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Excerpt

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Part One

THE HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK

CHAPTER I

THE OPENING OF THE PERIOD

I. THE BENEDICTINE CONSTITUTIONS

The constitutional and capitular history of the black monks between the Fourth Lateran Council and the Dissolution is divided conveniently, if somewhat accidentally, by the constitutions issued in 1336 by Benedict XII.¹ That pontiff, who reigned from the last days of 1334 to the spring of 1342, was in many ways the most distinguished of the popes of the fourteenth century after the death of Boniface VIII, and his comparatively short reign left a permanent mark both on church discipline and the history of dogma, while a more tangible monument of his energies remains in the massive ochre walls of the Palace of the Popes at Avignon. Himself a French Cistercian who had ruled as abbot before his elevation to the episcopate, he earnestly worked as pope for such a reform or reorganization of the monastic and religious orders as should be in harmony with the ideas of the time. He was a practical and energetic ruler, and within five years of his accession had accomplished a large part of his task, as he saw it, by preparing and promulgating comprehensive statutes for the three great orders of monks and canons. His first care was to issue a bull (*Pastor bonus* of 17 June 1335) against apostate religious; this was followed by constitutions for his own order in *Fulgens sicut stella* of 12 July; then came the decrees for the black monks in *Summi magistri* of 20 June 1336; and finally the Augustinian canons received the *Ad decorem* of 15 May 1339. In each case a small but strong papal committee of zealous superiors of the order concerned had framed decrees which were submitted to the pope and approved. There was to be no question of a return to primitive observance or the letter of the Rule, or even to the strictest practice of two centuries before; Benedict aimed at securing the financial and numerical prosperity of the monastic body and at maintaining a good level of intellectual training, while he frankly accepted the common mitigations of the Rule; he attempted to check the abuse of power and dilapidation by superiors by legislation not always in harmony with monastic tradition, and to abolish some of the most inexcusable deviations from the common life. It was, in fact, a sincere attempt, similar to but less energetic than that of Innocent III, to make of the uncentralized monks a prosperous, efficient and well disciplined body; the scheme had in it no pregnant, germinal force, no dynamic ideas. It did, however, pass immediately into current canon law and remained the norm till the Dissolu-

¹ These are in Wilkins, *Concilia*, II, 588 *seqq.* There is a summary in *MC*, II, 230–2. Cf. also J.-B. Mahn, *Le Pape Benoît XII et les Cisterciens*. For a further account of the Benedictine legislation as affecting studies and the Cistercians, v. *infra*, pp. 15, 24–5.

tion; some of its enactments, indeed, remain almost unchanged in the monastic constitutions of the present day.

To achieve his purpose for the black monks Benedict XII set up a commission in the first months of his reign, and the outcome of their deliberations was the bull *Summi magistri*. While this was in large part a re-enactment of old legislation it contained some novel features and laid a new emphasis on old things. In England, henceforth, a single triennial provincial chapter was to replace the two of North and South; in each monastery a yearly chapter was to be held, at which the superior was to render a full financial account; a list was given of measures for which the consent of this chapter was needed. Certain current practices leading to abuse were directly envisaged: thus the holding of private property was banned and the common practice of giving the monks a money allowance for food and clothing was reprobated; all were to receive from the common store; on four days of the week (Sunday, Monday, Tuesday and Thursday) meat-eating on the part of half of the community was accepted, but this was to be outside the refectory and was forbidden in Advent and from Septuagesima to Easter; it was forbidden for monks to have rights of maintenance at any house save their own, and the presidents were given power to deal with unfortunate or decaying houses. Finally, the study movement received an important recognition: in each house a master was to teach the young monks grammar, logic and philosophy, and one out of every twenty subjects at least was to be sent with an adequate pension to the university.

Though lacking the fire of intense spiritual endeavour, Benedict was an efficient administrator. Within six months of the issue of *Summi magistri* the abbots of St Mary's, York, and St Albans—the latter the distinguished Michael de Mentmore—were appointed executors of the bull and were charged not only with convening and setting in motion the first of the new series of chapters, but also with visiting every monastic house with a view to reporting upon its financial resources, in order that the pope might settle the number of monks to be maintained at each for the future.¹ The latter charge raised protests both from individual houses and from the king, who scented a new papal tax in the inquisition, and there is no evidence that it was ever carried out in entirety.² The new constitutions, however, were duly sent to England with a covering bull early in 1337,³ and in spite of royal prohibition the first joint chapter was held in June 1338 at the Cluniac house of Northampton, the central point of medieval England.⁴

At this meeting diffinitors were chosen to draw up a new set of statutes consisting of the old ones modified and augmented by the recent papal pronouncements. In addition, every monastery was to examine its own code of customs to ascertain if they conflicted with the Benedictine con-

¹ *MC*, III, 7–11.

³ *Ibid.* 3–4.

² *Ibid.* 13–15.

⁴ *MC* II, 5–12.

stitutions, while the diffinitors were to explain themselves, or refer to the pope, any points on which the new legislation might appear alarmingly strict. At the next meeting in 1340 it was found that the diffinitors had not yet achieved their task, owing to lack of information from certain houses; they were therefore instructed to meet again shortly at Oxford, while at the same time three emissaries were chosen to obtain from the Curia the mitigation or interpretation of certain decrees.¹ The latter object was attained by the receipt of a bull from Clement VI; the former by the production in 1343 of a comprehensive code of statutes which was on the whole little more than a revised version of the code of 1273, with some added details and the assumption of the Benedictine constitutions.²

For twenty years after this the records of the chapters are wanting, but in 1363 the sole president, the great Abbot Thomas de la Mare of St Albans, published yet another code. Whether this, too, was the work of diffinitors is not clear.³ De la Mare, as will be recounted elsewhere, was an energetic reformer and legislator whose activities had ranged from his own abbey and her satellite priories to a number of houses which he had been appointed to visit, and it may be that the statutes were his own work, based in part on the representations of a few contemporary abbots. Certainly, where they differ from the older code they bear a strong personal impress, particularly in the long disquisition on extravagances of dress and in the detailed enactments for the financial support and discipline of the students at Oxford.

Henceforward, for almost eighty years, very little material has survived regarding the business of chapter, but as there is no reference in subsequent documents to any further legislation, and as it was even found necessary to obtain from Innocent VII in 1405 a bull enforcing the constitutions of Benedict XII,⁴ it may be assumed that none was enacted.

At last, twenty years after the death of Henry V, an attempt at codification was once more made. This time, so we are told, it was brought about by the accumulation of decrees and by the uneasiness of those who saw statutes conflicting with each other and with common usage. The reference, no doubt, is to the customs connected with meat-eating and with the *peculium*, which many wished to see fully legalized by papal indult. The resulting code of 1444 is the least original and important of all in the history of the chapters.⁵ Though lengthy, it contains scarcely any new matter save for a number of regulations for studies at the universities. While there is no notable relaxation, there is likewise no tendency to reform; the statutes are in fact a faithful echo, pitched in a slightly lower key, of the legislation of the two previous centuries. The statutes of 1444 were, so far as surviving evidence shows, the last comprehensive code to be drawn up. Henceforward, the only new legislation consists of a number

¹ *Ibid.* 13–18.

³ *Ibid.* 64–82; *v. infra*, pp. 42–3.

⁵ *MC*, II, 187–220.

² *Ibid.* 28–62.

⁴ *MC*, III, 88–92.

of scattered diffinitions concerned with the universities. No references to later statutes exist, and it may therefore be assumed that the black monks of England had as their norm of life until the Dissolution the statutes of 1444.

Thus for more than three centuries the autonomous English monasteries were governed by a body of decrees, modified and added to from time to time, but retaining in all essentials the form first taken immediately after the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215. Since that date there had been three or four occasions on which a comprehensive reform had been envisaged—in 1273, in 1336 and the following years, and in 1421. None of these had fully succeeded, and each had been less drastic than its predecessors. In 1273 there had been a real endeavour to restore to the monasteries the fully regular life of the early twelfth century; in 1336 a regular and respectable, if somewhat mitigated, observance had been the goal; in 1421 the aim had been to remove a number of abuses which had seriously modified the common life. As has been said, all these efforts were in the long run failures, and the rhythm of the monastic life shows, during the three centuries concerned, a slow but continuous tendency to slacken, save in two or three periods of twenty years.

Yet so far as legislation goes, the life lived in 1500 was essentially that of 1200 and 1300. The horarium, the practices, the dietary regulations, were in essentials the same. So far as essentials went, in the forensic order at least, the critical century had been the twelfth. What changes had followed for the worse are scarcely reflected in the legislation, but must be sought in the indications given elsewhere. During these three centuries, the positive legislation chiefly concerned two matters: the accountability of superiors and officials to the community in general, and the rights of the latter to veto certain undertakings; and the regularization and development of higher studies. The progressive mitigations gave step by step the sanction of law to existing customs as regards meat-eating, periodical periods of recreation, and certain less important deviations from the strict following of the Rule; they also came to tolerate some important relaxations from the strictness of the common life, notably as regards the *peculium* for clothes and the provision of private apartments for a growing number of the senior monks. As for the life of the choir, this remained substantially unaltered to the end, save that the additional psalmody was curtailed in many houses in accordance with the decrees of chapter at the end of the thirteenth century.

During the period following the union of the two provinces in a single chapter the functions of the body and its presidents differed little from those exercised previously. From 1336 to 1498, without a single known exception save the 'irregular' meeting at Westminster in 1421, the chapters were held at Northampton. The central position was of obvious convenience, but it is curious that the regular meetings of some seventy English heads of houses should have taken place in a monastery which

until 1405 was a member of the Cluniac congregation. Perhaps, however, there were advantages in a neutral venue. From 1498 onwards Coventry and Westminster were the places of meeting.

The list of presidents is unfortunately very incomplete.¹ After 1336 they were three in number, doubtless in order that a northerner might be added to the existing two from the south. In practice, however, this rule was not rigidly kept, though in the majority of cases where three names have been preserved one is that of a northerner, almost invariably the abbot of York or the prior of Durham. In 1426 a decree was passed that one president should come from the south or east, one from the west, and one from the north, but there is not sufficient evidence to show how far, if at all, this rule was observed. The presidency, as might have been expected, was usually held by superiors of ten or a dozen of the larger houses, including the cathedral priories, but it remained strictly elective and never became the monopoly of a ring. So far as can be judged, the chapters elected the men deemed ablest, not merely amiable nonentities, and some of the most distinguished prelates of the period were re-elected for a number of terms. Thus the two great abbots of St Albans, Michael de Mentmore (1335–49) and Thomas de la Mare (1349–96) were presidents in succession for all the years of which there is record between 1340 and 1369, and John Chinnock of Glastonbury held office from 1387 to 1399.

On the whole, the presidents would appear to have exerted a greater influence than might have been expected. The fact that they were two (later three) in number was possibly a source of strength rather than weakness; the black monks would not have brooked a general, and a weak man would have felt the isolation of his position. As it was, they could advise and support each other, and the large number of monasteries concerned militated against jealousies. Elected as they were three years before the chapter at which they were to preside, they could when necessary prepare the main lines of future legislation, and on more than one occasion a really eminent president left a permanent mark on the body. Their greatest permanent task was, however, the supervision of the common houses of study at Oxford and (later) Cambridge; they also supervised the visitors of the various circuits appointed by chapter.

This would seem a fitting place to record the slight constitutional changes of the Austin canons. The decrees of Pope Benedict XII in their regard were in their main lines and general temper similar to those for the black monks, though special attention was given to practices peculiar to the order such as the serving of churches, and a somewhat less austere regime of fasting and abstinence was accepted: Saturdays were not days of abstinence, and the ancient custom of each house was to be followed as regards the keeping of abstinence on Wednesdays and the season between Septuagesima and Lent. Other decrees prohibited the carrying of arms

¹ *MC*, III, 259–62.

and countenanced hunting and hawking on the canons' properties, though they themselves were to take no part.¹

The united chapter of the two English provinces duly met for the first time at Newstead in 1341 and accepted the Benedictine constitutions;² there is no record of protests or of application for dispensations as there is among the black monks, though in the event the canons showed even less disposition to honour such of the decrees as sharpened their traditional observance. In any case, no drastic revision of legislation was undertaken; indeed, it was decreed at Oseney in 1353 that all houses, northern and southern, were to adopt the Northampton statutes of 1325,³ and this decree, presumably ineffective, was reaffirmed as binding on the northern houses in 1380.⁴ This attempted unity, however, did not long endure; after three years the north reverted to the statutes of Healaugh Park, dating from c. 1265 to 1285, with which they were familiar.⁵ The only considerable change was that from 1353 onwards three presidents, of whom two were of the south, and one of the north, replaced the two hitherto elected. They were to hold office for three chapters (i.e. nine years), and the chapters were to be held alternately at Northampton and Newstead (Notts), each near the confines of its province.⁶ This last regulation lapsed after a time, and Northampton became the normal venue for all chapters. Presidents were elected from a wide selection of houses, but Leicester, Northampton, Oseney and Waltham in the southern province, and Gisburn, Nostell and Thurgarton in the northern maintained their pre-eminence. Unfortunately, detailed records of the chapters cease after the first decade of the fifteenth century.

II. THE BLACK DEATH

Towards the end of the nineteenth century there was a tendency among English historians to regard every symptom of languor and decadence in the religious life of the country after 1350 as a direct consequence of the great plague of 1348–9.⁷ In particular, this visitation, by permanently reducing the numbers and stamina of the religious, was taken as marking the moment when a material, soon to be followed by a spiritual, decline

¹ The constitutions are printed in Wilkins, *Concilia*, II, 629 *seqq.*, but the best text is that of H. E. Salter, *Chapters of the Augustinian Canons*, Appendix II, pp. 214–67.

² *AC*, 49–52.

³ *Ibid.* 59–61.

⁴ *Ibid.* 73–5.

⁵ *Ibid.* 76. Cf. *RO*, I, 30.

⁶ *Ibid.* 59, 61.

⁷ For a short account of the Great Pestilence in England and the losses in the religious world Abbot Gasquet's *The Black Death* is still useful, though it has been corrected and supplemented by subsequent research. G. G. Coulton, *The Black Death* has a good bibliography to date of writing. The work of P. G. Mode, *The Influence of the Black Death on the English Monasteries* contains valuable information but, as often happens with doctoral dissertations, shows a lack of historical perspective and traces in every subsequent monastic vicissitude the influence of the Black Death. The author also makes the mistake of supposing that the monks served in person many of the churches they owned. A. M. Campbell, *The Black Death and Men of Learning*, is concerned with the whole of Europe, but has interesting references to England.

set irrevocably in. It was the great divide, one of the few decisive fractures in the continuity of European history.¹ This hypothesis, as regards its moral and spiritual implications, can be neither established nor demolished by direct evidence. The precise influence of a great catastrophe—war, famine or pestilence—on the moral and spiritual resources of a country must always elude the historian. It should, however, be possible to establish a few facts to show in particular cases how severe were the losses in personnel, and to pronounce in general on the relative excellence of discipline and observance in the generations before and after the series of plagues that devastated the country between 1348 and 1370. On the latter point, indeed, judgement is given by implication in many chapters of this work; here, it will be needful only to give a summary decision after the direct and tangible results of the plague have been passed in review.

The Black Death, a variety of the contagious bubonic plague of the East, of which rats through their parasites were the chief carriers, reached England from the Continent in the late summer of 1348. It entered the country on the Dorset coast, probably at Weymouth, and spread rapidly up and across the land, raging in London all through the winter and until the following May. By the midsummer of 1349 it had all but exhausted itself, though a parting shaft carried off the great Bradwardine in August. It returned in 1361–2 and again in 1368–9, and these later visitations, though less catastrophic in character, were very severe, and attracted more attention from contemporaries than the references in text-books might suggest. The disease appears to have taken two forms, the one implying a longer period of sickness and danger than the other; in the more common form, death was the probable, though not the inevitable, outcome, and took place within three days or less.

A consensus of opinion, after the discussions of the past half-century, acknowledges that, when all allowance has been made for contemporary exaggeration, the population of the country during the fatal twelvemonth was reduced by more than a quarter and perhaps by as much as a third.² Individual districts suffered still more heavily, while individual groups, such as villages or religious communities, might escape altogether or be annihilated. The disease left behind it a train of *sequelae* in those who had

¹ Mode, *op. cit.*, in his early pages cites several of the emphatic pronouncements of historians of fifty years since, and echoes of their opinion may still be heard even in the works of careful scholars such as Fr P. Hughes, who remarks (*The Reformation in England*, 1, 40): 'In many respects the monasteries in England never regained what they now lost [i.e. by the Black Death]. Very few indeed of them—comparatively speaking—were henceforward sufficiently staffed to carry out their primary function of choral prayer in the way this needs to be done.' The wording is cautious, but the reader would scarcely be led to expect such post-plague numbers as the following: Bury St Edmunds, 62; Canterbury, Christ Church, 70; Canterbury, St Augustine's, 54; Durham, 74; Gloucester, 54; St Albans, 54; Worcester, 45. Downside Abbey, with a large public school and other commitments besides choral duties, has (1953) some 50 permanently resident monks.

² So, for example, M. M. Postan in his important article, 'Some economic evidence of falling population in the later Middle Ages', 221–46. This estimate is adopted *passim* by writers in vols. 1 and 11 of the *CEH*.

survived its attack, and this lack of physical resistance, added to the recent memories of terror, no doubt added to the apprehension when later visitations struck a reduced population.

When the fearful severity of the scourge is borne in mind it may appear strange that it has left such scanty traces in the monastic records. There was no English rival to Thucydides or even to Boccaccio, and the rare mention is often a passing allusion only. Even the chronicler of St Albans, who devotes so much space to the doings of contemporary abbots, has no graphic phrases to describe the disaster that affected the domestic history of his house so deeply¹. Such notices as survive make it clear that the incidence of mortality was very uneven in the different houses, but there is no way of ascertaining, as has been done with some certainty in the case of the parochial clergy by use of the records of institutions to benefices, whether the total losses were lower or higher than the average losses of the whole population. On the one hand, a large household in close contact by day and night would be a natural field for rapid infection; even at the present day, with scientific techniques of isolation and disinfectants, groups and institutions such as a ship's company or a school are peculiarly liable to suffer when once hit by an epidemic. On the other hand, the religious, as living regular, well-nourished lives, might be expected to have had greater resistance, while the level of cleanliness, sanitation, medical service and nursing, though low by modern standards, must have been high indeed in the great monasteries when compared with the conditions prevailing in villages and towns. Detailed notices are relatively scanty. The most familiar, perhaps, is that in the ample chronicle of St Albans, a house which lost its abbot, prior, subprior and forty-six monks, in addition to others in the dependent cells, in the course of a few days when the pestilence struck the abbey at Eastertide, 1349.² At Westminster in May, a month later, the abbot and twenty-six monks were carried off,³ but the still larger community of Christ Church, Canterbury, escaped with only four deaths⁴—an escape that can scarcely have been wholly due to its copious supply of pure and running water. Other figures are known from scattered sources: thus Lewes⁵ and Reading⁶ lost large numbers; Louth Park the abbot and many monks.⁷ A few houses were even harder hit, and the record perhaps owes its existence to that circumstance. Thus among the Cistercians at the Devonshire house of Newenham twenty monks and three converses died, leaving the abbot with only two monks behind;⁸ at Meaux in Yorkshire only ten monks

¹ *GASA*, II, 369–70.

² *Ibid.*

³ Flete, *History of Westminster*, ed. J. A. Robinson, 128.

⁴ *Lit. Cant.* II, xxii–xxiii.

⁵ B.M. MS. Cole 5824 fo. 78 (cited by Gasquet, *Black Death*, 134).

⁶ *VCH, Berks.*, II, 66.

⁷ *Chronicon abbatis de Parco Lude*, ed. E. Venables, p. 38. The writer, though diffuse in his expressions of emotion says merely: *obierunt multi*.

⁸ Gasquet, *op. cit.* 103, with references.

THE OPENING OF THE PERIOD

II

survived from a community of forty-two monks and seven converses.¹ Among the canons Croxton in Leicestershire was all but exterminated,² Lanthony lost nineteen out of thirty,³ and at Bodmin the prior and all but two of the canons went, leaving only an invalid and a simpleton to look after each other,⁴ while at some of the smaller houses, such as Hickling, Ivychurch, Mountjoy and Sandford⁵ such a clean sweep was made that regular observance was at an end and an appeal was made at the general chapter for drafts from elsewhere. For the friars figures are extremely rare, but we are told that the Norwich house of Preachers was emptied to the last friar.⁶

In addition to these direct and precise references to losses, it has been noted that the recorded deaths of heads of houses in the fatal twelvemonth are strikingly more numerous than in normal times. Gasquet collected some forty references to the death of an abbot or prior, and a more recent investigator has reckoned that whereas the average annual number of voidances for the previous nine years was twenty-one, in the year 1348–9 this number rose to 144; it may be noted that the same authority found the average for the years 1350–60 to be twenty, while in the year (1361–2) of the second visitation of the plague it rose to fifty-six.⁷ A further means of calculation has been found in a comparison of the numbers of religious shortly before 1349 and those at a later date in the century. In almost every case a very sharp fall is seen, at once most noticeable and most significant at some of the largest houses. Thus Bath, Glastonbury and St Swithun's, Winchester, all show a reduction by nearly a half between the first and last quarters of the century.⁸ It is natural, and perhaps allowable, to connect this steep fall with the plague in its three visitations, but it is impossible to be certain whether the drop was primarily due to the mortality within the house or to the falling-off of recruits from a diminished population now in what we may anachronistically call 'full employment'. It may be significant that at Christ Church, which all but escaped the plague of 1349, and Durham, from which no record of any kind survives, the numbers fell by only a third or less.⁹

Yet another argument has been found in the appearance of a series of petitions to Rome from monasteries all over England asking for faculties to ordain a specified number of monks to the priesthood below the

1 *Chronicon monasterii de Melsa*, ed. E. A. Bond, III, 37.

2 *V. infra*, p. 12, n. 1.

3 *VCH, Glos.*, II, 90, with reference.

4 *Reg. J. Grandisson*, ed. F. C. Hingeston-Randolph, II, 1076–8.

5 *VCH, Norfolk*, II, 241; *AC*, no. 34, p. 58: 'Ivychirche et Sandford per mortalitates fratrum adeo sunt collapse quod nulla ad presens in eisdem viget religio.'

6 *VCH, Norfolk*, II, 241.

7 Mode, *The Influence of the Black Death on the English Monasteries*, 18. The writer apparently includes some heads of hospitals and colleges in his calculations, but this does not affect the ratio of the totals.

8 A glance through Gasquet's *Black Death* or Knowles and Hadcock, *Medieval Religious Houses* will provide numerous additional examples.

9 For Canterbury (65 falls to 46) v. R. A. L. Smith, *Canterbury Cathedral Priory*, 3; for Durham (70 falls to 56) v. Knowles and Hadcock, *op. cit.* 69.