Christians that have a strong Biblical background often know little about the origins and history of their Faith

To better meet the needs of adult Christians (both those mature in their Faith, and those just starting out in the "School of Christ"), I've written a series of courses that focus on the history of the Christian Church (including the Jewish roots), as well as the development of doctrine in the Church. The topics represented in these courses are intended to both further the participant's walk in the Faith, as well as serve as a starting point for Christian apologetics.

While the primary purpose of these courses is for use in churches, they also may be useful for High School and College projects, especially the courses focused primarily on historical aspects.

One note: these courses are primarily written from an Evangelical Protestant viewpoint (I come from a Reformed Church background), but I hope I've given ample time to other points of view throughout the various courses.

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# Table of Contents

<b>CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY AND HISTORY ADULT SUNDAY SCHOOL COURSES .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>5</b>
Glossary .....	5
<b>TIMELINE.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>PREDECESSORS AND ANTECEDENTS .....</b>	<b>7</b>
Nazirites.....	7
“Sons of Zadok” and the Essenes .....	8
The Early Christians .....	9
The desert monks.....	10
<b>THE FIRST WESTERN MONASTIC MOVEMENTS .....</b>	<b>12</b>
Joseph of Arimathea.....	12
St. Benedict – The Rule of Benedict.....	12
Celtic Monasticism .....	15
<b>THE GREAT MEDIEVAL ORDERS .....</b>	<b>16</b>
Benedictines.....	16
The Cluniacs.....	17
Carthusians.....	18
Bernard of Clairvaux & the Cistercians .....	19
The Canons .....	20
The military orders - Knights Templar, Knights Hospitalers.....	20
The rise of Friars – Dominicans & Franciscans.....	21
<b>THE MEDIEVAL MONASTERY .....</b>	<b>23</b>
Monastic buildings .....	23
<b>THE DECLINE OF MONASTICISM .....</b>	<b>26</b>
The Black Death.....	26
Laxness in the monastery .....	26
The Reformation.....	27
The French Revolution.....	28
<b>WESTERN MONASTICISM TODAY .....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>SOURCES .....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>ABOUT THE AUTHOR .....</b>	<b>31</b>

## Introduction

For 700 years, medieval monasteries in Europe were the spiritual, agricultural, educational, legal, and administrative centers of the areas in which they were located. Following a daily routine of prayer, solitude, and physical labor, the monasteries provided a refuge from the cruel world that was Medieval Europe. In addition, it was the monks (and nuns) of these monasteries who kept alive the spark of knowledge in the West through their patient preservation and hand copying of ancient texts (both Christian and Classical).

I've long had an interest in Western monasticism. From the period from 1985-1992, I was able to visit over 40 medieval monasteries in England and Wales, adding to my interest in the topic. I am pleased to contribute this booklet to the knowledge of the subject.

This booklet will discuss the antecedents of the Western monastic movement (both Jewish and Christian), examine its founders and greatest influences (St. Antony, St. Benedict, St. Bernard of Clairvaux), and finally, discuss the downfall of the monastic movement.

## Glossary

- **Abbey** – religious community presided over by an abbot or an abbess
- **Abbess** – head of a nunnery (or, occasionally, head of a double monastery – St. Hilda of Whitby)
- **Abbot** – head of an abbey. “In the monastery, he is considered to represent the person of Christ.” (*Rule of Benedict* Chapter II)
- **Cenobites** – monks that live in a monastic community, typically under an abbot
- **Dissolution of the Monasteries** – the disbanding of the monasteries in England by King Henry VIII (1536/40)
- **Hermits (or anchorites)** – ascetic solitaries, typically not part of a defined monastic order
- **Lay brother** (especially Cistercian) – member of monastery not required to observe the complete holy office. Often involved in manual labor.
- **Monk** – from Gr. *monos*, man by himself; member of a monastic religious order, Bound to vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. A.K.A. “a religious”.
- **Prior** – second in command to an abbot, or head of a priory
- **Priory** – smaller monastic house than an abbey. Often a daughter house of an abbey (all Cluniac houses were priories, except for the one at Cluny). Headed by a *prior*.

## Timeline

Date	Event
1 <sup>st</sup> century	First virgins consecrated to Christ – daughters of Deacon Philip in Acts 21:9
251 A.D.	Early Christian hermit St. Antony is born
3 <sup>rd</sup> century	Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Tertullian, and Cyprian all praise asceticism
320	Pachomius (293-346) founds monastery at Tabennisi in Egypt; later founds nearby nunnery with over 400 nuns
c. 330	St. Amoun and St. Macarius create monasteries in the Egyptian desert
c. 341	Synod at Gangra expresses disapproval of monks that en-

Date	Event
	tirely give up church attendance
c. 356	St. Basil (330-379) joins a monastery in Asia Minor; begins work on his <i>Rules</i> for monastic living.
386 A.D.	St. Jerome founds monasteries in Bethlehem
4 <sup>th</sup> century	Monasteries begin to appear in the West – St. Ambrose at Milan, St. Hilary at Poitiers, etc.
401	St. Augustine of Hippo writes <i>On the Works of Monks</i> to encourage monks to do manual labor and to earn their own “keep”
c. 480	Birth of St. Benedict
5 <sup>th</sup> century	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Laura</i> organizations appear in Judean desert; several generally solitary monks gathered around one leader – common prayers and meals (similar to later Carthusians)</li> <li>• Symeon the Stylite (c. 390 – 459) lives on top of a column (monastery of Telanissos in Syria)</li> <li>• St. Patrick brings Christianity to Ireland</li> </ul>
c. 526	Rule of Benedict written
c. 550	Death of St. Benedict
c. 563	St. Columba founds a monastery at Iona, for the purpose of converting Scotland to Christianity
597	St. Augustine, prior of St. Andrew’s monastery in Rome, is sent to England as a missionary by Pope Gregory I
c. 663	Synod of Whitby (hosted by St. Hilda) resolves differences between Celtic and Roman Christianity
731	Bede completes <i>History of the English Church and People</i>
late 8 <sup>th</sup> - century	Abbeys of northern and eastern England destroyed by Viking raiders (Lindisfarne sacked in 793)
909	Berno founds the monastic house of Cluny.
936	Abbot Laffredus of Farfa in Lazio is poisoned by two of his monks, for trying to enforce the Benedictine rule
c. 943	St. Dunstan begins monastic reform movement in England
c. 970	English bishops and abbots/abbesses meet with King Edgar to create the <i>Regularis Concordia</i> , a constitution for English monasticism. Some practices were peculiar to English monasticism – lay people attending Sunday Mass at the monastic church, for example
1084	St. Bruno founds the Carthusians
1098	Cistercian order founded in Citeaux by Robert Molêsme
1099	First Crusade captures Jerusalem
1115	St. Bernard founds new Cistercian abbey at Clairvaux
1118	Hugh de Payens and eight companions form the Knights Templar in Jerusalem
1127	St. Bernard writes <i>Apologia</i> – an indictment of the Cluniacs
1128	Knights Templar adopt Cistercian rule
1170	Birth of St. Dominic in Castile, Spain
1181	Birth of St. Francis of Assisi
1210	Franciscan Order recognized by Pope Innocent III
1217	Pope Honorius III licenses the creation of the “Order of Preachers”, later known as the Dominicans

Date	Event
1221	Death of St. Dominic, founder of the Dominican Order
1228	Francis of Assisi canonized
1233	The Dominicans are given the task of running the courts of the Inquisition
1291	Last Christian stronghold in the Holy Lands falls (Acre)
1323	Pope John XXII supports the idea that Christ and the Apostles did not practice absolute poverty – a blow to the stricter Franciscans of the day
1328	Franciscan Spiritual William of Ockham (Ockham's Razor) excommunicated for insisting on strict poverty for monks
1347/51	Bubonic and Pneumonic Plague sweeps through Europe and England; many monasteries devastated
1517	Martin Luther tacks <i>95 Theses</i> to the door of Wittenburg Castle, launching the Protestant Reformation
1534	Society of Jesus (Jesuits) formed by Saint Ignatius of Loyola
1536/40	800 religious communities in England and Wales are dissolved by Henry VIII and his secretary Thomas Cromwell
1662	Armand Jean Le Bouthillier de Rancé, abbot of the Cistercian abbey Notre Dame de la Trappe, France, forms the Trappists (Cistercians of the Strict Observance)
1732	Protestant <i>Seventh Day Baptists</i> found mixed-gender monastery in Ephrata, Pennsylvania
1790	Cistercian and Cluniac orders suppressed in France by the French Revolution
1798	Knights of Malta (former Knights Hospitalers) defeated by Napoleon I
1830	St. Bernard is declared a doctor of the Church by Pope Pius VIII
1944	The Trappist Monastery of the Holy Spirit in Conyers, Georgia is founded

## Predecessors and antecedents

The monastic movement which swelled in the West in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries had both Christian and Jewish predecessors.

### **Nazirites**

The Jewish Nazirites, who are mentioned as early as the Pentateuch in the Old Testament, were not a monastic order per se, but made it possible for those that wanted to make a “special vow, a vow of separation to the LORD”. The Christian monks later echoed these ideas of separation from the normal, and of making a vow to God (Medieval monks vowed poverty, chastity and obedience). The Book of Numbers lists some of the requirements for becoming a Nazirite:

<sup>2</sup>“Speak to the Israelites and say to them: ‘If a man or woman wants to make a special vow, a vow of separation to the LORD as a Nazirite, <sup>3</sup>he must abstain from wine and other fermented drink...<sup>5</sup>“During the entire period of his vow of separation no razor may be used on his head. He must be holy until the period of his separation to the LORD is over; he must let the hair of his head grow long. <sup>6</sup>Throughout the period of his separation to the LORD he must not go near a dead body. ...<sup>8</sup>Throughout the period of his separation he is consecrated to the LORD.” (Numbers 6, NIV)

There appeared to have been two types of Nazirites. The first type (probably a minority) were dedicated at birth:

- Samson (Judges 13:7)
- Samuel (1 Sam 1:11)
- John the Baptist (Luke 1:15)

(The Benedictines would later accept children to be entered into the order for life.)

The second type (probably the most numerous) made their vow for a specified period of time. The most famous is Paul of Tarsus (Acts 18:18).

### ***“Sons of Zadok” and the Essenes***

*Manual of Discipline*: “And this is the order for the men of the community who have offered themselves to turn from all evil and to lay hold of all that he commanded according to his will, to be separated from the congregation of the men of error, to become a community in law and in wealth, answering when asked by the sons of Zadok, the priests who keep the covenant...” (*The Dead Sea Scrolls*, Millar Burrows, p. 376)

Among the 800 scrolls found in caves above the Dead Sea settlement of Qumran were 10+ copies of each of two documents that appear to be the rules or “constitution” of a Second Temple Jewish “monastic” order. The documents in question are *The Manual of Discipline* (or the *Rule of the Community*), and the *Damascus Document* (fragments of which were also found in Cairo in 1897). Neither document reveals the name of the community that wrote them, other than the nomenclature “Sons of Zadok”.

While one must be careful to not assign attributes of Medieval Christian monasticism to a Jewish religious sect that existed before Christ, there are some remarkable similarities between the rules outlined in the two documents, and the later Christian monastic rules, such as the 6<sup>th</sup> century *Rule of Benedict*. Some of the rules and attributes of the “Sons of Zadok” which seem to closely parallel the later Christian monastic rules include:

- They were headed by a “superintendent” or “examiner”, who seemed to be both teacher and Chief Financial Officer
- Judicial decisions were made by the assembled members of the group
- Apparently there was community ownership of property
- There appears to have been a required two-stage (one year each) probation period for entry into the sect
- At some point they appear to have separated themselves from the rest of Judaism, and settle in a remote area (“When these things come to pass for the community in Israel, by these regulations they shall be separated from the midst of the session of the men of error to go to the wilderness to prepare there the way of the LORD...” (from the *Manual of Discipline*, Burrows, 382)
- Prayer was an important element of their daily worship
- Those that violated Mosaic law and the community rule willfully were excommunicated
- They scrupulously obeyed the Sabbath



So, who were the “Sons of Zadok”? The most common explanation by modern day scholars is that they were Essenes, the mysterious religious group named by 1<sup>st</sup> century historians Josephus and Pliny the Elder:

“On the west side of the Dead Sea, but out of range of the exhalations of the coast, is the solitary tribe of the Essenes, which is remarkable beyond all other tribes in the whole world, as it has no women and has renounced all sexual desire, has no money, and has only palm trees for company...” (Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*; translation from *The People of the Dead Sea Scrolls: Essenes or Sadducees?*, James C. Vanderkam, Bible Review, April 1991)

Whether or not the community of the *Manual of Discipline* and the *Damascus Document* were Essenes or not, they do appear to have been a 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup>-century B.C. Jewish monastic group, whose rules were either later emulated or paralleled by St. Benedict, St. Augustine, and others.

### ***The Early Christians***

An obvious “early Christian” role-model for later monastic ascetics is to be found in the person of John the Baptist, who preached in the Judean desert, and wore clothes of “camel’s hair”:

<sup>1</sup>In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea...<sup>4</sup>John’s clothes were made of camel’s hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. <sup>5</sup>People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. <sup>6</sup>Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.” (Matthew 3, NIV)

John the Baptist is also one of the several Nazirites mentioned in the Bible that were dedicated at birth to the discipline:

“He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth.” (Luke 1:15, NIV)

Elements that would later be echoed in Western monasticism can also be found in the “primitive” early church as described in Acts. Attributes such as sharing possessions, continual fellowship, teaching and learning, and communal meals were all part of very early Christian practice, as these passages from Acts discuss (see also Acts 4:32-37):

<sup>42</sup>They continually devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer. <sup>43</sup>A sense of awe came over everyone, and many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. <sup>44</sup>All the believers were together, and they shared everything with one another. <sup>45</sup>They made it their practice to sell their possessions and goods and to distribute the proceeds to anyone who was in need. <sup>46</sup>They had a single purpose and went to the Temple every day. They ate at each other’s homes and shared their food with glad and humble hearts. <sup>47</sup>They kept praising God and enjoying the good will of all the people. And every day the Lord was adding to them people who were being saved.” (Acts 2:42-47, NIV)

There also seems to be some admiration of celibacy and/or singleness in the early church, as these passages from Acts, 1 Corinthians, and 4<sup>th</sup>-century Bishop Eusebius indicate:

<sup>7</sup>On finishing the voyage from Tyre, we arrived at Ptolemais, greeted the brothers, and stayed with them for one day. <sup>8</sup>The next day we left and came to Caesarea. We went to the home of Philip the evangelist, one of the seven, and stayed with him. <sup>9</sup>He had four unmarried daughters who could prophesy.” (Acts 21:7-9, NIV)

<sup>8</sup>“Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I am.” (1 Cor 7:8)

“For in Asia also great lights have fallen asleep, which shall rise again on the last day, at the coming of the Lord, when he shall come with glory from heaven and shall seek out all the saints. Among these are Philip, one of the twelve apostles, who sleeps in Hierapolis, and his two aged virgin daughters, and another daughter who lived in the Holy Spirit and now rests at Ephesus...” (Eusebius, quoting Polycrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book 3, Chapter 31)

## **The desert monks**

“...he [St. Antony] persuaded many to embrace the solitary life. And thus it happened in the end that cells arose even in the mountains, and the desert was colonized by monks, who came forth from their own people, and enrolled themselves for the citizenship in the heavens.” (*Life of St. Antony*, by Bishop Athanasius, Chapter 14)

As early as second century, there were small groups of Christians that renounced marriage and possessions, and lived in remote places. However, Christian monasticism as we know it today probably started in the deserts of Egypt in the late-3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries. These early monks in Egypt are known as the “desert monks”, or “the ascetics”.



Some scholars believe that the growth of the desert ascetic movement was in response to the growing cosmopolitan nature of the Church – in c. 312 A.D., the Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity, and eventually made Christianity the official religion of the combined (east and west) Roman empire. Could the Church remain pure while exercising great political and economic power and control?

Some of the desert monks sought to emulate the lives of the Christian martyrs. Others believed that the path to salvation was through constant prayer and supplication to God. This raised a disturbing question that would be raised time and time again throughout the history of monasticism – is a monastic life “dedicated to God” “better” than the lives of normal church-going folks? Better than the non-monastic priests, bishops, and other clerics? And if so, does this mean that there are two “gradients” of Christians? Is one more “saved” than the other? Does “subduing natural urges” (one of the goals of the ascetics) attain greater favor in heaven?

One of the earliest of the desert monks is St. Antony (251-356). He is also one of the most famous, by virtue of the *Life of Antony*, written by Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria around the time of Antony’s death. (Athanasius was famous for his anti-Arian writings, as well as his Paschal letter 39, which is the oldest extant listing of the books of the New Testament as we know them today). We will examine St. Antony in some detail, as an example of the desert monk movement.

St. Antony was Egyptian by birth, born into a wealthy family. Upon the death of his parents, Antony renounced his wealth, put a young sister into a convent to be raised, and retired to tombs located outside of his village. Later, he moved into an abandoned fort in a remote mountain area, and resided there for 20 years. Finally, he moved to another area with a spring at the foot of a mountain, where he lived out the rest of his 105 years.

According to the *Life of Antony*, Antony lived a very severe and ascetic life:

“... he was ever fasting, and he had a garment of hair on the inside, while the outside was skin, which he kept until his end. And he neither bathed his body with water to free himself from filth, nor did he ever wash his feet nor even endure so much as to put them into water, unless compelled by necessity. Nor did any one even see him unclothed, nor his body naked at all, except after his death, when he was buried.” (*Life of Antony*, Chapter 48)

One of the reasons for the severe life led by Antony was his constant battles with the devil – a recurrent theme throughout his biography:

“But Antony having learned from the Scriptures that the devices of the devil are many, zealously continued the discipline, reckoning that though the devil had not been able to deceive his heart by bodily pleasure, he would endeavor to ensnare him by other means. For the demon loves sin. Wherefore more and more he repressed the body and kept it in subjection, lest haply having conquered on one side, he should be dragged down on the other. He therefore planned to accustom himself to a severer mode of life.” (*Life of Antony*, Chapter 7)

In time, as the fame of Antony spread, cells of monks grew up around Antony’s cell, and looked to him for leadership (according to Athanasius, Constantine himself once wrote to St. Antony asking for advice!):

“So their cells were in the mountains, like filled with holy bands of men who sang psalms, loved reading, fasted, prayed, rejoiced in the hope of things to come, labored in alms-giving, and preserved love and harmony one with another...For then there was neither the evil-doer, nor the injured, nor the reproaches of the tax-gatherer: but instead a multitude of ascetics; and the one purpose of them all was to aim at virtue.” (*Life of Antony*, Chapter 44)

Athanasius (who may have had his own agenda) records that Antony was anti-Arian (as was Athanasius), and always bowed down to local ecclesiastical rule (something which not all monks would do in the future – Cluniacs, Knights Templar, etc.) Antony also “worked, however with his hands, having heard, ‘he who is idle let him not eat,’ and part he spent on bread and part he gave to the needy.” (*Life of Antony*, Chapter 3)

During his long life (105 years), Antony is credited with performing many miracles (including bringing water out of dry land), as well as having the power to heal. This desert monk (with some help from Bishop Athanasius) would have a lasting influence on Christian monasticism. (“For not from writings, nor from worldly wisdom, nor through any art, was Antony renowned, but solely from his piety towards God.” (*Life of Antony*, Chapter 93)

Antony was not alone in his desert monk-ship. Other monks contemporary with Antony founded monasteries or nunneries in the desert, including St. Pachomius, who in 320 founded a monastery at Tabennisi in Egypt, and Sts. Amoun and Macarius in c. 330.

In c. 356, St. Basil (330-379) joined a monastery in Asia Minor, and began work on one of the first “rules” for monastic living (which Benedict credits in *his* famous rule as one of his inspirations).

Several of the post-Nicene Church Fathers either started monasteries, or were monks themselves, including St. Athanasius, St. Augustine of Hippo (North Africa), and St. Jerome (Bethlehem).

## The first Western monastic movements

### *Joseph of Arimathea*

Medieval legend, at least, records that the first monastic settlement in the West was by Joseph of Arimathea in England at Glastonbury, in the first century (37 A.D. or 63 A.D., depending on the source). The basic tenants of this legend (relating to the monastic establishment) go something like this:

- In the year 63 A.D. (or, possibly, earlier) Joseph is sent by the Apostle Philip from Gaul to England, with 11 (or 12, in some accounts) disciples, one of whom is his son Josephes
- Joseph lands in the British west country (Somerset), and is granted some land on the Island of Ynis-witrin ("Isle of Glass") by a local King, Arviragus
- Joseph and his followers create an ascetic community
- At the bidding of the archangel Gabriel, they build a church of daub and wattle in honor of the Blessed Mary.
- After the death of Joseph and his followers, the site is abandoned. Later, the great Benedictine monastery of Glastonbury is built on the site.

The legend is remembered today because it also records that Joseph brought with him (variously) two cruets "filled with blood and sweat of the prophet Jesus", collected when Joseph took Jesus down from the cross, or the Cup from the Last Supper (a.k.a. the Holy Grail, or the Sangreal).

Is there any chance that the legends are true? Tertullian as early as the third century reported that "the haunts of the Britons" were "subjected to Christ". Gildas the Wise (500? - 572? A.D.) reported that the British Isles received the "holy precepts of Christ" in the "latter part of the reign of Tiberius Caesar" (who died in 37 A.D.)

Whether true or no, the monastic settlement ascribed to Joseph of Arimathea didn't last. But other early Western monastic settlements would.

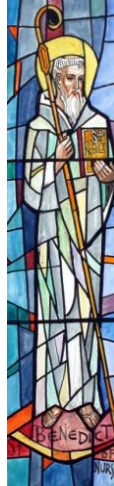


The stark remains of St. Mary's Chapel (1186), said to have been built on the exact spot where Joseph built the first daub and wattle church in 63/64 A.D.

### *St. Benedict – The Rule of Benedict*

Much of Western monasticism as we know it today can fairly be traced to a 6<sup>th</sup>-century Italian monk named St. Benedict of Nursia (c. 480-550). The little that we know about Benedict comes from St. Gregory the Great's *Life of St. Benedict* written around 593/94. According to Gregory, Benedict started his monastic career by living in solitude in a cave at Subiaco, Italy, 30 miles east of Rome, to escape the paganism he saw in Rome. In time, other monks asked him to be their leader, and he eventually started 12 monasteries of 12 monks each in the Subiaco area.

Around 529, Benedict founded the monastery of Monte Cassino, Italy (80 miles S. of Rome). Also around this time, Benedict wrote his famous *Rule* for monastic life. The Rule would be the basis for most Western monasticism for the next 1000 years, and is still an influence today.



Saint Benedict<sup>1</sup>

## The Rule of Benedict

“The reason we have written this rule is that, by observing it in monasteries, we can show that we have some degree of virtue and the beginnings of monastic life.” (*The Rule of St. Benedict in English*, 1981, The Order of St. Benedict)

Many of the precepts of Western monasticism were established in the Rule of Benedict. Some of these are included below:

Precept	From the Rule
(All quotes from <i>The Rule of Saint Benedict in English</i> , The Liturgical Press, 1982)	
“Therefore we intend to establish a school for the Lord’s service. In drawing up its regulations, we hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome.” (Prologue)	
12-month novitiate	“If after due reflection he promises to observe everything and to obey every command given him, let him be received into the community.” (Chapter 58)
Abolition of private property	“Above all, this evil practice must be uprooted and removed from the monastery. We mean that without an order from the abbot, no one may presume to give, receive or retain anything as his own, nothing at all – not a book, writing tablets or

<sup>1</sup> Library of Congress LAMB, no. 1517 (A size) [P&P]

Precept	From the Rule
	stylus – in short, not a single item...” (Chapter 33) see also Acts 4:32
Communal meetings of the abbot and the monks (later to be known as Chapter House)	“As often as anything important is to be done in the monastery, the abbot shall call the whole community together and himself explain what the business is; and after hearing the advice of the brothers, let him ponder it and follow what he judges the wiser course.” (Chapter 3)
Communal sleeping arrangements (dormitory style)	“The monks are to sleep in separate beds...If possible, all are to sleep in one place...A lamp must be kept burning in the room until morning.” (Chapter 22)
Division of the day into seven offices	Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, Nones, Vespers, Compline – “Seven times a day I praise you for your righteous laws.” (Psalms 119:164, NIV)
Excommunication in degrees	Rebuking in front of the community, exclusion from table and oratory, shunning, “strokes of the rod”, banishment from the community
Humility	Benedict quotes from Luke “Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled, and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.” (Chapter 7)
Importance of manual labor	“Idleness is the enemy of the soul. Therefore, the brothers should have specified periods for manual labor as well as for prayerful reading.” (Chapter 48)
Obedience	“They no longer live by their own judgement, giving in to their whims and appetites; rather, they walk according to another’s decisions and directions, choosing to live in monasteries and to have an abbot over them.” (Chapter 5)
Reading accompanying meals	Church Fathers, Lives of the Saints, Bible
Rule by an abbott	“He is believed to hold the place of Christ in the monastery, since he is addressed by a title of Christ.” (Chapter 2)
Self-control	“We must then be on guard against any base desire, because death is stationed near the gateway of plea-

Precept	From the Rule
	sure.” (Chapter 7)
Silence enforced except at prescribed times (Chapter); Laughter, gossip forbidden	“Monks should diligently cultivate silence at all times...” (Chapter 42)
Some positions within the community are defined in addition to the abbot	<p><b>Cellarer</b> – “...someone who is wise, mature in conduct, temperate, not an excessive eater, not proud, excitable, offensive, dilatory or wasteful...” (Chapter 31)</p> <p><b>Prior</b> - “The prior for his part is to carry out respectfully what his abbot assigns to him, and do nothing contrary to the abbot’s wishes or arrangements.”</p> <p><b>Porter</b> - “At the door of the monastery, place a sensible old man who knows how to take a message and deliver a reply, and whose age keeps him from roaming about. This porter will need a room near the entrance so that visitors will always find him there to answer them.” (Chapter 66)</p>

### **Celtic Monasticism**

While “Roman” monasticism was thriving by the 6<sup>th</sup> century in places like Italy, France, and North Africa, an equally vibrant form of monasticism came out of Western Britain and Ireland – Celtic monasticism. Celtic monasticism was more ascetic and disciplined than Roman monasticism, and tended to have less emphasis on the monastic community (monks often lived in individual cells). (Photo<sup>2</sup>)

Celtic monasticism was also avidly evangelistic, sending out missionaries to Scotland, Northumbria, and parts of Europe. One of the most famous missionary journeys was that of St. Columba (c. 521-597), who established a monastery on the island of Iona, for the purpose of converting the Picts (Scotland). St. Columban (c. 543 – 615) led a missionary journey to Europe, and founded monasteries in France and Italy (!) Another famous missionary was Aidan, who founded a monastery at Lindisfarne in Northumbria, for the purpose of converting Northern England.

Celtic monasticism was also known for its emphasis on learning, and on preserving the great works of the past. The most famous book of Celtic monasticism is the intricately illuminated *Book of Kells*, a copy of the Gospels dating to the 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> century.

Celtic monasticism didn’t follow the Benedictine Rule, nor did they view themselves as beholden to Rome. Over time, they developed several practices that were different enough from Roman monastic-



<sup>2</sup> Library of Congress LAMB, no. 1042 (A size) [P&P]

ism to attract the attention of Rome. These differences included maintaining a different calendar than Rome (celebrating Easter on a different day), and wearing a different tonsure (shaving of all of the top of the head).

In 663, a great Synod was held at Whitby, under the patronage of Hilda of Whitby (614-680). The Synod of Whitby (King Oswy making the final decision) decided against Celtic calendar and tonsure, ensuring that Celtic monasticism in the future would have a more Roman flavor. Hilda in of her self is an interesting figure – she not only founded Whitby Abbey, but 5 future bishops trained in her “double monastery” (male and female) community.

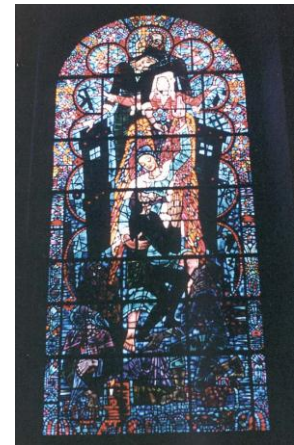
Celtic monasticism might have become the predominant form of monasticism in Britain, had not Pope Gregory sent St. Augustine in 597 A.D. to bring Britain into the Roman fold. Augustine founded several monasteries, and served as the first Archbishop of Canterbury.



Remains of 11<sup>th</sup> century Benedictine Monastery Whitby Abbey. In 663, Whitby was the site of the Synod of Whitby, which decided in favor of Roman, rather than Celtic, monasticism.

## The great medieval Orders

The zenith of Western monasticism was from the period starting with St. Benedict in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, lasting until about the 13<sup>th</sup> century. But even during that period of ascendancy, Western monasticism still faced varying cycles of decline and reform. As a matter of fact, as we discuss some of the major medieval orders in this next section, many of them were created to combat perceived laxity on the part of their antecedents. (Photo at right: Stained glass at Canterbury Cathedral, a former Benedictine monastery)



The medieval monastic orders were also interesting studies in economics. It seems that putting a bunch of zealous men that work for free in a rigidly controlled and disciplined environment can lead to great profits for the controlling authority – the monastery or the Order. A good example is the Cistercians, who became the leading wool merchants of their day, or the almost unimaginably wealthy Knights Templar. In both cases, the profligate wealth eventually led to their downfall.

### ***Benedictines***

The first and most influential of the great Medieval orders were the Benedictines, sometimes called the “Black Monks”, after the color of their robes. This is the monastic order which grew out of the *Rule of Benedict* in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Many of the great monasteries of the Middle Ages were Benedictine, such as Glastonbury, Canterbury, and Whitby.



Their influence can not be underestimated. Fifty Popes (including Pope Gregory the Great, father of Gregorian Chant) have come from the Benedictine order. According to Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia 99:

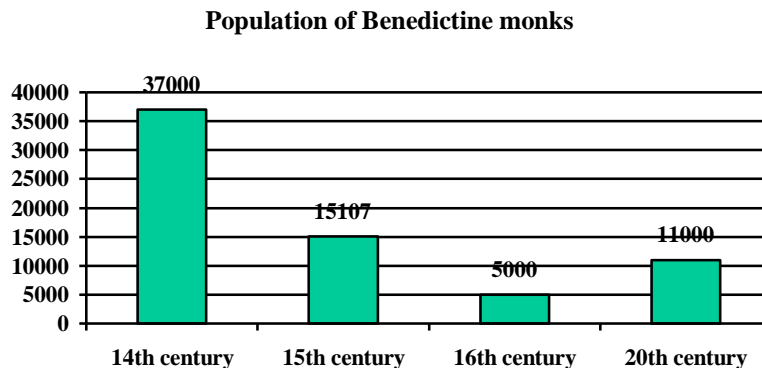
“As early as 1354 the order had provided 24 popes, 200 cardinals, 7000 archbishops, 15,000 bishops, 1560 canonized saints, and 5000 holy persons worthy of canonization, a number since increased to 40,000...”  
("Benedictines," *Microsoft® Encarta® Encyclopedia 99*. © 1993-1998 Microsoft Corporation)

During the Middle Ages, the abbot of a powerful Benedictine monastery often served as the local landlord, judge, and – in England –Parliamentarian. The abbot, of course, also presided over his monks with almost total authority.

Over time, Benedictine monasteries developed many positions of authority that were not defined in St. Benedict’s original rule. The people that filled these positions were known as obedientiaries, and included (among others):

- **Precentor** – in charge of copying manuscripts
- **Sacrist** – running of the Abbey church
- **Chamberlain** – monks sleeping quarters, clothing, bathing
- **Kitchener and refectorer** – in charge of food and drink
- **Almoner** – alms for the poor
- **Infirmarian** – head of infirmary or hospital
- **Master of works** (sometimes the sacrist) – in charge of new building

The Benedictine order included nuns as well as monks (although mixed houses like Whitby were rare). It is said that St. Benedict and his sister St. Scholastica founded the first order of Benedictine nuns.



As can be seen by the above graph, the Benedictine’s experienced a steady decline in the number of monks after the 14<sup>th</sup> century, culminating with a mere 5,000 during the century of the Reformation – helped along by Henry VIII’s Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1536/40. However, the order is far from dead today – it has at least 30 monasteries in the United States alone.

### ***The Cluniacs***

The Cluniacs were founded at Cluny in France in 910 A.D. by William the Pious, Duke of Aquitaine. Like the later Knights Templar, the Cluniacs were placed under direct jurisdiction of the Pope. As such, there was no local episcopal control of the order.

The Cluniacs were known for their great focus on liturgy and meditation on scripture, and ornate churches. And while they ostensibly strictly followed the *Rule of Benedict*, they did not include manual work as part of a monk's daily routine. This was in stark contrast to both the *Rule of Benedict*, and the views of St. Augustine of Hippo, who spoke out forcefully against monks that did not work in his 401 A.D. *On the Works of Monks* (which quoted from the Apostle Paul – “if you don't work, you don't eat”).

Unlike the Benedictines, where local abbots had significant authority, all Cluniac houses were ruled from abbey at Cluny, and all daughter houses were considered priories – a sort of monastic feudel system. (In fact, monks had to travel to Cluny in order to join the order). Also unlike the Benedictines, the Cluniacs tended to recruit from the nobility. Many of the monks were also priests.

The Cluniacs were spectacularly successful for the first 200 years of their existence - within 200 years of their founding, they had established over 2000 houses! As was the case with most mediaeval monastic orders, the Cluniacs became very prosperous in time, which tended to blur the initial ascetic zeal that existed at the foundation. Also, their excess of ritual may have helped lead to their eventual downfall. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, for example, St. Bernard of Clairvaux spoke out strongly against the order. By the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the Cluniacs were already in decline.



Ruins of Castle Acre Priory, Norfolk, England – an 11<sup>th</sup>-century Cluniac house

## **Carthusians**

It has been pointed out that one religious order that has never needed reforming in its history is the Carthusians, which still exists as an order today. St. Bruno founded the Carthusians (*The Poor Brothers of God of the Charterhouse*) as an ascetic order in 1084, probably in reaction to the excessive riches of the Cluniacs. The order, founded in Grande Chartreuse, France (near Grenoble) stressed poverty, penance, silence, and manual work.

Rather than basing their order on the *Rule of Benedict*, the Carthusians used the more ascetic desert monks as their role models. Unlike most monastic communities, the Carthusian monks lived in individual cells, and only met communally for vespers and matins (and for feast days, funerals, etc.) Carthusian monks fasted often, and never ate meat and rarely drank wine. During Lent, they flagellated themselves once a day (!)

Interestingly enough, the Carthusians were introduced in England (1178) by Henry II as part of his penance for the death of Saint Thomas Becket. In England, the *Chartreuse* Houses were referred to as “Charter Houses”.



Remains of a solitary cell at Carthusian monastery Mount Grace Priory, North Yorkshire, England. Note the food hatch, through which the monks received their meals.

## ***Bernard of Clairvaux & the Cistercians***

“St. Bernard was a man of lofty mind, whom I almost venture to set above all other celebrated teachers both ancient and modern...” (*To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany*, Martin Luther, 1524)

Perhaps the greatest of the monastic reform movements of the Middle Ages involved the Cistercians, led by (although not founded by) St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) the most influential churchman of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The Cistercians were founded in 1098 in Citeaux (*Cistercium* in Latin), France (Burgundy), by Saint Robert of Molesme.

The Cistercians were founded on the ideal of returning to a strict interpretation of the *Rule of Benedict*, which the Cistercian leaders felt had been neglected by both Benedictines and Cluniacs. The order grew rapidly in both numbers and influence – within 200 years, they had over 740 communities.

The Cistercians were known as the “White Monks”, because they wore a habit of unbleached cloth. To better remove themselves from the secular world, they settled far from towns, often reclaiming inhospitable land in very remote places (Fountains, Rievaulx and Tintern Abbeys in Britain/Wales are all good examples). The monks were dedicated to three activities - worship, study and work.

One important feature of life in a Cistercian monastery was the *lay brothers*, those attracted to the monastic life, but not wishing to live the strict life of a monk. The lay brothers typically tended to the agricultural and livestock needs of the Abbey, often living at remote *granges* – a farmstead within a day’s ride of the abbey. In some abbeys, the lay brothers outnumbered the monks by a 4-1 margin, such as at Rievaulx Abbey under Abbot Ailred, which had 150 monks and 600 lay-brothers.

The most famous Cistercian was Bernard of Clairvaux. Bernard became a Cistercian in 1112, and in c. 1115, he founded a new Cistercian Abbey at Clairvaux, which had over 700 monks at its height. By the time of Bernard’s death in 1153, Clairvaux had spawned 68 daughter houses.

Bernard was outspoken in his criticism of the ornate churches of the Cluniacs. He wrote a scathing indictment of the Cluniacs in 1127, called the *Apologia*, in which he said (of the Cluniacs):

“What is the object of all this?...the church walls are resplendent, but the poor are absent...what has all this imagery to do with monks? What with those who profess poverty and spirituality of mind?” (St. Bernard, Rowling, p. 128)



Under St. Bernard, rules were drawn up which forbade paintings, sculptures, precious metals etc. in Cistercian churches. As a result, Cistercian monasteries are among the least ornate of any monastic houses.

Bernard, like St. Antony 900 years before, was said to have the power of healing. He is also remembered for being an avid advocate of the Crusades. He not only secured official recognition of the Knights Templar (Synod of Troyes, 1128), he is said to have almost single-handedly ordered the Second Crusade (1146). In 1830, St. Bernard was declared a doctor of the Church by Pope Pius VIII.

Organizationally, the Cistercians were somewhere in the middle between the decentralized Benedictines, and the “command and control” Cluniacs. Every year, abbots were expected to return to the grand chapter of the order in Citeaux. By definition, the abbot of Citeaux was head of order. However, daughter house abbots could inspect Citeaux. Steven Harding, an Englishman who was Abbot of Citeaux from 1110–1134, drew up the constitution of the Cistercians (*carta charitatis*, the Rule of Love) in 1119. The Cistercians had fewer monks with special titles than the Benedictines – the cellarer was the principle officer next to the abbot.

Over time, the Cistercian abbeys in England became big producers of wool, which was sold overseas to weavers in Flanders and Florence. As such, the order became very rich. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, an ascetic splinter group of the Cistercians was formed - the Trappists (which includes the monks in Conyers, Georgia, outside of Atlanta).

The Cistercians were wiped out in England by Henry VIII, and in France by the French Revolution. However, there are still a few thousand Cistercian monks around the world today.

### ***The Canons***

A slight variation on the medieval model of monasticism was created by the Augustinian and Premonstatensian canons of the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century. The Augustinian (or Austin) Canons were founded in 1059, while the Premonstatensian Canons were founded a century later in 1120 (receiving papal sanction in 1126), in Premontre, France. Both groups of canons followed the *Rule of St. Augustine*, which was based on a letter written to some monks a thousand years before by St. Augustine of Hippo. (Photo<sup>3</sup>)



Both orders lived in communities, but were much more likely to journey out and serve the people in the local communities as priests, manning hospitals, and the like. Most Augustinian houses were under the control of the local bishops.

### ***The military orders - Knights Templar, Knights Hospitalers***

The successful crusades of the late 11<sup>th</sup>/early 12<sup>th</sup> centuries spawned a curious new kind of monk – the warrior monk. Could monks dedicated to God also be fighting men? Two important groups, the Knight Templars and the Knights Hospitalers were exactly that.

The Knights Templar were founded in 1119 A.D., to protect pilgrim routes to the Holy Lands. The operated out of what they believed were the ruins of the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem (hence the name,

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<sup>3</sup> Library of Congress LAMB, no. 891 (AA size) [P&P]

Knights *Templar*. The Templars received the backing of St. Bernard of Clairvaux (who some people believe was involved in their founding), and they became nominal Cistercians (1128). Over time, these warrior monks became key figures in the Crusades (one source estimates that over 20,000 Knights Templar were killed in the Crusades). The Templars were notable for the fact that they answered only to the Pope, and not to any local ecclesiastical authority.

In time, the Templars established local offices (called Temples) throughout Western Christendom. Always innovative, they started what is considered by many to be the first European banking system, and it was their involvement as bankers that eventually led to their downfall. By the early 1300s, King Philip IV of France was deeply in debt to the Paris Temple. In 1307, he charged the order with heresy. Charges eventually brought against the Templars included that postulants were required to deny Christ and spit on the cross, and that the Templars worshiped a mysterious head named “Baphomet” (perhaps a mangling of “Mohammed”?) These charges were never proved, except in confessions received under torture at the hands of the Inquisition.

The Council of Vienne in 1312 officially dissolved the order, giving most of their property to a similar order, named the Hospitalers (see below). The final part of the saga of the Knights Templar occurred in 1314, when Templar Grand Master Jacques de Molay was burned alive, after recanting of an earlier confession.

After the Templars were dissolved, the French crown received cancellation of all debts owed to the Templars, as well as much of their monetary wealth. At their peak in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, it is estimated that the Templars owned 9000 castles and manor houses.

A similar group of warrior monks were formed in c. 1110, originally to man hospitals in the Holy Lands – *The Knights of the Order of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem*, or the *Knights Hospitalers*. Like the aforementioned canons, the Hospitalers operated under the *Rule of St. Augustine*. The Hospitalers started out in Jerusalem, then moved to Acre (1187), Cyprus (1291), Rhodes (1310) and finally Malta (1530). They were forced out of Malta in 1798 by Napoleon I, but still exist today as the *Knights of Malta*.

### ***The rise of Friars – Dominicans & Franciscans***

“Neither the rule of Augustine, nor of Benedict, nor of Bernard.” (St. Francis of Assisi, translation from Butler/Given-Wilson)
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The last great monastic movement of the Middle Ages was that of the mendicant friars – monks dedicated to a life of poverty, and often existing only on handouts as they roamed around the countryside. Two orders of friars are particularly notable, although they couldn’t be more different – the Dominicans and the Franciscans.

The founder of the Dominicans, St Dominic was born Domingo de Guzman at Calaruega, Castile, in 1170. He eventually became an Augustinian canon (see above), and adopted a life of poverty. Dominic devoted most of the latter part of his life (beginning in 1205) preaching against and trying to convert the “heretic” Cathars in the Languedoc area of France.

In 1217, Pope Honorius III, impressed by the efforts of Dominic to convert heretics through his zealous preaching, licensed the creation of the “Order of Preachers”, also known as the Black Friars (because

they wore white robes with black capes), and the “dogs of the Lord” (*Domini canes*). Later, they would be known primarily as Dominicans. At the time of Dominic’s death in 1221, there were 60 Dominican monasteries. By 1237, there were over 300.

In 1233, the Dominicans were given the task of running the courts of the Inquisition, a task which they took to with great ferocity and effectiveness for the next several hundred years.

Famous Dominicans of the Middle Ages included St. Thomas Aquinas, and Torquemada, the Grand Inquisitor of Spain in the time of Columbus.

The second group of mendicant friars that arose during the 13<sup>th</sup> century was the Franciscans. The Franciscans were founded by St. Francis of Assisi (1181 – 1226), the son of a wealthy merchant. In 1206, Francis gave up his wealth and embraced a life of poverty and service to the poor. He founded the Franciscan order in 1209/10. (The Order was officially sanctioned by Pope Innocent III in 1210, after Francis wallowed in the mud with some pigs to prove his humility to the Pope!) (Photo<sup>4</sup>)



The Franciscans originally had no formal monastic houses, and lived a life of absolute poverty – taking their cue from the Biblical injunctions in Matthew 6, such as:

<sup>28</sup>“And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. <sup>29</sup>Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. <sup>30</sup>If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? <sup>31</sup>So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ <sup>32</sup>For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. <sup>33</sup>But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. <sup>34</sup>Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” (Matt 6:28-34, NIV)

In time, after the death of Francis, the order did start to have buildings to call their own. One group of Franciscans, known as the Spirituals, wished to maintain the ideal of absolute poverty originally promulgated by their founder. They ran afoul of the Inquisition, and were harshly suppressed – it seems that they expected all church officials, including Rome, to live in complete poverty!

Famous medieval Franciscans included Duns Scotus, William of Ockham and Roger Bacon.

There were many similarities between the Dominicans and the Franciscans – even though there was great rivalry between the two orders in the Middle Ages. Both were primarily devoted to the laity – healing the sick, “saving” the heretics, acting as missionaries. Both orders served as Inquisitors, during the darkest days of the Inquisition. Both orders were dedicated to the ideal of monastic poverty. And both Orders answered only to the Pope. Perhaps the main difference between the two was the great emphasis that the Dominicans put on the study of logic and theology – the better to combat the arguments of heretics! St. Francis, on the other hand, put little emphasis on “book learning”.

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<sup>4</sup> Library of Congress LAMB, no. 2088 (A size) [P&P]

## The Medieval monastery

The monastic day was divided into seven “hours” by the Rule of Benedict (*opus dei*, or the “time of God”). While the names assigned to these hours, and the times they were practiced differed slightly from order to order, from country to country, and from season to season, a generic list of the daily rule follows:

- Vigils – early morning (typically 2:00)
- Lauds (“praises”) – first light
- Prime – sunrise
- Terce – around 9:00 a.m.
- Sext/nones – noon
- Vespers – 4:30
- Compline – dusk (to “complete” the hours); afterwards, the monks retired to bed

The hours were typically celebrated in the monastic church (see next section), in the monk’s *choir*, a set of facing chairs at the top of the cross in a typical abbey church. Prayers, and recitation of the Psalms (often sung in Plain Chant) were the order of the day. Mass typically occurred only on Sundays, often being preceded by a grand procession of the monks into the abbey church.

Depending on the order, the waking moments not spent following the seven “hours” might be spent in study, or manual work (most orders except the Carthusians and Cluniacs). Also, monks typically met together every day for a meeting known as the Chapter. At Chapter, the abbot presided over the Order, discussing news of the day, dealing with disciplinary problems, etc.

Monks typically slept in a common dormitory called a *dorter*, and had meals in common in the *refectory*. Silence was typically observed during meals, with a single reader intoning from the Lives of the Saints, the Church Fathers (especially Augustine, Jerome, Ambrose and Gregory) and the Bible.

### Monastic buildings



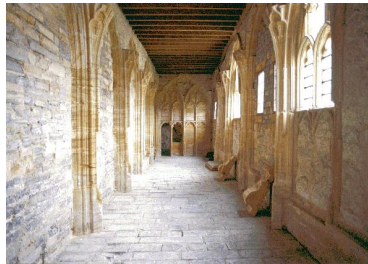
Ruins of Cistercian monastery Rievaulx Abbey (1132), North Yorkshire, England

Monasteries were typically self-contained miniature cities, providing everything the community needed for day to day activities. The heart of the monastery was the abbey church, which was typically laid out on an east-west axis (long part of the cross), with the transepts (short part of the cross) going north-south at the east end. The high altar was usually in the chancel, east of the transepts (top of the cross)

This was the area used by the monks for reciting the daily hours (the *monk's choir*). In England, the nave (western end of long arm) was used by townspeople (Benedictine monasteries). In Cistercian abbey churches, the nave was used by lay-brothers.

Below are descriptions of some other common buildings and architectural features in a monastery.

- **Cellarium** – storehouse of monastery, often located under the dorter
- **Chancel** – east part of church (top of cross). Location of high altar and the monk's choir.
- **Chapter House** – building for general meetings of the monks with their abbot; it sometimes also contained the graves of abbots.
- **Cloister** – most monastic buildings surrounded a square in the center of the Abbey called the *cloister* (Latin *claustrum* – closed in). The open middle part of the cloister was known as the *garth*. It was often used to grow vegetables. The outside perimeter of the cloister often contained a vaulted walkway. In many monasteries, this walkway was closed in, and was used for reading, studying, and, most importantly, the copying of manuscripts.



The south cloister walk of Mulchelney Abbey in England. Cloister walks often contained individual carrels for monks to copy and illustrate manuscripts. Notice the excellent light source.

- **Crypt** – typically located under the monastic church; often the burial place of saints.
- **Dorter** – sleeping quarters for monks (lay brothers had separate quarters). In England, in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, dorters were often laid out in barracks style. By the 14<sup>th</sup> century, many monasteries had erected partitions for privacy.



Magnificent *dorter* at Cleeve Abbey, an English Cistercian Abbey founded in 1198.

- **Flying buttress** – an external stone arch used to help support the weight of the walls and roof of an abbey church





The flying buttress made the great medieval churches possible. This one is at Winchester Cathedral (1076), a former Benedictine Monastery

- **Frater** – (a.k.a. refectory) – the common dining hall, which often had a pulpit for readings during meals. Fraters were typically located close to the kitchen, where food was prepared.



Abbot's Kitchen, at Glastonbury Abbey, Somerset, England

- **Galilee** – westward extension of the nave
- **Gatehouse** – where the porter could greet visitors to the abbey
- **Rere-dorter** – lavatories, garderobe, *domus neccaria*



Rere-dorter at Cluniac monastery Castle Acre Priory (Norfolk, England)

- **Rood screen** – stone partition with altars in front of it dividing the nave from the monk's choir
- **Transepts** – North and South part of the church (short part of the cross). Often contained one or more chapels.
- **Warming house** – building where a fire was kept burning all winter (often under the dorter)

## The decline of monasticism

The reasons for the decline and fall of monasticism as a major force in Western Christendom are many and varied. This section will examine some of them in roughly chronological order.

### *The Black Death*

The Black Death, the Medieval name for either bubonic or pneumonic plague, raged through Europe from 1347 to 1351. Various estimates of the death toll range from one quarter to one third of the population of Europe. The monasteries were not immune from this pandemic. St. Albans in Britain, for example, lost 47 monks and an abbot in a short time. Many monasteries never fully recovered from the devastation of the Plague. This was especially true because by the time the Black Death hit, the period of the greatest fervor for the ideal of monasticism in Europe was already past.

### *Laxness in the monastery*

As previously mentioned, the story of Western monasticism in the Middle Ages was one of a cycle of laxness/reform. By the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, the reform spirit had pretty much been overrun by the extreme wealth of various abbeys (and whole orders). Monasteries were often viewed as being oppressive rulers and landlords by the local populaces (During the Peasants Revolt of 1381 in England, there were peasant attacks on Bury St. Edmunds and St. Albans.) Local bishops and clerics were often jealous of their monastic neighbors, many of whom answered only to the pope. The mendicant movement of the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, so promising in its early manifestations, eventually became lax and was characterized by idleness. By the time of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* in 1380, monks and friars had often become objects of ridicule, as these portraits from the Prologue of Chaucer's famous work show:

#### THE MONK

Where this brave monk was of the cell.  
The rule of Maurus or Saint Benedict,  
By reason it was old and somewhat strict,  
This said monk let such old things slowly pace  
And followed new-world manners in their place...

What? Should he study as a madman would  
Upon a book in cloister cell? Or yet  
labour with his hands and swink and sweat,  
As Austin bids? How shall the world be served?...

Now certainly he was a fine prelate:  
He was not pale as some poor wasted ghost.  
A fat swan loved he best of any roast.  
His palfrey was as brown as is a berry....

#### THE FRIAR

A friar there was, a wanton and a merry,  
A limiter, a very festive man...

Gently absolved too, leaving naught of dread.  
He was an easy man to give penance  
When knowing he should gain a good pittance;  
For to a begging friar, money given  
Is sign that any man has been well shriven...

In towns he knew the taverns, every one,  
And every good host and each barmaid too-  
Better than begging lepers, these he knew...

He was the finest beggar of his house;  
A certain district being farmed to him,  
None of his brethren dared approach its rim...  
(Electronically Enhanced Text (c) Copyright 1996, World Library(R))

## ***The Reformation***

Perhaps the greatest contributor to the downfall of monasticism in the Middle Ages was the Protestant Reformation. Martin Luther, a former monk himself, wrote viciously against his former profession. And Henry VIII of England, in a short 4-year period, wiped out 800 monasteries.

## **The Philosophical issue**

As earlier noted, a nagging question had dogged monasticism from its very beginning in the deserts of Egypt – if being a monk brought one closer to God (and closer to salvation), did that mean that monks were “better” than normal Christians? Were there two classes of Christians – one purer than the other?

Martin Luther strongly rejected the notion that monks were “holier” than normal Christians. And he added another reason for rejecting monasticism – he felt that it smacked of salvation by works.

“As monastic vows directly conflict with the first chief article, they must be absolutely abolished. For it is of them that Christ says, Matthew 24:5, 23 ff.: I am Christ, etc. For he who makes a vow to live as a monk believes that he will enter upon a mode of life holier than ordinary Christians lead, and wishes to earn heaven by his own works not only for himself, but also for others; this is to deny Christ. And they boast from their St. Thomas that a monastic vow is equal to Baptism. This is blasphemy (against God)”. (Martin Luther, 1537, *The Smalcald Articles*)

## **The Dissolution of the monasteries**

In the period from 1527/29, King Henry VIII of England sought an annulment from the pope of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon. After repeated refusals, in 1534, Henry led the passage of the Acts of Supremacy, which established the Church of England with the King at its head. A by-product of this action was that monasticism was entirely wiped out from England within 6 years.

From 1536/40, Henry and his secretary Thomas Cromwell dissolved 800 monasteries, and confiscated 200,000 pounds for the crown. In 1500, England had 10,000 monks and 2,000 nuns. By the end of 1540, they were all gone – most of them petitioned off by the crown. A few received more grievous fates. Abbot Richard Whiting, the last abbot (1525 – 1539) of the great Benedictine monastery at Glastonbury, was unceremoniously hung by order of Thomas Cromwell on the Glastonbury Tor on November 15, 1539, on the spurious charge of “robbery”. (Photo on above: the eerie remains of Walsingham Priory in England – founded 1169, dissolved by Henry VIII on August 4, 1538)



## Protestant monks?

While in general, Protestants disapproved of the monastic ideal, there were a few curious exceptions. One was a group called the Seventh Day German Baptists, who built a medieval-style monastery in Pennsylvania's Lancaster County in 1732. Founded by a German mystic named Conrad Beissel, the faith incorporated such diverse elements of theology as Anabaptist, Dunkard, Rosicrucian, Catholic, Mystic, and Jewish.

The community was divided into three main groups. The married householders, who lived in single housing units near the Cloister, and the celibate Brothers and Sisters, who lived in the Cloister buildings themselves. *Ephrata Cloister* was basically self-sufficient, and like its medieval European counterparts, was the educational, industrial, spiritual and charitable center of the area in which it was located. At its peak, the order had over 300 members. While the last of the celibates died in 1814, the order itself survived until 1934.



The *Sister's House* at Ephrata Cloister, sleeping quarters for the celibate sisters



Would-be monk in the Ephrata Cloister *Solitary House*, used to house brothers who did not wish to live in the main dormer.

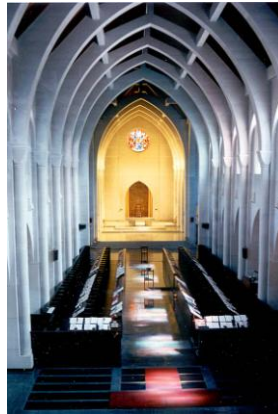
## ***The French Revolution***

While monasticism was essentially wiped out in England in the 16<sup>th</sup> century by Henry VIII, it took until the late 18<sup>th</sup> century for a similar event to happen in France – this time, the catalyst was the French Revolution. The French government during the Revolution confiscated most church property, and priests and bishops were required to swear an oath to the new order or face dismissal (Civil Constitution of 1790). Also in 1790, the Cistercian and Cluniac orders were suppressed.

## **Western Monasticism today**

There are various estimates of the number of Western monastics in the world today. Mayeul de Dreuille in his book *From East to West: A History of Monasticism* estimates that there are 17,525 monks in the

Roman Catholic Church today, and 25,820 nuns/sisters. Interestingly enough, the United States has been an especially fertile ground for modern day monastics – the Benedictines, for example, have 30 monasteries in the United States. So the monastic ideal has hardly disappeared. However, unlike in the Middle Ages when monasticism had a terrific impact on the legal, governmental, educational, and spiritual lives of the people in the areas in which monasteries were located (and on Europe itself), today monasteries and their inhabitants tend to be rather low key. Modern monasteries are often connected to schools or hospitals, and are often focused on charity as their main *raison d'être*.



Trappist Monastery of the Holy Spirit in Conyers, Georgia

We have a good example of a modern-day monastery in our own metropolitan Atlanta area – the Trappist Monastery of the Holy Spirit in Conyers, Georgia. The monastery was founded in 1944, and is dedicated to the ideal of "prayer and work." The monastery follows the Rule of Benedict.

## Conclusion

In the 2,000-year-old history of the Christian Church, monasticism had a long reign as a key (perhaps *the* key) form of expressing Christianity in the West. From the 6<sup>th</sup> century, when the Rule of Benedict was written, until the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, when the monasteries were suppressed in England and France (respectively), monasticism was considered to be the "highest" form of Christianity. While we as Protestants today may disagree with the idea of two kinds of Christians (and the idea of salvation by works), we cannot help but admire the ideals of monasticism when it was at its best – as practiced by such great leaders as Sts. Augustine, Benedict, Bernard, and Dunstan.

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### About the Author

Robert C. Jones grew up in the Philadelphia, Pennsylvania area. He made his living as a hotel lounge band leader/musician from 1974-1981. In 1981, he moved to the Atlanta, Georgia area, where he received a B.S. in Computer Science at DeVry Institute of Technology. Since 1984, Robert has worked for Hewlett-Packard as a computer consultant.



Robert is an ordained elder in the Presbyterian Church. He has written and taught numerous adult Sunday School courses (see front inside cover). He has also been active in choir ministries over the years, and has taught the *Disciples* Bible Study six times.

Robert is also President of the Kennesaw Historical Society, for whom he has written several books, including "The Law Heard 'Round the World - An Examination of the Kennesaw Gun Law and Its Effects on the Community", "Retracing the Route of the General - Following in the Footsteps of the Andrews Raid", and "Kennesaw (Big Shanty) in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century". A new book, "Images of America: Kennesaw", was published by Arcadia in 2006.

Robert has also written several books on ghost towns in the Southwest, including in Death Valley, Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, and Mojave National Preserve.

In 2005, Robert co-authored a business-oriented book entitled "Working Virtually: The Challenges of Virtual Teams". His co-authors were Lise Pace and Rob Oyung.

His interests include the Civil War, Medieval Monasteries, American railroads, ghost towns, hiking in Death Valley and the Mojave, and Biblical Archaeology.

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Front Cover: An Anglican Church Service begins in the ruins of the Abbey Church at Byland Abbey, a former Cistercian monastery in North Yorkshire, England (founded 1134; dissolved Nov. 1538). Photo by Robert Jones