11th of MAY THE FIVE ‘GREAT’ ABBOTS OF CLUNY

ODO 927-42

MAIEUL 943-94

ODILO 994-1049

HUGH the GREAT 1049-1109

PETER THE VENERABLE 1122-57

BACKGROUND

With the feasts of Pachomius and the ‘Great Abbots of Cluny’ falling so closely together the temptation is to flesh out intervening developments in monastic history, so here is the briefest sketch.

In the Eastern Orthodox tradition the rule of Basil the Great still forms the basis of monastic life, while 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, although the mediaeval ‘Augustinian’ canons derived from the saint in name only. Paulinus of Nola and his wife Theresia formed a community in Gaul, as did Martin of Tours, but they owed their inspiration to John Cassian in the fifth century who visited the desert communities, and wrote up his experiences in the ‘Conferences’ and ‘Institutions’ before settling in Gaul. The Celtic foundations of a century later took their inspiration from the East too.

At some time in the fifth century another rule for monastic life was written by an anonymous monk known only as ‘The Master,’ an eclectic affair with borrowings from many pre-existing rules, which, however, formed the basis for the Rule of St Benedict of Nursia which became standard for most monastic communities with the support of Gregory the Great towards the end of the sixth century and remained standard until the reforms of the eleventh.

Within a very short time after Gregory’s death, however, law and order in Europe degenerated into that state of affairs that we clumsily call ‘Warlordism,’ and the Rule of St Benedict, which had never been intended to operate for all monasteries under his immediate supervision, deteriorated badly.

Emperor Charlemagne propagated a series of reforms and improvements in an effort to regenerate church life throughout his lands, but it was with the Capitula of Aachen of 817, under the direction of Benedict of Amiens that a serious attempt was made to standardise monastic life with a version of The Rule framed within the Benedictine tradition.

By the tenth century however, the world had changed drastically: the Carolingian empire had been divided among Charlemagne’s warring sons; there was great general poverty and instability not least as a consequence of invasions from Vikings in the west and Magyars in the east, whilst magnates endowed the land on which monasteries were built and run, the donors insisted on proprietary rights; 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.

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THE CLUNIAC TRADITION

It was William the Pious of Acquitaine 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 927 right through to 1157 there followed a glorious succession of illustrious and long-lived abbots.

The Benedictines, like eastern theologians, viewed liturgy as the space 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 effected in the chant at Cluny, which spread all over Europe as other abbots eager for reform, sought to emulate its ethos.]

Here is a description of Cluniac churches from David Watkins’ ‘History of western architecture’:

‘the great Benedictine monastery of Cluny was not only the most important Romanesque building in Burgundy but was also one of the most influential institutions in mediaeval Europe. It was founded in 910 by William of Acquitaine with a charter which exempted it from external interference whether ecclesiastic or lay. During the next three centuries it more than realised the grandiose visions of the St Gall Plan of 820 for an ideal monastery. Breaking with Benedictine convention, by which each monastery was self-governing, the Abbot of Cluny came to exercise direct control over as many as 1450 Cluniac monasteries. …

The successive abbey churches at Cluny are known today as Cluny I, II & III. Cluny I dedicated in 927, was replaced in 955-81 by Cluny II which was not tunnel-vaulted until 1010. This, in turn, was replaced by Cluny III built c1088-1130, as the largest church in Christendom and the stone tunnel vaults provided an ideal sounding box for the solemn antiphonal chanting of the Latin office for which the Cluniac Order became renowned. There were twin bell towers and a taller tower over the crossing.

The construction in 1088-1130 of the third abbey church at Cluny as the largest church in Christendom was contemporary with the unprecedented burst of building activity in Norman England. The Cluniac monks dedicated themselves to the solemn worship of almighty god. The stone tunnel vaults of their churches formed an appropriately imposing enclosure within which the characteristic Cluniac chant could echo and re-echo in an unceasing tide of rhythmical solemnity. CLUNY III was evidently intended as a counterbalance to the imperial splendour of Speyer. It thus became a centre of papal, as opposed to imperial power. It was designed by Gunzo, a monk of Cluny who was a musician with an interest in mathematics. As a result the dimensions of the various parts of the vast church – 600 feet long and 100 feet high were related to each other by a complicated mathematical process … not adopted on aesthetic grounds, but rather as a practical convenience and as a reflection on the emphasis on aspects of number in the writings of philosophers such as Plato and Augustine. …

‘The overwhelming scale of Cluny III, its unprecedented length and height and its numerous towers and radiating chapels; its two sets of transepts and its choir housing 300 monks; its frescoes and sculptures, all astonished visitors until its tragic destruction early in the nineteenth century. The church was dedicated by Pope Innocent II in 1130. Professor Constant, who spent a lifetime studying Cluny regarded it as a learned combination of ancient Roman grandeur, Carolingian vivacity and proto-Gothic dynamism. Not only were the proportions of the nave Gothic but the arches of the arcades were pointed. The Tympanum of the great west portal 64 feet high, was carved with a tremendous allegorical representation of Christ enthroned in majesty in a hieratic Byzantine pose.’

The splendid chant, which came about partly because of improvements in musical notation devised during the Abbacy of Odo, took more and more of the monks’ attention so that Benedict’s original intention to balance monastic routine with roughly equal division of time among manual work, private devotion and liturgical duties probably suffered, and some of the essentials of upkeep and living were assigned to a workforce of lay men and women.

The one man who most famously took exception to Cluny was Bernard of Clairvaux, not to be confused with huge dogs and reviving brandy! Bernard detested Cluny and its works as having forsaken its reforming spirit, in pursuit of wealth and worldliness, and it must be said that by the end of the eleventh century reactions had arisen in favour of ‘holy simplicity’ of which the Cistercians were only the most successful.

Had this emphasis on raising and maintaining standards of worship been the sum total of Cluniac achievement one might, indeed, have thought it somewhat vain and perhaps even misguided: contemporary accounts of Benedictine Order such as the volume in the DLT ‘Traditions of Christian Spirituality’ series omits Cluny to all intents and purposes.

Rowan Williams makes the perfectly reasonable point that at this time the abbots were almost living parallel lives with their monks because they were among the movers and shakers of their time, and, until the papal reforms of the middle of the eleventh century they probably represented Europe’s best hope for stability; after all they had become major landowners in a feudal society in which land ownership was at a premium, and these were exceptionally able men who would have made superb government ministers. Like St Bernard in the next century, they were almost too talented to be confined to their cloisters.

From the purely monastic point of view Rowan’s comment may carry some force, but the abbots of Cluny poured their love out into the world often in acts of personal charity: it is written of Odo that no poor person was ever turned away, and that if the abbot judged that a gift had been presented by somebody whose clothing indicated his poverty, Odo would order that something of double its estimated value be given in return.

The last abbot in this illustrious series, Peter the Venerable, did, in fact, oversee some reforms, but, among other irenic achievements, he managed to remain friends with Bernard, the order’s chief critic and rival, and it was by his agency that a reconciliation came about between Bernard and the wayward but brilliant theologian Peter Abelard, some of whose ideas Bernard had worked hard to have condemned.

It is certainly true that Odo rejoiced that the abbey was never short of funds but, during a period of intense instability in church and state the Cluniac foundations provided direct benefits to society through charity, hospitality, including care for the sick, refuge and shelter, and indirectly in much increased land use and employment, food production and distribution; and in terms of stability their arbitration was often sought; they brokered truces, peace deals and sanctuary, and altogether their activities and influence as responsible leaders of feudal society more than compensated for long absences from their monasteries.

As a cultural aside, the splendour and ‘worldliness’ served to maintain status among rulers, so as to be taken seriously in their good offices in society. 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. The death of Peter the Venerable in 1157, and of Bernard three years later, mark the end of an era.

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15TH MAY PACHOMIUS 290-346

When we think of the Desert Hermits, perhaps we imagine St Anthony of Egypt alone in his cave for twenty years fighting the demons; Simeon the Stylite in Syria, stuck up on a platform 60 feet up in the air for 34 years with nobody sending up or bringing down his few necessities. Anthony’s disciples brought him back and nursed him to health: St Simeon was called upon for prayer and counsel, and eventually an entire church was erected around his column.

With the passing of time and painful experience well-intentioned hermits discovered the dangers of trying to live utterly alone: as they grew older they needed practical assistance, whereas the younger ones needed counsel and encouragement: none of the men were priests, so that it was necessary to gather and worship together and apart from the threat of thieves, who did, almost unbelievably, operate in the desert, the fiercest enemy for somebody in isolation came from within their own minds and spirits.

Many a hermit venerated for holiness would attract disciples who may or may not have been part of their support system. These disciples would meld, in time, into a small caucus around the saint, and perhaps under his tutelage some informal way of life, centred on work, worship and learning would develop. This semi-formal group was known as a ‘Lavra.’ These Lavras multiplied until, in the words of Athanasius, ‘The desert became a city peopled by monks.’

What began as a flight into the desert for an ascetic refuge from the city gradually transmuted into what the sociologist, Max Weber termed ‘The routinisation of charisma.’

The next development in this process came about when Pachomius devised and superintended his ‘social experiment’ of placing some of these groups and individuals together in one larger community under what, in his case, comes to us as something perhaps more akin to a military colony than to what we now realise was one of the very first viable Christian monastic foundations. .

Pachomius was born around 290 in 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 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 small group together in one community under his own leadership.

The story goes that in around 320, while out gathering wood, Pachomius discovered an abandoned village at Tabansi on the Nile in Southern Egypt, God called him to remain and build a monastery ‘For many will come to you to become monks.’ He persuaded Palaemon to move over, and the village was adapted to the needs of the rule that an angel is said to have handed down, but it is not difficult to discern Pachomius’ own military method at work in the wholly sensible and practical administration he developed. Clearly the time was right, because in a relatively short period he had seen through the first of several regional monastic foundations under his direction.

The author Steven J Davis has written a short but wide-ranging book on monasticism, comparing early Christian foundations with those of Buddhist, Jain and Sufi orders. He describes Pachomius’ early foundation as a social experiment and adds that it is no co-incidence that he adapted and refurbished an entire village, ‘Insofar as they incorporated residential structures akin to households; streets and water distribution systems; agriculture and food distribution; industrial instillations, infirmaries and places of worship’. As they developed over the centuries, monasteries became the template for the cathedral schools, hospitals and the earliest universities.

The community was divided into houses each with a master responsible to Pachomius himself and designated by each letter of the Greek alphabet and with a distinct function serving the monastery as a whole.

Pachomius’ own experience of having his vocation severely tested when first asking Palaemon to take him on as a disciple determined his own policy and practice for receiving novices into his community. He would place a very wise and experienced monk as doorkeeper of each monastery so that a new recruit would be made to wait a few days outside while being taught the Lord’s prayer and as many of the Psalms as he was able to learn. He would be gently questioned as to his vocation: was he a slave? Was he fleeing the law? Did he have responsibilities to others which he sought to evade? What was his employment? Was he willing to give up his possessions and leave his parents?

Once these facts were established the doorkeeper would admit the novice, explain the rules and exchange his clothes for the monastic habit and he would be shown his place among the worshippers both in the smaller house church to which he was assigned, and in the monastery’s principal place of worship. The clothes would be retained as an insurance for a few months before being given to the poor.

The habit consisted of a top garment without sleeves which, in Egypt, could be interpreted as a sign of worldliness, and could impede work: there were two of these; an old one for sleep and work, the other for all other use; a linen mantle, a goat skin for harsh weather conditions and two hoods. At that time in Egypt only children wore hoods: wearing one was symbolic of child-like humility; a willingness to obey orders and learn. A belt and shoes completed the outfit: a staff would only be used if the monk went on a journey.

An unusual feature of the monastery was that Pachomius insisted that every monk should be literate: ‘There shall be no one in the monastery who does not learn to read and does not memorise something of the scripture. If a person is illiterate he shall go three times a day – at 6am, 9am and at noon to someone who can teach him and who has been appointed for him. He shall stand before him and learn very studiously and with all gratitude … Even if he does not want to he shall be compelled to read.’ This was to facilitate each monk to take part in worship, and because there was never enough manuscript for everybody, competency in reading and rapid learning were of maximum importance. Nobody missed out in the shared work of the liturgy, not to mention that most private prayer derived from the Bible.

After service each master would lead his charges out to their assigned work while they recited scripture or remained silent. Some monks would run errands outside the monastery, while others had roles as ministers to the sick [infirmarians] porters, gardeners, cooks, harvesters, bakers, boatmen and stewards. Much of this organisation centred on food production:

Monks ate in the refectory and the portion control that made Trusthouse Forte rich had its inauguration here; under some circumstances small quantities of food could be taken back to the houses, and eating was permitted for monks who worked outside the monastery, when harvesting fruit and vegetables, or who were visiting sick relatives, but no food could be consumed in the privacy of the cell. As for rest, reclining chairs only allowed a monk to sleep in a sitting position, the idea being that he should be ever ready!

A major pre-occupation of the desert hermits and monks was the avoidance of sexual temptation, whether in fantasy or from the occasional rare encounter with a woman. Women went into the desert as well as men, and some were venerated for their holiness, but those of us who attempt even our own meagre prayers know too well how we can become distracted, so imagine that each monk was expected to go to his ‘Abba’ and share any thought or temptation that entered his head via the opposition, and fess up!

Pachomius understood the power of example, so that when his sister came to visit he refused to meet her, and sent a message via the gate-keeper blessing her to found a convent on the far side of the Nile, resulting in two houses being built for her community there by his monks, which brought about the system of pairing women’s and men’s houses separately but under one rule, a variation that lasted well into the high middle ages.

It should not surprise us to learn that, like his most famous successor, Benedict, some of his early community found Pachomius’ discipline somewhat over-zealous, and he is said to have chased ‘slackers’ out of the gate with an iron bolt.

Nevertheless, whether as the result of such painful learning or, more likely, as an empathetic and compassionate pastor, Pachomius was known and admired 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.

By the time of his death in 346, Pachomius had attracted around five thousand disciples and his sister around two thousand women in 11autonomous regional communities. Whilst many monasteries were founded with rules based on those of Pachomius, particularly in Egypt, his own rule still forms the basis of monastic life in the Coptic tradition.

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16TH MAY CAROLINE CHISHOLM

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 Shenai,] 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.