

The Monastic Tradition

- Christianity spread rapidly across Europe, particularly after the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine in the 4th century. The monastic tradition soon followed.
- The basic idea that inspired monasticism is asceticism. This is a strict form of self-discipline for spiritual end—often takes the form of fasting, vigils, and abstinence from all worldly pleasures.

The three principles of an ascetic life are based on very powerful aspects of life: wealth, sex and authority

- **Poverty** The rejection of worldly goods is a common theme of the Gospels. This was a vow that the individual monk took, though the monastery itself or the community, as a corporate body, might own property and even be wealthy.
- **Chastity** Monasteries universally consist of single-sex communities who lead a chaste lifestyle.
- **Obedience** Monasticism is a rejection of individualism. This is manifest as the complete obedience to a common rule by the individual monk. This is usually manifest in the person of an Abbot to whom all the monks owe complete obedience.

Eremitic and Coenobitic: two closely related traditions

- **Eremitic** Living alone and coming together only for liturgical ceremonies, hence the word *Hermit*—an individual who lives a reclusive, solitary life. Hermits attracted followers and often moved from a solitary life to a community or coenobitic monastery.
- **Coenobitic** To be part of a community. An eremitic monk was usually an enlightened person who was more educated.

What is the difference between a hermit and a monk?

- The essential difference is that a hermit lives on his/her own whereas a monk lives as part of a community.
- In the early centuries of Christianity the difference between the two is not always that clear. A hermit might attract followers who eventually became a loosely formed community. On the other hand a monk might often spend part of his/her time living as a hermit.
- There is also a difference between a community of monks living close to a centre of population and one located in an extremely remote place, like on Sceilig Mhíchíl.

In Early Christian Ireland there was a very strong eremitic (from *eremos*—solitary) tradition, which fed into the monastic tradition. St. Kevin at Glendalough is an example.

Monk's Appearance

- All Medieval monks were clean-shaven. They were distinguished by having the top of their heads shaven. This is called a *tonsure*. Irish monks had a diamond-shaped tonsure.

Learning and Language

- After the fall of the Roman Empire, the Irish monasteries became an important reservoir of Christian learning. Irish monks like Columcille (Scotland and England) and Columbanus (France, Germany, Switzerland and Italy) played an important role in the re-introduction of this learning back into Europe in the 6th to 8th centuries.
- Monks needed to be able to read and write in Latin. To this end monasteries became major seats of learning and were responsible for the production and safeguarding of religious books. A school, library and scriptorium were features of most monasteries in medieval Europe.
- Latin, from 4th century, was the official language of Christianity and therefore religious office holders had to learn Latin. Thus, Latin became the language of education, science and religion and to this day still is used—periodic table in Science (Fe—iron), generic names for species—plants animals etc. e.g. *homo sapiens*, *plantagio lanciolata*.
- The Gospels were translated into Latin as Christianity spread rapidly across the Roman Empire from the 4th century. Latin became the official language of the church throughout Europe. This meant that religious officers needed to be able to read and write in Latin.
- But not all the learning was purely religious. Until the revival of secular learning in the Renaissance, monasteries were the main cultural centres of learning and many Irish monasteries were internationally famous education centres e.g. Roscarbery, Co. Cork and Clonmacnoise, Co. Offaly. The development of philosophy and history owe much to the intellectual activity of learned monks. In Ireland, the great history of early medieval times *The Annals of the Four Masters* was collected by monks from monastic libraries.

Craftsmanship

- Monks became highly skilled in the production of the holy artefacts necessary for divine worship, like chalices.
- The Irish monks were masters of the crafts of calligraphy and metal work, as seen in the Book of Kells (a Bible), the Ardagh Chalice and many other artefacts now on display in the National Museum of Ireland.

The Vallum

- The vast majority of Early Christian monasteries in Ireland had an earthen bank forming the **vallum**. Stone walls were used in areas where stone was plentiful and earth scarce. The area enclosed can range from 30m to 100m in diameter.
- The importance of the vallum was to mark the boundary between the secular world outside and the ecclesiastical world within, where different rules and laws applied. Many criminals sought refuge in monasteries because they were beyond the secular law once inside the vallum. One of the functions of stone crosses was to mark entry to the holy ground of the monastery.
- Archaeologists have been able to identify these enclosures from aerial photographs. Often the vallum has long been levelled and ploughed over. But in certain conditions—especially during a drought—the line of the vallum can be seen in the colour of the crop. An example of this is Monasterboice in Co. Louth. The visible remains (high crosses; round tower; ruined church) now occur within the graveyard but in the fields around it the line of the vallum has been identified on aerial photographs.

Irish Monasteries from 6th to 11th centuries

- In Ireland some monastic communities chose to live in existing local communities while others sought remote isolated areas like islands e.g. Sceilig Mhíchíl, Co. Kerry and Scattery Island, Co. Clare.
- The place name Desert or Dysert often indicates the location of an isolated monastery e.g. Dysertmore.

Many monasteries, like Kevin's at Glendalough, dominated religious life throughout Ireland from the 6th century until the reform of the Irish church in the 12th century.

- They varied in size from large centres with a big population to small isolated hermitages.
- They occurred throughout the country.
- They were important centres of learning and teaching.
- The reputation of Irish monasteries was known right across Europe.
- They dominated the Irish church until the 12th century.
- As they grew in importance they also became a powerful political and economic force in Ireland.

Stone as a Building Material

Along the western seaboard, where wood was scarce and stone plentiful, buildings were made from stone and their ruins survive to this day. We therefore rely on these western examples to get some idea of what the early monasteries looked like. Examples of western monasteries using stone for buildings are

- Reask, Co Kerry
- Church Island, Co Kerry
- Inishcealtra, Co Clare
- Scattery Island, Co Clare
- High Island, Co. Galway
- Kilmacduagh, Co. Galway
- St. MacDara's Island, Co. Galway
- Inishmurray, Co Sligo

Important archaeological excavations have taken place at Church Island and Reask, both in Co. Kerry, and Nendrum, Co. Down.

Synods

- There were bishops in Ireland from the 5th century onwards e.g. St. Patrick. However, it was the monastery that dominated religious life until the reform of the church in 12th century. Then number of synods were held in order to bring the church into line with current European practices.

Synod of Cashel 1101 AD was concerned with

- Freeing the church from lay interference and exactions.
- Clerical immunity from prosecution from secular courts.
- Clerical celibacy.
- Church sanctuary.
- Irish marriage practices.

Synod of Rathbraisil (1111 AD)

- Established a diocesan structure to the church governed by bishops. This diocesan structure with its numerous parishes forms the basis of the present day ecclesiastical system.

Many of these dioceses had their centres in the new growing urban centres, like the towns established by the Vikings (Dublin, Limerick, Cork) (See *Towns*, T2, U3). The bishops took up residence at these new diocesan centres and built cathedrals. This resulted in a downgrading of many once-important monasteries.



Monk on horseback from the Book of Kells



A monk/bishop on horseback from the Cross of Banagher Co Offaly c. 9th century

Short Interview with Br. Patrick, a Benedictine Monk.

Text of the interview.

Monastic way of life

“Monasticism, started after the fall of the Roman Empire when everything was in chaos. The Roman Empire was probably the most stable and most extraordinary structure imposed on Western European society and when that collapsed there was nothing left so this was an alternative model which was developed by St. Benedict where people could live together and work together. Until then they didn't have a policy or they didn't have some kind of ideology which kept them together. It was a structure. It was how you eat, how you sleep, how you work, how you get up, how you go to bed. So it was very simple and this was during the Dark Ages when people weren't educated, so they couldn't understand various philosophies or books so this particular structure kept that spirit alive right through the Dark Ages and in fact it was the formation of Europe. The monks actually were the initial workforce that constructed Europe as it is today because they were obeying one abbot and they were all working—unpaid labour and they constructed all that infrastructure which we call Europe today so in fact when the European Community was being formed Jacques de Lours called together all the abbots of the Benedictine monasteries of Europe and he said “you are the ones who should be describing to us how to reform Europe for a second time and how to put into what were originally structures simply on an economic basis and how to make them spiritual and meaningful.”

What other things do you do in your day?

“Well my life is meant to be and is as far as I can make it, a life following the Holy Spirit, so far the first five years of the new century, I went wherever the Holy Spirit prompted me to go and that took me to 13 different countries. Sometimes I didn't know why I was going somewhere until I arrived, then it would be pointed out to me why I had come. So if you follow the spirit you will have the most extraordinary life and it may look on the outside as if you are doing something very regular, but on the inside something is happening at every moment which is quite extraordinary and which ,if you follow it gives you a really exciting existence. Now I wrote all that down in a book which I called ‘Walkabout’ which was a way of describing my life with the Holy Spirit. Now that has been the last five years. Before that I was headmaster in the school. I was teaching for twenty five years so I couldn't afford to have that leisure or that freedom. So I lived a very ordinary life but fortunately in the last 5 years I have been allowed to follow this particular vocation.”

Would you recommend this way of life?

“I think it depends on the person. There are horses for courses and most people for instance who have read Harry Potter know that Harry Potter was having a very miserable life living with the Dursley's and at one moment an owl came into his room and handed him a letter inviting him to an alternative kind of school, an alternative kind of life and I think a monastery is similar to that. It is a different way of living in the world and most people live an alternative way of life which is not monastic but those who are interested in God and interested in another world then this is the perfect kind of life for them.”

Are you Content?

“Well I would say at this point in my life I am very contented and I have been very lucky and I also have had enormous opportunities which aren't given to many people so that it has been a very fulfilling life. Now that doesn't mean that at all times during my life I have been happy and everything has gone well, it simply means that things have happened to me which make it possible for me to say at this moment that at all times I was guided and led in a way that makes it now a very fulfilling and a very wonderful landscape to look back over and enjoy.”

Would you describe yourself as a holy person?

Luckily the Rule of St. Benedict that we follow says that nobody should call themselves holy. That's up to other people to make that judgement and on being holy there is nobody on this planet who is holy, we say it, those of us who are Christians say it every time we go to mass ‘*You alone are holy*’, there is only one God and that is the only holiness available.