

Apart from our occasional special numbers, most of our issues no doubt seem to lack unity. More often than not, however, there is, if not a unity of theme, at least a certain more subtle underlying rhythm or movement through the articles. And this month we could say that we are playing on a theme with variations.

The theme is *mutation*. This actual term is taken immediately from Mr Nicholl's article. Here, with all his characteristic sanity and all the deceptive simplicity of great learning pared down to essentials, he evokes a fearful mutation, which, he suggests, has taken place in an area stretching from the Rhine to the Urals and over a period of fifty years. He does not fail to point to a complementary emergence of a counter-type, spring out of the depths of the human spirit.

The term, then, the richly suggestive idea, and the time span and space selected for vision, invite a further modulation. And is it just the play of the association of ideas, or the bias of personal sympathy with a dear master, that seems to make the subject of a book published this month so relevant to a consideration of mutations over a longer time? The book in question is *Aelred of Rievaulx* (S.P.C.K.), by Fr Aelred Squire, O.P., and it is a sentence from the Preface which immediately suggests precisely why and how what is termed simply 'A Study' of this great twelfth-century Cistercian abbot can be used as a gauge of the mutations which are taking place as—even ecclesiastically at last—we break out of the mediaeval epoch: 'It does not aim at history or biography in the more usual sense. . . . This study tries rather to establish a mood of listening to the resonances of a life bound by its own particular conventions, as all lives are, yet discovering its personal liberation and authenticity in a manner which may often seem surprisingly instructive to very different people in nevertheless kindred situations . . .' (p. xi).

It is the combination of difference and kinship, the fact that we can simultaneously identify with a peculiarly warm human being and yet have a sense of breaking definitively with the world in which he lived and moved, which makes the subject of the book as treated so inviting an 'object of comparison'.

To begin, then, with the kinship, and the human sympathy: we readily recognize our own particular as well as a universal dream and aspiration in the following quotation from St Aelred's *Mirror of Charity* (it is the novice's description of how the life to which he has come at Rievaulx appears to him):

My food is more sparing now, my clothing rougher, my drink from the spring, sleep on my book or on a mattress, when I should like it in comfort. . . . We eat our bread in the sweat of our own labour. . . . And yet there are things to delight me. There are never quarrels or strife. There are never fretful complaints of peasants about hard exactions or the wrongs of the poor. There are no pleas or lawsuits. Everywhere is peace and a wonderful freedom from the noise of the world. Such unity and concord is there among the brethren that everything seems to be everybody's and each has all. No attention is paid to status, no heed given to birth. Only need makes for diversity, only weakness for inequality. For what is produced by the common labour is given to everyone, not according to the dictates of natural sympathy or personal preference, but exactly as each one needs (p. 29).

At the same time, the hint of the monastic setting of this particular realization at the beginning of the quotation is not accidental. And here we begin to enter upon the differences. For what no doubt strikes most of us alive today in the post-conciliar Church is that St Aelred's particular dream and achievement is formulated and as it were *specialized* in specifically monastic terms. In fact, we are directly told in the book of 'the case for seeing the monks and ascetics of later days as the true inheritors of that ardent Christian faith which had led the early martyrs to their suffering' (p. 1; cf. pp. 30 and 141), whereas today we should like to think rather of the *whole* People of God as heirs to the primitive call to holiness.

So here is the first mutation between St Aelred's world and our own. It is a profound one, two aspects of which can be singled out.

Chapter 2, entitled 'A Way of Life', moves to a close with a peculiarly lovely quotation from St Aelred's *Mirror of Charity* on the subject of friendship:

It is no small consolation in this life to have someone you can unite with in an intimate affection and the embrace of holy love, someone in whom your spirit can rest, to whom you can pour out your soul, to whose pleasant exchanges, as to soothing songs, you can fly in sorrow, to the dear breast of whose friendship, amidst the many troubles of the world, you can safely retire, to whose loving heart, as to yourself, you can unhesitatingly commit the stomach of all your thoughts; with whose spiritual kisses, as with remedial salves, you may draw out all the weariness of your restless anxieties. A man who can shed tears with you in your worries, be happy with you when things go well, search out with you the answers to your problems, whom with the ties of charity you can lead into the depths of your heart; a man who, though he be absent in body, is yet present in spirit; where heart to heart you can talk to him, all the more delightfully for being so secret, where

heart to heart you can confer with him and, when the noise of the world is still, rest heart to heart with him in the sleep of peace, in the embrace of charity, in the kiss of unity, where the sweetness of the Spirit flows between you, where you so join yourself and cleave to him that soul mingles with soul and two become one (pp. 49–50; cf. pp. 106–107).

It was, of course, entirely within the logic of St Aelred's monastic 'specialization' of the Christian life that the love of which he speaks with such moving insight was a homosexual love—just as it is entirely within the logic of our quite altered perspective that we should in general want to reinterpret precisely the same sentiments in heterosexual and more literally physical, as well as spiritual, terms.

And this aspect of mutation is intimately linked with another. For if we reinterpret St Aelred's friendship in terms of a conjugal relationship, then we must make a corresponding reinterpretation of what Fr Aelred calls (in reference to the cloister 'where accord on so many basic matters can be assumed') 'a natural setting for the development of friendship'. Describing St Aelred's doctrine of friendship, Fr Aelred explains why we have to distinguish friendship from charity. He begins by saying that 'Aelred makes it quite clear that this disinterestedness in love, which is a reflection of God's disinterested self-giving in creation, is in no sense incompatible with a genuine sense of need. God alone is unneedy. . . . Everything else needs the completion of relationship for its fulfilment in a world in which a vestige of God's supreme unity has been left in the natural tendency of all things to fall into an order in time and place' (p. 104). He then goes on to relate how it is 'however the result of Original Sin that the charity in which man was created, which was in a sense "natural" to him, has grown cold. The private good is now sought over against the common good, and avarice and envy encroach upon friendship. In this state of things it has become necessary to distinguish between charity and friendship. Even the most perverse have to be loved, but it is clear that there cannot be any community of will and opinion between the good and the evil. . . . But the reality of friendship has been forced to withdraw to the circle of those who have that genuine accord which is only possible to the good.'

So, St Aelred in the twelfth century perceived that friendship was central, but that it needed the right conditions for its development. Can we not therefore say that he thereby suggests the inner connexion between the twin twentieth-century commitments at once to marriage and to the need to change the social structures? In either case, an intimate relationship is the nub and paradigm of social relationships at large, the radiant focus and point of concentration of a wider nexus of less intense but just relationships, but the scope and application of the principle is again different. And it is as part of such a mutation of perspective that we can perhaps appreciate

such very different articles as those of Mrs Haughton and Fr Cornelius Ernst. Where the one is directly concerned with the integral formation of those called to transform the structures of society at large, the other is concerned to present, in another context, Christianity as an experience of radical novelty and its genetic moment as a potency for transforming all other possible traditions and ways of being human.

In this new study of St Aelred, then, we have one standard by which to measure something of the larger mutations we are undergoing. And yet from a Christian point of view, such mutations *are* only variations on a theme. To return to Mr Nicholl: he says that 'human nature (or God) is very fertile'. Fr Cornelius in his turn speaks of 'the spring of water welling up in the community of Christian believers unto eternal life', whilst Fr Timothy McDermott spells out something of the multitudinosity of this spring, dividing, as it does, already into four great rivers, like those of Paradise.

Which leaves us with one last point: granted that so much has changed, granted that we have recovered an aspiration to make the *whole* People of God heirs of the 'first freshness of the Church' (p. 141), have priests and monks, hermits and religious, thereby become quite redundant? Here again a passage from the Study of St Aelred can give us a clue. Fr Aelred quotes a sermon of his patron to his monks: 'We ought to remember what we are called to. We ought to realize that the men of this world give us their lands and their substance that they may be protected by our prayers and reconciled to God.' But it is his own immediate comment which is decisive: 'Although arguments like these seem to suppose a functional view of monasticism in society, their stress on the primacy of genuine holiness is valid in any social setting' (p. 58). In other words, in the present functional dislocation of the world, the monk may indeed be a monknik, a man out of place and work, an outrageous fool. But if he can manage to be a fool for Christ's sake, not only does he indeed sustain the 'stress on the primacy of genuine holiness', but he is a pledge and a pointer towards some (perhaps distant) reconciliation of mutual functionality, a world in which there is realized again 'the tendency of all things to fall into an order in time and place. From stones in the brook and trees in the wood to animals at play, everything seems to long for companionship' (p. 104).

And it will no doubt be part of this reconciliation, in which we find our own particular version of what Dr Harry Guntrip calls 'consciously significant mutuality', to rediscover that the monk is not—as he never really has been—a special sort of Christian, but merely the outward, social symbol and emblem of the common human interior passage through darkness into light:

And so, persevering until death in the monastery, we may share by patience in the sufferings of Christ, that we may deserve to be partakers of his kingdom. (*Rule of St Benedict*, quoted at p. 35.) P.L.