

THE TECHNICAL REQUIREMENTS OF FIDELITY (with special reference to the theology of abbacy)

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What the Gospels say about authority in the Church and obedience is clear and sacrosanct, and no serious person would dream of questioning it, But the way it is presented, theologically and ascetically, takes on different forms and shapes in each age. Further, in the course of centuries a certain symbolic language and imagery have been developed to describe the function of the religious superior.

The father-image that occurred quite naturally at first was later narrowed down to the image of the Roman paterfamilias, In the heyday of the ancient schools the idea of a "master" came to be added to that of "father". Then the medieval lord and the absolute monarch of the Grand Siècle have also left their trace on our conception of the superior's office.

Even if the spiritual reality that these "images" once served to express is not doubted, they themselves seem more and more pointless and obsolete to the present generation. Modern man is certainly not insensible to the language of symbols-which is that of art-but he feels the need first to set his two feet solidly on the ground in this changing world. More than symbols and metaphors, today's religious needs a sound theology of authority and obedience, and, in the monastic Order, a theology of abbacy.

Other factors also make this formulation of a theology of abbacy necessary. The sociological mutations of the last decades, a more accurate historical sense and, above all, a better ecclesiology have shown how necessary it is to renew the structures and methods of government of the religious communities. The various General Chapters have put this reform on their agenda, and immediately several problems have been found to arise: abbacy for life or for a term, election of the abbot's council by the community, presence of delegates from the communities at the General Chapters, etc. Before replying to all these questions, the abbots themselves must inevitably consider: "What exactly does it mean to be an abbot ? What is the essential role of the abbot ?" Quite a crisis of identity ! And the traditional image of the abbot is not adequate to resolve this crisis. The abbots also feel the need for a theology of the abbacy.

So, on all sides people call for studies on the abbacy, its history and theology. For such studies to serve some useful purpose, in present circumstances, it is not enough that they should be undertaken by discreet and well-intentioned religious, "under obedience". They

must first comply with the technical requirements of contemporary scholarship.

In the present article I certainly will not presume to formulate a theology of abbacy. In fact I consider that it would be premature to attempt a comprehensive study of the subject. I prefer to go to the more urgent and essential points, by dealing with the technical requirements of such a study and giving some indications of the method to be employed. I shall then point out the exact significance and the limits of such studies. Although, as the sub-title suggests, I apply my remarks on method to the study of the abbacy, I think that they have a broader scope and hold good for all study on the monastic tradition.

I. The interpretation of monastic sources

A comprehensive study of the abbacy calls for the collaboration of specialists in a number of different subjects. The sociologist and psychologist, as well as the historian and theologian, have their word to say. But a positive investigation into monastic tradition ought to be at the starting point of all new thought. In this first part of my article I shall confine myself to describing the method to use in this research. After recalling the rules of textual, literary and historical' criticism which ought to be applied in all work of this kind, I will deal with their application to the concrete case of a study of the abbacy.

The first and one of the most essential tasks in historical work is research into the sources, which is subject to the laws of a discipline called heuristics. Even though this research is prior to the "criticism" proper, a certain discrimination is indispensable. It is not simply a question of amassing quotations to corroborate already-established theses; it is a question of making a complete summary of all the available sources and of appreciating them at their true value.

In this work the historian should be conscious of the great complexity of the monastic phenomenon through the ages and even at any one period. Monastic reviews are flooded with apparently very learned articles in which the authors, to support their statements, quote pell-mell from texts taken from all monastic spheres and all ages [1] . It is not unusual to see a higgledy-piggledy collection of quotations from St Anthony, St Bernard, St Pachomius, Nicholas Cabasilas, Origen, St Ephraim, St Basil, Evagrius, St Benedict... as if they all represented the same monolithic tradition. There is neither rhyme nor reason in such a method, for each of these authors or monks was moulded by the historical, sociological and ecclesiological context in

which he lived. And it often happens that, while using identical terms, they say very different things. You must know how to study each author for himself and each monastic environment for itself, and to distinguish the different currents which flow in the great monastic tradition.

Although the documents that the research worker brings to light can be of various kinds, I will deal here only with the most ordinary instance, the interpretation of written documents: lives of the saints, apophthegms or sayings of the Fathers, accounts of journeys, Rules and other ascetical works, etc.

The first task, indispensable to the scholar faced with an ancient monastic text, whatever it may be, is that of textual criticism. The texts which tell us about monastic history or the teachings of this or that great monk have been many times transcribed, in various environments and in different ages. With very rare exceptions, we never possess the original of these works, but only more or less divergent copies. Comparison of these will allow you to establish a hierarchy among them and to decide which is closest to the original.

Textual criticism is now a much improved branch of study. There is no lack of general introductory works, from which one can learn a certain number of general rules not to be ignored [2] . The fact remains, however, that the application of these rules varies widely according to the kind of writings one is studying. Textual criticism of patristic writings has its own rules, distinct from those of criticism of the writings of classical authors; [3] and the study of a fourth-century text will always be a more delicate task than that of a twelfth-century text.

When one approaches the monastic writings of the patristic age, one is on the most uncertain ground. Few accounts of antiquity have known more chances and mishaps in their textual transmission. Frequently copied, recopied and compiled, they have come down to us in different forms each of which reflects, not the milieu in which the work was written, but that in which it was copied, adulterated etc. These successive corrections can have as much value for the historian as the original text, provided that he can date them.

Although all this applies especially to the texts of primitive monasticism, it also applies to later texts. For instance, certain very important documents concerning the beginnings of Cîteaux have come down to us in various forms representing the preoccupations of successive periods.

When the investigator has at his disposal a critically annotated

edition, his work will be easier. Unfortunately there are still only a few documents of monastic history that have had such, treatment. This is why anyone who undertakes a serious study of any period of monastic history must be able to refer to the manuscripts; and if he is not able to edit them critically he should at least know how to use them according to the rules of textual criticism. In any case, he must know these rules even to make the best use of the apparatus of a critical edition.

All this would still be relatively straightforward if the texts had been scattered through the monastic world only in their original language. But they have usually been translated into several languages and sometimes the language of the original remains uncertain. In general one can say that the majority of the great texts of primitive Eastern monasticism exist in Greek, Coptic (Sahidic, Bohäiric, Fayoumic, etc.), Arabic, Ethiopian, Syriac, etc. Even if one has a text in the original language all these translations retain their importance for they are so many witnesses to the evolution of the monastic tradition. A profound study of these texts, therefore, requires ï knowledge of languages.

If ancient translators complicate ï scholar's life, compilers follow joyfully in their footsteps. Spiritual texts in ancient times and even as late as the Middle Ages were considered common property which each person could arrange as he pleased. In transcribing them for practical purposes of edification the scribes cut out sections, added personal reflections, combined them with other documents, etc., all according to their own inexorable caprices. And in some cases these alterations went on over several centuries. Now, many ancient documents have come down to us only as integral parts of later compilations. Long and patient work is necessary to "dissect" these compilations and identify the various editorial strata, each of which gives evidence of a different generation and a different milieu. It may be that a certain passage from a Greek life of St Pachomius († 347), for example, reveals the liturgical practices and doctrinal preoccupations of seventh-century Constantinople... An amateur might well discover there material for a "stimulating" article on Pachomian monasticism, but true scholarship will hardly profit from it.

This long and tedious labor of textual criticism is not as barren and dry as one is too easily led to believe. Anyway, it is the absolutely essential technical aspect of faithfulness to our Fathers in monasticism. In all honesty we should undertake these labors or no longer talk about faithfulness to the spirit of our "founders".

We are faced with a humiliating and distressing fact: in the present state of research it is impossible to make a comprehensive study of

monastic tradition, or even a scholarly study of monastic spirituality at a given period. An immense effort of preliminary work has still to be done. For some monastic milieux the sources have still not been systematically investigated. For others, the inventory of the manuscripts has been made but there are still no critical editions of the texts and many monographs will be necessary before they can be brought out. Meanwhile, studies of the spirituality of these milieux certainly can and even should be made; their conclusions, however, remain provisional and cannot serve as a sure base for monastic renewal. Take the history of the origins of the Cistercian Order, for example. In recent years controversies have arisen about certain important documents, without anyone publishing a critical text [4] . It is hardly flattering to Cistercians to state that there exists no satisfactory critical text of the Exordium Parvum or of either of the two recensions of the Charter of Charity. Faithfulness to the spirit of our founders demands in the very first place that we settle down without any more delay to the task of solving the problems of textual criticism before elaborating fine hypotheses. Meanwhile every assertion on the spirit of our fathers should be received with caution.

As soon as the text is well established the work of interpretation begins; it should involve literary and historical criticism.

Everyone nowadays recognizes that literary criticism, particularly regarding literary forms, is important for Biblical studies. It is equally important in monastic studies. We must distinguish the different literary forms of the apophthegms, the Lives of the Saints, and the monastic Rules, in order to interpret them properly. Further, the vocabulary and grammar of any language can change considerably over the centuries. So one needs a thorough knowledge of languages and their development if one is to analyse .an ancient text correctly and especially to understand the shades of meaning.

A literary work never appears suddenly, by spontaneous generation. It is rooted in a specific soil. So, for example, a person who wishes to study the monasticism of St Ephraim will not only have to become immersed in the ways of thought and expression of the Syriac language but also to make himself familiar with the history of Syria in the fourth century-its civil, political and ecclesiastical institutions, the liturgy and theology of the Syrian Church, etc.

All these considerations lead us to certain practical conclusions. The first is that the specialist scholar must place strict limits on the field in which he will specialize. Sometimes one hears people speak of "specialists in monastic history", or even of "specialists in monastic affairs". There is in these expressions a *contradictio in terminis*.

One might as well talk about. "specialists in general medicine". One can really specialize only in a very restricted field, as, for example, Syrian monasticism in the fourth century, Gallic monasticism in the time of Cassian or Cistercian monasticism in the first half of the twelfth century. Whoever ventures into one or other of these fields of research. will find it necessary first to spend some years in becoming conversant with the sources, languages, works already published, spirit of the age, historical context, etc. It is only after this long period of "running in" .that he will be able to undertake a truly specialist work which will be of real use.

Specialization does not mean narrowness of mind and being shut up in a small world apart. On the contrary, the more a person specializes in a given subject, the more he should broaden the field of his scholarship and general knowledge. The deeper a person wishes to go in the understanding of an age or a monastic writer, the better he ought to know the whole of the monastic tradition.

Another conclusion arises from the preceding paragraphs. It is that in our day all really scholarly work must necessarily be the product of a team working in collaboration. Each specialist, in his own work, depends on a large number of other specialists, so that collaboration is the only way of arriving at a worthwhile result. But all that will become more apparent if we take a concrete case as an example. How can we carry out a comprehensive study of the abbacy in monastic tradition ?

11. A positive investigation into the abbacy in monastic tradition

A study of the abbacy in monastic tradition should set out to investigate precisely how the role of abbot was conceived and put into practice in monasticism through the ages. it will not, however, be enough to describe the customs and theories: we shall have to show how they are related to their sociological, philosophical and theological context. It will also be necessary to identify the various influences under which the institution and concept of the abbacy have evolved. From this standpoint it will be essential to distinguish accurately, within the great monastic tradition, the coenobitic current in which the abbacy developed its full meaning and the semianchoretic current in which there was not, properly speaking, a common. superior, but rather a charismatic monk who was the spiritual father of each of the other monks.

As life precedes speculation, the first sources that the historian and the patrologist should study will be those that acquaint us with the

life of the ancient monks. They should then consult their Rules, but without forgetting that there could be considerable differences between these legislative texts and the actual life lived. Finally it will be necessary to study what monks of past centuries have thought and written about the abbot's office, while taking into account the different factors which may have influenced the formation of their doctrines or theories.

Since the idea of the abbacy is intimately connected with that of coenobitism, the historian of the abbacy will not be able to avoid carefully studying the life of the primitive communities of ascetics in the first Judeo-Christian churches, especially in Syria and Persia. In fact it was in direct dependence on this intra-ecclesial asceticism that coenobitism was born [5] . Only one of the few specialists in Syrian and Persian monasticism will be able to carry out such a study. His task will be difficult, for many of the important sources are still unpublished. Furthermore, certain important problems of chronology-especially concerning the works of St Ephraim-are still under dispute.

The Christian ascetic communities that existed in Cappadocia a little before St Basil present the same interest. It is extremely illuminating to see how under Basil's direction they gradually evolved; and how the office of superior, at first non-existent in them, developed by degrees from the demands of communal life. Dom Jean Gribomont's studies on the chronology of St Basil's works enable us to follow this evolution. Even here however the ground is still uncertain, because the critical text of St Basil's works is still in the draft stage.

As Pachomius, was the founder of coenobitic life in Egypt, the study of Pachomian monasticism will be quite as important as that of Basilian monasticism for formulating a theology of coenobitic abbacy. A very important Arabic life of Pachomius (Göttingen, Universitätsbibliothek, cod. arab. 116) is unfortunately still unpublished. The Coptic and Greek records, however, have been given excellent critical editions which facilitate the work of research. Nevertheless, all the different revisions and translations of the Lives and Rules of St Pachomius and his successors form a maze in which one can find one's bearings, to a slight extent, only after a long and patient labor of analysis. A careful study of the Pachomian documents, taking into account the chronology of the sources and the various editorial strata, will allow us to follow a rapid evolution in the notion of authority and obedience in the Pachomian monasticism of the first and second generations.

The. concept of the abbot which Western monasticism inherited was

greatly influenced by the role of the spiritual father in the desert and in the semi-anchoretic communities of Lower Egypt. Apart from lives of saints and accounts of journeys, such as the *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* and the *Historia Lausiaca*, the main source for learning about this monastic world is obviously all the collections of apophthegms. He who tackles this study. will need great courage and a strong dose of lucidity, to find his way through the labyrinth of different compilations of apophthegms in which all the tendencies of ancient monasticism are represented. For the moment the problems of textual and literary criticism of the apophthegms remain practically insoluble, so that the results of every study on the spirituality of these documents remain largely hypothetical. Yet the studies of Fr J.-C. Guy and Canon R. Draguet allow us to make a more rational study of this literature than was possible ten or twelve years ago.

The monasticism of the Gauls and of Italy before Cassian is still too little known for anyone to be able to study in depth the ideas of the abbas which one meets there. A study of the superior's function in the thought of Cassian will be easier because we have good editions of Cassian's work.

We have a good study, by Dom Adalbert de Vogüé, of the concept of the abbot in the Rule of St Benedict s [6] . His intention is to interpret the Rule in the light of the *Regula Magistri* and the whole of the earlier monastic tradition. Even though I have elsewhere expressed reservations on some of Dom de Vogue's points [7] , "it must be acknowledged that this work is a serious, scholarly study of the function of the abbot according to the Rule of St Benedict. Moreover, as St Benedict depends to a great degree on the Eastern tradition, it will be possible to interpret him with even greater assurance when this is better known. The part played by the great abbots of Cluny and Cîteaux, especially in the golden age of these two great abbeys, ought also to be the object of a searching investigation. A similar investigation. will doubtless prove necessary for the centuries nearer to us, even if one cannot establish a real development in the concept of abbacy since the Middle Ages.

It is easy to see that an enormous programme of work has been outlined. And yet it is on the results of such a positive investigation that theological thought ought to be founded if it is not to remain purely theoretical. Obviously it would be Utopian and frivolous to entrust such a "comprehensive study" on the role of the abbot or the theology of abbacy to one or two people. Only a team of research workers can cope with this task. A study done on the cheap can claim to arrive only at approximations. And if we wish to found our monastic renewal on, a better knowledge of the spirit of our fathers in monasticism we cannot be satisfied with approximations.

This simple draft formulation of a work plan on a particular question chosen as one example among many others shows us what a crying need there is for specialists in monastic questions. Until now monks do not seem to have attached sufficient importance to these questions. One of the rare specialists in Syrian, Persian and Mesopotamian monasticism is a non-Catholic layman, A. Vööbus. The standard work on the apophthegms is still the study by the Protestant, W. Bousset; and the great contemporary specialist in them is not a monk but a Jesuit, Fr J.-C. Guy. Similarly, the pioneer work of a young Belgian graduate, J.-A. Lefèvre, has been necessary to arouse a little interest among Cistercians in important problems relating to their origins. There are no doubt numerous monks among contemporary specialists [8] , but they really are too few in number for the tasks to be done. It is annoying that at the stage we have now reached in our renewal we need at once the results of studies which have not yet been undertaken and which will require years of work.

This shortage of specialists and works of research is a minor evil compared with the outdated methodology of monastic studies. Compared to Biblical and patristic studies, a very considerable part of current monastic studies depends on long since outmoded methods.

Could it be that this state of things is the source of the doctrinal uncertainty one notes at the moment in only too widespread monastic circles ? People are too easily satisfied with slogans, ready-made ideas that they repeat without ever verifying and in the end, without believing. Faithfulness to the spirit of our founders demands a profound knowledge of that spirit, and this knowledge can be acquired only with the help of studies which comply with modern scholarly requirements. This care for historical truth and scholarly research into this truth is not just a bee in the bonnet of the intellectuals. It meets the technical requirements of faithfulness-requirements that one cannot ignore without immediately falling into unfaithfulness.

III. Role and limits of theological thought

All the hard work in positive research that I have just described makes sense only if it leads to an equally genuine exertion in theological thought. Now, theological thought ought also to answer to the technical requirements of modern scholarship.

In our days the development of scientific method imposes quite new demands on the theologian. This is how Fr Bernard Lonergan, S.J., described this development and its consequences at the Theological Congress in Toronto in 1967

First, then, theology was a deductive, and it has become largely an empirical science. It was a deductive science in the sense that its theses were conclusions to be proven from the premises provided by Scripture and Tradition. It has become an empirical science in the sense that Scripture and Tradition now supply not premises, but data. The data has to be viewed in its historical perspective. It has to be interpreted in the light of contemporary techniques and procedures. Where before the step from premises to conclusions was brief, simple, and certain, today the steps from data to interpretation are long, arduous, and, at best, probable. An empirical science does not demonstrate. It accumulates information, develops understanding, masters ever more of its materials, but it does not preclude the uncovering of further relevant data, the emergence of new insights, the attainment of a more comprehensive view [9] .

To wish to formulate a theology of monastic life from abstract principles would be an illusion. Besides, the attempts that have been made prove the futility of such a method. The starting point ought to be the fact of monasticism: the fact that since the first centuries of the Church men and women, to answer a personal call from the Lord, have lived their Christian life in a particular way that people have called the monastic life. The theologian's mission is to analyse and interpret for contemporary men this datum which the historian and patrologist have made known to him in all its complexity and richness.

What I have just said about the theology of monasticism in general is just as valid for one particular point, such as the theology of the abbacy. There is no revealed theology of abbacy for the theologian to set out to discover. Neither can one be deduced from abstract principles. The starting point of the enquiry, here again, ought to be empirical: what role has the abbot played in the monastic community through the centuries ? Such an enquiry will result in a mass of data that we shall then have to classify, co-ordinate, interpret and evaluate.

In this task of theological interpretation and evaluation one must recognize the possibility and even the necessity of a certain pluralism. It is possible to have several theologies of monastic life and of the abbacy, all equally valid.

A fundamental distinction can bring us some light in this field: the distinction between dogma, or revealed data, and theology. Dogma is the divine message, theology is the human effort to understand it. A good part of the malaise prevalent nowadays in the Church is because people do not make this distinction enough, and too often present on the same footing the most fundamental truths of the Scriptures and the theologians' explanations-explanations which in certain cases may well

have been unquestioned for centuries and even used by the Magisterium in official texts, but which none the less remain human explanations, subject to the laws of contingency and change.

As a matter of fact, the distinction between the revealed datum and the human explanation is extremely difficult to make, for nowhere are the revealed data to be found in a pure state. They have been handed down to us through Scripture and the Tradition of the Church in various forms of expression in which the data themselves and the Church's comprehension of them are indissolubly mixed. In the same way, each element of monastic tradition is the living expression of the insight that the men and women whom we call monks and nuns have had into the Gospel data on the perfect life.

Only the Biblical expression of the data of revelation can serve as an absolute norm in the process of handing them down. Every other norm is a norma normata which must be interpreted and evaluated in the light of the Scriptures and the whole of Tradition [10] . It is for the theologian to decide what, in a given Rule or a given form of monastic life at a given period, is the expression of a real, evangelical value, and what may be either a deviation or the result of an influence extraneous to the Gospels.

Take the various ways in which the authority of the abbot has been put into practice in the course of monastic tradition: the theologian should say to what extent they represent truly evangelical values and to what extent they are the transposition into religious life of elements borrowed from the sociological and even political context of the age.

The theologian's work is never completed, No theological explanation excludes a further investigation, for it is impossible to contain reality especially supernatural reality-in formulas. Numerous theological explanations of the same reality are possible and even necessary, because each of them is a different approach to the same mystery, each is an attempt to explain what is not fully explicable, to examine closely what will always remain unfathomable.

The theologian is at the service of the Church community. His attempts to understand and interpret should therefore aim at presenting the reality he has studied in a new synthesis and in categories comprehensible to contemporary men. But there we enter into a domain beyond the scope of the present article; here we set out merely to describe the method to employ in the practical enquiry which would make this new conceptual formulation possible.

Finally I should like to make one more point: all true theology is

something profoundly and necessarily personal; it is the communication of a vital experience far more than the communication of ideas. Only he who profoundly experiences a supernatural reality can give a theological explanation of it likely to lead his brothers to a vital experience of the same reality. But since the theologian is a man of the Church, it is not only his personal experience that he should write about, but rather that of the community whose life he shares. The theologian's function, like that of the poet and the artist, is to put into words what all experience without being able to express it and consequently in a partly unconscious way.

This personal nature of theology precludes the existence of an "official" theology. It would therefore be a mistake to canonize as it were in an official document such as the Constitutions a set theology of the monastic life and the abbacy.

In short, neither a historical nor a strictly theological study can impose norms for our path to monastic renewal or, for example, say what should be the abbot's role in a monastic community. Everything in this field depends on the present will of God.

The different governmental structures of the religious orders, and especially the General Chapters, need the services of historians and theologians to understand and explain the message that the Spirit has to transmit to them through monastic Tradition. But they cannot shift their responsibility onto them. The Spirit who has spoken to monks in other times, and whose voice one hears through the evidence of Tradition, still speaks to monks today in a thousand and one ways. Hodie si vocem ejus audieritis...

It may seem hard to have to seek ceaselessly after the will of God in such a way. It would be so much simpler to set into a mould, to have only to consult a text drawn up once and for all and to find all outlined there, down to the last details, the will of God for us. But that is not God's plan. He has chosen to have His People seek for Him so that they may have the joy of finding Him. God's People is a People on the march, which receives its allowance of light from day to day and should not seek to hoard this manna for the next day. Blessed are the poor in spirit.

Mistassini Armand VEILLEUX

(Abbot)

[1] Dom Jean Gribomont has made some pertinent remarks on this subject in his review of Suso Frank's work BIOS ANGELIKOS (Beitrage zur Geschichte des alten Mönchtums und des Benediktinerordens 26), in Rivista di Storia e Letteratura religiosa 2 (1966) pp. 532-4.

[2] See, for example, P. Maas, Textual Criticism, Oxford 1958.

[3] See H. Musurillo, "Some Textual Problems in the Editing of the Greek Fathers", in Studia Patristica III (Texte und Untersuchungen 78), Berlin 1961, pp. 85-96.

[4] See Edith Pasztor's observations: "Le origini dell'Ordine cisterciense e la riforma monastica", in Analecta cisterciensia 21 (1965), pp. 112-7.

[5] I have made this point in "La théologie de l'abbatiate cénobitique et ses implications liturgiques", in Supplément de la Vie Spirituelle n° 86, Sept. 1968, pp. 351-93. Obviously, I was not attempting there to give the whole history of coenobitism --- that would be contrary to the method described in the present article --- but simply to present a synthesis of the results of studies made up to the present.

[6] A. de Vogüé, La communauté et l'abbé dans la règle de saint Benoît, Desclée De Brouwer, 1961.

[7] In the article referred to in note 5.

[8] I avoid giving a list, for fear of omissions,...

[9] Bernard Lonergan, "Theology in its New Context", in L.K. Shook, Theology of Renewal, vol. I, Palm Publishers, Montreal 1968, pp. 37-8.

[10] Tradition is an interpretation of Scripture, but it should itself be interpreted in the light of Scripture. On this "hermeneutic circle" see Magnus Löhrer, Überlegungen zur Interpretation lehramtlicher Aussagen als Frage des ökumenischen Gesprächs", in Gott in Welt (Festgabe für Karl Rahner zum 60. Geburtstag am 5. März 1964), Freiburg - Basle - Vienna 1964, pp. 499-523.