

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

A Short History of Benedictine Monasticism

Review Author: Sister Maria Bruno, OSB.

Philippine Studies vol. 14, no. 1 (1966): 167–171

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at philstudies@admu.edu.ph.

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>
Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

proach to marriage as the Divine Plan, the vocation of the vast majority of the human race. From preparation for marriage, reflections on its nature and purpose and modern theories, consideration of the quality of love, with its counterfeits exposed and its true nature presented, through courtship, engagement, honeymoon, and on through the early adjustments to a consideration of all the factors that establish a family in true love, the author moves with sureness and practicality. The natural and supernatural, sacred and secular, philosophic and scientific blend easily to give us a total design ranging from the role of religion to the role of recreation and the problem of the family budget and family shopping. One section treats of marriage failure and rehabilitation and describes all the organizations available in the Church today to assist couples to make a success of their marriage, scil., Cana Conferences, Christian Family Movement, Catholic Life Movement, Family Life Bureau, etc.

The busy priest who is occasionally called on to give a retreat or conferences to the laity on short notice will find in this book a ready reference that will put at his finger tips a rich scientific and withal supernatural approach to the myriad problems that beset the modern Catholic couples who are sincerely trying to know and to follow the Divine plan for a successful marriage, the great challenge of their vocation in the modern world. The priest or seminarian who can not afford many books will find that in buying this one he has put on his desk a veritable library on modern marriage rich with the experience that the author gained as Director of the Marriage Counseling Center at the Catholic University in Washington.

G. W. HEALY, S. J.

A SHORT HISTORY OF BENEDICTINE MONASTICISM

BENEDICTINE MONASTICISM: Its Formation and Development through the Twelfth Century. By Lowrie Daly, S.J. New York: Sheed and Ward, Inc., 1965.

Numerous books have been written on Benedictine Monasticism, most of them by Benedictine authors for monastic or scholarly consumption. Here we have a straightforward informative narrative intended for wide circulation from the pen of a Jesuit author. His frank enthusiasm and discerning admiration for things Benedictine imperceptibly impart themselves to the reader and enable him to communicate with a past that comes alive in so many scenes vibrant with meaning.

As the foreword points out, the purpose of this book is towards a fuller instruction on medieval civilization; the frame of reference, there-

fore, within which this study of the Benedictine way of life is set is the horizon of western civilization, its arch springing from the distraught times when the Roman Empire painfully breathed its last.

The four chapters of the first section usher the reader into the phase of the early church, eventually emerging from the era of the persecutions; this was the heroic age of "the great men of desert days"; from there we are led on to the gradual development of western monasticism, three of the great western Fathers of the church pointing the way, together with St. Athanasius who was responsible for spreading "the new movement" in the "upper brackets of Roman society."

Right from the start, the author manages to provide a psychological setting for historical data that otherwise might once again become as many cut-and-dried abstracts of a past too remote to be appreciated by the twentieth-century Christian. Take St. Anthony, for instance, close friend of Athanasius: "His father strove in vain to keep 'this devourer of the psalms' in an agricultural frame of mind with one eye on the Roman tax-collector who descended like locusts, and the other on the eccentricities of that supporter of Egypt, the Nile." Here is a desert father in the making, and lest someone think that this is all there is to it, we are informed that "his death was marked by the same efficiency as his whole life," and this pertinent observation is borne out to the full by a poignant quotation. St. Jerome, fervent promoter of monasticism in the West (not as yet western monasticism) being introduced, we cannot help sensing the temper of the man who was also a saint, and Father Daly has no intention of diminishing the thrill of the impact as he dryly comments, *a propos* the arduous efforts on the part of St. Jerome: "His letters of advice were given with the flashing invective which illuminates and often characterizes his other writings."

The early attempts at establishing monasticism in the West reached a certain climax in the Ireland of the fifth and sixth centuries, with a "fusion of the native Celtic, Roman and the spiritual Christian elements." By and large, Irish monasticism, as compared with continental forms, especially after the rule of St. Benedict had become universal, was marked by a certain harshness and severity, more reminiscent of eastern than of western monasticism, and "when new monastic life appeared in Ireland, it was the austere Cistercian interpretation of the Benedictine Rule which appealed to the Irish seekers of perfection."

The Rule of St. Benedict was destined to bring order and unity into the "various developments of monasticism in Europe," because in it, "the greatest of monastic lawgivers appeared to give that Roman gift of organization to the monastic world, as the Romans of old had given so much organization to the political world of the Mediterranean." In the chapter that introduces the general reader to the person of St. Benedict, we are, if one may say so, made aware of the *Sitz im Leben* of the Rule: "Theoderic, a Goth and an Arian, with his subjects who

were Italians and Catholics, and the twenty-year Gothic war furnish the lackdrop; some of the more painful personal experiences of St. Benedict, as Viccovaro and the persecution by an evil priest are shown to enter into the warp and woof of the Rule (cf. pp. 69-73). Of the characteristics of the Rule, the negative one that it shows little of the local, is remarkably pertinent; the positive marks mentioned are those with which anyone who has some acquaintance with the Rule is familiar.

The next three chapters (7, 8, 9) fall under the heading: Construction of Christendom; they sketch a vivid picture of the concerted missionary endeavors that radiated from the Benedictine Order and comprised the whole of Europe. While the story of the evangelization of Europe in its general outlines is known to the informed reader, the value of these chapters lies in the point of vantage: the missionary movement is seen and depicted as emanating from the centers of Benedictine life. Consequently, at the start of that all-embracing work, England stands in the limelight, and the author finds it in order to commend Christopher Dawson's remark to the effect that "on the material side, Anglo-Saxon civilization was a failure; its chief industry seems to have been the manufacture and exportation of saints" (quoted on p. 114). We are tempted to take it that the reader is invited to mark the relevance of the utterance, seeing that at a later stage it has been accurately reversed, at least by some unkind observers of the British Empire. And another thought, too, comes to mind: Is it not sometimes being asked today why, with the exception of Henry Newman, Anglo-Saxon thought has contributed so little to Catholic theology?

Regarding relevance, an article high in demand just now. Father Daly gives us another clue on p. 127, with the focus on the quarrel that ensued when the advocates of a vernacular Slavic liturgy clashed head-on with the staunch defenders of the Latin idiom.

The next set of chapters is fittingly devoted to four great reform movements within the Benedictine Order; those of Cluny and Citeaux being the most prominent, and the latter also the most enduring. A final appraisal of these two legitimate interpretations of the Rule succinctly summarizes their main divergences.

From the reform movements we are led still farther into the inner sanctuary and wellspring of this astounding efflorescence into action, the Benedictine monastery itself, its life and its problems. In a context that is by nature more intimate, more personal, and therefore more human, the author gives ample play to his keen sense of the psychological and of the humorous. Of both we get a foretaste and an ideological background in a graphic comparison on p. 25: At that stage, the monastic ascesis of renunciation is to be made palatable to the reader through a most enlivening argument *ad hominem*: "The balance of our nature has been lost and human desires, like apples from an upset cart, roll around without direction or order, without bridle

or restraint." And so, there must prop up "problems, internal, external and fraternal" (see ch. 15). And thus, too, Father Daly's penetrating search into the "ascetical cliché" has him observe, ruefully: "... the monks had died to the world, but often had considerable difficulty in staying dead!"

That in the autarchic community of the medieval monastery "a well-stocked fish-pond was a necessary corollary of the monastic diet" sounds like an understatement with tongue-in-cheek, especially since we are assured that "the monastic diet was neither poor nor meager." The guest-house of the monasteries are "the motels of the time;" "the scriptorium is the medieval publishing house." For the rest, we are always kept aware of the fact that the primary purpose and engagement of the monastic community was of a spiritual nature, and that the ascetical ideal was oriented along biblical and liturgical lines. In dealing with the delicate question of expenditures, the author makes it clear that charitable works consumed a large portion of the income of the monastic establishment.

The enmeshment in and consequent commitment of the medieval monastery to feudalism with its ensuing problems, which eventually called for adaptation to a new pattern of society, form the theme of the last chapters.

Fr. D. certainly is not miserly with the praise he bestows on the contributions of Benedictine monks to practically all fields of activity. These topics receive a clarifying and very informative treatment. Perhaps more than a Benedictine author, Fr. D. is ready to concede that on almost all these levels, but especially on the intellectual plane, the most favorable climate for monastic leadership was the period from the sixth to the twelfth century. Thereafter, medieval society being no longer exclusively rural, gradually assumed more expansive forms, and intellectual life in particular grew into ampler and more sophisticated modes of thought with the preponderance of the great universities and the new dialectical effervescence. Monastic learning had been more in the line of humanistic and historical studies with the Scriptures and the Fathers occupying the foremost place. Into this context falls the development of the "quaestio" and the "disputatio": Here one would have enjoyed a somewhat more colorful picture since the "disputation" of the schools took its modest origin from the monastic "collatio." Abaelardus himself, for instance, who is mentioned as the greatest teacher, seems, in spite of himself, somehow cherishing the old ideal when he thinks out somewhat aloud to the effect that, in reference (and reverence) to the "disputation", there is "nothing more useful . . . , nothing more subtle . . . if only it were charity that took the lead and humility prompted that tenacious search after the truth . . ."

With a beautiful but quite lengthy quotation from Henry Newman on the nature of monasticism, Fr. D. takes a somewhat sudden and

unexpected leave from his Benedictine confrères; perhaps, however, it is due to the limited scope of this work which presents Benedictine monasticism up to the twelfth century, that there seems to be no hint of connection between a heritage, that is a living tradition and an ever-new mission. But then, we have still a modest query: Where are the Benedictine nuns, the Hildegards, Roswithas and their glorious company, or those, for example, who, we know, were exported from England? In a second edition, one would like to discover them in even so inconspicuous a place because they deserve it.

Four documents pertaining to monasticism complete this very valuable volume, and lists of additional readings at the end of many chapters afford ample opportunity for further study.

SISTER MARIA BRUNO, O.S.B.

ON PRE-MARITAL CHASTITY

WHY WAIT TILL MARRIAGE? By Evelyn Millis Duval. New York: Association Press, 1965. 118 pp.

Since the modern boy and girl do not easily accept an argument from authority even in serious matters such as pre-marital chastity the priest or parent dealing with them will be most grateful for this book. It professes to give the reasons for premarital chastity, frank and specific for today's youth, and it does all of that in a manner that is as fresh as the morning newspaper but as solid as modern studies in sociology and human nature and a rich life-time experience can make it.

Anyone who deals with modern youth is aware that they are getting the wrong doctrine, loud and clear from all the mass media. This insidious doctrine coupled with their personal temptations makes their struggle for chastity a titanic one for many. When a non-Catholic writes so clearly, so forcefully in favor of chastity, in a style that is crisp and with arguments that are solid and reasonable the priest and student counselor will be most grateful, for his work is going to be much easier when he has at his finger tips the answer to the modern fallacies and lies concerning premarital sex: "Our sex morals are old-fashioned"; "What harm can experimenting do?"; "But we're really in love!", "Everyone does it"; "But it's perfectly 'safe' today", etc.

Fr. Filas in reviewing this book (*America*: April 17, 1965: 571) expressed the hope that it would be accepted in Catholic circles on a par with Fr. Gerald Kelly's *Modern Youth and Chastity*. The two works together would give our boys and girls the answers and information that they need, the principles to guide them and the conviction