

Unit 1: Before Cîteaux:

The Rule of St Benedict and the spread of Benedictine monasticism

The Rule of St Benedict was the basis of monastic life in medieval Europe. There have been a number of editions and translations but that by Justin McCann (London, 1989) is very accessible. It is important to gain a thorough understanding of the *Rule* (RSB) because the Cistercians claimed to return to the *Rule* stripped of accretions that it had acquired over the centuries.

On Moodle you will find a web link to a site that contains a copy of the Rule.

The Rule

The *Rule* was written by Benedict of Nursia some time between 535 and his death in c. 550, for his own house at Monte Cassino, in Italy. It was only one of a number of such rules to be compiled in the fifth and sixth centuries, when writers in Gaul and Italy imbibed, pondered on, and adapted, notions of the monastic life that spread from the East where it had originated. One of these writers was John Cassian, whom you will find mention of in the *Rule*. Cassian visited the hermit communities of the East and his *Conferences* records the conversations he had with them. Cassian drew up his *Institutes* for his monastic community at Apt in southern France.

Of all these rules, St Benedict's was the most successful. It provides a framework for community living, both in terms of the daily occupations of the monks, and the government of the house. As you read the *Rule* (RSB) think first of all about how Benedict conceived of the monastic life. What did it mean to become a monk? What does Chapter 1 tell us about the forms of monastic life that were acceptable to Benedict and those that were not? What does Benedict have to say about the ascetic life [that is, the life of self-denial and harshness], the spiritual aims of the monk, and the virtues to which he should strive?

There are two other main issues that you should try to get to grips with.

- 1 The structure of the monastic day. How did Benedict arrange the day, and how did it differ in winter and summer? What was the purpose of each activity?
- 2 What had Benedict got to say about government and authority in the monastery? Who was in charge? What were his powers and were there any checks on his power? How did new recruits enter the monastic life?

In time it was to become the standard pattern of observance for all the monastic orders, except for the regular canons, who based their lives on the *Rule of St Augustine*, and the friars who emerged in the early thirteenth century. However, it was only gradually that the *Rule of St Benedict* came to occupy a position of pre-eminence in the monastic world. Part of the reason for its fame was the launch of the cult of St Benedict by Pope Gregory the Great in his *Dialogues*, written c. 593–4; even so, the evidence for the exclusive use of the *Rule* in the Roman monasteries, let alone further afield, is slight. From the seventh century there is evidence for the use of the *Rule* along with others, to form ‘mixed rules’: a number of monasteries in Gaul, for instance, followed the ‘mixed rule’ of St Columbanus (an Irish missionary to Gaul) and the *Rule of St Benedict*.

One of the major impulses for its adoption came from lay patrons (lay = secular, not monks or clergy). Monasticism could only thrive when monks obtained land on which to build their houses, and to cultivate their food. Thus throughout their history – and this is one of the paradoxes of monasticism – monks and nuns were dependent on the world they shunned. But lay people did not give something for nothing: in return for supporting monasteries they expected monks and nuns to pray vicariously for their souls.

From the *Rule* to the Benedictine Centuries

From the eighth century Western Europe had been harassed by onslaughts and invasions by Vikings, Hungarians and Saracens. Many monasteries were themselves attacked or even destroyed; a celebrated English example is St Cuthbert’s monastery of Lindisfarne on the Northumbrian coast, first struck in 793 and finally abandoned in 875. On the continent the monks of the abbey of St Philibert on the west coast of France were forced to flee to escape sea-borne raids: they occupied five sites in forty years, and finally settled over six hundred miles from their original home - only to find themselves exposed to attacks by the Hungarians. Moreover the breakdown of imperial authority in the aftermath of invasion left the way open for the rise of local lords. And these magnates would sometimes exploit monastic houses that were on their lands, seizing their estates and attempting to control their affairs. This situation led to two developments: one was an attempt by monasteries to gain exemption from local powers, both lay and episcopal; the second – a new departure in monastic life – was the banding together of a number of houses, in order to offer mutual support. One of the first to succeed in so doing was the abbey of Cluny, established in Burgundy some thirty kilometres

from Mâcon in 909–10 by its first abbot, Berno, and sponsored by William, count of Aquitaine. The new community appealed to the pope to be accepted under his special patronage, and the pope agreed. Thus the abbey of Cluny became exempt from local pressure, both from its lay founder, and from the local bishop - for episcopal intervention in monastic affairs was sporadic, but nevertheless a reality. Cluny came, for a period of two centuries and more, to dominate the monastic world as no other single house had done before. This pre-eminence was manifest in two main areas: in its daily observance, and in the confederation of houses that it created.

The Cistercian order was the most important, but was far from being the only new order to burst on the monastic scene in the late eleventh and early twelfth century. The reasons for the proliferation of new forms of monastic life are complex. However, there are two main threads: dissatisfaction with existing monasticism; and a desire to return to primitive monasticism, the call of the eremitical tradition of the deserts of Egypt and Palestine where monasticism began. In these seminars we explore the reasons, first of all, for the emergence of hermit communities, such as the orders of Vallombrosa, Camaldoli, and, perhaps most famous of all, the Carthusians. Why did men and women wish to become hermits? And why – under what pressures – did many of their eremitical communities become monastic houses? Secondly we ask: was there a ‘crisis of monasticism’?

You will find power point presentation to accompany these notes.