

## Origin of the Cistercian Order

The seed from which the Cistercian Order emerged was planted some 180 years earlier with the Cluniac Reformation of AD 910, which saw the emergence at Cluny Abbey (in Burgundy) of the Cluniac Order. This reformation of Benedictine monasticism embodied a purer observance by the Cluniac Order of the authentic spirit of the Rule of St Benedict than that achieved by the Benedictine Order through their traditional observance.

In 1098, Robert of Molesme, with a group of 21 followers, left the Cluniac monastery of Molesme (in Burgundy) in order to follow a more strict and literal observance of the Rule of St Benedict than that achieved by the Cluniac Reformation. Robert and his party arrived, reportedly on the Feast Day of St Benedict, at the site (gifted by Odo I, Duke of Burgundy) on which the Abbey of Citeaux would be founded. Paradoxically, in 1099 the Abbot of Molesme, angered by Robert's departure, petitioned Pope Urban II to order Robert back to the Abbey. Robert, shortly after, became Abbot and implemented reforms similar to those he had instigated at Citeaux.

By the time of Robert's departure from Citeaux, the Cistercian *ordo* (a monastic way of life, liturgy and ethos) had been established. Despite Robert's departure, Citeaux continued to flourish; particularly under the abbacy of Stephen Harding (the third Abbot, 1108 to 1133). By 1119 the four primary daughter-houses of La Ferté (1113), Pontigny (1114), Clairvaux (1115) and Morimond (1115), the four filiations of Citeaux, had been founded, and the *Carta Caritatis* (Charter of Charity), the foundational document of the Order, had received a papal bull from Pope Calixtus II; enshrining it as a canon law of the Catholic Church. The Cistercian Order was established.



Locations

Stephen Harding is considered the Father of the Cistercian Order, with good reason. During his abbacy he guided the fledgling Abbey through the trials and destitution common to most abbeys in the early years of their founding, to the beginnings of the accomplishment that would elevate Citeaux as the Mother-house of the Cistercian Order. Stephen was also singularly instrumental, both as Prior to Alberic (second Abbot of Citeaux) and as Abbot himself, in the creation of the charters and usages that would govern all aspects of the Cistercian Order; of particular import being the aforementioned *Carta Caritatis* and the *Consuetudines* (customs and regulations of the Order). Stephen's abbacy also saw

Cistercian monasticism spread rapidly throughout Europe and at the time of his death upwards of ninety monasteries had been founded; twenty of which were daughters of Citeaux.



Cîteaux Abbey

How did the Cistercians differ from the Benedictine, Cluniac and other contemporary Orders? Why were Cistercians benedictine and not Benedictine? The difference lay not in the strictness of their adherence to the Rule of St Benedict, although this was of significance, but in the charters and usages that governed that strict adherence.

In following the traditional Rule of St Benedict, each abbey of the Benedictine Order was autonomous and independent of other religious houses. The Abbot was not answerable to any authority, religious or secular, but that of God. Abbeys depended on patrons to provide support - in the form of donations of money and land, and protection; in return for which was a guarantee of prayers of salvation in perpetuity for the patron, his family and descendants. However, the autonomous independence of Benedictine abbeys exposed them to patrons who exercised privileges of material benefit, rights to hospitality and involvement in Abbey governance, as a condition of their continued patronage. The consequence of which was that Benedictine abbeys, to varying extent, displayed wealth and trappings of comfort, ate less frugally, and ceased to observe some of the night-time Divine Offices.

The Cistercian Order, however, was hierarchical under the central governance of a Mother-house and Father-abbot, which allowed statutes to be disseminated and discipline to be enforced. Firstly, by the Abbot of an abbey's respective mother-house in the filial affiliation, and secondly, directly by the Father-abbot from the Mother-house of Cîteaux through the mechanism of the General Chapter (on general matters pertaining to the Order as a whole or when the filial method failed or was unable to do so). Filial affiliation also aided and set the passage of ideas in matters such as architecture, furnishings, agriculture, industry and technology. Filial affiliation also prevented patrons from exercising those privileges customarily enjoyed over Benedictine abbeys.

### Referenced Documents

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