

Stephen Harding

Saint Name: St. Stephen Harding
Dates: 1050 AD – March 28, 1134
Location: United Kingdom
Feast Day: April 17



Stephen Harding was born in Dorset, England in the year 1050 and educated at the Sherburne Abbey. As a young man fluent in English, French and Latin, he traveled to Scotland, Paris and then to Rome where he eventually moved to the abbey of Molesme in Burgundy. So impressed by its holy abbot, Robert of Molesme and the prior abbot, Alberic (both of which were later canonized), Stephen joined the community and became a monk. In 1098, together with St. Robert, St Alberic, and twenty- one other monks, Stephen left Molesme to avoid what he perceived to be the abbey's increasing wealth and corruption and founded a new monastery at Citeaux – the Cistercian Order. Stephen, the youngest of the three became the third abbot of Citeaux. In 1112, St Bernard arrived with thirty of his followers. During the next eight years a dozen more Cistercian homes were erected to house all of those who flocked to the ideals of the new community. In 1119, Stephen wrote the Carta Caritatis, (Charter of Love), an important document for the Cistercian Order which defined the spirit of the Cistercian Abbeys and established its unifying principle – rejection of all feudal revenues and reintroduction of manual labor for monks. Stephen served as Abbot for twenty-five years, during which time he established 13 monasteries. By the end of the 12th century there were 500 Cistercian Abbeys in Europe. While no single person is considered the founder of the Cistercian Order, the shape of Cistercian belief and its rapid growth was due largely to the leadership of Stephen Harding. He resigned his office in 1133 because of near-blindness and advanced age, dying the following year on March 28, 1134.

St. Stephen Harding is honored as a saint in the Roman Catholic Church, having been canonized in 1623. Until 1683, his feast day was celebrated on March 28 but then moved to April 17.