

2 The Cistercian Order 1200–1600

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In his *Exordium Magnum*, composed between 1206 and 1221,¹ Conrad of Eberbach saw in the wonderful history of the Cistercian Order an example of the providence of God.² During the thirteenth century the Order was greatly admired. The Frankish lords of the new Latin Empire of Constantinople were generous benefactors,³ though the hope of successful proselytism among the Orthodox proved illusory.⁴ Ruling houses often chose Cistercian abbeys as burial places for their dynasties.⁵ In 1228 King Louis IX of France founded the Cistercian abbey of Royaumont near one of his castles, for members of the royal family other than the kings themselves.⁶ The remains of Pribislav, the first Christian ruler of Pomerania, were translated to the abbey of Doberan by his son Borwin around 1219.⁷ Mariensee/Chorin was founded in 1258 as a burial place for the younger line of the Ascanian margraves of Brandenburg.⁸ In 1291 King Wenceslas II of Bohemia founded the Cistercian abbey of Zbraslav (Aula Regia) as the necropolis of his dynasty.⁹

Most spectacular was the increase in houses for Cistercian women. 'The religious movement of women of the Cistercian Order', wrote Jacques de Vitry, a contemporary, 'increased to infinity like the stars of heaven.'¹⁰ Local studies confirm Jacques's enthusiasm. In 1234, for instance, the archbishop of Cologne approved the foundation of a house of Cistercian nuns at Duissern near Duisburg. It was to be for thirteen nuns, a number which was not to be exceeded. Already in 1237 the archbishop agreed to twenty-five. In 1240, six years after its foundation, there were enough sisters in Duissern for the foundation of a daughter house.¹¹

Competition with the mendicants made it imperative for the Order to modernise. As the Englishman Stephen of Lexington, successively abbot of Stanley, Savigny and, after 1243, Clairvaux, wrote, 'For the last thirteen years no prominent scholar, especially in biblical studies, has joined us. Those now in the Order are growing old, and advancing along the way of all flesh.'¹² The answer, Stephen was convinced, was for Cistercians to study at the universities.

Since 1224 the abbey of Clairvaux had possessed a little property in Paris. In 1237 the General Chapter sanctioned the residence there of some student monks from various abbeys.¹³ In 1245 the General Chapter confirmed the *Studium* at Paris begun by the abbot of Clairvaux.¹⁴ In 1247 a plot of land for more ample premises was acquired and the students were in place by 1250. There seems, however, to have been considerable opposition to this innovation within the Order. In 1256 Stephen was deposed, and ended his life in retirement at the abbey of Ourscamp.¹⁵ The *Studium* survived, however. In 1320 it was sold to the abbey of Cîteaux¹⁶ and became a recognised house of studies for the whole Order to which the larger abbeys were obliged to send their most promising subjects. Eventually houses for study were also opened in Toulouse, Montpellier, Salamanca, Metz, Bologna and Oxford.¹⁷

The adoption by the thirteenth-century Cistercians of the new Gothic style was another example of their determination to be up to date. The wide proportions, low vaults and shallow sanctuaries of their twelfth-century churches were abandoned. The change was spectacularly evident at Rievaulx in north Yorkshire, England, where a low twelfth-century nave, probably covered, like the aisles, by a barrel vault, led into soaring transepts and a chancel, seven bays long, covered by cross-vaulting.¹⁸ In central Italy the three most spectacular Cistercian churches built in the French Gothic manner are Fossanova consecrated in 1208, Casamari, 1217, and San Galgano (now a ruin), which was being built throughout most of the thirteenth century.¹⁹ In northern Europe churches were built in brick. Cistercian examples in Germany are Chorin in Brandenburg and Doberan in Pomerania.²⁰ The latter has an apse surrounded by an ambulatory with radiating chapels, like a French cathedral.

The thirteenth century began with a quarrel between the Order and Pope Innocent III.²¹ Invoking their exemptions, the monks made difficulties about a financial contribution to the pope's planned crusade. Innocent threatened to revoke their privileges. By July 1201 a generous grant from the Order had mollified him. Thereafter it enjoyed papal favour. In 1215 the Fourth Lateran Council decreed that in each ecclesiastical province, Benedictine abbots who had no superiors should hold occasional General Chapters, and that initially two Cistercian abbots, experienced as they were in such meetings, might guide their proceedings.²² Cistercians came to be regarded as experts in monasticism. Between 1220 and 1245 they took over twenty-five communities from other Orders. Most of these were affiliated to the line of Clairvaux.²³

The General Chapter codified its binding legislation in 1202, 1237, 1257, 1316 and 1340.²⁴ The codes were efficiently arranged according to subjects or *distinctiones*, a list of which appeared at the beginning of each volume. The text of each *distinctio* was preceded by a list of contents. Modern editions have indices, but for most purposes the original arrangement remains the easiest to use.

The codifications are evidence of clear thinking at the centre of the Order, but the rivalry between the abbots of Cîteaux and Clairvaux always stood in the way of smooth government. The most serious crisis was in 1263–5.²⁵ The quarrel was about appointments to the *diffinitorium*, a steering committee of the General Chapter. Even Pope Clement IV's bull *Parvus fons* of 1265 did not quite settle the matter. It required the intervention of a papal legate to effect a compromise. The abbot of Cîteaux would appoint four abbots of his choice; each of the other four proto-abbots might nominate two abbots whom the abbot of Cîteaux could not veto. They could nominate three more, of whom the abbot of Cîteaux was to reject one.²⁶

Finance was another source of friction within the Order. When the General Chapter met, the visiting abbots were accommodated at Cîteaux. To house several hundred abbots was a considerable burden for the mother house. In 1189 Richard I of England donated the church of Scarborough to help with the expenses.²⁷ There were also benefactions from other rulers, and annual pensions from some of the richer abbeys. None of this covered all the costs. Moreover the Order was burdened with other financial demands. The popes wanted support for their crusades against the Hohenstaufen. By the end of the thirteenth century kings were successful in exacting money from the religious Orders. To meet ever-increasing demands the Cistercians had to devise a system of taxation for all their abbeys. By the early fourteenth century each one had been assessed on a sliding scale according to its revenues and the needs of the Order. The collections remained an unpopular feature of Cistercian life for the rest of the Middle Ages, but until the end of the 1340s they were relatively successful.²⁸

During the fourteenth century the General Chapter gradually lost authority and prestige. In 1340 it was prepared to excuse poor attendance 'because of the danger on the roads'; no doubt on account of the war between England and France. In 1349 the Black Death was recognised as a more than sufficient reason for absence.²⁹ The origins of the trouble, however, went further back. Abbots at a distance from Cîteaux were already excused attendance every year.³⁰ Such abbots, unfamiliar with procedures and personalities, might not find the long journey

worth while. Domination by a steering committee of insiders would make things worse. In 1356 only twenty-three abbots attended the General Chapter; in the next year there were twenty-four. By this time the assembly had lost all authority. Already in 1341/2, to the dismay of the General Chapter, the English abbots had met to regulate their own affairs, an arrangement tacitly approved in 1357.³¹ During the papal schism of 1378–1415 there were two General Chapters recognised by rival popes.³²

The fourteenth century was a time of plague and wars. A certain loss of confidence in the religious life was noticeable. Many religious houses fell into troubles from which they never emerged.³³ Cistercian abbots began to live outside their monasteries. In 1342 seven of them, including the abbot of Cîteaux, were residing at the Order's college in Paris.³⁴ Even more damaging was the system of *commendam* whereby the pope, and later on local rulers, could appoint anyone, even a layman, to be an abbot.³⁵ With some exceptions, these absentee superiors were interested only in their revenues. Many communities decayed and eventually dwindled to almost nothing. In January 1532 Edme de Saulieu, abbot of Clairvaux, visited the abbey of Franquevaux in southern France. Its commendator, a canon of Nîmes, did not show up. The buildings were dilapidated. There were assorted fowls in the cloister, sheep in the chapter house, cows in the parlour and pigs in the noviciate. The community consisted of three irregular religious. On the morning of Dom Edme's visitation one of them had left early to hunt rabbits, another was out looking for eggs.³⁶

The austere Cistercian pope Benedict XII (1334–42)³⁷ wanted to restore standards, especially in his own Order, but his plan, borrowed from the Dominicans, to allow representatives of each community to attend the General Chapter with the abbots met with vehement opposition from the latter and had to be withdrawn.³⁸ The bull *Fulgens* (1335)³⁹ made provisions about debt, finance, visitations and attendance at the General Chapter. It regulated studies in the Order, confirming the *Studia* in Paris and elsewhere. Known as the *statuta papalia*, the bulls *Parvus fons* and *Fulgens* replaced the older texts as the legal basis for Cistercian life during the later Middle Ages.⁴⁰

Reform was more effective when it was localised and involved a smaller number of houses. The women showed the way. The expansion of women's houses in the thirteenth century had taken the Order by surprise. Abbots were afraid to take responsibility for so many new houses. The General Chapter often forbade the incorporation of houses for women into the Order, although at other times individual houses

were recognised. The Order's policies were far from consistent.⁴¹ By 1300 there were numerous monasteries for women which followed Cistercians customs but did not officially belong to the Order.

Whether incorporated or not, houses for women often acted together. The best-known association is the one dependent on the abbey of Tart (Côte-d'Or, France). The abbey was founded by Stephen Harding and it followed the Cistercian customs although it never formed part of the Order. Its eighteen daughter houses met for an annual General Chapter under the joint presidency of the abbess and the abbot of Cîteaux. The records of these meetings are sparse. All but one of the surviving statutes date from the thirteenth century. Tart and its daughters may be regarded as the earliest of the Cistercian congregations.⁴²

In Castile a congregation of Cistercian women's houses came into being through the will of Alfonso VIII (1158–1214). In 1187 he had founded the abbey of Las Huelgas near Burgos, and ordained that its nuns should follow the Cistercian rule. At his request the General Chapter at Cîteaux agreed that the Cistercian abbesses of Leon and Castile should meet annually at Las Huelgas to discuss their common affairs and enforce discipline. Two such meetings took place in 1189 but some abbesses came only under pressure from the king and in later years they refused to attend.⁴³

In Flanders the three houses for women founded by Bartholomew of Tienen: Bloemendaal (Florival) near Nivelles, Maagdendaal (Val-des-Vierges) near Tienen and its daughter house of Nazareth near Lierre, together with La Ramée near Tienen, appear to have worked closely together.⁴⁴ Bartholomew's daughter Beatrice (the future mystic, d. 1268) became a novice at Bloemendaal. Her superiors sent her to La Ramée to learn calligraphy. We next hear of her at Maagdendaal. From there she was sent to the newly founded house of Nazareth.⁴⁵ Abbess Gertrud of Hackeborn, superior of Helfta in Saxony during its golden age (1252–92), was also for a time abbess of the nearby house of St Gertrud in Hadersleben, and for most of the thirteenth century relations between the two houses remained close.⁴⁶

Formal federations for the men came into being during the fifteenth century. The *Colligatio Galilaeensis* was a gathering of very strict Cistercian houses in the Netherlands strongly influenced by the *Devotio moderna*. Its constitutions were drawn up in 1418. Communities were small. The monks lived in poverty and isolation. To emphasise humility, superiors were known as priors not abbots. Communities avoided using the word 'chapter' for their meetings.⁴⁷ More controversial was the reform associated with Martin Vargas in Castile. A former confessor

of Pope Martin V, he became a Cistercian and with papal permission founded some hermitages where the Cistercian customs were strictly observed. In 1437 papally approved statutes formed them into a congregation completely independent of the Cistercian General Chapter. The outraged Cistercian authorities excommunicated Vargas, who died in a monastic prison.⁴⁸ His congregation, however, survived and flourished.

It should not be supposed that only houses in these and similar congregations were observant. Exempt by papal privilege from the *commendam*, Cîteaux, Clairvaux and other great abbeys maintained their high standards.⁴⁹ During a long period of office Jean de Cirey, abbot of Cîteaux (1476–1501), made determined efforts to reform the Order, predictably hampered by a long-running feud with Pierre de Virey, abbot of Clairvaux (1471–96).⁵⁰ A number of late medieval Cistercians were involved in public affairs. Richard Stradell, abbot of Dore in Hertfordshire, England (1305–46), was sent by Edward III on embassies to Scotland and France.⁵¹ In 1423 John of Hallis, abbot of Balmerino in Scotland, was a member of the embassy sent to England to negotiate the release of King James I. It was the beginning of a distinguished diplomatic and legal career.⁵² In Florence Cistercians played a part in the administration of the city. After 1259 a monk of the abbey of Settimo was one of the officers who kept the communal accounts. In the fourteenth century a Cistercian and a *Humiliato* took charge of the city's seal. The chapel in the Palazzo Vecchio was dedicated to St Bernard.⁵³ Dante's veneration for the saint is well known:

... vidi un sene
vestito con le genti gloriose.
Diffuso era per gli occhi e per le gene
di benigna letizia, in atto pio,
quale a tenero padre si conviene.⁵⁴

('I saw an old man clothed like those in glory, benign joy shone out of his eyes and features, his gestures were gentle, as befits a tender father.') It is Bernard who explains to the poet the different states of bliss in heaven and prepares him for the beatific vision.⁵⁵

Cistercian charities were impressive. During the great European famine of 1315–17, according to a contemporary, Cistercian abbeys in France ruined themselves by giving relief to the crowds⁵⁶ which flocked to them for help. There were still traditional monasteries in which the spiritual life flourished. In the middle years of the fourteenth century Guillaume de Digulleville (c. 1295–after 1358), a monk of Chaalis, wrote the *Pèlerinage de la vie humaine*, in which he compared human life to

the journey of a pilgrim to Jerusalem.⁵⁷ It was very influential and popular, as numerous manuscript copies and translations show.⁵⁸ Another much-read treatise was the *Malogranatum* ('The Pomegranate'), produced, most probably, in the Bohemian abbey of Zbraslav at the end of the fourteenth century. The author discussed the three traditional stages of union with God and advised frequent communion, as demanded by many of the Bohemian laity at the time.⁵⁹

Among the nuns the traditional concept of Jesus as spouse was spectacularly developed.⁶⁰ A noteworthy feature of the women mystics was their pastoral concern. The charity of Ida of Leeuw (d. 1260) extended beyond the cloister.⁶¹ Of Beatrice of Nazareth (d. 1268) we read that 'Persons of various ages, conditions, and professions were to be seen daily coming with their needs to the blessed woman.'⁶² Gertrud of Helfta (1256–1302) translated portions of the Bible into the vernacular. She was always ready to interrupt her meditations to support someone prey to temptation, comfort the bereaved or help the needy.⁶³

There were few ways for the women to make their writings and activities widely known. Their influence during the Middle Ages was very localised. This changed with the invention of printing. In 1536 the *Exercises* of Gertrud of Helfta were printed by the Carthusians of Cologne. Ten further editions of her works, some translated into Italian, French and German, followed in the sixteenth century, published in Cologne, Venice, Paris and Madrid. A Spanish translation was published in Salamanca in 1601. Further editions continued until the twentieth century.⁶⁴

The Reformation deprived the Order of all its houses in northern Europe. Of those that remained many were demoralised, and the Council of Trent at first made little difference. In 1561 and 1579 visitations of Cistercian houses in central, southern and northern Italy revealed dilapidated buildings and monasteries with few or no inhabitants. The formation of congregations in Italy, Spain and Portugal brought about slow improvements. Characteristics of these organisations were: superiors elected for a limited term (to exclude commendators), annual General Chapters which appointed visitors and even moved monks from one house to the other, and common noviciates. Relations with Cîteaux were formal.⁶⁵

A spectacular reform movement was that of Jean de la Barrière (1544–1600).⁶⁶ As a student in Paris he came under the influence of a devout priest. Since the age of eighteen he had been commendatory abbot of the Cistercian abbey of Feuillant near Toulouse, and in 1573 he decided to become a monk there and to introduce reform. He

made a short retreat at a nearby abbey, took the monastic habit and was later ordained. At Feuillant resistance to his reforms was fierce, and in 1577 he was forced to leave for Toulouse, where he made his name as a preacher. A local bishop gave him the abbatial blessing. Thereupon he returned to Feuillant. The refractory monks were persuaded to leave and a new community came into being, marked by extraordinary penances which owed nothing to Cistercian tradition, of which Jean was largely ignorant. Papal approval came in 1581 and 1586. The Feuillants were freed from the authority of the Cistercian General Chapter and authorised to found new houses. A branch for women came into being in 1588. At a General Chapter of the new congregation held under papal auspices in 1590 the more bizarre penances were abandoned.

Near the end of his life Jacques de Thérines, the Cistercian abbot of Chaalis near Paris (1308–17), wrote to the pope about the life of the White Monks. They kept, he said, very exactly the threefold vows made by all Benedictines. They were strictly enclosed, their nourishment was sparse, they were devoted to prayer and devout reading. They were meticulous in celebrating the divine office. They found time during the day for manual labour. They were generous to the poor. They held study in high regard and had teachers at the major universities. Discipline was maintained by an efficient system of visitation.⁶⁷

Jacques was no Bernard, but his was a noble vision. Very many religious houses in the late Middle Ages failed to live up to it. In the worst of times, however, there were still large Cistercian communities where it was a lived reality. It was a guide to men of the calibre of Stephen of Lexington, Pope Benedict XII and Jean de Cirey. It inspired visionaries like Beatrice of Nazareth and Gertrud of Helfta.

Notes

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