

The Different Forms of Monastic Life in France and their Links with Foreign Countries

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Undoubtedly France holds a special place in the development of monastic life. In the territory of Gaul the West experienced the first development of this way of life which came from abroad and was implemented by foreigners. Some of the most influential reforms of the Benedictine order, too, started here.

Some Historical Points of Reference

Martin and Cassian, the first monastic generations in Gaul

Martin was born in Pannonia in present-day western Hungary in the 4th c. and was consecrated monk by bishop Hilary of Poitiers. As soldier in the garrison of Trier he had probably witnessed the testimony of Athanasius of Alexandria, who had taken refuge there under the protection of bishop Maximin, who by the way was a native of Poitou (Trier very quickly saw the foundation of a monastery under the patronage of St. Maximin). Martin built a hermitage not far from town at Ligugé. After having become bishop of Tours, he founded the monastery of Marmoutier and some others in his diocese. He spread his monastic conviction on his voyages to other European centers where his example of pastoral work based on monastic life was soon copied.

We should also underline the special way of John Cassian in the 5th c. Born in present-day Romania; he became monk in Bethlehem and afterwards in Egypt for 15 years. Then he went to Provence where he founded the monastery of St. Victor in Marseille. He exposed the wisdom of the Egyptian hermits in his central writings, the “Institutions of the Coenobia” and the “Conferences of the Desert Fathers”, which became the sources of the development of monasticism in the Latin Church.

Also in the 5th c. Honorat and Caprais went to gather the teaching of the oriental monks before coming back to live as monks on the island of Lérins which became a very influential model of monastic life.

Columbanus

The great monk Columbanus was born in 540. After having lived for 30 years in stability in his monastery Cluam-Inis in Ireland, he asked permission to travel pursuing the great adventure of apostolic life. Finally he came to France and founded the abbey of Luxeuil in the Vosges mountains and later two more monasteries nearby. After having been driven away, the monks of Columbanus settled near the river Rhine, then crossed the Alpes and came to Bobbio in Lombardy, where they built a monastery which was to become famous.

It could be interesting to note that the monastery of Jouarre for some time followed the Rule of Columbanus.

At the same time St. Radegund, a Thuringian princess and Frankish queen, founded a monastery at Poitiers. It was dedicated to the Holy Cross because it received a relic sent by the Emperor Justin II of Constantinople.

St. Benedict of Aniane

Benedict of Aniane reformed the monastic life during the 8th c. He was born in the south of France, in Maguelon and became monk in the monastery of Saint-Seine in Burgundy. But after some years he found that the monastery did not correspond to his ideal and he went to found another monastery on property belonging to his family in Aniane. After this success and with the consent of the king Louis the Pious, son of Charlemagne, he visited a number of the Frankish monasteries and sent groups of monks to reform them or to make foundations. In this way he reformed 26 monasteries of the roman-frankish empire which followed the rule of St. Benedict. He took the name Benedict and settled at Inden near Aachen in order to build up an exemplary monastery. He died before he could finish his work, but his influence continued to shape the European monastic life which had become Benedictine thanks to him.

The Order of Cluny

What Benedict of Aniane had not been able to do was carried out by Cluny thanks to the long term in office of the abbey's first superiors from the 9th to the 13th c.

The network of the Cluniac monasteries was extremely manifold: it was linked to the effort to support the population, and many monasteries were placed at strategic places throughout the empire or they became central places along the great pilgrim ways.

Besides Cluny there existed the groups of monasteries around Fleury and Gorze.

The Cistercian order

The monastic orders developed progressively proceeding from a central structure. The development of the Cistercian order in the whole of Europe and beyond, with the structure established by Stephen Harding, is impressive. As you might know, the numbers mounted from 19 houses in 1119 to 343 abbeys in 1153. In the 13th c. there were up to 694 Cistercian houses.

In this flourishing era, a number of new orders were created in the same spirit of diffusion and unity. They actively participated in the network of cultural exchange on regional, national and international levels in the towns, along the traffic routes or in remote places.

The Counter-Reformation

A number of monastic initiatives came to live as a reaction to the Protestant reformation. We mention the Benedictines of Perpetual Adoration founded by Mechtilde De Bar, who spread in the whole of Europe. But they are just one example among others.

We could also point at the originality of the Order of Saint-Maur with its many European extensions. With the Maurists emerges the figure of the monk-scholar.

The reform of Citeaux by Rancé is equally a great moment of expansion which today touches the whole world.

Monastic networks

The first conclusion that can be drawn from this long history is that monastic life can only function well in networks. Isolated monasteries hardly ever have as much influence as well-connected monasteries. These networks, whatever their nature may be, allow exchange and expansion which cross the borders. They put into practice the dynamism of the Kingdom of God which already is present on earth.

As we have seen French monasteries have contributed a lot to this development in the course of history. The fact that in 1961 the organization which has become the AIM (first a relief-organization, today inter-monastic alliance) was founded in France is not without significance. And the fact that the Benedictine Confederation and the Cistercian orders wished to keep the headquarters of the AIM in France also shows what you can expect from a country like ours. Our task is to nourish an alliance, to share gifts, cultures, sensibilities and to enrich each other in this way.

The AIM is aware of the importance of its role and tries to fulfill it by encouraging formation, by overviewing and analyzing specific situations, by visiting monasteries and by helping to evaluate plans for foundations.

At the origin of all this is the wish to deepen human relations according to the double commandment of love: to love God and to love one's neighbor. This is the secret of monastic life beyond time and space, which is deeply rooted in the everyday life of human communities.

It seems to me that in a social context which is as pessimistic as in France today, the monastic communities strive to establish a balance between persons and relationships of the communities. The image that we show to our surroundings and as far as to the other end of the world must be placed in this context.

Special contributions by French monasticism

Speaking of French monasteries in the Benedictine world you feel simultaneously respect and a kind of irritation. When travelling around the world you notice how much French monasteries are characterized by a withdrawal into solitude. Almost everywhere else you find communities with a thousand activities especially in the field of education. In their lifestyle the French Benedictines (men and women) are often closer to Trappist communities than to the Benedictine communities abroad.

You notice this in the foundations in West Africa, Vietnam or Madagascar. Even if this rather secluded monastic way of life contains a kind of grandeur, the Benedictines must not shut themselves away completely; quite in the contrary, they should keep alive the concern to participate in the development of the surrounding society.

Characteristic elements in the French perspective are the importance of the liturgical studies undertaken by Solesmes in the 19th c. and continued today by the French speaking Cistercian commission and the Liturgical Institute of Paris; the appraisal of manual work and hopefully

of the intellectual work, too; pastoral work within the frame of hospitality; and finally the quality of a stable fraternal life in one place which takes account of the development of each member of the community.

The French monasteries and their foundations abroad are on the contrary places full of life where innumerable activities come to life: on the one hand they are characterized by the beauty of silence which leads to listening with the heart, by mutual obedience, a life of prayer and community life, and on the other hand they are characterized by the manifold works aiming at the proclamation of the Good News. Sometimes the founders come from elsewhere or got their formation elsewhere. Most effective are those who are not afraid to open up the limitation of their spirit to the greater dimension of the world. It is noticeable that difficult situations like exile or persecution which put monasteries into a position of fragility often lead to new projects in other places.

In order to retain this capacity of opening up in this way, it is important to focus on formation on all levels, including the level of leadership.

It is well known that our monasteries are also places of hospitality. We welcome guests who are by definition are people passing through, seekers of humanity, seekers of God, in one word pilgrims. Among them are many strangers, especially in mixed societies like ours. In this respect monastic networks have always played a central role which has often allowed to take part in counterbalancing poverty, sickness, social insecurity, instable populations, and all this especially in times of unrest, war, famine or lack of orientation.

Through the relationships within the monastic world the communities are transformed into places of exchange and enrichment where sometimes new cultures come into being, either because of foundations on unexpected territories or because the needs of the monasteries are answered from outside.

Development and movement are closely linked. Whenever life becomes static, the risk grows that this will lead to disastrous consequences.

In the future each and every monastery must work on the question of formation to develop truly multicultural roots based on the Rule of St. Benedict. For that we need a culture of exchange, of mutuality, of openness for the others. This is far away from the temptation to take in foreign persons in order to fill up our weak communities. The kind of dialogue which seems to be of highest importance today should lead to a real collaboration. This is the direction in which lies our future.

Like all the other monasteries the French ones must stay awake for the always unexpected call of the Lord and they must incessantly use all their strength in order to proclaim everywhere the wonders of God. More than ever before we will welcome strangers or send someone abroad, but we will do that in good conditions and with much communal reflection. This perspective will turn the monasteries which are linked by a thousand fraternal relationships into places of solidarity, real parables of the coming Kingdom, where we try to relieve a bit the pain of those who, guests on earth and potentially our enemies, shall become our brothers and sisters in Christ.