

THE HABIT OF SIMPLICITY

An Introduction to Cistercian Spirituality

Our secondary school history course covered everything in chronological order, from the Stone Age to the accession of George I, which means that it would have been somewhere around the age of thirteen that we were introduced to the history of monasticism, and in particular, the Cistercian reform. The early Cistercians, with their ideals of poverty, silence and prayer, their rejection of fuss and frivolity, and what seemed to me their realistic attitude to the value of hard work, made an immediate impact on me, and since then I have found myself profoundly influenced by many Cistercians - writers, teachers, saints, and especially, ordinary monks such as those of the Atlas Mountains, whose commitment to peace and prayer carries an important message for contemporary Christians in an increasingly divided and secular world. So this is not going to be an academic discussion of the history, structures and ideals of the Cistercian order, but rather an attempt to describe how Cistercian spirituality appears to a lay observer, and the contribution it can make to establishing a genuinely prayerful but ordinary Christian life.

This is the first concept that it is important to grasp. Cistercian spirituality (and, in fact, monastic spirituality in general), is not a matter of techniques of prayer, liturgical rites, the exercise of ministries or whatever, but a way of living. Over and over, monks repeat this: Basil Pennington answers people who ask for the Cistercian method,

"The whole of monastic life is our method. It is hearing the Word of God and keeping it."
(*Light from the Cloister* p.41.)

Andre Louf, in talking of the training of a novice says, "Right from the beginning, the life itself is one of the most powerful forces in his formation" (*The Cistercian Way* p.55)

Thomas Keating reinforces this: "the fundamental practice for healing the wounds of the false-self system is to fulfill the duties of our job in life." (*The Mystery of Christ* p.24)

This attitude has two major consequences. Monastic spirituality cannot be viewed as an upgrade to boost our physical, social and intellectual development, nor as a bolt-on extra which can be fitted into our free time - or, perhaps, more generously, for which we should sacrifice our free time. There is *no* free time; the package is total, it encompasses every minute of our lives.

But this also means that nothing is entirely secular; everything is holy. The Rule of St Benedict endorses this, in its instruction to the cellarer to

"regard the chattels of the monastery and its whole property as if they were the sacred vessels of the altar"(RB 31:10)

Nothing in monastic life is despised or condemned. Sometimes choices have to be made, and many things that are part of a normal life have to be renounced, but neither contempt for creation nor spiritual snobbery is part of the Cistercian package. It is only in this context that we can begin to address the notion of "flight from the world" which is so associated with the idea of monasteries.

The image of the cloister is so powerful, and the concept of enclosure so unusual to our mobile, sociable, fast-moving culture, that it is quite easy to get bogged down in romantic reveries about an isolated Abbey deep in the countryside: no traffic, no television, no telephone, no door-to-door salesman cold-calling, no frantic rush to work; or, more bleakly, no visitors, no Christmas parties, no birthday cards. The reality is rather different. Solitude is an important concept, but the solitude of a monastic life is characterised less by a contempt for wickedness and materialism than by a sense of solidarity with those who suffer.

Thus the first Cistercian foundations were not made in locations that were promising despite their isolation - places that you might expect to make something of. They were the sort of places poor people had to put up with - where you would expect to stay poor. St. Bernard encouraged the monks of Tre Fontane not to go in for expensive medical treatments, but to

"use common herbs such as they are used by the poor" (quoted by Thomas Merton in *The Hidden Ground of Love*, p.330).

This attitude continues to the present day. At the time when Thomas Merton was being told that it was not a contemplative's job to write about racism and nuclear disarmament, his monastery at Gethsemani was nevertheless providing scholarships for the education of black children, and donations for groups working for peace. The guest house at Nunraw is open to people recovering from all kinds of traumas - alcoholism, abuse, mental illness, bereavement - and no charge is made, although donations are welcome. The monks at Tibhirine debated endlessly about whether to leave Algeria when the trouble started, but always decided to stay. One said

"Why should I have the choice to flee while the Algerians do not?" and another described his

"radical commitment to live at the level of people who have to struggle." (from the article by Donald McGlynn "Atlas Martyrs" in *CSQ* 32.2 p.165-6)

This is one reason for the emphasis on manual work in the Cistercian order. Monasteries were always meant to be economically self-sufficient

"so that the monks have no need to wander around outside it, for that does not profit their souls at all." (*RB* 66:7).

There is also some evidence from the time of St. Bernard that Cistercians were anxious not to become dependent on powerful lay nobles who might exploit the monasteries for their own purposes. But there are several benefits which flow from the practice of manual work. Firstly, the discipline of a real physical skill, such as those associated with Cistercians - farming, woodwork, pottery or the making of cheese, bread beer or chocolate - is like the discipline of yoga or Zen flower arranging. It teaches genuine attention to the work one is doing, and faithfulness to the demands of the job and the medium in which one works, and inculcates the virtues of humility, patience, obedience, and a realistic awareness of one's talents and limitations. Andre Louf says,

"whatever it is - the soil, clay, wood, water, metal, cheese or chocolate, the monk needs this simple material to measure himself against every day." (*The Cistercian Way* p.115)

He also points out that a good period of physical exercise is often just what is needed to quiet the mind and dispose it for prayer - a good point to remember as we find ourselves

with more distracting and more sedentary lifestyles.

Unlike the disciplines of Zen and yoga, however, which largely centre on the individual, the practice of manual labour can also move us beyond ourselves. Learning how to wash a floor, bake a loaf or light a fire correctly brings us to a deeper knowledge of some aspect of God's creation and teaches us respect and reverence for the Creator. But more than this, to earn one's own living is not merely to avoid being a burden on others; it contributes to the well-being of all those we serve. It is an act of love for the community.

Love for the community is a leading characteristic of the Rule of St. Benedict; the mutual respect and support of the brothers is, for him, the chief strength of monastic life. On the other hand, however, he is very aware of the dangers of factions, of favouritism and the potential for the subversion of good discipline. Early Cistercians seem to have been less inhibited. Warm friendships and expressions of affection are quite common. Aelred of Rievaulx refused to make a fool of himself by undue fuss over whether his monks were giving each other hugs, having private conversations, or sitting about together, even on their beds. He wrote an interpretation of Cicero's *De Amicitia* in which the intimacy of a sound friendship is regarded not only as no threat to the love of Christ, but as a help towards, and as an expression of the intimacy with God to which we are called in heaven. St. Bernard's great contribution to the spirituality of the Middle Ages was a warm personal feeling for the human Jesus in His work, prayer and suffering, and it is significant that the first constitution of the order was called the *Carta Caritatis* - the charter of love. This makes Cistercian spirituality much more accessible to people living in a family than, say, the injunctions of St. John of the Cross to live in community as if no other person lived there, or to treat your family as strangers. (*Counsels of Light and Love* p.26-35).

Respect for creation, compassion for suffering and warm and generous personal relationships are basic to all sound spirituality. The distinctive note of the Cistercian way of life is simplicity.

At a time when the 'Shaker look' became, for a while, the latest trend in interior decoration, and when Anouska Hempel can spend appalling amounts of money and time creating and maintaining immaculate minimalist interiors for luxury hotels, it is all too easy to get bogged down in the aesthetics of simplicity. It is true that Cistercian buildings are plain and free of ornament; that food is basic and nourishing rather than a gourmet treat, and that there is much less fuss and bustle about the rhythm of life than outside. Nor can it be denied that this can be extremely beautiful in itself and very satisfying to the senses. Andre Louf writes movingly about the beauty of Cistercian churches, and its role in leading the mind to God. But it must be stressed that what a Cistercian seeks is not an uncluttered look or an uncluttered lifestyle, but a genuinely uncluttered mind and heart.

The stripping away of inessentials - of ornament, of luxury, of self-assertion or self-indulgence, or of frivolous involvement in the trivialities of life, is not simply a matter of self-denial, (though self-denial may turn out to be a key part of our training in freedom), nor of social justice, although it was St. Bernard, and not Carl Marx who said that to possess more than you need is theft from the poor. It is meant to result in a will that is free, a mind that is receptive, and a heart that is focused on God. A liturgy so plain may be less delightful to sing or to listen to, but it is easier to join in without getting bogged down in performance anxiety. A mind that does not need stimulation or distraction every five minutes is free to dwell deeply on the word of God. An ego that is not too defensive about its place in the pecking order is ready to act in solidarity with others. A heart that is not wasting its energy on superficial pleasures and consolations can commit deeply and generously to God and neighbour.

This is necessarily a sketchy and inadequate discussion, and it is immediately obvious that I have not covered many important issues - silence, obedience, penance, the liturgy, to name but a few. However many people are becoming aware of the potential of Cistercian spirituality adapted for lay people, and for those who are interested in pursuing the matter further, I have added a short bibliography.

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