

THE FORMATION OF MONASTIC CULTURE

The Conversion of St. Benedict

TWO SERIES OF TEXTS have exercised a decisive, constant, and universal influence on the origin and development of medieval monastic culture in the West, and they contain in germ the two essential components of this culture: grammar and spirituality. These two groups of texts are those connected with St. Benedict, and those of a Doctor of the Church who was very close to him in all respects, St. Gregory the Great. These texts must be examined in succession and they will afford an opportunity to define terms and to recall ideas which are essential to an understanding of all that follows. We begin to follow the sublime path pointed out by St. Bernard in a humble and austere fashion: *angusto initio*.

THE LIFE OF ST. BENEDICT: STUDIES

The monastic tradition of the Middle Ages in the West, taken as a whole, is founded principally on two texts which make of it a "Benedictine" tradition: the Life of Saint Benedict in Book II of the *Dialogues* of Saint Gregory, and the *Rule for Monks*, traditionally attributed to St. Benedict. The first is a document rich in historical and spiritual data. No attempt will be made here to try to distinguish in the stories in the Dialogue between facts and the traditional themes in the Lives of the Saints, since the present investigation is concerned less with the story of St. Benedict than with the history of his influence in the specific province of cultural orientation. Now, on this point, at the beginning of the *Life*, St. Gregory has left an interesting piece of evidence; it was often to be invoked by tradition and has become something of a symbol of St. Benedict. This text is the one in which, in the Prologue of Book II of the *Dialogues*, St. Gregory recounts that the young Benedict left Rome and school to go and lead in solitude a life entirely consecrated to God.¹ A certain number of facts are brought out in this story. To begin with, there is the conversion of St. Benedict. It is no less important for our understanding of his life, or less significant

for our understanding of his work and influence, than is the conversion of St. Augustine. Like St. Augustine, St. Benedict began by taking up studies, and then abandoned them. Two questions which may arise here are: What studies did he undertake? Why did he give them up?

What did he study? The subjects then being taught to "freemen": as St. Gregory says, the *liberalia studia*; for the young Romans of the times, this expression meant grammar, rhetoric, and law.² Many suppositions have been made as to how old the young Benedict may have been, and consequently what he studied.³ Did he get as far as the study of law? There is nothing to prove that he did. He is still a child (*puer*); he has scarcely "taken a step in the world." Probably he had studied at least grammar, the *grammatica* of which more will be said later. It is of little consequence here since what interests us is the symbolic meaning of the story. What does happen is that soon, disgusted with what he sees and hears in the school milieu, Benedict leaves everything and escapes from school. Why? Not because he was doing poorly in his studies—that is not implied at all—but because student life, school life, is full of danger to morals.⁴ All the rest of St. Benedict's life was to be subordinated to the search for God, and lived out under the best conditions for reaching that goal—that is to say, in separation from this dangerous world. Thus in the life of St. Benedict we find in germ the two components of monastic culture: studies undertaken, and then, not precisely scorned, but renounced and transcended, for the sake of the kingdom of God. Benedict's conduct is no exception: it is typical of the monks of antiquity. The same attitude can be seen, for example, in the life of St. Caesarius of Arles: occasionally leaving the monastery of Lérins, he would go to live with a family who introduced him to Julian Pomerius, "who was famous in the region for his extraordinary knowledge of grammatical art."

They wanted "secular learning to add polish to his monastic simplicity." But very soon Caesarius renounced the instruction of this grammarian who was, incidentally, the author of a work of high order *On the Contemplative Life*.⁵ All Benedictine tradition was to be made in the image of St. Benedict's life: *scienter nescius et sapienter indoctus*. It was to embrace the teaching of learned ignorance, to be nurtured by it and to transmit, recall, and keep it alive face to face with the cultural activity of the Church, as an inevitable paradox.

THE *Rule* OF ST. BENEDICT SUPPOSES LEARNED MONKS

Let us now go on to the *Rule* of St. Benedict, with regard to which two problems may arise: What is the culture of its author; What is the culture

that he either expects his disciples to have or prescribes for them? It is difficult to estimate what the author of the *Rule* must have known to write it, but there is no need to exaggerate his learning, or to minimize it. As was done with regard to his conversion, historians here too have yielded to one or the other of these temptations. Similar divergences come to light concerning almost every problem of monastic culture, a fact not without some significance. To cast light on St. Benedict's culture, one could search for the sources of his *Rule*. But since he often quotes at second hand, using earlier rules, this criterion does not reveal very much. To sum up, the author of the *Rule* is distinguished less by the breadth of his knowledge than by the intelligence with which he uses it, by his understanding of the monastic life, and by the characteristics he impressed upon it.

It is scarcely any easier to offer a precise and certain answer for the second question: What culture does St. Benedict expect or demand of the monk? On this point again—that is to say, on St. Benedict's attitude toward learning and toward study—varying judgments have been expressed. Some see in the monastery a sort of academy. Others advance the opinion that St. Benedict makes little if any provision for intellectual work. It is true that he makes no legislation on it, no doubt because he takes it for granted, while he regulates manual work according to what is allowed or required by the established daily order of time. Here again there is disagreement among even the well-informed because reasons can be found in the *Rule* to justify different interpretations. In the *Rule* itself the "studies problem" exists; let us try to state it first according to the *Rule* itself, and then by comparison with the teaching of a contemporary of Benedict, Cassiodorus.

In the *Rule* we can distinguish the two elements which we have seen in the life of St. Benedict: the knowledge of letters and the search for God. The fundamental fact that stands out in this domain is that one of the principal occupations of the monk is the *lectio divina*, which includes meditation: *meditari aut legere*. Consequently one must, in the monastery, possess books, know how to write them and read them, and, therefore, if it be necessary, learn how to read.⁶ It is not certain that St. Benedict is speaking of a library since the word *bibliotheca*, which he uses in referring to books read in Lent, can mean, for him, the Bible.⁷ But St. Benedict evidently takes for granted the existence of a library, and a fairly extensive one at that, since each monk is supposed to receive a *codex* in Lent. Toward the end of the *Rule*, it is suggested that all read the Scripture, Cassian, and St. Basil; they should be able to read in the refectory, in choir, and before guests.

Naturally, in order to possess books, it eventually becomes necessary to know how to write them. All the monks, as a matter of course and without exception, are supposed to know how to write. The abbot and the cellarer must keep accounts of what is expended and what is received.⁸ Written documents are kept in the archives.⁹ One of the things exacted of the monks is that they ask permission to write each other letters; another is that they possess no writing materials without permission;¹⁰ furthermore, each one is to receive writing equipment.¹¹ Some at least are expected to know how to make books—that is to say, to copy, bind, and even decorate them, and this with two different purposes in mind. On this point the lack of precision in the *Rule* is clarified by reference to other contemporary rules. Books must be made, first of all, for the monastery; no doubt, books might be received through endowment—such cases are known—but usually they were copied in the monastery. This fact is attested explicitly in several rules of the same period, and it is assumed by St. Benedict, as is the following fact: books were also copied and sold outside the monastery. This is also mentioned in very old rules, in terms identical with those used in St. Benedict,¹² where they can scarcely have any other meaning.

Likewise, St. Benedict assumes that the monks are not illiterate; a few only are judged unable to read and to study. As a whole, in order to do the public and private reading prescribed by the *Rule*, they must know how to read, and this implies a school where reading and writing are learned. As a matter of fact, it cannot be supposed that in the sixth century all who entered the monastery were literate. St. Benedict prescribes that “one shall read [*legatur ei*] the *Rule* to the novice”¹³ as if it could have happened that he was not able, on coming to the monastery, to read it for himself, not having yet learned how to read. Besides, the word “read” in this context can also mean “comment”: the *Rule* will be read to him, and at the same time explained. It is not said that he will be taught to read during his novitiate. But since children are offered to the monastery and destined to remain there as monks who will therefore eventually have to know how to read and write, there must be for them—and for them only—a school and also books. It has been conjectured that, in all likelihood, the library must have contained, besides Scripture and the Fathers, elementary works on grammar, a Donatus, a Priscian, a Quintilian, and a few of the classical authors. The tablets and the stylus referred to in Chapter 55 are materials which would be used at least as much in school as in a scriptorium.

Lectio AND *Meditatio*

If then it is necessary to know how to read, it is primarily in order to be able to participate in the *lectio divina*. What does this consist of? How is this reading done? To understand this, one must recall the meaning that the words *legere* and *meditari* have for St. Benedict, and which they are to keep throughout the whole of the Middle Ages; what they express will explain one of the characteristic features of monastic literature of the Middle Ages: the phenomenon of reminiscence, of which more must be said later. With regard to literature, a fundamental observation must be made here: in the Middle Ages, as in antiquity, they read usually, not as today, principally with the eyes, but with the lips, pronouncing what they saw, and with the ears, listening to the words pronounced, hearing what is called the "voices of the pages." It is a real acoustical reading; *legere* means at the same time *audire*. One understands only what one hears, as we still say in French: "entendre le latin," which means to "comprehend" it. No doubt, silent reading, or reading in a low voice, was not unknown; in that case it is designated by expressions like those of St. Benedict: *tacite legere* or *legere sibi*, and according to St. Augustine: *legere in silentio*, as opposed to the *clara lectio*. But most frequently, when *legere* and *lectio* are used without further explanation, they mean an activity which, like chant and writing, requires the participation of the whole body and the whole mind. Doctors of ancient times used to recommend reading to their patients as a physical exercise on an equal level with walking, running, or ball-playing.¹⁴ The fact that the text which was being composed or copied was often written to dictation given aloud, either to oneself or to a secretary, satisfactorily explains the errors apparently due to hearing in medieval manuscripts:¹⁵ the use of the dictaphone today produces similar mistakes. The references made in classical, biblical, and patristic antiquity to reading aloud are well known,¹⁶ but it will suffice here if we present evidence furnished by monastic tradition.

Thus, when St. Benedict recommends that, during the time when the monks "are resting on their beds in silence," the one who wants to read should do so in such a way that he does not disturb the others, he clearly considers reading disruptive to silence.¹⁷ When Peter the Venerable was suffering from catarrh, not only was he no longer able to speak in public, but he could no longer perform his *lectio*.¹⁸ And Nicholas of Clairvaux noticed that after being bled he lacked the strength to read.¹⁹ This proves how true it was that the act of verbalizing was not divorced from the

visual. The latter was accompanied spontaneously by the movement of the lips, and the *lectio divina* was necessarily an active reading.

In this way reading is very close to the *meditatio*. This latter term is important since the practice it describes will determine, in large measure, the application of monastic psychology to Sacred Scripture and to the Fathers. The words *meditari* and *meditatio* are rich in meaning. In monastic tradition they keep both the profane meanings they had in classical Latin and the sacred meanings they had received from the Bible. These different meanings complement each other; for if the word *meditatio* was preferred to others in biblical versions and in spiritual tradition, it was because it was, in virtue of its original meaning, suited to the framing of the spiritual realities that they desired to express.

In secular usage, *meditari* means, in a general way, to think, to reflect, as does *cogitare* or *considerare*; but, more than these, it often implies an affinity with the practical or even moral order. It implies thinking of a thing with the intent to do it; in other words, to prepare oneself for it, to prefigure it in the mind, to desire it, in a way, to do it in advance—briefly, to practice it.²⁰ The word is also applied to physical exercises and sports, to those of military life, of the school world, to rhetoric, poetry, music, and, finally, to moral practices. To practice a thing by thinking of it, is to fix it in the memory, to learn it. All these shades of meaning are encountered in the language of the Christians; but they generally use the word in referring to a text. The reality it describes is used on a text, and this, the text *par excellence*, the Scripture *par excellence*, is the Bible and its commentaries. Indeed, it is mainly through the intermediary of ancient biblical versions and through the Vulgate that the word (meditation) has been introduced into the Christian vocabulary, particularly into monastic tradition, where it was to continue to retain the new shade of meaning given it by the Bible.²¹ There, it is used generally to translate the Hebrew *hāgā*, and like the latter it means, fundamentally, to learn the Torah and the words of the Sages, while pronouncing them usually in a low tone, in reciting them to oneself, in murmuring them with the mouth. This is what we call “learning by heart,” what ought rather to be called, according to the ancients, “learning by mouth” since the mouth “meditates wisdom”: *Os iusti meditabitur sapientiam*. In certain texts, that will mean only a “murmur” reduced to the minimum, an inner murmur, purely spiritual. But always the original meaning is at least intended: to pronounce the sacred words in order to retain them; both the audible reading and the exercise of memory and reflection which it precedes are involved. To speak, to think, to remember, are the three necessary phases of the same activity.

To express what one is thinking and to repeat it enables one to imprint it on one's mind. In Christian as well as rabbinical tradition, one cannot meditate anything else but a text, and since this text is the word of God, meditation is the necessary complement, almost the equivalent, of the *lectio divina*. In conformity with the modern vocabulary, one can meditate "in the abstract," so to speak. Let us consider the *Meditations* of Descartes, or such books of devotion where "to meditate on the Divine attributes" means to reflect on them, to awaken in the self ideas concerning them. For the ancients, to meditate is to read a text and to learn it "by heart" in the fullest sense of this expression, that is, with one's whole being: with the body, since the mouth pronounced it, with the memory which fixes it, with the intelligence which understands its meaning, and with the will which desires to put it into practice.

As can be seen, this fundamental activity of monastic life is based on literature. For the monks in general, the foremost aid to good works is a text which makes possible the meditated reading of the word of God. This will greatly affect the domain of monastic exegesis, entirely oriented toward life, and not toward abstract knowledge. This point will be taken up later. But from now on can be seen the importance of letters, and of the psychological activities which it has brought about through reading and meditation, since the beginning of the Benedictine tradition. There is no Benedictine life without literature. Not that literature is an end, even a secondary end, of monastic life; but it is a conditioning factor. In order to undertake one of the principal occupations of the monk, it is necessary to know, to learn, and, for some, to teach *grammatica*.

THE STUDY OF GRAMMAR IN ST. BENEDICT

And what does *grammatica* mean? To recall what it meant to the ancients themselves we need quote only two sources, one pagan and the other Christian.²² Quintilian said that this word, of Greek origin, has as its Latin equivalent the term *litteratura*, and Marius Victorinus, quoting Varro, gave this definition: "The art of grammar, which we call literature, is the science of the things said by poets, historians, and orators; its principal functions are: to write, to read, to understand, and to prove." Thus grammar is the first stage and the foundation of general culture, and the two synonymous terms *grammaticus* and *litteratus* designate a man "who knows how to read"—that is, not only how to decipher the letters, but how to understand the texts. For the Romans of the classical period, as Marrou has demonstrated, grammar is "a truly logical analysis of the cate-

gories of the understanding.”²³ The procedure is used in connection with the texts of the great writers. The analysis and the explanation of the authors, above all of poets, is done in connection with and by means of a prepared and, so to speak, “expressive reading selection.” To express a text, to make it give up its full meaning by reciting it to oneself, is to prove that it has been well understood. No doubt, in St. Benedict’s time, this method was elementary; its aim is to satisfy immediate needs. It is concerned less with reading the great authors and writing in their style than learning the Bible or at least the psalter, if possible, by heart. During the Merovingian period, this teaching program was reduced practically to the psalms: and instead of beginning by the grammatical analysis of letters, then of syllables, words, and finally of sentences, the child is immediately put in contact with the psalter, in which he learns to read first verses, and then whole psalms.²⁴ But nothing proves that such was already the case when the *Rule* of St. Benedict was written, and the fact remains that for St. Benedict, as for all monastic legislators of his time, the monk was expected to have some knowledge of letters and a certain proficiency in doctrine. In the secular schools the *auctores* studied, particularly the poets, are full of mythology; hence the danger which these studies, however necessary, present for Christians. In the monastic school, teaching is concerned mainly—but not exclusively—with Scripture and its commentaries. Thus the monastic school resembles at once the classical school, because of the traditional method of *grammatica*, and the rabbinical school, because of the nature of the text to which this method is applied. Furthermore, education is not separated from spiritual effort; even from this viewpoint, the monastery is truly a “school for the service of the Lord”—*dominici schola servitii*.

Indeed the one end of monastic life is the search for God. It is clear to anyone who is acquainted with the *Rule* of St. Benedict that monastic life has no other purpose than *quaerere Deum*. In order to obtain eternal life, of which St. Benedict speaks so often as the only end which has any importance, one must become detached from all immediate interests, devoting oneself in silence and in withdrawal from the world to prayer and asceticism. All of the monk’s activities, including his literary activity, can have no motivation other than spiritual, and spiritual motives are always called upon to justify all his actions. If, for example, the monk obeys, it is “because he wishes to make progress toward eternal life.” According to St. Benedict, monastic life is entirely disinterested; its reason for existing is to further the salvation of the monk, his search for God, and not for any