**The World of the Cloister**

A perennial question in Christianity is which is the better way of living a good Christian life- by renouncing the world or remaining in the world. Looking to the Gospels the answer is not clear-cut as the teaching of Jesus is set within actual human situations (*ad personam*) and the answer differs accordingly. Neither is it clear from the Epistle writers as again the context is *ad personam*. This article examines the world of the cloister from when it emerged in England and Wales until the Reformation when it was all swept away in almost the blink of an eye.

**The Early Medieval Era**

In the original etymological sense monks were people who lived alone as Anchorites in the Egyptian desert. However, groups of anchorites soon began to live in small communities or *coenobi*. Both St Augustine of Hippo and St John Cassian gave *coenobi* brief mentions although in St Augustine's case he provided a blueprint for his episcopal household and which, much later gave the Augustinian Canons the Rule which they followed. It was around AD 530 that St Benedict wrote his "little Rule" influenced by an earlier document by "the Master" and also Cassian[1]. The little Rule which is still influencing monasticism in the twenty-first century is centred on the vows of Obedience, Stability and *Conversatio morum* which means being faithful to the monastic way, namely the single-hearted quest for God. This also encompasses the other two traditional vows most monks take - chastity and poverty. Under the rule the Benedictine spends most of the day in silence: occupied by the worship of God in the eightfold Daily Office and Mass, in private meditation or spiritual reading, in manual labour supporting the community, and in eating and sleeping. Each community was envisaged by Benedict to be a family under an Abbot (from the Aramaic *abba* the term Jesus used when addressing his Father) and each foundation was independent though belonging to the wider confederation viz. the wider family. It may seem a monotonous life, but it is that routine which makes the monastic life possible. As time went on it was felt that patrons, who had given land and money to build the monasteries were interfering with how they were run and often appointing family members as Abbots. To some, like Abbot Berno of Baume, Benedictine monasticism needed to return to its primitive state, and he founded the Cluniac Order in order to achieve this. Similarly, Stephen Harding based his Cistercian Order on a literal reading of St Benedict's Rule, but it was St Bernard of Clairvaux who led the Order to become the most influential Order of the C12th.

It was in the late sixth century that the Benedictine Rule arrived in England with the arrival of St Augustine of Canterbury, and both St Wilfrid of York and Hexham and St Benedict Biscop of Jarrow and Monkswearmouth paid it particular respect. It would also significantly shape the way Christianity operated in medieval Britain. However, there was another monastic tradition, not influenced by Benedict, already flourishing in Western Britain. This was Celtic monasticism, which had possibly originated in Gaul with which there were shared trading routes. It was a movement that was followed with different degrees of asceticism, the most extreme degree being that postulated by St David whose monks refused to eat meat or travel on horseback, practised extreme fasting and laid great emphasis on manual labour. Although under monastic discipline, its religious lived together communally and went out preaching and teaching and taking the sacraments to the laity. They also had a number of holy places usually on the far perimeter of their territory to which they would retreat for times of solitude and making atonement for

[1] Brookes C. *The Age of the Cloister* [Sutton, 2004] 44ff

perceived sins. Lindisfarne was probably one of the most famous religious houses in England during this period. Under St Aidan its founder, it trained many English youths into brothers including SS Cedd and Chad, blood brothers as well as monastic brothers who left Lindisfarne to found priories in Northumbria and Mercia. Aidan was conscious of the place for women in the church also, and in AD648 summoned Hilda, great niece of King Edwin to preside over a small convent on the north bank of the River Wear. In 469 she moved to Hartlepool to found another house and in AD 657 she founded a double monastery at Whitby where in 664 she summoned church leaders to a Synod to decide the dating of Easter. Hilda, like many high-born women found herself provided with a vocation without an opportunity to decline. But it did mean they achieved a distinction that probably would not have happened if they stayed in the secular world. Younger sons of high-born status such as Bede, also found themselves provided with a vocation they had not asked for, but Bede, like Hilda made a success of it. By 735 when he died religious life had developed with monasteries for men and double houses. But Bede deplored the existence of what he called "fraudulent monasteries", monasteries set up by unscrupulous noblemen in an attempt to avoid military service or taxation. It was after 664 and the Synod of Whitby that the Benedictine Rule was adopted in most English Celtic monasteries though its spread was limited in what became known as the Celtic fringe. But a flourishing monastic tradition was about to be swept away in much of the country by Viking incursions which targeted monasteries for their wealth. Lindisfarne was the first to be targeted in 793 and throughout the C9th others followed. There had also grown a preference by the wealthy for secular clergy who were less expensive and thought to serve the requirements of the laity better. It was only in the middle of the C10th that kings became open to commit funds to found religious houses once more.

The monastic revival in the second half of the C10th was associated with three men: Dunstan (c909-988), Aethelwold (c912-984) and Oswald (d.992). Dunstan was appointed Abbot of Glastonbury in 943 where he re-formed a community following the Rule of St. Benedict. He became bishop of Worcester in 957 later adding the bishopric of London and Archbishopic of Canterbury which he ran in conjunction with each other. Aethelwold was made Abbot of Abingdon which was then served by secular clergy. He rebuilt the church and cloister and reintroduced St Benedict's Rule. In 963 he was made Bishop of Winchester, and a year later in connivance with the King, Edgar, he expelled the secular priests at both the old and new Minsters, replacing them with monks from Abingdon. Over the next few years, he refounded another seven monasteries and also a nunnery at Winchester. Oswald, who had trained at Fleury-sur-Loire and seen firsthand the reformed continental monasticism was Abbot at Westbury on Trym before moving to Ramsey. In AD961 he succeeded Dunstan as bishop of Worcester and in 972 also became Archbishop of York, holding both Sees jointly until his death in 992. With three strong monastic bishops overseeing most of the country, Edgar, King of Mercia and Northumbria and from AD959 king of all England, was able to press ahead with reform of the church including the establishment of a uniform monastic observance common to all England and embodied in *Regularis Concordia,* a supplement to the Rule of St Benedict compiled by Aethelwold and promulgated in the Council of Winchester which was held around 973. Between them, these three men were able to train up a second generation of monks in Southern and Central England, although the revival in the North did not begin until after the Norman Conquest. However, the monastic revival of the C10th helped make the later Anglo-Saxon period one of high Christian cultural achievement where the Arts flourished. Indeed, the years between 966-1066 were known as the Golden Age of Anglo–Saxon art and book painting. Sadly, in Northumbria, the second

Danish invasion of c978 saw all the centres destroyed although they flourished in the South and included producing metalwork, sculpture and a vigorous vernacular literature. In 1042 Edward the Confessor became king. Having lived in exile in Normandy for twenty-five years, he was a Norman sympathiser. He appointed secular priests to the episcopate rather than monks although the monastic Wulstan, bishop of Worcester 1062- 1095 served up to the time of William Rufus. There was some decline however, in monastic fervour in the late Anglo-Saxon period.

**The Late Medieval Period**

Following the Conquest, there was a flurry of new monastic foundations endowed by Norman knights from William himself downwards. The battle of Hastings was fought, on the Norman side, under a papally blessed banner which William had demanded from the papal legate. But the taking of Christian blood demanded penance and endowing a religious foundation was one way that penance could be paid. But as the century progressed the increase in new foundations continued. William and his heirs continued the tradition of their Anglo-Saxon predecessors in supporting and endowing the great Benedictine houses in existence such as Westminster and they also established new foundations such as William I establishing an Abbey at Battle, where the battle of Hastings actually took place. As happened in Anglo-Saxon times the followers of a feudal Lord or King would also endow or build new foundations. There was an attempt by Lanfranc, Archbishop of Canterbury, to bring English houses into line with reformed continental houses, but his Constitution, which he designed originally for Christchurch Canterbury was not generally adopted and most English houses remained autonomous until the development of Benedictine general chapters in the C13th. Some of the English houses were directly founded from the great French houses such as Bec or Fleury-sur-Loire and were later known as *alien priories*. Others were established as priories dependent on a mother house in England such as Tynemouth which was a daughter of St Alban's Abbey.

In the C12th there emerged several new Monastic Orders of which some made their way from the continent to England. The most important of these was the Cistercian Order, which had been founded by an Englishman Stephen Harding at Citeaux in 1097, though it struggled until Bernard of Clairvaux intervened and made it the most successful Order of the twelfth century. Harding had left his monastery in Sherborne and travelled to France in search of a more austere life. His *Carta Caritatis* was the constitutional foundation of the Cistercian Order -a succinct and simple statement of the basic arrangements of Cistercian life. Based on the Rule of St Benedict, which was interpreted literally, it removed the customs that had become attached to it but also drew from the hermit tradition that prayer and spiritual reading should have greater importance in the daily round. The Cistercians were attractive to patrons as they were relatively cheap to establish since they would not accept any property that was already developed and where no feudal dues payable. They requested "desert" land on which they could live in peace. Their buildings were austere shunning the elaborate ornamentation of Romanesque architecture. In short, the Cistercians tried to live a life that was austere, secluded and self sufficient as well as deeply spiritual. The first Cistercian house in England was founded in 1128 at Waverley in Surrey, a daughter house of L'Aumone in France. The Cistercian Order was particularly successful amongst the Welsh for three reasons: it was not associated in Welsh minds with English conquest; secondly the physical landscape with its large deserted places and remote valleys were exactly what the Order searched out and finally its practice of manual work, austere discipline and rigorous self discipline were very similar ideals of the monastic life of the Celtic saints.

Additionally, the adoption of pastoral ways of farming, particularly keeping sheep, meant that the Cistercians fitted more or less smoothly into the prevalent agrarian patterns in Wales. (See also article on St Aelred and the Cistercians.)

During the twelfth century another form of religious life grew increasingly popular and that was the Augustinian Canons. It was a time of much debate about the religious and intellectual life especially about the nature of the *via Apostolica*. The traditional view of all monks especially the Benedictines was that their life was apostolic, yet one of the main roles of the apostles was to preach and evangelise, in other words they were missionary figures. Large numbers of churches were given to the monks, which they were expected to serve in return for the tithe payment. Yet many felt the monastic life should be angelic not apostolic – a life of prayer not activity and the biblical teaching about Martha and Mary was often cited. A clear distinction between the active and the contemplative life was wanted. In England, Anselm, who became Archbishop of Canterbury in 1093 fostered the growth of canons to rescue the monks from the chores of Martha and the secular clergy from what he saw as their lax lifestyle by drawing them into an Institute whose base was St Augustine's Rule. (although it would be 1244 in Tuscany before the Order of St Augustine was given papal approval).

However, the Rule of St Augustine changed the face of the monastic world and prospered for three reasons. Firstly, the prestige of Augustine's name, secondly its combination of spiritual fervour, practical sense and inherent vagueness which allowed differing customs and varying ways of life to be attached to it. Finally, it seemed eventually to its adherents that the Augustinian Rule was closer to the *Via Apostolica* than the Benedictine Rule. Which was the better way to follow was subject to much debate, but Anselm clearly felt that the canons were a very useful and valid alternative in the religious life. Others agreed, for Augustine's Rule became the basis for the Austin Canons, the Premonstratensions, who opened their first English house in 1133 and in the C13th the Dominicans and the Austin Friars. In England, many of the earlier houses of canons were founded by converting the chapters of old churches into colleges of canons, but the first great English houses were all in towns such as Holy Trinity within Aldgate. This was founded by Queen Matilda around 1107. She was also the chief patron of the Order in England and inspired her husband King Henry I to be a benefactor. In 1135, when Stephen seized the throne there were around sixty-five houses and over one hundred by 1154 when Henry II became king.

Many early houses were endowed with churches, which the canons were expected to serve, but many were founded in conjunction with hospitals to serve the poor, the sick and the needy. The feudal Lords clearly wished to see effective pastoral care in the expanding towns but were equally pleased to find a cheap form of endowment to enable it to happen. Likewise, the conversion of a large church or group of churches in a town into an Augustinian priory endowed with churches concentrated resources of no use to a secular Lord and could be achieved on a modest scale.

In 1178, the first Carthusian house was founded in England at Witham in Somerset. This was a direct result of the murder of Thomas Beckett in 1164 of which the King, Henry II was implicated as an accomplice. In 1172 he agreed to perform as penance a three-year crusade either in Spain against the Moors or the Holy Land. In 1175 the Pope commuted the sentence to the foundation of three religious houses. In order to fulfil this Henry changed the college of secular canons at Waltham into a house of Canons Regular, in Ambresley, he replaced the nuns with French nuns from Fontevrault and in Witham he decided to found a Carthusian house as representative of the most austere of monastic orders. Like the Cistercians the Carthusian monks required an isolated site with no feudal arrangements or peasant farmers to be dealt with. Their monasteries were

single cells around a great cloister where the monks lived at hermits, though meeting together for the Offices. As with the Cistercians they also farmed the land they owned using conversi or lay brothers.[2]

Although not of the Cloister, there was another form of religious life that sprang up in the C13th and that is the mendicant life or wandering preachers and teachers. Commonly known as Friars, these men belonged to one of two Orders the Franciscans who were founded in Italy (1210) and the Dominicans who were founded in Spain (1216). Just as the c12th could be considered the Age of the monk and canon, the C13th could be considered the age of the Friar. Francis found his vocation by a personal call to follow the way of the disciples living in poverty and simplicity. However, he rejected the call of the cloister and began to gather followers and compile his Rule. In 1210 he was given informal and verbal approval which was enshrined by a Papal Bull in 1223. There was a monastic element in that they took the vows of chastity, obedience and poverty and lived together in simple communities, but there was also an apostolic element modelled on the way of life preached by Jesus to go out in twos without money or nonessential possessions. therefore, the Franciscan Order was dedicated to wandering and a poverty more complete than had hitherto been tried. Although some of the friars preached, many were not considered fitted for that task but worked among the poor in particular and taught Christianity by example.

Dominic De Guzman a Castilian founded his Order in France and given papal approval in 1216. Unlike Francis, who was a layman, Dominic was a professed Augustinian Canon working in one of the hardest mission fields in Europe, that of the Cathar heretics in Southern France. Like Francis he formed a group of followers and took steps to have it recognised as an Order, but Papal politics meant it was not recognised until 1216. The Dominicans were founded to wander but to preach the Gospel in the vernacular. He imposed a much more orderly structure than the loose knit Franciscan structure. The basis of Dominican way of life was active in that they went out preaching as did the Augustinian Canons but contemplative in their study prayer and meditation which came from the Premonstratension Order. As Brooke puts it "the ascetic monastic tradition of the C12th still lived and reigned but adapted to suit the practical needs of an Order of Preachers".

The relationship between Regular and Mendicant Orders was complex. The Friars provided a vocation for those who wished to wander and preach whilst having the opportunity to live the life of a Regular and it took away from the Cistercians the initiative that they had throughout the C12th. But things were never quite the same in the later Medieval period. The world had changed; the rise of Islam and Byzantine empires led to feelings of insecurity especially in the C14th when the Black Death decimated populations throughout Europe. The Hundred Years War between England and France was another factor in the insecurity people were feeling. Climate change in the shape of the earth cooling together with intermittent famines also led to changes in England's economy – for example it was no longer possible to grow vines for making wine. Outwardly even the monastic Orders appeared to be failing with losses of vocation, but this needs to be measured against the fall in population noted above. By 1500, in both England and Wales the charitable functions of the abbeys were very diminished in scale and even the Friars were more likely to be found in houses and less concerned about itinerant preaching. As the reign of Henry VIII began it

[2] Coppack, G and Aston M *God's Poor Men The Carthusian in Britain* (Tempus 2002)

seemed as if the religious orders were content to live a comfortable life in the Houses. Neither Religious or Mendicant seemed to want or be able to offer a conspicuous example to the laity.

**Dr Margaret Turnham**

**Sources**


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