

## CREATIVINESS AND FIDELITY TO TRADITION

The decisions of our last General Chapter, together with the various projects which are under way for the restructuring of our monastic Office are creating a certain uneasiness of conscience for a good number of monks and nuns. They are asking whether all these changes are not in opposition' to the fidelity which we owe to the Rule of St Benedict.

It sometimes happens that the promoters of liturgical renewal try to; prove, in ways which are too facile or too clumsy, that the reforms in view have their roots in 'tradition'. It also sometimes happens that serious historians, while claiming that they are malting their assertions only from the standpoint of the historian, try to warn liturgists that such and such a modification in the Office would not be in conformity with the Rule of St Benedict.

It is clear that we are confronted here with a whole set of problems which merit reflection. What is the meaning of monastic tradition for us from the theological point of view ? What is the role of the historian and of historical research in our monastic renewal ? What does being faithful to our founders mean ?

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To begin with, we need to remember that the question of fidelity to the 'founders' is not by any means the same for a monastic order such as ours as it is for modern congregations. The latter were founded at a definite time by men with a special charism, in order to meet specific needs in the Church, and it is this that constitutes their particular mission and the reason for their existence. But when we are dealing with the monastic orders we cannot speak -of 'founders' in the same sense.

It is therefore important to be clear of whom we are speaking, when we talk about our 'founders'. Our founders were, no doubt, our Fathers of Citeaux. But St Benedict was also our founder. So, too, were the great spiritual masters of monasticism, both in the East and the West. But it was Christ and the Apostles who were most especially our founders. To be faithful to Citeaux means, first of all, to accept the principle of reform and renewal. To be faithful to St Benedict signifies

willingness to enter into the great cenobitical current of which the Regula Benedicti was the crystallization in the West in the sixth century. Over and above Cîteaux, we owe fidelity to the Fathers of the Desert, that is, to the various currents of primitive monastic tradition. But, above all else, we owe fidelity to the Gospel and to the example of Christian life given us by the first Christian community of Jerusalem. Respect for this hierarchy of values is the first requirement of enlightened fidelity to tradition.

Monasticism, in each of the several forms in which it has been realised in history, is an event in the history of salvation, a moment of dialogue between God and his People. This dialogue consists indissolubly in a call from God and the response which the Church makes, through certain of her members, to this call from her Bridegroom. It is the inspiration of the Spirit and, at the same time, the response that the Spirit stirs up in the souls of those whom he has led out into the desert in order to speak to their hearts. Each moment of the history of monasticism, in so far as it is an ecclesial reality, is a living interpretation, a realisation, and, consequently, a proclamation, of the teaching of the Gospel concerning the perfect life, as understood and lived under the impulsion of the Spirit of Christ. As such, it is an element of the tradition of the Church.

The primary and completely irreplaceable Rule of the monk—and all the great monastic legislators are there to proclaim the fact—will always be Holy Scripture, to which nothing can be added, and from which nothing can be subtracted. But in his reading of Scripture, in his constantly renewed effort to understand and to fulfil the Gospel message of poverty, chastity and obedience, the monk can never afford to neglect the existential interpretation given to this message by monastic tradition, and especially by the life of the monks of the first generation, in whom the original charism is more easily recognisable, since it is still only lightly covered by institutions.

The thing that interests the historian of monasticism is, therefore, to get behind the raw facts of history in order to rediscover and understand the reality enshrined in these facts. In order to discover the meaning of this history, he needs to penetrate beyond the particularities of time and place, and to make contact with the eternal. When he studies and describes the observances, liturgical or otherwise, of the early monks, he is only starting out on the first steps of his enquiry. For observances are only elements of a 'complete act' which we cannot possibly understand unless we study it as a whole. At the base and starting point of this historical fact, and serving as its permanent substratum, there lies a determinate spiritual attitude, a particular concept of life according to the Gospel and of the relationships existing between the various elements

which make it up. It is this religious attitude that it is important for the historian to discover.

The work of the historian must, therefore, be a work of interpretation. For to understand a fact is to discover its proper significance by replacing it in the context of which it is the expression. To understand the spirituality of the early monks and their attitude towards liturgy-even simply as a historian, and much more so as a theologian-it is necessary to explain texts and observances which involve an overall mentality and use a language often very different from our own. This means that we must, whether we like it or not, explain to ourselves what we are reading ; we must translate and interpret. Father de Lubac, in his admirable introduction to *Histoire et Esprit*, reminds us of the need for doing this. It is an operation which 'is not performed without risk ; but this risk must be run' (P. 10-11).

The consequence of this is that the standpoint from which such a study is undertaken will, in the long run, have to be that of the theologian. This will not be the result of an arbitrary choice, but because of the nature of the object to be studied. The interpretation of history depends on the type of ends from which the historian sets out to understand facts. But since monasticism is as we have described it above, the principle of interpretation and explanation adopted in the study of its history cannot be other than theological. This does not in any way imply that we are abandoning the field proper to history for that of theology, nor that we are being unfaithful to the methods proper to historical science. The historian who wants to be more than a mere narrator, who wants to explain the facts, ought, at least in a second stage, to place himself at a standpoint different from that of a simple observer. In order to explain facts, and already in a certain measure to select them and expose them to view, he must make use of a principle of discernment which, as such, belongs to another sphere and is not the object of observation, although it has, no doubt, a certain measure of insertion in the facts.

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In other words, whether one approaches history as an amateur (which is dangerous) or as a specialist (which is compromising), the adoption of a good historical method, important though it is, is not enough. An adequate subjective attitude is just as indispensable.

In the first place, it is necessary to renounce a standpoint that is too one-sidedly finalist and would tend to make us study early

monasticism with the sole object of detecting elements which might have some relationship to the present, or might be useful for justifying the taking up of this or that position in the contemporary movement for monastic renewal. In his work *De la connaissance historique*, H.I. Marrou stigmatises those 'comedians of propaganda' who 'see in the knowledge of the past a collection of picturesque anecdotes, parallels and precedents which it may be useful to invoke'. 'That,' he continues, 'is to debase history to the naive concept which the rhetoricians of antiquity had of it : a collection of examples at the service of orators hard up for ideas. The facility of the exercise empties it of all claim to seriousness' (p. 15). The past will not yield up its message unless we envisage it for itself and in its entirety.

Furthermore, any deep understanding of the meaning of history is opposed to the kind of archaism to which the partisans of an ill-understood return to the sources all too easily fall a prey. Certainly, the structures of the past are often worthy of admiration. But they are never perfect. While admiring them, we must recognise their deficiencies, though without judging them according to the criteria of the present day. To want to return to the forms of the past, as if the history of monasticism consisted inevitably in a continual weakening of primitive fervour and in a gradual loss of the spirit of the 'founders', would not only be a pessimistic attitude denying the irreversible movement of history, but also an attitude of defeatism in the face of our own responsibilities. The past belongs to the men of old, the present is ours, the future is in the hands of God... and in our hands, too.

We should be falling into an analogous archaistic attitude, although under a slightly different disguise, if we were to try and make the early monks solve our present problems by asking ourselves what 'our Fathers' would have done in our circumstances. Such questions do not admit of an answer. Our fathers in the monastic life, in the East as well as in the West, were men of their own time and place in every fibre of their being. They faced problems which were proper to them and to their times, and they tackled these courageously and wisely with the means which their times placed at their disposal. Pachomius, Benedict and Bernard in the twentieth century would no longer be Pachomius, Benedict and Bernard.

But can we throw a little more light on the attitude which we ought to take up with regard to the monks of the past ? In recent years, the ingenious suggestion has been made that we should consider them as separated brethren---separated in time, that is---and should therefore engage in dialogue with them. This is a good approach, but within certain conditions. As a matter of fact, the idea that history ought

to be a dialogue with the past is commonly accepted by modern historians. But that does not simply mean that we have to enter into dialogue with the results of scientific research. It means that this research itself has to be a dialogue with the fact of the past taken in its entirety.

The condition for a realistic and fruitful dialogue with the past is that it should be existential. Our response to the message of the monks of old must be a renewal of our own monastic life. This, in the last analysis, is the meaning of our study of history. This study can never reach conclusions which have the value of universal principles. It simply allows us (and this is already a tremendous thing) to hear the call of God through a human response to that call, bound to a certain time and place. As for our own response to that call, this can only be entirely personal. No study of history, however scientific it may be, can work out a definition of monasticism. All it can do is to describe and interpret the monastic phenomenon, and to put the men of today into contact with the call that God is addressing to them through this monastic tradition.

In the same way, a scientific study can describe for us what the Benedictine Office in St Benedict's time was, and determine what elements of earlier liturgical tradition Benedict considered it useful to retain, to reject, or to modify. But such a historical study can never suffice to determine whether adaptations made today are faithful or unfaithful to the Rule of St Benedict and to tradition.

Fidelity is an interpersonal reality. We are faithful, not to something, but to someone. For us, this Someone is the Spirit ; the Spirit who has led the monks of every age out into the desert, who has guided them in all their searching and in all their reforms. He is still present in the Church of today. Fundamentally, the thing that counts is not the recitation of the same number of psalms and offices at the same hours as in the time of St Benedict, but to be faithful to the will of the Spirit for the present day.

The ways of the Spirit are many. Through the answer which the monks of the fourth or sixth or twelfth century made to his call, the monks of today hear a call that is personal and actual. Their fidelity to this call must create its own answer. Or rather, it is the Spirit himself that will create it in them, if they will open up their hearts to him. That is why the answer is bound to be unpredictable. To neglect the weight of tradition, or to barricade oneself comfortably behind longstanding habits are two ways of retreating in face of the demands of fidelity. All true fidelity is creative.

Document extrait du [site de l'abbaye Notre-Dame de Scourmont](#), qui se trouve sur le territoire de Forges, à sept kilomètres au sud de la ville de Chimay, en Belgique. Notre-Dame de Scourmont est une abbaye de l'Ordre Cistercien de la Stricte Observance.

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Mistassini

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