

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

express in concrete visible form the fundamental principles essential to christian life in all ages, in a word to give them stability. By the very fact of living apart in community from the rest of the world, not dedicated to any particular kind of work, using the ordinary means at hand to obtain his living, the monk's life was able to continue stable and unchanging in a changing and unstable world. Unaffected by wars, economic changes and social revolutions it was able to provide from age to age an abiding spectacle of a life in which all human activity was co-ordinated and directed to its proper end, humanism in fact in its truest sense.¹ The practical result was that christian civilisation, preserved in the monasteries, survived the break-up of the Roman Empire, gathered strength during the dark ages and blossomed into the complete christian culture—complete, that is, in its own limited, imperfect form—of the Middle Ages.

Now, strange and paradoxical as it may seem, St Benedict's work began, after the classical model for monks and hermits, as a flight from the world. Nor is it true to say, as some have suggested, that his ideals were later modified in practice. Rather did his work for the world follow from a strictly logical development of his original plan, *viz.* flight from the world and—his own special contribution—a stabilising of this condition. Henceforth the 'workshop' where the monk is to labour at the 'spiritual craft' is 'the cloister of the monastery, and stability in the community'.²

Thus, whether at best the monk find his life in the monastery what St Benedict declared it his intention to make it, 'a school of the Lord's service', or whether at worst it should prove to be a crucifixion, he will never, having solemnly vowed stability, be tempted either in the one case to run away from school, or in the other to come down from the cross. And the point, be it noted, where the monk finds God whom he has come to seek, the gateway to the unseen world, is the Work of God, the liturgy, the whole complex of Mass—Sacraments—Office. Hence the central position of the Work of God to which 'nothing is to be preferred'³, and the *conversio morum* (or *conversatio morum*) is, for St Benedict, a progressively deeper and fuller participation through this work of God in, at one and the same time, the 'sufferings of Christ' and the 'participation of his kingdom'.⁴

It is thus precisely this principle of stability which has given to

¹ For a masterly exposition of this aspect cf. *Saints for Civilisation*, Margaret Monro (Longmans).

² Rule of St Benedict, ch. iv (quotations are from Abbot Hunter-Blair's translation).

³ *ibid.*, ch. xliii.

⁴ *ibid.*, prologue.

Benedictine monastic life its essential character: the monk flies from the world and turns (*conversio*) to God; it remains for stability to keep him firm in his purpose, his face turned towards God and the world of the spirit—*oculi mei semper ad Dominum; in te cantatio mea semper*. We find in consequence a whole series of regulations to render this effective, to make the monk's break with the world permanent and stable, and to centre all his life and interest inside the enclosure: the enclosure of the monastery and the 'wise old man' at the gate; it is to be as far as possible self-supporting and so independent and unaffected by wars, by international, social and economic crises, by financial fluctuations, or even by the vagaries of anti-clerical governments. So, it is hoped, the monks will have no excuse for wandering abroad 'for this is by no means expedient for their souls'.⁵ The monk's break with the world and the direction of his interest inwards is further emphasised by the prohibition regarding the reception of letters and presents; moreover, he may not eat outside, if he is to return the same day, and must not even speak of what he has seen outside.

The question too of the monk's daily work will be very important, since he is subject to the common lot of mankind of earning his bread in the sweat of his brow. Men vary considerably in temperament and ability—no special qualifications in this respect are required—so there will be need for such abundance and variety of work as to suit every type of character. In the self-supporting monastery which St Benedict considered necessary for stability such variety will always exist. Stability may, however, be open to attack from another angle.

It is inevitable that one particular kind of work, or one aspect of the life, should be developed more than others. There is in consequence always present the danger of such work developing to such an extent as to obscure everything else, becoming first the most important work or activity and, finally, the exclusive work or *raison d'être* of the monastery. Eventually it tends to become the focus of the whole life and interest of the community; the deciding factor on all matters of policy is: How will it affect this particular work? The monastery has in effect come back to the world it professed to leave and is fulfilling in the world a particular, specialised work like that of modern 'active' congregations, to use the current terminology. It may even be, has in fact happened, that work outside the monastery, undertaken in the first instance as a duty of charity, may come to be regarded as the actual purpose and end of the community, and monastic life, life inside the monas-

⁵ *ibid.*, ch. lxvi.

tery such as we have described, be considered something of a novelty and an innovation.

So, in the course of their history, there has been a danger of monasteries becoming at various periods great agricultural centres, houses of studies, great public schools, centres of liturgical research, missionary centres, instead of combining in their organisation a cross section of these and other activities. The effect on the individual monk, vowed to stability in his search for God and found unsuited to the particular work engaged in, is that he is either left in idleness, 'an enemy to the soul' ⁶, or returned to the world he had left. The periodic reforms in the monastic order have in general consisted in a reaction against some such tendency, usually, in an attempt to redress the balance, accompanied by an over-emphasis in the opposite direction.

The monk then leaves the world in order to seek God and his kingdom. He is the child of no particular age, country or culture, equally at home in the late Roman Empire, the dark ages, the middle ages, the modern age and the age still to come, absorbing all that is good in his environment, exercising, apart from the rest of the world, all the basic activities of man in proportion as they serve his purpose. The one guiding principle in all this is simply the establishment of stability in his search for God.

The paradox, therefore, would seem to be that the very perfection of the manner in which St Benedict fled from the world and, by stability, subjected himself to the process of 'growing up in Christ' by a life of communion with God effected primarily through the Church's liturgy, that this was precisely the measure of his influence on the world of his time. Nor, for that matter, is it really a paradox; rather will it be seen on closer investigation to be the working of a principle of universal validity, that in order to exert an effective influence on the world it is necessary to step aside from it; that in order to attain to reality it is necessary to relinquish for a time that which appears to be most real. It is a truth that is repeatedly re-discovered. Was there not a Greek philosopher who declared that, given a fulcrum and a spot outside the earth on which to rest it, he would undertake to move the globe from its place? Readers of Hugh Dormer's *Diaries*, on the other hand, may remember his first realisation of the fact that you often reach things, in this life, only by walking away from them.

The reason for the influence thus exerted is obvious. Such a one is in direct contact with the source and origin of all life, energy and power; a channel of communication is set up whereby grace is

⁶ *ibid.*, ch. xlviii.

⁷ Eph. iv, 15.

transfused through a sickly and dying world. Nor, if the true end is being pursued faithfully, are there ever wanting occasions for direct intervention in human affairs, cases, that is, where charity demands such intervention. Yet the principle remains: stability, persevering in the monastery until death.

And what, the weary reader may well ask at this stage, has all this to do with his own personal, private life of the spirit? The answer is, as already suggested, that the principle of stability is of universal application. The monk vows to do intensively, using the same ordinary means, what every Christian is obliged to do in his own degree. Complete stability is indeed an attribute of God alone:

*Rerum, Deus, tenax vigor,
Immotus in te permanens . . .*

sings the Church every day at the afternoon hour, when the sun has already begun to decline:

O Strength and Stay upholding all creation,
Who ever dost thyself unmoved abide . . .

Still it does seem to be a fact of experience, of which St Benedict was an outstanding example, that the closer man draws to the *Primum Movens Immobile* the more nearly does his mode of operation approach the divine. By withdrawing within himself to apparent immobility he discovers the hidden source of the most intense activity, activity which normally remains in the spiritual, invisible sphere, but may at times issue in work that is seen to be of far-reaching consequences in the external world.

Such complete immobility as is here attributed to God is clearly not possible for man. The contemplative, who flies from the world and seeks to keep his eyes fixed always on the Lord, does not in fact succeed in doing so perfectly. The artist, the poet or the craftsman, at the very moment of his inspiration, must turn his eyes from the vision in order to embody it in his material, must pass from the spiritual to the material, from the inner to the outer world. Just as, in the monastic order as a whole, there is always present this tendency outward already noticed, and so a tension is set up between it and the necessity of directness and singleness of vision, so is it equally with the individual monk. Moreover the very necessity of earning his living will make this in some degree inevitable. The layman too is called to the same goal and by the same method; the flight of the monk is simply an intensive degree of that renunciation of the world binding every Christian.

For man then there must always be an alternation of rest and movement, sleeping and waking, death and life, the *arsis* and *thesis*, to use a different metaphor, of the marching warrior and the dancing

child, of the heart-beat and of the rhythmic verse, the round of the seasons, night and day, growth and decay. In his progress he must constantly pause for a new access of life before a further forward movement. There must be always this alternation, but it is in the nature of man, particularly of western man, to tend naturally outwards to action and to neglect the inner pause which alone can give ordered energy and direction to his activity. In consequence he has continually to remind himself of the need of this.

Similarly in the larger world with its longer rhythm; after an expenditure of energy outward there is a return inward to the source for a new accumulation of life and energy. Too often, unfortunately, here as well there is too great an expenditure of energy, of activity, in one particular direction, the direction varying at different periods, too great an immersion in the things of the external world and a wanton squandering of spiritual force through neglect of the inward vision. We have already noted in passing the recurrence of this in the monastic order, the continual tendency outward, away from the centre, described as, in its essence, a weakening of stability, continually corrected by its periodic reforms, characterised by a return to the centre away from the outside world and a re-awakening of its original native spirit. On a still larger scale it is seen in the rise of cultures and civilisations: their decline and, even before it becomes evident to any but a few of those then living that the force of the old is already spent, a movement inward to its sources, a re-awakening, a flight from the contemporary world to renew its youth at the fount of the eternal, unseen, unchangeable, to draw there life for the coming age, to give form and spirit to the chaos of what, gradually emptied of the informing spirit, has become almost mere matter, void and empty.

It is almost a commonplace today to say that our present civilisation is in the final stages of dissolution; it has been affirmed so long and in so many different ways. The signs however of the rebirth are already evident for those who have eyes to see them. The decree on frequent Communion, the liturgical revival and the development of the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ which is so closely bound up with it, the social encyclicals, the revived interest in contemplative prayer and the writings of the mystics, the revival of the monastic order during the past fifty years by the founding of new communities and the gradual return to monastic life of the older ones, the rapid expansion of the other contemplative orders such as the Carmelites. All these and many other signs point to a revival of the life of the spirit at its source, to a flight from the world, a turning inward to the centre where God, the source of all life and of all activity remains ever motionless in himself, a belated

response to the continually-repeated cry of the Spirit: *Vacate et videte quia ego sum Deus*—Be still and see that I am God (Ps. 45).

And the result, if we are to believe those qualified to give an opinion, may well be the assimilation and spiritualising of all the material progress of the past five hundred years, with the resulting effect of a Christian civilisation on a higher level than has yet been attained, a culture more truly spiritual, yet taking to itself and transforming material elements formerly opposed to it. The material development, which has advanced so enormously and outstripped the moral power to control it, will be subdued from within, not by force from without. What we are witnessing, they suggest in effect, is nothing less than a new realisation of the need of stability, of that constant contact with the unseen attainable only by some measure of flight from the visible world, the beginning of the *arsis* of the motion, the suspension of the foot, the beginning of a momentary pause—momentary indeed when viewed against the background of eternity—before the motion forward, the cessation from activity which will itself give rise to the more intense activity of the Spirit renewing the face of the earth. It was presumably in this spirit that recently an abbot of exceptionally wide knowledge and understanding of present tendencies exhorted his monks on his death-bed: *Tenete traditiones*—(Stand fast and) hold the traditions⁸, that our age needed nothing new; the inference presumably being that the principles required for the birth of a new world, the higher, more deeply spiritual civilisation of the future, are precisely those which, at the break-up of the Graeco-Roman world, gave rise to the civilisation of the middle ages, the principles on which, through two world-wars, he had so faithfully built up his own community.

In an attempt at last to suggest the application of all this to the private lives of those who are not Benedictines: the primary need of our age is a return to the contemplative life. This is largely to be brought about most effectively by the formation of a large number of small units or 'cells' of intensely Christian life, of that contemplative life in the traditional, wide sense which is the aim of monastic life, units of individuals and, better still, of families and groups of families. On all who are conscious of the deeper stirrings of the Spirit in the world today there lies an obligation of corresponding with it to the extent of their ability. The centre of their lives too, as of that of the monastic community, will be what the Popes have repeatedly stressed as 'the primary and indispensable source of the true Christian spirit', the liturgy of the Church. In order, however, to enter completely into the life of the Church and to receive its full

⁸ 2 Thess. ii, 14.

effects there is necessary today for most men a veritable flight from the world comparable in its own degree to that of the monk, and the establishment of a natural stability, order and rhythm as the foundation of the supernatural structure. Apart too from its personal and hidden effects, such a life serves as a re-affirmation of the permanent stable necessity of a constant turning from the world to God in public as well as private life, not a flight, that is a desertion, as rats desert a sinking ship, but a flight to the source whence alone new life and energy can be drawn for a dying world, to find for it 'a fountain of water springing up into life everlasting'.⁹

To suggest in detail the manner in which this is to be effected by the individual would be beyond the scope of this article. This must, in any case, be dictated largely by already-existing obligations and circumstances. In general, however, it must consist in a renewal of the inner life by as complete a withdrawal from active life as is compatible with the duties of one's state. This may not necessarily include a withdrawal from active life or even from the conduct of public affairs when there is a particular obligation. In this respect, however, it must be remembered that it is on the rarest occasions only that any individual can be described as indispensable and that, on the other hand, men ready and willing to assume office will always be with us. Such a life will include a ruthless pruning away of all that is superfluous—and it is surprising how much can be profitably cut off—leaving the soul as far as possible free and unhindered by external things to attend to its primary business, a readiness, in fact, if called upon, to give up everything.

The extent to which the step of full physical flight is possible is qualified still more by existing obligations and circumstances, but where it can be prudently taken there can be no doubt of its desirability. It may call for a certain amount of heroism; it will certainly require a strong faith; but what is true of earthly conquests is still more true of the spiritual world, that 'the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence and the violent bear it away'.¹⁰

Prudence is, no doubt, the queen of the virtues, but it is to be doubted if the folly of the cross, for instance, appeared particularly prudent to all but a small minority. Men too often give their decision after the event. The fact is that the healthy development of the life of the spirit presupposes normally certain natural physical conditions, hence the repeated petition of the Church for health both of soul and body. Normally—we say 'normally' since there are no bounds to grace and no limits to the extent to which good can be brought out of evil—still, normally a full, healthy spiritual

⁹ John, iv, 14.

¹⁰ Matt. xi, 12.

development requires as its foundation the normal, natural rhythm of life, a life lived, that is, in contact with nature itself, in which all the elements essential to human life, the seasons of the year, seed-time and harvest, the production of food, clothing and shelter and all the basic needs of mankind are seen on a sufficiently small scale to be grasped as a whole, and their relative values, their place in God's scheme of things and their natural inter-dependence duly appreciated. It presupposes too a full family life, and such a life in its perfection is one in which the centre of the life, its means of livelihood, is in the home itself or in its immediate vicinity. Only so will men, generally speaking, come to see the things of the natural world as a reflection in time of the spiritual realities of the unseen, unchanging world. All this is, to say the least, extremely difficult in the artificial conditions of our large industrial cities and without a certain measure of economic stability.

Families and individuals desiring such a deeper, fuller Christian life and with the courage to attempt it will normally require assistance and guidance. Here religious communities, especially those with a full liturgical life and of these particularly those that combine with it a full, self-supporting community life, could do a great service by assisting such groups of families to settle and earn a living in their orbit, perhaps as an extension of the oblate or third order system. What better form of Catholic action, too, could there be for our Catholic land-owners and business men than the formation of such groups, the establishment of small agricultural and industrial units, in pleasant country, centred around a dignified church with as full a liturgical life as possible?

It was on familiar lines—'infiltration' seems to be the current military term—that England in Saxon times was regained for the Faith and was able in addition to carry the Faith to great stretches of the Continent. The application of this to foreign missions today in, for instance, the African continent, is obvious. There the spade-work has been done, the still more vital operation of 'growing into' Christianity still remains. It will be done only by a gradual building-up and development from within of the traditional native culture rather than by the imposition from without of a foreign, vitiated European civilisation.

Whether this revival of the contemplative life, of which we are witnessing the beginnings, is, as suggested, simply the gathering of spiritual force for a new blossoming of Christian culture, or is rather an instinctive drawing of the blood to the heart in face of the last great struggle which is to herald the 'new heaven and new earth' of the Apocalypse we can only conjecture. It seems likely in

any case, as M. Maritain has suggested¹¹, that we have not yet seen the worst that the forces of materialism can do, that they have not yet completed their course. The necessity then is urgent of establishing now, firm and stable, the foundations of whatever edifice is to rise and, for those who have the courage and generosity to respond, the way is clear.

‘WITH NATIVE HONOUR CLAD’

BY

BEDE BAILEY, O.P.

POPE PIUS XII, in his Encyclical Letter *Fulgens Radiatur*¹ written to honour the fourteenth centenary of the death of St Benedict, invites ‘all classes of society’ to turn again to the Holy Rule that there they may find ‘the sacred principles of religion and the standards of life which are the most secure and most stable foundations of human society’.

It is clear that the Pope had a special reason for stressing the civilising and unifying effects of St Benedict’s work. All men are now searching for a solid foundation on which to rebuild the unity of Europe. It is an appropriate moment, then, to remind us of the way in which Europe was first united in the spirit of Christ. ‘Not only England, Gaul, the Low Countries, Friesland, Denmark, Germany and Scandinavia, but also many Slavonic lands boast of their conversion by those monks, whom they consider their glory and reverence as founders of their civilisation.’ It is true that now there are many other workers in the service of our Lord who have not St Benedict for their father and who follow other Rules. But the Pope asks all Christians, ‘beset and perturbed amid so much grave material and moral destruction, dangers and disasters, to turn to him for necessary and timely remedies’.

It is particularly fitting that the Catholics of England should recognise the great debt that we owe to the Benedictines. Not only was the Faith brought here by St Augustine and his companions, monks trained according to the Rule of St Benedict, but, since that first coming, the Black Monks have been at the heart of English Catholic life, and their history is the most ancient of English histories, beside which the oldest of our great families are but parvenus. The names of Bede and Cuthbert were revered before the reign of Alfred, and it is now a thousand years since St Dunstan of Canter-

¹¹ *True Humanism* (Geoffrey Bles).

¹ The translation that is used is that printed in *Pax* for Summer and Autumn, 1947.