

F.A. Gasquet. English Monastic Life. Methuen & Co. London, 1904.

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CHAPTER I

THE MONASTIC LIFE

The regular or monastic life was instituted to enable men to attain with greater security to the higher ideals of the Christian life proposed to them in the Gospel. In the early ages of the church the fervour of the first converts, strengthened and purified by the fierce persecutions they had to endure for religious, enabled them, or a considerable number of them, to reach this high standard without withdrawing from the world, its business, or society. The belief that, by the means of regulated labour and strict discipline of the senses and appetites, it was in the power of man to perfect his moral nature and rise to heights in the spiritual order, not otherwise attainable, seems almost inherent in man's nature. Well-regulated practices founded upon this principle have been existent in all forms of religious worship other than Christian, and they can be recognised no less in the observances of ancient Egypt than in those of the lamas of modern Thibet [sic]. In the pagan world this doctrine seems to have dictated much of the peculiar teaching of the Stoics ; and among the Jews and Essenes governed their

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lives in theory and practice upon this belief. Even among the early Christians there were some, who by striving to master their lower nature desired to attain the true end of human life as the Gospel taught them, the knowledge and love of God and obedience to His will. These were known as *Ascetae*, and in one of the earliest Christian documents they are mentioned as a class of Christians between the laity and the clergy. They were, however, in the world though not "of the world," and strove to reach their goal whilst living their ordinary life by means of perseverance in prayer, voluntary chastity and poverty, as well as by the exercise of mortification of all kinds.

Though the practice of seeking seclusion from the world for the purpose of better carrying out these ideals was apparently not unknown in the third century, it was not until after the conversion of Constantine that it can be said to have become general. The triumph of Christianity not only freed Christians from the spiritual stimulus of persecution, but it opened the door of the Christian home to

worldly habits and luxury which were hitherto unknown, and which made the practice of the higher ideals of the spirit difficult, if not impossible, in the ordinary surroundings of the family life. To use the expression of Walter Hilton, the baptism of Constantine “brought so many fish into Peter’s net that it was well-nigh rent by the very multitude.” Henceforth it became necessary for Christians, who would satisfy the deeply seated instinct of human nature for the higher life, to seek it mostly in the solitudes of the desert, or later within the sheltering walls of the monastery.

For a right understanding of monastic history and monastic practices in the West generally, and even in

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England, it is necessary to have some idea at least of the main features of Eastern monachism. It has been pointed out by Dom Butler, in his masterly introduction to the *Lausiac History of Palladius*,¹ that monachism developed along two lines in Egypt. The first was the system initiated and directed by St. Anthony, when about the year A.D. 305, after living a life of seclusion for some twenty years, he undertook the direction and organisation of the multitude of monks which the reputation of his sanctity had drawn to his neighbourhood. The second was due to St. Pachomius, who, just about the same time, at the beginning of the fourth century, whilst yet quite a young man, founded his first monastery at Tabennisi in the far south of Egypt.

The first system came to prevail over a great portion of the country by the end of the first century after its foundation by St. Anthony. The monks were mostly hermits in the strict sense of the word. They lived apart and “out of earshot of one another,”² coming together at certain times for divine worship. In other districts the religious lived together in threes and fours, who, on all days but the Saturdays and Sundays when all assembled in the great church, were used to sing their songs and hymns together in their common cells. Of this system Palladius, who is the first authority on the matter, says : “They have different practices, each as he is able and as he wishes.” Dom Butler describes it :—

“There was no rule of life. The Elders exercised an authority, but it was mainly personal....The society appears to have been a sort of spiritual democracy, ruled by the personal influence of the leading ascetics, but there was

¹ Texts and Studies, Cambridge, vol. vi., No. 1, p. 233.

² Ibid.

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no efficient hold upon individuals to keep them from falling into extravagances.... A young man would put himself under the guidance of a senior and obey him in all things ; but the bonds between them were wholly voluntary. The purely eremitical life tended to die out, but what took its place continued to be semi-ermitical.”¹

The second system introduced at the beginning of the fourth century may be described as the cenobitical or conventual type of monachism. Pachomius' monks lived together under a complete system of organization, not, indeed, as a family under a father, but rather as an army under a discipline of a military character. This form of the monastic life spread with great rapidity, and by the time of its founder's death (c. 345) it counted eight monasteries and several hundred monks.

“The most remarkable feature about it,” says Dom Butler, “is that (like Cîteaux in a later age) it almost at once assumed the shape of a fully organised congregation or order, with a superior general and a system of visitation and general chapters—in short, all the machinery of centralized government, such as does not appear again in the monastic world until the Cistercians and the Mendicant Orders arose in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.”²

The various monasteries under the Rule of St. Pachomius existed as separate houses, each with a head or praepositus and other officials of its own, and organized apparently on the basis of the trades followed by the inmates. The number in each house naturally varied ; between thirty and forty on an average living together. At the more solemn services all the members of the various houses came together to the common church ;

¹ Ibid., p. 234.

² Ibid., p. 235.

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but the lesser offices were celebrated by the houses individually. Under this rule, regular organized work was provided for the monk not merely as a discipline and penitential exercise, as was the case under the Antonian system, but as a part of the life itself. The common ideal of asceticism aimed at was not too high.

“The fundamental idea of St. Pachomius' Rule was,” says Dom Butler, “to establish a moderate level of observance which might be obligatory upon all ; and to leave it open to each—and to, indeed, encourage each—to go beyond the fixed minimum, according as he was prompted by his strength, his courage, and his zeal.”¹

Hence we find the Pachomian monks eating or fasting as they wished. The tables were laid at midday, and dinner was provided every hour till evening ; they ate when they liked, or fasted if they felt called on so to do. Some took a meal only in the evening, others every second or even only every fifth day. The Rule allowed them their full freedom ; and any idea of what is now understood by “Common Life”—the living together and doing all things together according to rule—was a feature entirely absent from Egyptian monachism.

One other feature must also be noticed, which would seem to be the direct outcome of the liberty allowed in much of the life, and in particular in the matter of austerities, to the individual monk under the systems both of St. Anthony and St. Pachomius. It is a spirit of strongly marked individualism. Each worked for

his personal advance in virtue ; each strove to do his utmost in all kinds of ascetical exercises and austerities—in prolonging his fasts, his prayers, his silence. The favourite

¹ Ibid., p. 236.

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name used to describe any of the prominent monks was “great athlete.” They loved “to make a record” in austerities, and to contend with one another in mortifications ; and they would freely boast of their spiritual achievements. This being so, penances and austerities tended to multiply and increase in severity, and this freedom of the individual in regard to his asceticism accounts for the very severe and often incongruous mortifications undertaken by the monks of Egypt.

Monachism was introduced into Western Europe from Egypt by way of Rome. The first monks who settled in the Eternal City were known as “Egyptians,” and the Latin translation of the *Vita Antonii* (c. 380) became “the recognized embodiment of the monastic ideal.” It preserved its primitive character in the matter of austerities during the fourth century, and St. Augustine declares that he knew of religious bodies of both sexes, which exercised themselves “in incredible fastings,” passing not merely one day without food or drink, which was “a common practice, “ but often going “for three days or more without anything.”

During this same century the monastic life made its appearance in Gaul. About A.D. 360 St. Martin founded a religious house at Ligugé, near Poitiers ; and when about A.D. 371 he became Bishop of Tours, he established another monastic centre in a retired position near his Episcopal city, which he made his usual residence. The life led by the monks was a simple reproduction of that of St. Anthony’s followers. Cassian, the great organizer of monachism in Gaul, also followed closely the primitive Egyptian ideals both in theory and practice, whilst what is known of the early history of the monastery at Lerins,

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founded by Honoratus, to whom Cassian dedicated the second part of his *Conferences*, points to the fact that here too the eremitical life was regarded as the monastic ideal. On the whole, therefore, it may be said that the available evidence “amply justifies the statement that Gallic monachism during the fifth and sixth centuries was thoroughly Egyptian in both theory and practice.”¹

It is now possible to understand the position of St. Benedict in regard to monasticism. The great Patriarch of Western monks was born probably about A.D. 480, and it was during that century that the knowledge of Eastern rules of regular life was increased greatly in Italy by the translation of an abridgement of Saint Basil’s code into Latin by Rufinus. St. Basil had introduced for his monks in Cappadocia and the neighbouring provinces certain modifications of the Egyptian monastic observances. There was more common life for his religious : they lived together and ate together ; and not when they pleased, but when the

superior ordained. They prayed always in common, and generally depended upon the will of a common superior. About the same time St. Jerome translated the Rule of Pachomius, and the influence of these two Rules upon the monastic life of Italy at the period when St. Benedict comes upon the scene is manifest. Whatever changes had been introduced into the local observances, and however varied were the practices of individual monasteries, it is at least certain that at this period the monastic system in use in Italy was founded upon and drew its chief inspirations from Egyptian models. What was wholly successful in the East proved, however, unsuitable to Western imitators, and, owing to the climactic

¹ Ibid., p. 247.

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conditions, impossible. This much seems certain even from the mention made of the Gyrovagi and Sarabites by St. Benedict, since he describes them as existing kinds of monks whose example was to be avoided. That he had practical knowledge and experience of the Egyptian and the eastern types of monachism clearly appears in his reference to Cassian and to the Rule of "Our Holy Father Saint Basil," as he calls him, and in the fact that he made his own first essay in the monastic life as a solitary.

When, some time about the beginning of the sixth century, St. Benedict came to write his Rule, with full knowledge and experience both of the systems then in vogue and of the existing need of some reconstitution, it is noteworthy that he did not attempt to restore the lapsed practices of primitive asceticism, or insist upon any very different scheme of regular discipline. On the contrary, "he deliberately turned his back on the austerities that had hitherto been regarded as the chief means for attaining the spiritual end of the monastic life." He calls his Rule "a very little rule for beginners"—*minima inchoationis regula*, and says that though there may be in it some things "a little severe," still he hopes that he will establish "nothing harsh, nothing heavy." The most cursory comparison between this new Rule and those which previously existed will make it abundantly clear that St. Benedict's legislation was conceived in a spirit of moderation in regard to every detail of the monastic life. Common-sense, and the wise consideration of the superior in tempering any possible severity, according to the needs of times, places, and circumstances were, by his desire, to preside over the spiritual growth of those trained in his "school of divine service."

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In addition to this St. Benedict broke with the past in another and not less important way, and in one which, if rightly considered and acted upon, more than compensated for the mitigation of corporal austerities introduced into his rule of life. The strong note of individualism characteristic of Egyptian monachism, which gave rise to what Dom Butler calls the "rivalry in ascetical achievement," gave place in St. Benedict's code to the common practices of the community, and

to the entire submission of the individual will, even in matters of personal austerity and mortification, to the judgment of the superior.

“This two-fold break with the past, in the elimination of austerity and in the sinking of the individual in the community, made St. Benedict’s Rule less a development than a revolution in monachism. It may be almost called a new creation ; and it was destined to prove, as the subsequent history shows, peculiarly adapted to the new races that were peopling Western Europe.”¹

We are now in a position to turn to England. When, less than half a century after St. Benedict’s death, St. Augustine and his fellow monks in A.D. 597 first brought this Rule of Life to our country, a system of monasticism had been long established in the land. It was Celtic in its immediate origin ; but whether it had been imported originally from Egypt or the East generally, or whether, as some recent scholars have thought, it was a natural and spontaneous growth, is extremely doubtful. The method of life pursued by the Celtic monks and the austerities practiced by them bear a singular resemblance to the main features of Egyptian monachism ; so close, indeed, is this likeness that it is hard to believe there could have been no connection between them. One

¹ Ibid., p. 256.

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characteristic feature of Celtic monasticism, on the other hand, appears to be unique and to divide it off from every other type. The Celtic monasteries included among their officials one, and in some cases many bishops. At the head was the abbot, and the Episcopal office was held by members of the house subordinate to him. In certain monasteries the number of bishops was so numerous as to suggest that they must have really occupied the position of priests at the subordinate churches. Thus St. Columba went in A.D. 590 from Iona to a synod at Drumcheatt, accompanied by as many as twenty bishops ; and in some of the Irish ecclesiastical meetings the bishops, as in the case of some of the African synods, could be counted by hundreds. This Celtic system appears to be without parallel in other parts of the Christian Church, and scholars have suggested that it was a purely indigenous growth. One writer, Mr. Willis Bund, is of the opinion that the origin was tribal and that the first “monasteries” were mere settlements of Christians—clergy and laity, men, women, and children—who for the sake of protection lived together. It was at some subsequent date that a division was made between the male and female portions of the settlement, and later still the eremitical idea was grafted on the already existing system. If the tribal settlement was the origin of the Celtic monastery, it affords some explanation of the position occupied by the bishops as subjects of the abbots. The latter were in the first instance the chiefs or governors of the settlements, which would include the bishop or bishops of the churches comprised in the settlement. By degrees, according to the theory advanced, the head received a recognized ecclesiastical position as

abbot, the bishop still continuing to occupy a subordinate position, although there is evidence in the lives of the early Irish saints to show that the holder of the office was certainly treated with special dignity and honour.

The Celtic monastic system was apparently in vogue among the remnant of the ancient British Church in Wales and the West Country on the coming of St. Augustine. Little is known with certainty, but as the British Church was Celtic in origin it may be presumed that the Celtic type of monachism prevailed amongst the Christians in this country after the Saxon conquest. Whether it followed the distinctive practice of Irish monasticism in regard to the position of the abbot and the subject bishops may perhaps be doubted, as this does not appear to have been the practice of the Celtic Church of Gaul, with which there was a close early connection.

It has usually been supposed that the Rule of St. Columbanus represented the normal life of a Celtic monastery, but it has been lately shown that, so far as regards the Irish or Welsh houses, this Rule was never taken as a guide. It had its origin apparently in the fact that the Celtic monks on the Continent were induced, almost in spite of themselves, to adopt a mitigated rule of life by their close contact with Latin monasticism, which was then organizing itself on the lines of the Rule of St Benedict.¹ The Columban Rule was a code of great rigour, and "would, if carried out in its entirety, have made the Celtic monks almost, if not quite, the most austere of men." Even if it was not actually in use, the Rule of St. Columbanus may safely be taken to indicate the tendencies of Celtic monasticism generally, and the

¹ The Celtic Church of Wales, J. J. Willis Bund, p. 166.

impracticable nature of much of the legislation and the hard spirit which characterizes it goes far to explain how it came to pass that whenever it was brought face to face with the wider, milder, and more flexible code of St. Benedict, invariably, sooner or later, it gave place to it. In some monasteries, for a time, the two Rules seem to have been combined, or at least to have existed side by side, as at Luxeuil and Bobbio, in Italy, in the seventh century ; but when the abbot of the former monastery was called upon to defend the Celtic rule, at the Synod of Macon in A.D. 625, the Columban code may be said to have ceased to exist anywhere as a separate rule of life.

For the present purpose it will be sufficient to consider English monasticism from the coming of St. Augustine at the close of the sixth century as Benedictine. There was, it is true, a brief period when in Northumberland the Celtic form of regular observance established itself at Lindisfarne and elsewhere. This was due to the direct appeal made by King Edwy or Northumbria to the monks of Iona to come to Northumbria, and continue in the North the work of St. Paulinus, which had been interrupted by the incursions of Penda. Iona, the

foundation and home of St. Columba, was a large monastic and missionary centre regulated according to the true type of Celtic monachism under the abbatial superior ; and from Iona came St. Aidan and the other Celtic apostles of the northern parts. In one point, so far as the evidence exists for forming any judgment at all, the new foundation of Lindisfarne differed from the parent house at Iona. At the Northumbrian monastery the bishop was the head and took the place of the abbot, and did not occupy the subordinate position held by the bishops at Iona and its dependencies.

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