

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 93: St. Benedict & Western Monasticism

A Devoted Life: Did You Know?

Interesting and little-known facts about Benedictine monasticism.

A living tradition

Today there are about 25,000 Benedictine monks and nuns, as well as over 5,000 Cistercians and others who live according to the Rule of St. Benedict. In the last 40 years, these numbers have been declining, but the number of "oblates," lay people associated with monasteries, is growing rapidly and now exceeds the number of monks and nuns. Many of them are Protestants.

—*contributed by Hugh Feiss, OSB*

Walking in Benedict's steps today

Visit Clear Creek Monastery in Oklahoma and you will see something as close to 12th-century Benedictine monastic life as can be found in the 21st century. It all began in 1972 when a group of University of Kansas students discovered Fontgombault, a traditional Benedictine monastery in France known for its Gregorian chant, traditional Latin liturgy, and strict adherence to the Rule of St. Benedict. Around 30 students stayed at the abbey as guests, and a handful never left. The abbot of Fontgombault called it the "American Invasion."

Now Fontgombault has come to America. The students-turned-monks returned to the U.S. in the 1990s and founded Clear Creek Monastery. There, they continue to pursue a traditional Benedictine lifestyle.

Talk to the hand

Benedict encouraged his monks to be silent as often as possible. But of course, some form of communication is necessary in order for people to live together. In *The Year 1000*, Robert Lacey and Danny Danziger describe a Benedictine sign language manual from Canterbury listing no less than 127 hand signals, including signs for various people in the monastery, ordinary objects such as a pillow ("Stroke the sign of a feather inside your left hand"), and requests such as "Pass the salt" ("Stroke your hands with your three fingers together, as if you were salting something").

"One gets the impression," write Lacey and Danziger, "that mealtimes in a Benedictine refectory were rather like a gathering of baseball coaches, all furiously beckoning, squeezing their ear lobes, meaningfully rubbing their fingers up and down the sides of their noses, and smoothing their hands over their stomachs."

If you build it, they will pray

One of the greatest treasures from the era of Charlemagne that survives today is the Plan of St. Gall. This architectural drawing (reconstructed here) depicts a Benedictine monastery perfectly suited to the monastic life of prayer, study, and work. The monastery was never built, for reasons that are a mystery to us. But scholars believe the plan was developed in the ninth century as an example of the ideal monastery. A copy survives because Abbot Gozbert (816-837) requested it to guide his building program at the monastery of St. Gall and preserved it in the library there.

The plan tells us a lot about medieval monastic life, including the fact that in the ninth century a monastery

was meant to be self-sustaining—almost a mini-village in itself, complete with vegetable and herb gardens, granary, livestock, medical facilities, library, laundry, craft workshops, and guest lodging.

The first capitalists?

Benedict emphasized the role of manual labor as a God-given part of human life and instructed his monks to spend appropriate amounts of time each day in work, prayer, and reading. According to a long-standing thesis, Benedictine monks changed the West's view of work from being looked down upon to being respected as a form of prayer—leading, in turn, to the rise of capitalism. This argument has its flaws. It is true, however, that Benedictines were very good at "estate management," and that they helped to teach others the value of a regular, disciplined working life.

—contributed by Glenn W. Olsen

Hops and hospitality

Before she became the reformer Martin Luther's wife, Katharinevon Bora was in the beer-brewing business—as a Benedictine nun. Yes, Benedictines were once famous for their beer. In the Middle Ages, beer was a staple for most people. Monks in particular needed the nutritional benefits of beer because of the fasting they did. So in the seventh and eighth centuries, they began brewing their own and eventually developed advanced methods of beer-making. A brewery required up to 100 monk workers.

Combine Benedictine beer with Benedictine hospitality and you get pubs! Important guests were given celia, made from hops (a type of flower) and barley, and pilgrims drank cervisa, made of wheat, oats, and hops. Some Benedictine monasteries are still brewing—the German beer Andechs, for instance. But we mustn't forget what St. Benedict said about drinking: "Let us at least agree to drink sparingly, and not to satiety."

Plants and potions

Mystery writer Ellis Peter's famous detective, Brother Cadfael, is a medieval Benedictine monk who is also an herbalist—the forerunner of the pharmacist. In the Middle Ages, every good monastery had herbalist monks who treated the sick by concocting medicines from plants, herbs, and minerals. No doubt some of these were more effective than others, but aloe, rhubarb, and dandelion were a few popular ingredients still used medicinally today. More recently in the alternative medicine movement, the medical and botanical treatises of 12th-century Benedictine nun Hildegard of Bingen are making a comeback—but aspiring herbalists may have a hard time finding a unicorn's horn.

Holier than thou?

To those who thought celibate monks and nuns had a spiritual leg up on ordinary folks and a more direct route to heaven, 12th-century monk-bishop Hugh of Lincoln had a ready answer: **All Christians**—even married laypeople—are called to be saints, exhibiting love, truthfulness, and chastity. "The kingdom of God is not confined only to monks, hermits and anchorites," he said. "When, at the last, the Lord shall judge every individual, he will not hold it against him that he has not been a hermit or a monk, but will reject each of the damned because he had not been a real Christian."

Heretics

Heretics often provided a great service to the church. For example, Marcion rejected the Old Testament and the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and John, thus forcing the church to define the New Testament canon. Arius, in denying the deity of Christ, made the church articulate the doctrine that became most crucial to Christianity.

—contributed by Tony Lane

A Tragic Split

In 451 the Council of Chalcedon proclaimed that Christ is one person with two natures—fully God and fully man—and condemned the view of Eutyches who taught that Christ has only a divine nature.

Five eastern churches—Armenian, Coptic, Syrian, Ethiopian, and Indian Malabar—disagreed with both the council's decision and with Eutyches' teachings. These "Oriental" or "non-Chalcedonian" churches held that the incarnate Christ is "one Nature out of two." They eventually separated from the rest of the church. More recently, however, the Oriental Orthodox are taking steps to reconcile with the Chalcedonian churches (Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox) and the two sides are discovering that their beliefs about Christ are much closer than they realized.

India's Apostle

Indian Christians claim an ancient heritage. According to tradition, the Apostle Thomas landed on the Malabar coast of southwest India in A.D. 52. He converted people from various castes, and finally died in Mylapore (now within the huge city of Madras, recently renamed Chennai) at the hands of hostile Brahmins. The second-century *Acts of Thomas* relates that Thomas encountered an Indian official named Abban in Jerusalem, who invited him to come to India to build a place for King Gundaphorus. Thomas agreed to go with Abban, and the king eventually became a Christian.

"Uncle John"

As a boy, the great parliamentarian and abolitionist William Wilberforce loved to visit the pastor John Newton to hear his stories and songs. When Wilberforce later returned to his childhood faith, he also turned to his childhood friend as a spiritual mentor.

Antislavery

William Wilberforce and his fellow abolitionists engaged in an antislavery public opinion campaign unprecedented in English history. In 1814 they gathered one million signatures, one-tenth of the population, on 800 petitions, which they delivered to the House of Commons.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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A Devoted Life: From the Editor - Rediscovering Benedict

Jennifer Trafton

Not long ago a church history professor at a prominent Protestant seminary remarked to us, "No topic touches young evangelical students more than monasticism." Surprised? We were. Why monasticism? Why now?

In 1996 Kathleen Norris's *Cloister Walk*, the quiet memoir of a Protestant woman's experience in a Benedictine monastery, became an unexpected *New York Times* bestseller. In recent years, monastic spiritual disciplines such as *lectio divina*, a way of meditating on Scripture, have enjoyed newfound popularity among laypeople—seen, for example, in Eugene Peterson's *Eat This Book*, published by Eerdmans in 2006. In the midst of a frenetic, fragmented culture that glorifies independence, busyness, and material gain, many are seeking out a countercultural lifestyle that values prayer, silence, simplicity, liturgy, hospitality, community, and care for the poor.

Just do a quick search on Amazon.com and you'll see what I mean. Titles like *Seeking God: The Way of St. Benedict*, *St. Benedict's Toolbox: The Nuts and Bolts of Everyday Benedictine Living*, or *How to Be a Monastic and Not Leave Your Day Job* all testify to the fact that people are finding something they long for in the simple ideals of the pioneering sixth-century monk Benedict of Nursia and the movement he sparked. And they are struggling to know how to apply those ideals in the rough and tumble 21st century.

As Chris Armstrong's article in this issue describes, in addition to the traditional forms of monasticism that are still going strong, there is currently a movement among Protestant young adults to live communally and sacrificially in ways that draw upon Benedictine principles.

"Listen." That's the first word of the monastic rule written by Benedict. It's an appropriate word to emphasize in this issue, because I believe that learning about the history of Christianity should be first about listening—really listening—before judging and before acting. History can teach us humility when we learn to understand the world through another person's experience in another time and place.

CH&B tries to be a listening magazine, and this occasionally irritates readers from various points on the theological spectrum. Some Catholic readers point out the ways in which our latent Protestant perspective can skew the facts or blind us to certain aspects of their history. Some Protestant readers get upset when we present Catholic subjects without doing a point-by-point theological critique. Some Eastern Orthodox readers (few but vocal) feel left out when Orthodox perspectives and topics don't appear often enough.

I hope that as we listen together we can approach the complexities of the past and the challenges of the present with humility and deeper understanding. Monasticism is one of many intriguing historical conversations. I encourage you to eavesdrop.

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Radical Christians

Alone or in community, early monks and nuns sought to follow Christ in a whole-hearted and vividly countercultural way.

Jennifer Hevelone-Harper

Father Zossima left his monastery during Lent to enter the desert, hoping to find a spiritual father to offer him wisdom. Instead he met a woman, her naked body scorched by the Egyptian sun. Recognizing a life filled with holiness, he knelt and begged her blessing.

Reluctant with modesty, she spoke of her conversion from prostitution and of the 47 years she had lived alone in the desert: "I was burned by the heat of summer and frozen stiff and shivering in the winter ... struggling with many and diverse needs and huge temptations but through it all even until this day the power of God has guarded [me]."

The woman, St. Mary of Egypt, was exalted in this popular sixth-century story as a source of spiritual wisdom who could teach even a godly monk like Zossima. But the characters in this story, a monk and a desert hermit, would have seemed strange or even distasteful to many pagan Romans, because they seemed to reject traditional values such as loyalty to one's city, marriage, and obligation to family. How did early Christians come to embrace such peculiar lifestyles?

After Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity in the fourth century, Christians no longer faced the specter of martyrdom as the ultimate test of devotion. Instead, many ardent Christians withdrew to the wilderness to fast and pray. The "monk" (meaning "solitary"—either male or female) practiced "asceticism" (literally "training"), a life of spiritual discipline, either alone in the wilderness like Mary of Egypt or within the structure of a monastery as Zossima did. The temptations to despair or pride experienced by monks living alone could be guarded against by living with others in community. The Christian ascetic inherited the mantle of the martyr, as a witness to a divine reality that ran counter to the expectations of Roman society. Early Christian monks rejected traditional social mores and embraced ascetic disciplines, such as prayer, fasting, celibacy, and giving up sleep.

Ascetic Christians also repudiated the Roman method of striving for immortality by producing citizen children, who embodied part of a parent's very body and soul and guaranteed the survival of the community. Christ had promised that Christians' bodies would be made immortal and had offered his own broken flesh restored as a pledge. Monks sought to live an angelic life on earth, neither marrying nor having children. By refusing to participate in the continual process of physically repopulating the earth, they recognized that Christ's coming had initiated a new age and believed that their lives could help usher in his kingdom.

Although early Christian ascetics sometimes borrowed rhetoric from Neo-Platonists or Gnostics who seemed to denigrate the body, in actuality Christian asceticism rejected any dualistic beliefs that elevated the spirit over the material world. Monks repeatedly emphasized the physicality of the gospel. Not only did Christ become human, but he endured great physical sufferings and the ultimate bodily humiliation—death.

In imitating Christ's sufferings through martyrdom and asceticism, the believer's body became an instrument by which God could work the mystery of salvation. Christ's bodily resurrection was the guarantee for Christians' own expectations of physical resurrection. For the monk, the body became the

canvas on which to practice a new form of spirituality, taming physical passions in order to pursue union with God.

Taking the Bible at its Word

Early Christian ascetics were motivated by a literal interpretation of the gospel. Jesus had said, "Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me" (Matt. 10:37), and anyone who does not "hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters ... cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26).

A young Egyptian peasant named Antony heard Jesus' command read aloud at church: "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven" (Matt. 19:21). Antony obeyed. Giving his wealth to the poor and his sister to the care of nuns, he retreated to the desert. Living among the pagan tombs and temples, Antony battled evil spirits with God's help.

The popular account of Antony's life written by Athanasius in 357 was soon translated into many languages and proved influential in the conversion of Augustine of Hippo to Christianity. Western Christians eagerly read monastic texts from Egypt and began to follow their example, pursuing the ascetic life.

Cassian, a monk from Bethlehem who visited monasteries in Egypt before settling in the West in the early fourth century, captured the ethos of Egyptian spirituality for Westerners in his *Conferences* and *Institutes* written in Latin. Benedict of Nursia used Cassian's writings to develop his own ideas.

A New Way for Women

The Romans were scandalized by the fact that Christian monasticism welcomed women as well as men. This ascetic call offered women the freedom to have their worth defined in service to God, rather than in relationship to parents, husbands, and children. Such freedom threatened existing social structures.

Rushing into Ambrose's church in Milan, an orphaned girl begged him to consecrate her to a life of virginity, ripping the cloth from the altar to serve as her monastic veil. Her outraged uncle appeared in pursuit, screaming, "If your father were still alive, he would never have permitted this!"

"Perhaps that is why God has taken him!" the girl retorted.

Jerome was the spiritual director for a group of aristocratic women in Rome who practiced asceticism. He felt the heat of social disapproval as his protégées pursued activities unusual for women, such as studying the Old Testament in Hebrew. When a young widow under his supervision died from extreme fasting, he was forced to flee. Settling in Bethlehem, Jerome and his colleague Paula (mother of the dead widow) established a monastic foundation for men and women.

They were not the only westerners practicing monasticism in the Holy Land. Another aristocratic Roman matron, Melania the Elder, settled with Jerome's friend Rufinus on the Mount of Olives and helped him oversee a double monastery for men and women. Melania also visited the hermits of Egypt, offering them generous financial support.

Melania's extended family included several pioneers in monasticism. Her niece Melania the Younger fled barbarian raids on Rome to settle in North Africa near Augustine in Hippo. Committed to a celibate, spiritual marriage, she and her husband established a monastery there. Paulinus, a cousin of Melania the Elder and her biographer, implemented monastic innovations in Italy. A former governor, Paulinus retired to Nola (where he would eventually become bishop) to be close to the shrine of St. Felix, his patron. He

was a gentle spirited poet and each year composed a new poem for the saint's feast day. As an ascetic he lived in celibacy with his beloved wife Therasia and wrote letters to the leaders of the Western church. Paulinus was concerned with duty towards the poor and spiritual humility, and he praised Melania the Elder for these virtues.

Diverse and dedicated

Although stories of high-status aristocrats who renounced their wealth shocked late Roman society and made for dramatic literary narratives, people from diverse backgrounds practiced monasticism. Soldiers, thieves, and housewives all sought a life of prayer in monastic communities.

In Asia Minor, Macrina, the elder sister of the Cappadocian fathers Basil and Gregory, opened her home to women made homeless by famine. She intentionally invited former slaves and aristocrats to share a common life.

Christians in Gaul remembered St. Martin of Tours for ripping his cloak in two and giving half to a naked beggar. Born to pagan parents, Martin served as a soldier until his growing Christian convictions led him seek release from the army from the pagan emperor Julian, saying, "I am Christ's soldier; I am not allowed to fight." To prove his courage he volunteered to stand on the frontline of the battle with no weapon but a cross. After studying theology under Bishop Hilary in Poitiers, Martin traveled to the Balkans as a missionary but returned to Gaul to build monasteries.

Many in the early medieval West embraced this dual vocation of missionary and monastic founder. Rather than closing themselves off from the world, monks carried the gospel to distant lands as monasteries became the chief agents of the Christianization of Europe.

The stories of the early Christian monks illustrate the challenges of living in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages: barbarian invasions, war, religious persecution, famine, and poverty. The sixth century brought further disasters with an outbreak of bubonic plague that swept through the Middle East and Europe. In the face of these threats, monks embraced a radical way of living out the gospel. Instead of viewing the monastery as a place of retreat, monastic leaders offered spiritual encouragement and intercessory prayer on behalf of their neighbors.

The task of garnering spiritual resources to meet the challenges of this turbulent time resulted in a surge of monastic writings. In the East, the anchorites Barsanuphius and John of Gaza wrote over 800 letters of spiritual guidance to city officials, clergy, and laity. In the West, Benedict of Nursia sought to articulate how the Christian life could best be lived in community in the face of man-made and natural calamities. The endurance of his rule demonstrates the effectiveness of the monastic vocation as a response to life's uncertainties.

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The Blessing of Benedict

The "Father of Western Monasticism" spent his life teaching spiritual beginners about kindness, community, and prayer.

Carmen Acevedo Butcher

Beside a lake, a monk wielded a scythe up and down in fluid arcs, clearing a thicket of thorns for a garden. He had hacked at the wild, tangled weeds most of the morning and stood briefly to wipe the stinging sweat from his eyes before returning to work. But when he swung the heavy scythe heavenward this time, its iron blade loosened without warning and flew from its wooden handle, landing with a *splash* far from shore. The dark water swallowed it up, along with his heart. His hand and the abandoned tool handle shielded his eyes against the sun while he searched the ripples for the blade. He began pacing beside the lake, thinking how hard tools are to replace. ***What will Father Benedict say?***

The diligent, anxious monk-gardener was a Goth—a member of one of the pagan tribes marauding through Italy at the time. The abbot Benedict, however, had accepted this outsider into his monastery. Perhaps this Goth had once been a lowly soldier bullied by a sharp-tongued superior officer, or a servant beaten regularly with a stick. Whatever his former life, his panic at losing the tool's blade suggests that he was accustomed to being berated whenever things went wrong.

When Benedict heard of the Goth's dilemma, he sent no messenger to investigate, nor did he form a committee to look into the matter. He went himself and stood beside the Goth, who relaxed as he realized that he was not in trouble for losing a valuable tool. Benedict motioned for the scythe handle. The monk handed it over, then bent to rest his hands on his knees and studied the inexplicable movements of the abbot, who was sticking the scythe handle into the shallow water at the lake's edge. Then, out of the corner of his eye, the Goth saw something pop up through the wet surface yards from shore. His body snapped to attention as he heard a soft splash and watched the iron blade glide across the dark water to meet the handle and reattach itself.

Benedict handed the repaired scythe to him, saying, "Here. Take your tool. All is well. Go back to work, but don't be sad anymore. Stop worrying."

The fifth-century pope Gregory the Great tells this story in his biography of St. Benedict, who is called the Father of Western Monasticism. Benedict's birth around A.D. 480 coincided with an unstable, violent period in Italy. Wave after wave of pagans invaded while the Roman Empire collapsed. Benedict responded to the anarchy of his time by founding monastic communities built on the ideal of cultivating a family spirit among the monks, on disciplined daily worship, on a balanced and non-competitive approach towards fasting and other ascetic practices, and on the dignity of manual work for rich and poor alike.

Monastery after monastery based on Benedict's Rule brought light into Italy's darkest medieval days, and because the **Rule** has proved remarkably adaptable in the centuries since, its notion of balancing prayer, study, and work still informs the daily lives of peace-focused Benedictine monks, nuns, and oblates around the world.

Why did Pope Gregory take time out of his busy schedule to write a life of Benedict? It allowed him to present the ideal Christ-like pastor in vivid stories. Gregory had already described this pastoral ideal in his ***Liber pastoralis curae***, or ***Book of Pastoral Care***, which he finished a few years before composing Benedict's story. Gregory's ***Pastoral Care*** outlines the important spiritual duties of those who serve God:

They must not put their own egos before divine concerns, and they must be sensitive and responsive to the idiosyncrasies of each member of their congregation.

The story of the repaired scythe shows Benedict as a hands-on abbot whose pastoral ministry helped others achieve peace in the minutiae of ordinary life. Benedict's understanding of Christianity led him to accept and encourage people from all walks of life.

Benedict comes from the Latin word *benedicere*, meaning "to speak well of, to praise, to bless." Gregory viewed Benedict's name as synonymous with his ministry. Both focus our attention on the need to listen to others in order to see their unique, God-given strengths, and then choose the right words to encourage them. Both Gregory and Benedict believed that right speech is integral to right action. Benedict's Christ-like care for others cannot be divorced from his "blessed" words of reassurance to all who knew him.

The Story and the Storyteller

Gregory's *Dialogues* include the only ancient account we possess of Benedict's life. Composed in 593, three years after Gregory's elevation to the papacy and roughly one generation after the traditional date of Benedict's death (547), the four books of the *Dialogues* describe the lives of Italian abbots and bishops as patterns of the Christian life. Gregory wanted to show a post-Roman Empire world that God was still in control despite plague, hunger, poverty, drought, pagan invasions, and division among Christians. Because our own age is scarred by similar problems, Gregory's description of Benedict's peaceful life still speaks to us all.

Gregory's work is not a biography in the modern sense of the word but a hagiography, or "saint's life." Athanasius' *Life of Saint Anthony* (c. 298) set the standard by which all later works of hagiography were judged. Saints' lives featured common themes such as temptation, wilderness, hermitism, asceticism, miracles, and the nobly born protagonist who gives up his inheritance for the desert and communion with God.

Gregory never intended to write a chronological, historical account of Benedict's life, but he conscientiously based his stories on direct testimony, establishing his authority by explaining that his information came from a handful of Benedict's disciples who lived with the saint and were eyewitnesses to his miracles. What we know of Benedict, therefore, comes from an authentic medieval hagiography, and we should think of it as a genuine spiritual portrait.

Born to Privilege

Benedict was born in the tiny hill village of Nursia (now Norcia) in "Bella Umbria"—an area famous for its olive groves, vineyards, cypress woods, lavender bushes, cherry orchards, and mulberry trees. Raised in a wealthy Roman home, Benedict was taught that family is a sacred institution and that the father is its respected leader. The other guiding principle of his earliest years was obedience to a worthy communal cause. These Roman values were tested and even modified in the years to come by Benedict's growing Christian faith, but they never left him and later shaped the Rule he composed.

Around the time St. Patrick died in Ireland in 493, Benedict left his birthplace and traveled with his family and nurse some 100 miles southwest to Rome. The move from rural Nursia to sophisticated Rome, with its imperial buildings and culture, was no doubt a dramatic change for the teenage Benedict. First he studied in Rome's classical schools. Then, at 17, he gave up his boyhood tunic for a Roman toga and enrolled in a school of rhetoric, where he read and analyzed classical prose and also practiced and eventually mastered the skills of composition and public speaking. Under the tutelage of a teacher of rhetoric, Benedict must have spent hours studying the plays, speeches, letters, and philosophical epigrams of master rhetoricians like Seneca and Cicero.

Benedict soon discovered that he had little in common with his classmates, who indulged in cycles of studying and drunken partying. The poet Horace wrote that young Roman feasters ate "like wild pigs, gulping loud," and the satirist Juvenal exposed "their unceasing ungodly lechery."

As a scion of Roman privilege, Benedict would have been expected to contribute to his society through law or politics. As he found himself choosing a life path far different from the one he had been born to inherit, he must have felt the pressure of his heritage, and even a sharp loneliness. Benedict may have broken off his rigorous classical studies from time to time to contemplate this verse from John 15: "If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world—therefore the world hates you."

A Counter-Cultural Life

As a new century dawned, Benedict realized that he could no longer tolerate the compromised lives of his so-called well educated companions. He quit school and left Rome, abandoning wealth, inheritance, worldly status, parents, and the potential comforts of a wife, for God. His "only desire," Gregory said, was "to please the Lord." We can only speculate what Benedict's family thought of this spectacular U-turn in his life.

He headed for Enfide (modern-day Affile), accompanied by his loyal old nurse. The pair walked 40 miles east into the Simbrucini Mountains, settling near a church dedicated to St. Peter, where the Christian community hosted them. Benedict worked his first miracle in Enfide when he prayed over a broken clay *capisterium*, a valuable wheat-winnowing kitchen sifter that his nurse had borrowed and accidentally cracked. When Benedict looked up from praying, he saw that it was restored. This miraculous event brought him unlooked-for local fame, so he left his nurse in Enfide and hiked two and a half miles north to Subiaco to live in a cave near the Anio River.

Benedict's choice of residence was perhaps his strongest rhetorical statement. Subiaco was close to the former site of a luxurious Roman pleasure villa and expensive man-made lakes constructed by the infamous first-century emperor Nero, who persecuted Christians and wasted public funds. Nero's crimes against religious freedom and his hedonism left a deep mark on Christian history.

When Benedict situated himself near the ruins of Nero's resort and its nearby aqueducts, he was silently preaching Christ-like balance and agape love in profound contrast to the worldly self-indulgence and hatred long associated with the location. Here among the shadows of imperial ego, in a narrow, ten-foot-deep cave, Benedict started his deliberate, God-focused life.

Monastic Murder Plot

Benedict's local celebrity grew. One day some monks visited him from the nearby monastery of Vicovaro, 20 miles down the Anio River. Their abbot had recently died. They had heard of Benedict's power as a holy man and came to ask if he would be their new abbot. He refused, believing them to be insincere and unwilling to live a life of spiritual discipline, but the Vicovaro monks kept badgering him. Benedict finally relented, still harboring grave doubts.

His worries proved true. The monks disliked his rules. Some were too proud to work, others were too obstinate and sullen to submit to anyone, and most were simply too lazy to do anything but what struck them as interesting at the moment. The Vicovaro brothers may have believed that their ascetic lifestyle was work enough for them.

Resentment towards their new abbot grew. In the shadowy, whisper-filled stone corridors, the brothers plotted to hide poison in the young abbot's wine cup and present it to him before supper. As usual, before he drank, Benedict blessed the cup—but it shattered when he made the sign of the cross over it. Benedict immediately realized that the wine was deadly.

With composure more frightening to the monks than any shouting could have been, Benedict reprimanded them, "May God have mercy on you. May He forgive you. Why did you try to poison me? Didn't I tell you this arrangement would never work? Your lifestyle and mine don't agree. They never will. We must go our separate ways. I won't live here any longer."

A Rule for Monte Cassino

Benedict left the Vicovaro monks and returned to his cave in Subiaco, happy to live alone again. He loved the isolation of the wilderness and the comfort of God's uninterrupted company, but word quickly spread that the kind man of God was back. Shepherds and others made their way to Benedict's simple cave, hungry for his words.

Realizing that he must house these followers, Benedict left the solitude of the cave for good and built 12 monasteries, all neighbors to each other. Each accommodated 12 monks and a superior chosen by Benedict. He established a 13th monastery (called Monte Cassino) for those monks who would most benefit from living with and being mentored by him, and he became the abbot of all 13.

Here in these first monasteries, Benedict began to work out the details of his Rule. His experiences with the Vicovaro monks had further confirmed for him that unruly human nature required spiritual discipline. As the new father of monastic sons from widely different backgrounds, he also studied the individuals in his communities and, in a way that would later inspire Gregory, learned specific details about each. They were the high born and the peasant, the native and the foreigner, the educated and the illiterate, the young and the old—a community more diverse than today's average college dorm.

As Benedict saw relationships develop, problems crop up, and some pastoral approaches work better than others, he must have filed these experiences in his mind. During the times of *lectio divina*, "holy reading," he studied the earlier Italian Rule of the Master, as well as monastic rules written by St. Basil, St. Augustine, and others. Benedict continued taking notes for many years before writing down his articulate, humane, and balanced Rule at Monte Cassino around 529. Gregory himself directs us to Benedict's Rule if we want to know more about this saint's character, for "the holy man could only teach the lifestyle that he himself lived."

Blessing the Poor

Benedict's reputation for holiness grew, and Roman patricians began bringing their children to him for education. In response to this demand, he established schools for them. He also worked to meet the needs of the poor. Broken by war and famine, those born into Benedict's Italy grew up with little and inherited even less. Children lost fathers, women lost husbands, and all lost community. Meanwhile, Benedict watched the rich grow richer and blinder to others' needs.

One day, an emaciated man with thickly callused hands visited Benedict. He had heard that the abbot identified with the problems of ordinary men and women. "Father Benedict," he said, "as you can see, I'm a poor farmer. The earth is unforgiving. The rains don't come, only wars and taxes. My family is hungry, and I owe my creditors 12 pieces of gold. A year's wages! I'll be thrown in jail. If I lose work, how will my family eat?"

Benedict furrowed his brow in concern. "My son, at present, I don't have even one piece of gold to give you. But come back in two days."

As commanded, the man returned on the third day. Seeing something strangely shiny in the abbot's hands, he stammered, "What? How? All this—for my family?"

Benedict had spent the intervening days waking up before sunrise to pray for the poor man's need. On the third day, as Gregory tells it, the abbot found 13 pieces of gold on the abbey's corn chest—12 pieces for the man's debt and 1 for his family's other needs. The story ends, in my mind, with that hungry farmer running home on his skinny legs, clutching a sack filled with 13 bright, jingling coins, and thanking God for Benedict—a man of prayer who relied, not on himself, but on unending divine mercy.

Christianity for Beginners

Benedict's entire life was a series of risings in the dark. He was up before 2 A.M. singing the divine office—the daily chanting of the Psalms in Latin. This music is still the heart of Benedictine life. Many times in the profound quiet after midnight, while most peasants, politicians, children, fishermen, high-born ladies, servants, teachers, and bakers were sound asleep, lights fired up in Benedict's monasteries, and the man in a simple tunic began his day with a Psalm: "O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise."

Benedict knew that praising God is the best medicine for a flawed, poverty-stricken world. It requires rejecting arrogance, nurturing community, and understanding that even the oldest seeker of God is always a beginner. The epilogue of his Rule reminds us of this truth: "Whoever you may be rushing to your heavenly home, follow—with Christ's help—this little rule we've written for beginners. Only then, as God watches over you, will you ultimately reach the soaring heights of doctrine and integrity."

Gregory would have seen this as the best lesson taught by Benedict's life: There is always more to learn. We are all always beginners. Kindness is never complete.

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 93: St. Benedict & Western Monasticism

A Life of Listening

Benedict's Rule became the gold standard of monastic life.

Hugh Feiss, OSB

"Listen!" wrote Benedict at the beginning of his monastic Rule. Writing around A.D. 540, he offered a way of listening in a setting where God's voice could be heard, where those who wished to seek God through humility and obedience in a community of like-minded Christians could practice the disciplines of prayer without the distractions of family life.

In his prologue, Benedict invites the reader to listen to the voice of God calling him or her to service in prayer, faith, and good works. Such a disciplined life may be difficult at first, Benedict says, but "as we progress in this life and in faith, our hearts will expand with the inexpressible joy of love as we run the way of God's commandments." This is the ultimate outcome to which the Rule points: Joy is the result of loving service to God.

Monastic "rules" were more than lists of *dos* and *don'ts*. They were blueprints for an ordered and celibate form of Christian life that had been growing in the Christian church for 200 years before Benedict. He based his own rule on earlier ones such as the anonymous Rule of the Master. But it was Benedict's "little Rule for beginners" that became the gold standard for Western monasticism. In a short space, about 50 pages in modern editions, Benedict wrote a Rule noteworthy for its wise moderation, biblical grounding, flexibility, and interweaving of spiritual teaching and practical directives.

Called Into Community

By the time Benedict wrote his Rule, the monastic movement had taken many shapes. The hermit's life of solitude was one form. But although Benedict had great respect for hermits, he thought that a community offered more safeguards and guidance. Would-be hermits should first live in a community before embracing solitude. Therefore he was writing for "cenobites," monks who lived and served together "under a rule and an abbot."

Benedict's monastery was not an alternative church where super-Christians followed esoteric lore and practices. Benedict and most of his first disciples were laypeople, though he did allow ordained priests to enter the monastery. His primary goal was not to minister to the wider church, but to establish a community of baptized, celibate Christians devoted to helping each other live out the gospel. According to historian David Knowles, "Benedict's monastery is neither a penitentiary nor a school of ascetic mountaineering, but a family, a home of those seeking God."

To become a monk under the Rule of Benedict was to commit to the long haul. For this reason, Benedict stipulated that those who came to join the monastery were "not to be granted easy admittance." After spending some time in the guesthouse, they were admitted to a special part of the monastery called the "novitiate," where a monk appointed by the abbot instructed them in monastic life for a year. They studied the Rule, took part in the activities of the monastery, and experienced the hardships of a disciplined community life.

From this it became clear whether "they truly [sought] God, and [were] eager for the work of God." They became permanent members when, before the whole community, they promised "stability, fidelity to the monastic way of life, and obedience," that is, to live faithfully in their monastic community until death.

The Rhythm of the Day

A monk's daily routine reflected Benedict's conviction that prayerful listening should be at the center of the Christian life. The Psalmist declared, "Seven times a day I will praise you" (Ps. 119:164), and, "At midnight I arose to give you praise" (Ps. 119:62), so Benedict structured each day around seven communal prayers and added an eighth a few hours after midnight. He carefully distributed the 150 psalms over these prayer services so that all the psalms would be prayed at least once a week. To the psalms he added readings from Scripture (and, at the night service, readings from esteemed Christian writers), hymns, and prayers.

He called these prayers the "divine office" or "the work of God." He insisted that God is present everywhere, but "we believe without any doubt that this is especially true when we are assisting at the divine office." Benedict laid down two principles for praying the divine office: It should be done so that "our mind may be in harmony with our voice," and "nothing is to be preferred to the work of God."

In addition to spending about four hours a day praying the divine office, Benedict's monks spent an almost equal amount of time in "godly reading" (*lectio divina*). Like other literate people of their time, they read slowly and reflectively, pronouncing the words. This was because handwritten manuscripts were difficult to read, but also because the monks were not looking for quick information but ideas to live by. They wanted to take the words to heart and commit them to memory.

Benedict's expectation that his monks would read and memorize the Psalms and other parts of the Bible bore fruit. The monks developed a rich, biblically based culture, and their monasteries became centers of learning that were particularly important during the upheavals of the early Middle Ages.

School of the Lord's Service

A life of listening—to Scripture, to the writings of the church fathers, to the abbot, and to each other—required of the monks certain fundamental attitudes: the humility of a creature seeking to live in the presence of his Maker, the receptivity of a disciple "in the school of the Lord's service" (Benedict's definition of a monastery), and the silence of one who is slow to speak and ready to learn. While Benedict didn't require perpetual silence, he wanted monks to use sign language to ask for things during meals, because the monks listened to public reading while they ate. At night, he wanted strict silence.

The monks were to express obedience, silence, and humility in virtuous action. In chapter four of his Rule, Benedict listed some 70 "instruments of good works," beginning with the Lord's command to love God with all one's heart and to love one's neighbor as oneself. The list includes the Ten Commandments, ascetic practices, forgiveness, sincerity and restraint in speech, confession of sins, and placing one's hope solely in God.

These are not tools to earn salvation but ways to serve the Lord. Benedict cautioned that those who use these instruments rightly should "not become elated over their good observance, but realize that the good things in them come not from them but from the Lord." He went on to cite the apostle Paul: "By the grace of God I am what I am" (1 Cor. 15:10).

The Monastic Family

After explaining the attitudes he wished his monks to cultivate and listing ways these attitudes could be exercised, Benedict devoted most of the remaining 66 brief chapters of his Rule to organizational matters: who does what and how.

The abbot had a paramount role. Benedict's Rule stipulated that the monks elect their own abbot, or "father," who represented Christ in their midst. He, for his part, was never to deviate from the Lord's teaching. He was to teach more by example than by words. Although he was responsible for the physical as well as the spiritual welfare of his flock, he was not to be "overly concerned about passing and earthly things. He will have to render God an account of his care of the souls entrusted to him." Benedict's Rule is full of such reminders of God's all-seeing presence.

The abbot should never show favoritism. Within the community, social rank had no bearing: slaves and free, rich and poor, were equal. They took their places in the community according to the day of their entry into the monastery. The abbot should adapt himself to different personalities: the undisciplined and restless, the obedient and patient. "One he must coax, another scold, another persuade, according to each one's character and understanding." Benedict accepted that monks may sometimes be late, break things, and even rebel. The abbot "should know that he has undertaken care of sick souls, not tyranny over healthy ones." A number of chapters of the Rule, therefore, concern disciplinary measures.

The abbot had final say in decisions affecting the life of the community, but he was not to make important decisions without first hearing from the community members, so that all may be done "with foresight and fairness." The abbot and the monks were to listen to the Rule and to each other.

Life Together

The last chapters of the Rule regulated day-to-day life so that the community would run smoothly. Benedict instructed each official to do his task in a way that would build up the community and help its members live in God's presence. He distributed burdens so that no one was overworked. He made exceptions for the young, the old, and the infirm. He insisted that each person have what he needed, but nothing superfluous.

A cellarer (business manager) oversaw the material goods of the monastery, an infirmarian looked after the sick, a God-fearing elderly monk manned the gate, a prior assisted the abbot in overall care for the community. Each monk was assigned work to do because work is an integral part of human life, and because Benedict wanted the monastery to be as self-contained as possible.

Benedict's monastery was not a place of deprivation. He derived his basic principle from Acts: "Things were distributed to each according to his need." Everything was to be held in common, and each was to receive what he needed from the abbot: "cloak, tunic, sandals, shoes, belt, knife, stylus, needle, handkerchief, and writing tablets."

The monks' diet resembled that of their rural neighbors, except that the monks didn't eat meat (unless they were very weak and sick). Some earlier monastic writers thought monks should not drink wine, but in this and other matters Benedict offered a moderate alternative that took into account human limitations and differences: "The monks of our time cannot be persuaded of this, so let us at least agree to drink sparingly, and not to satiety."

The monks were to sleep with their clothes on (but without their knives in their belts!) so they could rise without delay when the signal was given. Though they rose very early, they went to bed very early, and in the summer they had a siesta in the afternoon. Benedict wanted to make sure they had adequate sleep.

Though the primary purpose of Benedict's community was not ministry outside the monastery, ministering to others inevitably grew out of their lives together. In the Rule, Christ appears in three guises: as the Lord, as a model of self-emptying humility, and in all people, especially those who are vulnerable and burdened: the sick, the elderly, the poor, pilgrims, and guests. All these people should be treated with the reverence one would show to Christ. Benedictine communities often became islands of peace in a tumultuous world.

Near the end of his Rule, Benedict urged his monks to "to compete in honoring each other," "with utmost patience to bear with each other's weaknesses of body and character," love God and the abbot, and prefer nothing to Christ—and "may He lead us together to ever lasting life."

The Rule's Legacy

Benedict's final chapter is a reading list for those who wish "to hasten on to the perfection of monastic life." Thus he concluded where he began, urging his monks to be listeners with him to Scripture, respected biblical interpreters, and his monastic forerunners, such as St. Basil and Cassian.

This varied list assured that there would be varieties of theory and practice in monastic communities following Benedict's Rule. Those who read these works would, like the Rule itself, be permeated with the Word of God and, after a lifetime of patience and faithful Christian living, would arrive where God wished them to be: eternal life. At the end, and throughout, the Rule speaks with seriousness and optimism about both hard effort and divine grace.

Benedict's Rule spread gradually until it became normative for monasteries in Western Europe in the ninth century. In almost every century since, there have been efforts at monastic renewal and reform inspired by its teaching. Hundreds of thousands of monks and nuns have tried to live according to the Rule. Lay people—men and women, kings, farmers, and writers—have associated themselves with monasteries as benefactors, prayer partners, retirees, and employees, not becoming monks but finding in the Rule guidance for their own Christian lives. Modern monks, nuns, and lay oblates—both Catholic and Protestant—are listening still to the Rule and to the Word of God to see where the Holy Spirit might be leading Benedict's disciples today.

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Monk-ing Around

A monk's daily schedule under Benedict's Rule was a careful balance of communal and private prayer, reading, and work. A summer day

2:30AM Rise for communal prayer, called "the divine office" (Vigils)
3:45-5:00 Private reading and prayer, learning psalms and other texts for the divine office
5:00-5:45 Communal prayer at dawn (Lauds)
6:00 Communal prayer at sunrise (Prime)
6:45-8:30 Work (housekeeping, crafts, gardening, and field work if necessary)
8:30 Communal prayer (Terce)
8:45-1:00 Private reading
1:00PM Communal prayer (Sext)
1:15 Meal together in the dining room, in silence, with public reading
1:45-2:30 Siesta or reading
2:30 Communal prayer (None)
2:45-6:00 Work
6:00-6:45 Communal prayer (Vespers)
7:00 Meal together in the dining room, in silence, with public reading
8:00 Communal prayer (Compline)
8:30 Retire in the dormitory

A winter day

2:30AM Rise for communal prayer (Vigils, with more prayers and readings in winter)
4:15-6:00 Private reading and prayer, learning psalms and other texts for the divine office

6:00-6:45 Communal prayer at dawn (Lauds)
7:00 Communal prayer at sunrise (Prime)
7:15-9:00 Private reading and prayer
9:00 Communal prayer (Terce)
9:15-12:00 Work (housekeeping, crafts)
12:00PM Communal prayer (Sext)
12:15-2:15 Work (housekeeping, crafts)
2:15 Communal prayer (None)
2:30 Meal together in dining room, in silence, with public reading
3:15 Private reading or prayer
5:00-5:45 Communal prayer (Vespers)
6:30 Communal prayer (Compline)
7:00 Retire in the dormitory

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 93: St. Benedict & Western Monasticism

A Devoted Life: Christian History Timeline

From its roots in the early Eastern church, through the Benedictine centuries, to the birth of new kinds of religious orders in the Middle Ages

compiled by Antonia Ryan with contributions from Carmen Acevedo Butcher

The Rise of Western Monasticism

-250-

c. **280s** Antony withdraws to the Egyptian desert

312/313 Constantine becomes a Christian; Edict of Milan calls for persecution of Christians to end

c. **320** Pachomius, founder of cenobitic (communal) monasticism in Egypt, receives his first disciples

325 Council of Nicaea approves creed proclaiming that Christ is divine in the same way as the Father

356 Antony dies; Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, writes *The Life of Antony*

370 Basil the Great, monastic founder in Cappadocia, becomes bishop of Caesarea; he writes principles of ascetic life

early **370s** Semi-hermits gather around Martin of Tours in Gaul; he later establishes a monastery that eventually becomes Benedictine

374 Melania the Elder establishes a monastery of women in Jerusalem; Rufinus follows in 380 and establishes a monastery of men

385 Jerome leaves Rome to follow monastic life in the East; his colleague Paula follows soon after

386 Augustine reads Latin translation of *The Life of Antony* and converts to Christianity soon after

c. **395** Paulinus moves to Nola, where he leads an ascetic life

404 Jerome translates rules of Pachomius into Latin

407-8 Destruction of Scetis, major center of hermits in Egyptian desert

410 Fall of Rome (city sacked by Goths)

410 Cassian writes *Conferences* in Latin, allowing Westerners to read about Eastern monastic traditions

-450-

451 Council of Chalcedon defines the two natures of Christ

455 Rome sacked again by Vandals

476 Romulus, the last Western Roman emperor, deposed by barbarian leader Odoacer

c. **480** Benedict is born in Nursia, Italy

489 Theodoric the Great, king of Ostrogoths, invades Italy and deposes Odoacer

c. **493** Benedict leaves Nursia to study in Rome

c. **502-505** Benedict lives as a hermit in a cave

c. **507-529** Benedict builds 13 monasteries

526 Theodoric dies, opening Italy to more invasions

c. **529** Benedict moves his monks to Monte Cassino

c. **530** Benedict writes his Rule

540 Gregory (the Great), Benedict's first biographer, is born

547 Traditional date of Benedict's death (March 21)

558 Abbey of Germain-des-Prés founded in France

563 Irish missionary monk Columba goes with 12 companions to Iona, Scotland; Celtic Christianity spreads to Scotland and other Anglo-Saxon territories

568 Lombards invade Italy

c. **580s** Monte Cassino is destroyed by Lombards; monks flee to Rome, carrying a copy of Benedict's Rule

590 Gregory, by now a Benedictine monk, becomes pope (reluctantly)

c. **590** Irish missionary monk Columbanus leaves Ireland for Gaul; later writes rule at Luxeuil, one of the Celtic monasteries that he established in the region

593 Pope Gregory writes *Dialogues*, including account of Benedict's life

597 Pope Gregory sends Augustine of Canterbury as missionary to England

629-670 Abbacy of Walbert of Luxeuil, who ushered in the period of "mixed rules" in Gaul by combining Columbanus's Rule with Benedict's

632 Mohammed dies in Mecca

-650-

663 Synod of Whitby convenes to work out conflicts between Celtic and Roman Christian practices in England; decides in favor of Roman practices, including date of Easter

680 Bede enters the cloister at Jarrow, England

c. **696** Rupert of Worms founds St. Peter's Abbey in Salzburg as part of mission to the South Alps

c. **717** Monte Cassino is refounded; revives observance of Benedict's Rule in Italy

720s English missionary monk Boniface sets up monastic foundations in present-day Germany

731 Bede completes ***Ecclesiastical History of the English People***

782 Charlemagne, King of the Franks, invites Alcuin to lead palace school, where he teaches the seven liberal arts

800 Charlemagne crowned emperor by Pope Leo III

c. **800** Anskar, "apostle to the Scandinavians," is born; enters monastery of Corbie as a youth

c. 800 Celtic monks at Iona and Kells, Ireland, illuminate the four gospels in the ***Book of Kells***

803 Charlemagne tells bishops to develop schools for church music

806 St. Columba's monastery at Iona destroyed by Vikings; all monks are killed

814 Charlemagne's son Louis the Pious begins reign

814 Synods of Aachen aim to have all monasteries follow Benedict's Rule; Benedict of Aniane is the abbot general

819-826 The Plan of St. Gall, a schema for an ideal monastery that influences future monastic architecture, is created at the monastery of Reichenau.

826 Anskar arrives in Denmark

-850-

863 Cyril and Methodius, Byzantine Christian brothers, go to Moravia as missionaries and help convert the Slavs (Cyril was an Eastern Orthodox monk)

883 Monte Cassino burned to the ground in Muslim invasions

909 Duke William of Aquitaine founds monastery of **Cluny**

c. **930-931** Abbot Odo of Cluny writes ***The Life of St. Gerald of Aurillac***

950 Conversion of Queen Olga of Russia

968 Vikings occupy Santiago de Compostela in Spain

1012 Italian monk Romauld founds Camaldolese order, which follows Benedict's Rule

-1050-

1054 Schism between Eastern and Western church

1066 William the Conqueror takes England

1084 French cleric Bruno founds the Carthusian order, combining communal and solitary forms of monastic life

1093 Anselm, monk of Bec, becomes Archbishop of Canterbury

1095 Pope Urban II proclaims the first Crusade

1098 Monastery of Citeaux founded, marks beginning of Cistercian order in Burgundy

1112 Bernard of Fontaine enters Citeaux with 30 noblemen, reinvigorating the Cistercian order; he later founds a monastery at Clairvaux

1122 Peter the Venerable becomes abbot of Cluny

1139 Peter the Venerable visits Spain; has Qur'an translated into Latin

1141 German Benedictine abbess, mystic, musician, and preacher Hildegard von Bingen begins to record her visions

c. **1170** Dominic born in Castile

1181/1182 Francis of Assisi born

1203-1206 Dominic begins to formulate his idea for an order of preachers

1212 Clare of Assisi begins the Poor Clares after hearing Francis preach

1215 Innocent III declares no new monastic rules are to be approved

1221 Dominic dies

1226 Francis dies

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 93: St. Benedict & Western Monasticism

Converting Europe

For centuries, monks were at the center of the Western missionary enterprise.

Glenn W. Olsen

Around 696, Duke Theodore of Bavaria gave the young bishop Rupert of Worms a grant of land in what is now Austria. A small Benedictine monastery called St. Peter's already existed in the midst of what was left of a Roman town. Rupert made the monastery into a launching pad to evangelize the eastern Alps. He also founded the convent of Nonnberg, the oldest continuously existing female convent in German-speaking lands.

In about 100 years, Salzburg went from being a ruin of a Roman town to being the center of missionary activity and learning in its region, with a monk-bishop supervising many monasteries and churches. What happened in Salzburg also happened elsewhere. Just as they built new buildings from old Roman materials, these medieval missionaries adapted or replaced elements of the pagan culture they found, constructing a new Christian culture in its place.

Again and again, monks built a monastery in an isolated spot, observed pastoral and educational needs in the local population, and responded by establishing schools and taking on pastoral tasks. Monasticism was a lay movement of people seeking an uncompromised Christian life, but by the 12th century half the Benedictine monks were also ordained priests. Benedict's Rule had never envisioned monks engaging in pastoral or missionary activity. But even in Benedict's own life, the contemplative and the pastoral roles went hand in hand.

In the year 600, Christianity was almost entirely an urban religion, centered on the still surviving, if often decaying, cities of the Roman Empire. By the time Charlemagne died in 814, Christians had moved into vast rural areas of the old empire, and a broad swathe of central and northern Europe—from Hungary through Poland to Scandinavia—had received Christianity for the first time. It was one of the most expansive and remarkable periods in Christian history, and it was largely due to the work of monks.

Beyond the Old Empire

Since the earliest period of the church, Christians had almost universally assumed that Christianity would develop within the boundaries of the Roman Empire and follow the contours of Roman life. Only in a few places did Christians attempt to evangelize the hinterlands beyond the Roman cities. Thus the word for "country-dweller" (*paganus*) also meant "pagan," or non-Christian. After the Visigoths sacked Rome in 410, Christians felt a new urgency to evangelize the barbarians now living among them.

Pope Celestine I sent Ireland its first bishop, Palladius, in 431, but Pope Gregory the Great (590-604) was the first pope clearly to imagine evangelization beyond the borders of the Roman Empire. He articulated the general principle that missionaries should adapt to existing societies as much as possible. Gregory is best known for sending a group of Roman monks to England in 597. Their leader, Augustine, established a community at Canterbury, earning him the name Augustine of Canterbury (to distinguish him from the early church father, Augustine of Hippo).

Benedict wrote his Rule about a half-century earlier, but we don't know whether Augustine and his monks were Benedictine. During the seventh and much of the eighth centuries, monasteries based their practices on a number of different monastic rules then circulating. Only gradually did Benedict's Rule win

out over the others. But already in the mission to England there were visible patterns that would occur repeatedly in succeeding generations, among Benedictines and non-Benedictines alike.

The Canterbury community lived a life of shared prayer and worship, without private property, in conscious imitation of the Jerusalem Christians described in the book of Acts. But the monks also preached the gospel outside the community, converting and baptizing many who, according to the early English historian Bede, admired "the simplicity of their holy lives and the comfort of their heavenly message." Eventually they converted King Ethelbert of Kent, whose wife Bertha was a Christian from France. It was not uncommon in the years that followed for a Christian queen to be the agent of her husband's conversion.

England was in many ways a half-tribal society. In a tribal society, the lower social classes tended to follow the king or chief. Thus, here and all over Europe, conversion tended to be from the top down. Bede tells us that Ethelbert let his followers decide for themselves whether they would become Christian, "for he had learned from his instructors and guides to salvation that the service of Christ must be accepted freely and not under compulsion. Nevertheless, he showed greater favor to believers, because they were fellow-citizens of the kingdom of heaven." This top-down evangelism had a very practical benefit: Once the king converted, it gave the missionaries the protection and freedom to preach and build churches throughout the kingdom.

Reaching the People

Many tensions emerged as Christianity moved into the countryside. Bede himself was not a missionary, but he lived in a Benedictine monastery in the north of England, at the edge of Christendom. One day, while the monks of his monastery were rafting supplies upriver, they were caught in the current and washed out to sea. The local peasants jeered as the monks struggled against the current. We can only guess what an unlettered peasant with a vocabulary of a few thousand words might have made of monasticism, ordered as it was around Latin chant and reading. For many, the monastery must have been a closed world.

Still, many laypeople, especially country-dwellers, learned their Christianity by watching the monks, who presented a wide range of practices for lay imitation. They taught that labor was not a curse but something dignified, and that all of life should be ordered in a way that glorified God. They practiced regular confession and encouraged the people to do so as well. Laypeople attended the monks' churches and learned to pray. In succeeding centuries, those who could afford them sometimes used simplified versions of the monks' prayer books for their own private devotions at home. Christian worship and artwork of the time focused on Christ as the Lord of the World—an easy concept for people from a warrior culture to grasp.

The Pagan Our Kinfolk

The conversion of England was precarious, and both physical and political dangers remained a fact of life for all missionaries in Western Europe. In the eighth century the "apostle of the Germans," Boniface, wrote in a letter of the perils he faced and his determination to persevere: "I am afraid, if I may put it so, that I have undertaken once and for all to steer a ship through the waves of a raging sea, a ship which I can neither guide securely nor abandon without sin."

Boniface had been born Winfrid sometime in the 670s and educated as a Benedictine in England. He was subsequently put in charge of a monastic school and ordained a priest. But his greatest desire was to preach to the Saxons in Germany—one of the tribes that had invaded and settled England in the 400s. He later wrote an open letter to English Christians reminding them that the Saxons were their kin: "Have mercy upon them because their repeated cry is, 'We are of one and the same blood and bone!'" He received permission to undertake a mission to Friesland (now part of the Netherlands) in 716. Two years

later he was in Rome, receiving papal approval to preach to the right of the Rhine.

Boniface found much to lament when he arrived, especially in Thuringia in central Germany, an area that already had pockets of Christianity. But as was the case elsewhere in Europe, political turmoil and corrupt leadership had bred laxity, and many Christians had half-lapsed back into their native religion, mingling Christian and pagan practices in ways that tested the limits of orthodoxy—and the missionary's patience. Boniface had only limited success here, but back in Friesland he fared better, converting many and establishing monasteries. This was the pattern of his life: sometimes succeeding, sometimes not, but all in all spreading Christianity and Benedictine monasticism far and wide.

Like many of his fellow missionaries, Boniface engaged in a kind of theater to win converts—something like the prophet Elijah taking on the priests of Baal—and he must have been viewed as a miracle-worker. In various places he cut down oaks that the pagans had held sacred, and at Geismar built a chapel out of the wood of one such tree. When the god Thor did not strike him down, many people converted. Boniface tried to present Christianity in a form comprehensible to these cultures, while drawing a line at things that were simply not acceptable. Christmas trees were in; sacred oaks, out.

Boniface's journeys ended in 755 when he ventured beyond the reach of royal protection. One morning, a band of armed looters attacked him and his fellow monks as they gathered to baptize converts. Tradition has it that Boniface tried in vain to block their blows with a Book of the Gospels.

Setbacks and Successes

The life of Anskar, "the apostle of the Scandinavians," had many parallels to that of Boniface. Anskar was born in 801, educated in Benedictine monasteries, and later taught in a monastic school. As a young child he dreamed of his dead mother, who told him to work hard: "We who dwell here have no time to be lazy."

Anskar was anything but lazy. He founded the first church in Sweden and the first school in Denmark. He held many offices—from abbot to archbishop to papal legate. He began charitable activities, such as building hospitals, and worked to mitigate the effects of the Viking slave trade. But he also suffered many reverses: Pagans burned down his school in Denmark and ran him out of the country, and after his death a resurgent paganism destroyed most of his work. Anskar repeatedly saw his efforts undone, but he did live to see the conversion of the King of Denmark.

The dangers and challenges Boniface and Anskar faced witness to the fact that much of Europe remained unconverted during this period. But the stories of their lives, written down and embellished by followers and successors, served as models and inspiration for countless other monastic missionaries. Always trying to find common ground with those they were evangelizing, these missionaries built monasteries, churches, and schools all over Europe. Along with failure came great success, and the period of the conversion of Europe was followed by the astonishing flourishing of Christian culture in the high Middle Ages.

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A Monk Who Made History

Bede gave us the single greatest source of information we have about Anglo-Saxon England.

In the year 686, a terrible plague swept through the monastery of Jarrow in eastern England. The population was decimated, leaving only two people to sing the daily prayers: the Anglo-Saxon abbot Ceolfrith and a young lad who had been dedicated to the monastic life. Tradition suggests that the boy who sang the Gloria with such passion was Bede, who would grow up to be one of the finest historians of the early Middle Ages.

All Bede knew was the life of a monk. At age seven, his parents sent him to the monastery of Wearmouth, and soon thereafter to its sister monastery at Jarrow, where he remained for nearly all of his 62 years. Bede was ordained a priest at age 30, but his reputation was established not by his work as a cleric, but as a scholar monk. His prodigious scholarship included biblical commentaries, observations on nature, and hagiographies.

His most famous work was his ***Ecclesiastical History of the English People***. Bede's History is not a bland recitation of facts and dates but a lively creation with a specific agenda: to demonstrate the orthodoxy of the English people. So Bede lauded the saints and heroes of England, from the earliest martyr to the Anglo-Saxon kings. He was at his most colorful when discussing Celtic Christians, who celebrated Easter on the wrong Sunday each year and cut their hair in scandalous ways! But for all of his criticism, Bede clearly had a grudging respect for the doughty Celts with their unique version of Christianity.

Bede died in 735 in his monastery's chapel, singing the Gloria as he had so many years before as a small boy. In time, the pope would declare him a Doctor of the Church, bestowing upon him the title we use to this day: the Venerable Bede.

—**Garry Crites**

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 93: St. Benedict & Western Monasticism

Illuminating Europe

Under Charlemagne's influence, the monasteries shaped the future of Western education, trade, and even handwriting.

Thomas O. Kay with Jennifer Trafton

With the best of intentions, a Christian congregation throws its energy and resources into obeying Jesus' command to be salt and light in society. Its members feed the hungry, care for the sick, and strive for social reform. They have scholars and teachers of the highest caliber and even publish their own literature for the wider community. Their spiritual reputation and social connections have earned them the ear of the leaders of the land and a foot in the door of powerful government offices.

They are eager to serve the world, but the world bites them back. Their activities become more and more shaped by society's agendas. Their leader is hardly more than a political pawn, his eyes set more on money and prestige than on spiritual matters. Are they transforming the culture, or is the culture transforming them? Have they gained the world only to lose their souls?

The situation sounds remarkably contemporary, but this tension has recurred throughout history—and it was the tension faced by Benedictine monasteries in the early Middle Ages. The original monastic impulse was to be countercultural, to separate from the distractions of the world in order to be single-mindedly devoted to God. Under the emperor Charlemagne and his successors, however, the monasteries were thrust into the center of cultural influence—leading to remarkable accomplishments that forever changed Western Europe, and also to challenges that tested the soul of monasticism.

A New Empire

Charlemagne (Charles the Great) dwarfed the previous rulers of war-torn Europe with his enormous military prowess and a personality as towering as his six-foot frame. As King of the Franks, he subdued the barbarian tribes, held back the Muslims aggressors in Spain, and extended his rule over the largest territory of Western Europe since the Roman Empire fell in the fifth century. The pope recognized Charlemagne's unique status and crowned him "emperor" on Christmas day, 800. The new emperor brought a short-lived but profoundly influential unity and stability to the land, which earned him the title "the Father of Europe."

When Charlemagne took the reins, Europe was teetering under regional warfare, poverty, illiteracy, clerical corruption, lax spiritual standards, and lingering pagan practices. There were no major cities. Local life was agrarian and feudal. Education had become nonexistent. Thus, one of his chief aims was to bring order and reform to both society and the church. Charlemagne read his Bible regularly and regarded himself as the protector of the church. Monasteries played a vital role in his vision for a Christian civilization. He urged the monks not only to have a strong spiritual commitment but also an active cultural life.

Many Christian leaders shared Charlemagne's desire to strengthen the monasteries. One of them was Benedict of Aniane, who eventually became an advisor to Charlemagne's son Louis the Pious. He is called "the second St. Benedict" because he zealously promoted Benedict's Rule as the best means to purify and unify the scattered, undisciplined monasteries. Benedict of Aniane wanted monks to devote themselves to prayer and to strict observance of the Rule—though not to the exclusion of their social role in the community. The purpose of monastic life should not be just to escape from the fires of hell, but to serve

and to teach.

A council at the imperial palace of Aachen, called by Louis the Pious in 816-817, put the official stamp on this effort to make Benedict's Rule the standard for all monasteries in Western Europe. Though this was never fully realized, the council's action ensured that Benedictine monasticism would be the dominant influence on religious, intellectual, and cultural life for centuries to come. Henceforth all monks thought of themselves as "the sons of St. Benedict."

People of the Book

In his 789 General Admonition outlining reforms for the church, Charlemagne lamented the many poorly written letters he had received from monasteries: "We therefore started to fear that as they were not that accomplished in writing, they were perhaps even less accomplished in understanding the Sacred Scriptures, and we know very well that the incorrect use of words is dangerous, errors of meaning being the most dangerous of all."

God forbid that the church's doctrine or practice should falter on a grammatical error! Yet that was precisely the problem. People were praying incorrectly, and how people are taught to pray affects what they believe. Though sermons were in the local languages, the Bible and the liturgy were in Latin, and few monks or clergy knew Latin well enough to understand them. In order to "recall the kingdom which God had given him to the worship of God," Charlemagne was convinced that books were the key. The resulting explosion of literary activity, education, and cultural revival is often called the "Carolingian Renaissance."

Monks were at the heart of this explosion. They heeded Charlemagne's warning that "correct conduct may be better than knowledge, nevertheless knowledge precedes conduct," and mastered Latin in order to study Scripture and other early documents of the church. Monasteries became publishing houses, producing original manuscripts (such as the monk Einhard's biography of Charlemagne) as well as tens of thousands of copies of biblical and classical texts. The monk-copyists developed a clear style of handwriting known as Carolingian minuscule—readily recognizable as the ancestor of basic letter shapes today.

Monastic libraries often held several hundred titles (the largest, at Fulda, had almost 1,000), including Bibles, church fathers such as Augustine and Jerome, saints' lives, and major classical writers such as Cicero, Livy, and Tacitus. The monks' tireless efforts proved essential for the preservation of ancient literature. In most cases, the oldest surviving copies of such works we possess today were made by Benedictine monks in the early Middle Ages.

If there were books to read, there had to be schools to teach reading. Monastic schools were the most successful of the era, imparting the liberal arts to boys and girls destined for church careers or convent life.

Monks in the Middle of Things

Many monasteries grew large and wealthy because they were endowed by kings and nobles to pray masses for dead relatives, to serve as royal way stations, or to provide educational services. The number of monks in a monastery could range from a handful to hundreds—on rare occasions more than a thousand. The peasants who lived in the monastery's orbit—doing manual labor for the monks or tilling the fields, for example—often numbered several thousand. The largest of these monasteries, St. Germain-des-Prés, owned 124,000 acres of land with a population of at least 12,000. Such monasteries were important commercial and industrial centers, possessing fleets, wharves, rights of coinage, and the privilege to hold markets and fairs. They were the big businesses (local and international) of their day.

After Vikings destroyed their wooden buildings, monasteries began building stone structures, often with towers and multiple churches. Some served as parish churches for the surrounding population. In addition

to being local centers of religious life, economic and agricultural activity, and education, monasteries served as welfare agencies, medical caregivers, and even travel accommodations. Their crafts and agricultural products benefited society; their stability strengthened society; their prayers interceded for society.

But these things were peripheral to the central spiritual purposes to which Benedict of Nursia had called his monks in the sixth century, and which leaders like Benedict of Aniane continued to call monks back to in the ninth century.

Trial by Fire

The revitalization of monasticism left an indelible mark on Christianity in Western Europe, but there was a dark underside to this cultural influence.

The rulers of Charlemagne's dynasty believed that a king's rights included control of the church and its possessions. Individual monasteries were very often under the authority of the king or wealthy landowners—a privilege abused by those who exploited the monasteries' economic resources for their own benefit. A monastery that depended heavily on the king's gifts of money and prestige had little freedom to go against the king's will.

Charlemagne often appointed his allies to be abbots, who frequently served as royal advisors and agents. Some of these abbots put personal and institutional aggrandizement above their spiritual callings. The monasteries were in grave danger of becoming political tools of the civil authority. The new social roles tended to make the essential religious functions of a monastery incidental. Monastic reformers worried that the communities were straying far from their original ideal—undistracted prayer and worship.

Wave after wave of Viking invasions from the early ninth through the tenth century did not help matters. The monasteries' great wealth and land holdings made them prime targets. Vikings ravaged the monastery of St. Martin of Tours on the Loire River in 853, killing 100 to 200 monks as well as other inhabitants of the region. Over 200 of Western Europe's 700 monasteries were destroyed, and many others were damaged. Ironically, the invasions that forced many monks out of their homes drove them eastward, spreading the accomplishments of Benedictine monasticism further.

The trials by fire faced by the monasteries seem to have been a refining process. Such challenges directed the monks back to the life of the spirit and paved the way for spiritual renewal in the 10th and 11th centuries. The tension between separation from the world and service to the world would be a continual struggle. But the strength of monasteries in Charlemagne's empire—a rope that held tight even when the empire fell apart—had an immense impact on the recovery, preservation, and enrichment of European culture.

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The Emperor's Scholar

Not everyone who influenced the development of monasticism was actually a monk. Case in point: Alcuin.

Born in Northumbria, England, around 740, Alcuin showed intellectual promise from an early age—promise that bore fruit when he entered the cathedral school in York to study under Aelbert. The young scholar did so well in his studies of theology and the liberal arts that, when Aelbert was made bishop of York, Alcuin became the new schoolmaster.

One benefit of being Aelbert's protégé was the opportunity to accompany the bishop on his trips to the continent. There Alcuin met the young Frankish king Charles, who eventually became known as

Charlemagne. Soon Alcuin was teaching in Charles's palace school and helping to engineer the Carolingian Renaissance, a heady period of church reform, literary productivity, and artistic exploration.

This was an age when many Western Christians had forgotten their ancient heritage, and illiteracy among the clergy had led to some strange beliefs and even stranger practices. The missionary monk Boniface complained to the pope that he had heard an ignorant priest baptize someone in nomine patria et filia, that is, "In the name of the fatherland and the daughter." The church was sorely in need of reform, and Alcuin was just the man to lead it.

Alcuin was a remarkable scholar. He wrote biblical commentaries, theological treatises, and biographies of the saints, but his most important work was supervising the production of Bibles. Charlemagne wanted an accurate, official version of the Bible. Furthermore, gospel books were needed for the new churches and monastic libraries springing up all over Europe.

In 796, Alcuin became abbot of the monastery of St. Martin of Tours, though he probably never took full monastic vows. From St. Martin's, he continued to write and to consult with the court of Charlemagne until he died in 804, assuring his continuing influence on European Christianity for years to come.

—*Garry Crites*

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 93: St. Benedict & Western Monasticism

Unceasing Prayer in an Uncertain World

As the peace and unity of Europe collapsed, the monastery of Cluny pointed a new way forward.

Dennis Martin

The late 800s and early 900s were not a good time for Western Europe. From Rome to the French Riviera and south to Sicily, towns and monasteries reeled from repeated raids by pillaging, enslaving Saracen (Muslim) pirates. North of the Alps, royal government under Charlemagne's successors wavered and faltered, leaving the monasteries along rivers vulnerable to Viking raiders and northern slavers.

These were the real "Dark Ages." In what we now know as France, local strongmen simply took matters into their own hands. Christian discipline suffered. Worship became haphazard. The church nearly succumbed to factions and to the greed of secular rulers who tried to dominate it.

Under these circumstances, the "unceasing" round of prayer that had characterized monks from the beginning became the shaft of light and hope in the darkness. Nowhere was this more evident than at Cluny, located in west-central France. Protected by geography, it was out of reach of invaders coming up the Rhône, Seine, Loire, or Garonne rivers.

Benedict's Rule had outlined a balanced life of work and prayer, but in a tottering world beset by anxiety, Cluny focused attention almost entirely on the stable rock of prayer as the "work of God" par excellence. At this immense monastic complex on great feast days, the monks prayed nearly without ceasing.

A Ramshackle Spiritual Empire

When Duke William I of Aquitaine founded the monastery at Cluny in 910, he chose for its leader Berno, the abbot of Baume, a Benedictine monastery in the Jura mountains west of the Rhône basin. Baume had maintained the strict Benedictine life promoted by Benedict of Aniane under imperial sponsorship a century earlier. In a bold move, Duke William deliberately forfeited future control over his new foundation—ensuring that Cluny would be free of the secular powers that controlled much of the church at that time.

In a charter dated September 11, Duke William wrote, "For the love of God and of our Savior Jesus Christ, I give and deliver to the Apostles Peter and Paul," in other words, to the pope, "the village of Cluny" and all the lands belonging to it "on condition that a Regular Monastery be established." He thereby placed the monks under the only real protection that mattered: the court of heaven in the person of the two great apostle-martyrs of Rome. He also stipulated freedom from oversight by the nearby bishop. Although William of Aquitaine could not have known it, the single monastic house he founded at Cluny set the switches for a millennium of monastic life.

Abbots grounded in Baume's solid Benedictine life guided Cluny in its formative first three decades. Cluny became a massive, self-sufficient monastic complex and soon came to be seen as a model monastery. Its flourishing life of prayer helped spark what are known as the "Benedictine centuries" (900-1100) and stimulated Benedictine reform and renewal from Spain and Italy to

Germany and England. Existing monasteries seeking to return to their first fervor came under Cluny's authority (67 of them by the early 1000s). The mother monastery's piecemeal addition of new daughter

houses (called "prieories") produced what church historian C. H. Lawrence described as a "ramshackle spiritual empire."

Praying Around the Clock

What was life like for the Benedictines of Cluny in the later 900s and 1000s? Historian Joan Evans gives us a vivid picture in her book *Monastic Life at Cluny, 910-1157* (Oxford, 1931). Time was measured not in hours on a clock but in hours of prayer. During the long nights from November to Easter, the night office (Vigils) began at two in the morning; during the spring and fall, it began before dawn as a prelude to morning prayer. When the bell rang for Matins, monks got out of bed, dressed, and washed in the cloister before proceeding to the abbey church. Cluny observed strict silence 24/7, except for a half-hour in the morning and a few minutes at midday.

Praying burned calories in an unheated church. A profound bow to the high altar required the same energy as toe-touch calisthenics. Monks normally stood during the Psalms. They were permitted to rest briefly by half-sitting on the "misericords" ("mercies," or ledges on the back of choir stalls), except during Lent. Cluny added its own specific rules (the Customs of Cluny) to Benedict's Rule—one of which called for a monk to walk around the church with a lantern, peering to see if a brother who appeared to be nodding off was asleep. If the lantern-bearer discovered eyes closed in meditation instead of sleep, he bowed in apology. Otherwise, he held the lantern closer until the somnolent monk woke up.

In addition to reciting the entire Psalter over the course of a week according to Benedict's Rule, the monks sang additional Psalms in intercession for the benefactors and friends of the abbey after each of the day's seven hours of prayer. They sang—not merely recited—two solemn Masses each day. On feast days, the monks made great processions through the corridors of the monastery with candles and incense and sang extended hymns, antiphons, and responsories.

The heavy round of prayer left little time for manual labor. Lay brothers and hired employees performed most of the field and artisan work required to sustain a self-sufficient monastic community. Still, on any non-feast day between Pentecost and November, after abbreviated morning prayers, the abbot was free to announce, "We shall go to work with our hands in the garden."

As the monks walked, they chanted the Psalms omitted from morning prayer. When they arrived at the field, they bowed to the east, begged God's aid just as they did in church, sang a Kyrie Eleison ("Lord, Have Mercy") and the Lord's Prayer, and proceeded to hoe beans while chanting Psalms. After a noonday break, they returned (in formal procession both coming and going) to the same combination of prayerful weeding. During a rest period, the abbot gave a homily on the value of manual work to the soul.

Open Hands

Despite being cloistered, Cluny maintained ties with the surrounding culture. Guests came constantly and found lodging in the abbey's guesthouse. The "almshouse"—the monastery's welfare office—gave money and food to the poor. On Thursday of Holy Week, each monk received a new pair of shoes (made in the monastery cobbler's shop). In imitation of Christ, he washed the feet of a poor man, who then received the monk's old shoes as a gift.

Abbot Odilo (d. 1049) instituted a day of prayer to commemorate all who had died believing in Christ. This met a deep need in a society filled with so much death and was greeted enthusiastically by the surrounding populace. Eventually what started at Cluny became the Feast of All Souls, still celebrated by Catholics on November 2.

For people facing huge political and cultural changes, the monastery's elaborate liturgy and constant prayer brought a little bit of the peace and permanence of heaven down to earth.

From the Cloister to the Streets

Cluny and her many daughter monasteries gave way to the new religious orders of the 1100s: Cistercians, Praemonstratensians, Carthusians, Canons Regular. In the 1200s came the mendicant ("begging") orders—Franciscans and Dominicans—who lived in the emerging cities and shortened their liturgical prayer life in order to spend more time on the streets pastoring and inspiring devout lay people. They were followed in the 1500s by new teaching and nursing orders, also active on the streets.

But nearly all of the new orders adopted aspects of Cluny's centralized organization aimed at keeping the secular authorities from interfering in the monasteries' internal affairs. Founded as a refuge for unceasing prayer in tumultuous times, Cluny both epitomized the self-sufficient, prayer-filled, cloistered community of Benedictine tradition and pointed the way toward new trends among religious orders for centuries to come.

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The Tale of Peter Abbot

One of Cluny's most "venerable" leaders believed firmly that the church is always in need of reform.

When Peter the Venerable (1092-1156) became abbot of Cluny in 1122, that grand experiment in monasticism was already over 200 years old. Many felt that powerful Cluny—with its massive Abbey Church, its extensive library, and its numerous priories—had become too worldly and was itself in need of reform. After all, no real monk needed the indoor plumbing that Cluny had!

Enter Peter, the son of a nobleman of Montboissier, who had taken monastic vows in his teens and quickly moved up the monastic hierarchy.

After his election as abbot of Cluny, Peter instituted a series of reforms intended to restore discipline to the priories, assure the financial health of the monastery, and boost the educational level of the monks. This reform itself was controversial; Peter frequently sparred with his friend Bernard of the rival monastery at Clairvaux, who believed that the central concerns of the monk should not be property and education, but prayer and work.

In addition to being a powerful figure in the church, Peter was also a creative and insightful apologist. For example, he arranged for Islamic texts, including the Qur'an, to be translated into Latin for the first time, allowing Christian apologists to study and critique Muslim theology more precisely than ever before. He also left behind a large corpus of letters that reveal the theological concerns of the 12th century in imaginative ways. (In one letter, he mentions that the abbey's manuscript of St. Augustine's letters had been "accidentally eaten by a bear"; Peter probably wished they had been Bernard's!)

Peter died at Cluny on Christmas Day in 1156. The influence of the monastery he loved was quickly fading, and the abbot who had been labeled the Venerable because of his godliness and his passion for reform became its evening star.

—Garry Crites

Living like a monk in the "real world"

Count Gerald of Aurillac took the values of the monastery into the realm of everyday life—and the battlefield.

Cluny's second abbot, Odo, was distressed by the way local nobles governed by sheer power. He wanted

worldly rulers to rule justly and for the common good rather than for selfish motives. So he wrote a biography of Gerald of Aurillac (855-909), a count who lived in the world and wielded the sword of government in a fully Christian, quasi-monastic manner. By Gerald's example, Odo hoped to show how one might adapt to secular circumstances the basic Christian principles that monks aspired to live out—justice, honesty, humility, and selfless love.

Gerald was the last representative of a noble family that had served the Carolingian rulers. He was trained as a warrior—athletic enough to vault over the back of a horse—but was also educated in Latin and classical literature. He wanted to join a monastery, but a bishop counseled that he could better use his status and privileges for God as a layman.

So Gerald lived as much like a monk as he could without actually becoming one. He eschewed marriage (his family lineage died out with him), wore a hidden tonsure, fasted to concentrate his mind while judging disputes within the "county" he governed, drank and ate sparingly even when hosting the feasts required by his status, ate meals with the poor, dressed soberly, and founded monasteries with his family's resources. His temperateness and discretion were inspired not by contempt for God's good gifts, but by a desire for better self-control so that he could serve God more effectively.

He exercised his God-given military responsibilities solely to defend the innocent and, according to Odo, "never stained his sword with human blood." Indeed, Gerald and his men fought with the "backs of their swords" and with "spears reversed" to show that God alone gave them victory. Gerald's very restricted use of war foreshadowed the rules for Christian military conduct (such as protection for civilians) pioneered by Cluny's monks in the 1000s.

"This man of God," Odo insisted, was "an example to the mighty, [and thus] let them see how they may imitate him as one of themselves held up for their example."

—*Dennis Martin*

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 93: St. Benedict & Western Monasticism

Re-Monking the Church

Many Catholics and Protestants are looking back to Benedict for the community and spiritual intensity they can't find in modern culture.

Chris Armstrong

Christians struggling for sanctity in a too-comfortable world should pay attention to this observation by Mark Noll: "For over a millennium, in the centuries between the reign of Constantine and the Protestant Reformation, almost everything in the church that approached the highest, noblest, and truest ideals of the gospel was done either by those who had chosen the monastic way or by those who had been inspired in their Christian life by the monks." Can Western monasticism's "father," Benedict, still give us an antidote to cultural compromise?

At first blush, this might seem unlikely, at least in the Western church. Between 1978 and 2004—nearly the entire span of John Paul II's pontificate—the number of men in monastic and religious orders (not including priests) decreased by 46% in Europe and 30% in the Americas, while the number of women decreased by 39% and 27%, respectively. Compare this to the trend in the global South: During the same period, men in monastic and religious orders increased by 48% in Africa and 39% in Asia, with women increasing on those two continents by 62% and 64%.

A number of the Catholic writers in the 2006 volume *A Monastic Vision for the 21st Century* frankly wonder if "monasticism as we know it" is, in God's providential plan, destined for obsolescence in the West. Yet most suggest that new and powerful forms of the monastic impulse may even now be arising.

This is certainly the impression given by the 21st annual Monastic Institute, held in July 2006 at St. John's Seminary in Collegeville, Minnesota. There, Catholic Benedictines and members of established communities such as L'Arche and the Catholic Worker Movement joined with leaders of new Protestant communities with names like the Simple Way (Pennsylvania), Rutba House (North Carolina), and the Church of the Servant King (Oregon) to mine the riches of Benedict's Rule. This strikingly diverse group—50% Catholic, 50% Protestant—discussed the topic of "new communities" with high hopes that, indeed, God is still in the monastic impulse.

The Lure of Tradition

Many signs buoy this hope. Even in the midst of declining numbers, Benedictine monasticism is still thriving on a wide spectrum from the modernized (seen at places like St. John's) to the traditional. In 2000, American monks reestablished a Benedictine monastic community in Benedict's Italian hometown of Nursia, now called Norcia. American Catholic monasticism has seen new life from an unexpected quarter: young men committing themselves to a very traditional form of Benedictine monasticism at the recently founded Clear Creek Monastery near Tulsa, Oklahoma. Clear Creek's monks celebrate the Latin Mass, cultivate Gregorian chant, and practice not only the gospel demands of poverty, chastity, and obedience, but also the distinctly Benedictine gift of hospitality. Many Americans, struck anew with the yearning for holy community rooted deep in the church's history, have come to visit—and a few to stay.

But what if someone does not desire—or does not sense God's call—to make the lifelong vows of celibacy, poverty, and obedience required of monastics? Do the spiritual resources of the monastic tradition have anything to offer to the person who has made commitments to spouse and family, or is pursuing a secular vocation? History gives a resounding "yes." After all, monasticism was never intended

to encompass a ***different*** set of spiritual values than those followed by all Christians. It offered a means of living the Christian life with more single-minded intensity.

For nearly a millennium, there have been people (one might call them "monastic groupies") who have connected themselves to a monastery in a less formal way, committing to certain spiritual disciplines while remaining in the world. The option of becoming a monastic associate or oblate has enjoyed a recent surge of popularity as both Catholics and Protestants have sought in monastic spirituality something they feel is missing in their own lives.

The Longing for Connectedness

Also more numerous within the Catholic fold—and arguably no less in the spirit of Benedict himself—are members of a cornucopia of mission-driven ***ecclesial communities***, such as the Christian Life Movement, Chemin Neuf (A New Way), and the Emmanuel Community. In June 2006, the same month that the Monastic Institute met in Minnesota, Pope Benedict XVI met with over 100 new ecclesial groups in St. Peter's Square.

Each is committed to following a disciplined pattern of life—some communally and some in the regular spheres of family and work—and to serving the world in its own way. Many include married couples along with priests and individuals who have taken vows of celibacy and poverty. Though the ecclesial communities are not deliberately "monastic," they are meeting needs that in previous centuries could only have been met by joining a monastery.

Many of us yearn to be deeply rooted in Christ in a way that reflects his holiness, and to share this rooted, holy life with a community, but we find this hard to do in the modern West. Our culture pushes us to strive for individual fulfillment, to consume more and more, and to spend much of our lives working to pay for that consumption. The result has been a world of constant mobility, alienation, and loneliness. Quasi-monastic movements like the Catholic ecclesial communities reveal a deep desire for connectedness—a sense that we need to live a regular, disciplined life of devotion to God, and that we can't do it alone.

Protestant "Monks"?

In Protestant circles, this monastic impulse can be seen especially in the phenomenon of ***intentional communities***. Among these, the self-described "new monastics" have taken their cue from philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre. In his influential 1981 book ***After Virtue***, MacIntyre compared the state of the West to the decadence of the late Roman Empire, and called for "another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict." In 1998 Jonathan R. Wilson picked up MacIntyre's ideas and put them into more explicitly Christian form in ***Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World***. He fleshed out a call for a "new monasticism" that would allow the church to truly be the church in this troubling, fragmented age.

In a time when, it seems to Wilson and the new monastics, "many parts of the church are sinking with the culture and doing so without any resistance," Benedict's wisdom has again become a fount of inspiration and guidance. In ***School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*** (which emerged from a 2004 meeting of "new monastic" communities) leaders concluded that at least ***some*** Christians must engage in ***some*** form of separation—not only from the "culture at large," but also from the increasingly compromised church—to model a life of true devotion and obedience to Christ.

But historically, of course, monastics have not stopped at separation—nor do these "new monastics." Benedict founded a monastic way in which hospitality to the stranger and the needy is a prophetic witness to the world. Thus these new quasi-monastic communities have dedicated themselves not only to contemplative disciplines and submission to a communal rule, but also to solidarity with the poor, racial reconciliation, and peacemaking.

One Protestant who attended the St. John meeting, Bethel Seminary graduate Jan Bros, was driven by the difficulty she experienced pursuing true spiritual formation in her old megachurch to start a new monastic community in Minneapolis called Abbey Way, founded on Benedictine principles. When Bros asked a Benedictine sister what she thought of Protestants seeking to start such communities, to her delight the nun replied, "Benedict would approve."

Passing Fad or Promising Future?

Even in the midst of such celebration, members of new communities, both Catholic and Protestant, are aware that the current love affair with monastic forms of worship and life can amount to another unhelpful "fad" as people run after books and retreats. A few candles and a few chanted prayers do not a prophetic community make.

Church of the Servant King's Jon Stock says, "It's awful hard for us Westerners not to approach Benedict as another technique, another consumable, another path to self-actualization." Stock also admits that the new monasticism, focused as it often is on social activism, can lose its connection to the larger church and to worship practices anchored in the church—a concern shared by the Roman Catholic hierarchy. Asbury Seminary's Christine Pohl admits that Benedict's four pillars—"life under a rule, life lived in commitment to a particular people and place, obedience, and ongoing conversion"—present a challenge to modern Western Christians, with our "wariness of vows and commitments, and our individualistic and mobile lifestyles."

Time will tell whether the "new monastic" communities will survive, whether the traditional Benedictine monasteries will continue to thrive, and what new forms of counter-cultural, prayerful, prophetic community will arise to inspire Christians and shake the culture. But for now, the future of Benedict seems as bright as his past.

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A Devoted Life: Recommended Resources

Dig deeper into this issue's theme

Compiled by the authors in this issue and the editors

Monasticism

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- [Issue 42: Francis of Assisi](#)
- [Issue 30: Women in the Medieval Church](#)
- Issue 24: Bernard of Clairvaux (out of print but available with subscription to www.ctlibrary.com)

Internet resources

- The Internet Medieval Sourcebook (www.fordham.edu/halsall/sbook.html), edited by Paul Halsall, is an excellent compilation of medieval texts.
- The Order of St. Benedict website (www.osb.org) includes translations of Benedict's Rule, Gregory's Life of Benedict, and information about various aspects of monasticism. It also has a geographic directory of Benedictine monasteries and retreat houses. The best way to learn about the Benedictine tradition is to visit one of these places and experience it first hand.

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 93: St. Benedict & Western Monasticism

The Original Do, Re, Mi

Julie Andrews made it popular, but the real musical genius behind this singing aid was a medieval monk.

David Neff

When the irrepressible nun-turned-nanny Maria taught the Von Trapp children to sing, she began with "Doe, a deer, a female deer, Ray, a drop of golden sun." Or so Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein portrayed it in their 1959 musical, *The Sound of Music*.

Do, re, mi is just one of several ways of naming notes (generically called *sol-feg* or *solfeggio*) to help singers learn a song rapidly, or even sing it at first sight. This system had its origins in a medieval monastery, where an Italian monk (rather than an Austrian nun) was teaching boys to sing. The monk's name was Guido d'Arezzo (born between 990 and 999), and he is one of the musical geniuses of the Middle Ages.

Guido was educated at the Benedictine monastery at Pomposa near Ferrara, and like church choir directors everywhere, he had to turn musically illiterate people into singers who could lead worship. At Pomposa, he gained a reputation for teaching chants to the singers in record time. He and his friend, Brother Michael, compiled a book of musical responses (or *antiphons*) for monastic worship using a new system of notation.



Guido's innovations included a system of naming the notes, based on an easy to remember melody. Guido set an existing hymn addressed to John the Baptist to a new tune. That melody was arranged like Richard Rodgers's "Doe, a deer, a female deer." The first note was the lowest note of the scale, and each subsequent phrase began one note higher than the previous phrase. Then Guido used the first syllable of each phrase to name that note of the scale. The hymn's first phrase was *Ut queant laxis*. So Guido named the first note *ut*. The second phrase was *resonare fibris*. So he named the second note *re*. The hymn had six phrases, and so his charges learned to sing, "*Ut, re, mi, fa, sol, la.*"

The chants of Guido's time usually stayed within that six-note range, but a few went further, and so he allowed for a note below (which he designated by the Greek letter gamma). And thus the range of notes became known by their first two syllables, *gamma* + *ut*, or *gamut*. That explains why today, when you "run the gamut," you move through the entire range of something.

While at Pomposa, Guido also devised a system of lines on which to write the notes. Before Guido, musicians wrote notes between the lines of text indicating by their position whether a melody went up or down on a given syllable. But how far up? How far down? That was difficult to tell. So Guido wrote the notes on lines or in the spaces between them.

Guido's practical creativity earned him admiration from other monastic houses in Italy, but jealousy and envy in his own monastery. Perhaps because of the bad feelings of his fellow monks, Guido left Pomposa and moved to Arezzo, where he wrote a book to help train the singers at the cathedral there. His innovative ideas caught the attention of the pope, who summoned him to Rome to teach the pope's clergy his methods. Guido's reputation and innovations have endured, providing the foundation for almost all music since then.

But how did **ut, re, mi** become **do, re, mi**? Once the syllables became completely independent of their original hymn, some unknown Italian of the 17th century thought do sounded better than **ut**. And he was right.

David Neff is the executive editor of Christian History & Biography and editor of Christianity Today. As music director at his church, he understands Guido's challenge to teach music quickly.

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"You have not labored in vain"

After a crushing political defeat, William Wilberforce nearly gave up his fight to abolish the slave trade. But a life-changing letter from John Newton sent this Daniel back into the lion's den.

Kevin Belmonte

On the evening of March 15, 1796, the streets adjacent to the Opera House of London thronged with carriages carrying the wealthy and powerful. Excited conversation buzzed beneath wrought-iron streetlamps. It was the premiere of the opera season. Vignoni, the noted Italian singer, was the lead in a new comic opera, *I Dui Gobi*—his first London performance since France had declared war on Britain in 1793. There was every reason to think that the night would be a triumph—and it was. *True Briton* reported that the premiere had been attended by "a large and splendid audience."

But March 15 also marked a triumph of a more insidious kind—a triumph that nearly ended the parliamentary career of the man who has been called "the greatest reformer in history": William Wilberforce.

On the very night of the *I Dui Gobi* premiere, a crucial vote took place in the House of Commons on Wilberforce's bill to abolish the British slave trade. The debate would decide the fate of this bill—whether countless sons and daughters of Africa would continue to be enslaved, or whether the British traffic in human flesh would end. For several weeks leading up to the March 15 debate, there were promising signs for a successful conclusion to what had been Wilberforce's consuming passion for nine years.

His opponents, however, hit upon a subtle tactic to shipwreck the bill. Capitalizing on the popularity of the opera premiere, they made sure free tickets were provided for Wilberforce's more lukewarm supporters. The sabotage attempt worked. In a terse diary entry, Wilberforce described his devastating defeat: "My Slave Bill was thrown out by 74 to 70. ... Ten or twelve of those who had supported me [were] absent in the country, or [away] on pleasure. Enough [were] at the Opera to have carried it."

Wilberforce's hopes were crushed. He contracted a severe fever, followed by excruciating intestinal troubles. Gravely ill, exhausted, and emotionally spent, he suffered what appears to have been his second nervous breakdown. His catastrophic defeat and debilitating illness prompted thoughts of retirement from public life. Seeking counsel, on July 21 he wrote a letter to his old friend and spiritual mentor John Newton—the former-slave-trader-turned-clergyman known today as the author of the hymn "Amazing Grace."

Newton's reply was eloquent and imbued with great wisdom. If God had not yet allowed Wilberforce to be dismissed from Parliament, he should take that as a "token for good." "Some of [God's] people may be emphatically said not to live to themselves. May it not be said of you? ... You meet with many things which weary and disgust you ... but then they are inseparably connected with your path of duty; and though you cannot do all the good you wish for, some good is done."

Just as Esther had been put in the palace of King Xerxes "for such a time as this," Newton wrote, "one may not be able to calculate all of the advantages that may result from your service in public life. The example, and even the presence of a consistent character, may have a powerful, though unobserved, effect upon others. You are in a place where many know Him not, and can show them the genuine fruits of the religion you are known to profess."

Newton wisely reminded Wilberforce that he had already accomplished a great deal: "Though you have not, as yet, fully succeeded in your persevering endeavours to abolish the slave trade, since you took it in hand the condition of the slaves in our islands has undoubtedly been already improved." These improvements were "proofs that you have not laboured in vain."

Newton next pointed to another biblical character who had served long, faithfully, and well under trying circumstances. Like Daniel, Wilberforce knew the loneliness of being a trailblazer. "It is true," Newton conceded, "that you live in the midst of difficulties and snares, and you need a double guard of watchfulness and prayer. But since you know both your need of help, and where to look for it, I may say to you as Darius to Daniel, 'Thy God whom thou servest continually is able to preserve and deliver you.' Daniel, likewise, was a public man, and in critical circumstances; but he trusted in the Lord; was faithful in his department, and therefore though he had enemies, they could not prevail against him.

"Indeed," Newton continued, "the great point for our comfort in life is to have a well-grounded persuasion that we are where, all things considered, we ought to be. Then it is no great matter whether we are in public or in private life, in a city or a village, in a palace or a cottage. The promise, 'My grace is sufficient for thee,' is necessary to support us in the smoothest scenes, and is equally able to support us in the most difficult.

"Happy the man who has a deep impression of our Lord's words, 'Without Me you can do nothing'—who feels with the Apostle ... likewise a heartfelt dependence upon the Saviour.

"He is always near. He knows our wants, our dangers, our feelings, and our fears. By looking to him we are made strong out of weakness. With his wisdom for our guide, his power for our protection and his fullness for our supply, we shall be able to 'withstand in the evil day, and having done all to stand.'

"May the Lord bless you. May he be your sun and shield, and fill you with all joy and peace in believing."

Newton's words gave Wilberforce the solace and strength he so desperately needed. He would remain in politics. He would remain in the battle to end the slave trade.

Neither man knew that 11 long years would pass before the goal was finally reached. The slave trade was legally abolished in the spring of 1807. Newton died the same year, but not before hearing the news from his friend Wilberforce, the defeated crusader who had found strength beyond himself to keep fighting.

Kevin Belmonte is the author of the award-winning biography William Wilberforce: A Hero for Humanity (now available from Zondervan). For the past five years, he has served as the lead historical consultant for the major motion picture Amazing Grace: The William Wilberforce Story.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 93: St. Benedict & Western Monasticism

Faith of Our Mothers

The history of the church would have looked very different without these famous moms.

Elesha Coffman

Church history might seem to suffer from "dead white male syndrome," but mothers have been central figures in the Christian tradition ever since Mary told Gabriel, "May it be to me as you have said." Some of the most notable Christian mothers have been celebrated for praying fervently for their children, modeling faith, and training their children up in the way they should go.

Prayers and tears

Probably the best known Christian mother from antiquity is **Monica** (331-387), a monumental figure in her son Augustine's autobiography, *Confessions*. Mother of three children, wife of a difficult man, she longed to secure every good thing for Augustine. Early in his life, this meant sending him to the best schools, advancing his career, and protecting him from a socially disadvantageous marriage. Later, she devoted herself to a different goal: drawing her son into the kingdom of God by whatever means necessary.

Monica had much to worry about regarding her son's spiritual health. He stole pears from a neighbor's tree, delighting in the evil of the act. He pursued his lusts heartily. He valued erudition over holiness. He fell under the sway of Manichaeism, a dualistic philosophy opposed to Christianity. More than once he ran off, largely to escape his mother's pious pressures.

When Augustine would not listen to her, Monica could only pray and weep for her wayward boy. In *Confessions*, Augustine recalled a mother who "wept to [God] for me, shedding more tears for my spiritual death than other mothers shed for the bodily death of a son." Eventually Monica brought her concerns to a Christian bishop, Ambrose, who assured her, "It cannot be that the son of these tears should be lost."



After years of supplication, Monica's prayers were answered. Augustine embraced Christianity and came to appreciate fully his mother's spiritual labors on his behalf. She lived to see him become a priest and died in peace, having told him, "There was one reason, and one alone, why I wished to remain a little longer in this life, and that was to see you a Catholic Christian before I died. God has granted my wish and more besides."

Monica's example inspired many Christian mothers in the Middle Ages. **Bridget of Sweden** (1303-1373), married at age 13 to a pious nobleman, bore eight children before she was widowed. One of those children, a son named Bengt, fell ill in his youth. Fearing that her sins had caused her son's condition, she cried out to God. She received reassurance that the illness had natural causes, and she was confident upon Bengt's death that he had gone to heaven. His brother Karl, however, posed a bigger challenge.

Karl, the black sheep of the family, caused his mother no end of anxiety. As she wept and prayed for him, she had a vision of her son standing before Christ, with Mary and an angel representing his defense and the Devil representing the prosecution. The Devil tried to damn Karl with a sack full of his sins, but the sack disappeared, then the Devil forgot what the sins were, and finally he forgot the sinner's name. The angel, vaguely echoing Ambrose, explained that Karl, who was known in heaven as "the son of

tears," was already forgiven.

Models of faith

Perpetua (182-203), a well-born young wife in Carthage, had recently given birth to her first child when she was swept up in a severe persecution of Christians. Her father pleaded with her to renounce her faith, for the sake of her own life and that of her child, but she refused. Eventually Perpetua was brought into the arena to be mauled to death by wild beasts. According to the famous account of her martyrdom, just before her death she admonished the believers in the crowd, "Stand fast in the faith." It is not known what became of her child or the rest of her family, but her legend inspired countless other suffering Christians.

Macrina the Elder (died c. 340) also held onto faith in a time of persecution. Responding to the preaching of Gregory the Wonder-Worker, she and her husband were two early converts to Christianity in Asia Minor (modern Turkey). During the last great campaign against Christians in the Roman Empire, Macrina and her husband fled from their hometown. According to tradition, the couple lived for seven years in a forest, nearly starving on several occasions. After they were allowed to return home, the empire confiscated their possessions. Additionally, Macrina was widowed (she is the patron saint of widows).

Nonetheless, Macrina's Christian commitment persisted, and it flourished in subsequent generations. Three of her grandchildren became the most celebrated Christians of their era. Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa greatly advanced Christian theology, and Basil also founded an important monastic order. Macrina the Younger inspired her brothers and led a community of devout Christian women.

Helena (250-330), mother of Emperor Constantine, became a Christian only after her son's conversion, but from that point on she exhibited tremendous zeal. The royal biographer Eusebius recorded glowing accounts of Helena's prayers and pilgrimages to the Holy Land. She was especially concerned to rediscover key sites in early church history, strip them of pagan encrustations, and consecrate them to God's service. By retracing Jesus' steps and dedicating holy markers along the way, Eusebius wrote, "she bequeathed the fruit of her piety to future generations."

Helena displayed other Christian virtues as well. She donated money to the poor, worked to liberate prisoners, and restored exiles. When she worshiped, she dressed plainly, mingling with humbler believers. She also donated money to churches throughout the empire, building or re-building facilities in places where Christianity had been a persecuted sect just a few years earlier.

Early childhood educators

Anthusa (c. 347-407) lived in Antioch, the hub of Paul's missionary journeys, and bore a son, John, just before her husband died. Though Antioch's population was roughly one-half Christian at this time, Anthusa feared society's corrupting influence on John, so she taught him what she knew of classics and Christian faith at home. After his character was formed, she sent him to be trained by an experienced orator, who honed John's innate gifts of communication. John became one of the early church's most renowned preachers. His contemporaries named him Chrysostom, or "golden-mouthed."

Katie Luther (1499-1552), wife of the Protestant Reformer Martin Luther, schooled a large and ever-changing group in her house. She bore six children, raised four orphans, and generally rode herd over the students Martin brought home from the university where he taught. Sometimes as many as 30 people crowded under her roof, seeking to learn all they could from both Martin and his formidable wife. Luther was only half-joking when he referred to her frequently as "my lord Katie."

Susanna Wesley (1669-1742), mother of John and Charles, is sometimes called the "Mother of Methodism" as well. She ran a tightly ordered household by necessity, for her husband subsisted on

a minister's salary and she bore 17 children, 9 of whom died in infancy. On top of all of her household duties, she conducted day school for her youngsters, instructing them in godliness alongside academics. Each child had chores to perform, Scriptures to learn, and character issues to address. Each child also had a personal audience with mother every week, for one-on-one attention and encouragement.

It is not hard to see how the discipline integral to the Methodist system grew from John Wesley's childhood experiences. In contrast to the Church of England, a hierarchy in which religious duties generally fell to clerics and spiritual oversight was sometimes lax, Methodism emphasized small groups in which every member was accountable for Bible study, mutual correction and edification, and Christian service.

Though Susanna lived only long enough to see John's earliest revival meetings, she would have been proud of the religious movement he founded following many of her principles.

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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Praying in the New World

compiled by David Neff and Rebecca Golossanov

Praying in the New World

Within two hours after the Jamestown settlers landed in Virginia, their Anglican minister built a makeshift church by "nailing a piece of timber between two trees," and stretching "a square of sailcloth over it." Thus, on May 13, 1607, they attended their first prayer service in the New World.

Captain John Smith, leader of this group of British entrepreneurs, described services under the "old saile" as "more like the real praising of God, than any he had ever heard in the costly buildings of the old world."

That was 400 years ago. Throughout 2007, the Virginia Commonwealth is celebrating the anniversary of this first permanent English settlement in North America with several special events including a main gala on May 11-13.

Unlike the later Puritan colony at Plymouth, the Jamestown group was driven less by faith than by gold and other material ends. Still, most (if not all) of the settlers were members of the Church of England. In the midst of hunger, conflicts with the Indians, sickness, and internal dissension, the colonists attended daily morning and evening prayer, heard two sermons on Sundays, and received Communion every three months.

Some Jamestown settlers tried to convert the Indians to Christianity. From the beginning King James I had admonished them to proclaim the "Christian religion to such people as yet live in darkness and miserable ignorance of the true knowledge and worship of God ..." They were largely unsuccessful, but with a few notable exceptions—including the native princess Pocahontas.

You can visit the Jamestown Settlement, a reconstruction of the fort, ships, and an Indian village—all complete with costumed interpreters. Down the road is the original Jamestown site, where an impressive ongoing archaeological dig is open to visitors. Visit www.Americas400thAnniversary.com for more information.

Hug a tree or save a church?

California's historical treasures include its 21 missions. The state's natural wonders include its famous redwoods. Last year, the city of Monterey weighed the continued existence of the state's oldest continuously functioning church against the well being of four beautiful, but much younger, redwoods.

The Cathedral of San Carlos Borroméo sits on the site where, in 1770, Franciscan missionary Junipero Serra and Governor Gaspar de Portolá established a mission and a presidio, or fort. The next year, Fr. Serra moved the mission five miles away to Carmel. However, the Monterey structure continued to function—first as a military chapel, then as a parish church, and now as a cathedral. When the other California missions were secularized in the 1800s, the church on this site kept functioning. After fire destroyed earlier structures, the present building was completed in December 1794.

The cathedral needs renovation. Moisture has affected its stone foundations (the shade from the redwoods keeps them from drying out). And tree roots have penetrated to the opposite side of the church. Originally, the city of Monterey suggested a compromise: take out only two of the trees and find a way to cap the roots of the others.

But, according to Cathy Leiker of the Royal Presidio Chapel's conservation office, an archaeologist found additional treasures beneath the trees: the floor of the soldiers' barracks, portions of the old presidio's walls, and the floor of an early baptistery. Because there was no way to keep the trees and preserve both the church and the buried archeological treasures, the city agreed that the trees had to go.

Recycling the classics

Scientists are using a high-energy x-ray beam to read a tenth-century greek text that was scraped and reused by a later scribe.

Would you pay \$2 million for a book made of recycled paper? You might if the "recycling" was the work of a 13th-century priest, and underneath the later writing was the earliest known copy of lost works by the ancient Greek mathematician Archimedes.

Medieval scribes who copied manuscripts couldn't just go to the stationers for their materials. They often had to reuse parchment or vellum made from animal skins. Fortunately, those materials were sturdy enough that they could be scraped and bleached and still be used again. Such a reused manuscript is called a palimpsest (from Greek words meaning "scraped again").

The scarcity and expense of writing materials always made it tempting to reuse parchment and vellum. So the ecumenical synod of 691 (the Council in Trullo) banned the cutting up or "corruption" of manuscripts of the Scriptures or the church fathers—unless they were already hopelessly worm-eaten.

A few months ago, the *Los Angeles Times* reported on a reused piece of sheepskin parchment. A Stanford University physicist had adapted his technique for studying iron molecules in spinach leaves to reveal traces of iron-based ink used in the nearly erased original writing. Under an even later bit of forged painting on the manuscript, he found the signature of the scribe who had turned the ancient mathematical treatises into a prayer book. On the edge of the first page, it said "By the hand of presbyter Ioannes Myronas." It was dated April 14, 1229.

The 348-page, \$2 million manuscript was first written in Constantinople and rewritten in Palestine. It now resides in Baltimore at the Walter Art Museum.

Beautiful books

It's a legendary scene: a medieval monk crouches over his parchment as he meticulously copies and illustrates sacred texts. A new exhibition at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles traces the production of illuminated manuscripts in France, where they have historically been a significant art form.

During the early Middle Ages, monks used their manuscripts for public worship, private devotions, and scholarly pursuits. Monasteries were centers of prayer and learning. By the 13th century, the demand for books increased and professional artists took up the task of manuscript production. Soon the most popular book became the Book of Hours, a devotional prayer book for laypeople.

The exhibition, "French Manuscript Illumination of the Middle Ages," includes 25 manuscripts from the Getty's collection and highlights achievements from the 800s to the 1500s. The exhibit opened January 23 and continues through April 15, 2007.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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Grace is in the Details

An 18th-century book gave Richard Foster new eyes for the present moment. The ordinary had never looked so extraordinary.

Richard J. Foster

Jean-Pierre de Caussade (1675-1751) was an ordained member of the Society of Jesus in Toulouse, France. He traveled widely as a preacher and in 1731 became the spiritual director of a Jesuit retreat house. Many of his letters to the nuns under his care were collected into the devotional classic Self-Abandonment to Divine Providence (translated by Kitty Muggeridge as The Sacrament of the Present Moment).

There is a tendency today to think of the great Devotional Masters almost as people from another planet, certainly as folk unconcerned with life in our hectic workaday world. And yet so often I have discovered just the opposite: these were people who sought to redeem and "hallow" the common ventures of life. Jean-Pierre de Caussade was one such person and his book, *The Sacrament of the Present Moment*, has changed forever the way I look at "ordinary" life.

My first encounter with *The Sacrament of the Present Moment* occurred aboard one of modern technology's finest inventions for solitude—the airplane. The journey was long, but the inward journey I entered into that day was far greater. Caussade was urging me to experience each moment—this very moment—as a holy sacrament, a visible sign of invisible grace. I felt a gracious invitation to cease my frantic striving for holiness and rest in the Light of Christ. That airplane trip became a hallowed time, a holy day, a sacramental moment.

This wonderful experience was followed by many more. Because of my readings in Caussade, these persistent questions had begun to intrude upon the ordinary events of my day. "In what sense can this experience be a divine sacrament?" "How is Christ mediated to me through this task?" "How can the fulfillment of this present duty be a participation in the life and death of Christ?"

Please understand, I am not referring to "religious" tasks, such as prayer or Holy Communion. I could quite readily understand and experience their sacramental character. Rather, I was examining much more ordinary activities, the "stuff" that made up the bulk of my days—teaching students, answering correspondence, playing with my boys, repairing broken window panes, paying bills, washing dishes. How could these events take on sacramental significance?

Caussade understood that our obedience to "the duty to the present moment" is the path to holiness. "No moment is trivial," observes Caussade, "since each one contains a divine Kingdom, and heavenly sustenance."

Caussade beckons us to a way of living that eschews all sacred/secular dichotomies. For him nothing is secular since God's activity permeates all things, even the most trivial. He urges us never to look "for the holiness of things but only the holiness within things." Even time itself is a sacrament for "time is but the history of divine action!"

Slowly, and without my conscious effort, a greater sense of wonder and spiritual wholeness began to make its way into my daily activities. Quiet worship and adoration began to flow out of (rather than in spite of) common tasks. Inward strength and spiritual graces began to slip into my heart as mysteriously

as the life of God steals into us through the Eucharist.

This duty to the present moment as the place where I find God is not always a welcome word to me. Often I want to bypass this moment, this duty, in favor of some future moment—one that is more challenging, more stimulating, more rewarding. That, I assume, is the place where God will bless me, not here, not in this task. The simple truth, of course, is that the only place God can bless me is where I am, because that is the only place I am.

Caussade invited me to discover that right where we are is holy ground, in the families we have been given, in the tasks we are assigned, among our neighbors and friends. It is this that makes living in our modern world bearable, even enjoyable. Indeed, it enables us, as George Fox put it, to "walk cheerfully over the earth."

Richard J. Foster is the author of Celebration of Discipline and the founder of Renovaré, an organization dedicated to spiritual formation and church renewal. This article is adapted from his essay, "The Devotional Masters: A Love Affair," in More Than Words, compiled by Philip Yancey and edited by James Calvin Schaap (Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2002).

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