

THE MONASTIC IDEAL

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THE theme of the whole conference is the Common Life of Christians; the theme of this paper is the Monastic Ideal of the Common Life. The monastic life exists in two forms, the eremitical and the cenobitical. It would be interesting to show how the common life of Christians is realised also in the eremitical monastic life, but for several reasons this paper will consider only the Christian common life as it is envisaged in cenobitical monasticism. And in the West, the Rule of St Benedict remains the norm of cenobitical monastic life, so that the monastic ideal described will be that of the Rule of St Benedict.

Even with this limitation of scope, the subject is not an easy one to treat. During the 1,400 years of Benedictine history, and also in contemporary monastic life, the ideal of the Rule has been realised in a great variety of ways. If we limit ourselves to examining the life described in the Rule, we may lose the deeper insight to be acquired through studying the multiple ways in which the virtualities of the Rule have been realised in history. If we consider Benedictine life concretely, either in the course of its history or as it is lived today, the theme becomes unmanageably large.

What I propose to do is to describe the life organised by the Rule itself—a life which for many centuries now has not been realised in the letter by any Benedictine or Cistercian monastery, but which nevertheless must remain for us all our norm and our inspiration—and to draw out its implications so far as these concern the common life of Christians. In thus limiting myself to the letter of the Rule, I must not be thought in any way to disavow the historic forms and developments through which the Benedictine tradition has come down to us.

We are so often told that monastic life is simply the Christian life in its perfection, that it may be useful to begin by underlining one aspect of the life described in the Rule which necessarily differentiates it from Christian life in the

world. The life of the Rule, though its literal observance for St Benedict's contemporaries would have been considerably less physically exacting than it would be for us today, was nevertheless by any standard a life of marked austerity and simplicity. It was a life of silence; and it was a life which, without being 'enclosed' as the life of many nuns has been since the Council of Trent, was nevertheless what Father Baker calls an 'abstracted life', a life apart from the world. Like the hermit in this, the cenobite withdraws from the earthly city, without cutting himself off from the common life of the body of Christ, by which and for which he lives.

If he is like the hermit in that he lives apart from the world, he is unlike him in that he lives, not merely in juxtaposition with, but in the closest organic union with, his fellow monks. The Rule knows of no division of the community into choir-monks who are priests or clerics, and who alone have 'chapter rights', and lay brothers for whom the liturgy and *lectio divina* are in large measure replaced by some simple vernacular office and by extra manual work. The community is of one category only, and is not a clerical body, though a few priests may have joined it, or the Abbot may have had one or two monks ordained to provide Mass and Sacraments for their brethren. There is no bond between the different monasteries which observe the Rule; each community is autonomous, aspirants do not join an order but enter a particular house, where they are trained, to which they are bound by the special vow of stability, and in which they normally reside until death. The community is ruled by an Abbot not necessarily a priest, chosen by themselves, who holds office for life, and whose authority is absolute, checked only by his own sense of supernatural responsibility, though St Benedict bids him consult the whole community in major issues, the seniors in less important matters; the very fact that this consultation is not intended to be a juridical check upon the Abbot's freedom of decision gives to these consultations a character of affectionate collaboration in a common task. The Abbot is to be not only ruler and administrator, but above all father, teacher, spiritual director of his monks.

In a life so conceived, we find all the characteristics of what has come to be called 'Benedictine family life'. By this expression it is meant that there is a specific element in Benedictine community life beyond the normal bond of fraternal charity which must animate any group of Christians living together; something for which an analogy can be found in the natural bonds and the supernatural charity which unite a Christian family. It is the purpose of this paper to show in what sense this is true.

To begin with, the permanence and local character of the bonds of Benedictine community life should be underlined; the same men will normally live together in the same place and under the same Abbot all their lives. And the intimacy of these relationships will naturally be deepened by the framework of enclosure and that separation from the world and from external ties which is essential to the monastic life. There is one implication of this strongly localised family life worth drawing out: the immense spiritual value of the discipline involved in accepting a particular spiritual heredity, with its own strength, its own narrowness, its own weaknesses, its own problems.

This family life was clearly intended by St Benedict to have an affectionate character; he speaks of the love an Abbot should bear his monks and strive to win from them; of the affection they owe to him and to each other. The Rule provides for no purely recreative conversation, and periods of recreation came in only in the early Middle Ages; perhaps this has given to later Benedictine life a new quality of comradeship; but I do not think it is possible to read the Rule without being struck by a delicacy of charity different in kind from what one would ask of a colony of solitaries; by the constant considerateness shown for all human weaknesses whether of body or of character; by the quality of courtesy which is made to permeate the relations of the monks with each other and with the officials; by the impression of a society of which love and not efficiency, nor even discipline, is the first law.

It is the fact that each Benedictine monastery is a family which has given its predominant characteristic to Benedictine work for souls. For one thing, an individual abbey cannot be

simply one unit among many others, directed by the authorities of a province or an order to do a particular work or carry out a particular policy or exercise a particular kind of influence. The work, policy, influence of each abbey will be determined principally by its own traditions and circumstances. The difficulty of harnessing Benedictine energies for this or that particular undertaking is sometimes a cause of exasperation to our friends; but here again, for better for worse, efficiency is not the first law. Again, because each abbey is a family, the influence exercised, the power for good, will be far more that of the community than that of an individual monk; and where the individual acts or speaks, he will do so as a son of the family to which he owes everything and which has formed him. Directly or indirectly, it is the tradition and spirit of the community which attracts and influences, in all the multiple forms which Benedictine work for souls has taken and takes.

What was the economic basis of this family life? For Cassian and the monks of Egypt it was a principle that a monk should live by the work of his hands, after the example of St Paul; and there can be no better safeguard for the double duty of real poverty and hard work. It seems clear that in the West from early times monasteries depended for their subsistence at least in part upon endowments in real property; and in ch. 48 St Benedict seems to regard the situation of monks obliged to be entirely self-supporting as something exceptional; it is a situation of which he speaks a little wistfully, as he speaks elsewhere of abstinence from wine, and which he exhorts his monks to accept with inward satisfaction rather than with murmuring. But even if his monks did not depend entirely upon the work of their own hands, they must have done so in large measure; some six-and-a-half hours a day were spent by all in manual work, in kitchen-garden, bakehouse, workshop or scriptorium; all took their weekly turn of service as conventual cooks. Such work done constantly in common and for the common good must have contributed largely to the building-up of a strong family life and of a deep local attachment.

Attachment. The purpose of the Gospel counsels and of

the vows is to set us free from all attachments. It has been recently said that monastic family life, with its emphasis upon love of home, abbot, brethren, may become nothing but an *ersatz* for the human affections and ties which have been renounced at profession. No doubt it can be materialised in this way, and become little more than an earthly loyalty, an *esprit de corps*, with the self-satisfaction and corporate pride which these easily engender. But experience seems to show that family life can only be built up among men who have no natural bond of blood, by a supernatural selflessness and charity. We learn to replace self-centredness by God-centredness, as we learn to love God and Christ whom we have not seen, through the love of our brethren whom we see and in whom we meet Christ at every moment of our lives. God has his own ways of teaching detachment even where he commands attachment, and the inner logic of monastic family life makes of it a true *schola caritatis*.

Nevertheless, the last word on monastic common life has not been said when it has been described by the analogy of the family life. To see deeper, we must look at the two other occupations which, with manual work, make up the waking hours of monastic life according to the Rule. Abbot Butler has reckoned that if St Benedict's monks spent some six-and-a-half hours a day in manual work, they spent about four in *lectio divina*, and at least three-and-a-half in the Divine Office. We are here at the source and core of monastic common life.

The monastic liturgy of the mid-sixth century was certainly simpler than that of today, but from the point of view both of text and of chant it was certainly more rich than the monastic liturgy described by Cassian. It had in any case those essential elements which belong to its very nature: the presence of Christ's redemptive act and our incorporation into it in the Eucharistic sacrifice; the presence of his Mysteries in the great feasts and seasons of the liturgical year; the presence of his prayer in the psalmody, prayed as the Fathers prayed it, as *vox Christi et Ecclesiae*. St Benedict's monks were not a clerical body, celebrating the Office *in persona Ecclesiae* in virtue of a juridical delegation; but of its very nature, their common liturgical prayer

was that *publicus cultus mystici Jesu Christi Corporis* of which *Mediator Dei* speaks. In other words, their liturgical prayer already pre-supposed and was the expression of a common life, into which they had been incorporated by Baptism, and of whose corporate worship the baptismal character made them capable. The common life in Christ, of which the liturgy was the organ and expression, was the key-theme of their *lectio divina*, the prayerful reading of the Scriptures and the Fathers, overflowing into private and contemplative prayer. It is this common life in Christ, celebrated and realised sacramentally in the liturgy, studied and savoured and contemplated in *lectio divina*, which has to work itself out in and as it were transubstantiate the monastic family life sketched in the first part of this conference. '*Sacramentum vivendo teneant, quod fide perceperunt*'. The Eucharist is the focus and source of all, 'the sacrament was instituted to nourish man spiritually through union with Christ and with his members'.¹ Here is the deepest aspect of monastic common life; the monastic family is an *ecclesia*, a microcosm of the great *Ecclesia*, the *Catholica*, the Body of Christ. The Abbot is not merely a christianised form of the Roman *paterfamilias*, he 'holds the place of Christ in the monastery'; that is why he presides over the liturgical renewal of Christ's work, as does the Bishop in his church; that is why such graces are attached to our loyalty and docility towards him. That is why St Benedict tells us to see Christ in our brethren, in the sick, in the guests, in the poor. Here too is the deepest sense of that ascetical teaching which St Benedict took over from Cassian. Both saw in self-will, *voluntas propria*, the supreme practical expression of the life of the old man; the essential task of asceticism is to uproot self-will in us. But this in itself would be purely negative; self-will has to be replaced, and not merely by humility and obedience, but by charity, to which they dispose and of which they are ultimately the expression. And this charity is given and nourished in the liturgy and especially in the Eucharist. Concretely, the liturgy itself

¹ '*Sacramentum . . . institutum . . . ad spiritualiter nutriendum per unionem ad Christum et ad membra ejus.*' (St Thomas, *Summa* III, 79, 5.)

is the discipline as well as the sacrament of charity; calm and united psalmody and chant cannot be achieved merely by artistic sense or training, they demand and build up self-abnegation and humility. We are often told that the common life is the supreme mortification; but to limit ourselves to this half-truth is to impoverish our vision disastrously; the common life, in its widest and most inclusive sense, is not merely the supreme discipline for self-will, but above all the supreme expression of eucharistic charity. Every offence against family life, not merely disobedience and the cruder manifestations of self-will, but also all singularity in our way of acting, all attachment to private ideals and theories, all particularism in our affections—all that St Bernard calls so profoundly *proprietatis*—are in conflict with the inner logic of the Eucharist and of the liturgy. Conversely, it is the grace of the liturgy which alone can be the source of an *amor fraternitatis* which knows no limits. So we come to recognise the profound interdependence of our liturgical life and of our family life; our family life being the expression of a charity derived from the liturgy; the liturgy itself becoming more vital, both as worship and as a channel of grace, in the measure of our generosity in family life.

If I were asked to sum up the Benedictine conception of family life, I would say that its fundamental material element is stability, with that permanence of all the basic ties of community life which the idea connotes. It is this which distinguishes monastic common life from all other form of common life in the Church today. Spiritually, its fundamental character is that of a sacramental common life: a common life overflowing from the *consortium mysterii salutaris*, finding in liturgical prayer its source, a part of its discipline, and its supreme expression. For if our charity derives from the Eucharist and the liturgy, it also expresses itself most purely in them.

It will be seen that neither of these two elements is exclusively Benedictine. If the vow of stability was St Benedict's own contribution to western monasticism, enduring attachment to a localised community loomed far larger in the life of the early Church—whether in the diocese with

its bishop and his *familia*, or with the regular canons, or with the multiple corporations of medieval ecclesiastical life—than it has come to do in the last centuries under the pressure of urgent need for elasticity and mobility in the apostolate. Here, as in so many other things, what is sometimes thought of as a Benedictine ‘speciality’ is little more than a survival of the spirit and practice of the early Church. As for the conception of a common life sacramental in its source, this must be true of any Christian common life, as it is true of the unity and life of the whole Church. It is not an accident that the prayers of the Liturgy constantly use the word *familia* as a synonym for *Ecclesia*: ‘Look down, we beseech thee, O Lord, upon this thy *family*, for whom our Lord Jesus Christ did not hesitate to deliver himself over to wicked men’. The local community, parish or diocese or *cenobium*, represents and realises concretely the whole Church. That is why St Paul’s Epistles are the best manual of monastic family life, and why St Ignatius’s picture of the local *ecclesia*, governed by the Bishop who holds the place of Christ and who celebrates the Eucharist in the midst of his own church to which he is indissolubly wedded, seems so familiar to the monk. And the text that most perfectly expresses the ideal of a sacramental common life has passed from the liturgy of the monastic family into the liturgy of the whole Church, from the homely and humble washing of the feet of the brethren by the cooks who had finished their week in the kitchen, to the pontifical rites of Maundy Thursday:

Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est.
 Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor . . .
 Timeamus et amemus Deum vivum,
 Et ex corde diligamus nos sincero . . .
 Simul ergo cum in unum congregamur,
 Ne nos mente dividamur, caveamus.
 Cessent jurgia maligna, cessent lites,
 Et in medio nostri sit Christus Deus.