

Medieval Monasticism

This lesson is entitled “Loving God: Medieval Monasticism.” In the last lesson I presented an overview of the last 500 years of the ancient and medieval period of church history. In this lesson I will begin to describe some of the important events that took place during that time. The prayer is from Saint Bernard, one of the great figures of the medieval church. As we prepare to think about medieval monasticism, let us pray in the words of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux.

“O Lord, come quickly and reign on Thy throne, for now often something rises up within me and tries to take possession of Thy throne; pride, covetousness, uncleanness, and sloth want to be my kings; and then evil speaking, anger, hatred, and the whole train of vices join with me in warring against myself and try to reign over me. I resist them, I cry out against them, and say, ‘I have no other king than Christ.’ O King of Peace, come and reign in me, for I will have no king but Thee! Amen.”

It has been some time since I have mentioned monasticism in the West. It all goes back to Saint Benedict of Nursia, who lived in the fifth and sixth centuries. From that point on, from the seventh century to the tenth century, we can speak of that period as the “Benedictine centuries.” Monasticism began and flourished. Communities continued to be created in different places in Europe, which were all following the Benedictine Rule. According to Benedict, each monastery was to be a self-contained unit under the direction of its own abbot. Benedict did not envision great orders, highly organized and centralized. Rather he intended individual monasteries that each had their own abbot. In due time in the West, however, a more centralized approach to the monasteries developed, particularly during the tenth and eleventh centuries. That was not true in the East. Eastern monasteries continued to be independent units. Monasticism in the East, which continued to be an important part of the Orthodox Church, never developed the centralized structures that it did in the West.

Benedict had envisioned the monastic life as a group of laypeople coming together to pray and work with their hands and to serve God as a community. That pattern has largely continued in the East. More often in the West, however, the monks became priests. The monastic orders in the West were orders of priests. The monasteries were colleges of priests. In the West there was often a second order that would be an order for women. There would be an order for men, with many priests and perhaps some laypeople, and then a second order for women, and sometimes a third order for laypeople. In the West there were often those three orders.

There were three main duties for a person living at the monastery. The first was prayer and worship. If you would have gone to one of those medieval monasteries, you would have found that for three or four hours each day the monks were engaged in prayer and worship. It was generally communal prayer and worship. They would read through the Scriptures together. They sang the Psalms together. Then some of that time would be in private prayer. Then for five hours their time would be spent in study. They preferred to call it “spiritual reading.” Their study was always of a devotional nature. They read the church fathers, and they read the Scriptures with the purpose of developing their own love for God and knowledge of Him. Then for six or seven hours each day they worked, doing manual labor. They took care of the building, farmed to produce food for the monastery, and went out into the community to carry out works of charity.

During the tenth and eleventh centuries there were some definite movements that took place in order to revive and renew the monastic movement flowing out of the Benedictine history. Many of those new movements took place in central France. In the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries France became the

great center of monastic life and reform in the Catholic Church. First came the establishment of the Cluniac order, which was a reform movement based on the Benedictine Rule. During the tenth and eleventh centuries, Cluny represented almost everything that was vital and progressive in Western Christianity. The greatest figure in the Cluniac movement was Bernard of Cluny. He lived in the twelfth century. He wrote a great poem called "*De Contemptu Mundi*," which means "Contempt for the World." It was a 3,000 line poem that satirized contemporary monastic corruption. He was a monk who wrote a poem about how other monks were corrupt and how the monastic movement needed to be reformed and brought back into line with its original ideals. The poem contrasts monastic corruption and the transient pleasures of this life with the glories of heaven. So much of the poem is about heaven. It has served as the base of several hymns, including "Jerusalem the Golden." A line from that hymn says, "O sweet and blessed country, the home of God's elect; O sweet and blessed country, that eager hearts expect; Jesus in mercy bring us to that dear land of rest, who art with God the Father and Spirit ever blessed." In that writing of Bernard of Cluny there is evidence of a longing for heaven, and it speaks of God's elect, and there is some emphasis on the importance of the doctrine of the Trinity.

A rather dreary pattern can be observed throughout the history of monastic movements. They begin with high ideals, but they will soon decline. Then something else will have to come along to reform that movement, which itself was a reform of monasticism or the church. The Cluniacs built a great abbey at Cluny. It was the greatest church in Europe. It was destroyed in the nineteenth century, and it served as a quarry for people for some time. People took stones from the great church and built their own houses with them. Yet in its heyday, it was greater than any church anywhere in the world. The largest enclosed space on earth today is the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. In the eleventh and twelfth century the largest enclosed space on the earth was the church at Cluny. It was a church of great splendor and magnificence. It seems strange that a monastery would produce a building of such grandeur, but that is what happened at Cluny. The order of Cluny came to an end in 1790 during the upheavals connected with the French revolution. It has not continued to the present.

Cluny eventually fell into a worldly spirit. It produced great and splendid churches, but it no longer maintained its zeal for the monastic ideal. Thus another order was formed, not too far from Cluny. It was called the Cistercian order. A new order is sometimes referred to as a reform of the reform. Cluny was a reform of the Benedictine movement. Then the Cistercians were a reform of the Cluniac movement. It was started in Citeaux. Its leader was another Bernard, Bernard of Clairvaux. Bernard of Clairvaux was one of the major figures of the Middle Ages. He is sometimes called the "last of the church fathers," because of his importance as a church leader. He is also sometimes called the "uncrowned emperor" of Europe. He seemed to have more influence than any king or emperor, and often more than the pope. Justo Gonzalez has said that Bernard's personality dominated his time.

Let me summarize the life of Bernard of Clairvaux and emphasize his importance. He was a great reformer. We know something of his concern for church reform from his book, *On Consideration*. He wrote that book for one of his own monks who was being promoted to a high office in the church. That monk was actually becoming the pope. So Bernard wrote a book as a guide for him so he would know how to be a good pope. It is a very good book. He told the new pope that "Lordship is forbidden. Ministry is bidden." In other words, do not rule over people. Serve people. Luther said that all popes should know that book by heart. He believed, quite correctly, that most popes paid no attention to it, but that if they did, things would have been very different in Rome. This all shows that Bernard had an ideal to not only reform the monastic movement, but also the whole church. He wrote books and letters. He advised people. It has been said that he was constantly giving advice. He was rather dogmatic about his advice, but he believed that people needed to hear what he had to say. They did need to hear what he had to say.

As a reformer, Bernard may remind us of a medieval Puritan. He believed the church was too rich, too extravagant, and too given over to pomp and ceremony. He wanted to see things quite changed. Bernard once said, “We must not pass over in silence the decay in the church. Better to provoke a scandal than to abandon the truth.” That is an interesting comment from a medieval church leader. He did not want to cover over the things that were going wrong. He thought it was better to create a scandal than to abandon the truth. People did not follow that advice very often, until the sixteenth century when people such as Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, and Knox created a scandal. They divided the church because they could not abandon truth. Bernard was an early reformer, working hard to bring the church more into line with a Christian understanding of what the church ought to be.

He was also a great preacher. He was sometimes referred to as “Dr. Mellifluous,” which meant the doctor whose words were like honey. He could preach with eloquence and power. He often used for himself the motto *pasce verbo, pasce vita*, which means “feed with the word, feed with the life.” A minister should feed people with the Word of God but also demonstrate through living the truth of the Word of God. It should be our life as well as our preaching that commends the Gospel and draws people to Christ.

Bernard was a great mystic, in the best sense of that word. I will describe medieval mysticism in a later lesson. There are some things we can learn from the mystics. There are also some errors that they fell into. For the most part, Bernard managed to stay on the good side of mysticism. One of the great books of the Middle Ages is the book *On Loving God*. It is a book that we can still read with a great deal of profit.

Bernard was also a great theologian. His greatest writing on theology is the book *On Grace and Free Choice*. In that book, we finally find a true Augustinian. In the midst of many semi-Pelagians and semi-Augustinians of the medieval church, Bernard was a full Augustinian. Bernard of Clairvaux’s book *On Grace and Free Choice* is the best book on grace between Saint Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Bradwardine of Canterbury. That is a span of 900 years. I will describe Bradwardine in another lesson. For almost a millennium, however, *On Grace and Free Choice* is the great work on grace. John Calvin in his *Institutes* praised the book by saying, “Bernard agreed with Augustine when he makes the church speak thus, ‘Draw me, however unwilling, to make me willing. Draw me, slow-footed, to make me run.’” That indicates that Bernard covered irresistible grace, election, the teaching of Augustine, and the Bible.

The Clairvaux community did not continue permanently. It was broken up, and the property was confiscated by the state in 1790, during the French revolution when there was so much anti-clerical activity in France. The house at Clairvaux still stands, but for the last 200 years it has not served as a church but as a prison. One of the successor movements to the Cistercians was the movement of the Capuchins. They were a revival of the Cistercian movement. The Capuchins wore brown robes with white cassocks and hoods. For that reason, Italians call coffee “cappuccino,” meaning “little Capuchin” because it is brown with a little white top. It looks like a little Capuchin monk.

So far I have been talking about a history of the Benedictines, as that movement spawned certain developments at Cluny, Citeaux, and other places. Two entirely new movements arose in the thirteenth century. The first was the Franciscans. Francis of Assisi, in Italy, was born in 1181 and died in 1226. In that short life, Francis was able to impact the church of his day and of successive centuries as well. Francis was a worldly young man who was dramatically converted and then went on to a life of dedication to God. In his life, as G. K. Chesterton said, “he found a freedom almost amounting to

frivolity.” Francis was a unique individual. There is nobody quite like him in the history of the church. He was not a scholar. He did not write much. Except for a few prayers, some of which became hymns, the only thing that he left was his testament. In that testimony he told in a few pages why he did what he did. His testimony was written shortly before his death. It was not long after his death that his followers produced a book called *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis*. In that book are the stories, highly imaginative stories, about the life of Saint Francis, which one writer has said “may not be totally untrue.” The stories were certainly embellished. Francis lives on in our memories because of *The Little Flowers*. In that book are all the stories about Francis preaching. Francis was a preacher, and he often preached to the animals that he would find as he wandered about in Italy. Francis not only preached to nice animals, like birds, rabbits, and sheep, but according to *The Little Flowers* he also preached to the bad animals such as the fierce wolf of Gubbio. That wolf was creating a great deal of disturbance by eating things, including people, and the people of Gubbio sought out Francis to do something about the terrible, fierce wolf. Francis went to Gubbio and met the wolf and called out to it, “Come hither, brother wolf. I command you in the name of Christ Jesus that you do no manner of evil either to me or to anyone else.” According to *The Little Flowers*, immediately after Saint Francis made the sign of the cross, “The terrible wolf closed his jaws, gave over running, and came meekly as any lamb and laid himself down at the feet of Saint Francis.” There are many more stories from *The Little Flowers*, and they are entertaining stories.

The life of Francis was a life of poverty and service. That was what Francis wanted to do. He wanted to be poor, and he wanted to have people around him who believed as he did that life is not made up of what we have but of what we can give. That was his principle to which he was dedicated. Some people thought that he was unbalanced in his dedication to his principle. He did not want to have anything. He continually refused to take anything. It is not certain that a Franciscan could own a Bible. If you owned one book, The Bible, you might want two books. If you owned two books, you might want three books. Soon you will have a big library and you will be proud of it. Then you will begin to drift away from God. Francis would say it was better not to start down that slippery slope.

Franciscans were not so much reformers as innovators. They created a new force in the church to minister to spiritual and physical needs. Something new and different was breaking forth in the church. Their movement was a contrast for the church, which boasted the great church at Cluny and the splendor and pomp at Rome. Francis was a poor little man wandering about who said none of that mattered. More than that, he said it was all bad. He said that the only thing that matters is to love God and to love people. Francis prayed a great prayer that we still use, “Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace.” That is what he wanted to be. He wanted to bring peace to this world.

His life was also filled with praise. The hymns that he wrote are all hymns of praise. The most famous hymn he wrote is “The Canticle of Brother Sun.” It is not a song about pantheism. He is not worshiping the sun. It is not a canticle “to brother sun.” It is “The Canticle of Brother Sun.” He is calling on the sun to join with him and join with all creation in the worship of God. There is a paraphrase of that canticle by William H. Draper, which is a well-known hymn that says, “All creatures of our God and King, lift up your voice and with us sing, Alleluia, Alleluia. Thou burning sun with golden beam, thou silver moon with softer gleam, O praise Him, O praise Him, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia. Amen.” It is a very scriptural idea. The Psalms call upon all creation to praise God with us, as does Saint Francis.

The order that Francis created was called the Order of the Lesser Brothers. We usually refer to them as Franciscans, but the official name is the Order of the Lesser Brothers, or OFM, *Ordo Friars Minores*. If you see OFM after a person’s name, you know that person is a Franciscan. The second order, the order

for women, was founded by Saint Clare. That order still exists alongside of the Franciscan order. A third order was also established for laypeople.

Even during the end of Francis' life, there was a struggle within these orders to maintain Francis' rule of absolute poverty. It was difficult for his followers to really believe that he meant what he said. These monastic orders, even the order of the Franciscans, could quite quickly develop into wealthy orders. People admired the monks and wanted to give to them. They wanted to give money and land and all sorts of things. Francis died in 1226. He was canonized only two years later in 1228. That is a quick canonization. Almost immediately, Francis' followers began to build a great basilica in his honor. It is there in Assisi today, and you can go to the great church in Assisi. It became the richest church in Italy. It was a strange memorial to the poor, little man, whose favorite saying was, "Foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head." I will not go into detail about the history of the Franciscans, but some very bitter controversies developed among the Franciscans because of the difficulty that Francis' followers had in trying to decide what to do. Should they become wealthy and prominent, as they had opportunity, or should they avoid those things?

The last order I want to describe is the Dominicans. It was quite a different order. It came into existence about the same time as the Franciscans, but it had a different purpose, a different ethos, and a different contribution to the history of the church. Dominic was a Spanish monk, living in Spain, in a monastery that was trying to follow the rule of Saint Augustine. He became interested through a couple of journeys he made in thinking about how Catholics could evangelize to both reach pagan people and reclaim heretics. The heretics that he particularly had in mind were the Albigensians of southern France. They were a Gnostic, Manichaean cult that controlled much of southern France. Dominic began to plan a new order that would be a missionary order. It would be an order of preachers. He established the Order of Preachers, which we call the Dominicans, but their abbreviation, OP, stands for Order of Preachers.

They stressed teaching and preaching. They did not stress poverty, although the Dominicans did take a vow of poverty. They did not, however, see poverty as essential to their spirituality as Francis did. They did not put much emphasis on manual labor, as the Benedictines did. They did not think they should spend most of their day cutting wood, drawing water, and washing dishes. They even limited their times of prayer. They did not pray for so long in the day as some of the other orders. They wanted to study. It was an order that dedicated itself to books. Each order of the Catholic Church has its distinctives, and the distinctive of the Dominicans is that they are an order of scholars. They are people who are studying and planning to be teachers and preachers. Many did develop into great preachers. Some of the great preachers of the medieval church were Dominicans. They punctuated their sermons by rhyme or alliteration. They also used illustrations and even humor. The Dominican sermons sound quite modern to us. They used those methods because they wanted to communicate to people. They found that those were effective ways to make people hear what they had to say.

They also became great scholars. They realized that it was important for them to enter the universities and infiltrate them and become teachers. If they could teach then they could persuade. Before long there were Dominicans teaching in Paris, Bologna, Cologne, and all the universities. They also started schools down to the level of young children. The Dominicans became the educators of Europe and of the Catholic Church. A movement like this was able to produce great scholars. Thomas Aquinas was a Dominican. His parents wanted him to become a Benedictine, but he wanted to become a Dominican. He did become a Dominican, and he became the great theologian of the High Middle Ages.

Interestingly, not only were there great scholars among the Dominicans, but some of the great mystics of the Middle Ages were also Dominicans. One of those was Meister Eckhart. One other thing to say about

the Dominicans is that they became the inquisitors of the Middle Ages. They were the people on the lookout for heresy. They developed schemes, plans, and programs to identify and root out heretics. Their nickname was the “watchdogs of the Lord.” *Domini canus* sounds like Dominican, or Dominic, but it was their nickname as the “watchdogs of the Lord.” Soon Cathars and Waldensians, and later Protestants, would feel that watchful eye of the Dominican inquisitors. As the great inquisitors of the Middle Ages, they were followed later by a sixteenth century order called the Jesuits.

It is possible for Protestants to dismiss the history of monasticism as worthless. That would be a false impression. It is possible for Catholics to glamorize it all as wonderful. That would be a false impression as well. Nobody would accuse Robert Lewis Dabney, a southern American Presbyterian, of being soft on Catholicism or on monasticism. He wrote wisely, “Monastic life, with all its perversions, produced not a little of the moral heroism in the Middle Ages.” By the time of the Reformation, much of that was lost. Monasticism was not nearly as noble in the sixteenth century as it was in some earlier centuries. Like much of church history, we try to see the good with the bad and learn from both.

I will end this lesson with the last verse of a song by Bernard of Clairvaux, which we know as “Jesus, Thou Joy of Loving Hearts”: “O Jesus, ever with us stay. Make all our moments calm and bright. Chase the dark night of sin away. Shed over the world Thy holy light.”

The Dominicans became the inquisitors because they were concerned about Catholic doctrine, about orthodoxy. They were concerned about heretics. As they traveled about preaching, one of the things they wanted to do was to discover heresy and to try to eliminate it. The Albigensian movement in southern France was a massive movement. It cleared Catholicism from half of France. The church, and particularly the Dominicans, believed that if the church did not do a better job of preventing heresy then the whole church would fall. So it became very important to take on that task. The work of the Inquisition was later than this time period. That was a highly structured approach to heresy. It included what questions to ask, what force to use, and what to do if a person recanted. All of that developed during the Counter-Reformation. The Dominicans were in the front of that movement.