

# Monastery vs. convent



**Question:** What is the difference between a monastery and a convent?

– **Allen Eberle**, Hague, N.D.

**Answer:** Like many words, we can denote a strict sense and a more relaxed colloquial sense. We can also note that the meaning of the words have changed a bit over time. The word monastery originally came from the Greek word monazein, which means “to live alone.” In the earliest days, monastics (both men and women) went to the desert to live a largely solitary life, in separate dwellings.

However, many of them in a local area came to share some common buildings for prayer and eating. Over time many came closer together, and eventually were housed under one roof, though the monks and monastic sisters still tended to keep long hours of silence. Thus they lived in a relative, if not physical solitude, coming together also for communal prayers, meals and necessary community deliberations in the shared chapel, refectory and chapter hall.

Today the word “monastery” has tended to be used only of communities of men, while communities of women have tended to have their dwelling denoted as a “convent” or “cloister.” But technically, there are women’s communities whose domicile is most properly termed a monastery.

The main difference that the term “monastery” is meant to signify is that those who live there, live “alone” or apart from the everyday world. Their prayer is centered in the monastic community. Generally too, their work or apostolate is also centered there, rather than out in the community or

world. Some enclosures are strict, others less so, but the concept of dwelling apart is key.

“Convents” and religious houses, however, tend to house religious men and women who do not live and work in such isolation from the everyday world. Perhaps they work in education, hospitals or other external places during the day, but then return and live in community, sharing meals and prayer and other aspects of common life.

The word “convent” comes from a Latin word that means “to convene or gather,” and is less inclusive of the concept of solitude contained in the word “monastery.”

## **Jesus’ genetics**

**Question:** Since every human child receives half of his chromosomes from his father and half from his mother, where did the Church teach Jesus get the other half of his chromosomes, since he had no earthly father?

– **Peter Stein**, Everett, Wash.

**Answer:** I am unaware of any official Church teaching in this regard. Knowledge of DNA, etc., is very recent and still deepening. Hence one would not expect a thorough theological treatise on a matter of this sort now.

However, one principle must surely apply, namely the teaching from both Scripture and Tradition that Jesus, as a divine person also had a complete, intact human nature and was like us, in this regard in all things but sin.

Hence he had the complete and proper number of chromosomes. How exactly God supplied the part usually supplied by a human father is not revealed. We are dealing with miracle and mystery.

But this truth remains clear, Jesus, though one person, is

fully divine and fully human.

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