

Spheres of Medieval Life

Monks, Nuns and Priests

In 731 AD the English monk and priest St Bede (Beda Venerabilis) wrote “At the age of seven I was, by the care of my relations, given to the [...] Abbot Benedict [of the monastery of St Paul and Peter, Northumberland, England] to be educated. From that time I have spent the whole of my life within that monastery, devoting all my energy to the study of the Bible, and apart from the monastic discipline and the daily duty of singing in the church, it has always been my delight to learn or read or write.”

A long time later an Austrian monk complained: “I disliked the life in the world and, therefore, I gave it up. But the life I am leading now, does not comfort me either; in many respects I hate it. Temptations exhaust me again and again, and sorrow and grief shake me.” [quoted in R. Schneider, *Alltag im Mittelalter*, 2006, p.131] These statements could tell the reader something about the reasons and circumstances for becoming a monk, about the life in a monastery and the feelings of being a monk.

The idea of a monastic life originated in Egypt*. In the 6th century Benedict of Nursia (Italy) followed older examples and established a community of men living and working together in prayer and isolation. These monks obeyed the so-called Benedict’s Rule (529 AD) which spread from the monks’ community of Monte Cassino* to other parts of Europe.

The Rule of St Benedict laid down how monks were expected to live:

- Quickly [the brothers] must follow commands as they have agreed that the abbot should rule them;
- Eight times a day let us praise the Creator.
- No one is allowed to give or receive anything without the abbot’s permission, or to have anything of his own.
- The brothers must serve each other, so that no one can get out of work in the kitchen.
- Monks shall be silent at all times [except for important conversation], especially at night.
- Laziness is the enemy of the soul, therefore the brothers should be occupied at certain times in manual labour and at fixed times in sacred reading.
- [And] love chastity [i.e. no sexual activities at all]. [extract]

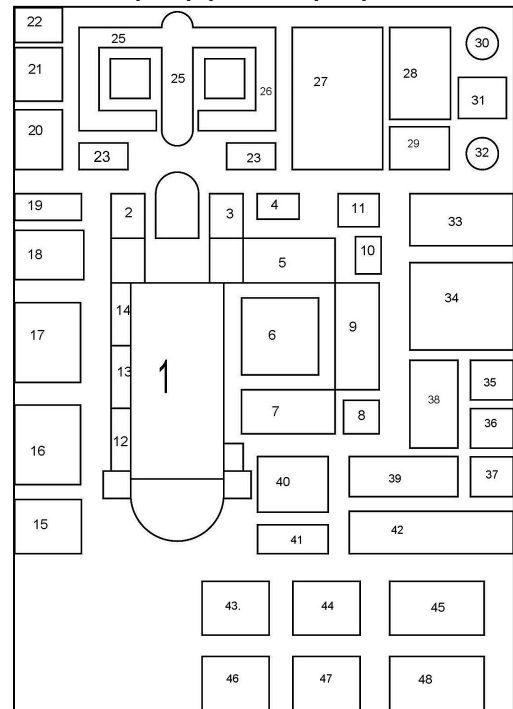
If any brother broke the rule, he was warned and, in extreme cases, he had to leave the community. A newcomer (novice) to a monastery had, after a time of probation, to make solemn vows of obedience to the rule and, if he did, was expected to remain for the rest of his life in the monastery.

In summer the monk’s timetable for prayers looked like this: 2.30; 4.30; 6.00 then m. l. - 9.00 then m. l. – 12.00 – lunch and rest – 13.30 then m. l. – 18.30 – evening meal – 19.30, then time to sleep. (manual labour)

The ground plan of the Benedictine monastery of St Gall (St Gallen), Switzerland, gives an idea to what extent the monks tried to fulfil Benedict’s demand that everything necessary should be within the walls of a monastery and in which fields the monks were busy.

Ground plan of St Gall (St. Gallen) Switzerland (9th c) (reduced plan)

1 Church; 2 scriptorium* & library; 3 sacristy; 4 house for holy bread; 5 warming room, above dormitory*; 6 cloister of the monks; 7 store-room 8 kitchen; 9 refectory*; 10 bathroom; 11 latrines, 12 porter; 13 schoolmaster; 14 visiting monks; 15 15 brewery, bakery for guests; 16 guesthouse, 17 school; 18 abbot's house; 19 servants; 20 bloodletting; 21 physician; 22 herb garden, 23 bathroom, kitchen; 24 hospital; 25 chapel; 26 novices' school; 27 cemetery and orchard; 28 vegetable garden; 29 gardener's quarter; 30 geese; 31 fowl* keeper; 32 hens; 33 barn; 34 craftsmen; 35 mill; 36 mortar*; 37 drying house; 38 bakery and brewery; 39 cooper*, granary; 40 pilgrims; 41 brewery, bakery; 42 servants; horses, oxen; 43 sheep; 44 goats; 45 cows; 46 servants; 47 swine; 48 horses:



In the course of time many monasteries became quite wealthy as a lot of people tried to please God by giving their property to them. The monastery of Prüm (Eifel) for example had estates

and was entitled to duties and services by peasants in an area between Arnheim and Münster in the North, and Metz and Heidelberg in the South. Around 900 AD it owned about 20,000 hectares of land, 261 vineyards and 37 mills. [1 hectare = 100x100 m]

New monk orders such as the Cistercians (*Zisterzienser*) then tried to follow more strictly their vow of poverty.

In addition to the monastery for monks, also convents for women (nunneries) were established. Girls were often sent to a nunnery by their families, and many older women became nuns because of the death of their husbands. Keeping the vows does not seem to have been easy for monks and nuns. The vow of chastity caused problems, especially, and the vow of poverty was very often disregarded.

Besides monasteries the other main religious presence was the parish* church and its priest.

The first parish churches were built by local lords who usually owned them. In most villages of the early Middle Ages the church was the finest building and made of stone. Pictures were painted on the interior walls to illustrate the Bible, so that the villagers could learn more about the Biblical stories. Not many of these paintings have survived.

Churchgoers had to stand during the service although originally sermons were not too long. But in the late Middle Ages, however, things began to change and sermons of two to four hours were not uncommon. As a consequence pews (wooden benches) and a pulpit (for the priest) were introduced.

The priest, a commoner by birth, was in most cases appointed by the Lord of the Manor who could also replace him if a he disliked him for any reason.

It was among the main duties of a priest to perform the three main most important ceremonies in a villager's life: baptism, marriage, and burial. Apart from that he had to look after the church building, to comfort those in need, and visit the sick.

He also helped to organize social events in the parish, for example puppet shows, fairs and dances.

To support himself the priest was given a small piece of land. The peasants had to give one tenth (*tithe*) of what they produced to the church. Although the priest usually received very little from that, as most was claimed by the bishop. Thus the priests in the Middle Ages often had a hard time to make both ends meet.

We do not know how far the following complaint of villagers to a bishop was justified, but perhaps it can partly be explained by the problems a medieval priest had to face.

5 “They say the priest puts his horses and sheep to graze in the churchyard. They say the priest was away for six weeks and made no arrangements for a substitute. He spends his time in taverns, and there his tongue is loosed to the great scandal of everyone. They even say he is living with a woman, Margaret, and spends more time with her than looking after his parishioners’ souls.” (From the records of the Bishop of Hereford, 1397. Evidence from villagers’ statements about their parish priest.)

Jürgen Plüer