

Monks and Hermits Reject the World

The Medieval world was a terrible place, full of violence and sin. For some people, there was too little of the virtues taught by the Old and New Testament writers. Fear had caused some early Christians to hide away in deserts or on mountainsides. They were called hermits. One lived in the desert for 90 years. The most famous hermit, St. Simeon Stylites, lived on a 60-foot-tall pillar for 30 years. St. Anthony was an Egyptian Christian who lived on a mountain near the Nile River around 300 A.D. He gathered



Franciscan monks belonged to the order established by St. Francis of Assisi

other hermits together in groups of two or three, and they would all come together for worship. These were the first monks. In the difficult times of the Middle Ages, more people wanted to escape from the wars so they could live a quiet life of books and prayer.

The temptations of the world bothered some who feared they might not live a good enough life to reach heaven. Some moved to remote places and lived as hermits, and others moved to monasteries (for men) or convents (for women). After a year of probation, they would join the order and agree to live by its rules. They had volunteered to live with hard work, simple food, and isolation from normal family life.

About 529, a hermit named Benedict started a monastery on a mountaintop in Italy (Monte Cassino). This was the first of many Benedictine monasteries. Benedict wrote tough rules for his monks. The first rule was total obedience to the abbot (head of the monastery). The monks could own nothing (even their clothes belonged to the order). Their workday began at 6 a.m. and continued until sunset; then they ate supper and went to Vespers. At 2 a.m., they went to a prayer service. Their days were spent doing manual labor, copying manuscripts, and praying.

In the 1200's new orders of monks formed: Franciscans, Dominicans, Carmelites, and the Augustinian Hermits. Besides monks who lived away from the world, there were now friars, members of the order who lived out among the people. Each order was easily identified by their cloak, and each had different virtues they stressed. These groups often disagreed over religious issues and became rivals for public support.

Women might join convents (also called nunneries) that followed strict rules similar to the monasteries. Their orders often had the same names as the men's: Benedictine, Dominican, Augustinian, and Franciscan orders of nuns. In the early days, nuns were more free to leave the convent, but later in the Middle Ages they were usually required to stay inside its walls.

A monastery might start with a few monks who lived by the strict rules of the order, but when donations of land and money came in, they often began to change. As vassal to a lord, the abbot became involved in politics. With greater wealth, the order could afford more luxuries, which made the lifestyle more appealing. Enforcement of rules grew lax in time. This led to criticism and demands for reform. Still, in the important areas of education, care of the sick, and safety for travelers, monasteries provided a valuable service.

Name _____

Class _____

CHALLENGES

1. Why was St. Simeon Stylites unusual?

2. Who created the first monastery?

3. What were "monasteries" for women called?

4. What was the first rule of a Benedictine monk?

5. How long was the workday at a Benedictine monastery?

6. Name four new orders founded in the 1200s.

7. How could you tell which order a monk belonged to?

8. What other name was used besides "convent"?

9. Why did monasteries become political?

10. What areas of Medieval life were made better by the monasteries?