Monastic Life

As the power and significance of the Church in Western Europe expanded after the fall of the Roman Empire, new Christian lifestyles developed. The old Roman parish system was adopted by the Church, and local parish priests were appointed to provide spiritual guidance for the Christians in their village or locale.

In the West, many priests were illiterate; many were raised as peasants. Many priests in the early Church married and had children. Bishops often came from the unruly nobility who were frequently uncouth and illiterate themselves.

In time, the clergy—Church leaders including the local priests—developed into two distinct groups: the secular clergy, who lived in the world and interacted with people on a regular basis; and the regular clergy, which was made up of men and women known as monks and nuns. The word monk is taken from a Greek word meaning solitary or alone.

The original monks came out of Egypt and Syria in the Near East. Early monks were hermits who sometimes practiced fasting and self-torture. Others, such as St. Simeon Stylites the Elder lived on top of a tall stone pillar out in the Syrian desert for more than 36 years.

Perhaps the most important outgrowth of monasticism was the establishment of monasteries in Western Europe. Benedict (480–543) was the founder of one of the first monastic systems. He established rules for monks to follow, including taking vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Such rules were part of what became known as the Benedictine rule. Benedict established a monastery in southern Italy at Monte Cassino, which still exists today.

By the end of the 600s, most monasteries in the West followed the Benedictine rule. A century later, the great Frankish king, Charlemagne, required all monks to follow the rule.

From 500 to 1100, monasteries played a key role in the Western Church. In a period when few schools existed in Western Europe, the monasteries were important centers of knowledge, information, and literacy. In fact, while few people could read in Europe during the Early Middle Ages, the monasteries were home to dedicated scholars who could read, write, and copy manuscripts, especially copies of the Bible.

The printing press was not invented until the 1300s, so men who could copy the Scriptures were important. When pagan Germanic tribes harassed the Church and its clergy between A.D. 400 and 800, many monks and scholars fled the Continent to Ireland, in the northern British Isles.

During these centuries, Ireland became an important center of learning and scholarship. When few people in Gaul could read, Irish scholars could read both Greek and Latin texts.

These scholar-monks copied the Bible, as well as ancient Greek and Roman manuscripts, helping keep learning and Western heritage alive.

One of the leading Irish monks was known as the Venerable Bede (B.E.D.), who lived from 673 to 735. Bede was raised in a monastery from age seven and spent his entire life studying, reading, copying manuscripts, and writing some of the early histories of England. He made popular the term anno Domini, meaning “in the year of our Lord,” abbreviated A.D.

The works of the Irish monks, such as Bede, produced some of the most beautiful books in the world. Such books were printed on animal skin called vellum, and were hand-sewn with wooden covers adorned with gold leaf and precious stones. The works produced by these monks were passed down through the ages. So beautiful were their works that people in Gothic times, during the High Middle Ages, actually thought such books had been created by angels!
Illuminated Manuscripts

Until the late 1400s, if someone said he was writing a book, he meant that literally—letter after letter and word after word was carefully written by hand in pen and ink. The books were often decorated with paintings in silver, gold, and rich colors. Those that remain are more than books—they are works of art. Read the passage below about these special books. Then answer the questions that follow.

He who knows not how to write thinks that writing is no labor, but ... I assure you that it is ... a painful task. It extinguishes the light from the eyes, it bends the back, it crushes the viscera and the ribs, it brings pain to the kidneys and weariness to the whole body. Therefore, o reader, turn ye the leaves with care, keep your fingers from the text, for as a hail storm devastates the fields, so does the careless reader destroy the script and the book. Know ye how sweet to the sailor is arrival at port? Even so for the copyist is tracing the last line.

—Florendo, a Spanish scribe, A.D. 945

The earliest known illustrated manuscripts come from Egypt and were written on long rolls of papyrus. By the A.D. 300s, these had been replaced by the codex, which was a book with pages. The codex was easier to work with and longer lasting because its flat pages survive longer than a roll.

Medieval monks all over Europe worked in scriptoria, writing studios set aside in monasteries for scribes, copying sacred works. Writing in Latin, their aim was to preserve, share, and pass on the ideas of classical writers and church leaders. This act of faith and devotion had an immediate, practical rationale—if the monastery wanted a Bible, which of course it did, someone had to create a copy.

In the earliest and simplest manuscripts, the words themselves were a work of art. Written in black, or occasionally red or other colors, they filled the page. Sometimes the initial letter was the larger and adorned with flowers and scrolls. Additionally, a decorative border might surround the page. Over the years, however, the manuscripts became more elaborate.

Most people at the time could not read, especially not Latin, which was the language of all manuscripts at this time. To help the people better understand, the narrative scribes, who were usually members of the clergy, began to illustrate the manuscripts to depict the familiar stories people had heard at Sunday sermons. For example, a woman being surprised by an angel and a dove descending from a cloud, was easily recognized as Mary being told that she was to be the mother of Jesus. The art was elaborate and colorful, with angels and beasts, trumpets and haloes dancing across the page in gold, silver, crimson and sapphire.

The Lindisfarne Gospels (c. A.D. 700) and The
Book of Kells (c. A.D. 800) are two masterpieces of Irish illumination. Irish monks produced lavish copies of the Bible in order to spread Christianity. While illustrating biblical events, these manuscripts also concentrated on decoration. An entire page might embellish one single capital letter with swirls and curlicues, symmetrical and mirror-image designs. Hidden in the intricate design might be animal figures such as cats and mice, butterflies, and even an otter catching fish. Human forms were largely absent.

Illumination reached its height in the A.D. 1400s with the French Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry (The Very Rich Hours of the Duke of Berry). A book of hours is a prayer book containing meditations and prayers for various seasons, months, days, and hours. Wealthy families would commission a book for their own use. Les Très Riches Heures was produced by the Limbourg brothers (Pol, Herman, and Jean) for the brother of King Charles VI. It is filled with exquisite illustrations of the daily life of the aristocracy and peasantry. The most remarkable pages are those of the calendar, which depicts life and nature throughout the year.

For example, February shows a snow-covered farm. The sheep huddle in their pen, birds scratch the snow for food, and a peasant woman blows on her freezing hands. October shows peasants sowing winter grain, with the Duke of Berry’s splendid castle in the background. The peasants’ tattered clothes and weary expressions are visible to all. There is even a scarecrow. January shows the nobility at a banquet, featuring the duke and countless guests. Compared to the whites of snowy February and the brown of the October soil, the blue, gold, red, and orange of the feast are a startling contrast.

Reviewing the Selection
1. What was the purpose of illuminated manuscripts?

Critical Thinking
2. Making Generalizations Many of the art during the Middle Ages was religious in nature—illuminated manuscripts, statues of the Virgin, stained-glass windows. What do you think this says about people’s concerns at that time?

3. Predicting In the A.D. 1500s, books began to be produced mechanically. How might this have changed the life of monks/scribes?