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Historical Perspectives on Benedictine Schools

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The Background

In 1919 Abbot Cuthbert Butler of Downside published his **Benedictine Monachism, Studies in Benedictine life and Rule** which combined, in a way not unknown to most historians, analysis and polemic. He presented an historical and working plan for the 'ideal', big, community centred-monasteries which were beginning to emerge in the English Congregation after centuries in which small continental priories and isolated, mainly single-handed missions, were the norm for English monks. He was a passionate advocate of communitarian, abbot-ruled monasteries. He also believed in the crucial importance of monastic studies. More surprisingly he regarded the education of the young secular students as well as monastic as a suitable occupation for a community of Benedictine monks. 'At the present day,' he wrote, 'secondary education, whether in boarding-schools or day-schools, has come to be perhaps the commonest and best recognised form of Benedictine external work. In 1914 more than a hundred schools were attached to the Benedictine monasteries, with an aggregate of over 15,000 pupils.'

St Benedict's monastery as described in the **Rule** may have been a school of the Lord's service, a community devoted to what we may now call lifelong or continuing education, but the place of any formal learning or teaching for children - in which terms we can define a 'school' in its most common modern educational sense is marginal to Benedict's enterprise. Indeed, the sections on children in the **Rule** are few and far between and not, to modern ears, particularly edifying: Chapter 37 of the **Rule** Indicated that children should be spared the seasonal rigours of fasting but not as Chapter 30 suggests the rod; ineligible for excommunication the boys were 'to suffer additional fasts or painful stripes, so that they may be cured.'

In the long view the Benedictine tradition has not been to conduct fee-paying boarding schools of the type envisaged by Abbot Butler which have literary reflections in Auberon Waugh's **Foxglove Saga** and Piers Paul Read's **Monk Dawson** as an adjunct to monastic life. Asceticism and the demands of a comfort-driven educational system make strange bedfellows. Benedictine educators have, in general, provided for three main constituencies:- novices, child oblates and, in some cases, choir boys who assisted in the liturgical life of a community. More subtly a great tradition of learning from one generation of master to another in the Medieval monastic world made the monks appear- in a broader educational sense - the great educators of 'the Benedictine Centuries.' The dominance

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of monastic culture had sometimes tended to widen the Benedictines claim to be indeed the schoolmasters of Europe.

Monastic Culture

Benedictine monasticism began as a predominantly lay movement but its emphasis on the centrality of the liturgy is so critical to Benedictine life that reading became a prerequisite of the monastic way of life. In the search for God the chief avenue is the word of God. A monk is a man of the word and the word is the principal tool of education as Dom Jean Leclercq suggested:-

For the monks in general, the foremost aid to good works is a text which makes possible the meditated reading of the word of God. This will affect the domain of monastic exegesis, entirely oriented toward life, and not toward abstract knowledge. One can see the importance of letters, and of the psychological activities which it has brought about through reading and meditation, since the beginning of the Benedictine Tradition. There is no Benedictine life without literature. Not that literature is an end, even a secondary end, of monastic life; but it is a conditioning factor. In order to undertake one of the principal occupations of the monk, it is necessary to know, to learn and, for some, to teach *grammatica*.

Learning to read, and to read well, is an essential part of this process. Benedictine monasticism with its central but incidental cultural element, contributed centrally to 'educating' all of Europe. Indeed, cultural commentators, including Cardinal Newman (not very sympathetic to his contemporary monks) and Christopher Dawson see the Benedictines as lighting up the so called 'Dark Ages' and by their stability in an unstable world saving the European cultural heritage:-

Western monasticism entered into the heritage of the classical culture and saved it from the ruin that overwhelmed the secular civilisation of the Latin West at the end of the sixth century. It is to the monastic libraries and scriptoria that we owe the preservation and translation of almost the entire body of Latin classical literature that we possess today. It is true that, Italian monasticism was itself affected by this collapse, and Cassiodorus left no successors in his own land.

His work was taken up and completed by the children of a new world - the Irish and Anglo-Saxon monks, who prepared that way for that revival of Christian classicism which finally emerged in the Carolingian period.

It was a living continuity. Together, Dom Jean Leclercq suggested , all the monks played a role in the Middle Ages not played by others or at least not to the same extent:

They formed the link between two cultural periods, between the Fathers and the "moderns". They preserved nothing just for the pleasure of preserving, but did so in order to live by the texts and to unify in the interests of their religious life, the cult and the culture. This is the reason why they were induced to keep alive and transmit the treasures of beauty which had been accumulated over the centuries of antiquity. Romanesque monastic art preceded and paved the way for the flowering of the Gothic; so also, monastic culture was the necessary precondition for the scholastic Golden Age and the short period which as since been called the Renaissance.

Yet the Medieval monasteries, despite their huge cultural impact rarely spilt over into the rough-and-tumble of educating those who were not heading for the life of the cloister. Some monasteries,

indeed, like Christ Church, Canterbury, the most populous of English Medieval monastic houses, employed a secular clerk to teach grammar to my externs who sought their services.

Women's monasteries, in the pre-Gregorian reform church, often seem to have had schools, like that of Whitby which trained five future bishops, but were increasingly unable to educate externs as the insistence on enclosure became dominant. 'Women religious deprived of their schools: Patricia Ranft argues, lost an opportunity to mould the next generation'. Ranft, suggests that enclosure also meant their social services to the poor and the pilgrims were curtailed or even eliminated because women religious could no longer maintain hospices within their monasteries. As contact with the outside world was restricted, women's influence in society diminished'.

Not that women religious were ill-educated or lacking in intellectual curiosity. Hrotsvita, was the first dramatist since the classical period and the earliest known German poet (932-1000). The key to her education as for so many monastics, including the remarkable Hildegard of Bingen, was the monastery library. 'A monastery without a library is like a castle without an armoury.' So wrote an unamed monk around C 1170.

External monastic schools in one form or another existed in the Middle Ages - but their scale remains problematic. Cuthbert Butler summarises that phenomenon saying 'I believe it would appear that cases of external schools, or at any rate schools to which external pupils, clerical or lay, were admitted, have at all times existed even though they were the exceptions. It would be as far from the truth to suppose that such schools for 'externs' existed at all, or nearly all, the Benedictine monasteries, as to suppose that they did not exist at any of them'.

Late Medieval Monasticism

The late Medieval church experienced a profound transformation. Among women monastics there was a great mystical revival in which the Benedictines shared. Among men came an increasing clericalism and a wider participation in non-monastic education. As recent research on the University of Oxford has shown monk students were increasing in number in the two centuries before the Dissolution of the monasteries. In 1336 Pope Benedict XII's bull **Summi Magistri** required that each monastery should provide teaching within its walls, preferably by a qualified member of the community, but otherwise by an external teacher, either from another religious order or a secular master; this person was to teach the 'primitive sciences' of grammar, logic and philosophy. In addition, one in twenty of the more able monks should be sent to a university, to study Theology or Canon Law, assuming that candidates could be found. Fifty years later there was a joint English Benedictine Studium at Oxford known as Gloucester Hall. The Benedictine order, with its three colleges and fifty monk-schools at the time of the dissolution of the monasteries, was the most conspicuous of all the religious orders at Oxford in the early sixteenth century. Not only were the Benedictines numerically dominant, but they also produced both the largest number of graduates and a greater number of doctors than any other order between 1500 and 1540.

'Statistics such as these do not tell us much about the quality of learning of the monks, nor do they allow us to gauge their performance against that of the seculars studying at the university, but they should nevertheless alert us to the peril of putting too much faith in the opinions of nineteenth century writers who characterised the monastic colleges of Oxford in this period as having 'very little importance in the history either of learning or of education'. Such negative assessments of the

performance of monk-scholars at the universities have been accepted by most twentieth century commentators and have been further reinforced by doubts as to desirability and utility of a university education for monks. Even Professor Knowles was critical of the practice of sending monks to the universities, and his judgement has been highly influential since the 1950s.

From Reformation to Enlightenment - The English Benedictines

The English Benedictines, exiled from their own country, were the poor relations in the French Church which, without much enthusiasm, they became a part. Exile in France perhaps necessitated some educational work to supply that which was unavailable in England owing to anti-Catholic laws. But the motive - apart from the need to educate the potential young monks in the Classics, the key to monastic learning - was more financial than anything else. Education formed the main source of income. Educating clergy alongside lay-people may have been a distinctive part of what became 'the Douai tradition' and cemented the long-term relationship between English Benedictines and the Catholic landed-classes, which has not quite disappeared, but hard cash was the motive force. Indeed when St Gregory's Douai, with its resplendent new 1770's buildings, felt the pinch the school suddenly filled with French pupils. I doubt whether this was motivated by anything other than filling the empty places. The rationalising of late eighteenth English Benedictine schools was a response to a crisis, not a prophetic statement of a pro-European utopian vision. That was left to the young Napoleon, not, unlike his later fellow dictator Hitler partly educated by Benedictines.

European Monasticism

In the wider world of the French Church, especially in its great period during the Seventeenth centuries, the Benedictines played a significant part in the Catholic Reformation of France following the Wars of Religion. Many of the monasteries formed themselves, in the counter-reformation model, into centrally organised congregations with superior generals rather than abbots and in many ways were indistinguishable from other religious orders. The Maurists were great educators by their works of erudition and of especially historical scholarship and their schools, reflecting contemporary French society with some of them planned as military academies (rather like such present day American monastic schools like Marmion Military Academy at Arizona, Illinois) and many more or less indistinguishable from Jesuit Colleges. Indistinguishable that is except in the most important way: they were not Jesuit colleges. Benedictines have often flourished in an atmosphere where Jesuits are not wanted - an atmosphere particularly prevalent in Enlightenment Europe. The Enlightenment period perhaps most clearly demonstrates some of the problems inherent in monastic education and attitudes to the prevailing educational environment.

The Enlightenment

Monks were not popular in the Enlightenment, dismissed a shadows of a past, Gothic world, 'superstitious enemies of the flesh'. Yet, if we cast aside our post-Victorian (not to say post-modern) view of monasticism, eighteen century Benedictinism was a counter-Reformation phenomenon, and in some areas of Europe, notably in Germany (or rather, in a pre-Bismarckian world) German-speaking countries, and in France a vital one on the area of learning and education.

The complexity of the pre-German unification political geography of central Europe and the effectiveness of the closure of many monasteries make it difficult at times to appreciate the former

vast scale of the monastic presence, particularly in Bavaria and Austria. In the German-speaking states there were 154 abbeys, twenty-five of which were either imperial foundations or prince abbacies. In the second half of the eighteenth century, the German bishops, who wanted to impose their authority on the independent monasteries, fixed the age of profession at 23. The German monasteries were distinguished, unlike their French and English contemporaries, by some great monastic leaders, including Dom Martin Gerbert, prince abbot of Saint-Blasien (1764-93), who combined administrative competence with genuine intellectual and religious reform. They were also characterised by a strongly localised and anti-congregational feel rather than a national spirit. In the course of two years, 1802 and 1803, under the anti-monastic influence of Josephism, 159 monasteries were dissolved in Bavaria and the Upper Palatinate. The outstanding scholarly achievement of these monks is documented, as a recent writer on the dispersion of Bavarian monastic books has pointed out, not only in their published academic works and in their teaching activities in schools, monastic academies, and universities, but also in numerous letters exchanged among themselves and, in the years immediately preceding the secularisation, between them and the bureaucrats.

In particular, the Austrian Enlightenment had a strongly Christian character, and Joseph II himself, the hammer of the monks, was a Christian reformer not a destroyer. Throughout the eighteenth century, when many Benedictine houses were being lavishly refurbished in baroque style, some also reached a new maturity in learning. Benedictines ran the university of Salzburg, an independent Catholic prince archbishopric and a self-conscious centre of higher culture, in its best years, and others established Ritterakademien, to provide a proper education in modern subjects at a Secondary level. In many ways eighteenth-century Austrian Benedictinism experienced an Enlightenment golden age: 'Osterreich' truly was 'Klosterreich'.

This is perhaps no more physically apparent than at Kremsmunster, south-west of Linz. Its extraordinary set of buildings includes a series of late seventeenth century Palladian-collonaded fishponds, which were used as a display area for the heads of the stags hunted by the abbots. Hunting may seem an even more incongruous pastime for a monk than pursuing the Enlightenment. The most striking if not the most beautiful part of the ensemble is the observatory, the Sternwarte, architecturally reminiscent of an Eastern European tower block, some seventy metres high. It is sometimes known as the 'Mathematical Tower'. It was constructed between 1746 and 1759 as a home for the scientific and artistic collections of the monastery. It us an encyclopaedia in stone with an implicit hierarchy of the sciences in the ascending order of its seven floors, with geology at the base and astronomy at the pinnacle via paleontology, mineralogy, physics, zoology, and anthropology. Astronomy's pre-eminence was reinforced by the presence of a statue of a great astronomer ranging from Ptolemy to Kepler on each landing.

Astronomy was perhaps the key area of dialogue between Enlightenment and religion, even if quite different inferences could be drawn from its observations. Astronomy could be seen as 'the model of a successful science' with its observational and theoretical dimensions, a symbol of the triumphs of the scientific method. Newton's solution to the problem of the motion of the planets was seen as an unparalleled scientific achievement by the apostles of Newtonianism, who included not a few monks. Newton's natural philosophy, it could be argued, has cast light in the hitherto unknown intricacies of God's glorious design. John McManners has suggested that by 1778, the year of the deaths of Voltaire and Rousseau, all the stock arguments against Christianity had been formulated

with the exception of the 'science-versus-religion' antithesis, 'a gambit as yet undetected behind the "Wisdom of God manifest in the Works of Creation" theme that had inspired John Ray, Robert Boyle, and Isaac Newton'. Edmund Halley's prediction of the return of the comet (subsequently named after him) in 1759 reinforced the feeling the Newtonian science had achieved prophetic power over celestial events. It was significantly in 1759 that the Kremsmunster observatory was opened, with its first astronomer, Dom Plasidus Fixlmillner, brother of the then abbot. It became known for certain discoveries about the movement of the stars and planets, but was famous (as it is today) for its long unbroken and precise meteorological measurements. Monastic astronomy tended to observe revolutions rather than make them. The baroque monasteries of central Europe thus provided foyers of culture where the sciences were practised and the art celebrated as part of an integral view of life and faith.

French monasticism was most subject to the critics of the Enlightenment and suffered remorselessly from the wit of Voltaire and others, as John McManners has demonstrated. In 1754 Voltaire spent almost a month with Abbot Augustin Calmet (1672-1757) at the abbey of Senones, a Vannist house. The formidably learned Calmet had the urge to be encyclopaedic before Diderot, but fawned on Voltaire. At the age of 83 the monk climbed up a high and unsteady ladder to pull out old books for the phiilosophe. Voltaire responded by describing his host as a 'naive compiler of so many fantasies and imbecilities, whose simplicity has made him invaluable to whoever wishes to laugh at ancient follies'. Dom Calmet was the quintessential French Benedictine of his time. He combined curiosity with credulity, social grace with eccentricity, a quest for new learning with a mind still dominated by the mentality of an enclosed cloister. Yet the reformers of French monasticism, in the romantic afterglow of the Revolution, tried to distance themselves in all but its learned tradition from the Maurists. They were suspected of a lighthearted indifference and even of harbouring too many Freemasons among their number. Indeed, a recent prosophographer of the Maurists, Dom Charvin, tried to identify those who actually belonged to Freemason lodges. This association was seen as going too far in the direction of the spirit of the age.

The Nineteenth Century

The 'Spirit of the Age' seemed to Catholic apologists throughout the nineteenth century as remarkably unhelpful to the Church and to the monastic life. The French Revolution seemed to have sounded the death knell of monasticism. The **Kulturkampf**, the French Third Republic and the triumph of liberalism in the anglopone society seemed to predict a secularist future. Yet, the nineteenth century revival of religion included a great Benedictine revival even if in some ways traditional monasticism was reinvented. When the Hungarian Congregation was reconstituted in 1802, the Government made it a condition that the monks should devote themselves to secondary education. A new utility reigned: education was 'useful', prayer not. The continuous history of many monastic schools in Central Europe reflects this inclination and most date in their modern form from the nineteenth century.

In general, however, nineteenth century monasticism had two dominant new stands. One was 'the back to basics' approach which spawned Solesmes and Beuron as well as the revival of the Trappists, model monasteries as bastions against the modern world. The other was the pioneer, missionary monastery, in the frontier areas of the church in America, North and South, in Australia and elsewhere, which regarded education (including schools) as part of its mission strategy.

In England a third way, the 'Public School' model which the Benedictine schools have gradually adopted - moving away from the Jesuit 'whole' school mentality to a house system, a cadet corps and a concentration on games. The English Benedictine Schools became members of the prestigious Head Masters' Conference and two monks, both Head Masters of Ampleforth, became chairmen of this conference in the second half of the twentieth century, but at the century's end the assimilation of the Benedictine Schools into the Public Schools system has its limitations. The Benedictine School is increasingly on the margins of the Public School system as Independent Schools detach themselves from their imperial past and offer a new and less ascetic ideals often led by consumerism. English Public Schools,essentially Victorian in their character, often look like monasteries but their raison d'etre is purely educational rather than spiritual.

The Twentieth Century

I am sorry to dwell so much on the English Schools but over the last half century they have provided a good example of the inherent problems located in Benedictine education. The 'baby boomers' of the post World War Two period and steady economic progress - as well as a great number of innovations - gave the English schools a buoyant period in the 1950's. Vatican II and the decline of the Catholic population as well as a boom and bust economic model has challenged this security. There has been much rethinking shown in the publication of such books as **Consider your Call**. The questions posed by the past press in all the more clearly.

Problems Raised by History

To look at the present in the perspective of the past is never easy but I would like to conclude by looking at six areas and then proposing some questions to discuss further.

(i) **Motivation**. Are Benedictine schools a matter of acquiring income and finding work for monks and nuns? The motive for Benedictine schools seems often to be less about an apostolate than as a way of keeping communities 'usefully' employed, a less satisfactory arrangement in a period where with the rise of the professional educator the age of the gifted amateur (monk as teacher) may have come an end.

(ii) **Syllabus**. The educational syllabus in many schools replaced the monastic specialities of 'the word', a natural development of the 'classical' syllabus, easily delivered by 'traditional' teaching methods and based very firmly on 'the book'.

(iii) **The Book**. The book in its codex form, one of the most efficient and long lasting of all technological innovations, is closely associated with the rise of Christianity and the monastic practice of lectio. The supplanting of the codex, the manuscript book, by printing was a development in which the monks took a full part and although often considered as the crucial intellectual divide between the medieval and modern world the transition seems not to have been a difficult one for monks. The 'Information Revolution' is now providing its own challenges. The most revolutionary impact of the new technology is perhaps that it allows authors and readers to handle pictures and sounds in exactly the same way as text and to transmit them with a precision which was never previously feasible. The Internet has already provided the biggest library that the world has ever known even if it is a library without librarians and without bookshelves. The implications of Information Technology and the Internet are critical for Benedictine educators.

(iv) **The Monastic Ideal** provides Benedictine schools with both an advantage and a problem, The advantage is that the monastic schools (single sex? wed to Christian values?) can provide a clear alternative, for parents who want it for their children to the secular schools, showing the priority of moral and spiritual values. The monastic ideal is a problem because it can too often be seen as alien to a modern world in permanent flux and where 'choice' is perceived as the most dominant of moral determinants.

(v) **Society**. In a period of change in society monastic schools have adapted giving more emphasis perhaps to collaboration with non-monastics in management and concentrating on chaplaincy work rather than on delivering the curriculum. In Western Society in particular, however, the monastic ideal, even in 'a marked-down' form, has an increasingly hostile public, led by suspicions and ignorance as well as by the Press' reaction to some well-publicised child-abuse cases. It is all too easy for monastic educators to lose heart.

(vi) But we are in a great **Tradition**, handing on the best of the past with a thorough understanding of the new. The spiritual teaching of the 'Rule' has a continuing appeal to lay people and it is perhaps as well that Benedictine Education has its origins in a Bible-based way of life rather than in a historically-trapped Ratio Studiorum. In a new 'dark ages' we may have a central role to play. New educational challenges with new methods but Benedictine educators can still bring out insights 'old and new'.

Bibliographical Note

The quotations are taken from Cuthbert Butler, **Benedictine Monachism**(1919), Christopher Dawson, **The Making of Europe** (1932), Jean Leclercq,**The Love of Learning and the Desire of God** (1978), Patricia Ranft,**Women and the Religious Life** (1996) and Peter Cunich in Henry Wansborough and Anthony Marett-Crosby, ed., **Benedictines in Oxford**(1997), pp. 155-82. The material on the Enlightenment is from my own contribution, 'Superstitious Enemies of the Flesh", to Nigel Aston, ed.,**Religious Change in Europe** (1997), pp. 149-60. I am grateful to Dr Kieran Flanagan of the University of Bristol for his INSET at Downside School when I was Head Master in 1991. He reflected on the specifically Benedictine contribution to Independent Education.

CONCLUSIONS

Schools as understood in this Conference are not an inherent part of the Benedictine tradition.

The schools emerged as a response to Missionary needs, the search for appropriate community work, and the necessity of funding less lucrative monastic activities.

They date, in their present, continuous form chiefly from the Church of the nineteenth and twentieth century following "golden age" in the mature counter-reformation of the Baroque church and a rupture induced by the onslaught of militant secularism.

They fail if too closely, associated with a political or social group or a fashionable way of thinking.

They flourish if they reflect the Gospel values of an authentic Benedictine community.

They thrive if they can express Benedictine aspirations which do not need to be tied to a system of educational policy.

They survive if they can adapt to the perceived needs of the wider Christian Church.

QUESTIONS

The Benedictine reliance on the Code x and its avowal of the centrality of Lectio: what challenges does this present in the face of "the Information Revolution"?

The "crisis of vocations" and the professionalism of education: can a "Benedictine" school survive a diminished community and a professional corps of teachers?

The challenge of material secularism and the nature of the Church with its "option for the poor": does an elitist education make sense as work for monks in the next millennium?

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