A MONASTIC SECOND SPRING

The Re-establishment of Benedictine life in Britain

THE DISSOLUTION of the English Monasteries and other great Religious Houses by King Henry VIII virtually destroyed monastic life in Britain and Ireland in the five short years between 1535 and 1540. So dominant had been the monks' contribution to the English 'thing' in the sphere of religious practice, so forceful its social, economic and political impact, that the spiritual and topographical shape of the country was entirely changed. Only gaunt and empty buildings remained as witnesses of a noble past that reached back for close on a thousand years.

The visible absence of monasteries was to haunt the countryside and townships of these islands for nearly three centuries. If men and women from Great Britain and Ireland, who had remained loyal to the ancient faith of Columba and Aidan, Gregory and Augustine, felt the call to follow Christ along the monastic path, they had to leave home for the continent of Europe. At the outset, its men joined monasteries in Italy and Spain. But later, they became numerous enough to band together. With the approval of Rome, they reshaped an English Congregation of Monasteries in the Netherlands, France and Germany. There they waited patiently, until God's time should come for them to return and to re-found their monasteries in the homeland.

The english monks settled at Douai (St Gregory's), at Dieuleward, Lorraine (St Laurence's) and at Paris (St Edmund's); the Scots established monasteries at Ratisbon and Wurzburg. The nuns settled earlier at Brussels, Cambrai and Ghent, at Dunkirk and Paris.

The return of the monks and nuns to Britain (c. A.D. 1800)

When, in 1789, the French Revolution burst on Europe, these foreign refugees from the British Isles had their property confiscated. Some of them were imprisoned, whilst the rest fled back to England and beyond. Not that they had monasteries to return to: indeed, the penal laws forbidding their presence in their homelands were still on the Statute-book, though the last martyr, of the Reformation, St Oliver Plunkett, had been executed at Tyburn a century earlier. However, the Protestant government and people, at least in England, were less and less inclined to enforce the harsh laws against priests and religious, as long as they remained unobtrusive. 'Live and let live' was the motto.

So the Douai monks of St Gregory's finally settled at Downside, near Bath (1814); the Dieuleward monks (St Laurence's) at Ampleforth, Yorkshire (1802); but the monks of the Paris foundation (St Edmund's) had been so scattered that they found it difficult to establish contact with one another. Finally, however, after the Napoleonic Wars, they were granted the old monastic buildings at Douai in north-west France (the continental home of the Downside monks); and then with the help of some Dieuleward monks, St Edmund's was re-established. To round off St Edmund's history, the monks of continental Douai, as a result of the anti-religious laws in France (1903), decided to return home; they settled near Woolhampton in Berkshire. They called their re-established monastery Douai (pronounced Doway), and have preserved the ancient link by a continued close relationship with Ampleforth.

The origins of the English Benedictine Convents in England are even more heroic than those of the monks. Eight years before any monastery of monks had been set up abroad, the Brussels Convent had been founded in 1598 by Lady Mary Percy, the daughter of the martyred Earl of Northumberland, Blessed Thomas Percy. Before very long they contributed to the foundation at Cambrai (1623), where among other novices were three great-great-granddaughters of St Thomas More, and also one of the Gascoigne family from Aberford in Yorkshire, who became the first Abbess. It was at Cambrai that Fr Augustine Baker became spiritual director to the nuns; there he wrote his innumerable treatises on prayer, later to be edited by his benedictine disciple Serenus Cressy, and published under the title *Sancta Sophia*, in 1657. The other foundation, with nuns from Brussels, was made at Ghent in 1624. Both the Cambrai and the Ghent convents themselves made further foundations: Cambrai opened a daughter house in Paris (1651), while Ghent followed suit with one at Dunkirk (1662) and another at Ypres (1665). There was no lack of heroic women prepared to go into exile to live the very austere life of prayer following the Rule of St Benedict; but there was considerable lack of money, and their poverty was very real.

During the French Revolution, the nuns of Cambrai, after sharing the rigours of prison life with the French Carmelites who were later martyred, finally reached England and settled permanently at Stanbrook, near Worcester (1838). The nuns of other houses also suffered imprisonment from the revolutionaries, and straggled across to England as best they could. Those of Ghent finally settled at Oulton, in Staffordshire (1853); those of Paris, the first to settle (1836), are still at Colwich in the same county. The nuns of Dunkirk, after a period of wandering, eventually found their home at Teignmouth, Devon (1862). The oldest foundation of all, that of Brussels, never found a permanent resting place, and have ceased to exist. The Priory of Fernham, in Oxfordshire, has a different origin, but a similar history. These sisters crossed to England in 1792 from the French convent of Montargis. In 1835, they found a home at

Princethorpe, near Rugby, and only moved to Fernham in 1966. Tyburn Convent (1903) also came from France.

From the first, each Benedictine convent was more or less autonomous; but this was far from the case with the monasteries of monks. They had inherited from their early italian and spanish connections a strange constitution, framed to prevent abbots *in commendam* from exercising any power over the individual monasteries. However, in the process, they created a kind of congregational structure in which a general chapter and president held most of the power, and the local priors very little. It was a convenient system, so long as the main purpose of the monks was to help the persecuted Catholics in England by sharing the labours of the apostolic mission. Thus, though the monasteries on the continent were exemplary monastic houses, especially Dieuleward, they remained little more than training grounds for missionaries.

Consequently, when the monks returned to England at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and for the hundred years that followed, the framework of the Congregation remained the same. The monasteries were in some respects little more than seminaries to supply priests for the parishes (called missions) dotted about the country, served by the monks. It was the President and his council who decided who would go where, not the Priors of the houses themselves. In between the four-yearly Chapter meetings, the President and his two Provincials of Canterbury and York ruled the monks of the English Benedictine Congregation. In fact, the monks made their vows to him, and not to the Priors of their chosen house. He was answerable only to the four-yearly Chapter by whom he was elected.

Only in 1900 did this strange unmonastic régime come to an end, when each monastery acquired its independence and an abbot. All during the nineteenth century the parishes were the major preoccupation of the monks, though small schools of a hundred boys or less with fairly good standards were run by Downside and Ampleforth. The chief Catholic educationalists in England during that time were the Jesuits, with their boarding-schools at Stonyhurst and Beaumont, and with grammar schools in several large towns.

Monastic ideals had almost been smothered in Europe, first by the onset of the Reformation and then again by the armies of the French Revolution; though of course some ancient monasteries had survived in Italy, Switzerland and Austria. The nineteenth century, however, witnessed a great romantic revival of monasticism. There was little historical perception but immense enthusiasm and religious fervour, which showed itself in England in artificial 'medieval ruins and advertising for ornamental hermits'. However, in France, Italy and Germany, the revival was real enough: for example, in the monasteries of Solesmes and Beuron. A number of monastic houses began to take root in England unconnected with the old English Benedictine Congregation. These newcomers were influenced in various ways by the wave of pure monasticism abroad. The

first group to arrive were the Italians of the 'Primitive Observance', who settled at Ramsgate in Kent (1856). Buckfast Abbey (1881), an offshoot of *La Pierre qui Vire* in France, was also part of the new monastic outlook. But it was probably the houses founded in England from Solesmes, by the greatest monastic reformer of the century, Dom Guéranger, at Farnborough in Hampshire (1895), and at Quarr in the Isle of Wight (1901), which had the greatest impact on the whole English Benedictine Congregation. Downside was particularly affected. When the German foundation at Erdington, near Birmingham, established from Beuron in 1875, was dissolved because of the First World War, a number of its monks transferred to Downside, chief among them being their future Abbot, Dom John Chapman, one of the most famous spiritual writers and directors of his day.

Meanwhile the Benedictine nuns, with Stanbrook in the van, had already (*c.* 1872) transformed their abbey according to the French model. Downside was partially won over, Ampleforth more slowly. Though the movement was hesitant at first, it was lasting. The monasteries now rightly became the centre of the life of the monks, each house was independent, the prayer-life and scholarship and the liturgy began to blossom, though the vestments and exaggerated liturgical ritual of the late middle ages made difficulties for the practical english temperament.

With the turn of the century, the monastic schools, which had been abandoned by the nuns, began to flourish to an extraordinary degree among the monks, chiefly owing to the new training available at the two older universities of Oxford and Cambridge, and to able and forceful monks, like Fathers Paul Nevill at Ampleforth, Sigebert Trafford at Downside and Ignatius Rice at Douai.

First-fruits: the Australian experiment

The original apostolic development had been the movement away from the previously established missions or parishes all over England, but especially in Lancashire and the North East, which were hidden away in the countryside under the shelter of great recusant families, into the large towns of the Industrial Revolution. There was steadfast and heroic work there, particularly during the plague years in Liverpool, and in the coal-mining areas in South Wales and the North East.

The first extraordinary venture, which clearly demanded deep faith, came from Downside in the 1830s. The abbey, itself scarcely established, sent to Australia one of its most promising young monks, Bernard Ullathorne, to give some hope and bring some order into the Catholic body which found itself at the other side of the world. He was followed by his old novice-master, Dom Bede Polding, the future archbishop of Sydney. In 1841, Ullathorne was back in London, speaking and writing against the iniquities of the convict settlements system in Australia. When the Hierarchy was

restored in England and Wales in 1850, he became the first bishop of Birmingham, and with Newman and Wiseman became one of the architects of the restored Church.

Meanwhile, Bede Polding was caring for the convict-settlers in Australia. He gathered priests from Europe, mostly from Ireland, and during his forty-three years as Sydney's Archbishop, established a hierarchy of five bishoprics and a hundred and thirty-five priests. His most far-reaching innovation as a Benedictine was his establishment of two orders of sisters. The first was the contemplative group at Rydalmere, which later moved to the present site of Pennant Hills (both near Sydney). The nuns were trained by two english Benedictines, one from Stanbrook and the other from Princethorpe. He wanted also an active order of benedictine sisters. Here again he was successful in attracting many vocations. But when he presented a Rule and Constitutions to the Holy See, the Congregation of Propaganda refused to allow Benedictines to break their enclosure by going among the poor people. Polding's solution was simply to change their name: they were eventually entitled Sisters of the Good Samaritan. Now (1980) they number over six hundred, and are a remarkable manifestation of the true benedictine spirit. They are spread over the eastern side of the continent, and have made foundations in Japan, where five houses already have japanese superiors. Bede Polding established the Congregation first to look after the poor women that came out among the convicts, then their children. They now have schools in a great number of the towns in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, and South Australia. The contemplatives at Pennant Hills have recently launched a second establishment at Ewu Park, Queensland (1980). Finally, a foundation by spanish monks was established as far back as 1846, at New Norcia, near Perth in Western Australia. It still thrives.

Internal expansion

The first new foundation proper in Great Britain was the establishment of a common noviciate and house of studies for the Congregation at Belmont in Herefordshire (1859). The moving spirit was a Downside monk, Fr Joseph Brown, who had been appointed Vicar Apostolic of the Welsh District. He envisaged a revival of the monastic structure of the middle ages, when the monks administered cathedrals in England, with a cathedral prior, while the bishop managed the diocese. When the english and welsh Hierarchy was re-established, Belmont became a cathedral church, with Bishop Brown O.S.B., as the Ordinary, and the senior monks as the canons of the cathedral. The Community was to consist of the novice master and professors, with novices and juniors from the various houses of the congregation. In 1920, when the autonomy of the different houses was being emphasized, each house withdrew its novices and Belmont became an independent abbey.

Next came the founding of Fort Augustus (1876), on the famous Loch Ness in Scotland, with a monk of Downside in charge. Dom Jerome Vaughan's great aim was to gather the remnants of the two monasteries where the exiled scottish monks had gravitated over the penal times to german houses, in order to keep a continuity. A few were found who had been monks of Lamspring, and one from Ratisbon. The House was given financial support by Lord Lovat, and it flourished. It too was influenced by the monastic renewal of the time. In 1877, the monks elected as their prior and later as their first abbot, Leo Linse, a German, from the house established from Beuron at Erdington, outside Birmingham. Fort Augustus itself supported the founding of a Benedictine convent (1981). After World War I, it moved to Holme Eden in Cumberland. Dumfries Priory (Benedictines of the Blessed Sacrament) was founded from Arras in 1884.

Downside made another foundation on the outskirts of London, at Ealing. It was to have a day school and run the parish (1897). Downside founded yet another monastery in England, Worth (1933) in West Sussex, this time with a boarding school. Worth Abbey itself made a foundation in Peru in 1969 (see below p 85). But perhaps the most significant move by Downside for its own life was that, taking advantage of the new liberty for Catholics to attend the old universities, it set up a private hall in Cambridge, Benet House (1896). Ampleforth followed suit at the University of Oxford, where St Benet's Hall was founded in 1897.

External expansion

The United States of America has had Benedictine monasteries since the middle of the last century. They came from two sources, Germany and Switzerland. The former ran schools for boys, the latter, seminaries: beginning with Latrobe in Pennsylvania from Germany, and St Meinrad's in Indiana from Switzerland. Americans with an english background, drawn to the english tradition and ways of education, made a tentative move through Downside to ask for a foundation in Rhode Island. When some years later a number of converts appeared on the scene from Rhode Island, Fort Augustus took over the Downside protégé, Portsmouth, and volunteered to train them and back the venture. At the same time Fort Augustus supported a move to found another house, in the capital itself. Thus Portsmouth, begun in 1919, was firmly established in 1927, while the Washington house was founded in 1924. Both are now abbeys.

In 1955, Ampleforth set in motion the founding of a monastery, this time in the Middle West, at St Louis, Missouri. Whereas Washington and Portsmouth were from the start manned mostly by Americans, St Louis was an english transplantation. Now all three are almost completely of american stock or naturalized. All three have schools, Portsmouth alone has boarders. The abbey churches of St Louis and Portsmouth are both outstanding examples of modern american architecture at its best: the

architects were Belluschi for Portsmouth and Gyo Obata for St Louis. The latter church is loaned as a parish church with a diocesan priest as pastor; the monks, a plethora of curates.

Tyburn Convent (1898) was founded from Montmartre; it has already spread its wings to Tyburn, Manly, in New South Wales (1956) and Tyburn, Piura, Peru (1976).

Meanwhile Stanbrook has not been idle. With a small team of nuns it established a monastery at São Paulo, in Brazil, in 1911. From this small beginning has sprung up the autonomous Congregation of Brazil which includes seven convents, the most notable being Belo Horizonte (cf *infra,* pp 88-89).

In 1936, anticipating the Nazi threat, the Congregation of St Ottilien from Germany made a foundation at Hendon, in London, to be of service for their missions in Korea and Tanzania, and now also in Kenya. With them are associated the Tutzing Sisters (cf *infra*, pp 79-84). In 1937, St Walburg, Eichstatt re-founded Minster, in Kent. Nor must we forget Ravenswood Priory (1913) and Andover Priory (1930) related to Buckfast.

Meanwhile two anglican communities, the monks in Caldey Island off the south coast of Wales, and the nuns in their convent at West Malling, were in the process of being reconciled with the See of Rome, the nuns first and then the monks in 1913. The latter finally settled at Prinknash, Gloucestershire, and the nuns at Talacre in North Wales. Prinknash, in its comparatively short existence, has taken over Farnborough from the Solesmes Congregation; and then, in 1946, it made a flourishing foundation in the highlands of Scotland, at Pluscarden, restoring an ancient medieval abbey.

The anglican tradition did not end here. Anglican monks have 're-formed' at Nashdom, in Buckinghamshire. They too have made a foundation in the United States of America: the Abbey of St Gregory's, Three Rivers, Michigan.

In 1922, another group of benedictine nuns, of the Solesmes affiliation, settled in St Cecilia's Abbey at Ryde in the Isle of Wight. They have flourished and have made, perhaps, the most courageous monastic foundation from England, *Shanti Nilayam*, near Bangalore in South India, in a completely different world and culture.

Equally unusual is the foundation at Ewu, Nigeria, which began as a joint venture of the Irish Abbey of Glenstal in County Limerick — founded from Maredsous in Belgium in 1927 — and Ampleforth in 1973. The full responsibility for this was taken up by Glenstal in 1975. It should also be mentioned that Glenstal has a 'sister' house, Kylemore Abbey, Connemara, founded in 1922 from Brussels, Ghent and Ypres, where the nuns were known as the 'Irish Dames'. This year (1981) will see yet another new departure; the foundation by the Olivetan Benedictines of Cockfosters, London, of twin monasteries for monks and nuns at Turvey in Bedfordshire. This is a resumption of the pre-Reformation tradition of the Gilbertines.

Conclusion

In reviewing this rather complex history of Benedictine new beginnings and developments over nearly two hundred years, one is left with the general impression that, as late as thirty years ago, one group of monasteries was so profoundly enclosed that they had scarcely any contacts outside; whilst the other was so active as to be unable to witness to their contemplative spirit. Today these two are drawing together towards a proper equilibrium; the 'open' have become more aware of their heritage, and the 'enclosed' less timid when the world knocks at their door. Yet each monastery of monks or nuns still preserves its distinct individuality, its own tradition handed down over the years. We may perhaps say that this is peculiar to the benedictine ethos, since each house is independent of the others, and also the monastic spirit, enshrined in Benedict's rule, is tenaciously flexible, able constantly to adapt to the highly variable conditions of time, place and culture.

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The above historical sketch, and indeed this Supplement as a whole, would be sadly incomplete without an appreciative and warm-hearted greeting to our brothers and sisters of the great Cistercian Tradition, exemplified in the english-speaking heritage initiated by a co-founder of Cîteaux, Stephen Harding, exemplified in the great abbeys of Rievaulx, Fountains and Tintern, and renewed for us today in many flourishing monasteries, especially in Ireland. There the Church is enriched by Mount Melleray, Mellifont in County Louth, Roscrea in Tipperary, Port Glenone in Antrim and Moone in Kildare. Here in England we have Mount St Bernard's and in Scotland, Nunraw; whilst the Sisters at Stapehill, Dorset, may look with a certain envy at the sudden flurry of international vocations to their sister and daughter-house at Glencairn, in County Waterford. They all stand unshakeably for the primacy of prayer and penance in union with the prayers of the suffering and glorified Jesus, together with the prayers and sufferings, sins and agonies of the Body of Christ, the Church, and of the world around. 'In my Father's house there are many mansions' (Jn 14, 2).

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