

From ancient desert monasticism to contemporary forms of religious life, a small band of Christian men and women in every generation choose to consecrate their lives to God with unique vows of love and service that give radical witness to the gospel.

religious houses eventually came into being, and religious life as we know it began to take shape.

Consecrated life—in its diverse expressions around the globe—is a gift to the church and world and always has been. Cistercian Doctor of the Church Saint Bernard of Clairvaux said of religious orders: “I admire them all. I belong to one of them by observance, but to all of them



by charity. We all need one another: the spiritual good which I do not own and possess, I receive from others.”

The prayer of religious communities lifts the entire church. Likewise, good works and the pursuit of justice shape society to more closely resemble the reign of God. A life of chastity, poverty, and obedience gives powerful witness to faith in Jesus without a word being uttered. “Consecrated men and women,” according to the 1996 apostolic letter *Via Consecrata*, “are sent forth to proclaim by the witness of their lives the value of Christian fraternity and the transforming power of the Good News, which makes it possible to see all people as sons and daughters

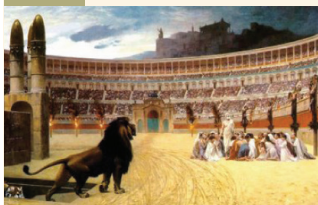
of God, and inspires a self-giving love towards everyone, especially the least of our brothers and sisters. Such communities are places of hope.” That hope is what attracts new members.

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, religious communities of men and women rise up, serve a purpose, thrive, and live on or come to an end. This ebb and flow has occurred for 2,000 years and will continue for millennia to come as new members around the world take vows and join their lives to communities to live out the gospel in radical ways in joyful hope.

What follows on the next pages is a timeline of the major events in the history of consecrated life through the ages.

A.D.
50-
65

Letters of Saint Paul refer to distinct groupings in the early church, including groups of celibate women dedicated to prayer and charity.



50-
313

Persecution of Christians. In 313 Roman Emperor Constantine issues the "Edict of Toleration." Christians seek ways other than martyrdom to give themselves completely to the faith.

251-
356

Saint Anthony the Great heeds the gospel call to sell all he has, serve the poor, and live a life of asceticism. He eventually takes up residence in the desert to live in solitude and prayer. His story is recorded by Saint Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, and becomes a fourth-century "bestseller" that inspires other men and women to live as hermits.

I saw the snares that the enemy spreads out over the world and I said groaning, "What can get through from such snares?" Then I heard a voice saying to me, "Humility." —SAINT ANTHONY

313-
400

Houses of monks and nuns are established in the Egyptian desert.

Pachomius, a contemporary of Saint Anthony the Great and a convert



to Christianity, creates a model for a cenobitic, or common, way of life based on the early Christian community

in Jerusalem, with all members sharing their goods and praying in common.

350-
370

Saint Basil establishes large communities of monks in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). As bishop of Cesarea, Basil has his monks engage in the apostolic work of teaching and pastoral care.



386

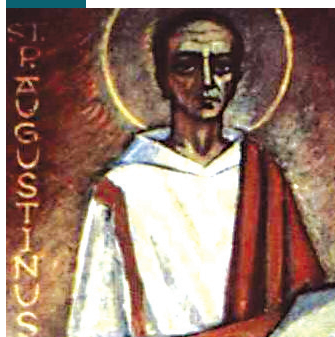
Saint Jerome, scholar and Bible translator, moves to Bethlehem where he sets up and lives in a monastery.

What does love look like? It has the hands to help others. It has the feet to hasten to the poor and needy. It has eyes to see misery and want. It has the ears to hear the sighs and sorrows of men. That is what love looks like.

—SAINT AUGUSTINE

400

Saint Augustine writes rules for monks and nuns during his early years as a bishop in North Africa. He also founds monasteries.



400-
500

Surge of monastic communities in the Eastern and Western church. In 470 **Saint Brigid** establishes Kildare Abbey in Ireland, a double monastery for monks and nuns.

500-
600

Common life (or community) becomes more dominant than the hermit's way of life and spreads to France, Germany, and Italy.

FROM THE RULE OF ST. BENEDICT: Of the Reception of Guests—Let all guests who arrive be received as Christ, because he will say: "I was a stranger and you took me in" (Matt. 25:35).

Saint Benedict of Nursia (480-547)

finds monasteries and writes a rule for monks, moderate in tone compared to other rules for monks of the time.

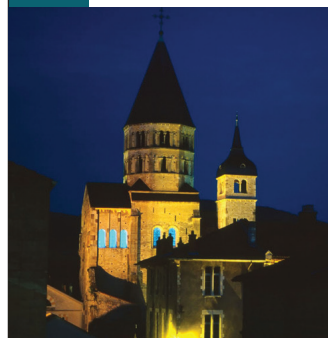


It soon becomes the standard for European monasticism and is still used today by Benedictines throughout the world. Benedict's twin sister, **Saint Scholastica**, heads a community of women near Benedict's monastery at Monte Cassino. She later is named the patron saint of nuns.

600-
1000

Monasteries in Europe maintain the literature of the ancient world, and Christian scripture is preserved and copied. Larger monasteries are centers of cultural and eco-

nomie activity, harboring schools, hospitals, guest houses, and farms. Meanwhile, Europe is ravaged by war and instability.



910

Benedictine Abbey of Cluny in central France spearheads reform of the medieval church and produces leaders, including monks who become bishops and even popes.

1050-
1150

Camaldolese and Carthusian hermit and contemplative monks are founded by Saint Romuald (in Italy) and Saint Bruno (in the French Alps). Both continue to this day.

1098-
1105

Cistercian order (Trappists) greatly increases in number and influence with the help of **Saint Bernard of Clairvaux**.

He who prays and labors lifts his heart to God with his hands.
—SAINT BERNARD

1121

Saint Norbert combines a monastic regimen with parish work, foreshadowing the coming of the mendicant, or "begging," orders and their service in cities.

The first "lay association" or "third order" of laity affiliated with a religious order is founded with the estab-



ishment of the Norbertine Third Order (often referred to as associates, tertiaries, lay associates,

or secular tertiaries). Such associations continue today.

1150-1300

Mendicant religious orders emerge as towns and cities develop. In contrast with the previous emphasis on contemplative life, these new religious orders preach the gospel and respond to the needs of the poor. The four major mendicant religious orders are the Carmelites (founded in 1150), Franciscans (1209), Dominicans (1214), and Augustinians (1256).

Saint Thomas Aquinas joins the Dominicans in 1242. Among the church's greatest theologians, canon law deems him the guide to be followed for those studying for the priesthood.



1206-1214

Carmelites establish a "rule," actually a set of rules meant to guide a daily life of prayer and contemplation. As the Carmelite order grows, it combines contemplative life with apostolic activity.

Preach the gospel at all times and when necessary use words.
—SAINT FRANCIS

1209

Saint Francis of Assisi founds the Franciscan order. Over the centuries various branches of Franciscan men's and women's communities emerge, with



members exercising influence as teachers. Franciscans also promote popular piety practices, such as the Christmas crib and Stations of the Cross.

1517

Martin Luther proposes 95 "theses" in Wittenberg, Germany, symbolically beginning the Protestant Reformation and its accompanying social and religious upheaval.



1534-1585

Saint Teresa of Ávila and Saint John of the Cross are Carmelite mystics, writers, and reformers in Spain whose writings continue to influence Catholic spirituality.

1540

Jesuits are founded by Saint Ignatius of Loyola. Their efforts in education and mission continue to wield influence in the church and world.

IGNATIAN SPIRITUALITY: "Every way of preparing . . . to find the Divine Will as to the management of one's life for the salvation of the soul is called a Spiritual Exercise."

1545-1563

Council of Trent encourages renewal of religious orders

1540-1900

and new forms of religious life.

Apostolic religious communities of men and women are established. These new communities emphasize



serving the needs of the poor, especially through education and medical care. With

Saint Vincent de Paul, Saint Louise de Marillac

forms the first community of non-cloistered sisters. Many religious institutes are founded in Europe



to meet social needs in the wake of the French Revolution. **Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton** founds the first apostolic community of women in the U.S.

1947

Pope Pius XII encourages the formation of secular institutes, a distinct form of consecrated life. These groups of priests and laity promise poverty, obedience, and chastity without communal life or distinctive clothing.

1950-1965

Peak growth years for U.S. religious communities. Religious women in the U.S. reach their highest number of 179,954 in 1965. They outnumber men in religious life 4 to 1.

1962-1965

Second Vatican Council. Among many other reforms meant to modernize the church, this worldwide council (or gathering of bishops) calls for renewal of

religious communities. Communities are urged to return to their roots and original charism—or guiding spirit—as well as to respond to the needs of the times. Religious communities experience change and upheaval.



1965-2009

People continue, as always, to found new religious communities in response to God's call. Religious life begins to attract new interest.

FROM PERFECTAE CARITATIS (Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life): *Religious should remember there is no better way than their own example to commend their institutes and gain candidates for the religious life.*

2013-2022

Pope Francis draws attention to religious life when he is elected in 2013. A Jesuit, he is one of only 34 religious institute members to become pope.



The church designates

2015 as the Year of Consecrated Life. Broadening the focus to all types of vocations, Pope Francis convenes an international synod of bishops on "Young people, the faith, and vocational discernment" in October 2018.