

The man of God, Alberic, however, after he had practised fruitfully regular discipline in the school of Christ for nine and a half years, went home to the Lord, full of glory in his faith and virtues, and therefore deserved to be rewarded by God with eternal life. His successor was a certain brother by the name of Stephen, an English man by nationality, who had also come to that place from Molesme, a lover of the Rule and of the place. During his time, the brethren and this abbot prohibited the duke of that land or any other lord from keeping his court at any time in that monastery, as they used in times past to do on the occasion of great feasts. Furthermore, lest anything remain in the house of God – where it was their wish to serve God devoutly day and night – that savoured of pride and superfluity or that would ever corrupt poverty, the safeguard of poverty, that they had chosen of their own free will, they resolved to keep no crosses of gold or silver ...

(Exordium Parvum)

Though it is unclear who wrote the *Exordium Parvum*, the use of “we Cistercians”¹ make it clear it was a member of the cistercians, likely during the early twelfth century since they are aware they will have successors. The text mentions Saint Alberic of Cîteaux, who was the abbot after Robert of Molesme had left Cîteaux, though he accepted the position “after much resistance,”² being that he was worried about the difficulties the monastery might face if he were to be the abbot. He was described as being a “lover of the rule and of the brethren,”³ since he spent his life worshipping God and following the rule, as well as his devotion to being the abbot for those of Cîteaux. He believed that the monks of Molesme did not follow the Rule of Saint Benedict the proper way and that they must go back to living poor lives. He was Abbot for nine and a half years before passing on, his successor was Saint Stephen Harding.

Stephen was the third abbot of Cîteaux and he is best known for writing the *Carta Caritatis*. There is also much debate about who wrote the *Exordium Parvum* with one theory being that it was Stephen himself who wrote it. Saint Stephen was against the methods of the Cluniacs and “firmly but modestly advanced a series of arguments that attacked the very essence of the Cluniac usages,”⁴ recognizing that they no longer followed or had distorted the Rule immensely. Once elected, Stephen had become an “even stricter and more uncompromising reformer,” compared to the late Saint Alberic, he believed that there should be absolutely zero distractions in the monastery and that the only thing the monks should need are their minds. In 1133 after 25 years as abbot, Stephen stepped down and died a year later.

The language used to describe Alberic and his passing makes it clear that the author of this text was someone who held him in high regard, which would make sense as it was most likely written by a Cistercian monk. They state that he “deserved to be rewarded by

¹ *The Exordium Parvum*, 12th century, 1

² *The Exordium Parvum*, 4

³ Thomas Merton, *Saint Alberic: Second Abbot of Cîteaux*, Vol 33, Iss 2, (Dubuque: Cistercian Studies Quarterly, 1998), 124.

⁴ Thomas Merton, *Saint Stephen Harding: Third Abbot of Cîteaux and Founder of the Cistercian Order*, Vol 33, Iss 3, (Dubuque: Cistercian Studies Quarterly, 1998), 264.

God,”⁵ meaning that they believe in the work he had done and most likely supported his methods of following the Rule. Alberic was a founder of Cîteaux and was very important in the evolution of the monastery, helping Cistercianism grow throughout Europe and break down on the greediness that was plaguing the Cluniacs and Benedictines. While Alberic was an important figure in the early days of Cîteaux, Stephen also put in a lot of work in the expansion of it.

In the passage there is a clear shift between the methods of Alberic as Abbot and the methods of Stephen as Abbot. It mentions how Alberic practiced “regular discipline,”⁶ while it describes how Stephen began to favour poverty over crosses made of metals. Alberic had already been stricter than the Cluniacs, he “made it his business to cut out the very heart of the Cluniac observance”⁷ in this new monastery. This shows how with each new abbot the strictness of the Rule grows, perhaps wanting to prove that they are no longer affiliated with the monks in Molesme. They each value committing to what Saint Benedict believed, which is why the Cistercians kept growing in popularity.

The mention of poverty is common throughout the text, symbolising the vow of poverty that the monks took before joining the monastery. It was Stephen who cracked down harshly on this vow, understanding that the “the safeguard of poverty, that they had chosen of their own free will,”⁸ was fundamental to the life of a monk to live by this vow. The Cluniacs had grown greedy during this time and began to build very elaborate monasteries with precious metals and heaps of food for the monks to enjoy. It was important and necessary in the eyes of Stephen that the monks return to their life of poverty and following the Rule since that was how they had chosen to live. Monks were not meant to live a life of distraction and richness since that would deter them from their job as “representatives of Christ.”⁹

Along with making the lives of the monks stricter, Stephen also decided to not allowed outside forces to come in and break the rules for the monks. In the text it states that Stephen had “prohibited the duke of that land or any other lord from keeping his court at any time in that monastery” since when they would arrive at the monastery there would be a big feast for everyone. This is thought that a duke by the name of Hugh had been denied by Stephen it was taken “as an insult and that it resulted in the withdrawing of his support from the monastery”¹⁰ meaning the monastery had lost one of their big benefactors and a lot of money. This only stood as a test by God to Stephen to prove that the monastery did not need to rely on money to perform their duties as monk and to worship the Lord.

As a result of Alberic and Stephen’s contributions to the monastery, the Cistercian order was able to spread its influence all over Europe. The implementation of this stricter following of the Rule allowed the monks to avoid temptations. This text allows historians to better understand the influences of the abbots that came from Cîteaux and why their influence was so drastic.

⁵ *The Exordium Parvum*, 8

⁶ *The Exordium Parvum*, 8

⁷ Merton, *Saint Alberic*, 124.

⁸ *The Exordium Parvum*, 8

⁹ Saint Benedict, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, Trans. Justin McCann, 1989, 6.

¹⁰ Merton, *Saint Stephen Harding*, 264.

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