

Monastery for the Poor

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When a Benedictine monastery reaches a point in its course where 'renewal' or re-orientating becomes important, what way will it take? There are two courses. Both ways have been tried in the last seventy years in this country, and comparison between them shows up some interesting features in more or less modern Christian life. I would like to discuss these two courses with a view to introducing the Worth Abbey Peru Foundation. To do so, however, I must summarize the features of Benedictine Christianity which are reckoned essential to it, and therefore at once beyond 'renewal', and also the guiding principles of any particular renewal.

A monastery is not Benedictine unless it is a charitable spiritual 'family' living more or less permanently together in one place under an Abbot, having common work and prayer as its main activities. The vows: obedience to the local abbot, stability in one Abbey and 'conversio morum' (monastic behaviour) underlie this arrangement. It is obvious that such principles lead to team work as against personal ventures or successes. The most obvious evidence of this is that you seldom hear of particular monks becoming great scientists or writers, but you often hear of particular monasteries, like Montserrat or Ampleforth. The democratic election of the Abbot (in this country for only the statutory period of eight years) and his physical proximity to the other monks also encourage corporate activity and unity. Although monasteries often have many different activities, it is of the essence that the effect is unitive, not diversifying. The same can be said of the prayer of a monastery: in the monastery there is a prayer activity going on, and each monk, if he is truly to be a Benedictine, must join in. The permanent commitment to one Abbey, the dedication of celibacy and poverty, equally become essential elements of the life. It could go without saying that the whole purpose of all this corporate activity is for the members to love each other more and more and for the Community to love the Church outside. That is the essential machinery, but it can be put to various uses.

In the early years of this century there was a 'renewal' in the Benedictine monasteries in this country. In the nineteenth century the monasteries had been hardly more than centres of pastoral activity; but by the First World War the trend was steadily back to the cloister and towards a fuller liturgical life. (During the same

period the moves towards big public school education was made.) The influence of the Liturgical Movement was quickly felt by the young radicals, and although the language was different, problems about monastic 'participation' between old and young became common. For a while it appeared that the main theme of the renewed monasteries was to be perfection of liturgical worship. A great deal of time, money, scholarship and pride was spent on details like appressed amices, the design of surplices, and the performance of 'high' ceremonies.

But in the thirties the renewal went one stage further. Great emphasis began to be laid on the spiritual life. The works of St John of the Cross and St Teresa, always monastic classics, were explained in terms of de Caussade and private meditation and passivity; there was a swing away from not only pastoral work, but also teaching and any 'noisy' activity. For many people the close-cropped monk hidden away in his cloister, seldom speaking even to his brethren, spending his time in equal proportions between prayer and reading, became the ideal of the monk. Even the illustrations in monastic journals show monks with long fingers and wide garments sitting in odd corners. It is obvious that this sort of life has the blessing of the Church upon it, and for years it has led men to reach a high standard of holiness. Benedictine monasteries of this sort, chiefly in Europe, have flourished from century to century.

The Vatican Council, however, led monks to take another look at their way of life. The present Pope has reiterated that Benedictine life has still a place in the world, but yet the needs of the poor in the third world must be borne in mind. It does not take an over-tender conscience to feel uncomfortable at monks living in a westernized, even wealthy monastery while other Christians starve in South America and India. Some monasteries have tried to found priories among the poor in their own country as an effort of renewal. The foundation which I wish to take as an example is that in Peru among the Quechua Indians on the East side of the Andes. Worth Abbey is a typical English monastery which runs a public school, serves a few local missions, and strives to perform its Liturgical Offices in style. It was the present Abbot who met in Rome a number of South American Abbots and Bishops, and who conceived the idea of founding a new house among the poor in South America. The aim all along has been to found a Benedictine monastic house directly to help the poor. It has always been hoped that the foundation would grow into an Abbey having local novices and being entirely Peruvianized, both financially and culturally. But it is not the future that has been carefully systematized and laid on. It is well understood that this must develop as the various pressures upon the Community exercise their influence. Abbot Farwell took the steps that arranged the basic circumstances for a modern missionary monastery.

The site was chosen by Father Bede Hill, who had been appointed Superior of the foundation in 1967. Having travelled extensively in Peru for four months, he chose this site rather than one in a town, where poverty and slum dwellers were the main problem, because this was a fertile valley where the Quechua Indians could be led to become good farmers and small business men. Father Bede decided to provide a service which would not merely help the local Indians immediately, but also begin to solve the problem of immigration to the unfertile parts of Peru. Owing to the widespread use of radio and the general lure of the cities, there has been a national emigration going on in Peru for ten years now, from the mountains down into the plains. The people everywhere are undernourished, chiefly through lack of protein, and they are very open to the inevitable consolations of alcohol and coca leaf. These indulgences not only prematurely age people, but make it impossible for them to reach any intellectual standard, even where schools exist. The two greatest needs in Peru, besides the two obvious ones of food and capital, are protein and primary education. Father Bede thought he would be able to provide these most readily in the remote Valley of the Apurimac, where there is sufficient water and a fairly self-contained community of 10,000 or so, who are likely over the next few years to increase by natural immigration to 30,000. The Government of Peru, both the old one that fell in October 1968 and the new military one, have consistently encouraged and helped him. In December 1968 the President of Peru gave 800 acres of land to the Padres Benedictinos, and immediately Father Bede and Abbot Farwell made the first moves in greater detail.

Three more monks were deputed to join Father Bede after a six-month course in Spanish. A preaching campaign was started in the South-east of England to raise funds to build and get started. Lay volunteers also were asked for. There were four monks on the site by Easter 1969, and another, together with two lay volunteers, have been sent out in August and September. Two of the monks came from Downside Abbey. The monks were chosen for their professional competence and, of course, general sturdiness. Father Bede Hill is a farmer and teacher. Father Michael Smith is a teacher and keen pastoral man. Father Richard Wilson, an engineer, builder and teacher. Father Ambrose Lambert, a teacher and jack-of-all-trades. Father Edward Crouzet is a linguist.

In the first three months most of the work has consisted in building a house, a necessary headquarters, and clearing the light jungle round about it. Only in September have all the monks and volunteers been able to concentrate at the site. Once the buildings are habitable there is to be an all-out attempt to clear the forest and to bring in cattle (if they can survive against the local diseases), or pigs. This entails considerable clearance of the undergrowth and woodland, the great majority of it virgin. Once the farm is more or less estab-

lished it is intended to start road-building. The farm, itself, is seven kilometers from the nearest road, and anything up to fifty kilometers needs to be made. It is clear that a team will have to work at this for many years. Once the road-building programme has been established, it is intended to build up a local radio station run by the monks and local natives, as a means to educate the inhabitants in simple farming methods, hygiene, religion and general culture. It is hoped that by 1972 most of these projects will be in operation. It is obvious that the greatest benefits will accrue from the people being able to develop their own culture as fully as possible. The monks feel that they are in Peru as the servants of the people, and they are as much awaiting developments as implementing them.

The whole context of the monks' work makes a difference to their way of life. Not only are there language differences, but their manner of prayer is to a certain extent affected. In September daily Choral Office in Spanish was started, and it has been made to fit the requirements of the place. There is an early morning office which is dovetailed with concelebrated Mass, which takes about fifty minutes, and in the evening an office of about a similar length. The inevitable meditation and spiritual reading continue as usual.

It may appear to unaccustomed eyes that this is traditional monasticism performing a more or less traditional task. To some extent, quite rightly, this is true. To 'cultivate' has always been the lot of groups of men who dedicate themselves in this way. What is new is the flexibility of the life: the lack of formal institution which constrains monks to a long established and, possibly, slightly irrelevant work. What had always been a virtue of the Jesuit Rule, that they can be diverted from area to area wherever the need may be, has become possible with a whole, though small, monastery. The monks have done this too in their own way.

This new venture into the interior needs not just monks long trained in the old tradition, but young men full of the enthusiasm of our time, and determined to find solutions to the problems of poverty and inequality. Permanent effect can only be achieved if young Peruvian and European novices are ready to become members of the Community for their whole lives. Although temporary lay volunteers are being sent out to this region, they will not be able to make any more than a superficial impression. The aim of the venture is to build up a modern, Christian culture: teachers, farmers, but men of charity too. In a sense, what the poor Indians lack first is confidence. They do not believe in themselves, they do not believe they can improve their lot, and even their devotional religion becomes a means of getting away from it all and is a form of recreation, possibly. The people are grandly medieval, they have huge processions, bless every conceivable object, and keep up large and beautiful churches, which overawe poverty. The greatest difficulty the monks will experience is the meeting of their westernized honest-

to-God religion with that of the natives. Probably only young well-educated natives would make a permanent improvement to their own country.

Perhaps the most important point to make is that the New Community or Renewal Community is progressing and finding its way towards an end nobody knows, and nobody is doctrinaire about. The Community aims to do what the people of Peru want; they aim to be the servants of the poor. It is not just a renewed Community, but a constantly renewing Community.

The following are extracts from letters received in the last year from this new monastery, and it may be of interest to show how in practice the scheme is developing.

30th May, 1969:

Here is an account of a missionary journey into the forest which Dom Ambrose and I (Dom Michael) made. On the 14th and 15th April I went off with Constantino, who speaks Quechua as well as Spanish. Our destination was Aurora, where a priest had not been to say Mass for three years. Everybody told us that Aurora was about three kilometers from San Francisco, itself twelve kilometers from Pichari, up the main carretera. There would be the usual Rosary and Litany of Our Lady in the chapel the first evening, and Mass and the Sacraments the next day. I had been assured that people from Aurora would meet me at San Francisco, but no time had been fixed for the meeting. Constantino and I arrived opposite San Francisco at 4 p.m., and we crossed over the Apurimac by the big steel 'balsa' or raft, a little later. On the other bank I immediately sensed an air of urgency in the Señor and Señora Navarro who met us. They had been waiting since noon, and I could not understand why, if Aurora was only an hour's walk up the road. I was to find out why later.

We walked up the road for an hour, and while we had a refreshment in the Navarro's house, darkness fell. Then naked candles were produced, and a group of people set out for another walk up the road. At the end of the file was a man with a bedstead and a mattress strapped to his back—my bed for the night. After following the road for a while we climbed up a path to the left. I expected to be led to a house just off the road where I could spend the night, but guided by candle-flames, one candle was held by a young girl who carried her baby brother on her back, we climbed up and up the path, through the jungle, over tree roots, through muddy pools, up slippery slopes. After about two hours we came to a clearing, where a number of people had assembled, obviously prepared to spend the night there. In the centre was a candle-lit chapel with an earth floor and an adobe brick altar. Round the chapel were some temporary booths where food and drink could be bought. A record-player and a band, which included an Ayacucho harp, played music for the Peruvian

dancing. Competing with the music were some primitive reed instruments played by a close group of youths, dressed in long brown robes, who performed an endless monotonous dance in a small circle. I led the recitation of the Rosary and the Litany in the chapel, and then had supper at one of the booths: it included a hot drink made from monkey-nuts ('ponche de mam'). I went to bed in a forest house some way down the steep slope, but I heard the music and dancing all night, and I only had an hour's sleep.

I rose early the next morning and washed and shaved at a small pool formed by a trickling spring. I meant to say my first Mass at 8 o'clock, but everybody told me I must wait for the 'mayordomo' to arrive. He had not arrived by 10.30, so I began my Mass then. After the Mass, there were four baptisms, blessing of water, a bunch of flowers, holy pictures, another baptism, confessions. At 12.15, I began a second Mass, and during it there was a wedding. A procession followed with a case containing a Face of Christ crowned with thorns, carried on a heavy litter. Then there was another baptism. It was two o'clock when it was all finished, and I had only had one cup of coffee. However, the school mistress provided me with a snack of egg and potatoes and 'yuca', before we set off down the mountain.

The party going down to the 'carretera' included the bridal couple. Two women sang a song in harmony in their honour. It sounded rather like a dirge. Every now and then, according to tradition, a pause was made for rest. Drinks were passed round, and the man with the harp played a tune, sometimes accompanied with a song by another youth. When we reached the main road, we went to the garden behind the Navarro's house, where a meal was enjoyed by a large gathering of people. It was now half-past four, and Constantine and I excused ourselves, as we hoped to return to our base in Pichari by nightfall. Actually we had not much hope of finding transport once we had crossed the Apurimac river. However, as we approached San Francisco we saw a car of the 'Reforma Agraria' waiting on the far side of the ferry. We hurried across the river in a small wooden 'balsa', and had time for refreshment in a primitive restaurant before we set off in the car along the bumpy forest road, with its uncertain plank bridges, in the gathering darkness. We reached our house in Pichari at seven o'clock, and I enjoyed the usual savoury supper which Ambrose prepares so well, with Dom Bede and Piti Dibos, who was paying his first visit to the Apurimac Valley.

Since the above, I have been on another expedition, by myself, without the help of Constantino. It was much tougher. All the journey to Treboline was done on foot, through the forest, up steep hills and down again, with a rucksack that weighed twelve kilos, which I carried two hours of the three and a half hours of our outward journey. A youth of eighteen carried it home for me, and we returned

home in three hours. We saw three snakes on our way home, a black viper and two equally poisonous reddish-brown beasties.

10th June, 1969:

I (Dom Ambrose) have just brought the Land-Rover back to Lima where I am spending a week helping Dom Bede with items of shopping. Dom Richard has just returned to the Apurimac, and is starting the construction of a three-roomed house, which arrived there ten days ago. The house will serve as a temporary residence for us on the Granja (Farm) till the big house arrives. The latter is not expected to be completed till September. Dom Bede broke off the contract for the original house which a Chilean firm has been trying to build for us since January, and we received our deposit back again. A Peruvian firm have agreed to provide the same size of house within two months at a cheaper price. By September then we should have two houses, and the little one will be used by the Volunteers.

While Richard and Bede have been working in Lima during the last two weeks, I have been supervising the work on the Granja. I am glad to say that the five cows have caused no trouble at all, and they have settled down very well. Being crosses of Shorthorn and Brahmin, or Zebo, known as Santa Gertrude, they take well to the heat, and they have thick enough skins not to be bothered too much by flies, insects and ticks, which carry blood diseases. With six workers we have cut and cleared two or three hectares of land along the side of the Apurimac and the cocoa plantation. Above the cocoa on a terrace some 100 feet higher than the river, we cut more secondary growth of trees and bushes in front of the site of the big house, thus opening up an extensive view of the river looking northwards. Below the house on the steep sides of the terrace, rows of sisal plants have been cleared. The cocoa plantation lands are drying out well, and the trees are in flower. Two large snakes were slaughtered in the process.

Although a vital bridge has been bought by the Ministry of Development to cross a 70-foot gorge over the Piene River, near Rosario, we can hardly expect the actual work on the road to Sivia to begin before next year. At the moment we are building a balsa wood raft of twelve logs, each about 15 feet long, and 18 inches diameter, so that we can transport two tractors and the pre-fab. houses across the river. I, also, helped to make a small balsa three feet wide and three feet long. The logs are held together by means of hammering three-foot lengths of hard wood called 'chunta' through each and every log from the side. If the 'chunta' is well placed and goes successfully, the Campas say 'Ong' ('It is good'); and if it is no good they say 'Boum'. The former carries a high intonation and the latter a low and dull intonation, like Chinese.

Meanwhile Dom Michael makes regular journeys to outlying villages up in the hills between Sivia and Rosario.

While the weather in Lima is grey again, we are having regular rain in the mornings, but the rest of the day in the Apurimac is as hot as usual. At night it is quite cool, and we have been using blankets. The river has gone down a good deal, and the colour of the water has changed from silty red to greyish blue. The locals fish with dynamite for fat fish about two feet long. It is too warm for trout in our area.

3rd September, 1969:

Dom Michael, as you have gathered, is always out with the Indians, but we see him from time to time when he emerges from the jungle; I really don't know how he does it. The rest of us are mostly up to our necks putting the house together, and trying to grow some food, getting the farm into a semblance of order, and so on. I have just had preliminary news of a probable £4,000 coming to us from Peruvian companies; but that will be for further capital items—finishing the payments on the house, and other things such as hydro-electric plant, etc.

Just before I left for Lima we got our second tractor on to the Granja—it is a big heavy one, and when we first drove it on to the balsa the latter floated, but slightly submerged beneath the surface! So we had to add another two tree trunks to give more buoyancy. Edward took a movie of the whole operation, and I very much look forward to seeing it. We lost a cow the other day which died from infection resulting from tick infestation. It is becoming clear that the animals we were given are not as well suited to the jungle as we hoped they might be. But any way I am coming to the conclusion that pigs are a far better proposition for meat production out there for a number of reasons. This change of opinion will not affect our scheme in any way. We shall still be trying to encourage meat production, but probably pig instead of cow.