





THE MEDIEVAL CHURCH

“The more things change, the more they stay the same.” At no point were those words more appropriate than the medieval times between 476 and 1485. The reason we call this era “medieval” is because it comes from Latin words for “middle” and “age”, so we often refer to this time as the Middle Ages.

In truth, the Middle Ages were a time of incredible change and upheaval. Through invasions and charges of numerous barbarian tribes, the Roman Empire fractured over the course of the fifth century A.D. Goths, Vandals, and many Germanic tribes flooded the regions once filled with Roman armies that held them at bay. In time, these peoples divided up what was left of the empire, carving kingdoms of the Burgundians, Franks, Visigoths, Ostrogoths, and Lombards out of the western European continent. Groups such as the Scots, Picts, Irish, Angles, and Saxons dwelt in Britain. With Europe divided into smaller kingdoms, trade and commerce collapsed along with the safety of many travel routes. The highly established Roman manner of administration and government fell apart, with each local kingdom maintaining its own particular way of law. Literacy among the masses fell, and it was several years before schools began to be established for the sake of educating citizens. Even agriculture declined as many farmers struggled to maintain quality harvests. Seeking some kind of structure, many kingdoms in medieval Europe adopted a land-based structure of everyday life. Society was layered by classes of kings, nobles, knights, and peasants to tend land and provide for the economic stability of a region.

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As the Middle Ages progressed, forceful leaders began to unite kingdoms and provide for the flourishing of those within their borders. Charlemagne was crowned Holy Roman Emperor on Christmas Day 800 in Rome by Pope Leo III in hopes of bringing together a number of regions under one banner. In spite of many positive reforms, Charlemagne and his descendants ruled over a loose federation of peoples. It was not holy, nor Roman, nor an empire. However, as the powers of kings continued to rise, they paralleled the force of strong popes such as Innocent III, often leading to spectacular clashes. The borders of nations began to take shape as kingdoms warred against one another, and then these conflicts quieted somewhat when they combined their armies against the Muslims in the Crusades. Originally a call to free the Holy Land of Israel from the clutch of the Seljuk Turks, the Crusades demonstrated the thirst for power and wealth amongst many knights, who sometimes committed vile sins and atrocious actions on those they conquered.

Paralleling the expansion of the Church's reign over many areas of human existence, monks, theologians, and clergy labored with all their hearts and souls to build a community of faith that was more of a reflection of the spiritual family that God intended. Benedict, Columba, and Francis organized communities in which the Gospel could be demonstrated, lived, and preached to others. When theology and community needed to be transformed in fresh ways, Theodulf, Anselm, and Bernard of Clairvaux answered the call. Gregory the Great reformed worship and the role of bishops. Stephen Langton negotiated arguably the greatest document of human liberty while securing freedom for the Church. The presence of God among His people was rediscovered in varied ways by theologians like Thomas Aquinas and mystics like Julian of Norwich. And when corruption took hold of the Church

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and leaders drifted from the authority of Scripture, a first wave of reformers in Peter Waldo, John Wycliffe, and John Hus arose to call God's people back to the grace of God offered in the Bible.

In all, the Middle Ages offer an energetic swath of activity and understanding. The Church, since the Council of Nicea in 325, had been taking on more of a shaping role in the life of European society, and this created many versions of the people of God on earth.

We have a Church that sought to reign, a Church that desired to love, a Church that pursued conquest, a Church that wanted to secure freedom, a Church that looked to proclaim the Gospel, a Church that craved the presence of God, a Church that fell into corruption, and a Church that undertook its own reform. Which one of these is the medieval Church? They all are! And in that we can find hope in the God Who loves His Church and humility as we seek to live in His name.





538, Monte Cassino, Italy

The gates of the great monastery swung open, and trudging in came a score of townspeople, ragged, thin, and worn. Standing his post by the gate, Rodolfino could detect dread in every step of every living soul. This is no quiet anxiety, he mused. This is a horror that they have no energy to express properly.

“Good sir,” he called to the first man through, who was holding a small girl in his arms, “do you require shelter? Food? Drink?”

“All of them,” the man coughed, placing the child in Rodolfino’s hands and collapsing to the ground in a hacking fit. A man and a woman—by the looks of them, Rodolfino thought, his son and daughter—came to each side and steadied him. The son looked up.

“Accept our apologies, good brother” he said, “but we have nowhere to go but here. The lack of food is too great, and with the enemy approaching we cannot remain in harm’s way!”

“The enemy?” Rodolfino asked before noticing his fellow gardener passing by. “Quickly!” he said. “Go and fetch the Father! We have guests in severe need. Hurry!” As the other monk scurried off toward the church, Rodolfino turned back to the travelers. “Which enemy do you speak of?”

“The soldiers come to burn our town!” cried a little boy who wrested free from his mother’s grip. “They come for us now!”

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“Have a care, my son,” his mother wept.

“Please,” came the voice of a burly fellow with a sword sheathed at his side. Hobbling forward on what was clearly a twisted ankle, he put forth his hand to grip Rodolfo’s. “I am the judge of Sant Elia. Forgive our ragged appearance, but we have walked over harsh ground for a day and a half because the Huns and Slavs have certainly fallen upon our village by now.”

“The Huns and Slavs?” Rodolfo gasped as several of the women began crying. “They are swarming the hills even now?”

“They are...” began the judge before noticing a cloaked figure approach them from behind Rodolfo. “Benedict! Praise God for you! Oh, Benedict!” And the judge fell to his knees before the abbot, grabbing his hand and kissing it as Benedict stopped, smiling, looking over the gathered masses with warm, shining eyes.

“Rodolfo,” Benedict quietly said, “can you and a couple more of the brothers please escort our guests to the refectory and give them what food we have available? I will bring along my friend and we can speak quietly there.”

“We will have to stretch our supplies, Father,” Rodolfo whispered, almost indistinctly.

“And they are guests in need, Brother Rodolfo,” Benedict replied, his hand on the weeping judge’s head. “Let us always receive them as we would receive the Lord Jesus Christ.”

“The news everywhere is horrifying,” the judge explained in the infirmary as a monk cared for his swollen ankle with some cloths soaked in warm water. “Eleven months ago, upwards of sixteen hundred Huns and Slavs came by ship from Constantinople, and then seven months later five thousand more warriors joined them.” He winced as his foot was shifted onto a towel.

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“The enemy swarmed over the land and took Rome, practically without a fight.”

“Why was there such little resistance?” Benedict asked, his eyes showing a flicker of worry but his voice steady and calm. “Didn’t King Vitiges head them off?”

“Vitiges is brave but reckless,” the judge groaned over the pain. “He won a great victory over his foe Belisarius in open battle, but before long the army ran out of food and supplies. Our allies were surrounded and butchered. Now remnants of the Huns and Slavs are also roaming the countryside all the way to Campania, burning, looting, and doing all manner of unspeakable things.” He grunted as the monk finished wrapping his foot.

“That should hold, sire,” the monk nodded and stepped back, as if to admire his handiwork. “Walk if you must, but it will be important to rest that foot for as long as you can.”

“Might we join the people for some food,” the judge asked, “but only after you, Father Benedict, show me this place you have created?”

“God has built this monastery,” Benedict answered, “and I have merely moved some stone, wood, and earth for His glory. But it would be my humble honor to show you what God has done.”

“This is different from what I hear of the monasteries in the East,” the judge marveled. “They brag about the austerity and hardness of their dwellings as if to say that cruelty and misery brings one close to God. Father Benedict, you seem to say otherwise.”

“In times of scarcity, we should be content with little, I agree,” Benedict said, walking slowly toward a workshop so that his guest could keep up. “But I do not believe God calls us all to extreme difficulty, especially the sort that leads to boasting. When I sat down to write my Rule years ago, the Lord granted me the insight to recognize that

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what is needed for my fellow monks is not harshness, but ordering their lives and mine wisely with strict discipline, a discipline that flows from a firm conviction of the love of Christ. Yes, the Byzantine monks live on bread, salt, and water, and they may do so. But for us to be about the work of God, we require strength to do so. This is why we have two meals per day. Both are cooked over flame, and we manage to grow and provide our own fruits and vegetables for our meals.”

“Is that a wine cellar by the south wall?” asked the judge, pointing.

“Indeed it is,” Benedict smiled, “for we have a small amount each day. A content monk is a dutiful servant of Christ. The energy we receive from food and rest strengthens us for our everyday effort. *Ora et labora*, Theudo. Prayer and work. Those are the cornerstones of our mission here at Monte Cassino. Some monks work in the wine press. Others,” he gestured as they approached a carpentry room, “labor here.”

“Wood!” his guest said, his eyes wide. “And you have tools and tables upon which to construct these...”. He stopped, staring at what lay upon the table. “Is that a headboard with the carving of a dove? It is the same style and carving as the bed I own. However, I bought that at the market shop in Sant Elia!”

Benedict cocked his head and raised his eyebrows. “How do you think it got there?”

“So my bed was made here, by your monks?” he replied, amazed.

“Indeed. Everyone here has the opportunity to serve as a craftsman, a cook, a gardener, a winemaker, a scribe,” said Benedict. “Like the Church of Christ, we depend on one another, and we provide for one another’s needs.” They approached the church at the center of Monte Cassino. “And here is where the center of our life takes place.”

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“Your prayers are the center?” the judge asked.

“As the Psalmist said, ‘Seven times a day, I rise and praise you’ and ‘At midnight, I rise to praise you’. So, we endeavor to live likewise.”

“By prayer as well as your work?”

“Prayer is our work,” Benedict replied emphatically. “Physical labor is of great value and keeps our hands from being idle. But we are called to worship and praise our heavenly King. In fact, you have come just as we are approaching our prayer service at the end of the day. We would be most honored for you to join us in the church before taking your rest.”

“Father Benedict!” came a strident call from across the yard. Running at a full sprint was Rodolfo, who wore a clearly anguished face.

“Brother Rodolfo, what news?” asked Benedict.

“Our worst fears have been realized, Father,” the monk huffed, out of breath. “We have no bread!”

“No bread?” Benedict inquired, disbelieving. “I know food has been scarce, but surely we had more wheat than that.”

“Five loaves remain, Father! Tomorrow at breakfast, we will be out of bread!”

“We will have to go to a settlement to the south and buy what we can or trade some wine,” Benedict thought aloud.

“That raises the second problem, Father!”

“What is that?”

“A raiding party of Slavs has come from the direction of Sant Elia and is making for the monastery!” Rodolfo blurted out. “They will certainly be here after nightfall if they do not break pace! If some among us go to find food, there might not be a monastery to return to.”

Benedict sensed the judge faltering at his side, and instinctively reached out to steady him. “Brother Rodolfo,” he calmly spoke, “gather the monks and the guests from the refectory and bring them here to the church.”

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“Father, did you not hear what I just told you?”

“I did,” Benedict replied evenly. “And I would remind you that even as dangers swarm around our family, the hours of prayer still stand firm.”

“But Father...”

“Brother Rodolfino, I am not asking you to give weight to your fears, I am reminding you that Christ is our shepherd even in apparent danger. Calm yourself. Gather all the monks. Bring the guests here. And do so immediately.”

The evening breezes wafted through the air as forty-five souls huddled inside the church and Benedict moved through the crowd toward the altar. Rodolfino had lit twelve candles, six on each side of the nave, and the flickering lights cast an eerie, inconstant glow throughout the church. Soft murmurs and whimpers of anxiety escaped from the mouths of many in the assembly, but when Benedict reached the front altar and turned to face the congregation, not a sound could be heard. He raised his hands to heaven.

“The Lord Almighty grant us a peaceful night,” he began, “and a perfect end.”

“Amen,” came the reply of the people.

They joined together to confess their sins, asking God for forgiveness, for changed desires, and for the love of God to dwell in their hearts. Benedict cleared his throat and called out, “O God, make speed to save us!”

“O Lord, make haste to help us!”

The words were not a mumble, but an earnest groaning from the hearts of the faithful. The words of the congregation faded as Benedict folded his hands to recite a psalm, when a flurry of noise broke overhead. Looking up, Benedict peered at the small slit of the window behind the altar and saw a black form thrash downward toward

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him. Putting up his hands for protection, Benedict and the entire congregation gave an awed gasp as a raven perched on the abbot's arm!

For a few seconds, nobody moved or spoke. Then Benedict's face split into a wide grin as he took his opposite hand and stroked the raven's head.

"Hello, little one," he whispered. "Have you come to assure us that we will be protected?"

The raven cocked its head to the side, looked at Benedict, then at the people, and finally back at the abbot, before crying, "Caw!"

Laughing loudly, Benedict gave the raven's head another stroke. "I thought so, little friend. I thought so." Looking at the timorous worshipers, he began to recite the words of the fourth Psalm:

"Answer me when I call, O God, defender of my cause; you set me free when I am hard-pressed; have mercy on me and hear my prayer. You mortals, how long will you dishonor my glory? How long will you worship dumb idols and run after false gods? Know that the LORD does wonders for the faithful; when I call upon the LORD, he will hear me. Tremble, then, and do not sin; speak to your heart in silence upon your bed. Offer the appointed sacrifices and put your trust in the LORD. Many are saying, 'Oh, that we might see better times!' Lift up the light of your countenance upon us, O LORD. You have put gladness in my heart, more than when grain and wine and oil increase. I lie down in peace; at once I fall asleep, for only you, LORD, make me dwell in safety."

Benedict looked out over the dozens of souls. Although some still exhibited fear, most showed resolve upon their faces, and all nodded as if embraced by the hands of courage. Benedict walked into the middle of the gathering, the raven still clinging to his left arm, and raised his right hand before speaking.

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“Yes, we lack food. Yes, we are under threat. But the adversity we face is the opportunity the Lord shall work through marvelously. The victory will be ours if we wait upon the Lord Jesus with courage.”

It was at dawn when Rodolfo opened the door to Benedict’s room. “Father!” he hissed.

Benedict sat upon his bed.

“I am sorry to interrupt what you might be doing, but you need to come to the front gate.”

“The Slavs have not approached the monastery?” Benedict asserted.

“Why do you ask that?” inquired Rodolfo.

Benedict stood up from his bed as the raven flew from the window sill and alighted on his left hand. The abbot walked across his small room and kindly touched Rodolfo on the shoulder. “Let us go to the gate, as you requested.”

Heading through the door, Benedict paused and turned back as the raven let out a loud caw. “Christ’s opportunity from our adversity. Come along with Peter and myself.”

Rodolfo looked around to see where this ‘Peter’ was. Mystified he followed Benedict and the raven out of the room.

“Father!” Rodolfo called as he and Benedict approached the gate. “It is truly a miracle! Whatever our fears are, they will vanish as the sun rises!”

“Calm yourself, Brother Rodolfo,” Benedict answered, waving his right hand as Peter the raven let out another lengthy squawk. “I take it the Slavs are nowhere near?”

“That’s just the thing, Father! We heard shouts in the valley as if their force was advancing up the mount, and then a mist arose from the forest obscuring the road. Some of us watched from the ramparts and heard new shouts,

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different calls...what sounded like yelps of fear. We heard swords unsheathed and shields battered. Cries of pain reached to the skies!”

“They must have grown confused and attacked each other in the fog,” the judge gasped.

“That we assumed,” said another of the monks, who jumped from a ladder adjoining the rampart to the ground, “for as the sun peeked over the horizon, we saw dead bodies at the base of the road! Father, Almighty God has indeed saved us!”

At that, the men gave a great cheer, and Peter the raven squawked once more!

“And that is not all,” added Rodolfino, walking toward the gate and opening it wide. “Father, come see!”

Benedict shuffled forward. There, on the ground before him, lay twenty large cloth sacks, some loaded down with wheat, and some with baked bread. An awed hush fell over the other monks as Benedict smiled and then raised himself up to stand, the raven never leaving his arm.

“Bread and grain,” he exulted, “enough to sustain us for weeks. The Lord knows our needs; the Lord provides for our every need. Today, brothers, we are saved from death and saved from hunger, for the Lord raises up His people. Let us remember this, that we are not ruled by our present worries, but by the promises of Christ in the past that are certain well into our future!”

The men shouted with glee and immediately rushed to bring the sacks of grain and bread into Monte Cassino. Leaving them to the task, Benedict climbed the ladder to the rampart, the raven still clinging to his arm, and he looked out over the expansive valley before turning to smile at the raven.

“A wondrous miracle, Peter,” Benedict said. “Wouldn’t you agree?”

Peter the raven let out another raucous “Caw!” Benedict could not help but laugh joyously in reply.

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“Yes, Peter,” he said. “With Christ before us, we go forward. Always forward.” He breathed deeply as he smiled out over the countryside. “Everywhere forward.”

BENEDICT was born in Nursia, Italy around 480, a twin with his devout sister Scholastica. His deep trust in Christ, combined with his energetic desire to nurture the faith of others, led him to found monasteries in and around the town of Subbiaco. His great literary achievement came in his Rule of St. Benedict, which laid out directives for monastery life that formed the activity of monks around physical labor, prayer, and obedience. This discipline set the standard for monasticism in western Europe through the Middle Ages, and it formed the heartbeat of his great monastery, Monte Cassino, which he founded around 529. Throughout the constant societal unrest and hardship of those years, Benedict remained faithful to Christ all the way to his death in 547.

FACT FILES

Medieval Monasticism

The years of the ancient church were marked by a considerable amount of energy. While Christians were establishing parameters for spiritual leadership, understanding how the New Testament took shape, or engaging in theological controversies that led to councils like Nicea and Chalcedon, there was barely a moment's time for the Church to catch its breath. Add in a considerable amount of early persecution, and we find that Christians faced the world with a great deal of vigor.

While no one dared declare that a Christian should be lazy or complacent, over time some leaders questioned what exactly God had called people to do. Throughout the late ancient church and into the Middle Ages, there arose an understanding that people might best serve God by joining communities dedicated to prayer and spiritual discipline. While these communities each had their own flavor and would develop into varied streams, they had a common vision to form a cluster of dedicated believers who withdrew from what they had known to a new life together. These communities became known as monasteries and the movement was monasticism.

Although we had just experienced some of Benedict's story at the monastery of Monte Cassino, the monastic movement predates him by a number of years. St. Antony of Egypt (251-356) was the first notable monk to gather followers into communities, centered mostly in the Egyptian desert and caves. Pachomius later built a physical monastery in Tabennisi, Egypt around the year 320, as a home for dedicated monks. Monasteries later experienced a surge of interest by virtue of the endorsement of Basil of Caesarea (330-379), who dictated that monasteries should

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be families of community, prayer, and work. Later monastic leaders such as John Cassian and Cassiodorus expanded the construction of monasteries into western Europe and emphasized the copying of ancient manuscripts for the preservation of classical and Biblical knowledge.

But it was Benedict who took the threads of monasticism and wove them together into a beautiful tapestry. In his Rule, Benedict effectively organized the life of his monasteries (and the entire order of what came to be known as the Benedictines). Believing that work disciplined the followers of Christ to serve Him better, Benedict ordered that part of the life of the monastery should be dedicated to physical labor. This would include gardening and growing the food eaten by the monks, enabling a level of self-sufficiency. Other monks might engage in craftsmanship and wood working or copying manuscripts. Some would keep the monastery buildings clean and well-swept. For every monk, there was an essential job to do. Worship was another portion of daily life, with many times set apart for prayer. Matins would occur at midnight, followed by Lauds three hours later, then—in regular increments—Prime, Tierce, Sext, Nones, Vespers, and Compline. A monk would pursue rest and sleep, when necessary, but prayer and worship were absolutely critical to the community's existence. And Benedict also demanded loving obedience to the abbot, the director of the monastery, as one would obey Christ Himself.

As the Church increased in stature and authority throughout the Middle Ages, the monastic movement experienced similar increases. To this end, there were positives and negatives as we evaluate medieval monasticism. Happily, there was a great deal of missionary fervor to take the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the surrounding areas. Monks were also able to put service into action. The manual labor of the Benedictines is a prime example, but

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there is also the matter of showing hospitality. In a world where one could not be certain of finding a decent inn to stay the night and where one might not want to risk sleeping on the open ground, monasteries would often allow travelers to stay in guest quarters for the night and receive food. Much of this grew out of Benedict's desire to receive every person as if receiving Jesus in one's presence. Monasteries served as schools and even hospitals for surrounding areas, and their collection of books became the libraries of the Middle Ages.

On the other hand, some negative realities grew up in monasticism. The reality of many sinners within a community meant that, sadly, one could find corruption, power-hungry leaders and followers, and some illicit behavior. Sometimes sons of nobles would opt to enter the monastic life and be upset that the activity there was more demanding and not as cushioned as they were used to. And after a time, a greater number of orders sprouted, each with its own emphasis, where it could seem there was much competition, depending on if one was aligned with the Benedictines, Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians, and so forth.

One of the key questions that we can pose regarding monasticism is, "Is withdrawal from the world to the monastery effective?" In one way, it is problematic. Why withdraw from the world when Jesus entered the world Himself to save us? Just because one withdraws from temptations and problems doesn't make one's heart pure when isolated. In other words, "wherever you go, there you are", and Jeremiah's reminder that "the heart is exceedingly wicked above all things"¹ rang true even to the most dedicated monks. Also, monasticism could raise the idea that serving Christ in the monastery was a higher calling than being a merchant or farmer or fisherman. The

1. Jeremiah 17:9

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problem is the Bible nowhere claims this radical distinction between “sacred” and “secular” work. All proper work is godly if God has ordained it and we offer it to Him with glad hearts.

Despite the problems, these were challenges that would be faced by any movement seeking a new way of pleasing God. And while monasticism struggled to confront these challenges, there were plenty of leaders who met these challenges head-on. When things needed reforming and cleansing, those reactions usually came from within the monasteries themselves. And in a time when western civilization was under threat by economic collapse, war, and lack of education, monks kept the light of civilization alive through their dedicated work to preserve the best of Scriptural and classical teaching passed down through the ages. Our link to the past that gives us understanding for our present and future is found largely in the work of faithful monks, many of whom labored in obscurity while pursuing the glory of God.