

INSIDE A RELIGIOUS HOUSE: DAILY LIFE AND THE CHAIN OF COMMAND

What kind of people were to be found in religious houses, and how did they spend their day? Any attempt to answer that question must bear in mind some fundamental points. For most monks and nuns the basis of their working life was the Rule of St Benedict, but Britain in the period covered by this study is far removed, chronologically and geographically, from Benedict's own monastery of Monte Cassino, for which the Rule was written. Even in the houses we call Benedictine (though this was not a term used at the time) modifications and alterations had taken place in monastic life and observances by the eleventh century. We must remember, too, that much of the documentation we have gives us details of theory: it is evidence of legislation, not necessarily of practice.

DAILY LIFE AND WORSHIP

In his rule Benedict devised for his monks a careful, rigid and, to modern perceptions, monotonous routine of work, prayer, study and sleep, designed to subdue the flesh and the will and to make the mind and the soul receptive to God. The overwhelming monastic concern was with the self, however much the world might benefit from the monks' intercessions. The pattern of the day, in which every minute was accounted for, varied only according to the seasons of the year and the liturgical calendar. However, a major development had taken place by the beginning of our period which had upset the delicate balance sought by Benedict. In the monastic world which gave birth to the *Regularis*

Concordia, the liturgy had become the overwhelming element, relegating manual work to almost a token gesture. Although there is no direct evidence at the English monasteries as at Cluny that on some days the liturgy assumed such a part of the *horarium* (timetable) that there was no time for anything else,¹ nevertheless the greater part of the day would have been spent in the church, in corporate worship of God. Below is a reconstruction of the monastic day according to the *Regularis Concordia*, which would with some variations have been in force from the early to mid eleventh century.²

WINTER

SUMMER

		1.30 a.m.	Preparation for night office; trina oratio and gradual psalms
		2.00 a.m.	<u>Nocturns</u> (night office) (later known as matins) including prayers for the royal family and for the dead
2.30 a.m.	Preparation for night office; trina oratio and gradual psalms		
3.00 a.m.	<u>Nocturns</u> (night office) (later known as matins) including prayers for the royal family and for the dead		
		3.30/	<u>Matins (lauds)</u> at
		4.00 a.m.	daybreak; change and wash
5.00 a.m.	Reading	5.00 a.m.	Trina oratio
			Reading
6.00 a.m.	<u>Matins (lauds)</u> at daybreak	6.00 a.m.	<u>Prime</u>
	<u>Prime</u>		Morrow mass; Chapter
7.30 a.m.	Reading	7.30 a.m.	Work
8.00 a.m.	Wash and change	8.00 a.m.	<u>Terce</u>
	<u>Terce</u>		Sung mass
	Morrow mass; Chapter		
9.45 a.m.	Work	9.30 a.m.	Reading
		11.30 a.m.	<u>Sext</u>
12.00 p.m.	<u>Sext</u>	12.00 p.m.	Dinner
	Sung mass		
1.30 p.m.	<u>None</u>	c. 1.00 p.m.	Siesta

2.00 p.m.	Dinner	2.30 p.m.	<u>None</u>
2.45 p.m.	Work		Drink
		3.00 p.m.	Work
4.15 p.m.	<u>Vespers</u>		
5.30 p.m.	Change into night shoes	5.30 p.m.	Supper
	Drink		
6.00 p.m.	Collatio	6.00 p.m.	<u>Vespers</u>
6.15 p.m.	<u>Compline</u>		
6.30 p.m.	Bed		
		7.30 p.m.	Night shoes
			Collatio
		8.00 p.m.	<u>Compline</u>
		c. 8.15 p.m.	Bed

It will be seen from this that the summer timetable has been modified to fill the increased hours of daylight. In winter roughly nine and a half hours were spent in church, one and a half reading, three and three-quarters in works, one and a quarter eating, and eight sleeping. In summer roughly the same proportion of the day was spent in communal prayer, rather more reading and less working, another hour eating and only just over five hours sleeping.

The liturgy

The basic framework of Benedict's day was provided by the eight services of communal worship, and this pattern was followed both by the canonical orders and by the friars. It was never forgotten that the primary function of those who were professed to the monastic life was prayer, the performance of the *Opus Dei*, God's work. Their intercession would help to save the human race, and this made them the spiritual equivalent of earthly soldiers. The way in which the liturgy was performed had developed since the sixth century, and one major change was that, whereas Benedict had assumed that mass (eucharist) would be celebrated only once a week, on Sunday, and on feast days, Cluny and other reform movements of the tenth century added two daily masses: the morrow or chapter mass and, later in the day, a sung high mass. We find both these in the *Concordia*, together with instructions on the performance of the liturgy during important seasons and on feast days. Processions, though not as common as they would become, were used as part of the Easter celebration, along with rich vestments, and song and gesture to emphasize the emotion of the occasion. During the Easter service four

brethren, dressed in copes, took their places by the empty sepulchre in imitation of the angel and the three women. There was no attempt here to act, and the Easter trope (ritual) was more liturgical than dramatic, but it was a significant development in the performance of the monastic office.³

The constitutions drawn up by Archbishop Lanfranc between 1079 and 1089 are a second major source for the nature of the *horarium* and liturgical practice.⁴ We know that these were followed not just at Christ Church, Canterbury, but also at Durham, St Albans and Westminster, and probably many other houses.⁵ The constitutions follow the pattern of the *Regularis Concordia* but were compiled from a number of customals and were particularly influenced by Cluny. They therefore make no mention of specifically English features, such as the prayers for the royal family and the Easter liturgical trope, but they elaborate the recitation of psalms. Processions became a more common feature of liturgical practice, and as in Cluniac ritual those celebrating mass on principal feasts were clothed in rich vestments. These solemn festivals increased in number over the years. During the reign of King John the prior and convent of Westminster granted to the abbot of the house an increase in the number of feasts to be celebrated with copes and processions, and with wine and pittance.⁶ From the twelfth century a daily office of the Virgin was introduced, probably first at Bury St Edmunds, although it was not until the following century that William of Trumpington, abbot of St Albans, realized that his house was out of step by performing this office, with albs (white vestments), only on Saturdays. He therefore ordered 'that a solemn mass of the blessed Virgin should be celebrated daily with music'.⁷ It is worth noting the common practice, expunged from the calendar of Christ Church by Lanfranc, which nevertheless re-emerged in the twelfth century at Bury, St Albans, Gloucester, Winchcombe, Worcester and others, of celebrating the feast of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary. This was a doctrine much debated in the period, and English monks and scholars were among those who rose up to defend its orthodoxy.⁸ Finally it may be noted that a number of further adjustments to the *horarium* took place in Benedictine houses in the thirteenth century: a period of sleep was allowed between matins and lauds; the night office began at midnight; and one of the masses was brought forward to allow greater time for study. Private prayer now occupied three short periods: before the night office when the monks had left their dormitory and processed into church; before terce, and after compline before retiring.⁹

A considerable elaboration which took place in post-Conquest days was the performance of masses for the dead. According to the *Regularis*

Concordia masses were said for thirty days for a dead monk, and prayers were recited for monks of nearby houses and for lay benefactors under agreements of confraternity.¹⁰ Apart from the common observance laid down by the *Regularis Concordia*, confraternity, a liturgical and social bond, was the only link between monasteries. Mention has already been made of the *Liber Vitae* of New Minster, Winchester, in the late Anglo-Saxon period.¹¹ After the Conquest it became more common for houses to bind themselves together by a promise that monks should receive the prayers of both or all the communities. Thus shortly before 1077 Worcester, Evesham, Gloucester, Pershore, Bath, Winchcombe and Chertsey reached an agreement to act as if the seven houses were one.¹² A confraternity list from St Mary's, York, dates from c. 1180, but the text indicates that many of the houses entered into this special relationship much earlier (for instance, the agreement with Ramsey can be assigned to 1091 × 1112), and shows links with houses all over England and in Normandy.¹³ From a simple act of prayer for each other's monks, a spiritual union, confraternity sometimes came to be extended to allow a monk full rights in other houses: entry into the choir, chapter and cloister.

The same basic framework of liturgy as laid down by Benedict was followed in Cistercian monasteries and in the churches of the other reformed congregations. Here the difference was less in the organization of the liturgical day and more in the emphasis. With their desire to follow the Rule in a simple manner the Cistercians considered that the elaborate liturgy, the addition of psalmody and chanting, had upset the delicate balance sought by Benedict. The restoration of manual work to its place in the timetable meant that the Cluniac-inspired liturgy was pruned and simplified. Processions, gorgeous vestments and costly altar vessels, as well as bells, were prohibited, and services became plain and unadorned, like the early buildings of the order.¹⁴ The Carthusians, too, followed the main services, but only three of these (matins, mass and vespers) were sung in church; the remainder were said by the monks in their cells or at private altars in the church. The practices of the regular canons are less easy to detect, and only two of their customs survive, from Barnwell (1295–6) and from mid-thirteenth-century Llanthony Prima; however, it is perhaps worthy of note that more than one contemporary commentator considered it a great merit of the Augustinian canons that their church services were marked by their moderate length.¹⁵ The friars also followed the pattern of monastic offices, but an innovation was the great emphasis laid on one of the minor services, compline. The reason for the elevation to a central position of this, the last office of the day, was the need of the congregation. Attendance by the laity of the night office, or prime, or any

other office, would not have been possible, but the friars encouraged their presence at compline, at the close of the working day.

Work and reading

Much attention has been devoted to the vexed question of what Benedict intended when he said that the brethren were to be engaged in manual work and reading, *lectio divina*. The purpose is clear: to fill the day with suitable activities in order to avoid *accidie*, idleness, the 'enemy of the soul'. Work had formed an essential part of the monastic tradition since the days of the Desert Fathers. But what kind of work? And what kind of reading? The pursuit of study and learning will be considered later.¹⁶ Here we may just note that at appropriate times of the day monks, canons and nuns engaged in reading and meditation, probably in the cloister. And what of manual work? There had been many changes since the days of Benedict. Cluniac monasticism had all but expunged work from the timetable, partly because of the proliferation of services which simply left no time for it, and partly because of developing attitudes which regarded manual work as fit for peasants and not for monks. Gradually the daily work of the monastery fell to hired servants. The early Cistercians insisted that work be restored to its rightful place: 'food for monks of our order ought to come from manual labour (*de labore manuum*), agriculture and the raising of animals'.¹⁷ St Francis saw a place for manual work in the daily régime of his friars, but from the beginning the Friars Preacher sacrificed it to the needs of study and preaching.

Of what did this work consist? There were a number of alternatives. The Cistercian statute quoted above suggests a certain amount of hard, physical labour in the fields and garden, but the White Monks, too, used the services of hired servants: the tasks of even the lay brethren were mostly managerial. Monks might be engaged in domestic tasks. In addition, those brethren with artistic or writing skills could be employed in the scriptorium in copying manuscripts and service books necessary for the performance of the liturgy, and charters and legal records, as well as decorating more sumptuous productions. An interesting case is immortalized in the muniments of Westminster Abbey: between 1124 and 1134 the abbot and prior wrote to the prior of Worcester to tell him that they were sending back a monk who had absconded from the priory of Great Malvern, one of their dependencies. They had been about to let him stay at the mother house, 'but he told us that he had begun a certain work for you, namely, a missal', and everyone now agreed he should complete it.¹⁸ Monks with special talents as craftsmen – goldsmiths and carvers, for instance – could be usefully employed, and for many in a sizeable

monastery 'manual work' meant the performance of managerial tasks necessary for the smooth running of a large corporation.¹⁹ We perhaps come closest to understanding the type of activity which made up the work periods for most religious in the pages of the twelfth-century *Dialogue between the master and his disciple concerning the Rule of St Augustine on the life of clerics*. Here a canon of Bridlington Priory in Yorkshire, possibly its prior, Robert, gives us a list of the suitable occupations allocated to a canon by his superior for those periods when he was not in church. These are reading, explaining and preaching the Word of God (although he does not say whether this is in the cloister or in the parish); practising for divine worship; preparing parchment; writing, illuminating and correcting books; making and repairing clothes; making implements, such as wooden spoons and candlesticks, and weaving mats. Then come the outdoor pursuits: digging the garden, laying out beds and sowing seeds, pruning and grafting, weeding, ploughing, reaping and mowing.²⁰ There is a range of activities here; it shows us the monastic world at its most ordinary.

Silence

The monotony of the monastic routine must have been compounded by the long hours spent in silence. The *Regularis Concordia* appears to have allowed talking in work periods in the cloister, but it also suggests that the monks while at labour should recite the canon and the psalter. Lanfranc allowed silence to be broken, again in the cloister, between the daily chapter and sext.²¹ The Institutes of the Gilbertine Order laid down that during the work periods while the nuns were occupied in tasks such as sewing, reading and copying manuscripts, they should sit in silence face-to-back to avoid communication. Gradually there came to be two recognized places in the monastic complex where talking was permitted: in the parlour which adjoined the chapter house (where the monks and officials talked) and near the superior's lodging, where the guests and the poor could converse with the monks, canons or nuns. The emphasis on solitude and contemplation in Carthusian houses meant that outside the services held in church, silence must have been all but total. The Rule of St Augustine laid down no precise injunctions on the question, and the customs which have survived suggest moderation. There was generally silence in the church, refectory and dormitory, but on other matters, such as the periods in which talking was allowed, local custom prevailed. The Bridlington author stated 'some prefer to use signs instead of words, some object to signs more than words, some employ a few fundamental signs'. There was evidently diversity within the one priory.

The daily chapter

Once a day the whole community of monks, canons or nuns met in the chapter house, so called because the proceedings usually began with the reading of a chapter of the Rule. The purpose of this assembly was to give opportunity for the confession of individual faults and their correction, and the discussion of business that concerned the house. Often it was a lively affair when the monks, released from their customary silence, could give vent to their opinions on matters great and small. It could be the scene of momentous events. It was in the chapter of St Mary's Abbey, York, one October day in 1132 that Archbishop Thurstan of York and abbots of neighbouring Black Monk houses heard the intense debate between two factions within the convent about their observances – and witnessed the ejection of the prior's party which had demanded reform. Less far-reaching in their effects, but no doubt of great concern at the time, were the disputes in the St Albans chapter between Abbot William of Trumpington and his monks on a variety of matters, including the abbot's alleged association with lay men and his practice of exiling monks to the abbey cells.²² But for many monks the chapter and its investigations into personal behaviour and vocation must have been an ordeal. In one of his spiritual writings Adam of Dryburgh puts this answer into the mouth of one asked what troubled him most about the monastic life:

It is the chapter. There is too little love and tenderness in those sitting around, no pity or compassion whatever in the superior presiding, but there is very great discomfort and unrest in my heart as I sit there.²³

Food

The Rule of St Benedict again anticipated the different demands which the summer and winter timetables placed on the monks. In winter, when sleep occupied eight hours of the day, only one meal was allowed, at about 2.00 p.m. In the summer two meals were taken, *prandium*, the main meal, at midday, and *cena* at 5.00 or 5.30 p.m. In the northern climate this was considered to be on the frugal side, so the *Regularis Concordia* added a drink (probably beer), to be taken in the evening in winter and in mid afternoon in summer. The thirteenth century witnessed attempts to allow two meals throughout winter. Meals generally consisted of bread, cheese, vegetables, beans and cereal, with pittance (extra dishes) of fish and eggs on special occasions.²⁴ The Benedictines and Cluniacs were frequently the target of criticism for their eating habits, and the Cistercians aimed to

restore a more rigorous diet. There was a ban on the consumption of eggs and cheese during Lent and Advent, and monks were only allowed a coarse type of brown bread. Despite their austerity the early statutes allowed small pittances on occasion, but there is evidence that at least one convert, Waldef, former prior of Kirkham, found the diet one of many aspects of Cistercian life which was hard to take.²⁵

Waldef had been an Augustinian canon, and at Kirkham may have enjoyed a more generous diet than even the Black Monks. Whereas it was assumed that for most monks meat would be prohibited – and the Premonstratensian canons followed the Cistercians in banning the use of meat and lard except in cases of severe illness – the evidence for the houses of Black Canons is more mixed. Gerald of Wales noted as a characteristic of the canons that they ate meat three times a week.²⁶ Partial abstinence seems to have been a popular compromise. Among the monks there came to be occasions when monks who were thought to need more fortifying food could partake of meat. One such circumstance would be illness, and Lanfranc allowed monks who were, or had been, sick to eat flesh. This leniency could be abused, and bishops during visitation sometimes had to lay down that those who pretended to be ill in order to be allowed meat should be punished.²⁷ Sick monks would have eaten meat in the infirmary, but a later development on many monastic sites was a separate room in the complex where the eating of meat was allowed. In addition, meat might be consumed at the abbot's table, where guests were entertained, and where from time to time monks were invited to join their superior. Before long, a third circumstance allowed monks to eat meat. This was after blood-letting, which was considered to be beneficial for the health, when a monk was thought to need meat in order to restore his strength. Lanfranc's constitutions clearly assumed that blood-letting would be an irregular occurrence, sought only by those who were sick. However, by the late twelfth century it had come to be a regular if infrequent event, like shaving and bathing, none of which were intended to be enjoyed. Despite injunctions to the contrary, blood-letting became a recreation to be anticipated with some pleasure, for meat-eating was not the only advantage. Those who had been let could miss the night office, have early meals and talk. It was a time when an astute brother could learn a lot. Jocelin of Brakelond, recording some opinions among the Bury monks as to who should be abbot, added:

I once saw Samson the subsacrist sitting in the kind of little groups that used to form at blood-letting time, when cloister monks would tell one another their private thoughts and discuss things together. I saw him sitting silently, smiling and noting what everyone else said, able to recall twenty years later some of the comments I have recorded above.²⁸

THE GOVERNMENT OF A RELIGIOUS HOUSE AND ITS PERSONNEL

Abbots and priors

The abbot was the head of an independent house of Black Monks, and of a Cistercian and Premonstratensian house, and his second-in-command was the prior. One Cluniac house (Bermondsey) and a handful of Augustinian communities enjoyed the title of abbey, but all their other houses, as well as Benedictine dependencies, were designated priories; their head was a prior, who had as his deputy a sub-prior. The powers of an abbot and a prior of an independent priory were, within their own houses, the same. In the Rule of St Benedict, the abbot was simply *primus inter pares*, first among equals; he was chosen from among the community as a pastor to profess novices and administer the house. Though he was urged to take the advice of his monks, his authority was absolute. By our period the office of abbot had developed considerably. As we have seen, he could be involved in government; he could be sent abroad on royal business; he could be a major landowner. At the abbey he had responsibility for entertaining guests and so might mix on a social and political level with the influential and powerful. For these reasons medieval writers, though they praised piety and holiness in an abbot, frequently assumed that he had to be a man of business, and these qualities were seen as essential – ironically as much so as his pastoral duties.²⁹ The increasing demands on the head of a community had two implications for the office. First, more responsibility for the everyday oversight of administration was delegated to the prior or sub-prior. Second, the development was a factor in the gradual separation of the revenues of the abbot and convent, which took place at major abbeys at different times.

The Rule of St Benedict laid down that the abbot should be elected from among the community by the *maior et sanior pars*, the wise majority, which doubtless meant the more senior monks. However, the political and economic importance of the abbot meant that the king took more than a passing interest in who was elected to this high office, and the *Regularis Concordia* laid down that abbatial election was to be according to the Rule of St Benedict and with the consent of the king.³⁰ The practice of royal intervention by Edward the Confessor continued under the Conqueror and his sons, William II and Henry I, both of whom discovered that failing to appoint an abbot and thus enjoying the abbey revenues during the vacancy was a useful supplement to their own income. After the ending of the Investiture Conflict, when Henry I was forced to concede that he had no right to invest bishops and abbots with the symbols of their ecclesiastical office, it became the practice for monks

to 'elect', in his presence, a candidate proposed by the king. With the weakening of royal authority under King Stephen, the church had a chance to assert its own rights, and this period coincided with the coming of the Cistercians. The new orders of the twelfth century were determined to avoid this kind of interference in their affairs. The statutes of the Cistercian Order, for instance, left no room for royal interference, and specified a free election, in the presence of the abbot of the mother house, by the monks, assisted by the abbots of any daughter houses. Documented cases seem to show that the White Monks managed to uphold their own independence and obtain the candidates of their choice. However, among Benedictine houses there was growing tension between the expectation of the king that he should influence the choice of an abbot, and the claim of a monastic community to free election.³¹

From the monastic writers of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries we have a number of descriptions of the process by which an abbot was elected. In 1180 following the death of Abbot Hugh of Bury St Edmunds the convent wrote to the king to inform him of the vacancy. One year and three months later the king wrote back to the convent, and under his instruction, the prior chose twelve monks to accompany him to the royal court; the thirteen were expected, in the royal presence, to agree on a candidate. The Bury monks did not consider this to be a free election, and decided on a middle course. Six of them were nominated by the convent, and they in secret chose three monks, whom they considered to be best qualified for the post of abbot. Their names were written down in secret and sealed, so that if the king were to allow the convent its free choice, the seal could be broken and the names revealed. When the thirteen appeared before the king, he agreed to a free election, but not before six other candidates were proposed. By gradual elimination one of the three original nominees, Samson the sacrist, was chosen.³² Similar evidence from St Albans, Battle and Peterborough shows the emergence of the practice of election *per compromissum*, by a committee of electors chosen by the convent.³³

The thirteenth century witnessed attempts by certain religious houses to secure elections which were free from interference, whether royal, papal, or from a lay patron. The best documented case comes again from Bury St Edmunds, where an account was written of the dispute surrounding the election of a successor for Abbot Samson, which occupied the years 1212–15. The matter split the convent into two factions, those who upheld the election of Abbot Hugh of Northwold, and those who advocated submitting to the pressure of King John, who refused to confirm the election.³⁴ How far the stand made by certain of the monks against the king was typical, or symptomatic of a movement

towards free elections, is uncertain. For one thing, the episode is unusually well documented; for another, it occurred at a time when the king was under pressure, both from the church and as a result of baronial discontent. What is certain, however, is that after 1215 the kings of England gradually conceded the right of free election to the religious houses of their realm. This presents a contrast to Scotland, where the royal house seems to have retained control over abbatial appointments. Indeed, the fourteenth century witnessed rivalry between the kings of Scotland and the popes to secure positions of importance for their own nominees, and in practice free election in Scotland meant, not freedom from royal intervention, but rather 'royal nomination without papal interference'.³⁵

The practice of royal intervention in elections, more particularly the regalian right of collecting the revenue of vacant abbeys, led to a significant development in the office of abbot, the gradual separation of the income of the abbot and monks. Religious houses as holders of land were part of the political, economic and social order. They were tenants-in-chief of the Crown, and this gave the Crown a right to administer abbey lands during a vacancy in the same way as it would a lay fief. Occasionally an abbot might be persuaded to pay a sum of money after his election – the equivalent of the lay entry fee or relief. This could come dangerously close to simony, the ecclesiastical sin of buying office. To a monarch such as William II the practice of keeping an abbey without a head in order to enjoy its revenues was not a strange concept. When Archbishop Anselm remonstrated with him, the king is alleged to have replied 'What business is it of yours? Aren't they my abbeys? You do what you want with your manors. Why can't I do what I want with my abbeys?'³⁶ There is an element of genuine surprise here. Therefore, in order to protect themselves and to minimize financial damage when an abbot had died or been removed from office, the monks began to divide the revenue of the house, a proportion for the abbot and the remainder for the convent. Only the abbot's portion now became subject to seizure by the king. This was a gradual process which can be traced from the reign of Henry I (1100–35), and it hastened the process by which the abbot came to have a distinct household.³⁷ The extent of this divergence worried the papal legates who from the thirteenth century visited English houses, and they attempted to set limits to the abbot's establishment. The growing apart of abbot and convent is also illustrated by the way in which the two issued charters or acquired property separately: at Westminster the formal division of estates did not come until 1225, but throughout the twelfth century the abbot and the prior and monks (sometimes just the monks) are shown by their charters to be acting independently.³⁸

Abesses, prioresses and the rule of female houses

Nunneries could have the status of abbey or priory, generally depending on their wealth and antiquity, and heads were therefore designated abess or prioress. The process for election was much the same as in a male house, although the lesser status and importance of most female houses meant that they were more likely to enjoy an election free from royal intervention. A description of what was probably a fairly typical process survives from the nunnery of Nun Cotham in a memorandum of the election of Prioress Lucy in 1271.

First a mass of the Holy Spirit was celebrated. Then as the convent entered the choir the grace of the Holy Spirit was invoked and *Veni Creator Spiritus* was sung. Third, the convent entered the chapter house with great devotion and solemnity. The inquisitors were then chosen, [namely] the master of the house with two canons and four nuns, and they made everyone leave the chapter so that they alone remained. Then they individually examined the vote of each one, and questioned each other closely . . . that they should testify on the salvation of their souls, as to who would be most suitable and fit for the office of prioress; and they gave their votes to the said lady Lucy . . . [then] N. on behalf of the whole chapter [asked] if there was common consent among them all, or the greater and wiser part of them, [and declared]: I elect N. [Lucy] as prioress.³⁹

At least one thirteenth-century bishop, Oliver Sutton of Lincoln (1280–99), took care to ensure that the procedures for election were followed correctly.⁴⁰

The authority of the abess or prioress was frequently circumscribed by the presence of a master or *custos*, a guardian to whom the bishop could grant charge of the temporalities of the nunnery, partly no doubt in order to preserve the seclusion of the prioress from the secular world. We have already seen these male masters in both Benedictine houses and those which became Cistercian, though they are less frequently documented from the middle of the thirteenth century onwards.⁴¹ The extract from Nun Cotham quoted above indicates a position of some priority for the master, at least during a vacancy. The designation given to male guardians in Scottish Cistercian nunneries suggests that they enjoyed a certain amount of authority. At North Berwick we find mention of James, described on one occasion as master of the nuns and on another as prior. There was a master of the nuns at South Berwick, St Bothans, Haddington (where there was also a reference to a prior), Coldstream and Eccles. A charter of 1296 for Coldstream mentions, in this sequence, the master, prioress and nuns, and this may well reflect their descending importance in the hierarchy of the house.⁴² The chaplains within nunneries may have had some authority, and it has been suggested that it

was their own religious affiliations which influenced internal observances at female houses.⁴³ The group of influential English nunneries whose foundations date from before the Conquest rewarded their chaplains not with salaries but with prebends; they were canons of the nunneries holding property in the form of revenue from their appropriated churches.⁴⁴ Among the Gilbertines the power of the prioress was limited still further by the structure of the order. At its head, and a symbol of its unity, was the master. Next, scrutators oversaw the internal discipline of the houses, and in individual houses there were three prioresses who acted in rota. When one died a replacement had to be elected within fifteen days, or the master would impose his own choice. Women accordingly had some authority within individual houses and the order, but the organization was still one which recognized male superiority.⁴⁵

The obedientiaries

Autocratic though Benedict's abbot was, even the saint recognized that authority would have to be delegated. The Rule mentions the presence, in the monastery, of a prior, deans to assist the abbot in the management of the affairs of the house, a cellarer, who had charge of provisioning it, and monks charged with the care of guests, novices, the infirmary and the kitchen. By the late Anglo-Saxon period in accordance with the Rule of St Benedict, there were below the abbot in the structure of command within the community a provost or prior, who was concerned with economic and external affairs, and deans, who took charge of internal discipline.⁴⁶ The growth in the size of religious houses and their endowments led to a more complex structure of organization, with the appointment, by the abbot, of obedientiaries, monks with special responsibilities. In a large abbey there may have been fifteen, and perhaps as many as twenty. The chief obedientiary was the prior or sub-prior, to whom general oversight of the monastery would be given. In Lanfranc's constitutions there was also a claustral prior, in charge of internal discipline. Among his other tasks, he had to watch the brethren leave the church after compline and then 'take a dark lantern if it be night and go through the crypt and other such parts of the church as may harbour irregularity, through the cloister, also, chapter-house and other offices, looking carefully to see that no brother remain there who should not'.⁴⁷ In his vigilance the claustral prior was aided by roundsmen who patrolled the monastery, noting any fault which would be denounced in chapter.

The sacrist was responsible for the security and cleanliness of the church, and the provision of the vessels for the altar. The precentor or precentrix had to make sure that there were available the correct number

of liturgical books for the services, and with the succentor (succentrix) led the chant in church; and he or she generally also looked after the library. The novice-master or mistress prepared postulants for the taking of their vows, and the almoner distributed charity to the poor, sick and needy. This was an important function of the medieval religious house, and most almoners had a separate income which was used to care for both casual and long-term indigent, sometimes within the monastery or nunnery and sometimes outside. An almonry house was constructed at the abbeys of Abingdon and Evesham about 1125; and at Christ Church, Canterbury, it was the custom for the almoner to visit the poor and sick in their homes. Gerald of Wales stated that of all the Welsh Cistercians, the monks of Margam were most noted for their charitable works, and illustrated this point with the story of a miracle which occurred during a famine when a vast crowd of poor and needy had gathered outside the gates of the abbey and a boat had been sent by the monks to Bristol to buy corn to 'meet this demand on their charity'.⁴⁸ A number of obedientiaries were responsible for the material welfare of the monastic community, and chief among these was the cellarer (cellaress), who had charge of all the property, rents and revenues of the house, supervised the servants and, where they existed, the lay brothers and sisters, and bought supplies. The kitchenier overlooked the preparation of meals, and the infirmarian cared for the sick. At Christ Church, Canterbury, the chamberlain provided garments, shoes and bedding and cleaned the dormitory once a year. The disadvantage of the obedientiary system was that it led to the fragmentation both of authority and financial management, particularly when a monastery lacked a strong abbot. Jocelin of Brakelond's chronicle of life at Bury St Edmunds gives us a vivid picture of the growth of power of the obedientiaries, especially the cellarer and the sacrist, their rivalries, and the problems caused by their control of the revenues of their office. The financial implications of the system, which will be considered in a later chapter, were very great.

The religious community: monks, canons, nuns and novices

We have few fixed points in the period 1000–1300 which enable us to say how large any monastic community was. Abingdon had a population of twenty-eight in 1100, which had grown to seventy-eight only seventeen years later. St Albans numbered fifty in 1190 and double that twenty years later. Bury St Edmunds had between seventy and eighty monks in 1213, and a northern house, Whitby, thirty-six in 1148. Around 1235 it was proposed that Coldingham Priory should increase to thirty monks and a prior, but by the early fourteenth century it had dropped to seven. The

cathedral priory of Christ Church, Canterbury, housed one hundred monks in 1087, between 140 and 150 in c. 1125, and 140 in c. 1190. In the thirteenth century political and economic factors caused numbers to fluctuate: by 1207, in the aftermath of the long quarrels between the convent and two archbishops, Baldwin and Hubert Walter, numbers had fallen dramatically to seventy-seven; and in 1298, possibly in consequence of the support given by the monks to Archbishop Winchelsey against the king, there were fewer than thirty monks. At the very end of our period the convent was apparently beginning to increase once more, and by 1315 there were seventy-three monks.⁴⁹ Among the Cistercians, Rievaulx was at its height under Ailred, with 140 monks, but the more usual size for the larger Cistercian communities, like Rievaulx and Fountains, would have been between sixty and seventy. The more substantial Augustinian houses probably contained thirty or so canons, while smaller priories and nunneries probably struggled to maintain the apostolic number of twelve and a head which the Cistercians considered to be the minimum complement of a convent. It has been estimated that by the thirteenth century the total number of monks, canons, nuns, and members of the military orders was in the region of 18,000–20,000, or, at a rough calculation, one in every 150 of the population.⁵⁰

Benedict assumed that there would be two kinds of novice: those of mature years who came seeking admission to the religious life; and those who, as children, were offered to a monastery by their parents. Here the oblates received their education along with other aristocratic children until at the age of seventeen they made their vows of poverty, conversion to the religious life and obedience. Some oblates, like Eve of Wilton and Orderic Vitalis, took to the religious life; others, like the nun of Watton, did not. One of the first groups to set their minds against this practice were the Cistercians, who insisted that fifteen should be the minimum age for a novice, and that no boys were to be taught at the monastery except novices.⁵¹ The White Monks were closely followed in this attitude by the Carthusians. Their objection was not solely – as might at first appear – concern for the child and his or her freedom of choice, but also that the presence of children was a disruptive influence within the cloister. In Benedictine abbeys, too, oblates were already being restricted. Under their combined pressure, the class of oblate disappeared during the twelfth century, until by its close seventeen to nineteen years became the usual minimum age for a postulant, who then undertook the year-long noviciate prescribed by the Rule.⁵² The class of oblate was officially abolished at the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215. Literate adults, clerical and lay, came to be the usual recruit. However, a religious vocation of itself did not guarantee acceptance within a monastery or nunnery. A

poorly endowed house would not be able to maintain a large convent, and a lack of resources could mean that an abbey had only two or three vacancies for novices each year. It was a delicate task to balance the intake of recruits with the material means for their upkeep.

A Cistercian novice: St Ailred

Ailred of Rievaulx was no ordinary monk, but the account of his entry into a Cistercian monastery as a novice is not so exceptional, and contains details worthy of note as describing common practice. Ailred was the son of a hereditary priest of Hexham, Eilaf, who had been supplanted by the Augustinian canons installed in the ancient church by Archbishop Thomas II of York. His upbringing shows us how close were the contacts between the north of England and Scotland, for young Ailred became steward to that noted monastic founder, King David I. By the time he was sent on the king's business to York (c. 1134) Ailred had already thought of becoming a monk. He had, moreover, heard of the coming of the Cistercians to the North, and decided to visit Rievaulx Abbey, founded about three years before. When his mission was over he stayed at Helmsley Castle, seat of Rievaulx's founder, Walter Espec, before next day setting out for Scotland. He could not resist a second visit to the abbey, and here he was met once more by the prior, the guest-master, the gate-keeper and a number of monks. Having decided to become a monk he gave up all his goods and for four days was kept in the guest house to test his purpose. After that he was examined by the whole convent as to his vocation and was then allowed to proceed to the novice-house or probatorium, where he spent a year before making his written profession:

before the altar in the church in the presence of all, as the blessed Benedict commands. There he is vested with the sacred robe, that is the habit sanctified by the abbot's blessing, and henceforth is regarded as a member of the monastic body.⁵³

The personal qualities of Ailred ensured that he would not remain a simple monk, and he went on to be novice-master at Rievaulx (1142–3), first abbot of Revesby (1143–7), and then abbot of Rievaulx until his death in 1167. The story of his entry into Rievaulx, however, is instructive. It was conducted according to the letter of the Rule. Although a recent commentator on Ailred's conversion has argued that he received special attention – the 'extravagant' welcoming party, and the fact that he was not kept waiting at the gate for four days to test his purpose, as the Rule required, but allowed to retire to the guest house – and that his entry was smoothed by King David I and Archbishop Thurstan,⁵⁴ nevertheless it remains clear that there were no shortcuts, even for one so exalted.

Ailred is one of only a small group of men who entered the religious life whose social origins can be discovered: generally, the evidence we have allows us to identify only a handful of those who became monks, canons and nuns in the religious houses of Britain. But what we have suggests that a number – perhaps a considerable number – were drawn from the baronial and knightly class, or from among the burgesses of the towns. They were either literate or well-born or both.⁵⁵ We cannot claim that all monks and canons were educated, well-connected men, or that all nuns were high-born, but there is sufficient evidence to suggest that the monastic life in the twelfth century appealed to this type of novice, and was a respectable alternative to life within the world. There are numerous examples of important clergy as well as laity attracted to the monastic life, such as the dean and canon of York Minster, who entered Fountains in the 1130s and saved it from near extinction. Our examination of recruitment by the friars revealed entry by a wide spectrum of persons, including noted scholars. Ailred had been to school in Hexham and Durham. His great friend from his days in Scotland, Waldef, was educated at the court of his stepfather, King David I. Waldef chose the path of the Augustinians, becoming a canon of Nostell, and, at about the time Ailred entered Rievaulx, he was prior of the Espec foundation of Kirkham. Not without some backward glances Waldef converted to the Cistercian way of life and became abbot of King David I's foundation of Melrose, a daughter house of Rievaulx. Here indeed is a tight web of patronage and kinship.⁵⁶

Welsh novices

The pattern of the noviciate among the Welsh houses is complicated by the tendency to fragment along political lines; monastic houses were either Welsh (notably the Cistercian houses of the North and West) or Anglo-Norman/English (the Cistercian houses of the South, and the Augustinian and Benedictine priories). The analysis by F. G. Cowley has suggested that the former never attracted English entrants and the latter failed to find Welsh ones. The alien cells of the South were staffed, from what we can tell, by monks from the mother house, either French or English, although there was the odd exception: Iestin ap Gwrgant, prince of Glamorgan from 1081, was deposed and entered the priory of Llangenydd, a dependency of St Taurin, Evreux.⁵⁷ The seven conventual priories may have had some local recruits drawn from those connected with Anglo-Norman patrons and the sons of burgesses of Brecon, Monmouth and so on. They tended to be small houses, rarely (apart from Ewenni) reaching the figure of thirteen inmates. Only Goldcliff, the richest of the Welsh Benedictine priories, exceeded this number,

reaching twenty-five in 1295. Even this was thought to be beyond its resources, and in the following two years ten monks were removed.⁵⁸ The Augustinians, having no constitutional ties with English houses, recruited locally, but their composition was related to the realities of political power. Thus Carmarthen Priory was for a time in the early thirteenth century a Welsh house with a Welsh prior, but after the resurgence of English royal power under Henry III it became once more a house dominated by the English.

A complete contrast is presented by the Cistercians of north and west Wales, Welsh Wales. From what we can tell they drew their recruits from the sons of married priests (for example, Cadwgan, monk of Strata Florida and later abbot of Whitland) or from the leading Welsh families. David Williams has drawn our attention to a list of monks from Valle Crucis Abbey in 1275 which shows them all to have been Welsh; two-thirds of known monks of Aberconwy and the majority of those of Strata Florida and Llantarnam also have Welsh names. However, the question of the racial origin of the monks of Welsh religious houses cannot be oversimplified. The names of the 750 or so monks which are known to us range over a long period and are not evenly spread among monasteries. Moreover, the concentration of monks of undoubted Welsh origin in certain houses may have been simply the result of intensely local recruitment, rather than an indication of political or cultural loyalties. At least one northern house, Basingwerk, which lay near the Dee estuary, shows little evidence of Welshness, and indeed drew many of its novices from the Chester area. Like Margam Abbey in south Wales, Basingwerk apparently attracted entrants from a wider geographical area than some of the other houses.⁵⁹ Despite these reservations, however, the evidence indicates that until the Edwardian Conquest the majority of religious houses of north Wales were overwhelmingly Welsh in their recruitment, and that even after the 1280s the Celtic element remained dominant.

This raises a question of wider application: how much is it possible to know about the localities from which religious houses recruited? This is a notoriously difficult question to answer, since so few lists of monks, canons and nuns have survived. However, we may suggest that, allowing for the particular appeal of celebrated houses at certain times in their history, many religious houses may have recruited locally. The chronicle of the election of Abbot Hugh of Bury St Edmunds, mentioned earlier in this chapter, allows us to identify the geographical origins of a number of its monks. It has been suggested that, out of a total of seventy-one monks, forty-four or forty-five either have surnames which identify their place of origin, or can be located using other evidence. These locations are widely scattered geographically – one monk evidently came from Wales and

another, possibly, from Scotland. However, the vast majority hailed from Norfolk and Suffolk, the 'heartland of the cult of St Edmund'.⁶⁰ Bury was a prestigious house, and its celebrity may well have drawn recruits from further afield. What we know of more modest houses, and certainly of the small, post-Conquest nunneries, suggests that their intake was intensely local, thus cementing their place within the fabric of society.⁶¹

Lay brothers and sisters

The new orders of the eleventh and twelfth centuries owed some of their success to their incorporation into the community of a group who fell midway between the professed religious and the laity. The word *conversus* (*conversa*), once applied to an adult convert to the religious life, now described one who was not a monk or nun, yet was still under vows and a full member of the community. As we have seen, it was the Cistercian Order which first realized the potential of the lay brothers as an essential part of the administration of their abbeys and granges, but they were to be found, too, among the Carthusians and, with their female equivalents, among the Gilbertines and in nunneries which were described as Cistercian. In the twelfth century, lay brothers/sisters may well have outnumbered professed monks and nuns; certainly they did at Rievaulx, where the relative numbers during the time of Ailred (1147–67) were 140 (monks) and 500 (*conversi*). Their own accommodation was a distinctive feature of the architectural arrangements of the Cistercian, Carthusian and Gilbertine houses.

Lay folk within the house

Every monastery or nunnery would have contained a number of lay people: servants, guests and more permanent residents. A sizeable community would have required an army of servants to help with the agricultural and domestic tasks. Indeed, there were probably twice as many servants as monks, canons or nuns, except in Cistercian houses, where some manual work would have been undertaken by lay brethren, and Gilbertine houses, where there were lay sisters to undertake the preparation of food, cleaning, and other domestic duties as well as to serve female guests. Monastic servants performed all kinds of work necessary for the smooth running of a large establishment. Sometimes they make their appearance as witnesses to charters or in accounts. At Westminster the allowances from abbey income included portions set aside for the servants of the bakery, brewery, infirmary, kitchen, yard and vineyard, and other documents mention the servants, or serjeants of the almonry,

buttery, sacristy and vestibule. Some of the more prestigious lay offices could become hereditary: in 1209, for instance, Nicholas son of Geoffrey granted to Robert of Croxley and his heirs his office of summoner in Westminster Abbey, for twelve years. For this Robert paid 50s., and £5 when the grant was made permanent.⁶² At Shrewsbury each abbey servant had an allowance for the support of his horse as well as himself.⁶³

St Benedict had laid on his monks an obligation and a duty to provide hospitality; thus guests were also a permanent feature of life in a monastery, especially those which lay in urban centres or, like St Albans, on major routes, or where relics and shrines attracted large numbers of pilgrims. Guests, who were usually entertained at the abbot's table, might bring with them a retinue of servants and followers who also had to be accommodated and horses to be stabled. Jocelin describes for us the custom at Bury: the abbot received all guests, whatever their status, except monks and clerics. If the abbot was not at home, the guests were to be received by the cellarer, and the maximum number of horses they were to bring was thirteen; if they brought more than this number, the remainder were to be charged to the expense of the abbot. The cellarer entertained all clerical guests, including bishops, and the expense fell on the convent unless the abbot chose to invite selected guests to his own table. However, there could evidently be some divergence from this practice, for when the archbishop of Norway visited Bury during the period after the death of Abbot Hugh (1181) he stayed in the abbot's lodging, and the king, out of the revenue he was enjoying as a result of the vacancy, made him an allowance of 10s. a day.⁶⁴

In addition to guests and pilgrims, there was in many abbeys and priories a special class of lay folk known as *corrodians*, composed of a variety of persons. They could be monastic servants, provided with a *corrody*, that is, board and lodging, as a supplement to their wages, or with similar maintenance after their retirement. *Corrodians* could also be former officials and servants of the Crown, imposed on the house by a king eager to reward past service; royal grants of monastic *corrodies* became increasingly common – and often burdensome – during the thirteenth century. *Corrodies* could also be purchased by lay persons. Perhaps for a sum of money, more frequently for the transfer of a parcel of land, a monastery or nunnery would undertake to provide board and lodging for the rest of the grantor's life. One example, from Shrewsbury, will suffice to illustrate this practice. In 1272 the abbot reached an agreement with Adam of Bispham and his wife, by which each day for the rest of their lives they were to receive two loaves from the convent, three gallons of ale 'of the better sort', one dish of food from the abbot's table, and when he was at home, two; their servant and maid were to have two

of the loaves allotted to abbey servants, two gallons of less good ale, and one of the servants' dishes; each year Adam was to receive a robe, like those worn by the more important of the abbey servants, and his wife 10s. to purchase a gown; Adam was to receive the same allowance towards a horse as an abbey servant; in addition they were to have, for the rest of their lives, the house which was formerly given to Stephen de Stanleg and his wife, and when one of them died, the corrody was to be reduced by a half. For all this, the two promised their movable goods to the abbey after their death.⁶⁵ It can be seen that corrodiess posed an even greater potential burden than hospitality on the resources of a house, particularly one meagrely endowed. Bishops' registers of the thirteenth century warn the religious orders to be circumspect. Often those who could least afford it fell into the trap of accepting ready money to eke out poor finances, only to find themselves supporting a corrodian, and maybe his family and servants, for years to come.

MONASTIC DISCIPLINE

The White Monks and their emulators

Within all religious houses there existed some way of detecting and correcting faults, both in the regular confession by individuals, privately and in chapter, and in the activities of the claustral prior of Christ Church, Canterbury and his roundsmen and their counterparts elsewhere. The White Monks took things a step further, and one of their great achievements, adopted and adapted by their emulators, was the creation of a machinery for the maintenance of monastic discipline. Not content to lay down the rules and regulations for observance, they made sure that these could be enforced by the dual method of annual visitation of each house by the abbot of its mother house, and the attendance of all abbots of the order at the general chapter of Cîteaux. The latter became the forum for the disciplining of abbots, discussion of decisions affecting the order as a whole, and passing legislation. How far were these obligations met? The evidence does not allow us to say for certain with what degree of diligence the British abbots attended the general chapter; there are, for instance, no records of attendance. Clearly to be present at the general chapter would have taken them away from their houses for a considerable period. The abbot of Basingwerk in north Wales would have needed to allow five weeks for the return journey – about a week longer than his counterpart at Tintern.⁶⁶ Added to the time the journey took there was the expense, which would have made quite an impact on the finances of some of the smaller and poorer houses of the order. From 1157 the

Scottish abbots, few in number, received permission to attend only every four years.⁶⁷ Although a petition was sent by the Welsh abbots in 1209 asking that one representative alone might be allowed to attend, this request was denied, and throughout our period it was assumed that the abbots of all English and Welsh houses would be there. Not until 1305 were they required to attend only every second year.

Abbots can be assumed to have been at the chapter when they were the recipients of commissions to investigate matters or when they themselves were involved in a dispute. Roger of Byland was there in 1149 when the issue of the filiation of Jervaulx was decided, and it was doubtless also in the chapter that Ailred of Rievaulx, to whom the case of Byland against Furness was delegated, delivered his judgement in the presence of a good many British abbots.⁶⁸ On the other hand, some evidence for non-attendance derives from the records of the general chapter. In 1190 the abbots of Quarr and Stanley did not appear and were placed by the chapter on punishment for three days. In 1195 the abbots of Combermere and Rievaulx failed to attend, and in 1198 those of Ford and Furness. The evidence has been variously interpreted. Knowles considered that in the twelfth century attendance was at an acceptable level, while more recently Hill claims to detect a serious falling-off of attendance, in which the Savigniac abbots were the worst offenders.⁶⁹ While the nature of the records means that our knowledge is incomplete, it has to be said that, bearing in mind the number of English and Welsh houses by 1200 (over eighty), there is no evidence of serious neglect. Circumstances in the thirteenth century were perhaps a little more difficult. Petitions to be excused were made by Neath in 1267, Margam in 1271, Whitland in 1278, and Tintern, Strata Florida, Caerleon and Strata Marcella in 1281. The difficulty of attendance in the latter year may well have been connected with the Edwardian conquest of Wales.⁷⁰ The British abbots as a whole had trouble in attending during the last years of the thirteenth century. In 1298 King Edward I forbade any Cistercian abbot to go to the chapter, or to send money. For some time the considerable expense for Cîteaux in accommodating several hundred abbots and attendants had been offset by a contribution levied on each abbey. It was the sending abroad of funds which might fall into the hands of his enemies, as much as the attendance at chapter, which concerned the king. Edward repeated his prohibition on a number of occasions, but this did not end all contact; individual abbots were able to obtain royal permission to attend, but a limit was placed on their expenses.⁷¹

The faults of individual abbots and communities could be reported to chapter, and action taken. Thus visitors sent in 1188 by the general chapter deposed the abbots of Tintern, Bordesley and Dore; in 1195 they

removed the abbot of Garendon and in 1199 another head of Bordesley.⁷² Another problem which emerges from the records of the general chapter is that from the late twelfth century onwards the order as a whole was having trouble with its lay brethren. In 1196 the abbot of Whitland was ordered to investigate problems in his daughter house of Strata Florida caused by the *conversi*, and in 1206 there were serious problems at Margam. Two conflicting accounts exist; the official one blamed the lay brethren for 'conspiracy', pursuing the abbot, barricading themselves in their dormitory and refusing food to the monks. However, Gerald of Wales, though his testimony is not unbiased, lays the blame firmly at the door of the abbot.⁷³ The problem of lack of discipline among the lay brethren was not confined to Wales, for at Garendon the lay brethren attacked and wounded the new abbot, Reginald, while he was in the infirmary. The motive for their assault may have been the abbot's attempts to get to grips with a problem which had plagued his predecessor, namely excessive beer-drinking among the lay brethren. As a result of the incident the chapter ordered the *conversi* to be sent to other monasteries throughout the country.⁷⁴ What we see here are localized instances of more general dissatisfaction among the Cistercian lay brothers about their standing within the order.

Equally hard to determine is the evidence for visitation, for which there are no systematic records. What is certain is that in the years of great expansion the burden which this obligation imposed must have been intolerable, if not impossible, for the major mother houses of Waverley, Fountains and Rievaulx, to say nothing of the continental mothers, Clairvaux and Savigny. The problem was addressed by the *Carta Caritatis Posterior* (a form of the *Carta Caritatis* which came into existence between 1165 and 1190), which allowed an abbot to appoint another as proxy to visit in his stead. Surviving references suggest that visitations may have come to be associated with particular problems encountered by a daughter house. In the mid 1160s Ailred visited Dundrennan 'to visit and comfort' the house, and in the same sentence Walter Daniel speaks of a war raging in the area.⁷⁵ In emulation of the system created by the White Monks, the Premonstratensians, the Gilbertines and the mendicants all incorporated elements of the chapter and visitation. In the Gilbertine hierarchy, directly below the master were three male scrutators (two canons and one lay brother) who visited each house once a year, and three female scrutators (two nuns and one lay sister) who visited all female houses; there were also scrutators of the cloister responsible for the detection of day-to-day faults. The only check on the power of the master was the annual general chapter which comprised all six scrutators, the general confessor, the prior and cellarer of each monastery and two

prioresses from each house. These, together with a third nun, canon and lay sister from each house, were entrusted with the election of four canons, who in turn chose nine more to help select a new master.⁷⁶

The Benedictines and Augustinians and the introduction of provincial chapters

The Lateran Council of 1215 ushered in an era of monastic reform. It put an end to the proliferation of new orders and recognized the existence of the friars. Moreover it tackled the problems posed by the autonomy of the houses of Black Monks and Black Canons: in particular, the bull *In Singulis Regnis* established the principle of three-yearly meetings of heads of houses, modelled on the Cistercian general chapter. In England there were to be meetings in the northern and southern provinces. In the South the opening meeting was at Oxford in 1218 under the presidency of the abbots of Bury St Edmunds and St Albans, assisted by the Cistercian abbots of Thame and Warden. The northern provincial chapter met first at Northallerton in 1221. Both tackled matters such as the limitation of abbatial expenses, the prohibition of private possessions by monks, and dietary regulations. On the whole, however, we have little record of any further activities for many years.⁷⁷ There were similar developments among the Augustinian canons. A provincial chapter was held at Leicester in 1216 under the auspices of two Premonstratensians from Welbeck and Croxton. A further chapter was held at Bedford, probably in 1220; thereafter the northern and southern provinces met separately.⁷⁸ For the northern province we have a fairly complete set of decisions of the chapters from 1223 to 1302.⁷⁹ The difficulties faced by the abbots and priors acting in chapter are amply demonstrated by the attempt to distil the customaries of all the houses into a single code. In 1265 when the chapter met at Worksop, a resolution was passed that representatives from seven leading houses should meet at Drax with a written record of the customs of all houses; from these the best were to be selected. The *Statuta de Parco*, taking their name from the Yorkshire house of Healaugh Park, were probably drawn up soon afterwards. However, they were not accepted by all, and still in 1288 protests were being heard against this effort to enforce universal observance over local custom. One argument raised was that the chapter had exceeded its powers and ought to confine itself to matters to do with the observance of the Rule of St Augustine.⁸⁰

Episcopal visitation

Throughout the period before 1215 a bishop had enjoyed, in canon law, the right to visit the religious houses of his dioceses; and we have isolated

instances in the eleventh and twelfth centuries of a bishop intervening in their affairs. There were several exceptions, however, to the bishops' right to visit. They were excluded from visitation of the houses of the 'exempt' orders, that is, the Cistercians, Premonstratensians and Gilbertines, of the Cluniacs, who were directly under the authority of the pope, and individual Benedictine houses which had secured the rights of exemption. By 1215 these were St Albans, St Augustine's, Canterbury, Battle, Westminster, Bury St Edmunds, Malmesbury and Evesham.⁸¹ However, it was not until the thirteenth century that episcopal intervention became formalized: in particular the twelfth decree of the Lateran Council of 1215 ordered bishops to make strenuous attempts to improve the monastic houses of their dioceses. From 1215 the right of visitation was accordingly sharpened, and became, moreover, a visible symbol of episcopal power to reform.⁸² From the mid thirteenth century onwards episcopal visitations became common, their records being particularly fruitful among the registers of the northern metropolitan, York. When studying the evidence of visitation, however, we must remember its limitations. The geographical extent of many English dioceses – notably Lincoln and York – meant that visitation could be a difficult and time-consuming exercise, and few houses were visited regularly.⁸³ Moreover, by the very nature of the occasion a bishop made note of the bad rather than the good or the ordinary (although in isolated cases a house might receive a 'gold star' for achievement, as the Augustinian priory of Newstead did in 1252). The visitation process was designed to root out faults, great and small. One example must suffice to demonstrate its nature and process.

*The visitations of Archbishop Wickwane, 1280–1*⁸⁴

In 1280 and 1281 over a period of just a few months, Archbishop Wickwane of York (1279–85) visited twenty-three religious houses in his large diocese, and appointed delegates to investigate three others on his behalf. The injunctions which he issued after each visitation reveal his meticulous concern for every aspect of monastic observance. At four houses all was well: there was no need for action at Whitby, St Mary's, York, Warter and Nostell 'because they conduct themselves well in all things'. Elsewhere there are repeated instructions which betray some common problems, not all of them serious and most to be expected in small, closely knit communities. One frequent suspicion was that monks, canons and nuns were in possession of private property, in contravention of the Rule. Sometimes, as at Nun Appleton, a general prohibition against private possessions was made; on other occasions specific instructions were laid down. The priors of Newburgh and Worksop were charged with the inspection of chests and carrels (individual workrooms around

the cloister) and with breaking open locks four times a year to see that no private possessions were being kept; the prior of Healaugh Park was to see that his canons received only gifts of clothes and shoes and not money. There is evidence at Newburgh, Bolton and Kirkham that the canons were not attentive at the services, and were inclined to rush through the chant in an undignified manner. The rule of silence was not being maintained at Worksop and Healaugh Park and, in the latter, rules about the eating of meat were not being observed. Wickwane was clearly worried about the way canons and monks were associating with guests, or leaving the house without permission. The canons of Newburgh were ordered not to wander around the cloister after compline in search of food and drink, either to consume alone or with guests; no woman was to be admitted into the house, with a single exception – the wife of the patron was allowed to stay for one night only; there was to be no hunting or other expeditions from the house. The canons of Healaugh Park were warned against allowing women to stay, and against going out after compline; canons of Bolton who went out without special permission were to be put on bread and water for a day. The nuns of Nun Appleton were not to leave the house or receive strangers in the refectory and cloister. Wickwane realized that some absences from the house were legitimate, but he was still concerned about their possible dangers, and at Thurgarton he stated that no canon was to be away for more than two weeks. The injunctions showed a number of houses in a state of poverty and warned against the granting of corrodies (Healaugh Park, Drax, Worksop), the entertaining of expensive guests (Worksop) and the reception of more novices (Bridlington). They also laid down stricter rules for financial management (Newburgh, Healaugh Park, Bolton, Nun Appleton).

Several visitations made complaints about individuals. A canon of Bolton was sent to undergo penance at Hexham. The sub-prior of Drax was deposed because he was ill-tempered, made no attempt to get on with his fellow canons, and was too fond of staying in bed. At the same house it was ordered that Hugh of Ricall, a quarrelsome canon, was not to hold office. Elias, the sub-cellarer, was too much inclined to wander off, and was ordered to stay in the church and the cloister. But by far the most serious problems were found at Selby, where the visitation revealed a veritable catalogue of faults in the abbot. He did not observe the Rule of St Benedict, did not sing mass, preach, instruct, attend chapter or correct faults. He rarely ate in the refectory, never slept in the dormitory, was hardly ever out of bed in time for matins, and ate meat in the company of lay men both on the abbey manors and in the monastery itself. He treated the monks badly, was contentious, alienated abbey property without

consent and in so doing had caused considerable financial losses. He appointed favourites as obedientaries and to oversee manors, men who were unsuitable to the task. He stood accused of immoral behaviour with a local woman and with the daughter of a man called Bodeman who resided by the abbey gate; the second woman was alleged to have had the abbot's child. He was not just immoral: he was violent, and had attacked William of York, William of Stormworth, whom he threw out of chapter, and a clerk named Thomas of Snaith. Finally, and the most bizarre accusation, he had spent a great deal of money on employing a sorcerer to locate the body of his brother, who had drowned in the river Ouse. Abbot Thomas was deposed and sent to Durham to undergo penance.

The time period spanned by this study is a wide one, and in 1300 we are far removed from the forty or so houses of Anglo-Saxon England, autonomous, bound by a common rule, but following local custom too. Few generalizations can be made, but we may ask how distinctive the houses of different orders and congregations were perceived to be, in their daily life and observances. It has already been suggested that to an outsider the divergences might not have seemed great. What were the everyday differences between a small Cistercian abbey and a Premonstratensian house? Or between a modest house of Black Monks and one of Black Canons? Or a Cistercian and a Benedictine nunnery? We can suggest that at the close of our period the divergences were less. The White Monks and Canons were perhaps, through political pressure, loosening their ties with France. By their constitutional developments the Black Monks and Canons were moving closer to the White. In the twelfth century, to be sure, differences were perceived, even if some were becoming stereotyped. Gerald of Wales for one was quite certain that 'Augustinian canons are more content than any of the others with a humble and modest mode of life'.⁸⁵ He could distinguish the Cluniacs and the Cistercians and be clear, in his own mind, of their faults and their good points.⁸⁶ Although he wrote in a satirical mode not uncommon in the twelfth century, Gerald was an exceptional observer. He was a natural story teller, had an eye for description, and was well travelled among the religious houses of Wales. He also had old scores to settle which naturally coloured his tales. Nevertheless, there are occasions when his observations harmonize with those of others. His description of the moderation of the life of the regular canons surely recalls, in a quite different tone, the life of Waldef, the saintly Augustinian who, having converted to be a Cistercian, found the harshness of the way of life, the dullness of the food, the monotony of the services and the exacting manual work almost more than he could bear.