



# Religious life through the centuries

*From the days of the ancient desert monks to new forms of community today, religious life has always responded to the challenges of the times. Here's a sampling of the major moments in the history of religious life.*

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**E**VER SINCE the early days of Christianity some followers of Jesus sought a different way to live their faith. Groups of widows gathered to dedicate themselves to prayer and good works. Later, others craved solitary prayer, so they fled to the desert to commune with God. Monasteries, cloisters, and religious houses came into being, and as they became formalized, religious life as we know it today began to take shape.

Religious life—in its multitude of forms around the globe—is a gift to the church and the world. Its prayer lifts the entire church. Likewise, good works and the pursuit of justice also shape society to more closely resemble the kingdom of God. A life of chastity, poverty, and obedience gives witness to Jesus without a word being uttered.

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, religious communities of men and women rise up, serve a purpose, thrive, and live on—or not. This ebb and flow has continued for 2,000 years. And God continues to call men and women to consecrated life. In large groups and as solitary persons, new members around the world continue to take vows and join their lives to religious communities to live out the gospel in radical ways.

What follows is a brief timeline of religious 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," which 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 commu-

nity 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

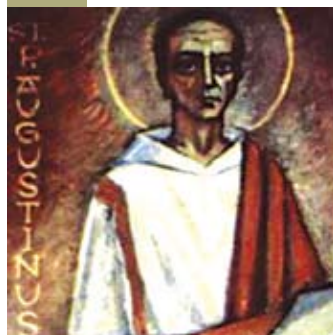
**Saint Jerome**, scholar and Bible translator, moves to Bethlehem where he sets up and lives in a monastery.

*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 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)

foundes monasteries and writes a rule for monks, modest in size and 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 economic 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 monks 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 establishment of the Norbertine Third Order (often referred to as associates, tertiaries, lay associates, or secular tertiaries). Such associations continue to link laity and religious 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 (founded in 1209), Dominicans (founded in 1214), and Augustinians (founded in 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 Avila and Saint John of the Cross** are Carmelite mystics, writers, and reformers in Spain whose writings continue to influence Catholic spirituality.

*Prayer is nothing else than being on terms of friendship with God.*  
—SAINT TERESA

1540 **Jesuits are founded**



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

*IGNATIUS 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 and new forms of religious life.

1540-1900

**Apostolic religious orders** 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 orders 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 continue to 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, as well as to respond to the needs of the times. Religious communities experience change and upheaval.

*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.*

1965-2009

**People continue to found new religious communities** in response to God’s call. Religious life continues to evolve and begins to experience new growth.

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