MONASTICISM TODAY

JOHN FITZSIMONS

THERE is always a fascination about trying to discern patterns in the course of the world's history, and this perhaps as much as anything else explains the phenomenally popular, as distinct from professional, interest in Professor Toynbee's *Studies in History*. A more particular source of fascination is picking out the turning points of history. Toynbee, for instance, suggests that the decline of the West began in what had hitherto been considered the high Middle Ages, to be precise in the years immediately preceding the pontificate of Hildebrand. To be more precise he tracks it down to a small action on the part of Hildebrand before he became pope, when he hired thugs to counter-attack the thugs who were stealing the offerings of Peter's pence from the altar of St Peter's. For Toynbee this appeal to the very secular arm by the spiritual power was the tiny crack in the great structure which was eventually to have momentous consequences.

One may or may not accept this interpretation, but it is a pleasant occupation, a game that all can play. My own choice is the broken earthenware sieve of St Benedict's nurse. We know the story from the *Dialogues* of St Gregory: how St Benedict put the pieces together again in a seemingly miraculous way. Then the gossip started, and following the gossip came the crowds. They drove him out from Enfide into the wilderness, first to Subiaco and then to Monte Cassino. What debt does Western civilization not owe to that sieve? One may be tempted to dismiss it as a nice conceit, but one cannot deny that out of the three years' seclusion at Subiaco came one of the great men of history whose contribution to European civilization, through his monks, was greater than any other. Most of the nations of Europe were converted to Christianity and learned the arts of peace from men who were trained through or lived under the Rule of St Benedict.

The point does not need labouring: it is a commonplace of the history of Europe. There was Augustine in England,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0269359300025726 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Swithbert and Willibrord in the Netherlands, Boniface in Germany, Ansgar in Scandinavia. Art, culture, crafts, peace—all came as a by-product of the monastic life and were preserved, grew and had decisive influence at a time when the whole of Europe was in flux. In later ages monasticism was to provide people with a lead in agriculture too—in this connection in England one has only to think of Evesham, Glastonbury and of the abbeys in Kent.

But Benedictinism is not confined to any age, nor to any special area of the world, nor indeed is it tied to any particular form of culture or of civilization. There is an amazing example in recent years of the fertility of the Benedictine idea: the monastery at Siluvaigiri near Salem in the State of Madras. In 1950 six Indians went to the Abbey of St André in Belgium for their novitiate and two monks from St André went out to help transform the community, already founded some time before, into a Benedictine Abbey. The six Indian monks returned in 1952 and on their arrival commenced singing the Divine Office, and started an Indian novitiate. They operate a small farm and live on its produce. They wear the coarse cotton robes of the Indian wandering monks, the Sanyassis, but of a darker orange-brown colour, not the usual saffron yellow. The habit consists of two pieces, one fastened around the hips, another slung over the shoulders. The monks walk barefoot and, like Indian monks, abstain from meat, eggs, fish and spirits. There are no choir stalls or benches, and during the Divine Office they squat on the floor or stand. The language of their liturgy is Latin, but their hope is that eventually it may be Hindu. Already the community has made considerable impact on the surrounding villages and people come great distances to the monastery to obtain medicines and to learn from the agricultural methods practised by the monks.

This new initiative on the part of the sons of St Benedict recalls strongly the opening words of that perhaps over-romanticized but nonetheless remarkable essay of Newman on 'The Mission of the Benedictine Order': 'As the physical universe is sustained and carried on in dependence on certain centres of power and laws of operation, so the course of the social and political world, and of that great religious organ-

ization, the Catholic Church, is found to proceed for the most part from the presence or action of definite persons, places, events and institutions, as the visible course of the whole.' In other words, the Church, as the Body of Christ, is incarnated in space and time. It is contingent on history and on geography, and there are different moments in the human becoming of the Church, just as there are of the spirit of St Benedict. Between Evesham and Siluvaigiri stretch six centuries and half the earth's circumference, but there is a unity, the unity of organic development. The Church itself in its development is moving continually towards its goal, the total Christ, the 'complete' Christ. Its end is the pleroma, for every society and social form in which the Church incarnates itself contributes to the completion of Christ. So the Church is not merely catholic in fact, but in intention too. She must become, and must be, a complete body, reaching perfect manhood, that maturity which is proportioned to the completed growth of Christ, as St Paul expresses it.

Yet in a sense this is all a by-product of the main work; the main work of the Church and of bodies, religious orders, congregations, institutes, that God has raised up in the Church to assist in the work is that in all things God may be glorified. The Church itself in its transcendental aspect is committed to this eucharistic work unchanged and unchanging, just as is the spirit of a religious order. The essentials of the Benedictine life remain the same: the spirit of interior peace; the regular praise of God in the Divine Office; the security of a rule; the stability of a society; the *familia* of the monastic community. But their impact on the world changes, as the world itself evolves. We ourselves are living at a period of history when this evolution is much more striking than in times past.

There is no doubt that we are living in an age of transition, at a time when the old world is in a state of decay and of disintegration. Man, as Pope Pius XII has said, is in process of being invested with a new spiritual physiognomy. At such a time the Spirit, using the instruments to hand, must renew the face of the earth and breathe a soul into the new world that is emerging. As Père de Lubac has put it,

'For some time we have been assisting not merely at extraordinary events which are changing the surface of the globe, but also at an event at a deeper level which is changing something in man himself. In this universe of ours, a universe in course of psychic evolution, however fixed its essential framework since the appearance of the human race, consciousness expands at certain moments and perceives new values and new dimensions. It seems obvious that we ourselves are living through one of these moments of awakening and transformation.'

One aspect of this emergence of a new world is particularly important: individualism has run its course and there is a widespread and deeply conscious movement towards a greater appreciation of the value of community. This is more than a mere reaction away from individualism towards collectivism, and it is as pronounced in the Church as in the world. It is no accident that these last years have seen the publication of the two great encyclicals, *Mystici Corporis* and *Mediator Dei*, the former dealing with the unity of all Christians in the Mystical Body of Christ and the latter on the liturgy as a collective or common act. It is no accident that in the realm of economic production there have been experiments ranging from the crude collectivism of the kolhoz of the U.S.S.R. to the Christian co-operatives of Antigonish, Nova Scotia. These developments are all part of a pattern: the reassertion of the fact that man is a social being and that he finds his fulfilment in togetherness. Yet this world that is coming into being, and seeking community, is a post-Christian world or a world that is largely indifferent to Christianity. It is much more desolate and discouraging than was the pre-Christian world that faced the infant Church in the first age: there is now such an intolerable distance between man and man.

It may seem paradoxical to suggest that the Benedictine ideal lived and made real is of great importance to the world today, because essentially it is other-worldly. If one thing is clear about the growth and vigour of the early Benedictine communities in Northwestern Europe it is that they were in no way dependent on civilization. They did not need it, and in fact the opposite came to be true: civilization

depended on them. The only support they needed was that of God and of the good earth, and they could thrive and grow. They were based and rooted in the eternal power of God and in the most enduring of earthly things, and so were little affected by the contingent happenings around them. In fact their survival had a great deal to do with the birth and growth of Europe. But this is not the place to indulge in a nostalgic panegyric of the past—however heartening it might be.

What of today? Today men need, and need desperately, a sense of community. And, in the writer's opinion, there are three fundamental communities: the parish, the domestic family and the monastic family. They are all analogous, with the domestic family as the prototype of the other two, both of them religious and both having their bearing on the domestic family. The family is the elementary human reality. It revolves round the facts of birth, life and growth. It assures to man his everyday life: roof, food, clothes, the rudiments of knowledge and human relationship. In the Church the parish is the centre of spiritual life, and we are born into the parish family by baptism. The parish responds to the elementary and daily needs of those who belong to it: it is the environment of one's personal life, not in the world but in the Church. In it also one acquires the rudiments of Christian knowledge. Parallel to birth and baptism is religious profession whereby a monk joins a community. This community is not a theoretical ideal but a practical example of the family impregnated with the Christian faith and liturgy.

At this point it may be advisable to develop the meaning of the word 'community', and to clarify the distinction between community and society. A community is based on having things in common, and the most fundamental of these is the biological community, the bond of blood between members of a family, of all who are of the same kith and kin. A community, because it springs from the reality, whether biological or psychological, of people who have something in common, is untidy. But all the members of a community have a sense of belonging, a feeling of fellowship. And so the bond develops into something more than

the simple fact of something held in common—it becomes a living human reality by a spirit of cohesion which begins with mutual respect and develops into the love of friendship. Now most communities are also societies, i.e., besides the *fact* of a common life there is also a *desire* for a common good. The group has a purpose, and there must be an authority to direct the members towards that purpose. While allowing scope for individual initiatives and skills, this authority will direct the over-all activity so that all will co-operate together to produce the common good of the group. This picture is as valid for the monastic family as it is for the domestic family.

There is one interesting point: the more complicated the life, the more detailed and difficult becomes the task of organizing men and things towards a common end. Thus the task of the chief of a tribe of primitives organizing his tribe-community to form a society will be comparatively simple, whereas in our modern industrial society the task of government is immensely complicated. But, as though by way of compensation, the community rites, customs and traditions of a primitive tribe may be very elaborate, while in our modern urban civilization ties are weakened and men's togetherness is expressed by obedience to law rather than by a sense of community.

In a society cohesion comes from the framework of law; in a community cohesion and solidarity come from friendship, the primary product of sharing a common life.

All this is very relevant to the Benedictine life today. In the modern world man has failed to find community. Whatever cohesion he has with his fellows comes more and more from laws imposed on him from without. In other words, society (and very often this means the power and authority of the State) grows while community declines, or is almost non-existent. The family is in eclipse as a community, because it has suffered the ravages of individualism and because the Christian principles of family life have been neglected. And yet the family is the primary community, and by its cohesion, strength and dignity will stand or fall the possibility of any greater social links between men in other communities, political or economic. Nor are many

parishes communities in any true sense, but are rather haphazardly chosen geographical areas where the parishioners are passive spectators of the liturgy—which should be the common prayer—who derive their sense of belonging from money-raising activities.

The importance of the third, the monastic, community can be best illustrated by a parallel. When the Deposit of Faith needed a deep shelter in which to survive the barbarian invasions and the disintegration of the Roman Empire, the monasteries came into being. In them religion *and* civilization weathered the storm, to bring a new greatness and magnificence, a growth and development, both to the Church and to the world. Surely the monasteries have a similar role to fulfil today—and this quite independent of the world—by living the Benedictine life as the Rule lays it down, as it has grown and been modified over the centuries.

Obviously the motive for this is not the good of mankind or of civilization. Once again as a by-product of the Benedictine life the world can be reborn, for those who seek God first are the only successful re-creators of society. The virtues of the domestic family will be preserved in the monastic family under the guidance and authority of the father, the Abbot. The community worship of God which should be the sign of the living parish will be preserved in the devout and worthy rendering of the liturgy, the Mass and the Divine Office. In a sense the common meal is the sign of natural community, the domestic family; while the liturgy is the sign of the supernatural community, the parish family. The courtesies and almost sacramental character of meals in the monastic refectory are the exemplar of the love, friendship and sharing which should be found in the domestic family. The liturgy which is the practical expression of sacramental life in the parish family is the ceremonial matrix for the prayer and life of the religious family. Above all there is the example of men dwelling together in friendship—a living community. It is true that because they live under a rule they also form a society, but the monastic community is so much more. It is a school of perfection, where respect, obedience and love are the fruits of many dwelling together in one.

In a changing world, a world of division, a world that hungers for God, the cenobitical family stands apart. It is stable, because anchored in the service of God. It is united in obedience to the Abbot, and because of the charity of its members in the bond of perfection. From its beginnings monasticism has always been inspired by what is most fundamental and yet what is most creative in the life of Christ as portrayed in the Gospels. St Benedict gathered together a small group of men to serve and praise God through their work and through their prayer. Together they were to seek the kingdom of God and his justice. It has been rightly pointed out that what was added unto them was the whole civilization of Europe. And the end is not yet.

CHRIST IN THE KORAN

MAJID FAKHRY

OF the three monotheistic religions of the Semites, Islam was the last to make its appearance upon the stage of history in the third decade of the seventh century. Unlike its two predecessors, Judaism and Christianity, its appearance was attended by a series of epoch-making events which mark the eclipse of the two great empires of the time, Byzantium and Persia. And, whereas the beginnings and development of the two latter religions are surrounded by comparative obscurity, historians know almost all the significant stages in the rise and development of Islam, which forces itself, like a cataclysm, upon the attention of the civilized world by dint of military prowess. One significant feature of the new faith, as it emerges out of the dark background of Western Arabia, is that, from the start, it places itself consciously and deliberately in line with the original Abrahamanic revelation, from which our faith takes its source. Muhammad, not unlike our Lord, declares that he did not come to destroy but to fulfil, and that, like

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0269359300025726 Published online by Cambridge University Press