

## Monks and Nuns of the Middle Ages

Choirs are singing sacred music, their voices echo through the halls; priests are speaking Latin and reading illuminated scrolls. Monks and nuns are following their orders, sewing or opening the door to travelers, the sick and poor. There are whispers of meditating and prayers. You can hear the shuffling of feet everywhere. This is the sound of a monastery in the Middle Ages.

A monk is a man who is a member of a brotherhood. He devotes his life to a discipline prescribed by his order. Monks and nuns live in a monastery. A monastery is a kind of half church half hospital. They take care of people there and they pray and meditate. It can also be like a school for kids. They would teach them how to read and write.



Monks and nuns spent most of their time praying meditating, and doing tasks like preparing medicine, or sewing, teaching, writing, and reading. Monks and nuns were very busy but also organized.

The timetable was a certain order of monks' prayers. The first one was the Opus Dei. This is Latin for work of God. The first prayer started very early in the morning and the last one started at midnight. Monks and nuns usually did not get a good night sleep. The timetable was started by Saint Benedict in Italy. The timetable was soon used by monks all over Europe. They did their work, including the timetable, in the monastery.

Some of their work was called Cloister. This was taken place in the heart of the monastery. (The monastery was usually in the shape of a cross to remind them of Christ's death). There was a four-sided square, which they walked around while studying and writing out prayers and parts of the bible. They published their books by hand. They wrote very neatly and drew pictures too. They decorated the first letter of each paragraph with great care. Sometimes they used gold for writing very fancy. When people became Monks, they made three vows. The first vow was called the vow of poverty. The vow of poverty meant you had to give up all personal possessions. The second vow was a vow to stay single. This vow was called chastity. The third vow was a vow to promise to obey the church and the monastery. This was called the vow of obedience. But after awhile some of the monks and nuns disobeyed some of the vows. This is one of the reasons the Benedict law became low. One other reason was that some monasteries became wealthy. Some monks and nuns wanted to change orders. A new order was called Cistercian . At once it was Respected. A Cistercian was a member of a monastery that is far away from towns. There are different Cistercian monasteries for different things.

Like, if you couldn't memorize your Latin studies, then you could go to a special Cistercian monastery for that. Those monasteries were very poor, but you would always be accepted. They raised their own cattle and food. A member of the Cistercian is called a lay brother or a conversi. Lay brothers helped in the Monastery estates. They joined in doing what they could in church.

Most people had to go to church like they had to go to school. People even had to pay taxes to churches. Taxes still must be paid to churches in Germany.

Monks and nuns could be recognized by their habits. Habits were special clothes, like uniforms. They often wore plain clothing, and a cross upon a chain around their necks. Some monks wore hair shirts as

undershirts, to purposely scratch their skin and constantly remind them of the suffering that Jesus had done.

Monks ate in a place called a refectory. While they ate, there was silence, except for a priest reading parts of the Bible. The tables were long and stretched out across the room. When some monasteries became wealthy, they had very fancy food.

A few people led religious lives totally on their own. These people were called hermits. They were thought to be holy and wise. They lived simply in small isolated houses. They often suffered physical hardship. Some hermits, especially women, were walled up in their houses.

Some monks and nuns became wealthy, despite making vows of poverty. They joined monasteries because they liked having special privileges. The privileges were often given to them by the King. One monastery in Italy was the biggest landowner, besides the king. Many monasteries, though, became centers of learning, and gave shelter to travelers, poor and sick.

The Carolingian Empire brought a period of economic anarchy - the economic system fell apart. People could barely survive. Monasteries were sacked and burned. Monks became fugitives - escapees - and some were only concerned to save their lives, their few possessions, and their sacred relics.

The monasteries did not become extinct, for a few men warned other monasteries of what was to come. Afterwards, there was a lot of work to be done rebuilding the monasteries. Some of their work put themselves in personal danger.

For example, Raffredus, the Abbot of Farfa, in Lazio, was poisoned by two monks. They killed him because he threatened to enforce the Benedictine law.

Some parents promised their children to monasteries. They did this because they knew that their children would never be homeless, nor without food. Also, if they were talented, this was a way for them to become rich or successful.

All through Europe, in villages, towns, and busy cities, were built cathedrals. Cathedrals were fancy churches. In the small towns, the cathedral was the largest building. The cathedral was very tall. The cathedral, like the monastery, was built in the shape of a cross to remind them of Christ's death. Statues framed the cathedrals. The ceilings were formed by arches. In Paris cathedral, the arches reached 93 feet. Usually in front of a cathedral is a big stained glass window. This is of no particular pattern. Inside it is dark, except for some glowing candles, and the light shining through the stained glass windows. The floor of a cathedral was usually built of flagstones. Many arches hold the ceiling. In some European countries, the arches can reach as high as 121 feet. The word cathedral comes from the word Cathedra, a Latin word for the throne that a bishop sat on at his church.

Monks and nuns performed many roles in the middle ages. They provided shelter, they taught others to read and write, prepared medicine, sewed clothes for others, and helped others in times of need. They spent most of their time praying and meditating. Originally, they craved the love of God and took vows of poverty, obedience, and chastity. However, as orders became more wealthy and powerful, some people went into orders - for money and power. Most monasteries remained important centers of caring and learning.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Hour: \_\_\_\_\_

## Monks and Nuns of the Middle Ages

**Define and describe the following:**

1. Monk-

2. Nun-

3. Opus Dei-

4. Cloister-

5. Monastery-

6. Convent-

7. Habits-

8. Refectory-

9. Hermits-

10. Cathedrals-