

BENEDICTINE MONASTICISM

BY

H. K. BYRNE, O.S.B.

Abbot of Ampleforth



SIMPLE statement of some elementary notions may fittingly accompany more learned essays on particular aspects of monasticism.

A Benedictine's aim is the common aim of all Christians. Only his method is, to some extent, peculiar to him. It may be succinctly described as 'monastic obedience'.

The monastic vow of obedience seems to have been one of St Benedict's inventions. Before his time monks either lived apart and independently (as did St Benedict himself in his Subiaco days) or attached themselves by easily terminable engagements to a teacher or a series of teachers. Doubtless that often worked well, and the monk either persevered in his solitude or passed from teacher to teacher receiving from each some special lesson, some further benefit. But it obviously left the unstable soul without support and opened a fairly comfortable career to the work-shy. Indignant descriptions of some unsatisfactory types enliven the first chapter of St Benedict's Rule.

His monks were to be neither self-directed nor peripatetic, but were to join 'the strong race of Cenobites, . . . that is, those who live in monasteries under a rule and an abbot'. And to each he says in the opening sentence of the prologue to his Rule: 'Hearken, my son, to the precepts of thy master and incline the ear of thy heart; freely receive and faithfully fulfil the instructions of thy loving father, that by the labour of obedience thou mayest return to him from whom thou hast strayed by the sloth of disobedience'.¹

When a Benedictine novice (and now not only a Benedictine) takes this vow, his action is ill described as 'giving up his will'. That omits the important point: 'to whom?' There is only One to whom a man may worthily and honourably give up his will. To God, then, and in order to show his love for God, he gives up, not some part of his powers, not some particular source of satisfaction, but the innermost sanctuary of his being, his whole self, his will: he surrenders all liberty of choice extending over those wide tracts of life in which God left him free to decide, and undertakes not to use that God-permitted freedom, but to act always in accordance with the will of God. Henceforth he knows to his immeasurable comfort

¹ *The Rule of Saint Benedict*. Translated with notes by Dom Justin McCann. (Stanbrook Abbey Press).

that so long as he is faithful to his vow his whole life is spent in the best possible way, however insignificant his occupations or outwardly unsuccessful his undertakings.

He does, however, something more. If he did not, his vow would be a vow to do always the most perfect thing. That is in all conscience a considerable obligation to assume, but it is not a vow of obedience, for it leaves to the 'vower' the decision of what is the most perfect thing. The novice vows obedience 'under' some one, 'under' a fellow-man, an abbot. This is a notable addition; for the abbot, though authorised indeed by the Church to hold his position and to exercise authority, and limited and guided by centuries of tradition and legislation (and hence the novice's submission is in no way degrading or unworthy), is nevertheless a fellow-man; and the effort to yield to the truth that his all-too-human decisions are expressions of God's will requires a good deal of human self-discipline and divine grace. Particular mortifications hurt portions of ourselves, but the surgical knife of obedience penetrates to the core of our being. This is not to say that Benedictines, and religious generally, live in a disgruntled condition of near-rebellion. On the contrary they are the most contented of mankind. But they will ruefully admit that the uprisings of self-will have cost them more disagreeable surprises and more searching, if unspectacular, self-discipline than any of their particular weaknesses.

It may be well to refer to some objections or questions which are likely to spring to the lay mind.

A monk may be told to do what is, or seems to him to be, sinful. It would be rash to assert that in fourteen centuries that has never happened. In such a painful situation the monk's Penny Catechism will teach him what to do.

Or he may receive an intolerably harsh or grossly unjust order. For that there is a system of legitimate appeals to higher authority and ultimately to the Holy See.

Or he may be told to do something which is unreasonably hard or beyond his capacity. For that St Benedict provides thus: 'If it happen that something hard or impossible be laid upon any brother, let him receive the command of his superior with all docility and obedience. But if he sees that the weight of the burden altogether exceeds the measure of his strength, let him explain the reasons of his incapacity to his superior calmly and in due season, without pride, obstinacy, or contradiction. If after his representations the superior still persist in his decision and command, let the subject know that it is expedient for him, and let him obey out of love, trusting in the assistance of God'.²

² *Rule. c. 68.*

A different kind of question is: Does not monastic life injure and even destroy by atrophy something of real value in a man's nature, his power of initiative and leadership? *A priori* that would seem inevitable: in fact a monk has no less of such ability (and almost certainly he has much more) than he would have if he were a layman. A part, no more than a part, of the reason for this is that a monk has the opportunity and the duty of exercising a good deal of initiative and discretion. Monasteries quickly build up a quite elaborate network of organisation, and only an exceptionally able superior would have the time, and only an exceptionally foolish one would have the wish, to take and hold all management in his own hands. Nor is this a modern development: a robot-like community would not have suited St Benedict.

Of the community life which the monk shares the present Pope has written in the recent Encyclical Letter on St Benedict: 'A monastic community is modelled on the christian household, over which the abbot or superior rules as the father of the family; and all are dependent on his authority as children under their father'. St Benedict frequently and forcibly reminds the abbot that he is in the position of a father, not a dictator, and with equal frequency and emphasis bids him remember the account which he will have to render at the Last Judgment. This family character of the community life is fortified by another of St Benedict's inventions, the vow of Stability. A monk is permanently enrolled in his community and committed to life-long obedience to its abbot.

A consequence, or more accurately a pre-requisite condition, of this same character is that Benedictines do not form an Order. Each monastery is, or should be, a self-contained, independent unit. Strictly speaking the whole body is a loose confederation of the (originally national) Congregations in which the individual monasteries are loosely federated. But life is short, and we generally use the word 'Order'.

Over this community life lie the obligations of the second Benedictine vow oddly expressed as Conversion of Manners. It is a reminder that the monastic state should not be stationary but involves unremitting effort upwards. Prayer, of course, both private and liturgical, looms large in it. A certain simplicity and frugality should mark it, and all should share and share alike. For private possessions, however trifling, and for avoidable differences of life and treatment, St Benedict reserves his severest censures.

And, finally, work. 'Idleness is the enemy of the soul. The brethren, therefore, must be occupied at certain hours with manual labour, and again at other hours in sacred reading'. (Rule, c. 48). Throughout their history they have turned their hands to most things, doing

whatever seemed from time to time most fitting and useful. In their early centuries this was salvage work among ancient christian and pagan classics. Then too, and since then, they have tried to make themselves useful in the 'human' pursuits of history and education. Otherwise they have not been specialists, and cannot claim, as can the Friars and some others, many great names in the records of Theology and Philosophy and Science.

To give a full description of monastic life would require a book; and the book might easily obscure the really important truth that a Benedictine's life should be prayerful, homely, simple, peacefully busy, and entirely dedicated to God's holy will in fulfilment of his vows of Stability, Conversion of Manners and Obedience. Compunction, fear of the Judgment and awe before the majesty of God should be strong in him, 'But, as we progress in our monastic life and in faith, our hearts shall be enlarged, and we shall run with unspeakable sweetness of love in the way of God's commandments; so that, never abandoning his rule but persevering in his teaching in the monastery until death, we shall share by patience in the sufferings of Christ, that we may deserve to be partakers also of his kingdom'. (Prologue to the Rule.)

STABILITY

DOM DENYS RUTLEDGE



O a generation born and bred to conditions notoriously unstable there should be something singularly attractive, if at the same time somewhat elusive, in the thought of stability. Most people will instinctively think of it in its possible application to international, social, economic and financial affairs; to religious, and more particularly to Benedictines, it may more naturally suggest the vow of stability which was St Benedict's most far-reaching contribution to western monasticism. Yet the two aspects are more closely connected than may at first sight appear; the one in fact springs naturally from the other. In both connections there is implied a continuity, a stability, of contact with the source and origin, the *Fons et Origo*, of all things, a dimly-realised perception of a model and exemplar in accordance with which man and his world are to be ordered and fashioned.

The Pope has recently, in his encyclical *Fulgens Radiatur*, drawn attention to St Benedict's work for the world, comparing the needs of his age with those of our own. It seems to have been St Benedict's work for civilisation to crystallise in a permanent institution, to