



The End of Medieval Monasticism?: Observant reform, the challenge of Martin Luther, and monks in the New World (1400-1600)

Europe 1400-1600

The map of Europe saw significant developments in this period.

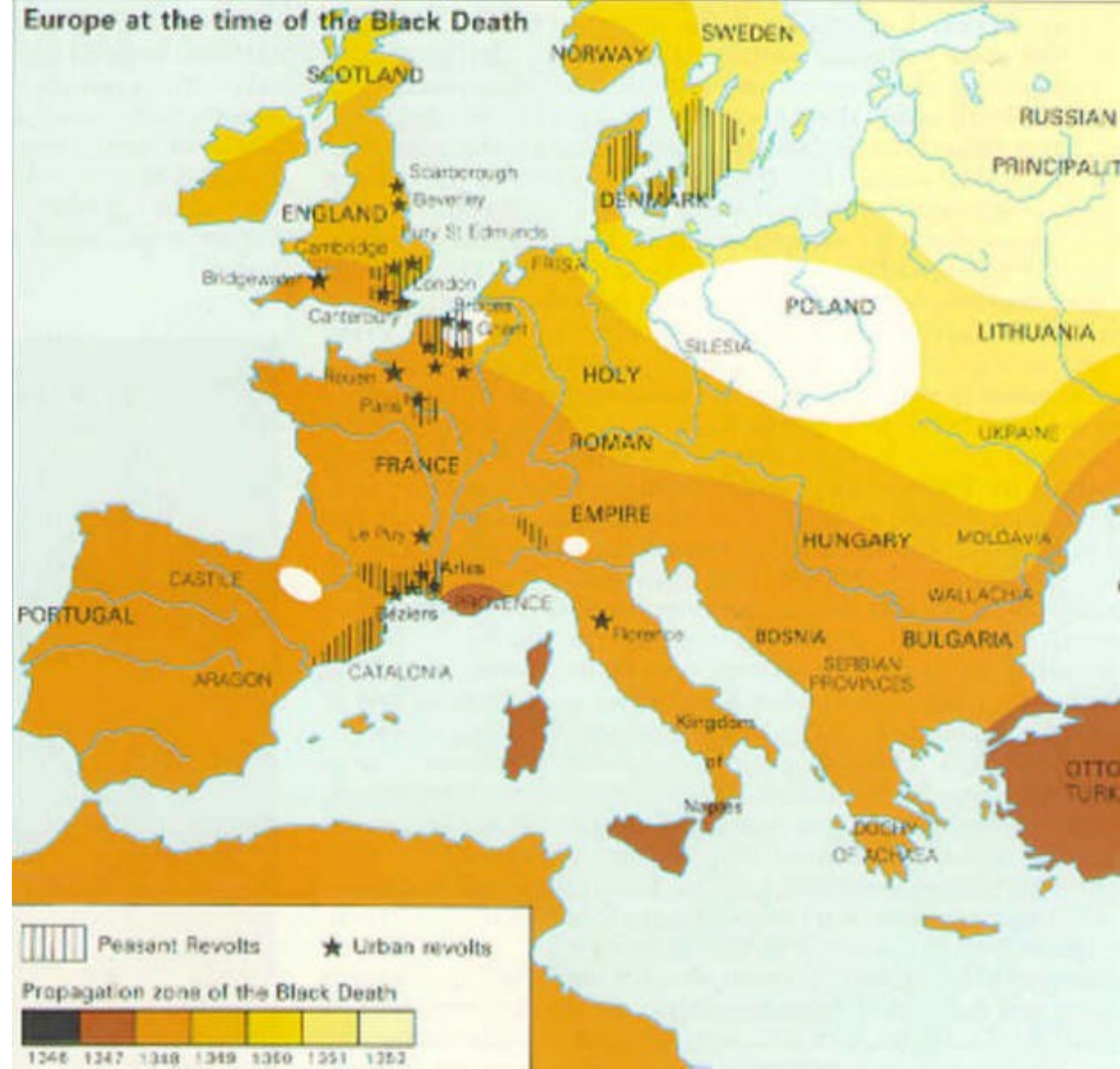
- Polities establish **increasingly advanced administrations**
 - Some historians speak of the **rise of the “state”** in this period.
- Wars between these polities also became more intense – larger, better organised armies – and **take on a more ‘national’ quality**.
 - E.g. The Hundred Years War between England and France.
- This was also an **age of exploration**.
 - Spain and Portugal, having rolled back Muslim power in Iberia, lead the way in **establishing colonies** in Africa, Asia, and, from 1492, the Americas.
- But with the Crusader states collapsed, the **power of the Turks would rise in the east**.
 - They took Constantinople (the end of the Byzantine/Eastern Roman empire) in 1453, and would threaten Central Europe in the 16th century.



Europe 1400-1600

Throughout this period, **the society and economy of Europe** experienced significant evolution and convulsions.

- Importance of **trade and commerce** continues to grow rapidly.
- Recurrent waves of bubonic plague (beginning with the **Black Death** (c. 1347-1351 which had killed perhaps over 30% of the European population) had powerful socio-economic effects
- Towns had faced particularly grave mortality (higher density population), but **landowners faced perhaps the toughest economic consequences** in the long term (less demand for land -> falling rents).
- **Falling rents and rising wages** also play their part in another development: gradually **rising standards of living** for many due to greater disposable income.



Europe 1400-1600

From the late 14th century and through the 15th and 16th centuries, there was also significant cultural change in learning and intellectual life.

At a general level, **access to some level of education widened:**

- **Basic literacy levels**, especially in towns and cities, continued to rise.
- **Vernacular writing and reading** becomes more common, feeds **lay reading circles** and **public debate**.
- **Copying and distribution of texts** explodes, accelerated by the mid-fifteenth century invention of the **printing press**.
- **Lay demand for religious texts** is particularly high, e.g., **the Bible**, which is translated into vernaculars despite Catholic opposition.

At a high intellectual level, a trend often called **“humanism”** emerged.

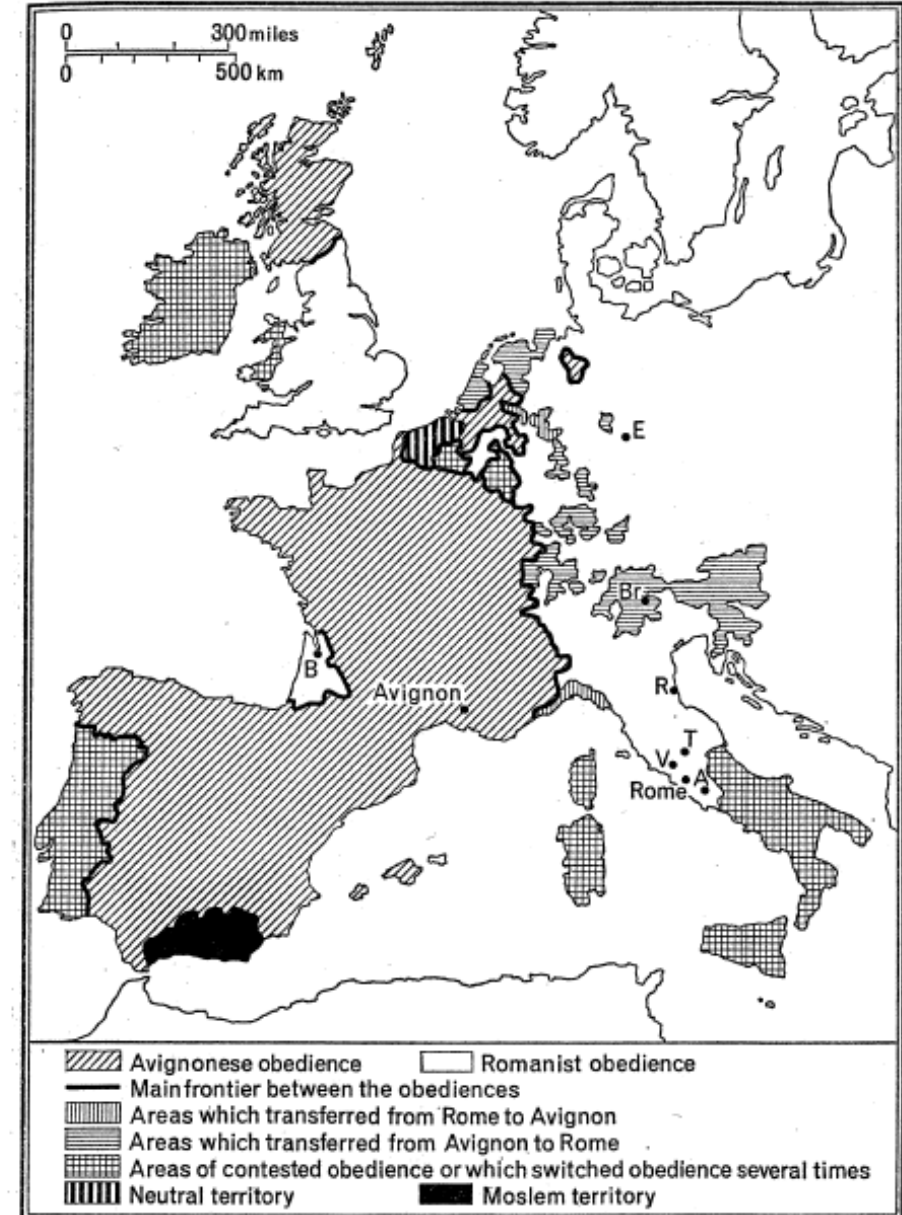
- Humanists showed a **very broad interest in ancient Latin and Greek learning** and take a strong interest in reviving their **rhetoric and literary expression**.
- **Greater access to Greek learning** helps to inspire a closer analysis of the Bible: by the turn of the sixteenth century, scholars like **Desiderius Erasmus** (d. 1536 – based at the University of Paris) were trying to understand the new Testament in its original Greek form.
- Sometimes “Renaissance humanism” has also been seen as a “modernising” **philosophical outlook** (e.g. by the 19th century historian Jakob Burckhardt), questioning the logical systematisation of scholastic theologians and placing more value on the human individual and individual perspective.
- This view can be overstated: humanists **take a wide variety of outlooks**.



Europe 1400-1600

Meanwhile, there were series of major challenges to the papacy:

- The **papacy relocated to Avignon in 1309**, partly seeking to avoid local Roman politics but also under French royal pressure.
- **Gregory XI** moves back to Rome in 1376/7, against the wishes of the French king **Charles V**.
- When there is a dispute over the election of successor **Urban VI** in 1378, however, Charles supports a rival claimant, "**Clement VII**": this leads to the **Great Western Schism** of the Church (see map) that lasts until 1417.
- The resolution to the Schism comes at the Council of Constance (1414-1418), where the church is reunited under a new pope, **Martin V**.
- As part of this process, the **papacy is made to submit to the rule of a regular general council of clerics from across Europe**.
- While the **conciliar system soon collapses** after the Council of Basel (1431-1449), the period shifted the balance of power between the papacy and lay rulers. **Kings now became increasingly confident in matters of religious leadership**.



Europe 1400-1600

From c.1520, the rise of **Protestantism** redefined the map of Europe:

- Not without precedent: the **Hussite followers of Jan Hus**, however, had already challenged the Catholic order in 15th century Bohemia and continued on.
- 16th century Protestants followed the inspiration of **Martin Luther** and **John Calvin**.
- Protestants not only **challenged the morality of many churchmen**, but also **rejected papal supremacy** and **challenged its theological orthodoxy**. E.g.:
 - the Catholic conception of sacraments (denying all but baptism and the Eucharist, thus reducing the role of the priesthood)
 - the religious importance of good works (preferring salvation by faith alone).
- Crucially, unlike earlier religious dissident groups, these men found **support from powerful lay rulers** (e.g. some German princes, Henry VIII in England)

The Catholic Church, however, is not passive amid this crisis

- The **Council of Trent** inaugurates the so called “**Catholic Reformation**”
- Also leads the way in bringing Christianity to the “New World” of the Americas and Asia.





1400-1600: a “transitional” age?

- Given this host of developments, it is easy to see why we often see this period as an **age of “transition” between “medieval” and “modern”**
 - Our nomenclature reflects this: “late Middle Ages” (up to c. 1520-1550); “early modern” – (c. 1520-1550 onward)
- Some traditional perspectives have seen a **“crisis”** amid these developments: **the painful collapse of medieval political, social and cultural norms.**
 - This is the famous perspective of Jan Huizinga in his early 20th century work *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*
- Others focus more on the positive developments, emphasising the **emergence of the “modern” amid the “medieval”** - e.g. Burckhardt’s perspective on “Renaissance humanism” – or even how **the “modern” built on “medieval” processes** – e.g. late medieval heretical sects (Waldensians, Lollards, Hussites) as Protestant forerunners.
- More recent perspectives – e.g. in religious terms, John Van Engen (see bibliography) – try to **understand the period’s own character**, rather than seeing it as simply a transitional phase.
 - This in turn can allow scholars to gain a **new, more complex perspective on the significant changes** that undoubtedly did occur in this period.



Monasticism 1400-1600

Perspectives on monasticism in this period have often reflected wider “transition” narratives.

Easy to see why:

- **New monastic (including mendicant) foundations became less common** in the late Middle Ages, while some existing ones disappear.
- Critically, the **Reformation saw many monasteries attacked by Protestants** (quite common in France and Central Europe) or **dissolved by Protestant lay governments** (e.g. the dissolution of the monasteries in England, 1536-1541).
- **New types of orders (“preaching orders”, e.g. Jesuits) emerge after this**, as part of the Catholic reformation.



Monasticism 1400-1600

Some older transition narratives concerning monasticism focus on **internal decline as the cause of these challenges**:

- Emphasis is placed on a supposedly widespread **decline in discipline**, that lead to increasing charges of hypocrisy (see John Gower source in lecture 6 for a mendicant example).
- For older Catholic historians, often monks themselves, (e.g. David Knowles), this view allowed them to see the Protestant reaction against monasticism as something caused largely by internal failure.
- For older Protestant historians (e.g. George Coulton), the bad behaviour of monks helped to prove the necessity of Protestantism

A less moralising narrative is that of monasticism becoming **less relevant amid the rise of new socio-cultural norms** (e.g. Hugh Lawrence).

- In this view, social change led to a **more personal, less institutional approach to religion**.
- In line with this, coenobitic monasticism is made less relevant by mendicant religion; then both are **made less relevant by rising lay piety**.

Material challenges

But what of the actual character of monasticism and its reform in this period? Is it lost in such sweeping narratives?

To take a look at the ground level, one must first acknowledge the **material challenges** faced by monastic institutions in this period.

- **Recurrent waves of plague** hits monasteries very hard.
 - Some monasteries lose many monks – although this is shorter term.
 - More crucially for the long-term, the consequences of plague mortality often **damaged their landed incomes** (falling rents).
 - Financial difficulties could be **very challenging for monastic life**: if numbers of monks or nuns reduce to just a few, it is hard to carry on fulfilling the rule, etc.



Material challenges

- **Lay governments seek to restrict amount of land going to Church institutions** via “mortmain” (“dead hand”) legislation.
 - Because such institutions owned land perpetually (thus, in “dead hand”), it could never revert back to lay lords (e.g. the king) in the way other lands could when someone died without heirs.
 - Thus, from late 13th century, some lay governments start charging large amortisation fines on gifts to Church institutions.
 - It has been argued that such developments were a **precursor to Protestant-era dissolutions of monasteries**, in which monastic properties were reclaimed.
- **The trend in religious benefaction is to require explicit services** that monasteries were perhaps not best placed to provide
 - Desire for many repeated masses led to the **rise of “chantry chaplains”**, secular clerics whose only job was to perform this task in return for benefaction income.
 - The emphasis on “service” as a condition of benefaction has also been seen as **background to monastic dissolutions**, although Protestants would attack the buying and selling of church services. The **desire to repurpose monastic properties** when services were no longer seen as relevant is already seen in England in the 15th century.

These factors, taken together, serve to **explain why fewer houses were built** in this period than the High Middle Ages.



Jo. Gerson cancel-
larius parisiensis



Cultural durability

Cultural attachment to monasticism, however, remained a powerful feature of European life in this period:

- **Connections between families and the monasteries** associated with them often remained strong (see e.g. Karen Stober, *Late Medieval Monasteries and Their Patrons: England and Wales, C.1300-1540*).
- As discussed in the previous lecture, monks became **well integrated in universities**, and monastic institutions could **interact positively with lay pious circles** (supplying texts etc.).
- Some “humanist” intellectuals (e.g. **Francesco Petrarch**, d. 1374 and **Jean Gerson**, d. 1429, pictured on the left) idealised the “purer” approach to learning that took place within monasteries, less distracted by the confrontation and “arrogance” of university debates.
- **Monastic charity and educative work** was also **important to many of the less visible in society**: social and basic educational services fostered attachment.
- Protestant attacks on and attempts to suppress monasteries would often meet strong reaction: e.g. the **Pilgrimage of Grace** (1536) – a revolt in Northern England – was partly inspired by concern of ordinary people over the closure of monasteries.



Late medieval monastic activism

There was also **significant dynamism** within late medieval monasticism.

While the provisions of the Fourth Lateran Council banned new “orders” with new “rules”, reformist energy continued to produce new congregations. So-called “**Observant**” reformers appeared in existing coenobitic and mendicant orders.

- The name relates to the favourite maxim of such reformers: “**regular observance**” (*observantia regularis*).
- Observant reformers emphasised **observance of legislation** – the “rule” of whatever order they were in (“regular observance” related to this), but also **additional constitutions of significant detail**.
- Related to this, their approach to ascetic life and divine service was one that was **obsessed with even the smallest details**, especially over the issue of **monastic poverty**: they sought to ban anything that might be perceived personal property.
- To enforce their way of life at all levels, they often pursued **congregational chapter systems** (already witnessed among the Cistercians and Mendicant orders) that went further than ever before in **demanding conformity from the most senior monks and nuns**.



Late medieval monastic activism

Observant Franciscans

- Some have argued that the terminology of “regular observance” first emerges in the mid-14th century Franciscan circles in Italy: a **less controversial successor movement to the Spiritual Franciscans**.
- Its earliest known 14th century Observant Franciscan communities, led by **Paoluccio Trinci** from 1368, tended almost towards eremitic life.
- Its most famous later members, however, earned fame as public preachers, encouraging not only Franciscans but also lay people to greater moral rigour: e.g. **Bernardino of Siena** (d. 1444, pictured left) and **Giovanni da Capistrano** (d. 1456).
- Observants eventually win recognition as a **semi-independent branch of their order** under their own *vicar-general* in the early 15th century.
- In addition, the Franciscan world also saw the rise of the **Colettine Poor Clares / Coletan Franciscans**: this was an Observant-style reform begun in 1406 by **Colette of Corbie** (d. 1447) that proved successful in France, the Low Countries and Germany in the 15th century. Unlike those formally called “Observants”, however, they remained under the *minister-general* of the order.

Late medieval monastic activism

Observant Benedictine Congregations

- The roots of Observant reform in fact probably go as far back among the **Black Monks**.
- From the mid-fourteenth century (from at least 1362), the monastery of **Subiaco** in Italy, founded by Saint Benedict of Nursia in the early 6th century, begins to introduce rigorous reform customs.
- Organised congregations follow, combining previously independent abbeys: **Kastl (1380)**, **Melk (1418)** and **Bursfelde (1433)** become very prominent in Germany; while the congregation of **Santa Giustina of Padua (1407)** does the same in Italy.

Observants Canons Regular Congregations

- There is evidence that an Observant-style reform of the Augustinian canons at Roudnice nad Labem had already begun in the 1330s with the assistance of the archbishop of Prague.
- In 1380s, an Observant reform congregation forms around the new house of **Windesheim** (on the right), which exerts significant influence on Canons Regular throughout Germany and the Low countries. Its members also work to reform houses of other orders, working alongside German Observant Benedictines.

Observant Dominican, Observant Carmelite, and Observant Augustinian Friar movements all also took root in the 15th century.



Other monastic hardliners

The Observant approach converged with developments in **more distinct monastic movements, both old and new, who mirrored their hard-line approach.**

The Carthusians

- Enjoyed a new spurt of growth: **over 100 new monasteries across Europe in the 14th and 15th centuries.**
- Had no formal “Observant” movement but become **intertwined with Observants in other orders** both in the **distribution of texts** and in having **similar supporters.**
- Observants often cited the Carthusians as a positive example and influence, both due to their **asceticism** and **extensive legislative efforts at their general chapters**

The Celestines

- A Benedictine reform with eremitic roots, founded by an Italian hermit **Pietro da Morrone** (d. 1296), who briefly reigned as pope as Celestine V in 1294.
- They forged a unique identity among Benedictines, founded on their own **very strict constitutions.** The Celestines had reformed or built c. 100 houses in Italy by 1400.
- They would also grow rapidly in France (17 monasteries by 1450), solely through new houses: there, they received significant French royal support.
- Despite the **Italian Celestines** already bearing similarities to Observant monasticism, **the French monks**, who become an independent congregation during the Great Western Schism, **began to see themselves as the “Observant” wing of the Celestine order** – gain permission to reform some Italian Celestine houses in the mid-15th century!





Other monastic hardliners

The Brigittines

- **Birgitta of Vadstena**, a Swedish princess who became a religious visionary, founded a monastic congregation (approved in 1370) formed of **double monasteries**.
- Under the **Rule of Saint Augustine**, but with **tough supplementary regulations**.
- 27 houses by 1515, with some very high ranking supporters in both Scandinavia, Italy and Germany. They also received a major royal house in England (Syon) in 1415.

The Minims

- **Francesco di Paola** (1417-1507), a Franciscan novice who left to become a hermit gained followers in Southern Italy and reputation as a healer from the mid-15th century.
- His fame led to the king of France, Louis XI, asking for him to come to France to help him in his sickness. Francesco becomes his confessor up until the time he dies in 1483.
- With the support of the French monarchy, he gained papal approval for **an extremely strict and detailed new Rule** (from 1493) and for the **foundation of a truly new order**: thus breaking the precept of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215.
- Technically a mendicant order, with First (male friars), Second (female enclosed nuns) and Third (lay) orders. Nevertheless, the First (male) order, **had relatively strict rules on separation by comparison to other communities of friars** (e.g. Franciscans, Dominicans).
- Francesco's congregation expands to over 30 convents across Italy, France, Germany and Spain by the time of his death in 1507, and much further afterwards.



The outreach of monastic activism

Observants themselves – who typically reformed existing houses – often came into **conflict with the unreformed *conventuales***.

Conventuales were those who followed the more moderated, traditional observances within their own houses and orders, especially over **issues of property and poverty**. [see Mixson in bibliography]

- These *conventuales* could prove very resistant and were not unsupported: they often had well-established customs that permitted **some (often small) items of personal property** that mirrored, at a lower level, the **greater access to little luxuries in the outside world**.
- The severity of the clash **further hardened Observant ideology and obsession with legislation**.
- As a result, Observants were also, in fact, **the origin of some of the harshest critiques of late medieval monastic “moral decline”** that later historians have cited. Observants have sometimes been seen as ineffective as a result of their own rhetoric!



The outreach of monastic activism

But monastic hardliners also had significant outreach and appeal to wider society:

Push factors

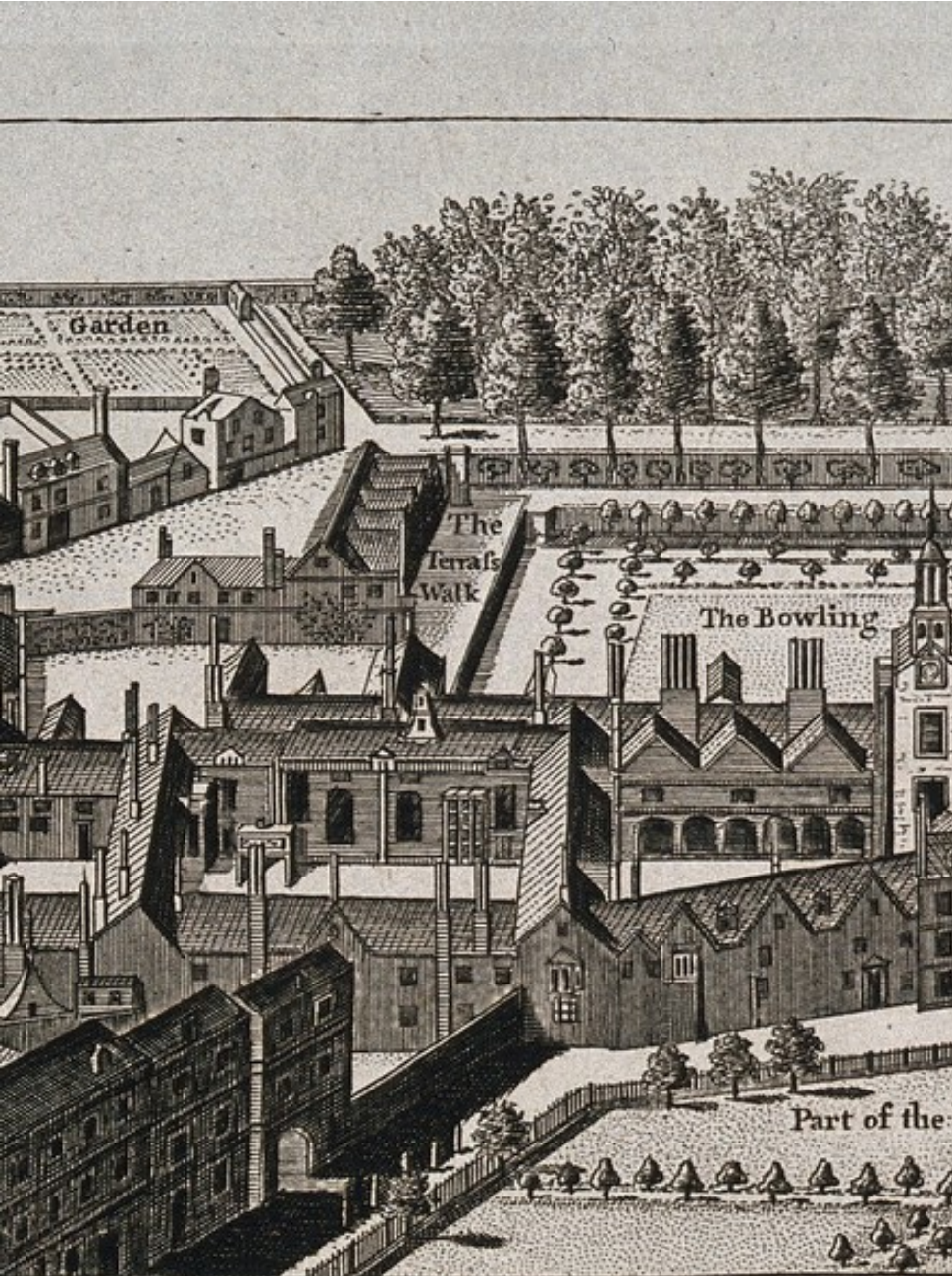
- Observant mendicants could be **vociferous preachers**, who pushed greater moral rigour even on non-monastic audiences: e.g. denouncing frivolous possessions.
- They could have quite some effect: “**bonfires of the vanities**” – the burning of little luxuries – happened under their influence.
- **Sumptuary legislation** against personal luxuries and expenditure translated this into actual enforcement in some regions (especially in Germany and Italy).



The outreach of monastic activism

Pull factors

- The **attention to detail** of late medieval monastic activists won them an audience beyond the nobility: it **intersected with the tastes of the professional classes**.
- Related to this, the **growing popularity of “counting piety”** practices – e.g. rosaries – among the laity intersected with the **structured, repetitive practices of such monks and nuns**.
- Their **precision also made them attractive intercessors**, even and perhaps especially within a service-oriented marketplace (they would **fulfil requests precisely**, less likely simply to put them aside).
- Legalism was also a pull factor in a period where law enjoyed growing influence and esteem in all parts of life: **benefactors often make note of legislative rigour**.



THE CHARTER HOUSE

New approaches to separation

The emphasis on extremely precise observance of detailed legislation arguably also responded to the question of **how members of religious orders could be both separate from society but accessible within it.**

- Such an observance **made the separation of Observant friars more tangible** – combatting some of the charges of mendicant hypocrisy.

Some **enclosed groups** – who enjoyed renewed growth in this period – arguably found an even more complete solution:

- Congregations like the Carthusians and the French Celestines were now **willing to build houses on the edge of or even in town/city centres.**
- Offsetting their loss of locational seclusion, they **reinforced their walls of stone with growing legislative rigour.**
- Such groups thus rendered themselves **accessible** while still being able to present themselves as the **purest of the pure.**
- While they did not preach publicly, they found a lay audience partly through **writing and copying texts:** they were **willing to share religious knowledge with local laity** in a way that fulfilled a significant cultural need.



The political context of late medieval monastic activism

This balance of precisely controlled separation from society with pronounced social engagement can also be related to contemporary political culture and events.

Royal religious leadership

The desire of kings to step further into the realm of **spiritual authority** led to the championing of rigorous monastic activists.

- Such houses were **proof of spiritual purity** for seemingly “worldly” monarchies, and acted as **sponsored religious examples** that went beyond the norms of the Church.
- The “palace monastery” becomes a trend: e.g. **Henry V of England** builds Carthusian and Brigittine houses close by to his new palace at Sheen. **Louis IX** and **Charles VIII** of France build Minim houses close to their favoured residences near Tours.

The Great Western Schism (1378-1417) and the Council of Constance

Many Observant and other rigorist reforms gained strength during and after the schism.

- The Church was perceived to be undergoing a **crisis brought by “greed” and “pride”**, and intellectuals cite **strict monastic values as an example for the Church**.
- The Council of Constance, where the Schism was solved, featured a concurrent Observant Benedictine reform chapter meeting at nearby **Petershausen** that effectively advertised itself as a model in miniature of the Council.
- The emphasis on **congregational chapter systems** intersected with **Conciliarism**.



Martin Luther and late medieval monasticism

A look at the origin of Protestantism suggests that **Martin Luther** (1483-1546) - the father of Protestantism - **reacted in part against the rising power and influence of rigorist monasticism**, rather than institutions that were simply fading.

- Born in Eisleben to a good family, he attended the **University of Erfurt**, where he studied theology.
- In 1505, however, he was almost struck by lightning, and came to fear the afterlife more greatly. Keen to repent for his sins and find greater purity, he became **Augustinian Friar at the Observant-influenced monastery of Erfurt in Germany**.
- He was a very dedicated monk at first – **an Observant in outlook**.
- But from 1517, it is clear that he had become disillusioned with the Church and, soon afterwards, even monastic life itself.



Martin Luther and late medieval monasticism

Luther's criticism of monasticism is multifaceted.

Partly it intersects with traditional historical narratives concerning "monastic decline" in the Late Middle Ages.

- **Like Observants themselves**, he was **critical of ascetic failings**, which he saw as an example of the hypocrisy of the wider institutional Church.

But no less importantly, he **attacked monasticism in terms that reflected the Observant way of life** he was most familiar with:

- He saw ascetic striving as a **human attempt to win merit with God that led to arrogant presumption**: the belief that one would be saved on this basis, rather than by God's grace.
- He viewed monastic vows as placing **an unfair burden on the soul**, contrary to evangelical freedom.

The **extreme demands of Observant life** – while having popular appeal – could thus also **provoke extreme reaction**.



Protestantism and monasticism

Protestant attacks came from several directions:

Denial of the idea/necessity of a vowed spiritual elite.

- This built on Luther's attack on human attempts to win merit with God through effort. In his view, all men were treated by God only in accordance with their faith – and **anyone could be strong in faith!**
- While this view also confronted late medieval lay pious practices, it had a natural appeal to the same audience.

Attacks on monastic "depravity" and "hypocrisy".

- These paralleled more general Protestant attacks on clerical morals and hypocrisy. But the **charge of hypocrisy could be levelled particularly strongly at monks** due to their vowed status and the greater expectation that they would give up worldly things.
- While some elements within this were more radical – e.g. attacking the popular buying and selling of spiritual services – some echoed well-worn critiques popularised by Observant Monks!

Criticisms of the amount of property that monasteries owned that might be used for other social purposes

- Protestant calls for monastic properties to be used to support other educative and social institutions and works could easily be used to justify royal governments in seizing this property.
- This dovetailed with existing long-standing royal concerns to control the amount of benefaction given to the Church, and also social attitudes which now understood benefaction as contingent upon useful service.



Protestantism and monasticism

A massive Protestant assault on monastic institutions followed. This was acted out in a number of different ways, e.g:

Encouraging monks and nuns to flee their monasteries, to give up their vows, to marry etc.

- This was a key feature of the Lutheran Reformation, in part because Luther himself fled a monastic life and married: he encouraged others to do the same.

Attacking monastic institutions and their members violently.

- Such attacks were perhaps particularly prominent with more radical forms (e.g. Calvinism) and where Protestants faced the most determined Catholic opposition: e.g. Southern France, the Spanish Netherlands.
- The Taborite Hussites – the most radical sect of this “pre-Protestant” group – arguably began this trend.

Dissolving monasteries.

- This occurred when a Protestant lay ruler stepped in and claimed monastic lands and property for himself.
- The most famous example is the English “dissolution of the monasteries”, which took place between 1536 and 1541 under the command of Henry VIII.



The continuance of monastic reform

Protestantism did not become dominant in all areas and there was **still much attachment to monastic institutions**.

Observants and other hardliners also remained a powerful social influence [see Roest in bibliography] - just as they had been on Luther!

- **Observant mendicants** enjoyed popularity for **firebrand preaching against the Reformation**.
- The **Minim order** would enjoy its **greatest spurt of growth in the 17th century**, founding hundreds of monasteries, despite having a distinctly late-medieval appearance.

Protestantism and Observant-style monasticism were **both appealing, competing paths for the most religiously engaged**.

- Protestants **often attacked Observant monasteries** particularly vociferously.
- Significant **flow of people between late medieval monastic reformist groups and the Protestants** – and both ways – despite very different theological outlooks.



The continuance of monastic reform

New **congregations that built on late medieval reform trends** appeared:

- These often combined **Mendicant-style active outreach to the laity** – of renewed urgency amid Protestant growth – with **more rigorous separation from the world** (including forms of semi-enclosure), reminiscent of the separate-but-near style of e.g. the late medieval Carthusians. For example:

The **Capuchin Franciscans**

- A congregation founded by the Italian Observant Franciscan **Matteo da Bascio** (1495-1552) in 1525.
- They sought to go beyond even the rigours of the Observant Franciscans, reinjecting some of the eremitic idealism that had been present in the life of Saint Francis, although their houses were soon also founded in cities.

The **Franciscan Recollects**

- Influenced by Observant Franciscan **Peter of Alcantara** (1499-1562).
- Emphasised that friars must reserve time to withdraw more completely from the world within an enclosure, as well as teach and preach.

Discalced Carmelites

- **Theresa of Avila** (1515-1583) began a rigorous reform of female Carmelites – re-stressing some of the order's early eremitic style – that soon spread to the male friars.
- Their name means “without shoes” in Latin, since they were to either go barefoot or in sandals. **Discalced Augustinian Friars** also follow a similar path in the late sixteenth century.

“Clerics Regular” and other priestly orders

Monastic energies and idealism also influenced a new type of religious order – that of the “**Clerics Regular**”: i.e., priests who took up a Rule.

The **Theatines**

- Founded in 1524 by several Italian priests.
- While they did not live in communities or follow a shared liturgy, they took Mendicant-style monastic vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.
- Lived a stricter life while running houses of prayer and hospitals.

The **Jesuits (the Society of Jesus)**

- Had their roots in a band of Spanish priests under the direction of **Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556)**.
- **Only the more senior members took vows** after a probation period.
- The order emphasises **learning, teaching and preaching**.

In addition, later in the 16th century, **societies of the clerics** emerge under a Rule where monastic-style vows never occur: e.g.

- The **Oratorians**, founded in the late 16th century (formalized in 1575) by the Italian priest, **Filippo Neri (1515-1595)**



“Clerics Regular” and other priestly orders

These groups were **different from earlier monastic expressions** in a number of ways.

- Much less emphasis on “common life” of a community in order to focus solely on public ministry.
- Members often do not live together in houses; some have less emphasis on taking vows or put these aside altogether.
- To later historians, they have often appeared more flexible, more individualistic, and even more “modern” by these virtues.

BUT, it is important to note that they **speak as much to the relevance of monastic tradition as to its alteration**:

- Like canons regular, they stemmed from idea of bringing ordained clerics, usually priests, together in greater ascetic conformity.
- Their emphasis on mobility, learning, teaching and preaching was prefigured by the Mendicant orders.
- Like Observants, they also possessed quite a lot of legislation and were often very strict in terms of self-denial [see Roest in bibl.]

They can thus also be seen as **a new attempt to “monasticize” the clergy**, as much as a loosening of monasticism.





Monasticism in the New World

Christopher Columbus's landing in the Caribbean in 1492 was followed a wave of further expeditions to the Americas in the early 16th century. Meanwhile, exploration also pushed further East, into the Indian Ocean and South East Asia.

- The most rapid early colonisers were the **Catholic Spanish (in the West)** and the **Portuguese (in the East)**: and with them, they brought the Church and its institutions, including religious orders
- Just as monks had played a role in converting pagans in the early Middle Ages, members of religions orders saw converting natives as **both a religious duty** but also **an ascetic challenge**.
- The first member of a religious order to visit the new world was actually a Minim – **Bernardo Boyl**, a Spanish follower of Francesco di Paola, in 1493!
- But it was the **Franciscans – especially Observant Franciscans** – as well as **Dominicans** and **Augustinian friars** who really formed the first wave. The Jesuits joined in the later 16th century.



Conversion from Europe to the Americas

Those who travelled to the New World **brought their attitudes from Europe.**

- Spanish and Portuguese Mendicants brought with them their **experience of lay preaching in Europe.**
- They also brought experience of **converting Jews and Muslims in territories reconquered from the Muslims** – as well as of the related **Spanish Inquisition** (first led by an Observant Dominican, Tomás de Torquemada, d. 1498).

Observants (above all Observant Franciscans) also led the way.

- They looked upon new territories full of unconverted people as an **open field for instilling the “purer”, stricter faith** that they preferred even for the laity (i.e., the idea of starting afresh).
- Under their influence as well as that of Thomas More’s *Utopia* (a text highly influenced by monastic thought), the bishop **Vasco de Quiroga (1470/78 - 1565)** even argued for organising native communities in “congregations” with clear lines of obedience.
- The **rigour and professionalism** of Observants made them more systematic in their efforts: they prepare many lay teaching books, and develop ways to learn and teach in the native languages.



Conversion from Europe to the Americas

Their approach naturally enhanced their demands on lay converts, in terms of both belief and morals.

- **Harsh punishments** – whippings and beatings – were frequently enforced on new converts when they failed to live up to the high standards set by the Observants.
- Some even became concerned by **“heresy” among the Indians** in holding on to elements of their former faith. The Observant Franciscan bishop of Mexico, **Juan de Zumárraga** (1468-1548) organised the first trials of “relapsed” Indians.

Others – even those from committed Observant backgrounds – began to see their subjects as unpersuadable to such discipline, and sought **more nuanced approaches**.

- Pessimistically, some **come to see them as “children” or “savages”** who could never come close to their standards. This led to **greater focus on simple Christian teaching**.
- This experience **also influenced the approach of Mendicants and Regular Clerics in Europe too**. Seeing Europe torn apart by Protestants, they begin to believe that the faith was very weak in the common people.
- Rather than primarily preaching moral rigour, they begin to **focus more on principal matters of faith**. [See Roest, “From Reconquista to Mission in the Early Modern World” in bibliography]

Final thoughts

Despite challenges, monastic institutions actually remained very prominent in the late medieval and early modern West. Transition narratives of **inherent decline** or **growing irrelevance** appear very much overstated.

- Many traditional ties between monasticism and society remained strong.
- Religious orders also found new room for missionary work and expansion in the New World.

Observant reforms and other rigorous monastic find new and socially attractive solutions to the classic monastic tension: **how to be out of the world while remaining available and useful to it**

- Tangible legalistic precision on matters of monastic purity allowed them to draw physically closer to their supporters with less contradiction, and to be elevated but accessible points of inspiration to the devout laity

Final thoughts

BUT if monastic hardliners had found new solutions they **also highlighted that same “out of the world but in the world” tension:**

- Their **constant critiques of other monks and nuns** become a commonplace view.
- Their **demandingly precise way of life was an unbearable burden even for some who joined willingly:** e.g. Luther
- Their **demands on the laity were also often unrealistic** – a tension also highlighted in missionary work.

A particularly energetic period of monastic reform thus also laid down an **unprecedented – and lasting – challenge to monastic life.**

- The Protestants firmly opened the **option of a religion and social life without a spiritual elite** that would prove attractive both in the short and long-term.
- Long-running tensions over the amount of property owned by monastic institutions were also brought to a head in this context: **state seizures of monastic property** would occur throughout the early modern and modern periods.

Sources – *The Life of Jean Bassand*, anonymous (c. 1450s)

Life of Jean Bassand (d. 1445)

- Jean Bassand was from a well-off urban background in Besançon in Burgundy (modern Day Eastern France)
- Originally an Augustinian Canon but joined the Celestines in Paris to take up a more rigorous life.
- Became the independent French Celestine congregation's most important leader in the first half of the fifteenth century, holding a number of key offices.
- He gained permission from pope Eugenius IV to initiate an Observant-style reform of certain Italian Celestine houses shortly before his death, beginning with the house of Aquila, the burial place of the Celestine founder, Pietro da Morrone (pope Celestine V).
- His Life (*vita*) was written up by a follower – most likely Jean Bertauld, a man from a similar urban background who became a very important Celestine leader himself.
- The text was largely read among the Celestines; provides a strong description of their monastic ideals and how they saw their place in the world in the mid-15th century.

Sources – *The Life of Jean Bassand*, anonymous (c. 1450s)

[At Aquila, Italy] Virtuously carrying the burden of religion more than ever before, when he had found the monastery empty of all necessities for the brothers, he worked with them, enduring poverty. He endured tricks by false brothers, suffered injuries, and was attacked by threats and mockery. Just before Lent, however, those “conventual” brothers, who had remained falsely with the devoted fathers, formed a plan together: to the scandal of the people [of Aquila], and to the injury of the blessed Father and his brothers, who were still few in number, they would suddenly withdraw, and the church would thus remain without masses. Thus, on the 4th Sunday of Lent, at the point when “Laetere Jerusalem” is sung in the church, they left. But behold, by divine provision, seven brothers newly arrived from France immediately entered the monastery through the church, and they were received by the blessed Father, and the Aquilan people with joy and exultation. The wrongdoers were bewildered and rejected: the monastery was now totally cleansed of undisciplined brothers, and regular observance remained unimpeded.

Sources – *Principles of the Old and the New Testaments*, by Matthias of Janov (1388-1392)

Matthias of Janov (Matěj z Janova)

- A Czech (Bohemian) intellectual churchman who had studied at Paris in the 1370s.
- During the Great Western Schism, he returned from Paris to Prague to teach, securing favour from the archbishop of the city Jan of Jenstein.
- Detests the papal schism, which he attributed to the greed of churchmen more broadly.
- Sometimes regarded as a pre-Hussite figure for his emphasis on the reform of ecclesiastical morals, his concern that the laity should have more frequent communion in both forms, and his dislike of the cult of relics in churches.

Principles of the Old and the New Testaments

- A series of collected essays on Church reform, many of them written for Jan of Jenstein.
- Matthias's compilation does not survive in complete, collected form: rather its essays were frequently copied and distributed in chunks or separately, attracting the attention of intellectuals and later Hussite writers.

Sources – *Principles of the Old and the New Testaments*, by Mattias of Janov (1388-1392)

And remember meanwhile, just how many devout, chaste, learned and humble men, wise and suited to all manner of good work for the building up of Christ's body and the people of the church are shut away in the houses and cloisters of the Carthusians, just how many young and old men, illustrious and well bred, are in convents of the order of Saint Benedict, how many remained enclosed in houses and cells of the Cistercians, how many are hidden in the dwellings of Augustinian friars ... That is why the holy people of the church, the flock of Christ's sheep, remains deserted and impoverished of spiritual men who would be useful to them. Bring forth all these men who are hiding in inner places and search them out with the utmost diligence from all parts of the world. [...] Then you will see how much utility you will confer to the sacred unity of the family of Christ, how great will be the edification of the people believing in the crucified Jesus, and what common illumination of the unrefined and simple peasants will come to pass.

Sources – Foundation charter of the Minim house at Bracancourt, by Jean de Baudricourt

Jean de Baudricourt (d. 1499)

- From a knightly background.
- Made his fame in French royal service, both as a soldier and administrator.
- Especially close to king **Louis XI** of France (reigned 1461), who appointed him governor of Burgundy.

Foundation charter of the Minim house at Bracancourt (1499)

- This document records his foundation of the Minim house at Bracancourt, in his own domains: one of houses of the new Minim order (which received full papal approval for its own Rule in 1493) in France.
- A rural house, unlike many other early Minim foundations in France, Jean de Bracancourt was nevertheless following in the footsteps of royal fashion: Louis XI had drawn the Minim founder, Francesco di Paola (d. 1507) from Italy to be his death bed confessor, and his successor, Charles VIII founded Minim houses.

Sources – Foundation charter of the Minim house at Bracancourt, by Jean de Baudricourt

We consider and understand that almighty God the Father is a just judge and that this lover and zealot of justice and equity gives and grants healthy counsel to humane frailty: while the said frailty is joined and united with the body during life, it can purge and wash away the sins, faults, omissions and deficits by which it incurs the indignation of God the creator, by praises, suffrages, obsequies, the celebration of masses, prayers, fasts and abstinences, and hence recover grace. We consider also that glorious God, whose mercy knows no bounds, allows those who love his divine service and revere his churches - whether by assisting, augmenting or building them anew, - to participate in his heavenly blessings, and that he returns to each according to his merits [...]

We have thus decided to construct and build a church and monastery [...] in a place commonly known as *Our Lady of Bracancourt*, so that this church and monastery can be filled with 13 religious men, of which 8 will be priests and the others deacons, subdeacons and Minim brothers. They will daily serve God and the glorious virgin Mary, according to the institution and rule of their order, and make supplications, pleas and prayers for the peace of the realm [of France], the health and prosperity of the King, and of ourselves.

Sources – *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, by Martin Luther (1520)

Martin Luther (d. 1546)

- Discussed in the slides.

The Babylonian Captivity of the Church (1520)

- One of Luther's most strident, early articulations of what would become Protestant theology, published – in print! – at the moment of his final break with the Roman Papacy.
- Heavily critical of the papacy for keeping the Church “captive”, it criticised the sacramental and penitential system of the church.
- Overall he argued these practices were representative of theology put too much emphasis on human action and merits in the pursuit of salvation, rather than simple faith in God.

Sources – *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, by Martin Luther (1520)

Vows should be abolished by a general edict, especially life-long vows, and all men diligently recalled to the vows of baptism. If this is not possible, everyone should be warned not to take a vow rashly. No one should be encouraged to do so. Permission to make vows should be given only with difficulty and reluctance. For we have vowed enough in baptism – more than we can ever fulfil [...] But now we travel over earth and sea to make many converts. We fill the world with priests, monks and nuns, and imprison them all in life-long vows. You will find those who argue and decree that a work done in fulfilment of a vow ranks higher than one done without a vow. They claim such works are rewarded with I know not what great rewards in heaven. Blind and godless Pharisees, who measure righteousness and holiness by the greatness, number or other quality of the works! But God measures them by faith alone, and with Him there is no difference between works except in the faith which performs them.

These wicked men inflate with bombast their own opinions and human works. They do this to lure the unthinking populace, who are almost always led by the glitter of works to make a shipwreck of their faith, to forget their baptism and to harm their Christian liberty. For a vow is a kind of law or requirement. Therefore, when vows are multiplied, laws and works are necessarily multiplied. When this is done, faith is extinguished and the liberty of baptism taken captive. [...] And if there were no other reason for abolishing these vows, this one would be reason enough: namely, that through them faith and baptism are slighted and works are exalted, which cannot be done without harmful results. For in the religious orders there is scarce one in many thousands, who is not more concerned about works than about faith, and on the basis of this madness they have even made distinctions among themselves, such as "the more strict" and "the more lax," as they call them. [...] However numerous, sacred, and arduous they may be, these works, in God's sight, are in no way whatsoever superior to the works of a farmer labouring in the field, or of a woman looking after her home [...] Vows only tend to the increase of pride and presumption.

Sources – Letter to Henry VIII of England (1536), by Thomas Starkey

Thomas Starkey

- Thomas was Henry VIII's chaplain and a firm ally of the king's actions against the monasteries.
- An Oxford educated humanist scholar, he was regarded as a moderate reformer: was employed as an intermediary between royal circles and Catholic holdouts.

Letter to Henry VIII of England (1536)

- The following letter – written around the time of the dissolution of the lesser monasteries – set out a moderate (but ultimately Protestant) reform position to the King, as well as a defence of his recent policies.
- Like many medieval letters, they were not intended to be purely “personal”, but rather to be read by others, who might also be informed by them.

Sources – Letter to Henry VIII of England (1536), by Thomas Starkey

There are many who plainly judge this act for the suppression of certain abbeyes both to be against charity and unjust to those who are dead, because their founders and other departed souls would seem to be defrauded of the benefit of prayer and [spiritual] almsgiving that are done there for their relief. [...]

But although it is so that prayer and almsgiving is of great comfort for those who have departed, and though God delights much in the direction of our charitable minds [towards this], to convert too many possessions to this end and purpose, and to appoint too many person to this role and duty cannot be done without great detriment and hurt to the Christian commonwealth ... and although it is a good and very religious thing to pray for those departed from this [worldly] misery, we cannot give all our possessions so that idle men are nourished with continual prayer.

Sources: *History of the Indian Church* (1573-1597), by Geronimo de Mendieta (1525-1604)

Geronimo de Mendieta (1525–1604)

- Joined the “Observant” arm of the Franciscan order in 1545 in Bilbao, Spain
- In 1554, he went to New Spain (modern day Mexico) to pursue missionary work among the Native Americans (the Spanish referred to them as “Indians”). In the process, he learnt the local Nahuatl language.

History of the Indian Church (1573-1597)

- A noted writer, Geronimo was commissioned in 1573 by his order to write a history of the Franciscan missionary work in the region. This *Historia eclesiástica Indiana*, written in Spanish, was completed in 1597.

Sources: *History of the Indian Church (1573-1597)*, by Geronimo de Mendieta (1525-1604)

This land was a transplanted hell: its people would yell at night, some invoking the devil, others in a drunken stupor, and still others singing and dancing. They had kettledrums, trumpets, horns and large conches, especially at the feasts of their demons. It is incredible how much wine they consumed at the drinking orgies which they held very often and how much one poured into his body. It was very pitiful to see men, created after the image of God, becoming worse than brute animals.

[...]

[Those venerable old friars], getting rid of their seriousness, started to play with straw and little stones with them [native children] during the recreation time. The friars always had paper and ink in their hands, and on hearing a word they wrote it down, indicating the circumstances in which it was said. In the afternoon the friars used to meet to interchange their writings and, the best they could, adapted the Nahuatl words to the Spanish terms that they considered most appropriate. And it used to happen that what one day they had understood the following day they would find out not to be so. [After some time] some of the grown-up children, as they saw the friars' desire to learn the language, not only corrected their mistakes, but also asked them many questions that were a source of happiness [for the friars].

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