

## Monks of the Middle Ages — Overview

*Much of the following introduction is based on excerpts from Thomas Woods' book 'How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilization.*

The contribution of Catholic monks to Western civilization is immense. Yet this seems counter-intuitive. The common perception of a monk is of a man who has given up worldly ambitions and dedicated his life to seclusion and prayer. How then could a group of isolated and unworldly men have made a dramatic impact on the very civilization they have withdrawn from? As Thomas Wood says in his introduction to 'How the Monks saved Civilization': "This historical fact comes as less of a surprise when we recall Christ's words: 'Seek ye first the kingdom of heaven, and all these things shall be added unto you.' That, stated simply, is the history of the monks."

Early forms of monastic life began in the third century, but it was not until the mid-500s, when St. Benedict established a rule for Monks living in common, that Monasticism became a great civilizing force throughout Europe.

"The moderation of Saint Benedict's Rule, as well as the structure and order it provided, facilitated its spread throughout Europe. . . . Each Benedictine house was independent of every other, and each had an abbot to oversee its affairs and good order. Monks had previously been free to wander from one place to another, but Saint Benedict envisioned a monastic lifestyle in which each remained attached to his own monastery. . . .

"Mere statistics can hardly do justice to the Benedictine achievement, but by the beginning of the fourteenth century, the order had supplied the Church with 24 popes, 200 cardinals, 7,000 archbishops, 15,000 bishops, and 1,500 canonized saints. At its height, the Benedictine order could boast 37,000 monasteries. And it is not merely their influence within the Church to which the statistics point; so exalted had the monastic ideal become throughout society that by the fourteenth century the order had already enrolled some twenty emperors, ten empresses, forty-seven kings, and fifty queens. Thus a great many of Europe's most powerful would come to pursue the humble life and spiritual regimen of the Benedictine order. . . .



But the cultural contributions of monks to Western Civilization, were just as important as their direct influence on the government of the Church and their moral influence on the Christian kingdoms of which they were a part. In almost every area, from agriculture and technology, to music, art, history and literature, the monks made enormous contributions. St. Benedict's motto was 'Ora et Labora', that is "Pray and Work". But instead of working to glorify themselves, most monks worked for the glory of God and the fruit of their labor was poured out for the benefit of others.

A few of the contributions of Monks to Christian civilization that are developed in Thomas Wood's article are listed here:



### Practical Arts

- Innovations in agriculture: introduced new crops and farming methods, improved irrigation.
- Innovations in animal husbandry and selective breeding of animals.
- Drained swamps, cleared forests, cultivated the wilderness, and planted orchards.
- Planted vineyards, improved production of wine, beer, and cheese. Invented Champagne.
- Restored respect and honor to manual labor, raised status and dignity of servants.

### Technical Skills

- Pioneered the use of water power for irrigations, milling grain, and tanning cloth.
- Diffused new techniques in metallurgy and iron production.
- Developed simple machines, including clocks and farming equipment.
- Experimented with manned flight as early as the 11th century.
- Made advancements in clock making and other small machinery.



"Monks were the "the skillful and unpaid technical advisers of [medieval Europe] . . . whether it be the mining of salt, lead, iron, alum, or gypsum, or metallurgy, quarrying marble, running cutler's shops and glassworks, or forging metal plates, there was no activity at all in which the monks did not display creativity and a fertile spirit of research. Utilizing their labor force, they instructed and trained it to perfection. Monastic know-how [would] spread throughout Europe."

### Charitable Works

- Monasteries served as Inns, schools, libraries, and hospitals.
- They offered alms to the poor and free food and lodging to all visitors. (Woods refers to entire chapter on Christian charity)
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### Literary Works

- Copied ancient Latin classics, both Christian and pagan, maintained the largest libraries of the Middle Ages.
- Monks Scholars and teachers of the ancient classics as well as copyists. Aristotle, Cicero, Lucian, Pliny, Virgil, Horace, Seneca and many more were preserved.
- Many Monasteries specialized in particular branches of knowledge (Medicine, law, history, Greek, Philosophy, painting, etc.) Monk scholars laid the foundation of the University system.
- Educated young monks and nobles, preserved literacy. Monastery schools established throughout realm of Charlemagne.
- Developed "illumination" of manuscripts into a great art form. Book of Kells, Lindisfarne Gospels, etc., are masterpieces of medieval art.
- Many important historians, theologians, and scientists of the Middle Ages were monks.



"They not only established the schools, and were the schoolmasters in them, but also laid the foundations for the universities. They were the thinkers and philosophers of the day and shaped the political and religious thought. To them, both collectively and individually, was due the continuity of thought and civilization of the ancient world with the later Middle Ages and with the modern period."

## Prominent and Sainted Monks of the Middle Ages

A great many of the achievements of the Monks of Europe were done anonymously. We don't know the names of most of the monks who cleared the fields, designed ingenious machines, founded hospitals, or spent their lives copying texts. But we do know a number of prominent names, and we know the accomplishments of some of the major periods of monastic influence within Church history.

### **200s to 600s: Desert Fathers and Eastern Monasticism**

During the terrible persecutions of the 3rd century, a group of early monks in Egypt and Roman Africa sought to escape the Empire and live as hermits in the desert. They gained fame among Christians for their piety and penances, and many sought to imitate them. By the fourth century, however, St. Basil the Great and the Cappadocian Fathers recommended that Monks live in community (cenobitic), rather than as hermits (eremitic), and established a rule for groups of monks that was popular in the east for several hundred years. St. John Cassian lived as a monk in the east, and studied the most successful monasteries there before traveling to Gaul, and spreading the ideas of Christian monasticism to the West. It was the writings and example of John Cassian that most influence St. Benedict, a few generations hence.

### **600s to 1000s: Benedictine Order**

St. Benedict is credited as the founder of Western Monasticism. He lived in Italy in the early sixth century, while the political situation was highly unstable, and in some regions the Church was the only functioning government. The rule of Benedict was very short--a modern translation would be only the size of a pamphlet. But it covered almost all important aspects of monastic life including the duties of the monks and Abbots, and guidelines for conflict resolution, spiritual discipline, and common prayer. "Unlike the Irish monasteries, which were known for their extremes of self-denial, Benedictine monasteries took for granted that the monk was to receive adequate food and sleep, even if during penitential seasons his regimen might grow more austere. The Benedictines typically lived at a material level comparable to that of a contemporary Italian peasant." This balanced approach attracted thousands of men from all stations of society, and Benedictine monasteries were founded all over Europe.

### **1000s to 1400s: Reformed Monasteries: Clunias, Carthusians, Cistercians**

By the late 900s there were many problems with some of the Benedictine monasteries. Some had become so rich that some of them had become corrupt. Others had been destroyed and scattered by Viking raids. Still others had become lax and undisciplined, and in some cases towns had built up around the monasteries so the Abbeys were no longer secluded. For all of these reason, men who sought out monastic life out of a sincere religious vocation were unhappy with their options and sought to found monasteries with stricter rules, and less corruption. Between 950 and 1100 three reformed orders of monks were founded, each kept most of the Benedictine rules in place, but took a different approach to monastic government. By the 1300s, most European monasteries were under the rule of the Cluniacs, Carthusians, or Cistercians. Eventually even these reformed orders became wealthy and the Mendicant orders of the 1300s were founded. However, from about 1000 to 1400, these reformed orders did great works and most medieval Monasteries still standing in Europe were established under these great orders.