INTRODUCTION

THE IMPORTANCE OF MONASTERIES IN EUROPE OF THE *ANCIEN RÉGIME*

For most historians of modern Europe my subject might as well not exist. Whereas in every history of the European Middle Ages monasteries play a principal role, the great majority of books on later periods ignore monks and nuns altogether – except perhaps for the Jesuits. This is true not only of general surveys but even of some distinguished works specifically concerned with church history. On page 259 of the *Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity* Patrick Collinson tells us that 'in Luther's perception the mass and all other devotions were "works" with a false motivation. There was no longer any rationale for monasticism.' After this, apart from a few mentions of the Jesuits, the authors, as if taking their cue from Luther, make no further direct reference to any monasteries or religious Orders in Europe until page 587, which is concerned with the period since the Second World War.[1]

Leaving aside for the moment the question of its rationale, I shall look first at the sheer scale of early modern monasticism. During the Reformation, of course, monasteries virtually disappeared from countries where Protestantism became the official religion. As for the lands in which Catholicism maintained itself or recovered its position, a commonly held view is encapsulated in C.H. Lawrence's justly respected work on *Medieval Monasticism*. He acknowledges that in these areas the institution survived. But even there, he declares:

> because associations devoted to the celebration of liturgical ritual no longer met the religious demands of society or provided convenient homes for its surplus children,

and because the number of monastic establishments vastly exceeded the needs of those few who had a personal vocation to the ascetical life, social and economic support fell away; the number of monasteries dwindled, and monastic property was transferred to other purposes.[2]

The truth is utterly different. In the countries where the Reformation did not succeed, monasteries not merely survived; they increased and flourished anew. Old Orders were reformed and prospered again; new Orders were founded, with aims somewhat different from the old, and grew mightily. This was true of France, the southern Netherlands, Spain, Portugal, Italy, southern Germany, Poland, parts of Switzerland and the vast lands of the Austrian Monarchy in central and eastern Europe. In most of these areas numbers of monks and nuns reached a peak in the second or third quarter of the eighteenth century. By around 1750 Catholic Europe boasted well over 15,000 monasteries for men and at least 10,000 nunneries – using those terms in the broadest sense.[3] These houses belonged to dozens of distinct Orders. In a cycle of mid-eighteenth-century paintings that decorate the walls of the abbot's antechamber in the Cistercian monastery at Schöntal in Franconia, 302 different types of clerical dress are depicted, most of them specific to a particular Order of monks or nuns; and its coverage was certainly incomplete.[4]

Around 1750 there were in the whole of Catholic Europe at least 350,000 inmates of monasteries out of a total population of less than a hundred million, a proportion of rather more than 1 in 300. They were not evenly spread, but their presence was everywhere evident and felt. In Spain and Italy nearly 1 person in 100 was a monk or nun of some sort; in exceptional places like the papal states the proportion was nearer 1 in 50. In France it was only about 1 in 300, near the average level for Catholic Europe, but even there, just before the Revolution, the agricultural writer Arthur Young complained: 'I search for good farmers, and run my head at every turn against monks.'[5] In fact these ratios of monks and nuns to total population, high though they seem by modern standards, give a misleadingly low impression of the strength of monasticism. Since in this period scarcely half of those who were born reached adulthood, and since the great majority of monks and nuns were adults, a more meaningful ratio is that of all monks and nuns to all adults. To arrive at that, the proportions already given need to be roughly doubled. Special circumstances could produce ratios so high as to be scarcely believable. The most extreme that I have come across is this: in seventeenth-century Florence the ratio of nuns to married women reached 102:100, more than double what it had been a century earlier.[6]

Two further numerical comparisons highlight the differences between early modern and modern society. In most Catholic countries there were in the eighteenth century many more monks than nuns, though in France – and at least in parts of Italy – it was the other way round. And in most, if not all, Catholic countries monks and nuns, taken together, formed the majority of all clergy.

The illustrations in this book depict some of the grandest monastery buildings, but they cannot begin to do justice to the monastic presence as a whole. In many dioceses the cathedral was rivalled in scale and opulence by several abbeys, which had usually been exempted for most or all purposes from the jurisdiction of the bishop.[7] Parish churches were generally unimpressive, much less grand than monastic churches that commonly served a mere handful of monks or nuns. From most parts of the countryside some monastic complex could be seen, often dominant on a hill. In towns of any size there were sure to be several forbidding conventual façades louring over the modest dwellings of ordinary citizens. Lisbon possessed in the mid-eighteenth century about fifty houses, one third of which were for women.[8] If that sounds like an extreme case, it pales into insignificance beside Paris, which is said by one authority to have had fifty-eight houses of monks and well over a hundred of nuns, while Naples broke all records with more than a hundred monasteries for males and nearly a hundred for females.[9] To mention a monastery conjures up for most people an image of splendid rural isolation, but by the eighteenth century monasticism in Catholic Europe was predominantly urban.

Monasteries were believed to be enormously rich, and extravagant estimates of their wealth were current – for example, that they owned over half of all land in Bavaria and in Naples.[10] To calculate the correct figures on the basis of the surviving information is always difficult and sometimes impossible, but it is clear that these very high estimates are exaggerated. Still, it is accepted that in Bavaria the greater monasteries were lords to 28 per cent of all peasants, which means that monasteries as a whole controlled an even higher proportion; and in Lower Austria, the province that includes Vienna, monasteries owned roughly 20 per cent of all land. In both cases their share was half of all church property.[11] In some areas the percentage of monastic land was much lower. In the different regions of France the proportion of land held in 1789 by the Church as a whole varied from 40 per cent in some regions to less than 1 per cent in others, and it is a reasonable guess that the average holding of monasteries was greater than 5 per cent, but not much greater. It is generally believed that a quarter of the immensely valuable land in Paris belonged to monasteries. So, across Catholic Europe, the Orders must have owned on average somewhere near 10 per cent of all the land, which was

about half of all the Church's land.[12] This is a very substantial proportion, quite enough to account for the belief of contemporaries that monasteries, taken as a whole, were very rich. By way of comparison, the National Trust even now owns little more than 1 per cent of the land of England, Wales and Northern Ireland.[13]

In addition to owning land, many monasteries, especially of the old Orders, had the right to levy tithe, which was in origin and principle a tax of 10 per cent, payable in kind by the producer on all the products of agriculture for the support of the parish priest. In a good proportion of parishes all or part of the tithe had been granted to monasteries or other ecclesiastical corporations, which had a duty to pay for the parish priest but could keep the surplus for themselves. The yield of tithe to monasteries was often even greater than the revenue from their own land.[14]

Among monasteries, however, and as between Orders, there was immense variation in wealth.[15] Most of the really well-endowed houses belonged to the old Orders which had been founded by 1150, chiefly the Benedictines, Cistercians, Augustinians, Premonstratensians and Carthusians. Later houses, including the very large number possessed by the Orders deriving from the Franciscans, founded in the thirteenth century, were originally in principle propertyless and 'mendicant', and they remained in general relatively poor, in many cases genuinely impoverished; and in some of these Orders the monks still begged for their living. But the richer monasteries, taken together, were landowners on the grand scale, lords to millions of peasants. They possessed farms and forests, which they sometimes managed themselves and sometimes leased out; they developed suburbs; they made and sold beer, wine and liqueurs; they acted virtually as banks; in fact they were involved in commercial and industrial enterprises of almost every kind. They were major employers of labour. If, as seems probable, a majority of monks became priests, the remainder took only minor orders. These, assisted in certain Orders by lay brothers and sisters, undertook some worldly and menial tasks. But many houses also employed numerous servants. All this support enabled the 'choir monks', especially the priests among them, and most nuns to devote themselves to higher things. An army of builders and craftsmen was required to construct and maintain their buildings. In seeking to make their churches and their services beautiful and splendid, they acted as major patrons of the visual arts and of music.

Monasteries continued to fulfil their ancient duties of hospitality and charity. Many of them, especially those in remote places, acted as virtual hotels. In addition to employing many people – usually more than was strictly necessary – they distributed food and alms to the poor and needy, and were known to be especially

generous to those affected by natural calamities. This indiscriminate charity was criticised by reformers and economists, but it is clear that many individuals, and whole villages in the neighbourhood of richer monasteries, survived only through these doles.[16]

Most monasteries were largely freed by law from the control of the ordinary church authorities and had valuable secular privileges too: these included exemption from some taxation, and jurisdiction over their inmates and over the inhabitants of their lands. Many of the abbots of the greater houses – and even, mainly in Germany, a few abbesses – had seats in the assemblies or 'Estates' of their provinces; and in the First or ecclesiastical Estate they often outnumbered the bishops.[17] The lands of many of the major monasteries within the Holy Roman Empire formed virtually independent principalities, ruled by their abbots or abbesses.[18] Further, most monastic Orders were international or supranational, their individual houses being in certain matters subject to authorities based outside their own countries, not only to the pope but also in some cases to a presiding abbot or to a 'general', perhaps located in Rome. This position still seemed natural enough in the Empire, with its hundreds of political units holding widely scattered lands, but appeared increasingly anomalous in the compact absolute monarchies that dominated most of Catholic Europe.

The rationale of monasticism remained essentially the desire or call to remove oneself from many of the ordinary cares and preoccupations of the world, taking vows – in most Orders lifelong vows – originally of poverty, chastity and obedience, in order to give oneself wholly to the service of God. This service always included prayer, meditation and worship, and helping to run the relevant institutions. According to the aims of particular Orders, it might also involve preaching, teaching, pastoral work and missionary activity; charity and the care of the sick, the old, the mad, the crippled and the deaf and dumb; music, scholarship and the copying and illumination of manuscripts; or even, in the case of the military Orders, taking up arms on behalf of the Church.

It was rare for an Order or even an individual house to have forgotten this rationale completely. But monasteries were so numerous, and in many cases so long established, so well endowed and so firmly rooted in their localities and in contemporary society, that they had come to fulfil social functions that had little to do with that rationale. Monastic property and wealth were seen by most Catholics as a part of the natural order, as was the monastic life itself. They offered various kinds of opportunity to society at large. If a family enabled a son to become a monk, or a daughter a nun, especially in a wealthy house, it was opening to them what was often their only chance of education, status, security, responsibility and a degree

of comfort for life. To do this usually required the provision of a dowry for a nun and a corresponding down payment for a monk. A bookish or musical boy or girl, even of very humble origin, might be welcome in a major monastery, and to enter one might be their only way of using their particular gifts. The family strategies of the nobility often depended on sending younger sons into monasteries, especially if they were scholarly or physically weak, and – even more important – providing for surplus daughters by placing them in nunneries. A Dominican, protesting to Philip II of Spain against a proposal to sell church lands to augment the royal treasury, declared that

> [nuns,] who form a very large part of the Spanish nobility, will be particularly affected . . . The great lords and all men of note, since they can marry off only one in four or six of their daughters because of excessive dowries, have no other remedy but, out of necessity, to place the others in monasteries; and the founders of these convents, with this idea in mind, worked to endow and enrich them so that poverty does not lead [the nuns] into wickedness or to live in despair and misery. To provide them with secure revenues that they can easily collect, they have been given lands and serfs.[19]

This practice, though more general in Spain and Italy than elsewhere, was accepted as normal in every Catholic country. At a lower social level, the life of the mendicant monk, committed to celibacy but guaranteed a roof over his head and legally protected as a member of the clergy, might well seem preferable to the ordinary fate of a penniless city youth; and, where the mendicant Orders were strong, especially in Italy, they could be seen as agents of poor relief or social control not only because of their work for people outside their houses but also because they admitted into their ranks men and women who would otherwise probably be unemployed and disaffected.[20]

The social gulf between the propertied and the mendicant Orders was highlighted by a Victorian Anglican clergyman called Hobart Seymour in his book *A Pilgrimage to Rome*, published in 1848. He was strongly anti-Catholic, and he was writing after the end of my period. But he was unusual in having made it his business to visit a variety of monasteries – and in having studied both at Trinity College, Dublin, and Oxford – and his acute observations would have applied with little alteration in the eighteenth century:

> The hotels and boarding houses of London and Paris [he declares] do not present a more perfect system of gradation than the convents and monasteries of Italy . . . Some . . . are well and richly endowed; . . . are supplied with many comforts, and . . . admit only a superior class of persons as members, with the exception of a few laymen

of the lower classes, who are admitted on the express understanding of their being servants to the others; acting as porters, cooks, messengers, &c. In convents of this class, the mode of life is not unlike that of some members of our English universities. Having nothing to do, they live in their apartments, dine together, gossip with one another, attend the prescribed number of services at chapel . . . Some [monks], whose inclinations lead them to study, . . . have proved themselves among the most intellectual, learned, and able men of the age. Some, whose tendencies are towards religion, . . . devote themselves to the acquisition of religious knowledge, and political intrigue . . . Others devote themselves to the amusement of the passing hour . . .

There are other [monasteries] which are exclusively appropriated to the inferior orders of life. These are chiefly Franciscans and Capuchins, whose appearance is familiar to every one who has visited any part of Italy. Their coarse brown dresses, their shaven crowns, their wooden-sandaled feet, their cord, their rosary, the shaven face of one order, and long beards of the other, are familiar to every eye; while the filth of their persons and the odour of their clothes are no less familiar to every traveller.

I was conducted through one of the convents of these men . . . It contained at the time no less than *one hundred and seventy monks*! . . . The dirt and stench of [their] little rooms, equalled only by a squalid garret in St Giles' in London, exceeds any possible description . . . It was a sort of overgrown alms-house, a sort of union poor-house, the inmates of which were not the sick and the infirm and the aged, as in England; but the strong, the active, the healthy, and the able-bodied of the population, who ought to have been compelled to labour for their support.[21]

Mendicants necessarily spent much time outside their houses. But monks of most other Orders – and some nuns – also took a much greater part than is generally realised in religious and secular life outside the monastery walls. Monks quite frequently achieved the highest positions in the Church. The eighteenth-century frescoes in the refectory of the Benedictine abbey of Pannonhalma in Hungary claim that the Order had produced 15,000 bishops, 7,000 archbishops, 200 cardinals and 52 popes.[22] Of the eighteenth-century popes Benedict XIII (1724–30) was a Dominican, Clement XIV (1769–74) a Franciscan and Pius VII, elected in 1800, a Benedictine. Many instances will be given in the course of this book of monks and nuns involved in a rich variety of apparently secular pursuits. But the most influential of all the social roles of monks and nuns was in education. Above the primary level, the colleges and universities of Catholic countries were dominated by monks.[23]

So, in the mid-eighteenth century, monasteries had immense, though largely forgotten, importance not just within the Church but also in the economic, social, political, artistic, intellectual and educational life of all parts of Catholic Europe.

THE ASSAULT ON THE MONASTERIES

By 1812 the situation was utterly different. Virtually no monasteries or nunneries survived in France, Germany, Belgium or in northern and central Italy. In Switzerland, Poland, southern Italy and much of Spain only a small number remained. On the other hand, in the Austrian Empire only about a third had been suppressed, while in Sicily, Portugal and the rest of Spain they had hardly been touched.[24] In most cases the lands and possessions of the suppressed houses had been confiscated by governments and sold off; and their buildings had been commandeered or vandalised. The surviving monks and nuns from these houses were mostly scattered, many in exile. While some had found congenial employment as parish clergy or in education, others were struggling to survive, on inadequate pensions if they were lucky. Given the previous influence of the Orders, this was a revolution – not only in religious and ecclesiastical history but also in the history of education and of society at large.

At government level the serious assault on the Orders had begun in the 1750s, when the rulers of Portugal set about destroying the Jesuits. By 1773 the movement against them had spread to all Catholic Powers, and pope Clement XIV concluded that it was necessary in the wider interests of the Church to suppress the Order.[25] Meanwhile, Catholic states were turning their attention to other Orders. Louis XV established in 1766 a *commission des réguliers* which led to the abolition of hundreds of monasteries, but among the reforming rulers the most prominent was the emperor Joseph II, who during the 1780s dissolved about a third of the more than 2,000 houses in the Austrian Monarchy.[26] Then in the early months of the French Revolution the National Assembly seized all church lands and abolished all monastic Orders and vows. Between 1794 and 1812 the armies and diplomacy of the Revolution and Napoleon saw to the extension of these drastic measures to the southern Netherlands, Germany, most of Italy and Switzerland and parts of Spain. The partitions of Poland between 1772 and 1795 led to substantial suppressions there.[27] In most countries revival followed the Restoration in 1815, but it had hardly been imaginable during the previous fifty years.

Though all Catholic countries shared some elements of this story, there were enormous differences between the experiences of individual states and regions. As we shall see, the situation of monasteries in *ancien régime* France was in many respects peculiar, but so in varying degrees was their position in every country, whether Belgium, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Germany, Switzerland, the Austrian Monarchy or Poland.[28] The chronology of decay, suppression and revival varied. Sometimes completely contradictory trends were at work in neighbouring

countries. For example, two months after the nationalisation of all monastic land in France in 1789 some of the greater Belgian houses organised and funded the forces that drove Joseph II's army from their provinces.[29] The composition and status of the clergy, and of the monks and nuns among them, varied from region to region, as did the social balance between sympathy with monasticism and hostility to it. These variations have both reflected and shaped the character of localities and nations, and deserve study in this connexion as well as for church history. To take two obvious examples, one of the defining characteristics of modern France is that its thousands of monasteries were all dissolved between 1790 and 1793, and that most of them were destroyed, vandalised or converted to other purposes, so that their traces are often lost or barely discernible.[30] Modern Austria, on the other hand, is visually dominated and still influenced by its great abbeys which, unusually, despite or because of the policies of Joseph II, escaped suppression in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, many of them boasting a continuous existence from the Dark Ages to the present day, except for the Nazi years.[31]

These are the phenomena that I wish to highlight, to explore and in some degree to explain in this book. I wish I could take the story beyond 1815, into the period of astonishing Catholic revival. But, as will become apparent, the story down to the end of the Napoleonic regime is by itself a very big subject indeed, more than enough for full scholarly treatment in a set of lectures or a short book. My justification for taking it and treating it in this cavalier way is that even in Catholic countries – and still more in Britain – it has been neglected, often literally ignored, not only by general historians but also by historians of religion. I hope both to encourage more historians to study it and to persuade a wider readership of its interest and importance. This is not a question of drawing attention to a quaint survival or a picturesque backwater. It is more like bringing to the surface 'a submerged Continent'.[32] In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Catholic Europe monks, nuns and their monasteries really mattered in the life of society; and they, and the institution of monasticism itself, were the object of continuous interest and fierce controversy. It is a grave distortion of history to leave them out of it.

THE DIFFICULTIES OF THE SUBJECT

Why has this distortion occurred? The most general aspect of the problem is that for many modern historians religion has little or no meaning, and so they find it difficult or impossible to believe that anyone can ever have been genuinely actuated by a religious motive. Faced with ostensibly religious activity, they ignore

it, underplay it or seek a secular explanation for it. Here are some examples. The great Tudor historian, Geoffrey Elton, was unable to accept that resentment at the dissolution of the monasteries could really have been, as the rebels claimed it was, a principal motive in the revolt against Henry VIII's government in 1536 which is known as the Pilgrimage of Grace. Many historians of the English Civil War and of England in the age of the industrial revolution have seen religious movements and disputes as merely the reflexion of economic and social divisions. French historians have carried out vast quantities of often valuable research into the origins and course of the Revolution as though it was simply a question of class struggle, rising prices and population pressure, neglecting or diminishing the role of individuals, politics and ideas, and especially of churches and religion. Most of these writers have accepted a more or less diluted version of Marxism, which claims to supply a materialist explanation of cultural, intellectual and religious manifestations. Put crudely, as Marx himself put it, 'religion is the opium of the people', and churches are simply an aspect of feudal or capitalist oppression. The specific examples just given are all instances where, recently, some historians have set out to redress the balance, insisting that religion must be taken seriously if the story is to be properly understood. But it remains difficult to win acceptance for such arguments.[33]

Perhaps the most extreme cases of blind ignoring of religious and ecclesiastical issues, and particularly of monasteries, are to be found in certain economic histories. These matters are hardly mentioned, for example, in the post-medieval volumes of the *Fontana Economic History of Europe*. Even more astonishingly, they hardly surface in a collection on Castilian economic decline in the seventeenth century.[34] This silence no doubt owes something to the reluctance of contemporary scholars to indulge in anything that smacks of denominational bickering, though it probably owes more to the discredit into which debates about 'religion and the rise of capitalism' have fallen among historians. But it is not necessary to assume that the peculiar twist given to these debates by their main promoters, Weber and Tawney, is the only possible approach. They were chiefly interested in the question whether the Protestant, especially the Calvinist, ethic encouraged entrepreneurship, innovation and hard work, and therefore, ultimately, industrialisation. The fact that discussion of these topics has run into the sands should not preclude argument about other aspects of the relationship between religion and economic growth. All European countries had churches which owned large amounts of land, but those that became Protestant must have contained on average substantially less church land than Catholic states, and many of them contained *no* monastic land.[35] It must surely be worthwhile for historians to consider whether the Church behaved