

Monastic Life

As the power and significance of the Church in Western Europe expanded after the fall of the Roman Empire, new Christian lifestyles developed. The old Roman parish system was adopted by the Church, and local parish priests were appointed to provide spiritual guidance for the Christians in their village or locale.

In the West, many priests were illiterate; many were raised as peasants. Many priests in the early Church married and had children. Bishops often came from the unruly nobility who were frequently uncouth and illiterate themselves.

In time, the clergy—Church leaders including the local priests—developed into two distinct groups: the secular clergy, who lived in the world and interacted with people on a regular basis; and the regular clergy, which was made up of men and women known as monks and nuns. The word monk is taken from a Greek word meaning *solitary* or *alone*.

The original monks came out of Egypt and Syria in the Near East. Early monks were hermits who sometimes practiced fasting and self-torture. Others, such as St. Simeon Stylites the Elder lived on top of a tall stone pillar out in the Syrian desert for more than 36 years.

Perhaps the most important outgrowth of monasticism was the establishment of monasteries in Western Europe. Benedict (480–543) was the founder of one of the first monastic systems. He established rules for monks to follow, including taking vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Such rules were part of what became known as the Benedictine rule. Benedict established a monastery in southern Italy at Monte Cassino, which still exists today.

By the end of the 600s, most monasteries in the West followed the Benedictine rule. A century later, the great Frankish king, Charlemagne, required all monks to follow the rule.

From 500 to 1100, monasteries played a key role in the Western Church. In a period when few schools existed in Western Europe, the monasteries were important centers of knowledge, information, and literacy. In fact, while few people could read in Europe during the Early Middle Ages, the monasteries were home to dedicated scholars who could read, write, and copy manuscripts, especially copies of the Bible.

The printing press was not invented until the

1300s, so men who could copy the Scriptures were important. When pagan Germanic tribes harassed the Church and its clergy between A.D. 400 and 800, many monks and scholars fled the Continent to Ireland, in the northern British Isles.

During these centuries, Ireland became an important center of learning and scholarship. When few people in Gaul could read, Irish scholars could read both Greek and Latin texts.

These scholar-monks copied the Bible, as well as ancient Greek and Roman manuscripts, helping keep learning and Western heritage alive.

One of the leading Irish monks was known as the Venerable Bede (BEED), who lived from 673 to 735. Bede was raised in a monastery from age seven and spent his entire life studying, reading, copying manuscripts, and writing some of the early histories of England. He made popular the term *anno Domini*, meaning “in the year of our Lord,” abbreviated A.D.

The works of the Irish monks, such as Bede, produced some of the most beautiful books in the world. Such books were printed on animal skin called vellum, and were hand-sewn with wooden covers adorned with gold leaf and precious stones. The works produced by these monks were passed down through the ages. So beautiful were their works that people in Gothic times, during the High Middle Ages, actually thought such books had been created by angels!



Review and Write

What contributions did Benedict make to the European monastic system?