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MONASTICISM IN MEDIEVAL EUROPE

The clergy was one of three social classes distinguished by medieval political theory in European society. Unlike the commoners and the aristocracy, the clergy was not born into its class but entered into it as a career, whether by choice or compulsion. Clerics were in large measure drawn from the aristocracy, particularly at the upper levels of Church administration, but a clerical career was also one of the few avenues of advancement open to the lower levels of society. Like the aristocracy, the clergy constituted only a tiny fraction of the population.

The Monastic Hierarchy

The clergy was divided into secular and regular clerics. The secular clergy ministered directly to the public at large (in Latin, seculum, the temporal world). The most common secular cleric was the parish priest who conducted religious services at the local church for the residents of the area, in some cases with the assistance of a staff of lesser clerics. Above the parish priest was a vast administrative hierarchy that covered all of Europe. The bishop administered a diocese that was composed of hundreds of parish churches. He was assisted in his duties by a substantial staff of Church officers, notably, a body of priests called canons who conducted religious services in the cathedral, or episcopal church, and took part in the administration of the diocese. Above the bishop was the archbishop, whose authority might extend over a half-dozen to a dozen dioceses, and at the head of the Church as a whole was the pope. Both archbishops and the pope had large administrative staffs of their own, also drawn from the clergy.

The Church wielded influence comparable to that of the aristocracy. The importance attached to so small a group reflects the status of religion in medieval society. There was no distinction between church and state, or even between church and community: to be a part of society was to be part of the Church. This aspect of medieval society had roots in the ancient world. The Roman Empire required its subjects to honor the state religion in addition to their own local deities, and among the barbarians religion was closely tied to a tribe's communal identity. Christianity was oriented more toward personal spirituality than were the older pagan religions of Europe, but in becoming the official religion in Europe, it also took on the social roles once occupied by paganism.

The medieval Church constituted a kind of second social system, sharing governmental authority with the feudal hierarchy and occasionally coming in conflict with secular lords over disputed rights. Every community and neighborhood was under the auspices of a parish. The Church had its own law code, called canon law, and a system of Church courts to enforce it, exercising authority over many aspects of people's lives. Marriage and its legal ramifications fell under the jurisdiction of the Church, and wills were also solemnized and enforced by Church authority. The Church was also responsible for what today would be termed moral legislation, including such matters as adultery, fornication, and blasphemy.

The regular clergy was originally limited to monks and nuns, who sought spiritual perfection by withdrawing from the secular world and living communal lives according to a codified rule of organization and conduct (in Latin, regula, rule). In time, other clerics became regular clergy by taking on the communal mode of life under a rule, while continuing to interact with the secular world. Many groups of cathedral canons adopted rules, and eventually houses of regular canons were established independent of
cathedrals. Regular canons enjoyed the strengths of monastic discipline and organization while still being permitted to interact with the world at large, a combination that made them extremely useful to both the Church and secular society. During the High Middle Ages, there arose new regular orders called mendicants or friars, who also lived communally under a rule but existed specifically to minister to the secular world. The regular clergy, like the secular, was ultimately subject to the authority of the pope.

**Monastic Life: Monks and Nuns**

Monks and nuns were sworn to a life of personal poverty, but this does not mean that they were recruited from among the poor. In fact, they were predominantly drawn from the aristocracy. Recruits were expected to bring a significant donation to their monastery, and it was the upper classes who had land and money to offer. While monks and nuns were individually poor because they were not permitted to own personal property, the monastery collectively was a rich institution, and these regular clergy enjoyed a standard of living far above that of ordinary medieval people. They had regular and sufficient meals regardless of the state of the harvest; they had wine to drink and occasional fine foods. Most lived in well-constructed stone facilities with good sanitation, and there was ample provision for them in illness and old age. The monastic way of life was austere, but it offered enough advantages that there was always a demand among the aristocracy for monastic positions.

Aristocratic parents with multiple sons and daughters needed to find an appropriate career for the younger ones, and sending them to monasteries was a good option, offering an acceptable standard of living, a stable future, and even prospects of prestige and power. Of course, this practice of treating monasticism as a career rather than a vocation meant that many monks were not deeply committed to the monastic ideal, to the detriment of monastic discipline.

The monk's vows were considered permanently binding, and new monks and nuns were in principle bound to the monastery for the rest of their lives, not even permitted to pass the cloister gate without permission, or to talk with any layperson. Everything they needed for the rest of their days was provided within the precincts of the monastery. In this way, the monastic residents could leave behind the outside world. In practice, however, many monks did have contact with the world beyond the cloister. Monastic officers were required by their work to interact with laymen and spend time in the outer areas of the monastery, or even beyond the monastery walls, serving as ambassadors from the monastery or administering its business affairs. Nuns, on the other hand, tended to stay more restricted within the walls, sometimes so much that the convents ran out of supplies.

In some cases, a monk or nun was permitted to transfer to a new monastery, either for his or her own spiritual benefit or to provide experience or expertise for an institution in need. During the 13th century, with rising educational standards in the secular world, many monasteries began to send monks to universities, and some monasteries established houses at universities to serve as residences for members of their order. Nuns continued to be educated in their own institutions.

**Benedictine Monasticism**

Western monasticism was given a definitive shape by Saint Benedict of Nursia in the sixth century. Benedict, an Italian abbot, laid out a plan for monastic life and organization that ultimately became the standard in western Europe. Benedictine monasticism was ascetic, requiring monks to live with minimal
possessions, simple food, and austere accommodations; yet it avoided the excesses of heroic self-denial, stressing instead the role of communal cooperation as a means of achieving personal spiritual improvement. The Benedictine monk sought communion with God through a combination of physical labor and a daily cycle of communal worship that came to be known as the Divine Office. Over time, the Divine Office took precedence over other monastic activities, although some forms of work, particularly reading and writing, continued to play an important part in the monastic routine and ethos.

For most of the early Middle Ages, the Benedictines were the only monastic order in western Europe. Over the centuries, monasteries of the order became lax in applying the rule and less vigorous in their sense of religious vocation, and in the 10th century a major reform movement was initiated with the founding of Cluny. Cluny's first abbot brought a renewed sense of zeal and discipline to the monastic world. Over the next two centuries, many new monasteries were established under Cluny's guidance, and older ones were placed under the authority of Cluny to help them reform. Partly in response to Cluny, a new reform movement arose toward the end of the 11th century. These Cistercians established a new rule of their own, rejecting the opulence of the traditional Benedictine monastery and its reliance on income from feudal manors. The new Cistercian monasteries were much plainer in decoration, and the monks made their living by farming their own lands through hired labor and lay brothers—members of the monastic community who lived semimonastic lives but were not actually monks.

The monastery also provided hospitality for travelers in an age when inns were not always easy to find. Many of the monastery's visitors were aristocrats, particularly lay patrons and other important figures, but others were ordinary folk, in many cases pilgrims making a journey to a shrine. Also important was the monastery's role in learning and literacy. Christianity was a religion based on written texts, and literacy was essential to allow the monk to fulfill his spiritual obligations. Monastic schools were especially influential during the early Middle Ages, at a time when other educational institutions were practically nonexistent; even some secular students acquired their learning in schools run by monasteries outside the cloister. A part of the intellectual importance of monasteries was their contribution to the study, preservation, and composition of written texts. The Benedictine rule made provision for work as an integral part of monastic life. Saint Benedict designated manual labor as an important part of monastic work, but by the High Middle Ages, the aristocratic population of the monasteries had largely abandoned physical work in favor of the more genteel occupations of reading and writing.

In sum, the monastic life was an essential one in the Middle Ages. As men and women sought a spiritual life, they ended up fulfilling many other roles in society. It is perhaps not surprising that as time passed, some monks and nuns forgot their spiritual roles and focused on more secular activities, leading to much criticism at the end of the medieval period.

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Further Reading


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Child being delivered to a monastery: The British Library

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