

A 1108 (20

BENEDICTINA

478

20

1973

A • AA

1973

23. AUG. 1974

34^{27 G Mp}

PAUL H. MOSHER
University of Washington

ABBOT BERNARD I OF MONTECASSINO AND THE FATE OF
BENEDICTINE MONASTICISM
IN THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY

The earlier centuries of the Middle Ages have been characterized as the « Benedictine centuries », and this description does not lack merit. During the years between Charlemagne and Philip Augustus Benedictine monks, reformed or unreformed, increased substantially in number, and monasteries were the chief providers of saints, popes and bishops¹. Abbot Guibert of Nogent wrote, about 1115, that « to say nothing of foreign regions unknown to me, the monastic rules are known to have been cultivated in many places and foundations under certain kings of France, and in some of them there gathered such an enormous number of men living the religious life that we marvel how the limited capacity of the places could hold such crowds »². In « foreign regions », such as Italy the same pattern held true; the *Vitae quatuor priorum abbatum cavensium* of Abbot Hugh of Venosa informs us that during the abbacy of Peter I (1079-1123) that abbot conferred the black Benedictine habit with his own hands on over three thousand monks within the Congregation of Cava, a great abbey near Salerno³.

Modern authors have echoed the observation of Abbot Guibert and the statistics of Abbot Hugh. From the middle of the eleventh to the end of the twelfth-century the « number of men and women living under a rule as monks, canons, hermits and recluses... increased enormously not only in terms of absolute numbers, perhaps as much

¹ While I realize that Cistercians are reformed Benedictines, I have occasionally, for purposes of clarity used the term « Benedictine » to mean the older abbeys and congregations including the Cluniacs but excluding the Cistercians who are referred to specifically.

² GUIBERT DE NOGENT, *Histoire de sa vie* (1053-1124), ed. B. BOURGIN (Coll. de textes pour servir à l'étude et à l'enseignement de l'histoire), Paris, 1907, pp. 22-23.

³ Ed. L. MATTEI-CERASOLI, *RIS*², VI, part v, p. 18.

as ten-fold in some regions, but probably also of proportion to the total population, although this was a time of rapid demographic growth⁴». We may indeed say with Richard Southern that Benedictine, or reformed Benedictine, monasticism possessed a virtual monopoly over, and leadership of, the religious life of Europe until the late twelfth century⁵. Monastic concepts of piety and spirituality so completely dominated the ecclesiological thought of the eleventh century that so eminent an historian of the Medieval Church as David Knowles has said that «the great movement of reform (the so-called Gregorian reform)... aimed, and in some part succeeded, in monachizing the Church, by putting before the clergy, and even before the laity, monastic discipline and monastic practices and ideals as the universal way of salvation⁶».

St. Benedict has intended his monasteries to be fortresses of prayer, isolated from the *saeculum* — the physical world and its temptations — where monks might live a common, busy, regulated life of prayer and activity directed toward the salvation of their souls and combat with the forces of evil in the realm of the spirit. The acquisition of the material goods necessary to support the monks and the growing abundance of pious benefactions from the aristocracy soon forced these islands of prayer into accommodation with the material world, for the land had to be farmed, its products and the other revenues of the monastery had to be husbanded. Furthermore, the monastic communities were called upon by society, as has been suggested above, to provide ecclesiastical leadership and secular counsel. Benedict's isolated spiritual fortresses were thus early transmuted, by the necessities of existence in the agrarian, localized Eu-

⁴ *Libellus de diversis ordinibus et professionibus qui sunt in ecclesia*, ed. and trans. G. CONSTABLE and B. SMITH, Oxford, 1972, p. xi.

⁵ *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages* (Pelican History of the Church, 2) Harmondsworth, 1970, p. 217.

⁶ «Bulletin of the John Rylands Library, XXXIX (1956), p. 132-133. Norman Cantor placed the issue in a larger, if more personal and problematic, context when he wrote that before 1050 «The monastic order became (through cooperation with the leaders of secular society) the keystone of the early medieval equilibrium», and suggested that the central idea of the Gregorian reformers was to monasticize not only the Church, but all of Western Christian society as well. *The Crisis of Western Monasticism, 1050-1130*, «American Historical Review», LXVI (1960), p. 58.

rope of the early Middle Ages, into institutions manifesting a Janus-like dualism of spiritual activity and temporal administration.

Despite its enormous outward success, Benedictine monasticism never made its worldly association harmonious with its inner life, and the monastic order went through a series of reforms beginning in the tenth century which sought, among other things, to find a satisfactory solution to the dualism forced upon monasticism by its worldly accommodation. The considerable, and unexpected, success of the Cistercian reform of the twelfth century first signified a shifting of the older congregations of Benedictines (including the Cluniacs) from that center of pietistic influence and exemplary religious style which they had so long occupied; but since the Cistercians stood for reinterpretation and not replacement of the Rule, they seemed not, at first, to mean a significant transformation in the status of the monastic order as a whole within greater society. The Cistercian movement did, however, signify a monastic attempt to respond to calls for reform and new forms of pietistic expression, and has been identified — along with the spread of Augustinian canons — as another crisis of western monasticism⁷.

It was only after the appearance and popularity of the orders of friars (and perhaps of some of the popular heresies as well), that the Cistercian shifts in the interpretation of the Rule — especially their emphasis on mystic inner conversion and their acceptance of lay brethren to assist the monks in their work of reclaiming forest and waste beyond the monastery walls — could be understood as a transitional phase in the development of spirituality in Europe, a transition which ultimately left the monasteries behind, and transferred the nucleus or apex of religious life from the cloister to the world beyond⁸.

Scholars agree that monasticism had spun from the center of the ecclesiastical and religious solar system by the thirteenth century, that it had been replaced as the highest expression of spirituality and piety by the mendicant orders, and that the great influence of

⁷ SOUTHERN, *Western Society and the Church*, pp. 240-41; J. LECLERCO, et al., *La spiritualité du moyen age* (Histoire de la spiritualité chrétienne, II), Paris, 1961, p. 203.

⁸ Cf. R. W. SOUTHERN, *The Making of the Middle Ages*, New Haven and London, 1953, p. 240.

monks in the ecclesiastical hierarchy had been lost to secular clergy who had not originated in the cloister⁹. The change is clearly perceptible, but it is drawn subtly and not in bold contrasts. Monks did not disappear nor did they cease altogether to hold high office; monasteries continued to be great landowners, great farmers and great administrators, but their leadership of the spiritual, religious and intellectual life of the Middle Ages had ended. The monastery was no longer the highest ideal of spiritual practice for society as a whole. The malaise revealed itself by a decline in the number and quality of monastic recruits; Ursmer Berlière has found thirteenth century complaints that many of the ablest young men were choosing to enter the mendicant orders, and that monasteries were sometimes left with the physically and mentally unfit¹⁰.

Some popes of the thirteenth century recognized the monastic crisis, but usually identified it as a decline of discipline and morality, and — in Italy at any rate — at least partially a result of the dispute between papacy and empire. The common response of the popes to the difficulty was to extend papal control over monasteries and monastic orders under the guise of reform. Sometimes the influence was beneficial, as when a pope helped a devastated abbey to regain its patrimony or free it from secular control, but it was just as often negative; popes quashed free elections, appointed commendatory abbots, or imposed harsh reform measures insensitive to local needs. Of the thirteenth century popes, only Innocent III appears to have had a clear and well-conceived program of monastic reform. He diagnosed the monastic crisis as the traditional and continuing one revealed by abuses of monastic life, disorder, jurisdictional disputes and the like, and his response was to treat the symptoms by a broad program of reorganizing monasteries everywhere into congregations like that of Cîteaux with regular chapters and visitations, close

⁹ See, for example, D. KNOWLES, *The Religious Orders in England*, Cambridge, 1948, pp. ix-x, and the same author's *Christian Monasticism* New York, 1969, pp. 108-113 and pp. 318-19; R. BRENTANO, *Two Churches* Princeton, 1968, p. 251.

¹⁰ *Le recrutement dans les monastères bénédictins au XIIIe et XIVe siècles* (Acad. Royale de Belgique, Classe des Lettres et des Sciences morales et politiques, Mémoires XVIII, fasc. 6), Brussels, 1924. Berlière's useful and suggestive study treats the monastic order as a whole, not just the Benedictines.

supervision and moral reform¹¹. Innocent's program exceeded the abilities of an already burdened administration and was not very successful; moreover it focused on the symptoms and not the central issue of the thirteenth century monastic crisis, which was the survival of monasticism — especially the old institution of Benedictine monasticism — as a viable institution in a society with ever changing religious needs. Could Benedictine monasticism continue to provide a unique and meaningful form of religious life within an expanding world increasingly dominated by towns, schools, wider learning, expanded and more regular trade and communication, and ever more rapid change?

While modern scholars have identified and outlined this monastic crisis, they have not sought to find contemporaneous monastic response to it. I have found one Benedictine treatise of the thirteenth century which recognizes the crisis, though not explicitly, and proposes answers to it: the *Speculum monachorum*, an unjustly neglected commentary on Benedictine life and portions of the Rule, written between 1272 and 1274 by Bernard Ayglier, abbot of Montecassino (1263-82)¹².

Abbot Bernard I of Montecassino was a man of considerable background. He was Provençal by birth, of petty noble family, who became in his youth a monk at the Benedictine abbey of Savigny in the province of Lyons. In 1256 he was preferred to the abbacy of the venerable and ancient insular abbey of Lérins by Count Charles of Anjou, the brother of King Louis IX of France, and not long after became a papal chaplain under Alexander IV. In 1263 he was translated — on the urging of Charles of Anjou — to the abbey of

¹¹ For Innocent's reform program see M. MACCARONE, *Riforma e sviluppo della vita religiosa con Innocenzo III*, « Rivista di Storia della Chiesa in Italia », XVI (1962), pp. 29-72. Urban IV's appointment of Bernard to Montecassino appears to have been motivated by politics rather than reform. Celestine V apparently wanted to convert all other monastic orders to his own, the Celestines, and Boniface VIII favored autonomy of all orders under papal control. Papal control was the desire of most thirteenth century popes.

¹² *Bernardi I Abbatis Casinensis Speculum Monachorum*, ed. P. H. WALTER, Freiburg im Breisgau, 1901, hereafter cited as SM. For the date of the work, see the *Regesti Bernardi I abbatis Casinensis fragmenta*, ed. A. CAPLET, Rome, 1890, p. xlvii. See also H. WALTER, *Der Speculum Monachorum des Abtes Bernard I von Cassino*, « Studien und Mitteilungen aus dem Benedict. und dem Cistercienser Orden », XXII, 1902, pp. 32-48.

Montecassino by a fellow Frenchman, Pope Urban IV; and he later produced funds to help the successful campaign of Count Charles against the last of the Hohenstaufen for the crown of Sicily¹³. Bernard was an administrator of great ability, who accomplished both the restoration of Montecassino's religious community and the renovation and reorganization of the abbey's vast domain of *universitates* and estates after the long period of demoralization and depredation which attended the last years of Hohenstaufen rule and the war of succession in southern Italy¹⁴. He was also a minor statesman who acted on occasion as papal or royal emissary, and was the author of a commentary on the *Rule* of St. Benedict in addition to his spiritual work, the *Speculum monachorum*¹⁵. Abbot Bernard was thus cast in the same mold as his Cistercian namesake and many other great medieval ecclesiastical figures in possessing not only personal ambition, administrative ability and statesmanship, but a high order of spirituality and piety as well.

Bernard's *Speculum*, or Mirror for Monks, is, on its surface, a formal treatise in scholastic style on the question: which portions of the *Rule* of St. Benedict must be accepted by monks as precepts, to which they are bound under pain of mortal sin, and which are counsel or admonition¹⁶? The subject of the book was suggested by ques-

¹³ For Bernard's life, see A. SABA, *Bernardo Ayglerio, abbate di Montecassino* (Miscellanea Cassinese, 8) Montecassino, 1931; CAPLET, *Regesti Bernardi I*, pp. 1v-cxiii; L. TOSTI gives a political account of Montecassino under Bernard in his *Storia della Badia di Monte-Cassino*, Naples, 1842, v. III, pp. 6-33. See also the perceptive observation of R. BRENTANO, *Two Churches*, pp. 253-54.

¹⁴ See the scattered material in L. FABIANI, *La terra di S. Benedetto: Studio storico-giuridico sull'Abbazia di Montecassino dal VII al XIII secolo* (Miscellanea Cassinese, 33 and 34), Montecassino, 1968, I, pp. 138, 192-93, 203, 342-47, 404-11; II, pp. 24-26, 44-45, 90-94, 433-41, 449-52; also CAPLET, *Regesti Bernardi I*, the *Regesto di Tommaso Decano o Cartolario del convento cassinese* (1178-1280), ed. M. INGUANEZ (Tabularium Cassinese), Montecassino, 1915, and T. LECCISOTTI, *A proposito dell'Abate di Montecassino Bernardo I*, extract from the *Bollettino Diocesano*, Montecassino, 1972.

A systematic study of the restoration of Montecassino under Abbot Bernard has not yet been made.

¹⁵ *Bernardi I Abbatiss Casinensis in Regulam Sancti Benedicti Expositio*, ed. A. CAPLET, Montecassino, 1894.

¹⁶ Bernard entitled his work *Speculum regulae monachorum* in the incipit (SM, p. 1), but elsewhere referred to it as the *Speculum monachorum* (*In Regulam... Expositio*, ed. CAPLET, p. 7 and p. 363) The title intended by Bernard might therefore be closer to «The mirror for monks based upon the *Rule*».

tions put to Bernard by monks at Montecassino, and the work was conceived while he was in France on papal business. Later, he says, he culled useful material from « various sacred writings, canon law and the examples offered by the Fathers », and incorporated them into the *Speculum monachorum* which he dedicated to Cassino's conventual dean, John, the vice-dean (and later abbot) Tommaso, and the monks of his abbey¹⁷. Knowledge of the *Speculum* was not limited to Montecassino, however, and the work enjoyed a certain vogue in the later Middle Ages. It is extant in some thirty-five codices, with provenances ranging from Monreale to Paris. It was published in Venice in 1505 and received a second edition in Paris only four years later¹⁸.

Beneath its learned format, however, the *Speculum* is a mirror of piety, inspiration and guidance for Benedictine monks of the older congregations and monasteries, which sought to identify the rôle of Benedictine monasticism in thirteenth century European society, a rôle no longer characterized by spiritual or social pre-eminence.

Within a tripartite external structure, Bernard placed his greatest emphasis on two matters: the monastic profession — its nature and its consequences — and the essential character of the Benedictine monastery¹⁹. The *Speculum* is conservative, for Bernard sought, after all, to support one of the most traditional of Europe's institutions, but it is not reactionary. Bernard was a man of affairs, widely read and widely travelled, who respected the Cistercians and was influenced by them (he drew heavily, in the *Speculum*, on the writings of St. Bernard of Clairvaux), and knew the friars, whose growing influence and social position he did not resent or oppose. In fact he founded a house and church for the Dominicans in San Germano, the little town attached to the base of Cassino's mount which housed the abbey's temporal administration, and corresponded with St. Thomas Aquinas, who had spent some time in his youth at Montecassino²⁰. The basic form of the *Speculum*, though not its content, was

¹⁷ SM, pp. 1-3.

¹⁸ SM, pp. cvii-xix.

¹⁹ The three main parts of the work are: I. On the nature of the monastic profession, II. On those qualities required by the profession, and on the prevention of wrongful living in the monastery, III. The correction of the negligence of professed monks by the stimulus of Scripture.

²⁰ The foundation charter may be found in TOSTI, *Montecassino*, III, pp. 79-80. A letter from St. Thomas Aquinas to Abbot Bernard is in CAPLET, *Reg. Bernardi I*, pp. xcix-ci.

probably based on a treatise by a French Dominican, Master Guillaume Perault²¹. Apart from its external form, however, mendicant ideas had little influence on the *Speculum*, which has instead to do with what Bernard understood to be the essentials of cloistered cenobitic life.

Bernard sets forth the answer to the question with which he introduced his book in the first of the three major divisions of the *Speculum*. The only portions of the *Rule* which are precepts to which Benedictine monks are bound under pain of mortal sin are the three vows taken by the Benedictine monk at the time of his ordination: stability, conversion of life, and obedience²². For Bernard, observation of these three vows defines the Benedictine monk. Of the three, Bernard devotes by far the greatest amount of his attention to the first, stability, which he seemed to feel was the most important to the thirteenth century Benedictine who was his intended audience²³. Indeed, stability occupies first place among all the monastic virtues in Bernard's work; obedience, which was primary for St. Benedict, is not neglected, but it is moved to third place. Bernard's stability is a quality both interior and exterior, which should be possessed by the individual monk, by the community of which he is a part (the *societas bonorum*), and by the physical monastery which surrounds and sustains them. It is this stability which, in Bernard's mind, principally distinguished the Benedictines from, and raised them above, the other religious orders.

Stability is first and foremost a «steadfast constancy of mind», (*mentis perseverantem constantiam*) which is attained by sound conscience, wisdom, divine love, divine grace and fear of God. It is a personal quality necessary for *conversatio sacra*. The physical monastery is both conducive to and symbolic of stability. A stable cloister fosters stability of mind, and stability of mind is, in turn, essential for both the *conversio* and *conversatio* of the monk. The goal of the monk is true inner conversion which can only be achieved by one who has attained stability of both mind and body, and for Bernard this is much more likely to happen within a stable cloister²⁴.

²¹ SM, pp. xv-xviii. Bernard only cites Perault twice.

²² *Sancti Benedicti Regula*, ed. G. PENCO, Florence, 1958

²³ SM, pp. 11-56.

²⁴ SM, pp. 56-57, 75.

In one of the most moving and eloquent passages of the *Speculum*, Bernard creates a verbal trope on the significance of monastic stability, which he makes first an enclosed garden of delights, a cloister of the soul. It is the garden of the Psalmist wherein the monk may pick the fruit of the Lord, the fruit, that is, of sublime contemplation. It is the garden where the Lord himself tarries, attracted by the voices of the monks in song and prayer ²⁵. Bernard then shifts metaphorically to the Gospel of St. John to transform the garden of delights and contemplation into the garden where Christ was crucified ²⁶. The monastery is then likened to Jerusalem, symbol of peace, « where the house of God is spiritually constructed », then to the firmament of heaven in which the monks are stars, and finally to the waters of the world, which gave it life ²⁷. On the other hand, the absence of stability in the cloister produces lack of direction, inconstancy, temptation and the decay which leads to damnation ²⁸.

Bernard thus seeks to demonstrate that monastic stability, which at first may seem to be the very antithesis of mystic contemplation, is the source and foundation of mystic and ascetic progress. The restraints of the monastery, far from being a hindrance to divine contemplation, provide the atmosphere in which it is most readily obtained.

Later in the *Speculum* Bernard again focuses on the monastery, and once again we are led to understand its place at the center of his pietistic thought. But this time the approach is at first quite different, and more traditional: the physical body of Christ is present in the sacraments, his mystic body in the good monks who form the *societas bonorum* — and then there are the wonderful, miracle-making remains of saints in the altars and tombs. And here Bernard is careful to give first place to the churches of venerable abbeys such as his own Montecassino: « Who can know », he asks, « how many saints' bodies are buried in holy places, and especially in great and ancient monastic houses ²⁹ »? They are buried everywhere in these ancient holy places, some yet undiscovered, even under the very paving which the monks tread daily in their round of prayer and singing.

²⁵ SM, pp. 50-51.

²⁶ SM, p. 51.

²⁷ SM, pp. 52-54.

²⁸ SM, pp. 25-50.

²⁹ SM, p. 136.

The monastery is thus a sacred precinct, filled with an aura of special holiness which emanates from these sacred presences.

But then Bernard moves his attention from the physical to the spiritual monastery. It is the « house of divine majesty surrounded by the wall of our penitence and probation », again favored by the Lord's presence because it is filled with the sweet sound of prayer³⁰. The monastery is the road by which St. Benedict ascended to heaven, a road followed by means of penitence and the abasement of pride, a road open to all those who imitate Benedict's example³¹. It is the place where patience, humility and obedience are tested and fused into the purest gold. It is a place of celestial conversation and of abundant benediction which form a legacy of St. Benedict to be enjoyed by any monk who follows him by obeying his *Rule*³². And finally, the monastery is « the gate of piety which leads to eternal life »; it is the strait gate of St. Matthew (7: 13-14) which leads to life, but is found only by a few³³. And these few are clearly, to Abbot Bernard, the society of good men who inhabit the Benedictine cloister.

Bernard's use of this metaphor, of the Benedictine monastery as the gate of eternal life which will be found by only a few, summarizes Bernard's concept of the rôle of Benedictine monasticism in his century. The friars had responded to the monastic crisis of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries by heeding the direction of changing piety, and abandoning the cloister in order to minister to the changing spiritual and material needs of the secular world. Bernard responded to their challenge introspectively and conservatively; the monastery, for him, remained unique, the single surest path to salvation, and the qualities which made it so were its stability and isolation from the secular world, and these qualities must be maintained. Monks should not leave the cloister to become students or masters, preachers or pilgrims, farmers or administrators, for to accommodate the monastery to the winds of social change would destroy both it and its unique spiritual mission. Although the friars performed good works, their wandering in the world imperilled their souls, while the Benedictines, whose numbers were indeed decreasing — the monks of Bernard's own abbey had diminished in number from former times —

³⁰ SM, p. 138.

³¹ SM, pp. 137, 139.

³² SM, p. 140.

³³ SM, p. 140.

found in the stability of the cloistered life those qualities of mind and soul which Bernard believed made them better able to reach communion with God and achieve eternal life.

Although the *Speculum* is conservative, it is not merely a gloss on St. Benedict, like Bernard's commentary on the *Rule*. Bernard reordered and re-evaluated the priorities of the *Rule* consistent with his perceptions of the needs of the monks of his own age. Benedict's Cassino as described by the *Rule* was a busy place, with a Roman sense of order and regulation, and in the *Rule* Benedict devoted most of his chapters to the exterior life within the convent. His principal inner virtue was obedience. Bernard's Cassino was also ordered, but it had become more essentially a center of mystic and ascetic contemplation, and its principal virtue, both interior and exterior, was stability. Bernard's piety was also greatly influenced by the mystical and ascetic thought of St. Bernard of Clairvaux (who is cited most frequently after the Bible and the *Rule*), and the ascetic works of St. Gregory the Great. But while Bernard adapted Cistercian mysticism and ascetism to the older Benedictine life, he rejected the Cistercian institutions of manual labor outside the monastic precinct and their acceptance of lay brethren within.

In his administrative and organizational reforms at Montecassino, Bernard tried to put the principles he expressed in the *Speculum* into practice by restricting, within reasonable limits, the number of monks whose duties involved them in contact with the world³⁴. Secular administration was handled at San Germano, which was physically removed from the monastery, and business was supervised by the seven senior and proven monks of Bernard's *familia*. Bernard's answer was again practical rather than radical; the temporal domain was to be ordered and systematized, and then administered by a hierarchy of officials headed by a few proven monks.

Bernard's concept of the fate of Benedictine monasticism in the thirteenth century was not radical. The problems he recognized were not the recruitment of more monks or the opening of the cloister to the needs of the world, but rather how to improve and direct the life of those men, however few, who chose the Benedictine cloister out of a desire for true conversion and reasonable surety of salvation. Bernard's program was two-fold, calling for both exterior and inte-

³⁴ SM, p. 178.

rior reform, and he sought to put his ideas into practice. He provided for the isolation and support of his cloister, and encouraged there a life of ascetic and mystic progress of the spirit influenced by the pietistic concepts of St. Bernard of Clairvaux. He restored and reordered Cassino's vast temporal domains and placed them in the hands of a few experienced monastic administrators. Bernard recognized that when properly ordered and directed, the Benedictine cloister would continue to provide a useful and unique form of spiritual life, but acknowledged that it would be a path chosen by fewer men than in the past. His response to crisis was conservative but thoughtful, and the hindsight of history seems to have supported his perceptions.