

CHAPTER I

THE RELIGIOUS ORDERS

§ 1. A monastery is a community of men or women, devoted to the service of God and obeying a fixed rule. Monastic rules of life varied in strictness and in detail; while each community supplemented the rule of its order by its own code of observances. The object, however, of these different rules and codes was one. The general term for the monastic life was 'religion' (*religio*): the 'religious' (*religiosus*) was bound by three vows, to poverty against the deceits of the world, to chastity against the lusts of the flesh, to obedience against the snares of the devil. His chief duty was to take part with his brethren in the recitation of the canonical hours, and in the celebration of daily masses. A portion of his day was set apart for meditation in the cloister; but his surplus time was devoted to labour. The business affairs of a monastery brought some religious into touch with the practical side of life. Others found their vocation in manual labour in the fields or workshops; while a certain number devoted themselves to literary work in the cloister.

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§ 2. The rule of St Benedict, on which western monachism was founded, distinguishes between four classes of religious. Of these the two principal were cenobites, monks living in a community (*coenobium*) under rule, and the anchorites, who have departed (*ἀναχωρεῖν*) from the world to live a solitary life of prayer. These were the sources of the two main streams of Christian monachism. Naturally, the anchorite came first into existence. The cenobite followed, by the combination of anchorites in monasteries. The development of the *coenobium* was gradual. About 305 A.D., St Anthony inaugurated the 'lauras' (*λαύραι*) of northern Egypt, monasteries in which each anchorite lived in his separate cell and met for common services only on Saturday and Sunday. A few years later St Pachomius founded his first *coenobium* at Tabennisi in southern Egypt. Here the social principle was more fully organised: common services in church were more frequent and labour was recognised as a factor in the monastic life; but the monks still lived separately. A further step was taken by St Basil, who about 360 founded a *coenobium* near Neocaesarea. His rule introduced the idea of common life under one roof. It became the basis of the monastic system of the eastern Church, and its principles had a lasting effect on the monastic life of western Europe.

§ 3. The influence of the monachism of the east

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naturally spread westward. No general rule of life was followed at first. Each collection of monks was governed by its own special observances, aiming generally at the ascetic ideal of separation from the world pursued by the early anchorites. Monachism, however, was a powerful agent in the Christianising of the west. Each monastery under its abbot or father became a training-ground for monk-bishops who ruled dioceses in new monastic centres of missionary effort. The beginnings of organised monachism in Ireland may be traced to the monastery of Lerins, on an island near Cannes, where St Patrick received his training. The success of Irish monasticism soon reacted upon Gaul and Italy, when St Columban founded the monasteries of Luxeuil and Bobbio upon a rule derived from Irish practice. About the same time St Columba at Iona established the vogue of the Irish system in northern Britain.

§ 4. Meanwhile, a new development of the principle arose. St Benedict, a native of Norcia near Spoleto, retired about the beginning of the sixth century to a hermitage at Subiaco. Here he attracted a number of followers, and several monasteries arose in the neighbourhood under his direction. It was for the monastery of Monte Cassino, which he ruled for some thirty years, that he composed the rule which became the law of the monastic life of western Europe. The success and the general adoption of

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the rule of Monte Cassino in the west were due to the statesmanship with which its injunctions were adapted to climate and physical capacity. The Benedictine monk entered upon a life of work and prayer, which needed the habitual exercise of self-control; but his bodily health ran no risk of being ruined by pious excess. Isolated devotion was superseded by religious life in a common church and cloister. This was the end to which Pachomius and Basil had contributed; but the mystical temperament of the east fostered a contemplative and ascetic tendency which modified the conception of a common life of uniform duty. The early monasteries of Gaul, such as that of St Martin at Tours, followed the model of the *laura* rather than the *coenobium*; and the separate cell and the practice of self-imposed austerities seem to have been general in early Celtic monasteries. The voluntary hardships of St Cuthbert in his cell on the Farne islands, the prayers and visions of the Saxon Guthlac at Croyland, were western survivals of the ideals of St Anthony and St Simeon Stylites. St Benedict, on the contrary, while casting no reflexions on a life which he himself had at first adopted, recommended to the aspirant for salvation no heroic tasks of prayer and fasting. His aim was the growth in grace of a brotherhood, living under a common rule in obedience to an abbot to whom considerable discretion was given. The natural

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tendency of the solitary life was to produce an emulation in religious endeavour ; and monasteries which were little more than collections of anchorites were liable to the decay consequent upon the rivalry of their inmates. St Benedict enjoined emulation in good works among his monks ; but their emulation had its root in humility and obedience, and its outward sign was a mutual deference far removed from spiritual pride. There can be little wonder that a rule, difficult but possible to follow, and allowing for individual weakness, spread far outside the community for which it was made, and that the Benedictine order by the end of the seventh century supplanted all other forms of monasticism in western Europe.

§ 5. The rule of St Benedict was introduced into England by St Augustine, prior of the monastery on the Coelian hill in Rome. At this time the chief strength of Celtic monachism was naturally in the north, although it had penetrated southwards to such isolated outposts as Glastonbury. Gradually Roman customs gained ground in the strongholds of Celtic Christianity. The grant of the monastery of Ripon to Wilfrid was followed by the departure of the Scottish monks. Little is definitely known of English monastic life at this period, but it is clear that it began to approximate more closely to the Benedictine model. Thus the nuns of Hackness, an offshoot of

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the monastery of Whitby, had a common dormitory ; while the monasteries of Monkwearmouth and Jarrow differed in many respects from the local pattern, and were certainly established upon a principle of common life. In certain features a compromise seems to have been arrived at, as in the survival of the custom, which had probably been introduced by Irish missionaries, of grouping monks and nuns in one monastery under the presidency of an abbess. The most famous instance of this was the abbey of Whitby, but other examples are known in various parts of England remote from each other. For a few of these models may have been found in Gaul, where the Benedictine rule was not introduced until a period later than the coming of Augustine. Another feature was the establishment of bishops' sees in monasteries. In European countries where the traditions of the Roman occupation were more or less continuous, the cathedral within the city was a distinct foundation from the monasteries which, as at Paris or Rouen, rose at a later date outside the walls. But the Celtic missionaries in England broke new ground in a country from which the traces of Roman Christianity had almost disappeared, and their sees were founded in monasteries. This custom was followed in the natural order of things by Augustine at Canterbury. In the re-organisation of dioceses after the Norman conquest it was still continued. In eight of the seventeen

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medieval dioceses of England the cathedral, and in two others one of the two cathedrals, was a monastic church.

§ 6. The Danish invasions brought extinction to the monastic life in the greater part of England. It was not until about a hundred years later that it was revived. Odo, archbishop of Canterbury 942-59, prepared the way for the movement. Its success was achieved under his successor, St Dunstan, with the co-operation of Edgar the peaceful. Ethelwold, bishop of Winchester, and Oswald, archbishop of York, were its most active promoters. Both were disciples of the reformed Benedictine rule which, early in the tenth century, had begun to spread from the abbey of Cluny. The abbey of Fleury or Saint-Benoit-sur-Loire, which, after the sack of Monte Cassino by the Lombards in 660, had become the resting-place of the body of St Benedict, was reformed under Cluniac influence. Oswald studied the Benedictine rule at Fleury. Made bishop of Worcester in 961, he was active in replacing the secular clergy of the churches of his diocese by monks. At Evesham, Pershore, Winchcombe, Worcester and elsewhere, Benedictine monks were introduced. In 971 Oswald aided Aelfwine, an East Anglian nobleman, to found the monastery of Ramsey in Huntingdonshire, and a few years later he and Ethelwold persuaded Abbo of Fleury to visit England

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and help them in extending the religious life. Ethelwold was equally active at Winchester, and, under a charter from king Edgar, restored destroyed monasteries throughout the country, including Ely and Peterborough. Dunstan, the reformer of Glastonbury, gave active sympathy to the movement, but was more cautious in his attitude to the secular clergy; and it is noteworthy that the reform did not at once extend to his cathedral church at Canterbury.

§ 7. This glorious period in the history of English monasticism closed with the disasters of the early part of the eleventh century. Canute and Edward the Confessor favoured and enriched many religious houses, and Edward, by his foundation of the abbey of Westminster, takes a foremost place among benefactors of the religious life in England. But, during this disturbed epoch, few new monasteries were founded, and the tendency to slackness in observance of the rule again appeared. The permanent triumph of monasticism was achieved after the Norman conquest. The Conqueror and his followers sought the salvation of their souls by the foundation of abbeys and priories on their new estates. The victory of Hastings was marked by the foundation of the abbey of Battle, the first of the long series of Norman monasteries in England. In the work of organisation ecclesiastics from the great abbeys of Normandy took, as was natural, the chief part. Two successive archbishops

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of Canterbury, Lanfranc, formerly a monk of Bec and abbot of St Stephen's at Caen, and Anselm, formerly abbot of Bec, were instrumental in giving the Benedictine order in England its pre-eminence under the early Norman kings.

§ 8. The Benedictine monasteries in England were colonised, or, where they were older than the conquest, received new blood from the monasteries of Normandy and France. We have seen that the rule of St Benedict was made for a special monastery: the order was a collection of independent houses which found the rule suitable to their needs. Thus each of the larger English Benedictine monasteries was a separate community, under the jurisdiction of the diocesan bishop, from whose visitations some powerful abbeys, such as St Albans, Evesham and Westminster, eventually obtained exemption. It was also subject to the visitation of two abbots, chosen annually by a general chapter of heads of English houses. The ruler of the monastery was the abbot: under him was his deputy, the prior, on whom a large part of the direct oversight of the house devolved. Where, as at Durham, the church of the monastery was also the cathedral of the diocese, the bishop was nominally abbot, but the actual ruler of the house was the prior; and to such houses the name of cathedral priory was given. The larger houses, however, frequently founded off-shoots on distant portions of

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their property, which were governed by priors appointed by the mother house, and were known as priories or cells. Although some of them became important houses, they were at first part and parcel of the mother house, and many continued to be so throughout the middle ages. Thus St Martin's at Dover was a priory of Christ Church, Canterbury, and Tynemouth in Northumberland was a priory of St Albans.

§ 9. There were also certain priories founded in subordination to foreign houses. Thus Bec had a priory at St Neots in Huntingdonshire; the abbey of Mont-Ste-Cathérine at Rouen had one at Blyth in Nottinghamshire. Both these houses contained several monks: in the thirteenth century there were fourteen at Blyth, all probably foreigners, and many of them sent from the parent house for a change of air. But there were also a large number of monastic possessions known as priories, which were not strictly conventual, but were simply manors in the possession of alien monasteries, on which a prior or *custos*, sent from the mother abbey with another monk as his *socius*, resided for a portion of the year, practically as estate agent. Sometimes he was allowed, as at Ecclesfield in Yorkshire, a priory of Saint-Wandrille, to serve the cure of the parish church; but this was not common. Where these small 'alien priories' are known to have