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The Monk and the People of God: Monastic Renewal

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Though the focus of the study is Spanish America, the volume will prove extremely helpful for students of Philippine history in the Spanish period. It is true that the peculiar conditions of the Philippines, particularly the predominant role played by the Church, both in the colonization and the evolution of Spanish rule here, often modified considerably the application of laws made for Spanish America. Nonetheless, the basic institutions and jurisprudence were the same, and this study will fulfill a need often felt by students of Philippine history. Acquaintance with this work will make more intelligible large sections of that history, as well as help prevent anachronistic judgments of the jurisdictional conflicts of Church and State which occupy so large a place in the chronicles of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

JOHN N. SCHUMACHER, S.J.

THE MONK AND THE PEOPLE OF GOD

MONASTIC RENEWAL, by Dom Cary-Elwes. New York: Herder and Herder, 1967. 256 pp.

Out of the maze of articles, essays, and books on the subject of renewal emerges a volume written by one who speaks from within. He bases his investigation on a thesis: "The Benedictine way of life, as developed through the centuries, is a true monastic tradition." This is fixing it with nails from the start, and consequently, the reader may more than guess where he is being led.

The monastic reader in particular may delve into the perusal of this book with calm anticipation, that is, dismantling some of his pent-up tension. That the Benedictine way of life is a true monastic tradition, no self-respecting monk or nun will question; the emphasis is on the modifying phrase, "as developed through the centuries". This one and only thesis may also be regarded as the working hypothesis of the entire volume: Chapter one, together with the preface, is somewhat like the *raison d'être* of the whole: Vatican II, with its invitation to *aggiornamento*, renewal, adaptation, reform; a brief comment on these four terms enriches their meaning by bringing out certain nuances; Vatican II itself is seen in the light of John XXIII as pentecostal gift of the Spirit, and accordingly, its trumpet sound for *aggiornamento* as appeal for responsible engagement.

Next comes a chapter on the status quo, the state of the question, with a rather breath-taking flash-back; the rest of the book, which is naturally the major portion, is taken up with the intended *aggiornamento* in vital areas of the monastic life.

The author is explicit in pointing out that his proposals are suggestions meant to stimulate reflection and discussion about these and other possible ways of renewal. How this delicate task will be realized remains within the competence of the individual monastic family.

But whatever may be the external manifestations of inward renewal, in order for it to be an authentic explicitation of that which has been towards what is to be and to become, first must be known and interpreted from a new angle that which is "given", the facts as they present themselves to us. Monasticism, "as a distinct and particular way of life is ultimately based on the gospel, but as understood through an initial and charismatic insight of the Founder. This "inner light, subsequently codified and approved" has been diffused and refracted in degrees of varying intensity throughout the historical evolution of the Order. Hence, what is needed by us today is a forward gaze by reason of the conciliar summons and a retrospective glance to intensify awareness of our identity thereby safeguarding it against the onslaught of unauthentic beckonings for change. It is only natural that a certain amount of tension should arise from this polarity of the new and the old; it is one of the healthy signs of maturing which by their very nature also contain a crisis-situation. That is why prudence and consideration are indicated. A lopsided view is bound to result if either focus is isolated. "The primary aim of the Benedictine is the seeking of God...this very act lived out through a lifetime is a sign to the world of faith in God." What are the criteria of "justifiable reform"? In the first place, it must be shown "what elements in the present time have true relevance to the monastic life, including elements of Church life and of secular life", and secondly, regarding the past, "one has to be quite sure of what is essential to the spirit of the Order and what is not". Thus, for example, it is essential for the Benedictine Order that the divine Office occupy a central position, and therefore, certain proposed eliminations or compilations are quite out of the question within the frame of valid renewal.

The appropriate setting for the task ahead also includes the positive appraisal of present-day trends towards personalism and towards the growing appreciation of human values. Creativity, self-development, self-expression must not be wanting; their true significance for the monastic community is set in relief by contrasting them with the value pattern of a fast fading era: paternalism, blind submission, an out-of-kilter-analogy regarding the family metaphor, and so forth.

Ancient monasticism, as exemplified in the Rule, exhibits traits of "a realistic, simple, and straightforward spirituality", and the modern mind, too, although, perhaps, in a different tonality, is "realistic, honest, and anti-humbag". As for the life of the Church, its contemporary currents are strong and can readily be identified: The Bible as basis for dogmatic theology, the morality of the gospel, the pro-

minence of love as the basic principle of this morality, and all this versus undue emphasis on ritual and law as of merely secondary status. . . . These currents must be channeled into the monastic renewal. Hence: the return to the authentic sources must become fruitful in biblical, communal, and liturgical aggiornamento; authentic reform must also show itself in the "acceptance, love and respect" due to the young in a Benedictine family life; ascetic attitudes with moralizing overtones need not be sheltered any further.

The chapter dealing with Benedictines today displays an impressive cross-section of Benedictine monasteries and convents in Europe and the United States with a survey of their activities including overseas foundations. The emphasis is on education. Dom Columba does not conceal his ardent admiration for the American version of Benedictinism; some of the European variety he frankly designates as "dated"; and he also indicates the reason which lies in the historical background. Regarding certain aspects of the liturgy, his stance is likewise more Anglo-Saxon than continental; yet he lavishes praise on the German Benedictine tradition: It is "as diversified as America. . . ."

The comment to the over-all sketch sounds a warning: A careful distinction should be made between the mixed contemplative-active life which is in harmony with the Benedictine tradition and the life of the active congregations. The distinction was also drawn by the Council Fathers when they designated the former as the monastic life, as contra-distinguished from the purely contemplative and the purely active way. The essence of the monastic life consists in blending activity in such wise with the divine Office that this activity can be fitted smoothly and harmoniously within the rhythm of choir prayer, the "opus Dei" par excellence. "Reducing the number of times a monk goes to choir is an impoverishment of the especially monastic life at the expense of outside work."—"For the Benedictine, prayer, prayer in common, the atmosphere of prayer is first." And since this is the age of missions, Benedictines once again should feel challenged and show that they have faith by going out into foreign lands assuming the work of the mission apostolate, but with a Benedictine spirit and pattern. At the same time, it must remain a guiding principle that no work should take sisters or monks far away from their monastery or convent since common prayer, solitude, and community life are the very foundation of the Benedictine life. Absence from the monastic family for the sake of necessary studies, undertaken in the spirit of true obedience, would, of course, not fall under this general discipline since they are not a permanent engagement and are essential to the well-being of the contemporary religious community. It is, nevertheless, in this particular area that an amount of ambiguity seems to pervade the different chapters of the book; the concluding cadences, however, are re-assuringly positive.

How this Benedictine life is essentially biblical in its outlook, the formulation of the vows, its asceticism is shown, first, by drawing on the early monastic legislators, St. Basil and the rule of St. Benedict in particular. In order that a revival of the pristine spirit be achieved, special attention ought to be paid to the interiorization of present-day spirituality and prayer life; in close relationship to the gospel, fraternal charity is to receive new emphasis; the spirit of obedience must be re-interpreted in the light of the life of Christ, but also in the context of human relations, so that it once again may become the seed of a simple and limpid spirituality, characterized by *sobrietas* (the English equivalent could suggest a puritan sort of sobriety) and interiority rather than austerity. In other words, obedience, instead of being "military, mechanical, inhuman", must become "personal, warm, and understanding".

Subsuming and integrating within its scope everything essential to the Benedictine way of life is the second vow, *conversio morum*: It is "the key to the monastic attitude to its own spiritual life", and is a far broader concept than the 'three vows', the formulation of which is of only post-tridentine origin.

In connection with adaptation there comes up, of course, the problem of the various contacts of the monastery with the outside world, especially through pastoral and educational work, and at present even hospital and social work. As regards the last, the author observes that, on the one hand, social field work is not done by Benedictines; on the other hand, monks and nuns should put to test their solidarity with the poor not only by the practice of individual and corporate poverty, but also by assisting the poor in their various bodily and spiritual needs, in a manner conformable to their monastic state of life, for example, by setting up "summer schools for the underprivileged". As for schools in general, they are, in any case, a significant part of the genuine tradition of monasticism.

Monastic poverty, although implicit in the vow of *conversio*, plays an important role in the Rule itself. A reconsideration of its meaning and scope is the more significant and weighty since the Second Vatican Council expects of religious that they re-examine their original commitments in this area in the light of the gospel and with the poverty of the world as a frame of reference. In the gospel, poverty of spirit is a beatitude, and Christ's teaching on poverty is an invitation to joy through self-abandonment and trust in God. Religious poverty, as imitation of Christ, a sharing of His poverty, can and should serve, today even more than in the past, as an effective witness to the Christian message. How evangelical poverty in the Benedictine community is to be realized depends much on place, circumstances and the type of work engaged in.

Finally, in the light of Vatican II, all religious, Benedictines not excepted, are invited to reflect anew on their traditional attitude towards the world. Rather than flight from a world considered as evil—a manichean legacy to very early eastern monachism—contemporary monks and nuns should not so much think in terms of flight 'from', but rather as flight towards God from that which is evil in the world, to choose God absolutely. "The Benedictine monk chooses the life of utter dedication to God which will include seclusion". To this necessary and essential segregation belong at least living quarters away from the world and silence to enable the monk to be recollected. With these essential safeguards, the Benedictine religious can engage in an appropriate amount of work that is suited to his type of life.

The fundamental preoccupation of monasticism, at the root of all ascetic practices and spiritual orientation, is the actuation of man's radical tendency towards God: To seek God first of all and to consider everything else under the aspect of this primary aim. This book is a vigorous affirmation of the old and ever-new goal. What contemporary insights have added is a more conscious awareness that the realization of the ideal is not achieved in a vacuum, neither is the monk's ideal that of disembodied spirit: Man does not go to God directly nor alone, but with the help and in company of his fellow human beings; he is responsible to the People of God and he is under the guidance of the Church; he sustains the impact of the historical situation. His love of God is authentic only if he truly loves his neighbor. These truths obviously are not new in their objective and propositional content; what is new, however, is the light shed upon them through insights gained from different angles of human self-realization.—As over against the new and exciting spiritual landscape, monasticism may seem unattractive and even archaic to the outsider. Yet the well-trodden paths of its expanses eventually may lead towards unexpected horizons and into luminous clearing, provided that monasticism assimilates into the innermost recesses of its system those insights which are apt to re-create the monk's identity as that of a man in whom his fellowman can decipher the clear contours of the Incarnate Son of God. Dom Columba's book is an unequivocal pointer in this direction.

SISTER MARIA BRUNO, O.S.B.

A "GRASS-ROOTS" VIEW OF ASIAN CHRISTIANITY

CHRISTIANITY IN THE ASIAN REVOLUTION, by Harry Haas.
Baltimore, Md.: Helicon Press, Inc., 1966. 116 pp.

The aim of this little book, according to its author, is "to try and evaluate the role of Christianity in the social upheavals taking place in Asia today, and the particular ways in which Asian Christians