

The Life of the Spirit

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CLUNIAC SPIRITUALITY.

By

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Though many writers have studied the Cluniac achievement from the ecclesiastical, the economic and even the political point of view, none of the standard books on the history of spirituality seems concerned to trace the growth of Cluniac spirituality. Indeed, it seems taken for granted on all sides that Cluny has no spirituality worth mentioning. An elaborate ceremonial, a devotion to the splendours of the Liturgy, accompanied by an easy asceticism, this is the impression that most people have received of it: an impression based solely on a few isolated facts culled from the *third* century of Cluny's existence. It may be useful, therefore, to outline a few of the principal ideas that dominated Cluny's spirituality during the course of its history from its foundation to the time of Peter the Venerable.

When Berno left the Abbey of Baume in A.D. 910 to accept part of the estate of the Duke of Aquitaine for his foundation at Cluny, monastic life was at a low ebb. For sixty years the Normans had ravaged a country already torn by internecine war. Towns and villages had been depopulated, monasteries had been sacked and destroyed, and the few refugees who had settled in ruinous buildings to restore a semblance of monastic life were undistinguished both for religion and discipline. Berno little realised the magnitude of his undertaking, for his own ambitions were surprisingly modest. He simply aimed at establishing the pure Benedictine tradition, and envisaged nothing more exalted than the literal fulfilment of the Rule. His last will and testament, which is the only literary fragment left to us, says expressly: "I beg of you to be all of one mind, and to persevere in

the manner of life observed in this monastery, preserving the same hours of Divine Office, the rule of silence, the quality of food and clothing and renunciation of personal property". Nothing is said of the deeper spiritual principles that should animate these material practices: and it appears that Cluny in its early days was as much attached to purely external forms as were later monastic reactionaries. Contemplative ideals and liturgical display, usually associated with Cluny, are not mentioned: but only a pedestrian piety, within easy grasp of the least sensitive.

This attitude is even more pronounced under Berno's successor, Odo. His "Collationes", written at the instance of Bishop Turpin, give a dark and gloomy picture of the times: a vicious laity, a negligent clergy, a decadent monastic body. The refinements of spirituality would be wasted on such a coarse and brutal society, and consequently, Odo's main preoccupation was the improvement of moral conditions by the insistence on temperance and chastity; and the restoration of monastic discipline by the enforcement of regular observance. Only a fraction of his teaching is addressed exclusively to monks, and this undoubtedly accounts for the severe tone, the pessimistic outlook and the low spiritual level of his writings. Fasting and watching are his mainstay, reinforced by the virtues of humility and obedience. Charity is considered not as the bond of perfection, but as a makeshift for those who are too weak to practise heroic virtue: indeed, its chief function is to wash away sin, being equivalent to almsgiving. Scripture content is reducible to *lamentationes, et carmen et vae*, that is, to sorrow for sin, to the joys of heaven and the pain of damnation. For Odo, the writings of Saint Gregory yield up little beyond moral disquisitions. He leaves no traces of having assimilated the rich vein of doctrine on prayer, contemplation and union. He shows however, a keen psychological insight and a robust common sense that is refreshing. With elaborate ecclesiastical functions he was completely out of sympathy: he condemned precious vestments and jewelled chalices as "foolish devotion" and wished to see Christ's disciples stripped naked like their Master on the Cross. He had three devotions, to Mary Magdalen, to Martin of Tours and to the Blessed Eucharist, which admirably sum up his spirituality: Mary, the sinner, is his model of repentance: Martin, the monk, is his model of discipline: the Blessed Eucharist is his source of spiritual renewal.

Passing over Saint Aymard, who has left no writings, we come to Saint Majolus, whose spirit emerges from biographies. The rugged ideas of Odo are softened down, the atmosphere grows

warmer, and there is a marked absence of emphasis on corporal austerity. Charity towards God and the brethren holds pride of place, and a desire for prayer and divine contemplation is fostered both in himself and others. It is not the lamentations of Jeremias which are now studied, but apparently, to judge by the "Planctus" of Jotsald, the *Canticle of Canticles*, and instead of the moral lessons of Saint Gregory, we find Majolus reading with avidity and absorption the writings of the Pseudo-Denys, which are essentially contemplative. The person of Christ makes more frequent appearance in Cluniac writings of this period, either as Head of the Mystical Body or as leader and model, but devotion to him is more rational than personal, more intellectual than affective. Thus at the end of the tenth century, whilst the essential monastic virtues were still fostered at Cluny, a greater emphasis was being laid on prayer and the perfection of charity.

With Odilo, A.D. 994-1048, a further change takes place. The early ascetic programme, fasts, vigils and assiduous psalmody, still continues, with the unexpected addition of the wearing of chains: but the insistence on the moral virtues, humility, silence, obedience, is now modified, and they are subordinated to faith, hope and charity. Though the conquest of self is important, union with God is supreme: and this is achieved by charity, "the root of all good". Hence, monastic life is now directed almost exclusively to spiritual reading and prayer. An intense cultivation of the sacramental life becomes evident (Odilo celebrated Mass every day for fifty-six years): and Cluniac spirituality centres more round the mysteries of faith. There is a constant reversion to the dogmas of the Trinity, the Incarnation, the operations of the Holy Ghost, the Redemption and the Mystical Body of Christ: personal love for Christ becomes more prominent, and we can see the gradual unfolding of that devotion to the Sacred Humanity which reaches perfection in a later age. The devotional glow is calm and restrained. There is nothing hysterical or sentimental about it. Meditation on Christ hinges mostly on his birth and infancy, and Odilo anticipates by two centuries Saint Ailred's devotion to "The boy Jesus at the age of twelve".

Our Lady also begins to figure largely in the thoughts of Cluniacs at this time: and under the affective piety directed towards her relationships with the Holy Child, we discern solid theological teaching and speculation. When speaking of Her, Odilo rises to sublime flights of eloquence, and from time to time breaks out into rapturous prayers, reminiscent of Saint Bernard. Indeed, one celebrated Bernardine passage on 'Our Lady Star of the Sea' seems to be lifted bodily from Odilo.

With Odilo, then, the whole Cluniac spirituality seems moving towards a climax. Under Hugh, his successor, the idea that the

monastic life finds its perfect fulfilment in contemplation and reading, was carried one step further. Already, manual labour had been encroached upon and finally supplanted by intellectual interests and the demands of the Liturgy; and the liturgy and ceremonial had received considerable accretions. Under the mistaken impression that psalmody and prayer are coterminous, this single element of the Benedictine Rule was exaggerated out of due proportion: and this upsetting of the equilibrium of monastic life was quickly followed by the complete disorganisation of the fundamental ascetic programme. The "intolerable burden of liturgical functions" as the Cluniac Matthew of Albano described it, demanded some compensation: and though monastic observance at Cluny was still strict, and the ideals still high, conditions militated against their long continuance.

A new idea found currency at Cluny about this time, later elaborated by Saint Bernard in his treatise "*De Gratia et de Arbitrio*". The soul, made to the image and likeness of God, has become defaced by sin, and the whole purpose of the spiritual life is to renew and to make spotless this divine image. Expressed thus nakedly, the idea seems banal: but it was to provide the monks of the twelfth century and beyond with a detailed psychological basis for their ascetical and mystical teaching.

Peter the Venerable took up the reins of government when Cluny's reputation had gravely suffered from the excesses of Ponce, and when the Cistercians, with their literal interpretation of Benedictine disciplinary prescriptions, made the Cluniacs appear lax and degenerate. Hence, many, under the influence of Saint Bernard's strictures, associate Cluny at this period of its existence with sumptuous banquets and golden goblets winking at the brim. True, Cluny had travelled far from the early bleakness of Berno: but it had gained considerably in breadth of outlook and liberty of spirit. Peter was to show by a lifetime of forbearance that charity is definitely the acme of perfection, and that, beside it, mere external observance could appear very much like puritanical hypocrisy. Circumstances threw him into conflict with the Cistercians, yet on all essentially religious topics, even on the comparative disdain for mere intellectual pursuits, he was in complete agreement with them. His preference for piety before learning is expressed in a letter to Heloise: "Well hast thou changed thy pursuits: and like a wise woman hast chosen the Gospel instead of Logic, the Epistles instead of Physics, Christ instead of Plato, the Cloister instead of the Academy". His devotions centred round the same mysteries and the same persons: but they were more theological in content, and less emotional in expression, than Saint Bernard's. Peter's writings range over the whole field of spiritual doctrine, from

questions of Friendship to the fundamental exercises of the eremitical life: and since his correspondents number Popes, Archbishops, Kings, nobles and even his own relatives, no particular idea can be put forward as expressive of his whole spirituality. But if we consider his large-hearted indulgence and sympathy for every human weakness: his love of peace and truth: his mingling of mercy and judgment: his imperturbable good humour and majestic bearing in all difficulties: we are brought face to face with perfect charity, a virtue he inculcated in and out of season. In Peter we see Cluniac spirituality at its highest and its best. He embodies both its ascetic and its mystical ideals, its strong Benedictine tradition and its devotional developments, its religious and its intellectual interests. His solid conservative teaching, his wisdom born of experience and traditions, his unshakeable confidence in the heritage of the past, all this was expressive of Cluny's spiritual history for the preceding three hundred years. The new, slick methods and outlook of the twelfth century renaissance, though founded on the same tradition, were out of sympathy with Cluny; and Peter, sensing it, bewailed it, but nevertheless moved steadily forward in a dignified and measured progress, like a stately ship, breasting all controversies and conflicts, and leaving peace in his wake.

Cluniac spirituality, therefore, had undergone some modification during its three centuries of growth, developing gradually from a bare and meticulous observance of ascetical practices, through the cultivation of the fundamental monastic virtues, to the most sublime conception of the contemplative life. As the attachment to formal rules relaxes, pre-occupation with prayer and charity takes its place, until, in the latter years of Peter the Venerable, these two completely supplant the austere observance of the Benedictine Rule. Side by side with this change goes the development of devotional life: simple and limited at first, but eventually embracing the principal mysteries of the faith, the human life of Christ and certain facets of the life of his Mother. Affective piety, absent at first, manifests itself clearly under Odilo, but with admirable restraint and without the slightest trace of sentimentalism. In fact, all the elements of twelfth century spirituality, which find their most lyrical expression in Saint Bernard, already find a home at Cluny. The Cistercian school introduced no novelties, but merely brought to perfection, through the instrumentality of its guiding genius, the doctrines and the devotions already adumbrated and established by the spirituality of Cluny. There was no meteoric rise in the devotion to the Humanity of Christ, no sudden discovery of devotion to Mary, but only a slow growth and a flowering in due season.