

5 The Cistercian community

JAMES FRANCE

According to tradition the New Monastery, later known as Cîteaux, was founded on 21 March 1098. The choice of day was no coincidence as on that day the feast of St Benedict was celebrated. It was also apt, for on moving from Molesme the twenty-one monks under their abbot Robert had left behind the 'old' ways of traditional monachism with its emphasis on the elaborate and time-consuming celebration of the Divine Office in order to embrace a 'new' interpretation of the Rule, one in which the balance between the three constituent parts of the monastic horarium – prayer, study and work – had been restored. The Rule and its revised implementation were basic to the Cistercian reform and were commented upon both in all early Cistercian texts as well as by a number of contemporary outside observers. The Premonstratensian abbot Philip of Harvengt claimed that with the foundation of Cîteaux the 'monastic Order, formerly dead, was revived ... and the Rule of St Benedict recovered in our times the truth of the letter'. Even some of the Cistercians' severest critics acknowledged their achievement. The chronicler William of Malmesbury refers to their distress that they were not able to follow 'the purity of the Rule' to which he states that they attached great importance by saying, 'So intent are they on their Rule, that they think not a jot or tittle of it should be disregarded.' The Norman Benedictine Orderic Vitalis described them as endeavouring 'to carry out a literal observance of the Rule of Saint Benedict'.

Although the Cistercians did away with many of the accretions to the liturgy that had been introduced over the centuries, the *opus Dei* – the Work of God – still remained their primary and distinctive occupation, constituting the very *raison d'être* of monasticism. St Benedict devoted twelve chapters in the Rule to its composition and the manner of celebrating the seven daytime canonical Hours of Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers and Compline, plus the Night Office. The primacy of the Office was endorsed by Bernard of Clairvaux in these words: 'By our Rule we must put nothing before the Work of God.'

Lectio divina – Sacred Reading – follows the Rule's opening statement, 'Listen carefully ... to the precepts of the master', and was the bedrock upon which the community was formed into 'a school of the Lord's service' (*RB* Prologue). It differs fundamentally from profane reading. Derived from the Latin verb '*lego*', *lectio* does not so much mean to 'read' as 'to gather' or 'to collect'; a slow process, originally carried out aloud, with Scripture and the works of the Fathers at its core. It is traditionally likened to 'ruminating' or 'chewing', almost in the sense of chewing the cud.

Following the rejection of the traditional income from rents, tithes and the possession of churches, the restoration of manual labour – *labor manuum* – to the monastic horarium was one of the main planks of the Cistercian reform and was binding on all members of the community, even the abbot. By their compliance the Cistercians conformed to what St Benedict had enjoined: 'Idleness is the enemy of the soul. The brethren, therefore, must be occupied at stated hours in manual labour' (*RB* 48).

Obedience is the monastic virtue par excellence, chosen by those 'not living by their own will, and obeying their own desires and passions, but walking by another's judgement and orders, they dwell in monasteries, and desire to have an abbot over them' (*RB* 5). The responsibility of the abbot was awesome and Benedict devoted four chapters to the office in his Rule (*RB* 2, 27, 56 and 64). Immediately after his definition of the four kinds of monks Benedict describes the kind of man the abbot should be. He is 'the representative of Christ in the monastery'. He is to teach 'by deeds and by words, but by deeds rather than by words'. Although he should love all in his care equally:

One he must humour, another rebuke, another persuade, according to each one's disposition and understanding, and thus adapt and accommodate himself to all in such a way, that he may not only suffer no loss in the sheep committed to him, but may even rejoice in the increase of a good flock. (*RB* 2)

Human frailty inevitably meant that the ideal envisaged by Benedict was not always achieved, but by the two main provisions of the Charter of Charity, the visitation of daughter houses by father abbots and the annual meeting at Cîteaux of abbots in General Chapter, the Cistercians had devised a mechanism whereby autocratic excesses could be curbed. They provided a restraint on the arbitrary rule of abbots – hitherto unknown among the Black Monks, whose abbeys were entirely autonomous – and ensured a degree of uniformity which they deemed essential.

The Rule assumed that an abbot held office for life, and among the Black Monks voluntary resignations were almost unknown, but among the Cistercians resignations were recognised practice from the first and were relatively common. In some cases the gift of spiritual leadership was not matched by the necessary administrative ability; in others, resignations were due to feelings of unworthiness or nostalgia for the house of profession to which they wished to return. Although depositions were rare, the Charter of Charity provided for the removal of abbots who showed 'contempt for the Rule or the Order' and who, after being warned four times, failed to emend.

The pastoral nature of the abbatial office was symbolised by the staff or crosier with which abbots were invested and which represented their authority over the monks in their care. The change from the simple shepherd's crook to the elaborate gilt crosiers with carvings and set with precious stones marked the emergence in the later Middle Ages of abbots as powerful prelates almost on a par with bishops. Abbots gradually withdrew from the common dormitory to a separate house where they could entertain distinguished guests in the same style they experienced when fêted by them. In the fourteenth century their social position was recognised by grants of *pontificalia*, whereby they were given the right to the use of a number of episcopal *insignia*, including the mitre.

One of the abbot's responsibilities was the appointment to all offices in the monastery. First was that of his deputy, the prior, who was in charge during the abbot's absence (*RB* 65). According to Benedict, 'the more he is set above the rest, the more scrupulously should he observe the precepts of the Rule', but if he failed he should be deposed.

Of crucial importance was the cellarer, who was responsible for the economy of the monastery and its estates and granges. The material well-being of the community, upon which its spiritual health rested, depended on his stewardship. He was therefore to be 'prudent, of mature character, temperate, not a great eater, not proud, not headstrong, not rough-spoken, not lazy, not wasteful, but a God-fearing man who may be like a father to the whole community' (*RB* 31). There are many examples of a successful term as cellarer leading to election as abbot, and the importance Bernard attached to the office may be seen by the choice of his brother, Gerard, as his cellarer at Clairvaux. In his lament upon his brother's death in Sermon 26 on the Song of Songs, Bernard outlined the duties of the office when he asked:

Did anything ever escape the skilled eye of Gerard in the buildings,
in the fields, in gardening, in the water systems, in all the arts

and crafts of the people of the countryside? With masterly competence he supervised the masons, the smiths, the farm workers, the gardeners, the shoemakers and the weavers.

The porter or gate keeper is the only other official named by Benedict in a chapter heading (RB 66). A 'wise old man' living near the gate was the ideal person to scrutinise the coming and going, to ensure that no one entered who did not have legitimate business and that monks did not wander outside as 'all necessary things, such as water, mill, garden and various crafts be within the enclosure'.

Two office holders, the guest master and the novice master, are not mentioned in the Rule's chapter headings, but their all-important duties are outlined in its text. The guest house was 'to be assigned to a brother whose soul was full of the fear of God'. His responsibility it was to ensure that the paramount Benedictine obligation that 'all guests that come be received like Christ' was fulfilled (RB 53).

The novices were placed in the charge of one of the senior monks 'skilled in winning souls that he may watch over them with the utmost care' (RB 58). He was responsible for their formation and for discerning their suitability. Earlier in his career Aelred of Rievaulx is said by his biographer, Walter Daniel, to have excelled as novice master, making good monks of his novices as 'worthy vessels of God and acceptable to the Order and even examples of perfection to those who truly yearn to excel as patterns of goodness'. Another distinguished novice master was Caesarius of Heisterbach, who in the early thirteenth century wrote the *Dialogue on Miracles* – the *Dialogus miraculorum* – which takes the form of a dialogue between him and one of his novices.

Benedict outlines the procedure for the reception of novices (RB 58). He insists that only those who are persistent in their attempts to enter a monastery be admitted and that they should spend four days in the guest house before being taken to the chapter house. Here the abbot would point out the severity of the Rule and only after the candidate had three times freely consented to keeping it all would he be taken to the novitiate – the *cella novitiorum* – there to spend his year of probation. At the end of this he made the three monastic vows of stability, conversion of life and obedience, confirmed in a written petition which he placed on the altar. Having disposed of all his property, the novice was stripped of his own clothes and put on the cowl. He was now a full member of the community with a vote in abbatial elections. Sometime in the second half of the twelfth century novices were given their own habit. According to the *Ecclesiastica Officia*, in which Cistercian life

was regulated in the minutest detail, novices were required to wear 'the same habit as the monks except for what is the special monastic item', in other words excepting the cowl, instead of which they had a sleeveless mantle.

Compliance with the precepts of the Rule, dedication to a life of humility and obedience lived in accordance with the three elements of prayer, study and work under the three monastic vows and its transmission to future generations by the formation of novices was the stated aim of the early Cistercians. As we have seen, a strict interpretation of the Rule constituted their very *raison d'être*, which was mentioned over and over again in their early texts. And yet, paradoxically, they chose to deviate from the Rule in two fundamental respects, one of them by omission, the other by addition. As a result of this change the Cistercian community was to become radically different from the earlier Benedictine model.

The omission from the Rule consisted of doing away with the *oblati* – youngsters offered by their parents to be reared in the monastery, also known as *nutriti*, that is, those given board in the monastery. According to the Rule, upon the reception of young boys, the petition which was normally written by the novices themselves was drawn up by their parents and placed on the altar (*RB* 59). They were to be corrected according to their age with 'an appropriate measure of discipline' (*RB* 30). In future admission was to be a matter of free choice and limited to adults, what today would be defined as a 'vocation'. According to an early statute the minimum age of the reception of Cistercian novices was set at fifteen, but sometime around the middle of the twelfth century it was raised to eighteen.

The addition to the Rule was the introduction of lay brothers, also known as *conversi* or *fratres laici*. They represented a new form of religious life, now for the first time open to the broad populace. Although the vast majority of lay brothers were recruited from the rural poor, out of humility a number of knights and scholars chose to become lay brothers in preference to joining as monks. The obligation of manual labour rested on all members of the community, but the Cistercians soon found that they were not able, by the work of their own hands alone, to fulfil their primary occupation, the *opus Dei*, and their obligation of residing in the cloister (*RB* 66). In announcing the institution of lay brothers the *Exordium Parvum* states that 'lay brothers, and not monks, should be in charge of those dwellings [granges], because, according to the Rule, monks should reside in their own cloister'. The grange formed the basis of the Cistercian agrarian economy, and early evidence shows the

connection between the introduction of lay brothers and the establishment of the earliest granges, both thought to be around 1120. The institution of the lay brotherhood was not original to the Cistercians, having already been introduced as a distinctive feature of the monastic reform of the second half of the eleventh century, but they developed it to its fullest extent. In some cases lay brothers outnumbered monks by two to one or even by three to one. While monks were clean-shaven and distinguished by the clerical tonsure and the wearing of the monastic cowl, the *conversi* were, as the name implies, lay. They were bearded – and therefore also known as *barbati* – and wore a sleeveless mantle. Being lay, they were nevertheless religious, having, after a year's noviciate, made the same three vows as monks. Separate architectural provision was made within the monastery: they were housed in the west range, where a lane, separated by a wall from the monks' cloister, served as their own cloister. They had their own choir in the western part of the nave, separated from the monks by a screen. Although separate, the lay brothers enjoyed the same spiritual and temporal status as monks, but in practice they were frequently patronised. Their inferiority vis-à-vis the monks in a servant–master relationship was a flaw which, together with economic, agrarian, demographic and cultural factors, contributed to their sharp decline in numbers in the fourteenth century.

Like most of their medieval contemporaries lay brothers were 'ignorant of letters' (*illiterati*), in other words lacking in knowledge of Latin, a skill required only for the *opus Dei* and *lectio divina*. The crucial part lay brothers played in the early material success of the Order was based on other skills and contributed substantially to the phenomenal growth of the monastic estates. Later evidence in the form of General Chapter statutes highlights the disciplinary problems partially caused by the large numbers who joined out of necessity, in the words of Caesarius of Heisterbach 'driven to enter by the furnace of poverty'. The moralising stories of visions and revelations contained in the *exemplum* literature are an invaluable source in telling us a great deal about the daily lives and mentality of lay brothers as well as about the monk-authors who wrote them. Towards the end of the twelfth century the earlier more heroic age had come to an end, and stories of exceptional lay brothers were used to show disapproval of the increasing clericalisation of monks and distrust of secular learning as well as being a spur to recapturing some of the simplicity of earlier times. The spiritual as well as material contribution of lay brothers to Cistercian history was immense.

In spite of the importance the Cistercians attached to a strict adherence to the Rule, their insistence on limiting their intake to adults and

their introduction of lay brothers were to fundamentally change the composition of all their communities.

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