# THE APOSTOLATE IN MONASTIC TRADITION

By ANNE FIELD

'THE ROLE of the monk is not to teach, but to weep over his sins and over the plight of the whole world'.[1] So declared St Jerome, and with him a whole host of ancient monastic writers. At first sight, such statements would seem to put the life of a monk at the opposite extreme from the apostolate and the active ministry. The monastic fathers were uncompromising in their insistence that his life was essentially contemplative and consisted in withdrawing, even fleeing, from the world and its distractions and in occupying himself in continuous prayer and penance. We find St Gregory the Great writing:

> Monks differ from all other christians in that they are withdrawn *(remoti)*. The chief note of their state of life is stillness *(quies)*, an abstraction from the lawful occupations which absorb other members of the Church. Monks are called to contemplation even more than the rest of men, since their whole way of life is a means to it.[2]

He enlarges on this in his description of the contemplative life:

> In the contemplative life, while maintaining with his whole heart the love of God and his neighbour, a man is at rest from exterior works, cleaving by desire to his Maker alone, so that having no wish for action and treading underfoot all preoccupation, his soul is on fire with longing to see the face of his Creator.[3]

The monastic life formed no part of the hierarchical structures of the Church. If some monks were ordained to the priesthood, this was in order to minister to the needs of the community and the neighbourhood; but the *Rule of St Benedict* expressed a certain coolness towards the clerical state (arising no doubt from St Benedict's personal experience):

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1 *Contra Vigilantium*, 15: PL 23, 251.
2 Cf Leclercq, J.: *Spirituality of the Middle Ages* (London, 1968), p 8.
3 *Homilies on Ezechiel*, II, 2, 8.

> If anyone of the priestly order ask to be received into the monastery, permission shall not be granted to him too readily. Nevertheless, if he persevere firmly in his petition, let him know that he will have to observe the full discipline of the rule and that nothing will be abated for him.[4]
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> If any abbot wish to have a priest or deacon ordained for his monastery, let him choose out one of his subjects who is worthy to exercise the priestly office. But let the one who is ordained beware of elation or pride; and let him not presume to do anything but what is commanded him by the abbot . . .[5]

St Gregory is equally cautious:

> While monks are not precluded from receiving orders, there is a certain danger in their doing so, because ordinarily speaking the clergy is involved in work which is not easily compatible with monastic life.[6]

Of its nature monastic life does not exist for any objective in the line of activity. Its meaning is to be found in the order of being, not of doing. For in former times, as at the present day, what was productive in a monk's life was not what he did, but what he was; he did not exist *for* any other purpose, but sought to live by and for God alone, hidden in the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection. By this very fact, however, he bore witness to the enduring truth that the kingdom of God is not of this world, that it cannot be brought about by man's own efforts, and that a man must prepare himself for it by living in humility and poverty and by persevering prayer. This very testimony has constantly been the apostolic function of monks in the Church.

Nevertheless, while they have always played their part in her apostolic task simply by being monks,[7] in time of need the Church has never hesitated to call upon them to undertake certain works belonging to her pastoral concern. St Gregory himself made use of them when necessary, and it was in obedience to his orders that the monk Augustine and his companions set out on their long journey to convert the anglo-saxons.

Probably Augustine and Boniface come to mind first when we think of the great missionary monks of benedictine tradition; however, they were not the first in the field. It would not be true, moreover, to say that monks became missionaries and apostles only when summoned from their cloister by the rulers of the Church. One of

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[4] *Rule of St Benedict*, 60. [5] *Ibid.*, 62. [6] Leclercq, *op. cit.*, p 9.
[7] Paul VI: Allocution to Benedictine Abbots, in *Acta Apostolicae* Sedis (AAS) 68 (1966), pp 1160–61.

the more important innovations of St Benedict's *Rule* was the vow of stability which he required of his sons. Before his time many monks were great wanderers. The idea of going forth from one's native land to dwell in strange countries was a typical form of asceticism in celtic monasticism. The irish pilgrim did not set out on his journey to visit the tombs of the apostles, as the anglo-saxons did, but in search of solitude and voluntary exile in order that he might gain an eternal home in heaven. This was a spiritual ideal analogous to that of the hermits of the desert, but a consequence of it was that their peregrinations often brought the irish monks into inhabited places where men were found willing to receive the christian message. And so they became missionaries, although the motive for their travels had not been the apostolate, but the desire for a freely chosen exile from their native land.

With the celtic monks christianity came to many parts of Britain, and with it the concept of *peregrinatio;* it is due to this spiritual ideal that pilgrimages to Rome became so popular among the anglo-saxons. Perhaps a difference in temperament caused the latter to prefer to make a sacred shrine the goal of their journeying, but in any case they would pass through lands where Christ had not yet been preached, and would be inflamed with zeal to bring the word of salvation to the people. Often enough such travels did not depend upon a monk's own choice, for the turmoils of those times frequently resulted in banishment for monk-bishops. St Wilfrid's forced periods of sojourn abroad brought the gospel to peoples yet unevangelized. St Boniface himself tells us that he was 'drawn by two feelings, *amor Christi et amor peregrinationis*'[8] (love of Christ and love of travelling); but a further driving force for Willibrord, Boniface and their companions would seem to have been the desire to bring their own faith to their still pagan kinsfolk in Frisia and Saxony.

They did not apparently feel that such a course was incompatible with the way of life they had chosen. They were not, in fact, given to theorizing about the nature of their calling, and we look in vain among the letters of Boniface and the other anglo-saxons for any theology of a missionary-monk. They wrote frequently asking for prayers, for books, and for other english monks and nuns to come out and assist them with their labours; for the rest, practical problems occupied their minds when they penned their letters. It remained for a later age to turn its attention to clarifying the difference

[8] *Epistolae*, XCIV.

between the mission of monks and that of the religious orders which were later to spring up with a specifically apostolic purpose; the anglo-saxons were content to put it into practice.

A thousand years afterwards, the monks who returned from Europe to labour once again on the english mission possessed a keen sense of continuity with the old tradition. It is said of the martyr St John Roberts that he was nicknamed 'that second Augustine monk', and all of them found it very fitting that benedictines should be among those striving to restore to their country the faith which had been brought to it by their precursors so long ago.

What was most characteristic, however, of the missionary labours of both celtic and anglo-saxon monks (and in this their seventeenth century brethren were not able to imitate them) was that they took it for granted that planting the faith and planting monasticism in mission territories were one and the same thing. Boniface brought monks and nuns from England to help him in the work of evangelization; but the majority of these did not set about their task in the manner of later missionaries who dispersed themselves over the countryside, preaching, teaching, instructing, baptizing. They still lived in accordance with their vocation as men and women vowed to a life of prayer and penance in the cloister. It was not so much the monks as the monasteries which introduced the faith to Europe; they became the centres of religious life, culture and civilization. In the monasteries the native peoples were able to observe the life of a christian community, the worship of the true God, the example of dedicated lives; in them, too, learning was acquired and children who would afterwards become monks or priests were educated. Men were taught to read and write, and also to cultivate the land; women were instructed in domestic crafts by the nuns, and the sick of the neighbourhood were cared for. Thus, through these great monastic settlements, a whole network of civilization gradually spread over the land together with the christian faith, as more monasteries and churches were established. The biographer of St Lioba, whom Boniface had sent for to help him in his work, writes of him that 'he built monasteries so that the people should be enchanted with the faith, not so much by the action of churchmen as by the communities of monks and consecrated virgins'.[9] With all his activity, it could always be said of Boniface that, like the monk-apostle Ansgar of Scandinavia, he was *foris apostolus, intus monachus* (an apostle abroad, a monk at home).

[9] Rudolph of Fulda, *Vita Leobae*, 10, in *Mon. Germ. Hist. Script.* VI, p 125.

In England itself the development of both christianity and civilization was due to the influence of the monasteries or minsters. They were a focus for the region, serving as a christian centre for the countryside; yet no statement that the minster was founded for the work of conversion can be discovered in any early source. When this civilizing and christianizing process was fully achieved, the monks were ready to stand aside and make way for the pastoral clergy; their community life within their monasteries remained undisturbed. The active apostolate and the cure of souls, education and civilization, were never the primary objective of monasticism; but wherever it flourished these also were to be found as by-products, and because they were not directly sought they were often more effective.

The most ancient, universal and traditional service rendered by the monasteries was that of hospitality. This hospitality was offered to the poor, the sick, to pilgrims and to strangers, in accordance with St Benedict's admonition: 'Let all guests that come be received like Christ, for he will say, I was a stranger and you took me in'.[10] People who lived under the shadow of the minsters turned naturally to the monks and nuns for help, instruction and encouragement; and travellers knew that they could be sure of finding a welcome and lodging among them, where they would be shown every care and concern, and where they would experience the charity and peace of Christ dwelling with men.

It is generally true to say that the type of ministry or service undertaken by a monastic community is determined by its environment, or by the needs of the local church and neighbourhood. Benedictines have not as a rule looked for some form of work or apostolate; rather the need has made itself apparent. Faced with a world in want, monks could not be content merely to exist; they also had to act. It is this that has prompted the different monastic activities according to historical and geographical factors, and according to the particular charism of each community. And yet these activities have never been the direct aim of the monks. Their function is not primarily to carry on the works of the active ministry, but to represent the presence and reality of grace in the Church, and to make of the cenobitic way of life a genuine model of her communal nature and eschatological goal. The very life of the monastery is a fulfilment of her apostolic mission to proclaim the saving word of God to all men.

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[10] *Rule of St Benedict*, 53.

During the second Vatican Council, the Church for the first time turned her gaze upon herself in order to study her own nature. Since then the monastic order has also pondered deeply upon the essence of its calling. To attempt here to determine the benedictine ideal and to confine the richness and vitality embodied in centuries of endeavour within the limits of a single definition would be neither prudent nor possible. The *Rule of St Benedict* is a document notable both for its singleness of purpose and its flexibility in allowing for diversity of application in varying circumstances. Its legislation provides a sixth century working model of a way of life which succeeding generations of monks and nuns have adapted in various ways to their own situation. In spite of this wide pluralism of orientation and practice, however, the principles of the Rule have never been abandoned, and the mode of monastic mission remains traditionally the proclamation of the gospel, not so much in preaching as in the life of a community living by its precepts and counsels.

In May 1964, a congress of the superiors of african monasteries held at Bouaké, West Africa, drew up a document which has already become something of a classic statement of monastic theology. The translation of the text is as follows:

> The superiors of the monasteries of Africa, gathered together in fraternal assembly, have taken note of their unanimous desire to present to africans a monastic life open to their own genius and, at the same time, in conformity with the place of monasticism in the Church and with its traditional ideal. This ideal, as it has been lived since its origins on african soil, is that of a humble and hidden life, entirely oriented towards the search for God. Aiming at the perfect realization of fraternal charity, through an effective separation from the world and a common life of the brethren 'forming but one heart and one soul', the monastery will be a witness to the demands of the kingdom of God and to his presence among men. Through prayer, penance and work, the monk joins himself intimately to Christ's sacrifice, and co-operates in his adoration and redemptive work. Through poverty according to the Beatitudes, which awakens in him a desire for the eternal realities on account of which he has left everything behind, he helps to hasten the coming of the kingdom.
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> The primary goal of monastic foundations in Africa is to allow those african souls who feel drawn thereto by the Spirit to realize the contemplative ideal in a state of life consecrated by the Church, and thus to bring about its firm establishment in their native land.
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> Since the monastic life represents a state of humility in the Church, it does not of itself tend to prepare its members for hierarchical functions:

> its goal normally excludes all pastoral offices. The monks in no way intend to be unconcerned about the influence which monasteries, through their life of prayer and charity, cannot fail to exercise upon the surrounding population. The traditional practice of hospitality allows them to take care of the spiritual and corporal needs of those who come to them in search of peace, help and encouragement, without prejudice to the essential conditions of silence and recollection without which an authentic monastic life cannot flourish.[11]

In December of the following year, the decree on the Church's missionary activity set its seal upon this ideal and upon the function which monks have to perform in mission fields, a function which cannot adequately be accomplished by any other organ in the Church:

> From the very planting stage of the Church the religious life should be carefully fostered, since it luminously manifests and signifies the inner nature of the christian calling . . . The contemplative life belongs to the fullness of the Church's presence, and should therefore be everywhere established.
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> Institutes of the contemplative life have, by their prayers, works of penance and sufferings, a most important role in the conversion of souls. It is, after all, God who responds to prayer by sending labourers into his harvest, by opening the minds of non-christians to hear the gospel, and by making the word of salvation fruitful in their hearts. Indeed these institutes are implored to found houses in mission places, as many have already done, so that leading their life in a way suited to the genuinely religious traditions of the people, they may bear outstanding witness to the majesty and charity of God and of union in Christ among non-christians.[12]

Already Pope Pius XII had asked for foundations to be made in the Third World. The established monasteries responded to this request with quiet generosity. In the many foundations which have been made during the past thirty years, the by-products of monasticism continue to appear according to the traditional pattern: the neighbourhood is encouraged to improve its agriculture and to develop its culture, children are taught, the sick are assisted, the gospel is preached, the faith is transmitted, the sacraments are administered. Hospitality is offered to all, and Christ's work among

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[11] 'Declaration of the Superiors of the Monasteries of Africa Assembled in congress at Bouaké, Ivory Coast, West Africa, May 21–26, 1964'. An english translation of the text is contained in Peifer, C.: *Monastic Spirituality* (New York, 1966), pp 375–376.

[12] *Ad Gentes*, 40.

men, embodied in the Church, assumes in these communities a concrete form.

In developed and stabilized countries where the pastoral ministry has been assumed by the indigenous clergy, or in the post-christian societies of Europe and America, this witness and hospitality are no less important. In a welfare state such as our own, however, the poor may well be those deficient in other than worldly goods. For there is a hunger among men and women today for the experience of God, for the meaning of life, for peace, acceptance and understanding. Welcoming such seekers is a typically monastic form of service, and for a community to share its own life with them for a time is a form of charity much stressed today.

But apart from the services which a monastery may render to the people of the surrounding area, an integral monastic life is itself an apostolic work, because it contributes to the vitality and growth of the Church. This apostolic function would still be fulfilled even if the external apostolate became so diminished that the greater part of the population were unaware of its presence; for it is the inner and invisible life of the Church which is affected by the work of prayer and asceticism and by the consecration of the whole lives of monks and nuns to the unceasing search for God. 'The more fervent their union with Christ in this gift of self which involves the whole of their living, the richer the Church's life, and the more vital and fruitful her apostolate'.[13]

Since this *Supplement* is concerned with women religious in particular, it may perhaps be permitted here to conclude with a brief consideration of the ecclesial value of a life consecrated to God in a monastery which has no direct share in the active ministry of the Church. The vocation of contemplative nuns, in the words of Pius XII, is a fully apostolic calling. 'Their apostolate is a universal one, circumscribed by no limits of time or place, and is directed towards everything which in any way concerns the honour of their divine Spouse and the salvation of men'.[14] The doctrinal justification for a life directed entirely to God in silence, obscurity, prayer and penance, and which is believed to be absolutely necessary to the Church's missionary effort, no matter how urgent the need for the active apostolate, must be sought in the mystical body of Christ and the communion of saints; in the knowledge that the contemplative's

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[13] *Perfectae Caritatis*, 1.

[14] The Apostolic Constitution *Sponsa Christi*, AAS (1951), p 1.

effort towards holiness and union with God enters into the total effort of the body of which she is a cell, and contributes to the perfection and growth of the whole, and in the whole doctrine of redemption through the cross.

> For although Christ gave himself to a ministry of intense, crowded activity in which he was heroically available to all who needed him, he repeatedly sought mountain solitudes to renew the vital links of prayer with his Father. When the crowds tracked him down in his solitude he did not send them away. Yet his mission was to be accomplished, not through popular acclamation, but in loneliness, in ultimate rejection by his own people who would not receive him. Only when 'lifted up from the earth' could he draw all men to himself. On the cross he endured abandonment and apparent uselessness, vitally involved in the affairs of men, loving God and men more than ever before, yet withdrawn, obedient and stabilized in his Father's will.[15]

By their withdrawal from public life and direct social action, contemplative nuns do not separate themselves from the rest of mankind. The superficial separation which they have chosen is directly concerned with a solidarity with their fellow men at a deeper level, in the heart of Christ. They do not seek to avoid involvement in the sorrows and struggles of mankind. What they do ask, and what the Church through them asks of the Lord, is what Rachel demanded of Jacob: give me children, or I shall die.[16] For apostolic zeal and the desire to further Christ's redemptive work are no less strong in them than in those engaged in the active ministry – only the mode of their apostolate is different.

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[15] *Draft Statement on Monastic Theology for the English Benedictine Congregation*, V, B, 4.

[16] Gen 30, 1.