**WHEN THE SAINTS…**

This week we celebrate:

The five ‘great’ ABBOTS OF CLUNY 11th of May

PACHOMIUS 15th of May

CAROLINE CHISHOLM, 16th of May

There seems to be a theme of visionary leadership running through the week.

PACHOMIUS was born around 290 in upper (southern) Egypt, to a pagan family who, nonetheless, gave him a good education. Conscripted for military service at age 20, the troop of new recruits were imprisoned, but cared for by some Christians whose love and concern affected his conversion.

From around 314 Pachomius at first joined the desert fathers as a hermit, and his own ministry to the sick, attracted a following. He found a spiritual guide in Palaemon, who encouraged him to bring this following together in one community under his own leadership in around 320. It is recounted that an angel gave him the ‘rule’ by which his early community was to live.

His military training for hard work and organisation equipped him for this task, though, at first, like his principal successor Benedict, this early community found his discipline somewhat over-zealous, and he is said to have chased these ‘slackers’ out of the gate with an iron bolt.

Thereafter he is venerated for having been able to listen gently and with understanding to any brother under his supervision, to have been particularly empathetic and encouraging with the concerns of his novices, and to have maintained his compassionate care for the sick.

A major pre-occupation of early desert fathers and monks was the avoidance of sexual temptation, which we might misunderstand as misogyny. When Pachomius’ sister came to visit he refused to meet her, and sent a message via the gate-keeper blessing her to fund a convent on the far side of the Nile, resulting in two houses being built for her community there by his monks.

By the time of his death in 346, Pachomius had attracted around five thousand disciples, and his sister around two thousand women.

Of course there had been monasteries in the east for centuries, and other Christian communities go back to Acts (ch2 v43ff.) the one that most influenced Pachomius. St Augustine of Hippo drew together a small group of like-minded men at his own home in North Africa, and Paulinus of Nola and his wife Theresia formed another such in Gaul.

Sometime in the 4th century an eclectic ‘rule’ for monastic life was written by an unknown monk whose only title is ‘The Master,’ and it was very largely based on this rule, borrowings from some of the many others, that, in the sixth century, Benedict of Nursia compiled his own, which has become the template and source of western monastic life ever since.

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By the tenth century however, the world had changed drastically. There was great general poverty and instability as a consequence of various invasions, and whilst magnates endowed the land on which monasteries were built and run, the donors insisted on proprietary rights; and tended to treat their foundations as investments; expecting to appoint their family and friends as abbot; to derive an income from the work of the monks; to be able to retire to the monasteries when they chose; and these and other external factors meant that the kind of holiness and simplicity of life that were the spirit of the rule of Benedict tended to slip, and root and branch reform became necessary if they were to survive as Benedictine monasteries at all.

It was William the Pious of Aquitaine who perceived the problem, and endowed some land at Cluny in Burgundy, with the stipulation that the abbot answer directly to the Pope, rather than to the bishop or any noble. In the year 910 he appointed a suitable man as abbot, with the freedom and opportunity to start anew. From 927right through to 1157 there followed a glorious succession of illustrious and long-lived abbots: Odo, Maieul, Odilo, Hugh the Great, and Peter the Venerable.

The world had changed. Lovers of architecture will recall that the 10th century is the time of the Romanesque: The Benedictines, like eastern theologians, viewed liturgy as the place where heaven and earth come together, so that, just as Moses insisted on offering to God the things of greatest beauty that his community could find or devise; so God should be praised through the most glorious and elaborate ceremony; fabrics, tapestry and vessels. It was in Cluny that the daily office was established and came to its fullest fruition, and extra care and consideration were lavished on the Mass. New rites were introduced, and many reforms and refinements were effected in the chant at Cluny, which spread all over Europe as other abbots eager for reform, sought to emulate its ethos.)

The one man who took exception to this beautification of worship was Bernard of Clairvaux, perhaps the most quarrelsome of all the saints, in the face of some pretty stiff competition, and certainly not to be confused with huge dogs and reviving brandy, though it must be said that he could also be a most sensitive and wise spiritual guide. Bernard detested Cluny and its works as having forsaken its reforming spirit, in pursuit of wealth and worldliness.

Had this emphasis on raising and maintaining standards of worship been the sum total of Cluniac spirituality one might, indeed, have thought it somewhat vain and perhaps even misguided; but far from it. The abbots of Cluny poured their love out into the world through greatly increased land usage; employment of many lay people; charity for the poor; care for the sick; shelter for travellers; the instigation and practice of peace-making through the sanctity of refuge, and the establishment of truce; so whilst worship was transformed and uplifted, a renewed Benedictine spirituality brought into the world economic social and ethical progress. Bishops, Popes and Kings sought the advice of these exceptionally holy and gifted visionary leaders, not only of their order, but, truly in many ways, of their times.

St Bernard’s loathing of Cluniac spirituality came to establish another great monastic order in the Cistercians, who came to public notice recently when their foundation in Leicestershire, St Bernard’s Abbey was featured in a TV series. Despite being a silent order, their provision for guests, and their entirely open charity stand as a monument to the constructive transformation of deeply felt differing spiritual callings.

In fact, during the ninth and tenth centuries the Papacy itself hit one of its occasional rock bottoms, so that, effectively, these exceptional abbots Benedictine, Cistercian and Premonstratensians, emerge as the standard-bearers of holiness who served to restore, revive and nurture the whole of the church in the west.

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The life and achievements of Caroline Chisholm are a shining example of the Gospel-inspired way of living creatively and conscientiously within very oppressive legal and moral constraints.

Caroline was born in 1808 and at her marriage she became a Roman Catholic like her husband. At the time in England there had existed many legal sanctions against Catholics, which were only in process of being abolished during her early life. In addition, as a married woman, her rights and personal freedoms were severely circumscribed, so that had she simply chosen to live a life of ‘good works’ that would surely have sufficed.

You can find out a lot about Caroline on Wikipedia, which, however, doesn’t appear to mention the fundamentally Christian dynamic in her campaigns and foundations for social reform.

In the briefest outline, Caroline, whose husband Archibald worked for the East India company, first joined him in Madras, (now Chennai) where she set up a school for the daughters of soldiers so successfully that their wives were keen to enrol for training in the three R’s, cookery, and other household skills.

In 1838 the family moved to Australia, and in the seven years until their return to England, she set up shelters and an employment registry for immigrant women, who were being shipped over in droves in order to regularise the imbalance between the sexes; there having been only 10% of female convicts arriving in New South Wales before transportation was abolished.

The women would reach their destination friendless and penniless, and, having often already been abused by ships’ officers, once in port, local men would board the transports and, under pretext of seeking servants, operate the kind of sex trafficking prevalent today. In face of scorn and opposition from all levels of society in Sydney (pimps, procuresses and the governor himself), Caroline struggled fearlessly, helping an estimated total of 11,000 women to find their feet; brought together 600 previously separated families, and effected hundreds of happy marriages.

Exceptionally, as a woman, she was invited to give evidence to legislative bodies and committees, on immigration and unemployment; and so won the governor of new South Wales to her cause that he helped her change emigration laws from U.K. in favour of the poor, and set up, with the help of Wilberforce and others, a fund offering loans to prospective emigrants. She claimed to be against the importation of the English class system into Australia, a pretty radical stance for her time.

Richard Symonds writes that; ‘Her influence with the colony’s leaders and the press, carefully and sparsely used, was very effective…’

Caroline wrote: ‘On Easter Sunday I was enabled at the altar of our Lord to make an offering of my talents to the God who gave them to me. I promised to know neither country nor creed, but to serve all justly and impartially.’

Here was a woman ‘Crafty as snakes and innocent of doves;’ known and admired for her shrewdness rather than ‘shrewishness,’ from whom many campaigners of today could learn!

Interestingly, though, Caroline Chisholm, after whom a school is named in her home town of Northampton, and about whose life a musical was written and performed in’ Oz,’ is celebrated as a saint in the Anglican calendar, though not in the Roman, for all that she was presented with a medal by Pope Pious IX, and brought up her children as Catholics. Perhaps there’s no evidence of authentic miracles even if her whole life seems to have been one miracle of grace.

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PRAYER

One of the pillars of Benedictine spirituality was willing obedience: if there was one thing that Benedict found himself unable to tolerate it was ‘murmuring,’ grumbling, but how could WE possibly manage without it?

And yet we have seen from history, and from some extremely unethical psychological experiments that blind obedience can be dangerous, destructive and sometimes even murderous. Jesus tried to teach a way of living in obedience to God’s will and conscience, despite constraints from established religion, culture and colonial rule. While we celebrate visionary leadership, perhaps this is the right time to be looking prayerfully at our often confused attitudes to our leaders in the unusual conditions in which we find ourselves at present?

At all events, it’s worth pondering Caroline’s epiphany on that special Easter Sunday.