

and then the role which prayer plays in it. The Christian life is conceived of as, above all, a life of detachment and desire: detachment from the world and from sin, and an intense desire for God. This attitude is already a prayer in itself, a life of prayer. It is only for clarity in exposition that the *life of prayer* may here be distinguished from the *act of prayer* itself.

REALIZATION OF MAN'S MISERY

At the root of this concept of the Christian life is found a lively awareness of man's misery: a lived consciousness, an experienced knowledge. It is very often expressed in texts of compelling truth. This awareness is basic, and it is always close to the surface in St. Gregory's vocabulary, in his modes of expression and in the themes habitual with him.¹⁵ Man's wretchedness comes from his physical nature, from Original Sin, from the egoism which harries each one of us, which is always on the watch, and which tends to vitiate all our actions, even the good ones. It must be put to rout constantly: not only at the outset of our actions, by purifying our intentions, but also during our actions, and again at the end, for it is always a menace to us. With regard to this, St. Gregory recalls the "weight" which attracts us to earth; the weight which is proper to what is changing and mortal, the "gravity" which is the sign of corruption, the particular attribute of sin, the reason why we speak of "grave sins."¹⁶ He also describes agitation, the *inquietudo*—that is to say, the lack of tranquillity and peace. The last manifestation of this mutability, the ultimate change, will be death. But once it has started, our entire life will be led under the sign of this mortal instability.

COMPUNCTION, DETACHMENT, AND DESIRE

The first result of experiencing man's condition, for the Christian who knows how to interpret it, is humility, in other words detachment from the world, from ourselves, and from our sins, and the consciousness of our need for God. Such is compunction under its double aspect: compunction of fear, compunction of desire. In its original profane use, the word "compunction" is a medical term,¹⁷ designating attacks of acute pain, of physical illness. But it has been used especially in the Christian vocabulary in a sense which, without losing contact with its origins, is nevertheless richer and loftier. Compunction becomes pain of the spirit, a suffering resulting simultaneously from two causes: the existence of sin and our own tendency toward sin—*compunctio paenitentiae, timoris, formidinis*

—and the existence of our desire for God and even our very possession of God. St. Gregory, more than others, accentuated this last aspect: an obscure possession, awareness of which does not last, and consequently gives rise to regret at seeing it disappear and to a desire to find it again. The “compunction of the heart,” “of the soul”—*compunctio cordis, animi*—always tends to become a “compunction of love,” “of delectation” and “of contemplation”—*compunctio amoris, dilectionis, contemplationis*. Compunction is an act of God in us, an act by which God awakens us, a shock, a blow, a “sting,” a sort of burn.¹⁸ God goads us as if with a spear; He “presses” us with insistence (*cum-pungere*), as if to pierce us. The love of the world lulls us; but, as if by a thunderclap, the attention of the soul is recalled to God.¹⁹

How is this action of God accomplished in us? By what means, through what intermediaries, and on what occasions? By all kinds of trials: tribulation, the *flagella Dei*, the thousandfold sufferings of life, sin itself,²⁰ and, above all, temptation.²¹ Permission to tempt man is given by God to the demon for reasons of wise providence (*dispensatio*), because of the benefit resulting from temptation. The latter is necessary and becomes more frequent and more violent as one progresses in the life of prayer. It encourages the purification of intentions, it humbles, and it is a cure for pride. This is why God accepts the risk involved; temptation, and even sin, are less grave than pride.²² But all this is merely an occasion, and not a cause. It is God Himself who is working in us by His mysterious action; compunction is a gift beyond our power to understand.²³ It induces, therefore, a purification which can be called passive: the Lord accomplishes it in us; our part is to consent to it.²⁴ One must above all, and first of all, make oneself sensitive to this invisible action of God, to this subtle intervention which can be captured only by new senses, the five “spiritual senses” previously outlined in theory by Origen, and which explain St. Gregory’s expressions like *palatum cordis* or *in aure cordis*, which, it is to be remembered, are to become part of later tradition.²⁵ An inner song, a slight murmur, a silent word²⁶—Gregory loves this poetic vocabulary, this paradoxical language, so suitable for expressing the realities of the mystical life. The ultimate role of compunction is to bring to the soul a longing for Heaven, and it is understandable that this theme is related to the theme of tears. Two kinds of tears symbolize the two forms of compunction: the lower stream, *irriguum inferius*, is the stream of repentance; the higher flood, *irriguum superius*, that of desire. Tears of love always accompany those of penitence; but more and more these are dominated by tears of joy.²⁷

With humility there grows the desire for Him who alone can fill our

inner emptiness. Compunction hollows us and thereby increases our capacity for God. St. Gregory is the doctor of desire; he constantly uses terms like *anhelare*, *aspirare*, *suspirare*,²⁸ which express a tendency toward transcendence, "sublimation." Another of his preferred themes is that of the spiritual flight which counteracts our heaviness; on wings, and with the plumage of an eagle, one must rise, must thrust oneself up toward God, seek Him, and hasten toward Him.²⁹

But what motive prompts this journey to the beyond? The desire to avoid the pains of this life? Not at all: they are but an occasion for desire. One must surmount them, rise above them up to God who is speaking to us through them and who is calling us to Him. "Detachment," in the original meaning of this figurative word, must also be exercised with regard to prosperity which binds so many men to earth.³⁰ The only desire which is legitimate is to possess God here below and forever: here below, in the very midst of sorrow, and because of it; later, in Heaven, since celestial realities (*caelestia*) are but another name for God. It is in order to reach God that one must love, desire, and wish for death, which does not eliminate the suffering or fear of death. It must be accepted, consented to, at the hour when God sends it, as the means for being united to Him.

Furthermore, if desire for God is ardent, it is also patient. It grows under the trial of time. One must learn to wait for God in order to love Him the more and to take advantage of the passage of time to become ever more open to His infinite plenitude.³¹ The importance given to desire confers on St. Gregory's doctrine an extremely dynamic quality. It is concerned with constant progress, for desire, as it becomes more intense, is rewarded by a certain possession of God which increases it still more. The result of this desire is peace rediscovered in God, since desire is itself a possession in which fear and love are reconciled. In the desire which, here below, is the very shape of love, the Christian finds God's joy, and union with the glorified Lord.³² "He who with his whole soul desires God, certainly already possesses the One he loves."³³ Love gives unity to all, and resolves all contradictions. *Quies in labore*, *fatigatio in requie*, these and other paradoxes explain this reconciliation of opposites. The force of love intensifies the spiritual quest. A new weight carries the soul toward God, the "weight of love" which is greater than that of mutability.³⁴ It is to the love of God that we should cling.³⁵ The power of love is like a "machine" which raises us.³⁶ The soul hardened (*durata*) by egosim becomes tender (*emollitur*);³⁷ the cold soul is warmed and cleansed of its rust.³⁸ Returned, brought back to its true center of gravity, "converted," it is simplified,³⁹

rectified,⁴⁰ freed.⁴¹ At peace, it enjoys tranquillity.⁴² Not that it has become indifferent or unfeeling;⁴³ it is only reconciled with itself and with God. It consents to its condition, which it understands better; it consents to God who causes Himself to be loved through expectation; it accepts its tasks.⁴⁴ It grows in stature, and as it were is "dilated": the soul becomes fruitful in the service of God.⁴⁵

KNOWLEDGE THROUGH LOVE

In such a conception of the Christian life, prayer is all-pervading. Gregory took pleasure in describing its most varied, and particularly its highest, forms. According to him, man tends toward the "light without limits."⁴⁶ And at the same time he is "blind" to this light.⁴⁷ He is so by nature, since he thinks by means of images which are necessarily material and consequently limited; while God, a spirit, is without limits. Man is unstable, while the eternal is immutable. He is also blind because of his sins which constantly turn his eyes back upon himself and on what is least good in him. But he can be raised (*sublevare*) above himself by the Spirit of God. It is through the Holy Spirit, this "finger of God," that the hand of the All High touches us, and gives us His gifts, His gift, which is Himself.⁴⁸ Man cannot help but desire this, prepare himself for it through detachment, asceticism; in other words, by the "active life," through the reading of Scripture and meditation on the mysteries of Christ, the objects *par excellence* of Christian contemplation. Then, sometimes, under the divine breath, the soul is elevated above its function of animating the body, and the mind beyond its customary modes of knowing. The intelligence, which is but one aspect of the mind, is "transcended." From a distance (*de longe*), we contemplate the beauty of our Creator in the knowledge of love: *per amorem agnoscimus*.⁴⁹ This adhesion of the spirit is not the result of striving; it is a taste, a relish, a wisdom, and not a science.⁵⁰ Contemplative understanding is understanding through love, which enriches the faith from which it proceeds. "You know, I say, not through faith, but through love. . . ." ⁵¹ "When we love supracelestial realities, we begin to know what we already love, since love itself is knowledge."⁵² The soul cannot, however, remain long on these heights. It is, as it were, dazzled by what it perceives of God; the light of God repels it, and it falls back upon itself, wearied and as if struck by lightning, by a sort of violent blow (*re-verberatio*).⁵³ It takes up again its life of desire in the midst of temptations, all the stronger and more numerous for its having been admitted to a higher plane. It is in a deeper, stronger state of humility,

humility born of the knowledge of God: *in contemplatione Dei homo sibi vilescit*.⁵⁴ Active humility (*vilescit*) is not the acquisition of a scientific principle, it is an experience, a personal growth in real awareness. It is a humility which effects a change in being, not in one's possessions. The gifts of God cannot be the end of such elevation, and even less the gifts of Nature. "Do not take thought in yourself of what *you have* but of what *you are*."⁵⁵ The soul, illuminated by God's light, the soul which knows God, perceives in itself all that is impure and contrary to God. Thus it is confirmed in humility, in the same attitude which had been the point of departure and the fundamental reason for its initial flight toward God.

PEACE

The Christian life, according to St. Gregory, is, one might say, a progress from one humility to another; from acquired humility to infused humility, humility nourished by the desire for God in a life of temptation and detachment, deepened and confirmed through loving knowledge in contemplation. Gregory recalls these successive stages in descriptions which are constantly renewed. He does not analyze them in abstract, philosophical terms; rather he borrows from the Bible concrete images which enable each one to recognize in these experiences the story of his own life. And because of this, his teaching filled the need of generations born into a barbarous world after the invasions. To these simple and new souls he offered a description of the Christian life which was comforting and accessible to all. This doctrine, a very human one, was founded on a knowledge of man as he is, body and soul, flesh and spirit. Without either illusions or despair, it was animated by insight which came from faith in God, and by real confidence in man in whom God dwells and whom God fashions through trial. The reading of his work communicates a feeling of peace through the calm of his writing. This man who constantly describes man's inner conflict does so with soothing words. On every page one finds, alternately, suffering and experience but also their reconciliation, their synthesis in charity.

Finally, this doctrine is a real theology. It implies a dogmatic theology; it develops a theology of the moral and mystical life, for these, as well, belong to the province of theology. Although scattered through long commentaries, this theology is nonetheless explicit. Would anyone dare say that there is no philosophy in Plato because it is dispersed in dialogues, and that there is philosophy in Wolff just because it is systematically presented? Gregory reflects on the realities of faith, the better to understand

them; he does not confine himself to drawing up practical directives as to the way to live in conformity with these realities. He seeks and offers a deep knowledge of them. The search for God and union with God are explained in Gregory in the form of a generalized doctrine of the relationship of man to God. The monastic Middle Ages in turn never ceased to reflect on this doctrine and the texts which express it. They enriched it, without renewing it. Péguy used to say: "Plato has never been surpassed." It seems that in the realm of theological analysis of the Christian experience, nothing essential has been added to Gregory the Great. But if the great ideas of the past are to remain young and vital, each generation must, in turn, think them through and rediscover them in their pristine newness. This is a duty which, in the Benedictine tradition, has not been neglected.

NOTES

1. "S. Grégoire le Grand," *La Vie Spirituelle* (1943) 442. Dom B. Capelle (RB [1929] 210) described St. Gregory as "Doctor of Contemplation." C. Butler, *Western Mysticism* (London, 1927), showed the importance of Gregory in the spiritual tradition of the West.
2. H. Rochais, "Contribution à l'histoire des florilèges ascétiques du haut moyen âge latin," RB (1953) 256.
3. "Un centon de Fleury sur les devoirs des moines," *Analecta monastica* I (Rome, 1948) 75-89.
4. Peter the Venerable, PL 189.839. *Pierre le Vénérable*, p. 261. J. Laporte, "Odon disciple de S. Grégoire le Grand," *A Cluny: Congrès Scientifique* (Dijon, 1950), pp. 138-43.
5. E. Bertaud, "Une traduction en vers latin des Dialogues de S. Grégoire," *Jumièges: Congrès Scientifique du XIII^e centenaire* (Rouen, 1955), pp. 625-35.
6. He cites Gregory three hundred times, according to H. Rochais, "Pour une nouvelle édition du 'Liber scintillarum'," *Études mérovingiennes* (Paris, 1953) 260.
7. I. Hausherr, *Penthos* (Rome, 1944), p. 23; F. Halkin, "Le pape Grégoire le Grand dans l'hagiographie byzantine," *Miscellanea Georg Hoffmann, S.J. Orientalia Christiana periodica* (1955) 109-14.
8. Cf. Indices in *Summa theologiae* and *Summa contra gentiles* (Rome, 1948), pp. 213-15.
9. F. Bouchage (Paris, 1930).
10. G. Lefèvre, *Prière pure et pureté de cœur. Textes de S. Grégoire le Grand et de S. Jean de la Croix* (Paris, 1953). He pointed out to the author the texts of St. John of the Cross which bear so close a resemblance to those of St. Gregory as to suggest direct dependence. Compare *Moralia* 5.56 and *Dark Night of the Soul* I II ch. 13; *Moralia* 30.39 and *The Ascent of Carmel* I 10; *In Ezech.* I II 9 and *Canticle*, strophe 27. In this last instance, both commentaries suppose the translation of *Surge* (Aquilo) by "depart" and not by "come."

11. PL 75-79.
12. On this point, see the fine introduction of R. Gillet to *Morales sur Job* (Sources Chrétiennes; Paris, 1950), pp. 81-109. The portion of the *Moralia* which appears in this volume, the beginning, does not perhaps find Gregory at his best as a doctor of mysticism. There he spends rather more time than usual on the explanation of the literal meaning of the text of Job.
13. O. Porcel, *La doctrina monastica de S. Gregorio Magno y la Regula monasteriorum* (Madrid, 1950), pp. 129-55.
14. *Epistolae* XI 30. (MGH *Epist.* II XI 18). Only a few texts will be cited here, merely as examples.
15. For example, *Moralia* 8.8-9; 8.53-54.
16. Corruptionis gravitas . . . , mutabilitatis pondus . . . *In Ezech.* II, I, 17; *Moralia* 8, 19, 53; 11, 68; 12, 17.
17. TLL, *s.v.*
18. *Moralia* 32.1.
19. *Ibid.* 6.40-43; 27.42.
20. *Ibid.* 2.79.
21. *Ibid.* 2.70, 83; 9.20.
22. *Ibid.* 33.25; 22.31-34.
23. *Ibid.* 27.40-41.
24. *Ibid.* 6.40-46.
25. The texts are quoted in *Un maître de la vie spirituelle au XI^e siècle, Jean de Fécamp* (Paris, 1946), p. 99. "Aurem cordis" ("The ear of the heart") occurs in the first sentence of the *Rule* of St. Benedict.
26. *Moralia* 30.20; 27.42; 5.52.
27. *Dialogus* III 34; *In Ezech.* II 10, 20-21; *Epist.* VII 26.
28. "Termes de S. Grégoire exprimant le désir céleste," *Analecta monastica*, I 90.
29. *Alae spirituales* . . . , *aquilae pennae* . . . , texts indicated in *Un Maître*, 90n4.
30. *Moralia* 5.2; 7.49.
31. *Ibid.* 26.34.
32. *Ibid.* 10.13; 22.48-51; *In Ezech.* II 1 18.
33. *In Evangelia* 30.1.
34. *Ibid.* 25.1-2.
35. *In Ezech.* II 7, 5.
36. *Moralia* 6.58.
37. *Ibid.* 18.45.
38. *In Evangelia* 25.2.10.
39. *Ibid.* 30.5; *Moralia* 10.48; 12.44.
40. *Moralia* 9.64, 80.
41. *Ibid.* 4.71; *In Ezech.* I 4, 13.
42. *Moralia* 33.63; 4.58.
43. *Ibid.* 2.28-29.
44. *Ibid.* 18.70.
45. *In Ezech.* II 2, 8-15; II 3, 8-13.
46. *Moralia* 10.13.
47. *Ibid.* 8.49-50; *In Evangelia* 1.1.
48. *In Ezech.* I 10, 26. "Le doigt de Dieu," *La vie spirituelle* (May 1948) 492-507.

- 49. *Moralia* 10.13; 31.101.
- 50. Ibid. 23.43; 28.1-9; *In Ezech.* II 6, 1-2; II 3, 14.
- 51. *In Evangelia* 14.4.
- 52. Ibid. 27.4.
- 53. *Moralia* 23.10-12. Other texts are studied in Gillet (n. 12) 50-54.
- 54. *In Ezech.* I 8, 11, 17-18; II 1, 18; II 2, 1.
- 55. *In Evangelia* 28.3.

Cult and Culture

NOW THAT WE HAVE SEEN in St. Benedict and in St. Gregory the essential elements of monastic culture and the decisive factors which guided it, we must consider the period in which it took shape. It is the custom to call this the Carolingian period, that is to say, the hundred or so years embracing the second half of the eighth century and the first half of the ninth. It was at this time that this culture took on substance and acquired distinct and definitive characteristics.

MONASTIC LANGUAGE AND CULTURE: FRUIT OF THE CAROLINGIAN RENAISSANCE

Much has been written on the definition of the words "culture" and "civilization," and it seems clear that, from a very general point of view, culture includes an overall conception of the world and of life, and the means for expressing it—that is to say, language and the arts. Precisely, language is the foremost of the arts, the art of speaking well, writing well, and of expressing thought well. Thus, language is always the symbol of a culture, and it shows the level of a culture. Therefore, to witness the birth of a homogeneous monastic culture means witnessing the formation of its language as well. Thus we will see the language of the Middle Ages come into being, the one which is to be used by the monastic Middle Ages. It will be, because of its origins, an essentially religious language, that is to say, a language intended to express a religion, and this in the very highest act of any religion: worship. To understand this, one must first of all recall how Western monasticism had paved the way for the Carolingian reform, and then emphasize the liturgical character of this cultural renaissance, and the part the monks played in it, in order to gauge its results on monastic literature.

We need not add that no attempt will be made here to exalt the "civilizing role" of the monks. We shall try only to understand why, and from what period on, medieval monastic culture became what it was.

MISSIONARIES: GRAMMARIANS

St. Gregory the Great as Pope had sent monks to England where they planted the culture of the Latin Church. The Anglo-Saxon monks who brought to fruition the seed received from Rome were obliged to forge their own mode of expression. They needed one for the observances of the cult which inspired so many of their poems, and for the apostolate; an Aelfric had to be at the same time a "maker of sermons and a grammarian."¹ During and after the long period when invasions were devastating the Continent, Latin culture was preserved primarily in England; a work like the *Ars grammatica* of St. Julian of Toledo was known to Aldhelm and later to the Venerable Bede.² Bede himself is an admirable product of all this effort. It is remarkable that, less than one hundred years after the arrival of St. Augustine of Canterbury, this grandchild of pagans should become a Doctor of the Church, and one of the classics of our Christian literature. This child of barbarians knew and quoted Pliny and other authors of classical antiquity, particularly the poets: Ovid, Lucan, Statius, Lucretius, and above all Virgil, whom he even tried to imitate. He was very well acquainted with the Fathers of the Church, especially St. Augustine, and, to an even greater degree, with St. Gregory, and he unites all these treasures in an harmonious synthesis. In his treatise on meter, his models are the classics, as well as Christian authors and liturgical hymns. He defends as legitimate certain liberties taken by Sedulius with regard to the classical rules, the better to sing the glory of the Trinity³ or to translate more exactly the truth of the words of the Lord.⁴

ST. BONIFACE

From England this Latin culture was to be taken back to a large part of the Continent. The missionaries carried across the Channel, not only the sacred books, but also the literary models left by the profane authors: there is a manuscript of Livy, copied in Italy in the fifth century, brought to England in the seventh or eighth century, that was soon carried back to the Utrecht region by one of the Anglo-Saxon missionaries.⁵ Nor did their efforts stop there; they further elaborated the theory of this literary art. Characteristically, the Apostle of Germany, the reformer of the Frankish Church, St. Boniface, was a grammarian and wrote a handbook on meter and a treatise on grammar, an aspect of his work that has scarcely been studied. And yet, one of the instruments of his apostolate, one of his means, and not the least of them, by which he was able to implant in the