

favour of Italian to help the people to understand'. I suppose we shall never know exactly what the Pope did say on that occasion. There is, however, no mistaking the portent of his words given *motu proprio* in the apostolic letter promulgating the new rubrics for the missal and breviary last year: 'Having, under divine guidance, decreed that an Ecumenical Council should be convened, we have given much thought as to what could be done about this initiative of our Predecessor . . . for a general liturgical restoration . . . (and) after long and mature consideration we have reached the conclusion that the basic principles (*altiora principia*) . . . should be referred to the Fathers of the forthcoming Ecumenical Council'.

## The Person and the Place—IV: Fontevrault<sup>1</sup>

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Fontevrault is not one of the compelling architectural landmarks of the Val de Loire, like Saint-Benoît or Cunault. It is just a peaceful, rambling old place that one visits because its splendid name and all its connotations have a fascination of their own. The English remember that Henry II and Richard, Queen Eleanor and King John's wife were buried there, while the French will remind you that Bertrade de Montfort, the mistress of Philip I, took the veil there and died of her austerities. But beside its well known connections with royal families, there is the attractive contradiction of Fontevrault having housed women of quite another stamp—lepers, prostitutes, and social outcasts of various kinds. That contradiction is sufficient to convince us that a really original and Christ-like mind must have been at work in this place.

Within the abbey, a first impression is of size and splendour and fine materials. The elaborate kitchen gives an idea of the numbers involved in the institution. (One quickly dismisses the thought that it might re-

<sup>1</sup>Previous articles in this series appeared in March, June, and October of last year.

flect a certain *recherche de la haute cuisine*). In the vast white emptiness of the church, so classically proportioned that it could almost be a Roman bath, one tries to visualize where the community, subdivided into various choirs, sang their office. Finally, the thing most designed to impress confronts us in full force. Four recumbent figures, three of them in white marble still slightly tinted with red and royal blue, are arranged in front of the apse as if in some austere Bayreuth setting. This is the Angevin mausoleum. But whereas Henry, Richard and Isabelle look well and truly dead, Eleanor is smiling and looking down at her book. Her effigy, however hard one tries not to let the imagination run away, is so eloquent that it seems to sum up the whole emergent problem of women's rights, to which the founder of the abbey felt called upon to dedicate his ministry.

Robert of Arbrissel, as far as we know, had no particular wish either to found a new order or to reform an old one. From having been a canon at Rennes, and a hermit in the forest of Craon, he was required by Urban II to preach at the consecration of a church. At Saint Nicolas at Angers, as Robert's *Vita* tells us, 'the pope could see that the Holy Spirit opened his mouth'. He was given a preaching mission, and his effect on his hearers was such that he soon had a band of people following him about wherever he went. Quite soon he realized that, since he could not get rid of them, he would have to do something about them, and when he was given land at Ebrald's fountain, he had them build huts and an oratory. In this casual way a new community came into being. Men and women were segregated, so Baudry of Bourgueil tells us in the *Vita*, the women devoting themselves to the contemplative life (because of their weaker sex), while the men ('being strong, and needing exercise'), worked for the needs of the whole group. Laymen and priests lived together, and were taught to do so 'lovingly, without discord'. All of them lived a very austere life, although none so austere as Robert's. The founder, with typical Breton ruggedness, insisted on travelling everywhere barefoot. Yet he was always genial and smiling and generous, keeping nothing for himself, but giving everything to his brethren and sisters. They called him 'the Master'. Since he was violent against sin but kind to the sinner, many people came to Fontevault, and stayed; the old and the young, the rich and the poor, virgins and widows, and above all women who had been particularly ill-used by men. Baudry calls Robert 'a mirror to the world, a destroyer of vices, a teacher of virtues, and above all a guide and a comfort to all who were desolate or who had gone astray'.

In the course of time, so much money came in that they could build a proper monastery and a church. Then other monasteries were built, and the women were (wisely, Baudry adds), divided into groups, as their numbers went on increasing. There were three hundred women in the main monastery, and elsewhere they were divided into hundreds and sixties, but always with some men to minister to their needs. The first *magistra* was Hersende de Champagne, and her cellaress was Petronille de Chemillé, for whom Baudry wrote the *Vita Roberti* when she later became superior herself. Robert was by now in demand everywhere as a preacher, so the community had to learn to look after themselves. Royal donations came in, but all this wealth, instead of bringing decadence, helped to make Fontevrault into an extremely generous centre of almsgiving and good works. Everyone was received there, 'the poor the sick, the incestuous, concubines, lepers, the weak and the aged', and among them Robert was known to work miracles of healing.

Not everyone, of course, thought that Fontevrault was a good thing. The secular clergy were, in the main, uneasy about it. 'Women leave their husbands and the faithful desert their own priests to follow this man' was the cry. The saintly bishop of Poitiers was on Robert's side, but the bishop of Angers was unfavourable, as were the abbot of the Trinité at Vendôme, and Marbod of Rennes. There were scandalous tales told about Robert testing his chastity and expiating past sins after the old Syrian manner, living deliberately in the closest proximity with women. At Rouen he converted a whole brothel, the inmates of which followed him forthwith. His influence was felt and his reputation spread all over Anjou and Poitou, and he wandered and preached for about twenty years, drawing to himself wherever he went large numbers of penitents, most of them women.

The contemporary religious outlook on women is found at its most succinct in Marbod's poem on the 'Three enemies'. Under the heading 'On women, and how prone they are to evil', we read that 'woman is a fragile thing, never without sin, never anything but a danger, if one lets her have her way. She is a devouring flame, she is the ultimate wrath, she is the closest enemy of all. Everything she learns, everything she teaches, is to our harm!' This was the way the Cistercians felt when they ruled that women, along with hunters and hawkers, might never come near their monasteries. It explains why Saint Bernard called his sister Hombeline a 'clod of dung' when she came to see him at Clairvaux, innocently wearing the latest fashion. It explains his withering

commiseration of a certain Sophie for being, not only a woman, but also a noble woman, and therefore so much the more dangerous a woman. 'To live with a woman without danger', he wrote in his sermons on the Canticle, 'is more difficult than raising the dead to life'.

It is no exaggeration, as Mâle points out in a brilliant chapter on monastic influence in the twelfth century, to say that woman was considered as formidable as the devil himself. She is at least the devil's instrument, used for destroying the souls of good and holy men. At Autun, Vézelay and Moissac, we find the same revolting temptresses in weathered sculpture, writhing among snakes and toads, being played upon by devils as if they were musical instruments, and variously using their wiles to entrap men, while the devil waits to snatch the victim as soon as the woman has done her work. The devil, Mâle writes, had never, before the middle ages, looked so evil, so powerful, so serious a menace to men. And the same can be said with equal truth of the image of woman, incredibly distorted by the monastic imagination.

Robert had to wear down a vast amount of prejudice from religious men, but this was not the only opposition he encountered. These, after all, were the men who set out to have nothing to do with women. What of those who knew women at first hand—the husbands, the seducers, the betrayers and exploiters of the women who found their way to Fontevrault! Robert's age was one in which marriage to a noble woman was the surest means of advancement. Women were pawns in the hands of dynasts, and it was a common thing to marry within the forbidden degrees for dynastic reasons, and then claim that impediment as grounds for divorce when a more illustrious partner became available. The reason why Fontevrault has gone down into history as a refuge for aristocratic women is simply because the *mal mariées*, lacking status and redress once they had been cast off, found that in Robert's community an honourable status of a sort could be regained, to say nothing of security, sympathy and spiritual comfort. Some took the veil, others, like Queen Eleanor, merely retired there. One can see the wisdom, that Baudry emphasises, of Robert's various groupings within the community. Obviously the leper women had to be a community on their own, and the distinctions of rank still counted for something. It seems very likely that Robert had a clear purpose of 'group therapy' in mind. One imagines that when, for instance, the Duke of Aquitaine's second wife, Philippa of Toulouse, entered Fontevrault because she could no longer tolerate his liaison with the Countess of Châtellerault, she can hardly have been better consoled than

by the Duke's first wife, Ermengarde, who was already in the monastery. Husbands and lovers all over Anjou and Aquitaine could only watch and examine their consciences, as the procession of worthy and wronged women streamed into Robert's nunnery. To take Duke William's reactions as a typical example, as Reto Bezzola does in a fascinating study of his poetry, is to observe a salutary dismay in the heart of *l'homme sensuel moyen*. William, as a poet, was a very articulate man, 'dwelling with more pleasure on woman's weaknesses than on her virtues'. If he was to keep his Nicolette, Aucassin was willing enough to go to hell, accompanied by all the fair ladies who had two or three lovers besides a husband, and a fine store of gold and silver, *vair* and *gris*, harpers and jongleurs. Duke William, in an understandable pique at having lost two wives to Robert's convent, sarcastically projected a large scale brothel, a profane counterpart of Fontevrault, at his palace at Niort.

The fact that Robert won his battle against Duke William and his kind, Bezzola suggests, is apparent in the transformation that took place in courtly poetry at this time. William is made to accept the new status of women. There is nothing for it but to face the fact that the outcast wives of France, thanks to Robert, have discovered a new prestige. William's acceptance of this new, independent woman is revealed in a beautiful spring piece, *Pus vezem de novelh florir*, quite different from his earlier verses, addressed to his *companhos* on the subject of his many *amigas*, where everything is gross and sarcastic. The lady of *Pus vezem* is a sudden and complete contrast. William now speaks of desiring something he cannot have. He is yearning for something which may never be granted. The whole reference to desire is muted and refined. The lady is no *amiga*, she is at last *domna*, to be served and obeyed. His aim is only to become worthy of her. He only appeals that she will not shut herself up in a nunnery. She is a positively Beatrician figure, too exalted to be possessed—an inspiration, a talisman, a beatitude. One is only two steps removed from the *Vita Nuova*.

In this way we can perhaps guess a little how Robert conquered the unjust husbands and lovers whose cruelty and neglect had helped to make Fontevrault necessary. His irrefutable argument to men of religion was quite simply an appeal to the example of our Lady and St John. From the beginning, the idea of a double order had raised everyone's eyebrows, particularly since it was always to be the abbess who was in charge of both men and women. The abbess, moreover, was to be a widow, combining in herself the qualities of mother-

hood and chastity, together with all the necessary *savoir faire* for looking after people and property. She is to be the absolute *domna*. Robert is recalling, not only the celebrated ideals of holy widowhood in Ambrose and Jerome, and the example of St Radegonde who left King Clothair to found her convent at Poitiers. The highest idea of all is Mary's own. To the Virgin Mother of God, all the nuns' churches were dedicated, while the oratories of the Fontevriste brethren were dedicated to Saint John, Mary's 'devoted minister, who diligently served her as long as she lived in this world'.

'Whatever I have built', Robert said as he lay dying, 'I have built for the sake of the nuns. I have given everything for them, my life, my ministry, and my disciples likewise. I want things to continue as I have stipulated, if you will agree with me now, and advise me as to whether I am right, before I die. If you will agree with me now that the abbess is to be a woman who has had experience of the world, let it stay that way when I am dead. Some will say a virgin is needed, on account of the dignity of virginity. But I say, how can a cloistered virgin look after the external affairs of a house when she has only sung psalms? Who shall reasonably sing of the things of earth, who has only ever sung about heaven? Who can carry the weight of practical affairs, who has only known the joys of contemplation? For anyone who has put off this world's habit, it is difficult to put it on again. A wise woman builds a house', he reminisced from Proverbs, 'but an unwise one pulls it down. I will not have my house pulled down'. One can imagine him looking fiercely about the assembled brethren. What exactly had he in mind, and how should it best be put? At last he had it. 'What I want is something to protect this place, the curtain of goat's hair that covered the roof of the tabernacle, the inside glowing with scarlet, a protection from the storm. So leave Mary to her prayers, and always find a Martha who knows how to minister to everyone's needs . . .'

The house was not pulled down. It remains to this day, full of that strange feeling of vocation built out of disaster, of sufferings borne with dignity. Here dawned an idea of woman's individuality and worth. Above all, as the story unfolds and the empty house comes to life, one sees it as a monument, not to the Angevins who lie in state, but to a humbler and a far greater person than these. It is the singleness of Robert's purpose, and the intensity of his compassion, which are enshrined at Fontevault.