THE CARTHUSIANS[1]

BY

DOM BENEDICT STEUART, O.S.B.

THIS is a new edition of a little book first published in 1881; but it is so much larger than the original production and contains so much added matter, that it must rank as almost a new work on the subject.

In the first part the author gives a short history of St Bruno and his foundation of the Carthusian way of life and of the monastery of the Grande Chartreuse, from its foundation by the Saint up to the expulsion of the community and its return, after an absence of thirty-seven years (1903 to 1940). Part II describes the life lived at the Grande Chartreuse with a full account of the monastery itself, its buildings, etc., while Part III sets before us the ideal of Carthusian life in its marvellous combination of the solitary and cenobitical forms of monastic life, designed to avoid the possible disadvantages and dangers of each. The author carefully distinguishes (a distiction never to be ignored) between the 'contemplative life' in the technical sense—that is, as a particular form of religious life—which is arranged in order to provide the means of attaining the gift of contemplation; and the 'contemplative state'—which implies the actual and personal arrival at contemplation. From the fact that a person has joined a 'contemplative order' and so may be technically called 'a contemplative', it does not necessarily follow that he or she is actually in the 'state of contemplation', nor that he or she can be *certain* of attaining to it. The state of contemplation is the result of a special grace granted by God—a gift which is entirely free and entirely *his*, but which he is ever ready to bestow on those who desire it and seek sincerely after it. That the number of contemplatives seems actually to be very small is due (if really the case) to the lack of courage to accept all that the life of contemplation involves and not because God reserves his gift to an élite, to a chosen few. It is a curious fact—or rather, it appears curious to the human way of regarding such

1. *La Grande Chartreuse:* par un Chartreux; huitième edition. B. Arthaud, Paris 1950.

matters—how often God seems to grant the gift of contemplative prayer to those whose surroundings in no way seem helpful and, on the other hand, how often he appears to hold it back from those whose life would seem to demand it! No doubt, this is a sign that God's gift is his own free choice which he bestows according to his own will. At the same time, the number of contemplatives is more numerous than is generally believed. To be a contemplative does not merely imply mystic union with God—that is, the fullest development of that to which all Christians are called; it also implies readiness to give *all* to God, according to *his* will, complete self-abnegation and self-surrender.

The author goes on to give a full description of the daily life in a Carthusian monastery and describes the elements of prayer, study and manual work. He insists strongly upon the supreme importance of the Liturgy—the Holy Sacrifice and the Divine Office—in the life of the Carthusian monk. He points out that Carthusian life is in fact entirely dependent upon the Liturgy, the days—otherwise so unchanging in their regularity and austerity—receiving new character, greater importance etc., according to feast or feria and according to whether the Office is recited in the solitude of the cell, the whole community together yet apart—or in common in the choir. The Statutes or Constitutions of the Order repeat almost the very words used by St Benedict in his rule—that 'nothing is to take precedence of the Work of God', as he calls the Divine Office.

In succeeding pages, the author treats of the means offered by Carthusian life for attaining to the state of contemplation: the solitude (the most characteristic and important element); the silence; bodily austerity—for example, never more than two meals even on non-fast days, never for any reason, the 'flesh of four-footed animals' allowed by St Benedict to those of his monks who were sick or very weak (Rule of St Benedict, Chaps. xxxvi and xxxix); and, as the direct means of interior prayer, the chant or recitation of the psalmody in choir and in the cell. With regard to the latter, the author touches on the objection which has been made—even in these days of 'liturgical movements'—against the amount of vocal prayer both in the cell and in choir, which is found in Carthusian life. Besides the Canonical Office, there is the daily recitation of the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin, and, often the Office of the Dead is recited as well. On the other hand,

very little time seems to be left for mental prayer. But it is not essential for the contemplative state to spend long times alone, in mental prayer—especially in the case of contemplative *religious*. These latter strive to carry on the early Christian ideal which has been obscured to a great extent by the later, post-reformation ideal of the interior life. Prayer and contemplation are largely an individual matter, and while not of course *separated* from the life of the Sacraments and the Liturgy, is—subconsciously, no doubt—considered to be almost entirely *distinct* from it. Here the 'difficulty' is met, first, by showing that the Canonical Office and other offices really take the place, to a great extent, of formal meditation. He asks, what could be better than the psalms as a means to raise the mind and soul to God and divine things—inspired as they are, by God, and written under the 'dictation', so to speak, of the Holy Ghost himself? He then quotes Denis the Carthusian, on the question of meditation: 'To meditate', says that holy man, 'is to direct the thoughts habitually towards God and to occupy them without ceasing with him, using the help of the many reflections that arise from reading, hearing or learning (he means in the monastic life), and which can without difficulty be directed towards God.' 'To meditate', he says again, 'is to see God present everywhere and always.' (Denis, *De Meditatione*, xli.) The best method of arriving at this consciousness of the divine presence is surely the use of the long time spent in celebrating the Divine Office—a time in which one can strive to be united with God by making use, not of one's own ideas or of merely human words, but of the ideas and words of God himself especially as set forth in the psalms.

The author ends his defence of Carthusian life by quoting the famous Bull, *Umbratilem*, of Pope Pius XI in which the full sanction and approval of the Church is made manifest. As the Bull declares, the Carthusians have the great advantage of being able to set forth before the world and the Church—unchanged in any essential elements—the example of the primitive monachism of the Fathers of the Desert. The proud boast, *Cartusia nunquam reformata quia nunquam deformata*, has sometimes been disputed. Certainly there *have* been changes since St Bruno gathered his disciples together at the *Grande Chartreuse*: for instance, the development of a centralised order with General Chapter, Superior General and so forth—and the late seventeenth-century

type of ecclesiastical ornament and vestments which are now almost *part* of Carthusian life as generally known. But these changes are merely external and superficial; as far as the austerity of the life, the strict solitude and the absence of any kind of external apostolic activity are concerned, the words *nunquam deformata* still hold good. In these strange days in which we live, in which God and religion, and even the most generally accepted ideas regarding morality, have been thrust entirely into the background, the silent, but no less striking example of a life lived so clearly for God alone, cannot fail to be an outstanding witness to the supernatural which the world denies. Would it be possible, in fact, for human nature to succeed in leading such a life throughout the ages by its own strength alone!

An Appendix deals with a question which seems to have caused a certain amount of trouble among the authorities of the Carthusian Order in these times; this is the question as to whether St Bruno and the early Carthusians followed the Rule of St Benedict (since the holy Founder of Carthusian life never himself wrote a rule for his monks) and whether as the result Carthusians may be looked upon as forming part of the 'Benedictine Order'. To this question the author gives a categorical denial: he admits that St Bruno made use of the Benedictine Rule as a guide, but he made use also of others—for example, the letters of St Jerome and other authoritative writings. He denies, in fact, that the Patriarch of western monasticism was other than one monastic authority among others. The difficulty in this matter seems to have arisen from reading back into the beginnings of Carthusian life what really belongs to a later period. Neither St Benedict nor St Bruno had any clear idea of founding an 'order' in the later sense of that word—namely, an organised society with local, provincial and general superiors. They both legislated for monks (living in monasteries) who belonged to the 'monastic order', the word 'order' (*ordo*) meaning here 'order of life' or 'way of life'. In this sense the word *ordo* is still used at the chapter of faults held usually after the Office of Prime, in monasteries. In announcing that the chapter is to take place, the superior says: *Loquamur de ordine nostro*, which should be translated 'let us speak about our way of life' or 'observance'; to speak about 'our order', in the ordinary meaning of the word, would hardly make sense! Benedictines, Carthusians, Cistercians, belong to the 'Monastic

Order', and that fact accounts for the substantial resemblances between them all, in spite of surface differences.

At one point (p. 226) the author makes a statement which is certainly not correct—although it is put forward as though there were no doubt at all about it. He is describing the Carthusian habit and, speaking of the upper part of it which the Carthusians call the 'cowl' but which Benedictines and other orders wearing a similar garment, call the 'scapular', he says, quite seriously it appears; 'it is the old [Roman] toga *which St Benedict had split open on each side*, in order to make it easier to use the hands'. [italics ours.] Apart from the fact that the toga was *the* special garb of the Roman citizen and official of the Roman State and so would not be a likely choice of monastic founders or superiors, there is also the fact that even had it been so chosen, it could not possibly have been opened up on each side—by St Benedict or anyone else—for it has only *one* side! The Roman toga, even in its latest and most complicated form, always remained essentially a cloak thrown over the left shoulder, drawn across the back and under the right arm and finally thrown over the left shoulder. As to the cowl, it began life as a large hood covering the head and with a kind of cape attached, covering the shoulders. The latter grew in size till it became a real cloak falling down to at least the knees and closed all round. In this form the cowl resembled exactly another Roman cloak known as the 'paenula' or 'planeta'. At first this latter garment was a kind of heavy overcoat worn when travelling; later (and under the name *planeta*[1]) it was adopted by patricians and other important members of the Roman State as a dignified robe for everyday wear, and it entirely ousted the toga—except on certain official occasions. This robe (from which, incidentally the liturgical chasuble was also derived) *could* be opened up at the sides, and this actually took place—in the case of the cowl as also in that of the chasuble—but it was not done by St Benedict. It seems to have been during the eighth century that the cowl was thus reduced in size; and the reduction led finally to the adoption of another more dignified outer garment, called the 'frock' (Latin: *froccus* or *floccus*) which ended in filching the very name 'cowl' from the original garment—itself now known as the scapular, except among the Carthusians, where it kept its old name. But

1. This name, which means 'a *wandering star*' really belongs to the earlier use of the cloak, in meaning, at least.

the *original* scapular, ordered by St Benedict as a working dress, ceased to exist. What it was really like is disputed: St Benedict does not describe it in his Rule, but speaks of it as of something well-known—although the word is not found anywhere else before the Saint's own time. Some think that the scapular was a small edition of the cowl—a hood and cape covering the shoulders (hence the name—from *scapulae*, 'the shoulders'). If this was the case, the scapular would simply be the original small cowl. Others think the scapular may have been a special form of belt worn by Eastern monks for manual work, and having straps or bands passing over the shoulders—hence, again, the name 'scapular'.

This lapse in historical research is, however, only a small blemish and does not interfere with the real value of the book.

And, we must not omit to give a word of sincere praise to the really beautiful photographs (the work, it seems, of a lay-brother of the Grande Chartreuse) with which the book is adorned: they are real 'pictures' and are a veritable revelation of the beauty and solitude of this centre of Carthusian life.

FRIARS IN BLACK

BY

GERARD MEATH, O.P.

'THE religion of thy father Dominic is a delightful garden, broad, joyous and fragrant.' Admirers of the spirit and children of Saint Dominic would appreciate our Lord's word 'broad' when he spoke to Saint Catherine, for it is said that no two Dominicans are alike. Whatever that means, something good or something dangerous, it is but one half of a story that is on the surface paradoxical. That St Dominic's spirit and sympathies were indeed broad can never be in doubt if we look at the characters of his first companions, a set of men at once entirely diverse and bending all their diverse talents to one purpose. For seven hundred years that spirit has grown stronger by the very diversity of its followers. Perhaps there has grown with it also a romantic aura that again is half good and half dangerous. In the