

## Traditions of Spiritual Guidance

# THE CISTERCIAN WAY

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CISTERCIAN SPIRITUALITY IS DEFINED, in the first place, by its pedigree. It is a particular interpretation of the sixth-century Rule of St Benedict as this was lived in the 'New Monastery' of Cîteaux founded in Burgundy in 1098. The tradition, thus begun, quickly spread to the four corners of Europe so that there were 352 monasteries of Cistercian monks at the death of St Bernard in 1153.

Demographic expansion was paralleled by a widespread concern within the monasteries to understand the essential quality of the Cistercian charism. The growth of the Order is impossible to comprehend except by reference to an articulate group of writers who expressed and propagated the values of the Cistercian ideal. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) is famous. William of St-Thierry (1075–1148), Gueric of Igny (1080–1157) and Aelred of Rievaulx (1109–1167) also are of global importance. There were scores of other writers such as Gilbert of Swineshead (d. 1172), Baldwin of Forde, later Archbishop of Canterbury (d. 1190), John of Forde (d. 1214) and Stephen of Sawley (d. 1252) who had a local following in their lifetimes and whose works remain powerful even today. Among the nuns it is Beatrice of Nazareth (1200–1268) who is most typical, although Gertrude the Great (1256–1302) and others from Helfta also came within the Cistercian ambit.<sup>1</sup> Such persons of great spiritual and literary power not only expressed the Cistercian grace but also contributed to its deepening and growth. Among the many monastic reforms of the eleventh and twelfth centuries Cîteaux prevailed because it was the most literate.

Cistercian spirituality is not, however, the exclusive domain of such spiritual giants. It is not a philosophy but a way of life (*conversatio*); not only a network of beliefs and values but also a body of practices that shape the experiences of those committed to this way. The literary expression of Cistercian spirituality is not self-standing; it presupposes that it was 'from the lives and labours of innumerable brothers and sisters that a powerful spiritual heritage arose'.<sup>2</sup>

It is this reliance on the commonality of monastic experience that gives cohesiveness and unity to the diverse expressions of Cistercian spirituality.<sup>3</sup> In this way the body of writings generated in the early centuries can be seen both as the unfolding of the normative vision of the founding abbots (Robert of Molesme, Alberic and Stephen Harding) and as the expressions of the inner meaning of the daily life followed by so many monks and nuns throughout the world and in different centuries. Nor was this 'unanimity' an accidental

outcome. It was explicitly provided for by the two foundational documents of the Order, the *Exordium parvum* and the *Carta caritatis*. In subsequent periods of confusion and decline this written fund of doctrine provided a rallying call for efforts of renewal and restoration.

What values were paramount in the experience of Cistercians?

### *Creative fidelity*

The Cistercian reform was never intended as a completely new initiative. The founders understood their enterprise as a return to a more integral observance of the Rule of Benedict. They located themselves within an existing spiritual tradition. The external priorities envisaged by the reform were already outlined by the Rule and explained and supported by five centuries of teaching. The foundation of this way of life was the daily service of the Liturgy of the Hours, buttressed by a disciplined existence that gave scope for prayer and *lectio divina*. In addition a certain style of community living was prescribed, with shared living space and activities, providing for some measure of interaction and responsibility. To balance the spiritual observances, there is room for hospitality and the obligation of real work. The spirituality propounded by the Rule is one that gives meaning to such a life-style. The spirituality and the life-style cannot be viewed in isolation from each other.

From the sixth to the tenth centuries western monasticism became more learned. Responding to St Benedict's call to wider reading as a means of broadening and deepening their understanding of monastic values, Benedictine monasteries developed impressive libraries and the level of literacy among the monks rose. As a result, there was a wider access to the great works of the patristic era, and considerable theological enrichment of the monastic tradition followed naturally. By the time of the Cistercian reform such works as Gregory the Great's *Moralia* ranked with the Scriptures and the liturgical books as normal monastic reading. The so-called Dark Ages witnessed a real development of doctrine as far as monasticism was concerned.

All this positive evolution the Cistercians gladly made their own. It was against the perceived laxity of many of the existing monastic families that they reacted.

One reason for the longevity of the Rule of Benedict was its adaptability to local circumstances. Benedict is famous for his reasonableness, discernment and moderation. Such broadness, however, can provide an occasion for decline, either when the resources of a local community are insufficient to resist destructive leadership (as in the case of Abbot Pons of Cluny) or when a general slackening of standards sets in. Stable communities can easily become dulled by routine; and it is just as easy to institutionalize bad habits as good. The challenge of integral Benedictine observance is such that it tends to demand more than a median degree of fervour. 'Moderation' easily becomes mediocrity and in such a situation autonomous Benedictine communities have only limited possibilities of reversing the trend. This is why many of the great moments in Benedictine history are linked with the upheaval of reform.

Robert, Alberic and Stephen, the first abbots of Cîteaux, saw as their first priority a return to the 'purity' of the Rule's observance. This they did by trimming away the customary concessions and mitigations that hindered monastic observance from generating energy. In the forefront of their minds was the desire to be faithful to Benedict's vision. But something else was operating of which they may have been unaware. With the benefit of hindsight we are able to recognize that what made the Cistercian initiative so exciting was that it was responsive to the 'signs of the times'. There was no question of neo-primitivism. What they proposed was a thoroughly 'modern' version of Benedictine monasticism. They reread the Rule in the light of contemporary aspirations. The reforms they propagated were 'novel', as protagonists among the Black Monks complained, in the sense that they departed from conventional usage and provided men of the twelfth century with a life-style that did for them what Benedict's Rule had done for their forebears in the sixth.

The reform of 1098 had another twist. As its concept took root and adherents multiplied, precautions became necessary to ensure that its specific observances were not watered down. Each monastery retained a supervisory role over all the monasteries it founded to ensure that fidelity did not wane. To supplement this there was to be an annual chapter under the presidency of the Abbot of Cîteaux to ensure that all 'lived under the one rule and in the practice of the same usages'.<sup>4</sup> In the inevitable fluctuation of fervour, abbeys were to support one another in such a way that the dynamism of the reform was not lost. Checks and balances were added to ensure that local autonomy remained an agent of fruitful adaptation and not the cause of unnoticed decline.

### *Austerity*

The most obvious characteristic of Cistercian life, in the beginning, as now, and wherever its integrity survives, is its relative simplicity and austerity. Shortly after 1135, Ordericus Vitalis described the distinctive features of the reform as it appeared to an outsider:

All go without trousers and lambskins. They abstain from the eating of fat and meat . . . They have a care for silence all the time and wear no dyed clothing. They work with their own hands to provide food and clothing for themselves. They fast from 13 September until Easter, except on Sundays. They bar their entrances and allow no access to the interior [of the monastery] . . . By their own work they have founded monasteries in deserts and wooded places.<sup>5</sup>

It is a fact, evident in the primitive documents, that the early Cistercians first defined themselves by what they rejected. In their determination to live the Rule literally, the pioneers permitted themselves to become famous for the 'unusual and almost unheard-of harshness of their life'.<sup>6</sup> At a time when many people were living rough in previously unsettled frontiers, the Cistercian adventure probably appeared far more attractive than the stodgy routines of

the large, established monasteries. Superfluity was trimmed to the bone and the result was a life that had a sharp focus and a clear sense of purpose. Not surprisingly, morale was high and recruitment was easy.

Early Cîteaux was designed for the young and fervent. As monasteries grew and pastoral care had to adapt to new situations, some of the early extremism was modified – especially after the death of Stephen Harding in 1134. Detailed prescription and close monitoring proved impossible in a complex international organization and, inevitably, the pastoral control exercised in the early days quickly became impracticable. Gradually, like rising damp, patches of decline began to appear as monasteries found themselves forced to respond to new demands with insufficient resources. The ‘Golden Age’ was over.

Simplicity that bordered on the extreme was considered so essential that, in the fourteenth century, an interpolator added a phrase to the Roman Privilege of 1100 to make the protection of the Apostolic See seem to be dependent on the ‘continued observance of discipline and frugality’.<sup>7</sup> Even today, when living standards have never been higher, a very simple life-style is an effective gauge of Cistercian authenticity. Negative values are hard to market and easy to ignore, but the Cistercian charism cannot exist without them: silence, separation from secular pursuits and mass media, a humble economy based on the monks’ work, the avoidance of indulgence and display in buildings and liturgy, a certain abstemiousness in food, clothing, furnishings and equipment. Austerity is not the only value – and there is always the danger of confusing means and ends – but a life that has no bite is not Cistercian.

### *Experience*

The twelfth century was a time in which emerged an increased appreciation of selfhood, subjectivity and experience.<sup>8</sup> The emphasis on subjective dispositions already found in the Rule of Benedict developed into a keen interest in the inner face of monastic observances. Monastic life moved away from the idea that the monk’s task was the performance of certain duties or services to concentrate more on the quality of his experience. Objective observances were seen to have as their goal subjective formation. The performance of prescribed acts functioned to promote the growth of persons to fuller humanity.

It was for this reason that the Cistercian authors insisted on the anthropological component of spirituality. A knowledge of God was not enough. It was necessary also to appreciate the nature, potential and limitations of the recipients of grace. Just as self-knowledge was necessary for an individual’s authentic progress, so pastors needed to be aware of the inner determinants of human behaviour. Some writers even dabbled in medical science to ground themselves in reality.<sup>9</sup> It is this concern for the human aspects of theology that gives to Cistercian literature its distinctive feel.

From their consideration of human beings as created in the image and likeness of God, the Cistercians developed a spirituality based on desire for God.<sup>10</sup> They saw, as parallel to the teaching of the Church and objective revelation, an innate sense of God that guides, energizes and sustains us in our

seeking of the transcendent. Religion was not seen as a matter of external certainties, but of fidelity to inward grace. The search for God was understood to coincide with the deepest aspirations of the heart; it was human fulfilment and not alienation.

This fundamental optimism was a source of courage in accepting as normal the alterations in experience that mark human progress. Everyone goes through phases of negativity and it is during these periods that encouragement is needed most. One of the characteristics of Cistercian writing was its willingness to identify and describe the obstacles to growth – often with a certain amount of humour – and to suggest means of avoiding them. It is this pragmatic and phenomenological approach which gives these texts a down-to-earth quality which makes them pleasant to read and endows them with a certain timelessness.

### *Affectivity*

The twelfth century was, likewise, an era in which love was seen as the primary goal of human existence.<sup>11</sup> It was the age of the love-lyric and of a revival of Ovid. Chrétien de Troyes was a neighbour of Bernard of Clairvaux. The theme of love is one that predominates in all the Cistercian authors of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and the Song of Songs was their devouring interest. When Bernard spoke to the already mature recruits to monastic life, he described the spiritual journey in terms that resonated with their own experience. It was a pursuit of love, a response to love, a forgetfulness of self in order to make room for love.

Yet the Cistercians did more than celebrate love. They also instructed their monks about how to install love as a principle of governance in their lives, how to let love grow to assume its natural proportions, how to implement love's dictates in the details of daily life. In his youth Bernard wrote *On the necessity of loving God*, and at the end of his life the same theme dominated his thoughts. William of St-Thierry was the author of *The nature and dignity of love* and Aelred's best-known works are *The mirror of charity* and *Spiritual friendship*. These are lyrical works but they are also the products of theological reflection and of practical experience. The Cistercian phenomenon revolves around the psychology and theology of love.

Love expressed itself most naturally for the Cistercians in their community life. Monasteries were regarded as 'schools of love' and there was a strong affective tone in everything that concerned community life.<sup>12</sup> Within communities and between communities charity was the goal proposed, with no divorce envisaged between love of God and of the brothers. Whatever problems occurred, love remained the ideal.

This is very clear in the treatise of Beatrice of Nazareth, *The seven modes of love*. A century after St Bernard she translates this typical Cistercian emphasis into a language and form that suits her own situation. Like her predecessors the dominant thought and *leitmotiv* of her life is *Minne*.

Love has drawn her and led her  
 and taught her the ways she has faithfully followed.  
 Often in great labour and in many activities,  
 in great infirmity and in strong desire,  
 in frequent impatience and in great dissatisfaction,  
 in adversity and in prosperity,  
 in lacking and in having,  
 in climbing and in hanging suspended,  
 in following and in striving,  
 in need and anxiety,  
 in fear and concern,  
 in great faithfulness and in many unfaithfulnesses,  
 in pleasure and in pain,  
 is she ready to suffer.  
 In death and in life she commits herself to love.<sup>13</sup>

There can be no doubt that the first Cistercians were men and women in love with love.

### *Mysticism*

Spiritual experience – with a strong affective component – is the engine that drives Cistercians forward. It is because of some sort of experience that young men turned their backs on worldly pleasures and entered the monastery.<sup>14</sup> As the years pass, it is just as necessary that there be an interior counterpoise to the negativity of asceticism and austerity that renders them tolerable, and permits the monk to persevere and ‘be content in a life that is ordinary, obscure and laborious’.<sup>15</sup> Unless the instinct for God is fed and fostered, the focus of the life becomes fuzzy and Cistercian specificity is lost.

Cistercian mysticism is the unseen concomitant of external *conversatio*. It begins long before entry with an external devotion and a sentimental attachment to the person of Christ. This leads, perhaps, to an awakening of the spiritual sense (*compunctio*) and thence to conversion. Thus desire is engendered. With the assent of the will, this becomes a seeking of God which gradually assumes the highest priority. It is about this time that monastic life is embraced. The steadfastness of such resolve is deepened by vicissitude, and its self-serving elements are patiently leached away. The Word visits the soul and there is, occasionally, a brief but life-giving encounter that has the effect of intensifying desire. It is at this point that the monk begins to move towards singleness of heart; there is a conformity of his will with God’s that leads to spiritual marriage, *unitas spiritus*, and ecstasy. By God’s gift heaven seems very close.

Such an itinerary is never far from the mind of Bernard and his friends. Their view of monastic life is thoroughly mystical. It makes no sense unless it leads to contemplation. Here two provisos are in order. The mystical teaching of the Cistercians was always biblical; it flowed from an interpretation of

scriptural texts and strictly maintained itself within their limits.<sup>16</sup> Secondly, it was not concerned with the extraordinary or parapsychological. It was a profoundly ethical mysticism, with its feet on the ground and its guarantee sought in daily behaviour.<sup>17</sup> Spiritual experience was not reserved for the advanced; its modalities suited persons at every stage of the ascent to God. The anecdotal history of Herbert of Clairvaux illustrates this beautifully: the monk is open to be touched by God whether he is chanting the psalms, or engaged in private prayer; when he is sick or oppressed by labour or disgusted by monastic cooking or even on the brink of desertion.<sup>18</sup> To these monks it seemed that heaven and earth interpenetrated in the *paradisus claustralis*; no wonder Bernard warned his community that there were angels lurking behind every corner.<sup>19</sup> What today strikes us as unusual is the fact that mystical experience seems almost to have been taken for granted: the monastery was really believed to be a school of contemplation.

### Summary

The Cistercian way is grounded on the Rule of Benedict and Latin tradition. Cistercian spirituality involves material observance of the great precepts of the Rule, with sensitivity to the needs and aspirations of our own times and with some protection against degeneration. The Cistercian way is austere, because this is the only means by which consciousness can be purified for the deep experience of love and contemplation, but it is a spirituality of optimism and light: biblical, experiential and affective. It has a strong eschatological character, but meanwhile, its external roughness is balanced by greater inner sweetness.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For a survey which lists the most significant writers in the Cistercian tradition see Edmund Mikkers, 'Robert de Molesme' in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* XIII (1987), cols 736–814. See also Alberic Altermatt, 'The Cistercian patrimony: introduction to the most important historical, juridical and spiritual documents', *Cistercian Studies [Quarterly]* 25 (1990), pp 287–328. From the beginning until 1800, some 3,000 writers are listed in E. Broutette, A. Dimier and E. Manning (eds), *Dictionnaire des auteurs cisterciens* (Rochefort: La Documentation Cistercienne, 1975–79). See also the unpublished notes of Vincent Hermans, *Spiritualité de Cîteaux* (Rome, 1954); M. Casey, 'Cistercian spirituality' in Michael Downey (ed), *The new dictionary of Catholic spirituality* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1993), pp 173–182.

<sup>2</sup> This phrase is lifted from *The Constitutions and Statutes of the monks and nuns of the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance* (Rome, 1990), Preface, 1.

<sup>3</sup> 'Cistercian spirituality during the twelfth and thirteen centuries is remarkable for the coherence of its doctrine and for the inner unity of the theory and practice of monastic life. This can be verified in the major authors who, while maintaining their personal vision of monastic life, manifest this profound unity in their works. Such unity was nourished by a common life of monastic and liturgical observances, by the teaching of holy Scripture and the Fathers of the Church and the Monastie Fathers.' Translated from Mikkers, *op. cit.*, col 766.

<sup>4</sup> *Carta caritatis* 3.2.

<sup>5</sup> *Historia ecclesiastica* Part 3, Book 8, Chapter 25; PL 188, 641c. There is an English translation by Marjorie Chibnall published by OUP in 1973; the section about the Cistercians is on

pp 312–327. For background see Marjorie Chibnall, *The world of Orderic Vitalis: Norman monks and Norman knights* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> *Exordium parvum* 16.4.

<sup>7</sup> See Chrysogonus Waddell, 'Prelude to a feast of freedom: notes on the Roman Privilege *Desiderium quod* of October 19, 1100', *Cîteaux* 33 (1982), pp 247–303.

<sup>8</sup> Colin Morris, *The discovery of the individual: 1050–1200* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987); Caroline Walker Bynum, 'Did the twelfth century discover the individual?' in *Jesus as mother: studies in the spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), pp 82–109; John F. Benton, 'Consciousness of self and perceptions of individuality' in Robert L. Benson et al., *Renaissance and renewal in the twelfth century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), pp 263–295; Ulrich Köpf, *Religiöse Erfahrung in der Theologie Bernhards von Clairvaux* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1980); Charles Dumont, 'L'expérience dans la discipline cistercienne' in *Sagesse ardente: à l'école cistercienne de l'amour dans la tradition bénédictine* (Oka: Pain de Cîteaux, 1995), pp 77–82.

<sup>9</sup> 'Any theory of man's ability to experience God which abstracts from the best contemporary insight into the nature of man's physical situation in the world does so at its own peril.' Bernard McGinn (ed), *Three treatises on man: a Cistercian anthropology* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1977), p 30.

<sup>10</sup> See M. Casey, *A thirst for God: spiritual desire in Bernard of Clairvaux's sermons on the Song of Songs* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1977); Lode van Heke, *Le désir dans l'expérience religieuse: l'homme réuni: relecture de Saint Bernard* (Paris: Cerf, 1990).

<sup>11</sup> See Jean Leclercq, *Monks and love in twelfth century France* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979); John C. Moore, *Love in twelfth century France* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972).

<sup>12</sup> See Caroline Bynum, 'The Cistercian conception of community', *op. cit.*, pp 59–81. 'Thus a comparison of Cistercian sermons and works of advice with treatises by their cloistered contemporaries underlines the Cistercians' affective intensity by showing its context. In contrast to black monks of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Cistercians expand the attention paid to interpersonal relations. In contrast to black monks and regular canons, they introduce a passionate concern for emotional change . . . Recent historiography has agreed that the affective spirituality of twelfth-century Cistercians is something new, whatever precursors and roots it has in writings of Anselm and other eleventh-century figures' (p 80). See M. Casey, 'The dialectic of solitude and communion in Cistercian communities', *CSQ* 21.4 (1988), pp 273–309; 'In communi vita fratrum: St Bernard's teaching on cenobitic solitude', *Analecta Cisterciensia* 46 (1990), pp 243–261.

<sup>13</sup> Lines 528–543. M. Casey (trans), 'Beatrice of Nazareth: the Seven Modes of Love', *Tjurunga* 50 (1996), p 82.

<sup>14</sup> As Bernard notes in Adv 3.3: 'If you have no knowledge of God, who is it that led you here? How is it that you have come to this place? How else is it that you have been persuaded to renounce, of your own free will, the affection of your friends, the pleasures of the body and the vanities of the world?'

<sup>15</sup> Constitution 3.5.

<sup>16</sup> See M. Casey, 'Bernard's biblical mysticism: approaching Sermon on the Song of Songs 74', *Studies in Spirituality* 4 (1994), pp 12–30.

<sup>17</sup> See M. Casey, 'In pursuit of ecstasy: reflections on Bernard of Clairvaux's *De diligendo dei*', *Monastic Studies* 16 (1986), pp 139–156.

<sup>18</sup> See M. Casey, 'Herbert of Clairvaux's *Book of wonderful happenings*', *CSQ* 25.1 (1990), pp 37–64.

<sup>19</sup> *Qui habitat* 12:6–8; *SBOp* 4:460–462.