

ROBERT GROSSETESTE ON THE MONASTIC LIFE

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Introductory Note

Robert Grosseteste, one of the greatest men of the thirteenth century England and bishop of Lincoln from 1235-1253, was in frequent contact with the numerous religious houses in his diocese. Often his high-handed but probably necessary actions as Visitor were not appreciated by the communities which experienced them.¹ His correspondence moreover shows him complaining to the abbot of Fleury about the irregular lives of some of his monks belonging to cells in his diocese, and giving sarcastic advice to the canons of Missenden on the choice of their future superior.* But the present letter to the monks of Bury St Edmunds† is witness to a much more cordial feeling, and shows the bishop's deep esteem for the life led by these monks in accordance with ideals which he shared.

Grosseteste's Franciscan friend Adam Marsh implored him not to work so hard and Matthew Paris described him as a man to whom quiet was unknown.‡ This letter shows that he worked even in his leisure hours: it is the result of the busy prelate spending a quiet day in a library, translating and adapting a Greek work on the monastic life which is otherwise unknown. The first and last paragraphs are Grosseteste's own: the intermediary paragraphs incorporate various elements of traditional monastic teaching, particularly from the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy of the Areopagite and from the *De Vita Contemplativa* of Philo, known possibly through Eusebius' citations from this work in his Ecclesiastical History.§

While Grosseteste was an original thinker, a great deal of his writing, particularly during his episcopate, consisted simply in translating Greek works into Latin. This work appears to be a freer translation than his usual ones. No doubt the Bury monks were pleased with this mark of affection from one often considered hostile to the monks, and there is

1 'in religiosos terribiliter et in religiosas terribilius consuevit fulgurare, zelum bonum habens, sed non secundum scientiam.' Matthew Paris, *Chronica Majora* (R.S.) V, 419. During the first visitation of his diocese in 1236 he removed from office seven Augustinian abbots and four priors. Cf. *Robert Grosseteste* (ed. D. A. Callus, O.P.), 154.

* Grosseteste, *Epistolae* (R.S.) LIII, LIV, CVIII and LXXXV.

† Not Peterborough, as stated by Luard. Cf. *Robert Grosseteste*, loc. cit.

‡ *Monumenta Franciscana* (R.S.) I, 143; Matthew Paris, *Chronica Majora* (R.S.) IV, 497.

§ Bk. II, ch. 16-17. Père Lagrange suggested that the Jewish Alexandrian Therapeutae described here by Philo never existed, but represent the author's ideal, based on the practice of the Essenes of Palestine (*Le Judaïsme avant Jésus Christ*, 583-586). In fact Christian writers like Eusebius made use of these passages as if they described actually existing communities of Christian monks.

evidence that his exhortations fell on good ground in the list of Sacristans in the Bury chronicle.

'Gregory the precentor who was born in the district of St Albans succeeded this man. He did not remain long in office for he was chosen to be prior of St Edmund's as his merits and holiness demanded. Several people, as we have seen ourselves, were cured at his tomb from various diseases by the merits of this holy man.'[¶]

Such entries are rare: together with the way Grosseteste takes for granted that the monks of Bury are devoted to the pursuit of holiness it leads one to suppose that the monks' life at this time was not only respectable but fervent, not concerned primarily with the maintenance of an external observance but with that seeking for God in the ways of the spirit which vivifies monastic life in every age.

ROBERT by the grace of God bishop of Lincoln, to his beloved brethren by the same grace the abbot and community of Bury, health, grace and blessing.

One day last week when I was resting from the anxieties of business, in the course of my reading I chanced upon a writing on monastic life, which gives it its due praise. As I thought it would please your devotion if I shared with you what I had been able to understand, not the very words I found, for they are not in Latin, but their meaning drawn from them to the best of my ability with a few thoughts added for clarity's sake, I have assembled them in these pages and have managed to send them to you.

This writing then shows that monks are men who philosophize about the rules of a life which should be led in surpassing holiness.¹ Their endeavour, purpose and occupation is to escape from the pleasures of the body and to mortify themselves by physical austerities while they still live in this body, and to leave the good things of the present world by a wise kind of folly, passing from truly good things to better ones until they attain the highest of all. For the monastic life is, as they say, the most excellent order of those who are being perfected:² it is purified by every kind of virtue and by the chastity of its particular activities, it is built up

[¶] *Memorial of St Edmund's Abbey* (R.S.) II, 293.

¹ St John Chrysostom (*Adv. Oppugatores* P.G. 47, 320 et seq), the author of *Liber de Monastica Exercitatione* attributed to St Nilus (P.G. 79, 719-723) and others called monks 'philosophers'. The immediate source is probably Ps. Denys, *De Hierarchia Eccles.* VI, III, 2 (P.G. 3, 534), or Philo, *De Vita Contemplativa* 2, Loeb Classics, vol. IX, p. 113.

² Cf. Ps. Denys, *loc. cit.*

in all kinds of service, it is raised to intellectual contemplation, it is knit together by the perfecting powers and the transcendent excellence of the angels, it is instructed by the traditions of the heavenly Hierarchy, and it is brought by analogy with them to the service of God and the consummate perfection of Divine contemplation. Hence the most holy and prominent monks thought them worthy of sacred names: they themselves called them 'monks'; others named them 'therapeutae'.³ In accordance with the composite derivation of the Greek word *monachos* a monk is so called from *monos*, which means 'alone', and *euche*, which means 'prayer', or 'vow', as if the word were *moneuchos*, because it is a monk's occupation to pray alone.⁴ For a monk's endeavour is to pray in the spirit at all times and to give thanks for everything. If he is to do this in suitable purity of heart he must be alone, separated in his mind and heart (by which he prays) from the turmoil of the imagination, from idle, useless, unclean and harmful thoughts, and from impure and inordinate affections in order to be cleansed from all that is worldly and transitory.⁵ Lest habitual or passing desires from without, or impure and inordinate affections from within, or even the busy turmoil of vain thoughts remain in his soul, he should not even be present to himself, but should deny himself and completely renounce his own will.

In this concept of solitude, whence the word 'monk' is derived because he directs his prayer to God alone, it is implied that the monk calls on God alone when he prays, not like those who do not seek God above all things in their prayer but are intent on obtaining other things through him. For what is sought as an end is sought more than that through which it is sought. He who prays alone must be separated in desire from human approbation, and not be like the hypocrites who love to pray standing in the synagogues and the street-corners to be seen by men.⁶ He also prays alone who prays living in solitude, that is, in the desert to which the Son of God went, leaving the ninety-nine sheep, to search for the one which was lost.⁷ Those then live in this solitude who can say with the Apostle: our way of life is in Heaven.⁸

3 Cf. Ps. Denys, *loc. cit.* c. 532.

4 This derivation is attributed by Haefsten (*Disquisitiones Monasticae*, p. 265 of Antwerp edition of 1644) to St John Climacus, St Maximus, and Isaac the Presbyter.

5 This point is emphasized by Ps. Denys, *loc. cit.*

6 Matt vi, 2.

7 Luke xv, 4.

8 Phil. iii, 20.

The solitude of a monk in prayer then is a solitude of mind and heart, a separation from useless and impure thoughts and affections, from the possession of and desire for all that is transitory, and from all human approbation; it is self-abnegation and the renunciation of one's own will, it is despising and overcoming the world; hence it is a heavenly way of life and a direct tendency towards God alone. The same solitude is to be found in the monk's vows.⁹

It is also said that the name of *monachos* (monk) is derived compositely from *monos* and *echo*, which means 'I have'; hence a monk is so called as if the word were *monechus*, that is, 'alone having the Alone';¹⁰ living alone, as explained above, the monk possesses by superabundant charity him who is truly Alone and holds nothing apart from him in the close embrace of charity.

It is said too that a monk is so called from *monos* and *achos* which means 'sadness inducing silence',¹¹ because it is fitting for a monk, as the Scripture says, to sit solitary and be silent,¹² raising himself above himself, a mere man, to the likeness of God. He brings down streams of tears from the source of compunction, lamenting and sorrowing incessantly for his own and others' sins and the miserable punishment incurred for guilt, namely, a delay in going to Heaven and the uncertainty of knowing whether one is worthy of love or hatred.

Then men who philosophize in this solitude are also called *therapeutae* from the Greek verb *therapeuo*, which means 'I serve freely and from love', because they accomplish a pure, united common service which proceeds from love and liberty of spirit and unites them to God's proper unity and brings them to a perfection like God's own.¹³

Alternatively they are called *therapeutae* from *therapeuo*, which means 'I heal', because, like doctors of the spirit, they heal the souls of those who come to them from guilty passions as if from fever and disease.¹⁴ When these men, it is said, begin to philosophize about the rules of leading a good life, they retire from their families and possessions and live outside the towns in deserts or

⁹ Cf. Ps. Denys, *loc. cit.* where a paragraph follows on monastic profession.

¹⁰ Implicitly if not explicitly in Ps. Denys.

¹¹ Haeflten (*loc. cit.*) attributes this derivation to St John Climacus.

¹² Lam. iii, 28.

¹³ Cf. Philo, *op. cit.* p. 115: Ps. Denys emphasizes the perfective unity of monastic life, which gives a uniform knowledge like God's own. P.G. 3, 546.

¹⁴ Cf. Philo, *op. cit.* pp. 113-5, and Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, Bk II, ch. 16-17.

in mountains,¹⁵ for they believe like the Baptist that living with those unlike themselves is useless and harmful. They desire and practise the life of the prophets, and accomplish the mysteries of a life worthy of reverence. None of them has anything of his own, neither food nor drink nor any other bodily necessity: each considers the laws and conferences, the prophetic injunctions and the liturgical hymns and anything else which increases and perfects knowledge and holiness¹⁶ as his own riches. As the monks are fully occupied with such matters, they do not eat or drink before sunset; for they think it fitting to philosophize during the light of day and attend to bodily needs during the darkness of night.¹⁷ But they do not spend the whole night in rest and sleep restoring their bodies for work; they pass the greater part of it in prayer, vigils and sacred chants, and they listen to the reading of the Bible together with allegorical commentaries. All legislation seems to these men like a living being: audible words are its body and the hidden meaning its soul. Hence they offer in the sacrifice of praise a complete living being, made of uncorrupted and un mutilated audible words as a whole and healthy body, and of the right understanding of the mystical meaning of the words as its soul which brings it unity.¹⁸ Therefore the choirs of monks destroy the devil's power and refute the poets' fictions, the magicians' arts and the soothsayers' false predictions. They live an angelic life in a frail body, stripped of all that is of the world and crucified to it, using necessaries as little as possible and nothing at all for pleasure. It is for the sake of mortifying the body that their use of necessary things is below the mean and that they take care to go no further. And as they own practically nothing, they work with their hands to find the means to give alms to the poor.

I have extracted all this from the writing I mentioned and I have ventured to set it before you like a little mirror, so that you may see in it a small reflection of monastic life. Maidens are delighted with mirrors of different kinds, and your souls are like the maidens of Christ's chaste bride. Because you have often contemplated the beauty of your way of life in the large, clear and clean mirror of St Benedict's Rule and in the even brighter mirror of St Basil's Rule and the edifying teaching written in the Lives of the

15 In Philo (p. 125) and Eusebius, but reading 'gardens' for 'mountains'.

16 In Philo (p. 127) and Eusebius.

17 In Philo (p. 133) and Eusebius.

18 These two sentences are in Philo (p. 161) and Eusebius.

Fathers,¹⁹ it should not be tedious for you to turn your gaze for a short while to this little mirror, which has been brought, as it were, from a foreign country. And in view of the great and excellent holiness of monastic life can anyone not see how unharmonious it would be if the place where monks are kept safe, that is the monastery, were not made holy too? (For 'monastery' is derived from *monachos* and *tereo*, a Greek verb which means 'I keep safe'.) May you then devotedly take upon yourselves the sanctification of your monastery, not with murmuring but with great spiritual joy, recalling that holiness befits the house of the Lord,²⁰ a holiness which makes the prayers of all who pray there strong and acceptable to God, a holiness which weakens and puts to flight evil spirits, but receives frequent visits from the angels, a holiness which is a suitable preparation for the indwelling of the very Lord of angels. When anyone receives an earthly king in his guest-room, does he not first clean, adorn and beautify it in every way he can and as much as his strength and means allow? He does not spare work or expense until it is ready and as acceptable as all this adornment can make it. Now the King of Heaven dwells always in your monastery not only by his Divine Nature but also by the true substance of his body which he took from the Virgin, which is present in the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist; and the greatest adornment of the bodily dwelling-place of his glory is the sanctification received at its dedication. If a man gave all the wealth of his house for this adornment in honour of so great a King, he would consider it as nothing²¹ in comparison with so great a good. Farewell.

¹⁹ Cf. *Regula S. Benedicti*, cap. 73.

²⁰ *Psalms XCII*, 5.

²¹ *Cant.* VIII, 7.

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