

## THE RELIGIOUS ORDERS IN ENGLAND AND WALES<sup>1</sup>

### I. *The Monks*

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ALL religious orders, however much they may vary in their origins or in the work they do, are based on a single—indeed a simple—idea: namely the search for Christian perfection. To begin with, this meant an individual's going apart, often into the desert or a cave, where he might devote himself wholly to prayer and contemplation. The very word 'monk' means a solitary. But in the fourth century in Egypt the monks began to organize themselves in communities: the movement spread, and gradually a rule of life developed by which the communities were bound. The most important of them was that of St Benedict, born in 480 in Italy, and the Benedictine rule became the dominant force in the growth of monastic life in the West.

The Rule of St Benedict, which is still followed today by the thousands of monks and nuns who bear his name throughout the world, is a sane and moderate document which provides a charter for a life to be lived in common. Its motto is '*Pax*', the peace that comes to those who follow Christ. For it is, in St Benedict's words, 'a school of the Lord's service', in which the monk is to learn to prefer the common good to his own interests, and that common good is seen in the faithful following of Christ. The Abbot is Christ to his community, and the monk's principal work is the *Opus Dei*: the work of celebrating the solemn liturgy, the praise and glory which it is man's chief privilege to offer to God. Manual work is to be the monk's other occupation, and the ordinary business of tilling the fields and running a house is seen to be itself a means of serving God in silence and simplicity. Labour itself is made into something holy.

A special feature of Benedictine life has always been the vow of stability, by which, in addition to the vows of obedience (he surrenders his own will to that of his superior), chastity (he surrenders his right to marriage and family life) and poverty (he has nothing of his own), the monk commits himself to the lifelong

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service of God in a particular monastery. It was this, most of all, that gave solidity to Benedictine life and made the great abbeys of Western Europe bastions of security and sanctity in a troubled world.

In England and Wales, as in the rest of Europe, the Benedictines were missionaries, teachers, scholars. It was Benedictine monks who were sent from Rome to evangelize the English in 596, and for close on a thousand years they were to enrich English life with such great monasteries as Westminster, Durham and Gloucester, and to produce such saints as St Dunstan and St Anselm. Alongside the Benedictines were other orders—the Canons Regular (priests in community following the rule of St Augustine), Carthusians (hermits, living a life of great asceticism, who had been founded by St Bruno) and later the Cistercians (who followed the rule of St Benedict in all its strictness, and were virtually a new order founded by St Bernard). The orders of monks and canons were throughout the middle ages a monument to the classic grandeur of the Church as established in a Christian society.

But with the Reformation all this very soon ceased to be. One hundred and fifty-seven monasteries of Benedictine monks and seventy-seven of Cistercians were suppressed, their property was confiscated and the monks dispersed, to resume as best they could their community life in exile. But even in their darkest days they remained consciously English, drawing recruits from the remaining Catholic families or from converts. They remained faithful, too, to the sober spirituality and the learning of monastic tradition, and such a man as Augustine Baker, in the seventeenth century, bears witness to the solid foundations of the Benedictine spirit even when its external expression was denied by adversity.

The last of the monks of Westminster died in exile in 1609, and it was through him that the continuity of English Benedictine life was secured, so that today the great abbey of Ampleforth can claim to be the monastic inheritor of the medieval abbey of Westminster. It was not till after the French Revolution, with all the upheavals it created in the religious life of Europe, that the English Benedictine monks were able to return to England to live an organized life in community. Individual monks had served as priests to the small Catholic flock in England throughout the difficulties of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but in 1802 English monks settled at Ampleforth in Yorkshire and in 1814 at

Downside, near Bath. Today the Benedictines of the English Congregation number more than five hundred religious, with six great abbeys: they are responsible for important boarding schools for boys, which, within the Benedictine tradition of Christian education, have built up an impressive academic record and an acknowledged place in the national life. They provide the facilities, and have acquired the prestige, of the famous English public schools, and in that way have done much to build up a stronger Catholic representation in the universities and in the professions. In addition, many Benedictine priests, faithful to their missionary history, are in charge of parishes—a work originally undertaken because of the shortage of diocesan clergy but now being increasingly given up.

But the primary monastic vocation remains that of the monk in his cloister, whose prayer and mortification are offered for the sanctification of the world. It is the genius of St Benedict's rule that it can allow for external work no doubt very different from that which St Benedict himself envisaged.

But there are also Benedictine monks in England who exclude external work from their monastic life. Chief among these are the monks of Buckfast and Prinknash—the former celebrated for having themselves largely built a great abbey on the site of a medieval monastery; and Prinknash especially notable as a community, originally within the Anglican Church but which made its corporate submission to Rome in 1913, which has appealed to the primitive Benedictine observance and has, for instance, revived the original practice of having professed choir monks who are not necessarily priests. Belonging to Prinknash is the abbey of Farnborough also, built by the exiled Empress Eugénie, which contains the tombs of Napoleon III, the Prince Imperial and the Empress herself. This was formerly a monastery of French monks, notable for scholarship of international renown, as reflected in such men as Abbot Cabrol, Dom Wilmart and Dom Gougau. It is to the French congregation that the abbey of Quarr (in the Isle of Wight) belongs, and here the observance is wholly contemplative, with a strong emphasis on scholarly research.

Among the other monastic orders of men, the Cistercians are represented in England at Mount St Bernards in Leicestershire and in Wales on the small island of Caldey. Popularly called Trappists, after the reforms instituted in the French abbey of La Trappe in the

seventeenth century, these monks live a life of the greatest austerity, spending their days and nights in an alternating round of prayer and strenuous manual labour. Their strict fasts, perpetual silence and bodily penance are only intelligible if they are seen as the generous and free choice of men whose love of God demands precisely a sacrifice of this sort—and that not only for their own sanctification, but that of the whole world. They make up for what is wanting in us. The Cistercian vocation thus provides in our own time the most striking proof of the perennial value of the monastic life in its most absolute form, and their great increase of recent years (specially in America) is proof enough that the idea of a life of such heroic renunciation is more than ever valid, though it can necessarily be only the vocation of comparatively few.

So, too, the Carthusians, who have always been few in number, with their special form of life—that of hermits who spend most of their time alone in prayer and work, and only come together on Sundays and feasts—they, with their one monastery in Sussex, bear witness to the same need. Of the Carthusians it has been said that in the nine centuries of their existence they have never been reformed because they have never needed to be.

The Canons Regular, who were numerous in England before the Reformation, are also represented once more, and their form of life, namely that of priests living together in community according to rule and vow, but with the express intention of engaging in the active mission of the Church, is one that is still of the greatest usefulness.

We have been speaking only of the orders of men represented in this country today which have their origin in the monastic tradition principally associated with St Benedict. It is important to remember that the Benedictines do not constitute an order in the sense that we shall be speaking of later religious families. Benedictines are indeed organized in Congregations, usually on a national basis, but the very diversity of the work they do, and even of the habit they wear—essentially always the same, but with many minor modifications—reflects the comprehensive quality of St Benedict's rule. Within the broad framework of the Liturgy of the Church and of a paternal form of government, the Benedictines are in fact well adapted to meet the most various needs of the Church, and their present position in England and Wales is proof

of this. Thus the same abbey, which has in its school an impressive record of aristocratic patronage and of athletic achievement, can be responsible for a learned quarterly review and can be known for the unsurpassed perfection of its liturgical life and in particular for its interpretation of plainchant. It may seem a far call from the world of Subiaco and St Benedict to the busy atmosphere of a Benedictine school or parish in England today, but the foundation remains the same, that 'in all things God may be glorified', so that the monk attends first and foremost to the things of God.

There is scarcely time to speak of the monastic orders of women, but they, in the nature of things, are more directly contemplative, living an enclosed life. If, exceptionally, they conduct a school, then it is regarded as an extension of the convent rather than as an institution which is staffed by nuns.

Thus the monastic life in England today remains, as always, a witness to the spiritual things that endure, an assurance that God is worshipped and that men and women are to be found to dedicate themselves first of all to his service. So, in the deserts of Egypt fifteen hundred years ago, and in the England of atomic power, there is to be found the still centre, the final acknowledgment that man is made for God.