Why All the Monk Business?

Monasteries played an essential role in the development of the Western church. This is surprising to us for a number of reasons. One of these reasons is the popularity of an overwhelmingly negative portrait that does not do justice to the monastic world. One aspect of that portrait reduces the role of the monastery to that of the “librarians of the West during the Dark Ages,” just holding and dutifully copying works until the bright guys of the Renaissance show up to actually read and understand them. The other view portrays monasteries as some kind of asylum for anti-social misfits, for those who couldn’t cut it in the real world, or, worse, the deviant. Finally, in our society anyone who would take vows of poverty, obedience, and chastity just has to be plain silly, right? Not quite. As Christians, we can find much to be thankful for coming out of the monastic world.

Monasteries were the spiritual laboratories of their day. The goal was to create stable, spiritual communities that through the application of spiritual disciplines might bring about righteousness for the individual and the larger community. The monastery was the designated place of worship; regular hours were set up so that worship might continue all day long and musical forms were developed that remain in place today. Monasteries were distribution centers for mercy ministries: food and lodging were often available. Almost all spiritual revivals between the years 500-1200 were based in monasteries. Finally, the monks did provide an important intellectual service to their society by copying, preserving, and cataloging written sources. Put another way, the monastery was the space of theology in the early middle ages.

Of course, like all periods and movements in Church history, the monastic movement reveals the tensions resulting from Christians struggling with their own sinful nature of individuals and the evils of their society.
From the Pillar to the Priory:

There is a long tradition of groups withdrawing from their society for religious or philosophical reasons. This tradition predates the Christian era. There were early retreats from society by Christians: Egyptian Christians, the Syrian Fathers (Pillar saints), and strong traditions in the Eastern Church are all part of this heritage, but Pachomius is considered to be the father of the first significant communal monastic movement that would affect the western traditions. Around 320, Pachomius set up a walled center providing for over 1,000 individuals near Thebes (in the upper Nile area of Egypt). They had a common meal and prayer time, a guesthouse, and provided education to the illiterate. Pachomius also wrote a code of behavior for anyone who was part of his community. Such a code is called a rule.

During the late Roman Empire and throughout the Middle Ages, spiritual renewal was often associated with certain forms of Christian communal life or organization. If we associate these forms with historical periods, we might come up with the following pattern of dominant practices:

- Loosely formed communities & Hermits (? – 300) (isolated groups)
- Monks (300-1200) (monasteries)
- Friars (1200-1500) (cities, towns)

A “Who’s Who” list of influential Early Church fathers finds a number who were at one time or another associated with the monastic lifestyle: Anthony, Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine…

Benedict of Nursia (480-547):
I, Abbot, or “it was the priest in the refectory with the poison”

The most important figure for medieval monastic life was a modest man named Benedict, living in the first half of the 6th century in central Italy. All we know about Benedict’s life comes to us from the writing of Gregory the Great (an early Pope) about 60 years after his death. According to Gregory, Benedict went to study in Rome (c.500), left disgusted with the moral conditions, became a hermit. Others began to join him (families sent their sons to him) and his renown grew. A few years later he is asked to become abbot at a nearby monastery, and he reluctantly accepts. His attempts to establish a more strict discipline meet with resistance, and they attempt to serve him poisoned wine. As his numbers grew, adversaries also arose and on one occasion an envious priest a poisoned loaf of bread. Seeing the futility of trying to reform this group, in 529 he moved to Monte Cassino where he founded a monastery. In this context he develops his Rule, which was to become the essential reference for almost all-monastic life.

“He wrote a Rule for monks, a work outstanding in good judgement and clearly expressed”
–Pope Gregory the Great, c. 600
The Rule of St. Benedict

As is the case for all medieval monastic rules, the Rule of Benedict seeks to create a way of communal life that would promote righteousness. The Rule lays out its goals, its principles, practices and punitive measures required when it is not followed. It is also important to note that his Rule promotes a self-sufficient community. Monastic life is to be composed of three major types of work: the “work of God” (opus dei, liturgical worship), “divine reading” (lectio divina, contemplation/meditation), and manual work. The Rule is all about obedience, and this obedience is to be from the heart, thus, humility is a major focus. His Rule relied on preexisting rules and commentaries, but he gave a clear organization and a flexibility that made monastic life attainable. “The monk’s life became comparable to that of the contemporary peasant” (Lane).

Let us encompass ourselves with faith and the practice of good works, and guided by the Gospel, tread the path He has cleared for us. Thus may we deserve to see Him, who has called us into His Kingdom. (prologue, transl. Miesel)

... We are about to found therefore a school for the Lord's service; in the organization of which we trust that we shall ordain nothing severe and nothing burdensome. But even if, the demands of justice dictating it, something a little irksome shall be the result, for the purpose of amending vices or preserving charity; - you shall not therefore, struck by fear, flee the way of salvation, which can not be entered upon except through a narrow entrance. But as one’s way of life and one’s faith progresses, the heart becomes broadened, and, with the unutterable sweetness of love, the way of the mandates of the Lord is traversed. Thus, never departing from His guidance, continuing in the monastery in his teaching until death, through patience we are made partakers in Christ's passion, in order that we may merit to be companions in His kingdom.

Worship? As the prophet [Psalmist] says: "Seven times in the day so I praise You.” Which sacred number of seven will thus be fulfilled by us if, at matins, at the first, third, sixth, ninth hours, at vespers time and at "completorium" we perform the duties of our service... For, concerning nocturnal vigils, the same prophet says: "At midnight I arose to confess unto thee." Therefore, at these times, let us give thanks to our Creator concerning the judgments of his righteousness....

Possessions? More than anything else is this special vice to be cut off root and branch from the monastery, that one should presume to give or receive anything without the order of the abbot, or should have anything of his own. He should have absolutely not anything: neither a book, nor tablets, nor a pen-nothing at all.-For indeed it is not allowed to the monks to have their own bodies or wills in their own power. But all things necessary they must expect from the Father of the monastery... All things shall be common to all, as it is written: "Let not any man presume or call anything his own.” But if any one shall have been discovered delighting in this most evil vice: being warned once and again, if he do not amend, let him be subjected to punishment.
Work? Idleness is the enemy of the soul. And therefore, at fixed times, the brothers ought to be occupied in manual labor; and again, at fixed times, in sacred reading…

Whoever you are, therefore, who are hastening to the heavenly homeland, fulfill with the help of Christ this minimum Rule which we have written for beginners; and then at length under God’s protection you will attain to the loftier heights of doctrine and virtue which we have mentioned above. (ch. 73)

The Benediction of the Rule

The Rule of Benedict was the dominant rule for monastic life between 600 and 1200. Its very flexibility allowed for variation and adaptation while respecting its essence. Important political and social changes affected the implementation of the Rule, but they were in turn affected by its application. For instance, as monasteries began to get more and more people from noble classes: work shifted from manual labor to liturgical, cultural activities. In early 800s it was largely imposed on a large scale by Louis the Pious (Charlemagne’s son) and Benedict of Aniane. Like Charlemagne, his patron, Benedict sought uniformity throughout Christendom, but in so doing, may have thwarted the autonomy laid out in the Rule. Since the Rule required that it be read frequently, it meant copies had to be made: monasteries became the center of the book culture.

Bard’s Rule of Monastic Reform = Renewal, Regulation, Renown, Reward, Relaxation

Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153)

Bernard of Clairvaux has been described as “the most influential Christian of his age” and was certainly one of the most widely-traveled and active leaders of the church in the 12th Century. He was born near Dijon (Burgundy) in France, grew up in a typical noble family (his father was a knight) and received a good education. At the age of 21 (1112), he decided to become a monk and entered a local monastery. This was no ordinary monastery; it was Cîteaux, a monastery enjoying growing renown in the reform of monastic life. In this context the exceptional organizational skills and drawing power of Bernard become evident and just three years later he is sent to found a new monastery at Clairvaux. The founding of new monasteries proves to be an area of excellence: 68 monasteries were directly founded by Bernard in 35 years. Some 800+ men join the monastery of Clairvaux and another 290 other Cistercian monasteries were founded during his lifetime and might be attributed to his influence.
In 1124 Bernard is asked to write some principles of the spiritual life. He writes powerful treatises on the love of God and, his first, on humility. Following this time, Bernard’s work as abbot and religious founder is regularly interrupted by calls from theologians, kings and Popes to intervene in their debates. In the course of these events, Bernard negotiated major feudal conflicts, engaged in philosophical and theological debates, and preached in favor of the 2nd crusade (1148)

**The Two Bernards: Mary and Martha**

Bernard consistently sought to be nothing more than a faithful abbot at Clairvaux. However he was consistently pulled in to the political and theological debates of his time.

Bernard-Mary: Contemplating the Love of God

**“The Four Degrees of Love”**

**Why We Should Love God And The Measure Of That Love:**

You want me to tell you why God is to be loved and how much. I answer, the reason for loving God is God Himself; and the measure of love due to Him is immeasurable love. …We are to love God for Himself, because of a twofold reason; nothing is more reasonable, nothing more profitable. …if one seeks for God's claim upon our love here is the chiefest: Because He first loved us (I John 4.19).

**The First Degree Of Love: in which one loves him or herself:**

But [human] nature is so frail and weak that necessity compels her to love herself first; and this is carnal love, wherewith one loves him-/herself first and selfishly.

**The Second Degree Of Love: we love God because of his goodness towards us:**

But when tribulations, constrain him to turn to God for unfailing help, would not even a heart as hard as iron, as cold as marble, be softened by the goodness of such a Savior, so that he would love God not altogether selfishly, but because He is God?

**The Third Degree Of Love: God is loved because he is God:**

…Whosoever praises God for His essential goodness, and not merely because of the benefits He has bestowed, does really love God for God's sake, and not selfishly.

**The Fourth Degree Of Love: we love ourselves solely because of God**

And real happiness will come, not in gratifying our desires or in gaining transient pleasures, but in accomplishing God's will for us... The fourth degree of love is attained for ever when we love God only and supremely, when we do not even love ourselves except for God's sake; so that He Himself is the reward of them that love Him, the everlasting reward of an everlasting love.

**The Attainment Of This Perfection...**

Not until death is swallowed up in victory, and perennial light overflows the uttermost bounds of darkness, not until celestial glory clothes our bodies, can our souls be freed entirely from self and give themselves up to God.
A Hymn often attributed to Bernard

O Sacred Head now wounded,  
With grief and shame weighed down,  
Now scornfully surrounded  
With thorns Thy only crown,  
How art Thou pale with anguish,  
With sore abuse and scorn!  
How does that visage languish  
Which once was bright as morn!  
What Thou, my Lord, has suffered  
Was all for sinners' gain:  
Mine, mine was the transgression,  
But Thine the deadly pain.  
Lo, here I fall, my Savior!  
'Tis I deserve Thy place;  
Look on me with Thy favor,  
Vouchsafe to me Thy grace.  
What language shall I borrow  
To thank Thee, dearest Friend,  
For this Thy dying sorrow,  
Thy pity without end?  
O make me Thine forever!  
And should I fainting be,  
Lord, let me never, never  
Outlive my love to Thee!  
(transl. James Alexander)

“The Soul’s Kiss” (Sermon 7 on the Song of Songs)

“Let him kiss me,” she says, “with the kiss of his mouth?” (Sg 1:1). Who is speaking? The Bride. But why “Bride”? She is the soul which thirsts for God. I set out the different affections so as to make it clearer which properly belongs to the Bride. If someone is a slave, he fears his master’s hand. If he is a pupil, he bends his ear to his master. If he is a son, he honors his father. But she who asks for a kiss feels love. ... She uses no preliminaries. She does not try to win him round. But with an open face she bursts out suddenly from a full heart (Mt 12:34), “Let him kiss me,” she says, “with the kiss of his mouth.” Surely it seems to you as though she said, “Who have I in heaven but you and who but you do I want upon earth?” (Ps 72:25).

Bernard-Martha: Busy in the World

Doubting the Doubter: Conflict with Peter Abelard

As evidenced by the Rule of Benedict, the theology that developed in and out of the monasteries sought a practical, spiritual application in the life of believers. A major emphasis was put on meditation, contemplation and worship. This form of theology became known as monastic theology. In the early 12th century, however, a major shift was taking place in how certain sectors of the Church wanted to do their theology. A demographic shift favoring the growth of urban areas, and development the political, economic, and social stability had reduced the apparent need to withdraw to the monastery. Theological centers began to move from the monastery to the Cathedral schools. This theology was labeled scholastic theology. " The change in focus involved more than a description of its origin, however. Scholastic theology was far more interested in intellectual inquiry and logical argumentation as a means to truth. This inquiry, so the proponents said, was fueled by doubt. So, doubt, rather than belief, became the preferred method of doing theology.

The champion of scholastic theology at this time (early 12th Century) was a man named Peter Abelard. Abelard had it all: brains, looks, influence... but he also had a reputation and an attitude. In his pursuits, Abelard demonstrated an almost shocking disdain for traditional Church authority, had pursued a passionate relationship with a young woman named Héloïse, and had some very unorthodox ideas. Perhaps the greatest issue came from his emphasis on interpreting that the atonement of Christ was really a demonstration of God’s love, suggesting that it may not have any real effectiveness. Many church leaders feared Abelard’s influence. A call was made to Bernard of Clairvaux...
Bernard reacted swiftly: letters to the Pope and (surprise!) soon a council was convened to deal with the issue and it was soon cast as a showdown between Abelard and Bernard, each representing one of the views of theology. However, Bernard’s heavy-handed refutation of scholastic theology and the errors of Abelard’s thinking quickly brought an end to the proceedings. Abelard was sentenced to finish his life at the monastery of Cluny. Bernard continued to fight against scholastic practitioners for the rest of his life, in some cases using strong-arm politics. This is one of the areas where history has judged him more severely.

The Second Crusade (1147-1149)
The other major criticism usually heard of Bernard focuses on his role in supporting the Second Crusade. While reluctant at first, Bernard was soon persuaded by the Pope to put his persuasive skills behind efforts to mount a second Crusade to the Holy Land in 1147. Bernard was so effective that contemporary accounts claim that he was almost torn to pieces by an enthusiastic crowd. He worked the political arena like modern-day campaigner: stopping at influential sites to drum up support. The rapid and absolute failure of the Second Crusade, however, became a public disgrace for Bernard. Soon afterwards, he writes an apology that still sounds defensive to the reader:

**God’s judgment is unfathomable:** “…the sons of the Church, those who bear the label, "Christian," have been laid low in the desert and have either been slain by the sword or consumed by famine…. We said "Peace, and there is no peace"; we promised good things, "and behold, trouble.",’ It might seem, in fact, that we acted rashly in this affair [i.e. The Second Crusade] or had "used lightness. [2 Cor 1:17] But, "I did not run my course like a man in doubt of his goal," [1 Cor 9:26] for I acted on your orders, or rather on God’s orders given through you. . . . The judgments of the Lord are true indeed. Who does not know that? This judgment, however, "is a great deep," [Ps. 32:7]...

**The Crusaders were not committed:** “Ask them. Why should it be my task to speak of what they have done? One thing I shall say: How could they make progress when they were always looking backward as they walked? Was there a time in the whole journey when they were not in their hearts returning to Egypt?

**A clear conscience:** The perfect and final apology for any man is the testimony of his own conscience. As for myself, I take it to be a small matter to be judged by those "who call evil good, and good evil, whose darkness is light, whose light darkness." [Is. 5:20]

**Bernard of Clairvaux’s major works**
- Grace and Freewill
- Loving God
- The Steps of Humility and Pride
- Sermons on the Song of Solomon (mystical union with God)
- [On the value of] Consideration (meditation)
- many (many) letters

Please do not turn the page until instructed to do so by your teacher.
An Evaluation of Medieval Monasticism

Why monasticism?
• A reaction against worldly tendencies in the Church
• A cultural model: in the Roman world, a desire to escape demands of the empire (secular, but known to Church)
• NT texts: discussion of poverty
• The Escape evil: comes very close to confusing sin=physical=world

Evaluating monasticism

Positive features
• A spiritual earnestness: prayer
• Developed an attitude of service
• Monasteries did serve a purpose in medieval world

Negative features
• divided christians into higher/lower categories (Secular-religious)
• Comes close to fostering a works righteousness

Application for us?
Positive: make time for meditation and prayer

Negative: do not remove yourself from your world
Norval’s Medieval Monastic Primer

People & Places
540 St. Benedict writes his Rule (of Nursia)
817 Benedict of Aniane: reformed monastic life (more work, less study, centralized organization)
909 Monastery of Cluny founded (Odo, Hugh the Great): worship becomes focus of monastic life; churches decorated; religious hierarchy. Largest Church building in the West; by 1100 had 2000+ monasteries. Inaugurated the “Truce of God” (=no warring from Thursday night to Monday morning)
1097 Cistercian (Robert de Molesme): simple, unadorned architecture; silence, austerity
1200 St. Francis: Franciscan friars, “the Grey Friars”; promoted strict poverty as a spiritual discipline

Monastic hours: It’s time to pray!
- Matins, Vigils = midnight
- Lauds = 3am, or sunrise
- Prime = 6am
- Terce = 9 am
- Sext = noon
- None = 3pm (none refers to nine, not noon)
- Vespers = 6pm or sunset
- Compline = 9pm or dark

Glossary
Order: a community under a religious rule, usually requires the taking of vows
Cenobite: a member of a monastic community
Anchorite: a hermit, person in religious seclusion
Abbey: self-sufficient monastic house (ruled by an abbot, abbess)
Canons: a regular priest who lives in a community, not necessarily a monastery
Friars: member of religious order who did not live in a monastery
Simony: the buying and selling of positions (offices) in the church.
Crusades: Religious wars fought by western Europeans to recover the Holy Land from the Muslims.

Final anecdote: The baying of hounds or the praying of monks? William of Aquitaine in 909 is prepared to found a monastery at Cluny. The monk entrusted with the oversight of this action chooses William’s favorite hunting ground as the premier site for the abbey. William hesitates, at which point the new abbot asks, “Which will serve you better on Judgment day: the baying of hounds or the praying of monks?”
“And Now, Hailing from Greater Cappadocia, Starting at Power Bishop It’s...”

There are several large movements within church history that will help us keep our bearings.

**The Church of the Fathers**
(90 AD to 500 AD)

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<th>90 AD</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Irnaeus (c. 130-c. 200)</td>
<td>Council of Chalcedon (451)</td>
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<td>Tertullian (c. 150 - c. 212)</td>
<td>Athanius (296-373)</td>
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<td>Augustine (354-430)</td>
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**The Medieval Church**
(500 AD to 1500 AD)

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<tr>
<th>500 AD</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Benedict (480-547)</td>
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<td>Anselm (1033-1109)</td>
<td>Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)</td>
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<td>Council of Nicea (325)</td>
<td>John Wycliffe (c. 1380-1384)</td>
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<td>Jan Hus (1372-1415)</td>
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**Reformation and Reaction**
(1500 AD to 1700)

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<th>1500 AD</th>
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<tr>
<td>Martin Luther (1483-1546)</td>
<td>Westminster Assembly (1643-1649)</td>
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<tr>
<td>John Calvin (1509-1564)</td>
<td>Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758)</td>
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* The “Medieval Church” for our purposes really refers to the church in Western Europe. In 1054 the tensions between church in the East (eastern Europe and the Middle East) and the church in the West came to a head prompting the “Great Schism.” Even though their remained a vibrant and growing church in the East, our tradition comes from these Western churches and so we focus on them.