

ST BENEDICT AND MONASTICISM

“Hearken, my son, to the precepts of the master... To you are my words now addressed, whoever you may be, that renouncing your own will to fight for the true King, Christ, you take up the strong and glorious weapons of obedience.”

Prologue, *Rule of St Benedict*

St Benedict’s Rule

The Rule of St Benedict is 1,450 years old. It is not too far fetched to say that we owe all that is most valuable in western culture to the influence of this document—the distillation of a lifetime of experiences of its saintly author with God and with men. “In quiet and repose of the humours,” St Albert the Great wrote some 650 years later, “the soul attains understanding and prudence.”¹ This expresses well the mind of the father of monasticism.

The monk gave himself to God irrevocably. He promised stability, conversion of his manner of life, and obedience to the Abbot of his monastery. The direction of his Abbot was God’s direction; his will, God’s will. What St Benedict promised the monk in return was his sanctification.

The followers of St Benedict in their *labor* for God down the centuries, produced for Him innumerable *opera*—works of architecture, of art, of culture.

“[St Benedict] found the world, physical and social, in ruins, and his mission was to restore it in the way, not of science, but of nature, not as if setting about to do it, not professing to do it by any set time or by any rare specific or by any series of strokes, but so quietly, patiently, gradually, that often till the work was done, it was not known to be doing. It was a restoration rather than a visitation, correction, or conversion. The new world which he helped to create was a growth rather than a structure. Silent men were observed about the country, or discovered in the forest, digging, clearing, and building; and other silent men, not seen were sitting in the cold cloister, tiring their eyes, and keeping their attention on the stretch, while they painfully copied and re-copied the manuscripts which they had saved. There was no one that ‘contended, or cried out’, or drew attention to what was going on; but by degrees the woody swamp became a hermitage, a religious house, a farm, an abbey, a village, a seminary, a school of learning, and a city.”²

Abbot Justin McCann adds to this analysis these comments.

“Amid the disruptive forces at work over the whole face of the Western world [the Benedictines] represented the stable tradition of an older time; they seized the torch of literature and learning, and though, amid those warring elements, in the gusty currents of a barbarous world, its light at times burnt very low, yet they passed it on still burning, and made possible the glories of the thirteenth century and the

¹ St Albert’s order, the Dominicans, encapsulated the same thought in a motto: *Contemplari et contemplata aliis tradere*—to contemplate and bring to others the fruits of that contemplation.

² John Henry Cardinal Newman, *The Mission of St Benedict* § 9, quoted in *St Benedict, the Story of the Man and His Work*, Abbot Justin McCann OSB, (Image Books) New York, 1958, p. 185.

renaissance of the fifteenth. It was in the monasteries that men found, in quiet and peace, the retreats in which they could study and write. It was here that they found the treasures not only of scriptural and patristic learning, but also of the learning of classical antiquity. The monasteries were the libraries of Europe, and enriched the stores which they possessed by the labour of assiduous transcription. Where do the great libraries of the present day, in Paris, Munich, London, Oxford and Cambridge derive the greater part of their manuscript collections? Their most precious possessions are the remains of the monastic libraries and the fruit of the monastic labours of the Middle Ages..."³

The monks produced their works anonymously for their motivation was not self promotion but the glory of God. The works were, in a sense, accidental. Almighty God allowed that in fulfilling their vows his servants would emulate His creativity, so their works were very good—*bonum est sui diffusivum*. This devotion to God and His glory continued despite the devastation initiated by Luther in Germany and by Henry Tudor in England in the sixteenth century, and on through all the disruptions caused by Protestantism down to the middle of the twentieth century. It has now largely disappeared.

Today, the vast majority of men are ignorant of St Benedict's Rule, as they are of history. They have no conception of the debt they owe its author and the thousands upon thousands of monks who submitted themselves to the discipline of that Rule over a millenium and a half.

A New Benedictinism

Contemplative life is like virtue. You cannot abuse it. Do so and it ceases to be contemplative life. The 'spirit of Vatican II', that gonfalon of Modernism that flutters bravely over most monasteries, has seen to it that their rigour has been moderated, their fasting attenuated, their focus compromised, and their silence reduced to something accidental. The silence is punctuated, moreover, by radio, television and the ubiquitous mobile telephone—for the demands of the world are paramount! Fr John Parsons has summarised the position well:

"After 1964 [the revival in religious life] instantly collapsed thanks to the new policy of adjusting religious life to the spirit of the age. Since the age is irreligious, the policy means that religious life must negate itself. It has generally been so..."⁴

The monk of 1960 intoning the words of the invitatory psalm, Psalm 94, *Venite exultemus Domino, jubilemus Deo...* recited the words—the *very sounds*—intoned by St Benedict and his monks in Monte Cassino 1,500 years before, words set in stone by St Jerome in his definitive translation of the Bible into the Latin Vulgate. These sacred sounds had been, so to speak, imprinted on the matter of the world in unbroken succession throughout all that one and a half millenia. The monk was thus united in his liturgical actions with his sacred forbears. Though he might doubt his fitness to

³ *St Benedict, the Story of the Man and His Work*, op. cit., p. 187

⁴ *Where Normal Religious Life Flourishes*, AD 2000, vol. 5, no. 10—November 1992

be counted among them, yet he could hear their voices echoing in the vaults of his abbey as the sounds of chanting melded into the Great Silence at the close of Matins.

Contrary to what may be believed, the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council did *not* proscribe the use of Latin in the Church's liturgy or the *Divine office*. Here are the relevant provisions of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the Council's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy:

36. §1 The use of the Latin language, with due respect to particular law, is to be preserved in the Latin rites...

...

101. §1 In accordance with the age-old tradition of the Latin rite, the Latin language is to be retained by clerics in the divine office...

The Council Fathers allowed exceptions, permitting the local ordinary power to allow the use of a vernacular translation of the office "to those clerics for whom the use of the Latin constitutes a grave obstacle to their praying the office properly" [cf. n. 101 §1]. They also allowed competent superiors of religious orders power to grant the use of the vernacular, even in choir, to religious including men who are not clerics [101 §2].

The 'spirit of Vatican II' ensured that the exception became the rule, and the Council Father's insistence on the use of Latin was ignored. The present writer was a novice in the Australian Province of the Dominican Order during the year 1968 and for part of 1969. Up until the end of 1968 the Dominican Fathers chanted the office in Latin. Its members were used to the language and they trained their novices and newly professed in its recitation. Such was their familiarity with it, it could not be said that the use of Latin constituted for them 'a grave obstacle to their praying the office properly'. Nevertheless, late in 1968, the Latin was replaced by the vernacular. Almost every other religious order throughout the English speaking world has done the same.

This abuse of the Council's permission of exceptions has brought with it the loss of a substantial part of the Church's patrimony. That abuse has reinforced itself with a new generation of clerics and religious who are almost completely ignorant of the Church's official language. The unity between the monk and his forbears was broken, the tradition fractured. Is it any wonder that monastic life has languished around the world since the late 1960s?⁵

The spirit of the age has opened religious life to every pagan ideology, including secular humanism and feminism. The concession in the sacred liturgy and the divine office in favour of the vernacular has opened them to worldly abuse. How many religious have abandoned their vocations because of the insistence of their fellow religious that the words of the liturgy should be recast in the false and emasculating language of feminist ideology?

⁵ Thomas Merton was one of those who opposed the change.

Contemplative life is something hard and unyielding. The modern version is something soft and plastic, like the caramel fudge some monasteries manufacture (and think it no shame to advertise) to earn their keep. Do you want to find true contemplative life? Look to those centres, few and isolated now on earth, where the insistence on cloister is ruthless; where the silence is mandatory, the ancient fasts are observed, and the horarium is dedicated to one thing, and one thing only, the Glory of Almighty God. One instance of this is the Abbaye Sainte-Madeleine du Barroux in the département of Vaucluse in southern France which, with Papal permission, adheres to the Tridentine liturgy. In November 2002, this foundation gave birth to another, the Abbey Sainte-Marie de la Garde, at St Pierre-de-Clairac near Agen in south western France.

The world is going to hell. The secular spirit grows every day and the only fetter it knows is that bizarre religion whose more extreme followers believe they perform a holy duty for God by slaughtering their fellow men. The world can be saved from perdition, but only by prayer and sacrifice. It is the vocation of the monastic life to fulfil that duty. Thomas Merton put it well in *The Seven Storey Mountain* in this paraphrase of advice him given by his confessor shortly after he entered the Abbey of Notre Dame de Gethsemani, Kentucky:

“Who knows how many souls are depending on your perserverance in this monastery? Perhaps God has ordained that there are many in the world who will only be saved through your fidelity to your vocation. You must remember them if you are ever tempted to leave.. Remember all those souls in the world. You know some of them. Others you may never know until you meet them in heaven. But in any case, you did not come here alone...”⁶

It cannot be accidental that on his election as Pope, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger chose the name ‘Benedict’. While he was a Cardinal, the new Pope showed great interest in the two Benedictine foundations mentioned above. But the Tridentine rite has no mortgage on the Latin language. There is no reason why the Church’s divine office should not be sung and chanted once again in the official language of the Church by a new crop of Benedictine monks conforming themselves to the alterations to the liturgy mandated by Vatican II and offering Mass in the *novus ordo*, if only they will reject the flag of Modernism and return to the rigour enunciated in his Rule by St Benedict.

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10th February 2007—*St Scholastica (sister of St Benedict)*

⁶ New York, 1948, published in England and Australia as *Elected Silence*, London (Burns & Oates), 1949: my copy, a 1969 reprint of *Elected Silence*: this quote at p. 270. I should add a ‘monitum’. Merton’s early works are generally reliable: his later works are not. He suffered from a major personal problem, self-absorption, and lost his way in monastic life.