

A NIGERIAN EXPERIMENT

THE FOUNDING of Ewu Monastery has many peculiar features. In the first place it was founded by two monasteries, Glenstal in the Republic of Ireland, and Ampleforth in Yorkshire (though eventually it was completely adopted by Glenstal).

Originally, the three founding monks could not get resident permits for Nigeria. They went first to the neighbouring country of Cameroon and helped to found a small major seminary at Bambui in the diocese of Bamenda. Eventually they entered Nigeria in June 1974. The original site at Eke in Eastern Nigeria proved to be impracticable. It was not until three years later that the little monastery was finally established sixty miles north-east of Benin City, on the Ishan plateau. The community of the neighbouring village of Ewu, Moslems and pagans as well as Christians, all accepted the foundation as a house of prayer: the only benedictine foundation in english-speaking West Africa.

It was to be a spiritual centre to which anyone, priests, religious, sisters, laity, could come to share in the prayer of the Church, celebrated with simple dignity and reverence.

For the Black World of Africa God is a fact, the reality. The presence of God is a given. Consequently the ground for prayer is already established. But apart from occasional petitions, for instance before a journey or for a safe return, or in gratitude for the sunrise and the start of a new day, many african tribes do not pray much to God. He is benevolent, and can never do anyone any harm. But the existence of spirits, good and bad, is also a given; and it is with the spirits that people are much more concerned, especially the evil spirits who cause most of the harm that befalls them, particularly sickness and disease. A deep fear of the spirit 'world thus pervades the lives of Africans. It is the joy of the Christian to proclaim: 'Fear no more, Christ has set us free'.

To preach poverty is a different matter. The Africans, except the tycoons, are poor already; and we Europeans, for all our hoped-for simplicity, are rich. Poverty for the Nigerians is to share what you have with those who have much less or nothing. This is the old tribal custom of the extended family; unless they hold together, they will all perish. If one member of this family finds a good job, his income is not considered to be his alone, it belongs to them all; and they come for their share. In this atmosphere the local church is the extended family of Christ, and so is the monastery. This is our hope for the foundation at Ewu. Agriculture is the people's way of life, the ground is fertile, the monks will be able to encourage more effective ways of cultivation. As the monastic community grows, it will be able to offer other material services.

More important will be the increased possibility of instructing the local Christians, especially the children, in their faith. Here is the real poverty of the countryside. The number of missionaries and indigenous priests is quite inadequate for the needs. The flow into the Church in the last decades has been impressive; but, though the faith is there and strong, it is lacking in depth of understanding. Undoubtedly the way ahead is through the liturgy. The Church is groping forward towards a really african presentation of the faith in the liturgy. Only the Africans themselves, however, can venture on this path with sure tread. Ewu will have to wait patiently until the Nigerians become the heart of the Community.

The sense of community is central to the african way of life. Throughout the christian centuries, the monasteries have turned outwards towards the local Church and society, in a gesture of mutual help, while still maintaining a strong area of withdrawal. This is particularly important in Africa, as the African expects just that. For this reason alone the setting up of small benedictine 'cells' could be of wide influence in that continent. The monks will have to open their doors, so that the people can share in their whole life.

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