

Early Medieval Monasticism

In the immediate centuries following the death of Jesus Christ, a culture of monasticism developed and prospered throughout the early Christian world. There was the growing opinion among a group of believers that the best way to serve Christ was through living a life of simplicity, asceticism, and isolation from mainstream civilization. Throughout the early medieval period, two different types of monasticism formed—solitary and cenobitic (communal). Figures such as Saint Anthony, Pachomius, and St. Benedict, in particular, developed principles for both varieties of monastic life that shaped the course of monasticism in Europe forever.

Although the Catholic Church and the papacy in Rome exerted official and formal power over Christendom in Western Europe, the monks of this growing monastic movement widely influenced several facets of early medieval society. During the early medieval period, monastic monks were revered as religious heroes throughout the larger European society. While their image fluctuated over time, these medieval monks greatly impacted and contributed to the religious and secular culture in Europe throughout the medieval period and beyond.

Early Christian Monasticism

One of the earliest figures of solitary monasticism was Saint Anthony, who lived a solitary life in Egypt during the third century. But life as an ascetic hermit was difficult on numerous levels. As a result, the cenobitic monastic movement began to gain popularity under leaders such as Pachomius, who created a community of monastic individuals during the first part of the fourth century. Pachomius was responsible for devising some of the first foundational rules for monastic living. These included the strict principle of total obedience to superiors, as well as the practice and observance of chastity and poverty.

By the first few decades of the fifth century, communal monastic living continued to grow and expand throughout Western Europe. Monasteries established across Europe expounded specific and distinct forms of asceticism. During the early medieval period, the Italian monk Benedict (ca. 480–543) was instrumental in shaping the contours of communal monasticism. His system, which came to be known as the “Rule,” influenced the features of monastic life, and in some respects early medieval culture, for several centuries. The Rule of St. Benedict continues to be used today in monasteries worldwide.

St. Benedict and the Benedictine Rule

Although the early medieval period saw many monastic monks who sought to live an austere lifestyle in order to fulfill their devotion to Christ, St. Benedict successfully brought a type of uniformity and discipline to an otherwise disparate movement. During his time as a young man studying in Rome, Benedict grew increasingly appalled by the ostentatious conduct of the Catholic Church in Rome, and decided to retreat from society entirely. Benedict began as a solitary hermit practicing an extreme version of

asceticism. Over time, he gained a number of followers who sought to emulate his lifestyle. He and his disciples eventually moved to the mountains near Rome, where Benedict created a unique structure for his monastic community at Monte Cassino (founded in 529). Before Benedict died he produced a set of guidelines for his own monastic community, which, over time, was adopted by large numbers of monasteries throughout Europe.

Benedict's model for monastic living promoted the community as a symbol for the family. The abbot was considered the father, and all of the monks were to be thought of as brothers. Each day was structured around private and communal prayer, sleep, religious reading and study, and manual labor. Daily life was primarily centered on a strict schedule of prayer and meditation, as monks were expected to convene eight times every day to engage in prayer. The Benedictine Rule included, but was not limited to, the following directives:

1. The abbot was endowed with full sovereignty and authority within a given monastic community. He was elected to his position for the duration of his lifetime and could not be replaced.
2. Monks were forbidden from leaving the monastic community.
3. All monks were required to exercise strict and complete obedience to authority regarding all lawful matters.
4. Monks were advised to use speech moderately, but silence was not mandated.
5. Humility was divided into twelve degrees, or steps, that were said to lead to heaven. These included the fear of God, patience, confession of sin, humble and modest speech as well as bodily posture. It also required monks to perceive themselves as worthless workmen who were inferior to all others.

Benedict's Rule allowed for a less severe lifestyle than some of the earlier and contemporary styles of devotion promoted by other monastic figures such as Pachomius. For example, Benedictine monks were provided two full meals, along with fresh fruits and vegetables, and even a small amount of wine, every day.

Monasticism in the High Middle Ages (1000–1300)

Following the first few centuries of the spread of European monasteries, an increasing amount of fraud and corruption began in pockets throughout the monastic world. The first major signs of reform came from a monk named Berno. In the early tenth century, Berno established a monastery in Cluny, France, which restored the Benedictine Rule to its original intent. Over time, however, Berno's monastery, like many others, fell victim to wealth, greed, and power.

During the second half of the twelfth century, a new style of monasticism formed and gained popularity under the original leadership of Peter Waldo. Waldo's version of the monastic lifestyle involved the actions of preaching and the embracing of poverty. This philosophy came to be referred to as *mendicant* monasticism. Mendicant monasticism promoted poverty and begging for charity. Today, mendicant monasticism is primarily associated with orders established by St. Francis of Assisi (1182–1226) and St. Dominic (1170–1221). As a result of the Franciscan and Dominican orders,

mendicant monasticism spread widely throughout medieval Europe and challenged the dependence on wealth and power that had evolved among traditional monasteries over time.

Impact on Culture

The monastic culture of early medieval Europe led to the widespread production of religious manuscripts and literacy within monastic communities. Medieval monks were some of the most highly literate members of European society. The considerable amount of time and energy monks spent reading scripture led to the need to duplicate religious texts. Monks were expected to be able to read and write, so they could copy religious writings in manuscript form. Medieval monasteries boasted prodigious libraries and writing rooms where monks spent countless hours producing decorative manuscripts for posterity. Furthermore, monastic communities and monasteries frequently acted as educational centers, infirmaries, and lodges for medieval travelers.

Early medieval monks also greatly contributed to the agricultural and economic development of Europe. The Benedictine Rule included habitual sessions of manual labor, and as a result, reestablished a certain degree of dignity and spirituality to the act of physical labor. Over the course of the medieval period, it became fashionable for powerful, elite families to build monasteries on the grounds of their estates. This led to strong ties between the monasteries and the influential civic forces in medieval society.

Summary:

- From the early days of Christianity, a monastic movement evolved out of the desire among many to live an austere and isolated life as a way of expressing their total devotion to Christ.
- Communal monasticism developed as the most popular form of early medieval monastic life. Monasteries sprang up all throughout Europe and strongly influenced the larger, secular communities around them.
- In many ways the monastic emphasis on literacy, chastity, manual labor, and an egalitarian structure of work led to an image of the early medieval monk as an ideal example of character, and many tried to emulate his features and characteristics.
- Over the course of the past 1,500 years, the principles of the Benedictine Rule have impacted the course and structure of monasteries all over Europe and throughout the world.
- During the course of the Middle Ages, other monastic orders emerged as an attempt to reform the corruption and greed that had begun to spread throughout Europe's medieval monastic life. These divisions within the monastic community continued to reflect the structure of European monasteries in the centuries to follow.