

# **A Sketch of Benedictine History**

John J. O'Hagan

## Monasticism as a Religious Phenomenon

Monasticism as a religious phenomenon has its earliest root in India, perhaps 2500 years before the birth of Christ. Among the Hindus, the laws of Manu provide that, after the rearing a family, members of the three upper castes may retire to a hermit life and seek truth in contemplation. Buddha created a monastic order, for which he drew up a set of rules that contain many analogies with the rules that were later instituted by Christian religious orders. Among the Greeks, the members of the Orphic brotherhood and the followers of Pythagoras showed marked tendencies toward the practice of monasticism. These monastics, like the early monastics of all faiths, were almost exclusively individual ascetics who might at the most take a young aspirant into their tutelage for a number of years. There was no communal aspect to their monasticism and no formal organization or structure to their lives. In all major religions with a monastic tradition, monasticism seems to have developed as individual holy men so impressed the community at large that a movement began to emulate their lives in a group. As far as can be determined, no monastic tradition has ever sprung fully formed from the desert floor. This is significant because it illustrates the point that despite the apparent other-worldliness of monastic life, it is a dynamic experience that does, in fact, change and adapt to the culture it represents. As history shows, change is often thrust upon monasticism by very negative circumstances.

The traditional reading of the history of monasticism, and of Western Monasticism in particular, is a story of the world's foibles and of constantly re-occurring cycles. Very "down" times, with the loss of the monastic ideal, are invariably followed by very "up" times, with the best of monastic accomplishments adding much to the world and our culture. An optimistic hope would be that our current era is one on the cusp of an "up" cycle, and that the immediate future will be one of great opportunity and great challenge for those attached either formally or informally to a monastic life style.

## Jewish Monasticism

Approximately 200 years before the birth of Christ, Judaism began to develop monastic sects. The most famous of these were the Essenes, who are thought to be identical or associated with the Qumran sectarians whose library was discovered in 1947 and gave the world the Dead Sea Scrolls. Serious biblical scholars suggest that John the Baptist may have been a member of the Essenes. For the most part, the Essenes were religiously fervent men, rebelling against what they saw as the corrupting influences of Roman rule and Greek thought. The Essenes (and other less well known Jewish sects) founded companies of dedicated members removed and isolated from the general populace. These companies were the beginnings of a monastic life that was organized and communal. With the founding of these companies, the Essenes changed monastic life from individual ascetics living eremitic (solitary) lives, to groups of individuals living a cenobitic (communal) life. Rules of behavior, prayer and structure of the community were formalized. Work filled the day and 1/3 of the night was to be devoted to study and meditation.

## The Desert Fathers

Christian monasticism seems to have emerged independently of Jewish and other monastic antecedents. The earliest Christian monastic practitioners were probably women, who consecrated their lives to Christ, but lived in towns with their families, alone, in groups, or with a member of the clergy. St. Anthony of Egypt (251-356) has been regarded as the founder of monasticism, but he was certainly not the first of the "desert fathers," although to this day he remains the most famous. Anthony, and others like him, while they had occasion to gain a certain fame and to preach to large gatherings, lived as hermits. Other holy men of the same time were developing monastic communities with structure and rules. One of Anthony's disciples, St. Ammun established a community where monks lived in individual cells around a church where they gathered on Sunday. Another, St. Macarius, founded a monastery at Scete in Egypt that is still existent today. St. Pachomius (c. 290-346) founded and led a large group of monastic communities at Tabennisi in the Thebaid Desert near the Nile River. His confederation included two women's communities.

St. Martin of Tours (336-399) and St. Augustine (354- 430) are two early church fathers who are not usually remembered as monastics. However, St. Martin was an influential exponent of monasticism in Europe, and Augustine is the author of the oldest monastic rules surviving in Latin.<sup>1</sup> John Cassian (c. 360-after 430) spent years in the Eastern Mediterranean as a monk first in Bethlehem and then in Egypt. He was much influenced by the theologian monk, Evagrius Ponticus. After serving as a deacon at Constantinople and an emissary of St. John Chrysostom to Pope Innocent I, Cassian settled in the West. About 415 he established two monasteries near Marseilles. There he wrote his two very influential books: *The Institutes and Conferences*, which aimed to bring the wisdom of the Eastern monks to the Latin speaking West. Cassian's writings had great influence on the Rule of the Master and on St. Benedict, who recommends his writings.

## St. Benedict

Benedict of Nursia was born into a wealthy family and a world of turmoil, war and destruction around 480. The last remnants of Roman imperial power were in a death struggle with northern invaders for control of the Italian peninsula. The countryside, the populace and even the monasteries were laid waste in this struggle. As a young man he was sent to Rome to study. His stay in Rome disillusioned him to the ways of the world, and he fled and settled in a cave at Subiaco . Although he lived a solitary life, he became known to the locals and in particular to a priest who visited him and kept him current on church affairs. When the superior of a local monastery died, Benedict was asked to serve in that position. That experience almost ended in disaster when the monks tried to poison him. He was obviously not the right person for the job, and he returned to his cave. It was during this second sojourn that he began to gather disciples and form a community. According to St. Gregory, Benedict's biographer, at Subiaco Benedict ultimately founded 12 monasteries, (the twelve tribes of Israel) each with 12 monks (the twelve apostles) and one superior. Having incurred the wrath of a local priest, he had to leave Subiaco. In this "exile" he founded his most famous and enduring monastery at Monte Cassino. It was at Monte Cassino that Benedict composed his Rule. Monte Cassino was Benedict's final monastery; he and his sister, Saint Scholastica, were buried there. The abbey at Monte Cassino survives to

this day despite periodic abandonment, once for as long as 150 years, and the best efforts of both sides in World War II.

## Benedict's Rule

When Benedict was born, Christian monasticism had been existent for several hundred years. Benedict did not invent the idea of monasticism as part of the Christian experience; it had already become a structured, ordered and significant part of the Church's life. Monasticism had a local character: each house with its own customs, practices and collection of rules, which likely would change each time the abbot changed. Monks were wont to wander from monastery to monastery. In fact, the Rule of Benedict has the utmost contempt for such "gyrovagues." "Always on the move, they never settle down and are slaves to their own wills and gross appetites."<sup>2</sup> What Benedict brought to monasticism was a perfection of the structure of monasticism and stability. He put into writing a plan for the organization of the life of the community that has survived for 1500 years. We are not well informed about the spread of the Rule in the decades after Benedict's death. His rule may have been spread in Gaul by the followers of St. Columbanus, who seem to have used both Columbanus' legislation and the Rule of Benedict in their monasteries. It would be left to another Benedict to bring to full fruition the Rule of Benedict of Nursia.

## Benedict of Aniane and the Establishment and Interpretation of the Rule of Benedict

Benedict of Aniane was a Visigoth nobleman who took the name Benedict on entering monastic life. He was born around 750 in France. He initially tried to form his own community, but disagreements and dissension soon destroyed that effort. Having studied the Rule of St. Benedict, which was in common but not universal usage, he became convinced that it provided the secure basis for a viable cenobitic community. He referred to it as "una regula" (the one rule). In 787 at Aniane, he began construction of a large church and a monastic community that would adhere to the Rule of Benedict. In a few years monks from Aniane were being sent to other monasteries to promote their observance of the Rule of St. Benedict. Benedict of Aniane had one distinct advantage over Benedict of Nursia: the patronage of the most powerful king in Europe, Charlemagne, and his son and successor, Louis the Pious. Both of these rulers were strong defenders of the church, and strong supporters of the monastic system. In 816 the Rule of Benedict was established as the norm in monasteries throughout the Carolingian Empire.

Benedict of Aniane's efforts to firmly entrench the Rule of Benedict in Western monastic culture continued unimpeded until 843 and the death of Louis the Pious. At the death of Louis, the Carolingian Empire began to dissolve. Germany, France and Italy fought over the remains, and the monasteries fared no better than the general populace. Some were pillaged and plundered and others reduced to wandering groups of mendicants. The Rule, so recently established as "de rigueur" in monasteries far and wide fell into disuse.

## The Middle Ages

It was over 100 years later before the Rule was once more on the ascendancy. In 962 Otto I restored the empire and the Rule of Benedict was once more "una regula." The 10th through the

12th centuries saw monasticism both grow and change. In 910, the monastery of Cluny was founded. The monks there followed the Rule of Benedict as interpreted by the Carolingians and gave priority to liturgical worship. The monks were guaranteed freedom from outside interference in the election of their abbot and in the operation of their monastery, which was placed in direct relation to the pope. Cluny was an overwhelming success and for a time was the epicenter of monasticism. Cluny was a prime contributor to the reform efforts of the eleventh century. Its prosperity and influence and involvement in outside affairs aroused criticism. In conscious contrast to what they saw as the practice of the monks of Cluny and other houses following the Rule of Benedict, the Cistercians insisted on an austere and literal following of his rule. In 1215 Rome decided to bring some order to what was becoming a vast array of monastic communities and at the Fourth Lateran Council passed special canons to regulate monastic observances. The Rule of Benedict played a large role in the construction of these canons. In the fourteenth century popes pressured the monasteries to band together in congregations for mutual support and regulation.

Once again, temporal events had a negative impact on monastic life. Civil disturbance and the church's unfortunate involvement in political events caused a decline in the monasteries. The monasteries that had enjoyed approximately two hundred years of unfettered growth were unfortunately wealthy. Kings, nobles, cardinals and prelates seized them, obtaining nominations as abbots "in commendam." They were almost without exception absentee landlords, who plundered the monasteries, depleted their wealth and left the property in ruins. Vocations declined and many communities were reduced to a mere handful of monks living on a pitiful dole given to them by their "commendatory abbot."

## The Reformation

The Protestant Reformation changed not just the history of Europe, but also the history of the world, and obviously an organization as large and as visible as Benedictine monasticism could not escape unscathed. Martin Luther denounced monasticism and demanded the seizure of all monastic property and its conversion to educational and charitable purposes. It mattered not whether the country in question remained Catholic or became Protestant. The monasteries suffered either at the hands of the reformists, or at the hands of the Catholic Church in its sometimes overzealous attempts to implement the reforms mandated by the Council of Trent. The Council imposed rigorous standards of congregation and chapter, and congregations and chapters rebelled. Much acrimony, pain and suffering were inflicted and bitter divisions, still not fully healed, were created. As late as 1903 Pope Leo the XIII, a staunch supporter of the Benedictines, lamented the bewildering profusion of overlapping congregations.<sup>3</sup>

In the late 15th and early 16th centuries Benedictine reformists, such as the Olivetans and the Cassinese Congregation in Italy, began a revival. Benedictine monasticism was enhanced with the addition of the Trappists in the 17th century. A group of Cistercians at la Trappe led by Armand-Jean le Bouthilier de Rancé (1626-1700), embarked on a rigorous return to what they believed was the tenor of the Rule of Benedict, adopting silence and rejecting recreation and any contact with the outside world. One publication about the order declares: "We are Trappists, Cistercian, Benedictines, monks. Trappists are a kind of Cistercian; Cistercians are a kind of

Benedictines; Benedictines are a kind of monk."<sup>4</sup>

### Modern Monasticism

The French Revolution was seen by many as the final death blow to Western monasticism, fostering as it did the Enlightenment's discrediting of religion. The last 100 years has demonstrated the error of this prophecy. There has been not only a resurgence of monasticism in the old world but its very successful transplantation to the new. The Americas, Africa, Australia and even the Orient all have viable and active Benedictine communities. The Benedictines are the largest monastic order in the world today with approximately 11,000 men and 25,000 women professed.

Just a statistical abstract of their accomplishments gives a very impressive view of Benedictines' important role in the church. Fifty Benedictines have become pope (including unfortunately the scandalous Alexander VI (the only Pope who has never found an apologist)). St. Augustine of Canterbury was the first of many Benedictine archbishops of Canterbury. The Benedictines have given the church 200 cardinals, 7,000 archbishops, 15,000 bishops, and 1,560 canonized saints. Names and numbers, however, are not offered as a "scorecard," but as a suggestion of just how active and involved in church affairs have been these followers of an unordained, simple man whose first word of advice to us his followers is ... "Listen."