

# Monasticism

## LESSON 1

### Monks, Monasteries & Monasticism



ARCHAEOLOGY  
time in transition

IT'S ABOUT TIME 2

**Aim(s)**

To provide students with an understanding of monasticism and its heritage in Ireland.

**Objective(s)**

To bring monasticism to life, firstly by listening to a present-day monk's story, and secondly by exploring the archaeology of an Early Christian monastery.

**Time Period**

5th century AD - 13th century.

**KEY INFORMATION****Lesson**

- Monasticism is a way of life whereby people live in a community, take religious vows, and follow a fixed set of rules.
- Monasticism is common to all religions.
- For over 500 years monks, monasteries and monasticism independently dominated Christian life in Ireland.
- There are numerous Early Christian monasteries throughout Ireland.

**Context**

- Early Christian monasteries were set inside a large enclosure.
- Monasteries became powerful religious, political economic and educational centres.
- Traditional monasteries declined in 12th century and were replaced by a new form of monasticism introduced by the Cistercians.

**METHODOLOGY & MEDIUM**

- Instruction
- Audio
- Discussion
- Worksheets
- **Worksheet 1** Patrick's Story
- **Worksheet 2** Draw a plan of an Early Christian Monastery in Ireland
- **Worksheet 3** Following Rules
- **Student Handout** Monks, Monasteries and Monasticism

**SECTIONS**

- Section 1** Patrick's Story
- Section 2** Early Christian Monasticism
- Section 3** Development of Monasticism in Early Christian Ireland
- Section 4** The Rules of Monastic Life
- Section 5** The Demise of the Early Christian Monastery in Ireland

**Recommendation**

This lesson lends itself to a cross curricular approach, in particular the Humanities and Religious Education.



**Key Question(s)** What is monastic life like today?



### Teacher Instruction

This is an audio assisted lesson accompanied by a questionnaire (**Worksheet 1**). Students should use the information they acquire from the audio file to answer the questions in the questionnaire.

Introduce the track in the following manner: *'Today we are going to look at a way of life that has been in existence for thousands of years, a way of life that is quite demanding and not to be entered into lightly. Please listen to this person as he describes his way of life'*

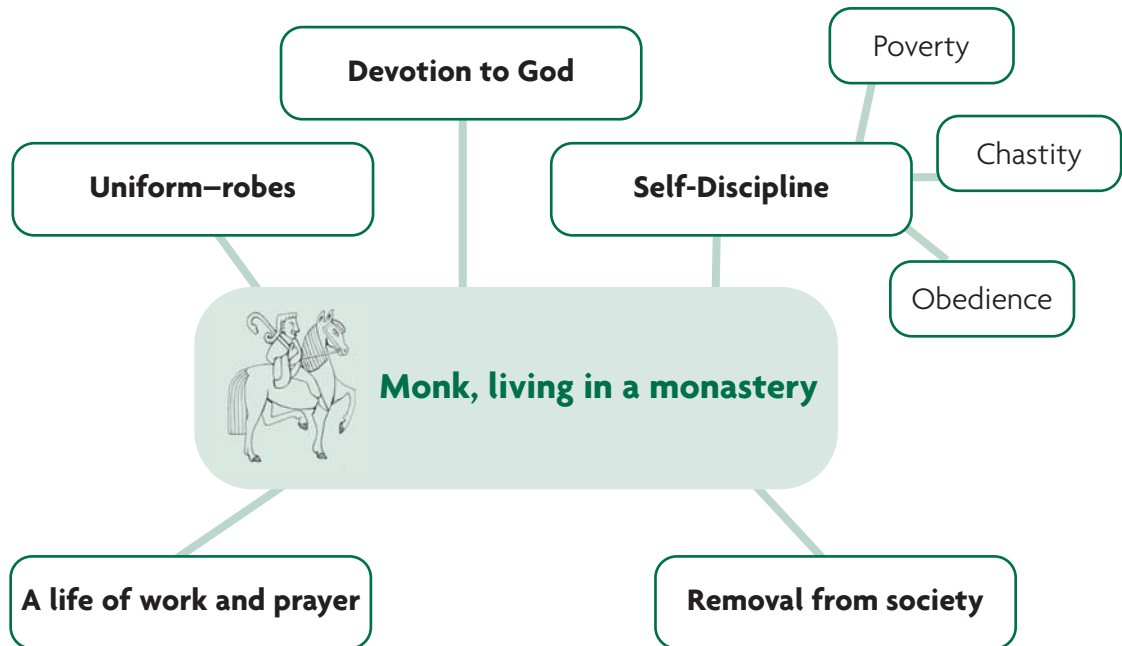
### Patrick's Story

I entered the monastery here at 18 when I finished my leaving cert, and had been at University for one year. Joining the monastery was not something I had always wanted to do but while I was at school two of my teachers who were also monks approached me and asked me if I would consider entering the abbey. Well, I spent a long time deciding and I eventually entered for the period of one year. Now that was forty years ago. I am glad now that I decided to take this path in life because it has been very good for me. In the beginning I was sent abroad for four years to study. I studied philosophy and I studied in French so I learnt French and when I came back I taught in the school, which the monastery ran. I taught French and English. I was also head-master of the school for a while and recently I have written about eight books which have come about because of all the reflection I have done during my time I have spent on my own, too. I live in a community with forty-three other men who are monks and we pray together on many occasions during the day. I get up at six o'clock, like most other people, and say Matins and Lauds in the church. Then midday office is at 10.30, Mass is at 12.00 and in the evening Vespers and Complaine are at 6.00pm and 8.30pm, so that covers the prayer life.

St. Benedict, the person whose Rule we follow, he laid down that these prayers should be said and that was one thousand years ago in 480 and we follow his Rule even today although obviously we have amended it somewhat. The person who is in charge of the monastery is called the abbot. Every monk takes a vow of obedience to the abbot. We all wear a uniform, which is a black robe, and we eat and we pray together although we all work at different jobs. Some of us teach, others work on the farm, others in the garden and some do woodwork or art work of various kinds, others teach at the University and some write books. We have many visitors who come to the monastery and stay in the guesthouse and go to the services that are in the church. Many people come to the monastery to get away from the noise and the turmoil of their working lives and they find that a monastery like ours is a good place to come and find some peace and to take stock of their lives. Everything we do as monks from chanting to writing is done in devotion to God. Self-discipline is also very important, to get us through the day and keep us living together but the essential thing is that we put everything that we have and everything that we are at God's disposal and that means that we don't have any personal possessions and we don't get married and we don't have children. Other people have to look after everything that happens in this world. Our job as monks is to look after the communication system between this world and God.

**Teacher Instruction**

When the students have completed the worksheet go through the questions and write their conclusions on the board along the following lines.

**Conclusion**

Patrick is a monk living in Ireland today who devotes his life to God through prayer and work and self discipline. He lives the monastic lifestyle in a monastery with other monks following rules laid down by the Abbot.

**Key Point**

A monastery is a place where a community of men or women live together, devoting themselves to the religious life, practising self-denial.



The basic idea that inspired monasticism is the practice of self-discipline or asceticism—this often takes the form of fasting, vigils and removal from worldly pleasures. The three key principals are

- Poverty—no worldly wealth.
- Chastity—lack of physical pleasure.
- Obedience—to live according to an exact set of rules.

**Key Points**

- Monasteries and the monastic life (monasticism) is a feature of most organised religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism and Judaism.
- Monasticism has been practiced for thousands of years across the world.

**Key Question(s)** How did monasticism start?

The origins of Christian monasticism can be found in the gospels. There are many examples in both the Old and New Testaments of people removing themselves from society and going away to pray and fast for long periods in remote places.

**Teacher Instruction**

Pose the following questions to the students

- Can you think of any examples from the Bible of someone removing themselves from society? **Jesus going into the desert for 40 days and 40 nights, praying and fasting.**
- Twelve monks is often given as the minimum number needed to form a monastery—why? **The twelve apostles.**

By the 4th century communities of Christians were leading a monastic life and living in monasteries in the Egyptian desert. These are known as The Desert Fathers and their writings were very influential on the development of monasticism.

There has always been a close relationship between hermits and monks. Both lead an ascetic life devoted to God. The essential difference is that a hermit lives alone but a monk lives in a community with other monks.

Women were also following the monastic lifestyle from Early Christian times. Female monks are called nuns and the monastery they live in is called a convent.



The word used to describe the severe self-discipline of monasticism is **ascetic**, and this way of life as **asceticism**. Not to be confused with **aesthetic**—the appreciation of beautiful things.

In the early centuries of Christianity there were two types of people devoting their lives to God: *Eremitic*: holy people dedicating their lives to God on their own—*hermits*. *Coenobitic*: part of a community—monks.

## SECTION 3 Development of Monasticism in Early Christian Ireland

**Key Question(s)** How did Christian monasticism develop?

Monasticism first developed in Ireland in the Early Christian period after the arrival of Christianity in the 5th century AD.

**Development of monasticism in Ireland**

In Early Christian Ireland there was a very strong eremitic (hermit) tradition, which fed into the monastic tradition. St. Kevin is an example. In the 6th century Kevin, as a young man, went to Glendalough to devote his life to God by living alone as a hermit. He became well known as a holy man. Soon other young men came to Glendalough to follow his example and so a monastic settlement developed. In 570 he became abbot of the monastery.

### What did Kevin need to set up his monastery?

- **Followers**—Once Kevin established his reputation as a holy man he would attract followers.
- **Land**—Also because of his reputation as a holy man Kevin was likely to have received offers of land to found his monastery. Kevin came from a powerful family group who were wealthy landowners. Kevin chose Glendalough.
- **Water**—When Kevin chose his location water would have played a key part in his choice—Glendalough is on a stream close to a lake. As well as providing fresh water the stream was also used to power his cornmill.



Many monasteries located themselves beside spring wells which may have been venerated in prehistoric times and continued on in use as holy wells, some even up to the present day.

### What did Kevin's monastery look like?

In Early Christian Ireland a monastery was a special place. This separateness was physically marked by the construction of a vallum. This was a high earthen bank or wall enclosing the entire monastery. The area enclosed was usually circular.

### What buildings did Kevin need for his monastery?



#### Teacher Instruction

Draw a large circle on the board to represent the vallum of Kevin's monastery at Glendalough and ask the students to identify key buildings. Write these within the circle.

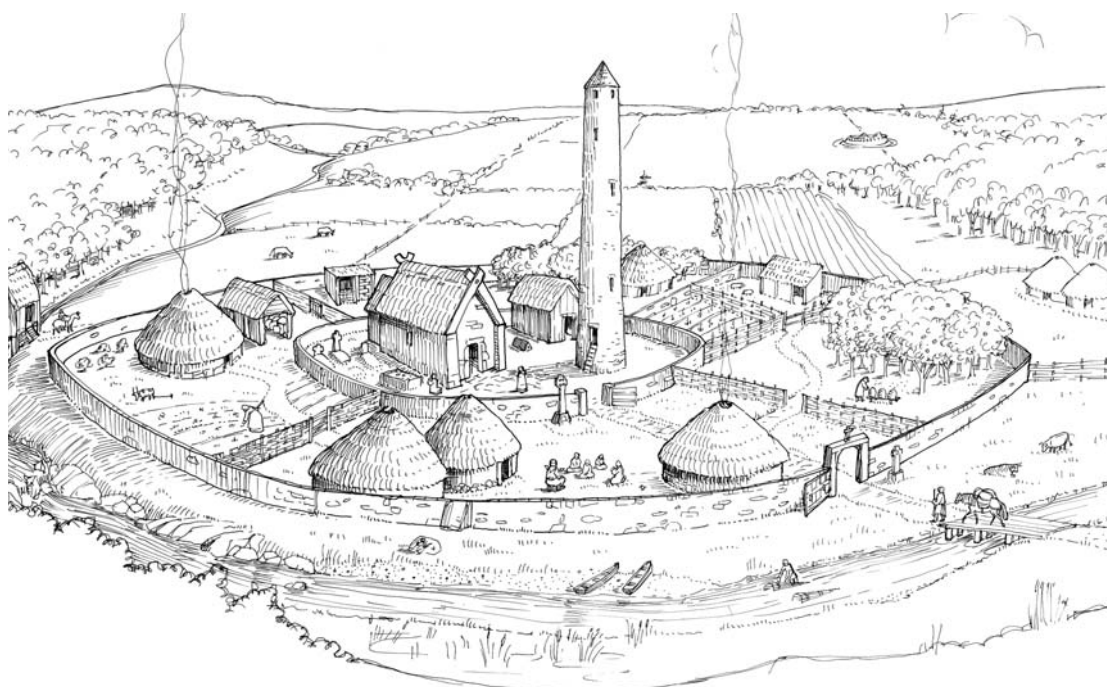


Fig 1: Early Christian Monastery



### The key buildings Kevin needed for his monastery

- **Church:** for praying and religious service; small in size, rectangular in plan; east-west orientation. Many early monasteries had more than one church, for example at Glendalough there are the remains of three churches in the area of the monastery.
- **Huts/cells:** small circular huts. Monks seem to have lived alone in singular huts.
- **Abbot's residence:** probably a large house.
- **High Cross:** space was needed around it as it was used in teaching episodes from the Bible.
- **Guest house:** for visitors.
- **Gateway:** there was a gateway into most monasteries roughly at each of the four cardinal points.
- **Infirmary:** for sick monks or lay people.
- **Communal building:** for eating, reading, meeting.
- **School/scriptorium/library:** a place of learning and where sacred holy books were transcribed and stored.
- **Workshop:** for metal work. Making religious artefacts e.g. chalices, patens. Farm implements were also made here.
- **Sheds for animals:** in the fields outside the monastery.
- **Carpenter's workshop:** a place where woodworking took place.

### What were the buildings made of?

Generally, the buildings were made of wood and have long since disappeared. At Glendalough some of the churches and the round tower of the monastery survive because they were constructed of stone.



### Teacher Instruction

Distribute **Worksheet 2** and ask the students to draw a plan of a monastery to their own design based on the list written on the board.

- **Most monasteries also contained a burial ground**—Christian graves at this time were shallow and orientated east-west. The body was wrapped in a shroud and buried fully extended with the head facing east. The favoured place for burials was on the south side of the church which was regarded as its sacred side.



### Teacher Instruction

Add the burial ground to the list on the board and ask the students to add it to their drawing. Place a number of the finished designs on the board. Look at the variety of different layouts the students have come up with. This variety reflects the random way an Early Christian monastery was laid out, with buildings scattered around a church. It is important to note that monasteries were always changing and growing as their importance grew or faded over time. Ask the students to consider some of the building types and list the artefacts they think might occur in them.

- **Church:** Bible; prayer books; Psalter; chalice; candles; crucifix; communion plate; bell etc.
- **Monks Huts:** robes; belt; prayer book etc.
- **Communal Building:** tables; chairs; kitchen utensils etc.
- **Library/school/scriptorium:** vellum rolls; ink; writing desk etc.
- **Iron workshop:** forge; crucibles; hammer; anvil; engraving tools etc.
- **Farm buildings :** plough; sack of corn; iron shears etc.



The valuables and wealth of monasteries is well known. The Vikings focused their attacks on monasteries as they knew they were a storehouse of riches. These valuables were religious objects made of silver, gold and jewels. Examples of these are The Tara Brooch, The Ardagh Chalice and the Derrynaflan hoard of communion vessels. All of these are on display in the National Museum of Ireland, Kildare Street, Dublin (see *Lifestyle* T2,U4).

## SECTION 4 The Rules of Monastic Life



**Key Question(s)** Apart from the construction and equipping of buildings what would St. Kevin have needed in order to establish his monastery?

In order for a large number of people to live together harmoniously, organisation is needed.

Here are some of the things St. Kevin needed to consider

- Regulation of attendance in church at set times.
- Organise a farm to provide food for the monks.
- Set times for rising, eating and going to bed.
- Maintain discipline and keep order.
- Keep a school to educate the novice monks.
- Set-up craft workshops.



Telling the time of day was difficult in Early Christian times. At a number of early Irish monastic sites sundials have survived but it was difficult to tell the time when the sun didn't shine. The first mechanical clocks were not invented until the 15th century.



### Key Point

In order to achieve the above objectives St. Kevin needed a **Rule Book**, with the regulations for the monastery written down for all to follow.

- Many of these Rules from Early Christian times have been lost over time
- The rules written by St. Columbanus (543 - 615 AD) played a major role firstly in Ireland, then in Iona, Scotland and subsequently in Europe.
- However, the most important set of rules written were those laid down by St. Benedict in Italy in 5th century AD. These are the most influential set of rules on Christian monasticism.

St. Kevin's rules do not survive but other rules have survived, for example St. Carthage's Rule for his monasteries in Lismore and Rahan in County Waterford was written in poetic stanza form (it has 135 four-line stanzas).



**Extract of the Rules of St. Carthage:**

*If you be a clerical student under government,  
Be active in resisting evil,  
Abide in the law of the church,  
Without laxity, without fault,*

*With modesty, with meekness,  
With constancy in obedience,  
With purity, with faultlessness,  
In all acts however trivial,*

*With patience, with simplicity,  
With gentleness to everyone,  
With groaning, with prayer,  
Unto Christ at all hours.*

**The Rule of St. Benedict**

St. Benedict set up monasteries in Italy in the 5th century AD. He played a key role in developing monastic life by setting down a comprehensive list of monastic rules. These rules formed the basis of monastic rules for a wide variety of monastic orders including the Cistercians, (see *The Cistercian Monastery*, T1, U2, L2).

The Rule consists of seventy-three chapters—each chapter covering a separate aspect of monastic life. The main elements are

- Monks should live communally under an elected Abbot.
- Monks should reside in one place.
- Monks should observe obedience, poverty and chastity.
- Monks should observe prayers at fixed hours (The Divine Office). The Rule stipulated the exact times at which monks got up and went to bed, and the exact times during the day they should attend services in the church.
- Monks should live a life of work, prayer and study at set times during the day.
- All property was communally owned.
- The Rule also stipulated what the monks should eat—no meat was allowed but fish could be eaten.
- The monks should wear plain woollen robes.
- The monks should sleep on a plain mattress in communal dormitories.



Benedict of Nursia was born in Italy in 480AD. He was educated in Rome and lived for a time as a hermit. Later he established twelve monasteries. One of these was at Monte Cassino where he drew up his monastic rule.



The original Rule book was burnt but fortunately a copy was made. In 581 AD the monastery of Monte Cassino was sacked and destroyed. The monks fled to Rome and brought with them, amongst other things, a book containing St. Benedict's Rule. This manuscript was kept safe in the Pope's library and was eventually returned to Monte Cassino where it was destroyed in a fire in 896 AD. Fortunately a copy of the Benedict's Rule had been made earlier by the Emperor Charlemagne around 800 AD so that it could be circulated amongst the monasteries of his empire. This copy survives today in the library of St. Gall in Switzerland. This set of rules is now known as *The Rule of St. Benedict*.

The Rule of St. Benedict played a major role in reforming the church in the 12th century when the Cistercian order adopted it, in the strictest form, as their rule.



### Teacher Instruction

Ask the students to divide into groups of two or three. Distribute **Worksheet 3** which is an extract from the fourth chapter of the *Rule of St. Benedict*. Ask the students to rank these rules in order from the easiest to the most difficult for them personally to obey. A third column is provided for rules which are not too difficult.

Lead a discussion under the following topics

- Would rules would they find easiest to obey?
- What rules would they find most difficult to obey?
- Would they be able to live by these rules?

## SECTION 5 The Demise of the Early Christian Monastery in Ireland



**Key Question(s)** What happened to these monasteries?

The introduction of a new diocesan parish system, after the Synod of Rathbraisl in 1111 AD, led to the decline of many traditional Irish monasteries.

### What is left of these early Irish monasteries?

When the 12th century reforms took effect many monasteries became parish centres. At many of these places today the main surviving features are

- An enclosed graveyard.
- A ruined medieval parish church.
- A holy well.
- Cross inscribed slabs.
- Some trace of the large enclosure or vallum (maybe discovered by aerial photography).

**Teacher Instruction**

Ask students to look at their drawing of the monastery and discuss what would survive above ground of the monastery today.

- Wooden church?
- Wooden huts/cells?
- Wooden school/scriptorium/library?
- Wooden sheds for animals?
- Wooden workshops for metal work?
- Burial ground?
- Stone cross?
- The vallum?

All the wooden features will not survive but the burial ground, stone cross and some trace of the vallum may still be in evidence.

- A new monastic tradition sweeps across Europe in the 11/12th century, with a new style of buildings and layout. This is introduced into Ireland by the Cistercians.

*See Projects section: Visit a Medieval Monastery and join in chant with Nóirín Ní Riain*

**WEB LINKS****WWW.**

Life in a modern Monastery

[www.bbc.co.uk/insideout/eastmidlands/series7/monastery.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/insideout/eastmidlands/series7/monastery.shtml)

Life of St. Columbanus

[www.newadvent.org/cathen/04137a.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04137a.htm)

Buddhist Monastic life

[www.buddhamind.info/leftside/monastic/monastic.htm](http://www.buddhamind.info/leftside/monastic/monastic.htm)

St Gall Monastery Plan

[www.stgallplan.org/](http://www.stgallplan.org/)

Monastic Ireland

[www.monasticireland.com/](http://www.monasticireland.com/)

Irish High Crosses

[www.megalithicireland.com/High%20Cross%20Home.htm](http://www.megalithicireland.com/High%20Cross%20Home.htm)

**Please answer the following questions**

Where does Patrick live? \_\_\_\_\_

Who encouraged him to choose this life? \_\_\_\_\_

What was his first job? \_\_\_\_\_

Who does he live with? \_\_\_\_\_

He rises at 5.15am—why? \_\_\_\_\_

What rule does he follow? \_\_\_\_\_

Who is he obedient to? \_\_\_\_\_

Does he eat his meals alone? \_\_\_\_\_

What kind of uniform does he wear? \_\_\_\_\_

Does Patrick own personal goods? \_\_\_\_\_

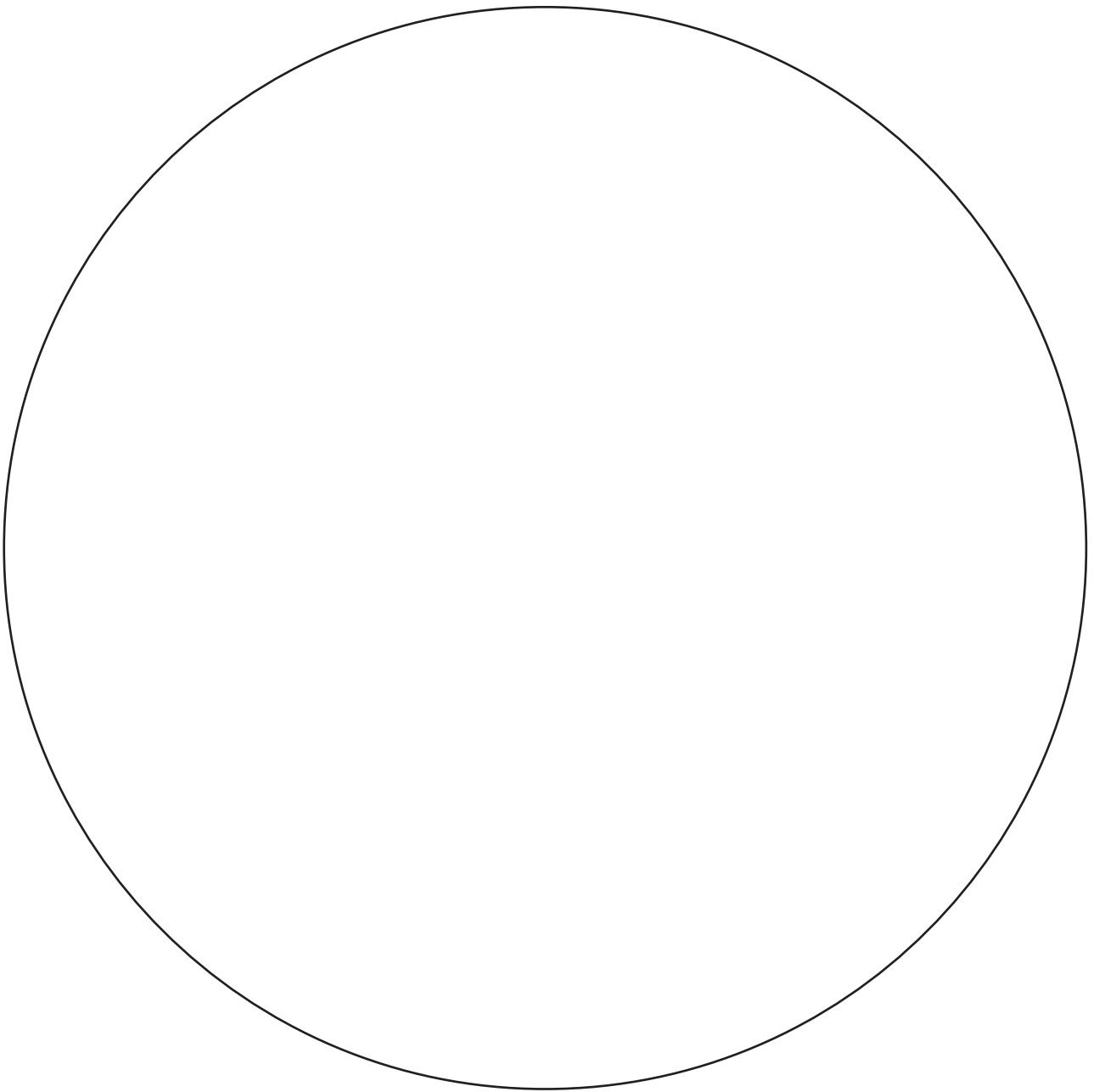
Is he married? \_\_\_\_\_

Can visitors stay at his home? \_\_\_\_\_

Does Patrick's life sound: (circle the one you find most appropriate)

*interesting*    *scary*    *fun*    *hard*    *dull*    *pointless*    *rewarding*

An A3 sheet is recommended for this exercise



On a scale of one to five categorise the rules in terms of ease or difficulty.  
1 = easiest, 5 = most difficult.

Extract of the Rule of St. Benedict—Selection from : CHAPTER IV *The Instruments of Good Works*

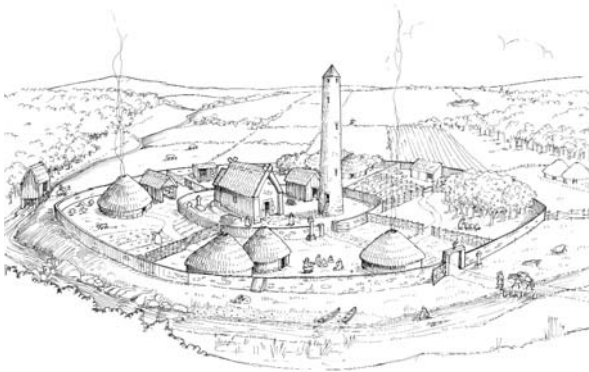
(12) Not to seek after pleasures.	1	2	3	4	5
(13) To love fasting.	1	2	3	4	5
(20) To hold one's self aloof from worldly ways.	1	2	3	4	5
(21) To prefer nothing to the love of Christ.	1	2	3	4	5
(22) Not to give way to anger.	1	2	3	4	5
(34) Not to be proud.	1	2	3	4	5
(35) Not to be given to wine.	1	2	3	4	5
(36) Not to be a great eater.	1	2	3	4	5
(37) Not to be drowsy.	1	2	3	4	5
(38) Not to be slothful.	1	2	3	4	5
(39) Not to be a murmurer.	1	2	3	4	5
(53) Not to love much speaking.	1	2	3	4	5
(54) Not to speak useless words and such as provoke laughter.	1	2	3	4	5
(55) Not to love boisterous laughter.	1	2	3	4	5
(56) To listen willingly to holy reading.	1	2	3	4	5
(57) To apply one's self often to prayer.	1	2	3	4	5
(69) To honour the aged.	1	2	3	4	5
(71) To pray for one's enemies in the love of Christ.	1	2	3	4	5
(72) To make peace with an adversary before the setting of the sun.	1	2	3	4	5
(73) Never to despair of God's mercy.	1	2	3	4	5



**Monastery**

This is a place where a community of men or women live, devoting themselves to religious life, practising self denial and removal from society.

Monasteries and monastic life are a feature of most organised religions.

**Early Christian Monastery**

The Early Christian monastery was enclosed by an earthen bank or stone wall (vallum). Within were:

- Church(es)
- Huts/cells
- Abbott's residence
- Stone crosses
- Gateway/access road
- Infirmary
- Communal buildings
- School/scriptorium/library
- Sheds for animals
- Workshops

All of these were loosely arranged around the church. Round Towers became a feature by the 10th century.

**Artefacts**

Derrynaflan (hoard of altar vessels)



Book of Kells

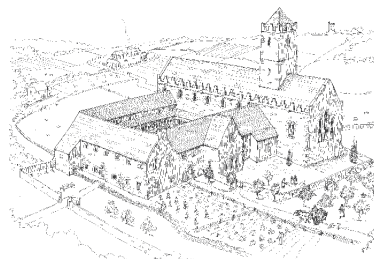
Monastic life became very popular in Early Christian Ireland. Monasteries became focal centres of religion in the country for over 600 years. They were also important centres for education and craftsmanship. Samples of works produced by monasteries include the Derrynaflan hoard and the Book of Kells.

These Early Christian monasteries went into decline in 12th century when the diocesan system was introduced.



Illustrations showing what Early Christian monks looked like

- Source (left): The Book of Kells
- Source (right): 9th century High Cross, Banagher, Co Offaly



A new style of monastery was introduced into Ireland in the 12th century; they were stone built and formally arranged around a cloister.



Kilmacoo, Co. Cork



Inishmurray, Co. Sligo

Features that may indicate the site of an Early Christian monastery:

- Vallum (if removed it may be visible on aerial photographs)
- Church ruin (probably medieval but rebuilt on the site of the earlier church(es))
- Holy Well
- Round Tower
- Cross Slab/High Cross

**Armagh**

This aerial view of Armagh town shows how property boundaries and roads have preserved the outline of the ancient monastic enclosure. Note: the church in the centre is built on the site of earlier churches (continuity of place).