The legacy of monastic hospitality
1 The Rule of Benedict and rise of Western monastic hospitality

In the first of two articles about the founding father of hospitality, **Kevin O'Gorman** looks at St Benedict's rule and its context of in the monastic orders. Contemporary hospitality operators will find themselves in a very familiar world.

HOSPITALITY HAS A LONG HISTORY, honourable tradition and rich heritage. Throughout human history hospitality has developed as a benchmark for civilisation. With the fall of the Roman Empire at the end of the fifth century 'gastronomy took sanctuary in the monasteries until the 15th century'.[1] During this time the monks were writing about and providing hospitality that would easily be recognised today. In the high Middle Ages hospitality emerged as a commonly accepted criterion of judgement of esteem at all levels of society.[2]

The origins of Western monasticism

The teachings of the New Testament provide the basis for the Western monastic tradition. There are also parallels to be found in early Buddhist and Hindu writings, and it is known that there was considerable contact between India and Alexandria, which was at that time (c 200AD) the principal commercial and intellectual centre in the Mediterranean. Hindu merchants had formed a permanent and prosperous colony in Alexandria.[3] Other forms of monasticism, such as the Syrian and strictly Oriental, were to have no direct influence on that of Europe.

The growth of Christian asceticism (self-denying way of life) coincided with the last of the great Roman persecutions of Christians to take place in Egypt, when many Christians fled from the cities to avoid martyrdom. The followers of St Anthony were purely eremitical (Christian hermit-like), whilst those who followed the Rule of St Pachomius more nearly approached the coenobitical ideal of communal living within a monastery. Under the Antonian system the austerities (regime of self-discipline) of the monks were left entirely to their own discretion; under the Pachomian system, however, there was an obligatory rule of limited severity, and the monks were free to add to it what other ascetical practices they chose. In addition, the prevailing idea in both sets of followers was that they were spiritual athletes and as such they rivalled each other in austerity. In the fourth century AD, when St Basil organized Greek monasticism, he set himself against the eremitical life and insisted upon community life, with meals, work and prayer in common. With him the practice of austerity, unlike that of the Egyptians, was to be subject to

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the control of the superior of the community. His idea of the monastic life was the result of an amalgam of the ideas existing in Egypt and the East, together with European culture and modes of thought.
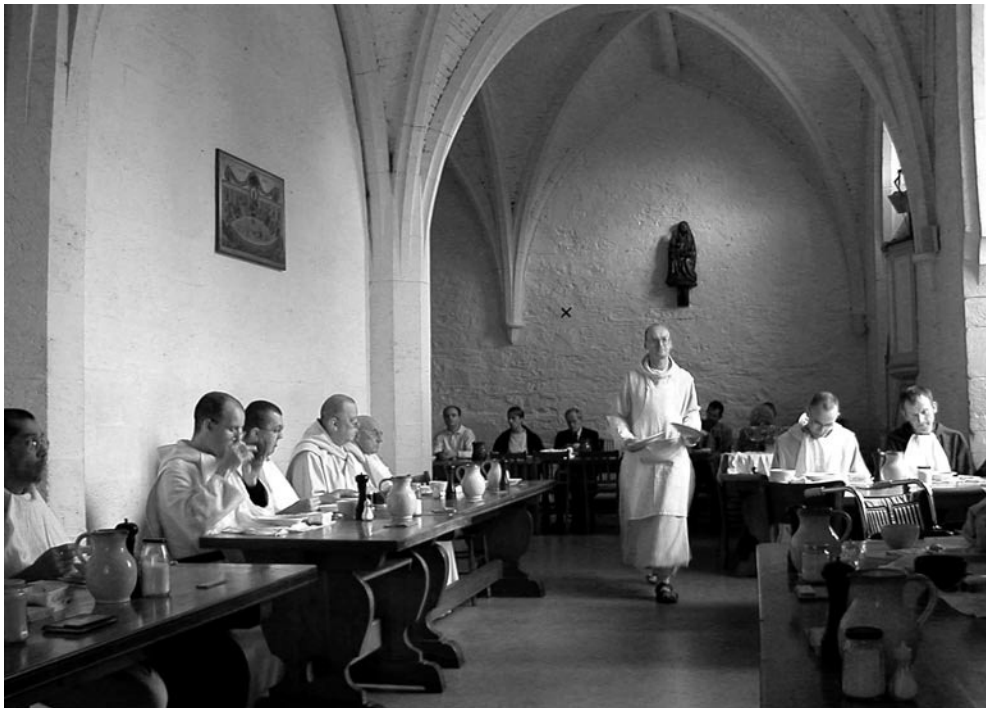
In the refectory of Pluscarden Abbey near Elgin, the server for the week is serving the meal. Following St Benedict's rule (chapter 35), all the able-bodied brothers take their turns at serving in the refectory. The Abbot does not usually serve the meal, except on Good Friday. The guests are seated in the background.

(Dom Giles Conacher OSB)

The Rule of Benedict

St Benedict is considered the founder of Western monasticism. He was born at Nursia in about 480AD and died at Monte Cassino, in 543AD. The only authentic life of Benedict of Nursia is in St Gregory's *Dialogues*, where St Benedict is introduced as:

a man of venerable life, blessed by grace, and blessed in name, for he was called 'Benedictus' or Bennet:

> His Rule was meant to be for the governance of the domestic life of lay individuals who wanted to live, in the fullest possible way, on the path that led to God

who, from his younger years, carried always the mind of an old man; for his age was inferior to his virtue.[4] For Benedict, a monastery was nothing more or less than 'A school for the Lord's service'. Benedict had lived the life of an eremite in the extreme Egyptian pattern. Instead of attempting to revive the old forms of asceticism, he consolidated the coenobitical life, emphasized the community spirit, and discouraged all private ventures in austerity. Benedict did not write the Rule for clerics; nor was it his intention to found a worldwide order. His Rule was meant to be for the governance of the domestic life of lay individuals who wanted to live, in the fullest possible way, on the path that led to God.

In Benedict's Rule the main focus for religious hospitality in chapter 53, is entitled *De Hospitibus Suscipiendis*—The Reception of Guests. In this chapter there is a polarity between the closed monastic world and the secular world in general. By leaving the secular society, the monk sets up an alternative world in which people from the secular world might wish to share. Therefore the ritual reception of guests was to play an important role by being both the bridge and the barrier between the two worlds. An English translation (from the original Latin) of chapter 53 is given opposite. There are, however, texts from other abbeys and congregations, which also highlight certain aspects of monastic hospitality and some are also exampled here to further illustrate the text of Benedict's chapter 53.[5]

Reception

In verse 1 of chapter 53 is the central feature that 'all guests are to be received as Christ'. From the original Latin used in the opening phrase it could be concluded that the chapter is dealing as much with

those travellers who arrive unexpectedly, as those who come for a planned visit. The Latin word used for guests is *hospites*. The same word is used in the Bible (Matthew 25:35) for 'strangers', showing clearly that hospitality should be offered to those who are in need of it, as well as to those who command shelter by power or prestige. When he quotes Matthew 25:35, Benedict changes the Latin words *collegistis* (you welcomed) to *suscepistis* (you received), and *suscipiantur* (be received). This is the key concept in the chapter. This echoes in the profession of a monk: he is 'received' into the monastery, so he can then 'receive' others in hospitality.[7]

The stratification of the hospitality is evident in verse 2, 'proper or due honour' *(congruus honor)*, which means that not all receive the same honour. There are two categories of person due particular honour: in Latin these are *domesticus fidei* and *peregrinis*. *Domesticus fidei,* literally 'those who share our faith', would apply to other clerics and monks, who are to be received with greater honour.[8] The Latin word *peregrinis* can mean 'pilgrim', 'visiting', 'strange', and 'foreign'. The context seems to favour the more technical meaning of' 'pilgrim', who could possibly

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be understood as another type of the *domestici fidei* who would then be due the same honour. In verse 15 Benedict is recognising people who were on a holy journey and would single them out for special attention. Pilgrimage, as a form of popular spiritual exer-

cise, peaked after St Benedict's time.[9] However, there is good evidence for pilgrimage to the tombs of the martyrs and saints, especially at Rome, and to the Holy Places before Benedict wrote his rule. [10]

In verse 3 Benedict talks about the nature of the greeting. Here Benedict is probably referring to cordial words and facial expressions, rather than concrete acts of hospitality. The acts are described in the succeeding verses, but the nature of the greeting is extremely important for the morale of the guest. The key point here is that the duty of caring for the physical needs of the guest actually counts for little if it is carried out in an insensitive manner. The desired reception of a guest is further illustrated in this quotation from the Swabian Congregation of St Joseph:

> Although guests are not allowed into the cloister, if the guests are allowed to pray with the monks then this demonstrates the fullness of the welcome that the monks offer to the guests

Our holy Father desired that guests arriving at the monastery be received with every manifestation of politeness and benevolence. As soon as a guest comes to the door of the monastery, therefore, the porter, after having acquainted himself with the guest's name and the general purpose of his visit, will request him to wait briefly in a properly appointed room. He will forthwith make the visitor's presence known to the abbot or his representative, who will permit nothing to delay him in greeting the guest in a polite and friendly manner, according to his state in life. He will welcome him in a proper and becoming manner and accompany him to the guest quarters.[11]

Benedict then (verse 4) gives instruction on how a guest has to be received. Primacy of the spiritual in the dealings of monks with outsiders is emphasised, making clear that the guest is received on the monastery's terms. If the monks put aside their religious character to deal with all guests at their level, then the cloister is breached and true monastic hospitality is falsified. The following two quotations serve to illustrate some of the considerations further:

From the 14th-century Congregation of Strasburg:
In performing the duties of hospitality superiors will keep specially in mind that with due regard for the

person's social rank and dignity they show those evidences of charity, considerateness and politeness which will edify them and make them well disposed toward the superiors personally, their monasteries, and the order. But above all else they are to see to it that the signs of respect are given in the true spirit of charity and out of love of Christ whom they receive and worship in the person of the guests.[12]
and from the Swabian Congregation of St Joseph:
Superiors are to perform all duties of hospitality promptly and willingly according to the rank and dignity of each guest and in keeping with the means of the monastery.[13]

In verse 6 the phrase 'the greeting itself, however' (*in ipsa autern salutatione*) would seem to indicate that only after the status of the guest is determined, are they actually greeted, and that despite the initial wariness all humility must now be displayed. In verse 7 'a complete prostration on the ground' *(prostrato omni corpore in terra)* is clearly an echo of the greeting Abraham (Genesis 18:2ff) gave to the strangers, and for the monks shows their general submission to the power of God and the benevolence of the community. This is reinforced in a quotation from the 14th-century Congregation of Strasburg:

> Abbots are to guard against treating guests by imitating worldlings, and on the pretext of hospitality or regard for dignity, entertaining them lavishly or extravagantly. Toward all there should be proper consideration for the guest's state in life, as well as for monastic poverty and sobriety.[14]

Participation

In verses 8 and 9 there is rich symbolism as the guest is being led deeper into the building and into the life of the community. Although guests are not allowed into the cloister, if the guests are allowed to pray with the monks then this demonstrates the fullness of the welcome that the monks offer to the guests; praying with the monks is to penetrate to the very centre of their life. From its earliest origins monasticism considered hospitality so important as to override asceticism. In verses 10 and 11 it is clearly shown however that the bending of the Rule, when there are guests to be accommodated, should not be allowed to disrupt

community life. The washing of feet (verses 12–14), is a mark of hospitality, not uncommon in the early Church (1 Timothy 5:10; cf. Luke 7:44–45). Verse 15 reminds the monks that special care must be shown to those in greatest need of hospitality, and closes with a specific mention of the poor; those in most need of hospitality.

The rest of the chapter 53 (verses 16–24) is pragmatic, and even restrictive, although certainly practical. It would seem that guests are never in short supply and can arrive at any time, but the monks need to try to minimise the disturbance to the community. In recognition of this there are three specific matters which are dealt with in these verses: the guests' kitchen, their accommodation and their communications with the monks.

In the kitchen

In verse 16 Benedict allows for a separate abbot's kitchen: this is to provide for the times when the abbot is eating with the guests, while the rest of the monks are fasting (cf verse 10). The running of the guest house is entrusted to two monks, who may even need help, which indicates that guests 'are never lacking'. The two monks 'who are capable of fulfilling this office' (*qui ipsud officium bene impleant*), are appointed for a year and must be competent. Another preoccupation characteristic of Benedict is indicated by the use of the words 'giving help to those in need of it and keeping them from grumbling' *(murmuratione* and *solacium).* If people are not given what they need to carry out their duties, they are not at fault: it is their superiors who fail to train or resource them who are culpable.[15] The following text, from the 11th-century Abbey of Cluny, further illustrates how a guest should be received:

The guest master receives with all politeness guests who are pilgrims or those who come to the monastery simply for their spiritual welfare… When a guest is led to the entrance of the enclosure at meal time, he waits there until presented to the abbot, who will pour water over his hands and accompany him to the head table… Whatever has been prepared for the brethren is to be served generously to the prior and the guest… If guests request to be shown the various

departments of the enclosure, the guest master will obtain the prior's permission and take them through the monastery during the time of one of the Masses while the community is in church. He will take them to the alms house, the store rooms, kitchen, refectory, novitiate, dormitory and infirmary. When they encounter brothers who have no permission to speak, these brothers are not to break the silence.[16]

Verse 22 has two practical suggestions. The first is 'let there be sufficient beds made up' (*ubi sint lecti strati sufficienter*). The guesthouse should always be ready for travellers arriving fatigued from the journey. Long delays in preparing the guesthouse would therefore be a hardship for them. The second is that the guesthouse should be 'wisely managed by wise persons' (*sapientibus et sapienter administretur*). In other words those managing the guesthouse should be practically competent. However, this is not to deny that, in a given monastic situation, the Guest Master may give spiritual counsel. The term 'managed' (*administretur*) is important, for it contrasts with proprietorship: within

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this context God is the owner of the house; the monks merely manage it. This need for careful management is also exampled in the quotation from the 15th-century Congregation of Bursfeld:

In the guest rooms everything is to be kept clean, but simple, lest in striving too hard to please we displease. Without explicit permission, none of the brethren is to visit guests; permission is not granted to anyone for visits after Compline.[17]

Communication

Chapter 53 concludes with a strict instruction to the monks about contact with the guest: 'not to visit or speak with them' *(ullatenus societur neque colloquatur).* This seemingly harsh restriction appears quite out of harmony with the spirit of the first half of the chapter. Kardong defends this by showing on the one hand monasteries that are overrun by guests need to protect their monks from the curious, whilst on the

other hand there are garrulous monks in need of a sympathetic ear.[18] Guests who come to the monastery for solitude should not have to provide that kind of listening service.

The evolution of monastic hospitality

St Benedict established the rule of monastic life that was later to be adopted by most Western monasteries. The Rule, which stressed communal living and physical labour, was also concerned with the needs of the

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local people, and the distribution of alms and food to the poor. During the lifetime of St Benedict his disciples spread the order throughout the countries of Central and Western Europe. It soon became the most important order, until the founding of the Augustinian Canons in the 11th century and the mendicant orders (those religious orders that forbid the ownership of property and encourage working or begging for a liv-

ing) in the 13th century. The Benedictines were also to have wide influence both within the Roman Catholic Church and in the secular society. St Augustine of Canterbury, for instance, the disciple of Gregory the Great, took the Benedictine Rule to England in the late 6th century, and was to be the first of a long list of Benedictines who would become Archbishop of Canterbury. By as early as 1354 the order had also provided 24 popes, 200 cardinals, 7,000 archbishops, 15,000 bishops, and it had also included 20 emperors, 10 empresses, 47 kings, 50 queens, and many other royal and noble people. The order reached a peak of around 37,000 Benedictines in the 14th century.

Early in the sixth century the first 12 Benedictine monasteries had been founded at Subiaco, near Rome, and the monastery, founded by St Benedict in 529, was situated on the hill of Monte Cassino overlooking the town of Cassino, northwest of Naples. It was for many centuries the leading monastery in Western Europe. Monte Cassino had a chequered history and was remodelled and rebuilt several times, with the present buildings being in the style of the 16th and 17th centuries. During the 11th and 12th centuries it was a centre of learning, particularly in the field of medicine: Monte Cassino monks established the famous medical school

Pluscarden Abbey is one of 16 houses of Benedictine monks in Britain and the only medieval monastery in Britain being used for its original purpose. Founded in 1230 by Alexander II, the community took up residence again in 1948, gaining the status of an abbey in 1974. This is the newly-built guest house, with 14 centrally-heated rooms. All guests are expected to take their share of the routine chores. For more details contact http://www.pluscardenabbey.org/retreats.asp
(Dom Giles Conacher OSB)

at Salerno. Abbeys were to become typical of Western monasticism. These self-contained communities have within the abbey walls: the abbey church; the dormitory; the refectory, or dining hall; and the guest house for travellers. The buildings enclose a large courtyard that is usually surrounded by a cloister, or sheltered arcade. The abbeys of the Middle Ages were peaceful retreats for scholars and were the chief centres of Christian piety and learning. They were also centres for religious hospitality, the care of the sick and the poor, and had responsibilities for refugees.

In the centuries that had immediately followed after St Benedict, the hospitality afforded by monasteries was comprehensive. It included lodging for travellers, accommodation and treatment for the sick, and charitable services for the poor. The usual period during which hospitality was freely provided was two complete days; and some similar restriction upon the abuse of hospitality seems to have been prescribed by most of the orders, friars as well as monks. When there were few urban centres, the monasteries represented the most stable and well-endowed institutions in the countryside. The prominence of the guesthouse in all monastic buildings, beginning with the famous plan of St Gall (Switzerland) in the ninth century, attests indirectly to how scrupulously this tradition was respected.[18] This is highlighted by Thurston when he records that the Rites of Durham give an account of the splendour of their guest house and of the hospitality practised therein.[19]

The other orders

The Benedictines were not the only religious order to concentrate on hospitality. Orders such as the Knights Hospitallers of St John of Jerusalem were largely given up to works of charity and hospitality. The hostels of Jerusalem fitted into a pattern of flexibility and adaptability of religious life, where the emphasis was not only on spirituality but also on making a positive impact in the world through practical service and hospitality for others.[19]

A hostel for pilgrims was already in existence in Jerusalem by 1070, probably under the control of a community of Benedictines, held to be founded by Pope Gregory, in the ninth century and was supported by funds sent out to Jerusalem by various supporters.[20] Unlike most religious orders, the Hospitallers could not even identify their original founder by name; these obscure origins must later have caused the Order problems in promoting its work among European donors, whose funding was necessary for their hospitable endeavours.

In a creative move the Order began to claim much grander and more distant origins for itself. By the 1180s, the Order had an impressive fictional history; according to one source the Hospital had been founded by King Antiochus of Jerusalem, which would date the foundation to the late third or early second century before Christ.[21] Others were to claim that John the Baptist's parents had served the poor there,[22] Jesus had visited the Hospital on many occasions and his mother Mary lived in the Hospital for three years.[23]

Despite these mythical origins, the members of the Order became known as Knights of St John or

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Hospitallers. The Order was formally recognised by Pope Paschal II in 1113, his bull granting papal protection and privileges to the Hospital, Pie Postulatio Voluntatis, Pope Paschal II (1099–1118) referred to Gerard as the 'institutor' of the Hospital, indicating that he was largely responsible for its existence as an independent institution;[24] he the ruler of the Hospital at the time of the First Crusade (1095–99):

Paschal, bishop, and servant of such as are the servants of God, to his venerable son Gerard, founder and Master of the Hostel at Jerusalem, and to his lawful successors for evermore…

We, therefore, much pleased with the pious earnestness of thy hospitality, do receive the petition with our paternal favour…

Furthermore, all dignities or possessions which your hostel at present holds, either on this side of the water, to wit in Asia, or in Europe, as also those which hereafter by God's bounty it may obtain; we confirm them to thee and to thy successors, who shall be devoting themselves with a pious zeal to the cares of hospitality, and through you to the said Hospital

in perpetuity.[25]

The hospitality of the Hospitallers is based around hostels, or pilgrim hospices, and caring for the sick for spiritual reward. In the seventh clause of their Statutes, adopted in 1181, they decree:

> *Commanders of the houses should serve the sick cheerfully, and should do their duty by them, and serve them without grumbling or complaining, so that by these good deeds they may deserve to have their reward in the glories of heaven.*[26]

Among the customs of the order, the ceremony of initiation provided for the usual vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, and then spoke of the respect due to the sick:

> *Also we make another promise, which no other people make, for you promise to be the serf and slave of our lords the sick. And to each of these things he should reply: 'Yes, if it please God'.*[27]

Raymond du Puy, who succeeded Brother Gerard in 1118, further developed the order and increased its role from a defensive hospitaller one to that of also defending the invalids and pilgrims against the Saracens.[28] The Statutes adopted by the Order, during the mastership of Raymond du Puy, included detail

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on reception. The reception of a sick person arriving in the community was not dissimilar to that experienced by a guest on arrival at a Benedictine monastery. Importance was given to prayer, welcome, accommodation, and a meal:

> **How Our Lords the Sick should be Received and Served.**
> *And in that Obedience in which the Master and the Chapter of the Hospital shall permit when the sick man shall come there, let him be received thus: let him partake of the Holy Sacrament, first having confessed his sins to the priest, and afterwards let him be carried to bed, and there as if he were a Lord, each day before the brethren go to eat, let him be refreshed with food charitably according to the ability of the House…*

A second chronicler, Rabbi Benjamin from Navarre, who visited Jerusalem in 1163, described the hospital in Jerusalem 'which support four hundred knights, and afford shelter to the sick; these are provided with everything they may want, both during life and death'.[29] He also described the hostel of the Knights Templars in Jerusalem. Theodorich, visiting Jerusalem in 1187, before the order's expulsion from the city, wrote,

> *Here on the south side of the church, stands the Church and Hostel of St John the Baptist. As for this, no one can credibly tell another how beautiful its buildings are, how abundantly it is supplied with rooms and beds, and other materials for the use of poor and sick people, how rich it is in the means of refreshing the poor, and how devotedly it labours to maintain the needy, unless he has had the opportunity of seeing it with his own eyes… but we saw that the beds numbered more than one thousand. It is not every one even of the most powerful kings and despots who could maintain as many people as that house does every day.*[30]

There were many other orders that flourished around the same time. The military order of St Lazarus of Jerusalem originated in a leper hospital which was founded in the 12th century by the Crusaders of the Latin Kingdom. Before this date there had been leper hospitals in the East of which the Knights of St Lazarus claimed to be the continuation. The inmates of St John were merely visitors, and changed constantly; the lepers of St Lazarus, on the contrary, were condemned to perpetual seclusion. In return, they were regarded as brothers or sisters of the house that sheltered them. They also observed the common rule, which united them with their religious guardians.

As well as offering hospitality, the Knights Hospitaller were becoming actively involved in protecting pilgrims. Evidence of this is found in Pope Innocent II's bull *Quam Amabilis Deo*, issued around 1140, the Pope states that the Hospitallers retained men at their own expense for the express purpose of ensuring the safety of pilgrims.[31] Order of the Temple or Knights Templar was probably founded in 1120 for this very purpose. The Templars grew rapidly after their official recognition at the Council of Troyes in January 1129, the creation of a permanent guard for pilgrim travellers was ideal complement to the activities of the Hospitallers, who provided hospitality and medi-

cal care for pilgrims.[32]

While it seems certain that the Templars influenced the Hospitallers to take on a military role during the 1130s, it is equally likely that initially the Hospitallers provided the founders of the Knights Templar with an effective example of what could be done to help pilgrims. Templars, indeed, appear in only four charters in the Kingdom of Jerusalem before 1128 and two of these are concerned with the affairs of the Hospitallers.[33] In December 1120, Hugh of Payns, first Grand Master of the Templars was a witness to King Baldwin II of Jerusalem's confirmation of the privileges of the Hospital, while Robert, Second Grand Master, is among the witnesses to a charter of Bernard, Bishop of Nazareth, dated October 1125, exempting the Hospitallers from payments to his diocese. At the Ecumenical Council of Vienne in 1312, Pope Clement V finally suppressed the Knights Templar.[34] They had been persecuted and tortured since in France since 1307; a great number had already been burned at the stake for heresy, after confessions that were often made under extreme torture.[35]

On this final suppression of the Templars, considerable interest was taken in the disposition of Templar possessions, which were given by Clement V to the Hospitallers.[36] Also at the beginning of the 12th century the Antonites founded the first centre consecrated by perpetual rule to the care of the sick, in Europe. This group followed the Rule of St Augustine. It was more flexible than that of Benedict and thus better suited for a community organised for service, rather than for prayer.[28]

Hospitals as institutions of public service increased in importance during the Middle Ages. Care was more impersonal, but also more predictable, and increasingly separate from the Church. In the 13th century, there were Church laws forbidding clerics to practice medicine; the fourth Lateran Council also forbade clerics to practice surgery. The provision of charitable services and lodgings remained monastic ministries throughout the Middle Ages, but gradually municipalities and their citizens sponsored not only hospitals, but also other charitable services. Walsh asserts that many hospitals in European cities had come under municipal control by the 14th and 15th centuries—a change that further distanced the hospital from its origins in Christian hospitality.[29]

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