

adopting the religious life. There are thus two degrees only of the state of perfection: the complete and master's one in bishops; the incomplete and learner's degree in religious. In both of these, and only in these, is there the characteristic of personal perpetual responsibility for living a life dedicated to perfection.



THE MONASTIC IDEA¹

BY

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IN the mind of the average Catholic, especially of the average cradle Catholic, a monk is someone who wears a habit. For this reason one constantly hears of Friars, Canons, and even Clerks Regular referred to as monks. Of course this is completely wrong. The only monks in the Church at present are the sons of Saint Benedict and Saint Bruno. Nevertheless, even the best instructed Catholic would find it hard to say what a monk is and in what way he differs from other religious. The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines a monk as 'a member of a community living apart under the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience'. The first part of this definition is all right, but it is hopelessly wrong over the vows. A monk takes a vow of obedience in common with other religious, but he does not take explicit vows of poverty or chastity; in their place he takes the vows of stability and conversation of manners.

These two vows need a little explaining as their import is not obvious at first sight, and it is to be hoped that the monastic idea will become plain in the course of the explanation. By his vow of stability a monk binds himself to persevere until death in the monastery of his profession. The reason for this is that a monastery is an independent family and the monastic vocation is to a particular house and not to an Order. This is true even in the case of the Cistercians. They are an Order in a very different sense from the modern religious orders. Each house is independent and only linked to the central house and mother house for purposes of

1. The summary of a lecture given to some men and women of London University on 27th February 1951.

visitation and discipline. In this way the Cistercians have been able to retain the traditional monastic ideal while acquiring the obvious advantages of centralisation.

There is nothing very difficult to understand about the vow of stability. It is the vow of 'conversation of manners' which gives the most difficulty, yet it embodies what is fundamental to the monastic idea. Things are not made any easier when the English form makes nonsense. The Latin is *conversatio morum*. The trouble is that there is no one word to translate *conversatio*. Abbot Chapman has got very near by translating *conversatio morum* as 'monasticity of behaviour'. But this is one of those tiresome translations that tell one very little. In order to understand what 'monasticity' means, we must realise that a monastery is not merely a family with the Abbot as a father; it is this, but it is something much more.

For a monk his community is nothing else than the mystical body of Christ. A monk achieves union with Christ through union with his brethren, and one of the surest signs of a monk's growth in spiritual stature is his more fervent sharing of the common life of his brethren. In a striking phrase of Saint Benedict, a monk 'shares by patience in the sufferings of Christ' by sharing fully in the common life of his community. In fact, for a monk the common life may be said to be a sacramental. It is for this reason that the worst sins of a monk are sins against the common life. Saint Benedict tells us that the vice of private ownership amongst monks must be utterly uprooted. But this is surely not so much because it is wrong for a monk to own anything (after all, he has not taken a vow of poverty), as because any form of private ownership, even that subtle form known as self-will, is a sin against the common life of the community. Therefore the worst of the penalties which Saint Benedict metes out to a guilty monk, next to expulsion from the monastery, is 'excommunication'. Monastic excommunication is not the same thing as the ecclesiastical penalty; it is a family affair. But it is a very terrible punishment because, to a greater or lesser degree according to the gravity of the crime, a monk is cut off from the common life of his brethren and therefore from the life of Christ. It is even possible for a monk to excommunicate himself by trying to lead his own life. This does happen sometimes, and unless it is seen and nipped in the bud by a wise Abbot the results can be tragic indeed.

The position which the Abbot holds in this scheme is unique and something quite different from the position held by, say, the General of the Jesuits. In a very full sense the Abbot is the father of his monks, tempering all things, so that, in the words of St Benedict, 'the strong may have something to aim at but the weak nothing to dismay them', being ever careful that by his severity he does not quench the smoking flax and ever bearing in mind the words of Jacob: 'If I shall overdrive my sheep, all my flock will perish in one day'. But the Abbot is something more than just the Father of his monks, he holds the place of Christ himself. Saint Benedict is never tired of reminding the Abbot of his great responsibility. He may delegate his administrative powers to a Prior, a Cellerer and, if the community is large, to Deans, but the ultimate responsibility is always his and it is of him that the Lord will require the souls of his children. In Saint Benedict's scheme the Abbot is the nexus of the whole fraternal unity and his office, by its very nature, lasts for life.

Now I think we are in a better position to understand the real meaning of *conversatio morum*. It implies a complete union with Christ through the common life of the community. It is, if one can say it, a *versatio cum Christo*.

There is another all important characteristic of the monastic idea. In speaking of the novices Saint Benedict mentions three important qualifications, the last two following from the first, which the novice-master must look for in his charges. Physical health has nothing to do with them. Physically the life instituted by Saint Benedict could not have been very much harder than the life of an ordinary countryman of his day. It is difficult to imagine the Saint turning a novice away solely on physical grounds. And although he emphasises the paramount importance of the Divine Office, St Benedict clearly realises that some of his monks may not be able to sing. The great qualification, the great mark of a true vocation, is that a novice should seek God. The novice-master must see if the novice is really seeking God and therefore fervent in the Divine Office and in the pursuit of humility. If the novice fails on this score, he will never make a monk. In passing, let it be said that the humility insisted on by Saint Benedict is not an attitude put on for the occasion, it is an effect of seeking God, a true knowledge of one's own nothingness arising from an ever-growing experience of God.

It should be clear from what has been said that the life of a monk is a life of prayer. But it is a life of prayer because everything that is done in the life is done in union with Christ. Important as is the Divine Office in the life of a monk, he does not cease to pray when he leaves the choir for work in the fields, he merely changes the ritual of his prayer. St Benedict insists that the implements of the farm should be treated with the same care as the vessels of the altar. Anyone who reads carefully the rule of Saint Benedict cannot fail to be impressed by the wonderful harmony of the life which he plans. Work in choir, work in the fields, work in the scriptorium, and ample hours of sleep, are like the strands of a rope, no one thicker than the other, and all combining to the strength of the whole.

But, human nature being what it is, it should not be a matter of surprise that during certain periods of the Church's history the subtle harmony of which a monk's life should be composed has either been lost sight of or misunderstood. The eighteenth century was an especially bad time, and even now we have not entirely ceased to suffer from its effects. The reformation had wiped out a large number of monasteries in Europe and those which remained suffered either from that leprosy of the monastic order, 'Abbots in commendam', or a certain dimming of the contemplative vision arising perhaps as a reaction from the excesses of quietism. Almost all houses, great or small, suffered from one or other or both of these evils. Then reformers arose. In a perfectly natural and even laudable reaction from the over-elegance and sophistication of the age, they often tended to view the monastic life solely in terms of penance and to turn monasteries into what were little better than penitential establishments. This was a gross over-emphasis of a part at the expense of the whole. And it had sad results, for men can become as attached to their penances as they can to their riches, and the results are just as evil. One of the grievous consequences of this was that the great qualification for the reformed monastic state became not whether a novice was truly seeking God, though doubtless this had its part, but whether he had the physical strength to stand up to the exceptional severity of the life. And so it happened that men who were really seeking God had sometimes to be turned away on purely physical grounds, while others, perhaps less desirable from a spiritual point of view, were accepted because they had the physical qualifications. Happily

now this is all passing and the old monastic idea is beginning to flourish once more, but none too soon.

Naturally the monastic life is severe, even austere, although prayer and not austerity is its end. But we who look on it from without are often mistaken as to the true nature of its hardness. The monastic virtues are not negative. The chastity of a monk is a white-hot love of God; his poverty is the riches of one who has purchased the pearl beyond all price, who has left all things that he may achieve the one thing necessary; his silence is the stillness of one who is listening to the Word of God and receiving him into his heart. Perhaps on the physical plane it is the monotony which a monk finds hardest at first. 'It is not the hunting that hurts the horse, but the hammer, hammer on the hard, hard road.' The same thing happening in the same way every day. And yet this monotony is essential. It is as it were the framework on which the monk should rest while his spirit pierces the dark cloud which surrounds the throne of God. When it becomes a very part of himself so that he no longer notices it, then it frees the spirit from the daily distractions of life. Like the ceaseless roll of a great river, it will carry him right to the throne of God if he but abandon himself to its course. But the real hardship, the terrible hardship of the life lies in regions above the physical plane where a monk battles with self-love and all the legions of hell in darkness and alone, until his union with Christ crucified is consummated. It is these men who are the kings of life. It is they who save the world as they hold up their hands in prayer on the mountain-tops while the battle rages in the plains below. It is they who save the foundering ship of our civilisation as they plunge down into the dark holds and, unseen by men, stem the leaks at their source with their lives.



ERRATUM: In the May issue of *LIFE OF THE SPIRIT*, p. 529. A correspondent has pointed out that Dom Maurice Chauncey was never Prior of the London Charterhouse but of Sheen under Queen Mary, and later of Sheen Anglorum at Bruges after Elizabeth's ejection.