

They left with their abbot

Reflections on the cenobitic character of the foundation of Cîteaux

Ever since the beginning of monasticism, there has been a tension - and usually a healthy one - between the eremitical and the cenobitic way of life. Even within the cenobitic tradition, we find a great variety of expressions, some closer to a gathering of hermits around the same spiritual father and others closer to what can be considered an authentically cenobitic tradition. While keeping in mind this great variety of expressions, we can say that there are basically two types of monastic community, and, correspondingly, two types of abbot (although this is never absolutely black and white).

You can say that in the first situation there is a community that has an abbot, and in the second situation there is an abbot who has a community. And there is an enormous difference between the two. In the first situation, people follow the cenobitic tradition of upper Egypt and of Cappadocia; in the second, people follow the semi-anachoretic tradition of Lower Egypt.

We find them throughout the history of monasticism, including in our day. the second form - or tradition - was propagated in the West mostly by Cassian, and seems to have acquired a new popularity in our time.

What I intend to show in this talk is that the early Cîteaux, just as Molesme from which it came, belonged clearly to the first type. Cîteaux was first of all a community that had a series of wonderful abbots. And it was the foundation of a community of monks, along with their abbot, and not the foundation of an abbot who sent some of his monks to make a foundation.

This clearly cenobitic orientation of the early Cîteaux is one of its most important characteristics, and distinguishes it from almost all the other monastic reforms of that time, which were usually a one-man project. One could mention, to give just a few examples:

Romuald at Camaldoli (1012)
John Gualbert of Vallombrosa (1038/39)
Peter Damian at Fonte Avellana (1047)
Stephen of Muret at Grandmont (c. 1076)

Bruno at La Grande Chartreuse (1084)

Perhaps one way to see the specific character of Cîteaux is to compare it to the reform of Cluny, which was a beautiful monastic reform and certainly the most important one in the Western Church before Cîteaux. It will be specially enlightening to compare the *curriculum vitae* of Bernon, the founder and first abbot of Cluny, with that of Robert of Molesme.

When William the Pious, duke of Aquitaine, decided to found a monastery on his land, "for the salvation of his soul", he gave his property to the apostles Peter and Paul, as we know, but concretely he entrusted it to the abbot Bernon. Bernon was a Burgundian from a noble family, who had already founded the abbey of Gigny on his own land. Then after becoming a monk at Saint-Martin of Autun, he imposed the same reform at Gigny and at the cella of Baume-les-Messieurs, which he also reformed. At the time of the foundation of Cluny Bernon was already abbot of Gigny and of Baume-les-Messieurs, and he kept his authority over these two houses. he received later on three other abbeys, apart from various communities which he was asked to reform and over which he also exercised the abbatial authority.

So, before dying, abbot Bernon divided his abbeys, by will, between his nephew Guy to whom he left Gigny and Baume, and his disciple Odo, to whom he gave Cluny. So Bernon, the first abbot of Cluny appointed his successor, Odo, before he died. Then Odo before dying appointed Aimardus, and Aimardus appointed Mayeul. And it must be noted that all of them were great abbots. This whole situation was consonant with a long tradition of Western monasticism, the tradition of family monasteries which was parallel to that of family churches (Eigenkirche).

With Robert of Molesme we have a completely different reality. Robert, true son of his time, had a strong sense of community. he was first of all a community man long before he became an abbot. It is true that he changed community often, but he always belonged to a community. Having entered rather young at Montier-la-Celle, he assumed a few years later (c. 1053) the service of prior in that community. Then he was made abbot of Saint Michel du Tonnerre (c. 1068-1072). After a few years he became a simple monk again before becoming prior (1072) of Saint Ayoul, a priory dependent on Montier-la-Celle. Later on, we find him with a group of hermits at Colan. And with them he founded Molesme in 1075. Let us look at this last experience for a moment.

Every great monastic reform begins with an eremitical movement. A large number of persons choose eremitical life; some of them because they have an authentic eremitical vocation, most of them because they are looking for something that the cenobitic communities of their time do not offer them. At the time of the foundation of Cîteaux there was one of these great eremitical movements responding to what was called by Morin the "crisis of cenobitism" of the 11th century. One of the most important characteristics of the Cistercian reform was that it was able to reclaim within cenobitism that renewed attraction towards solitude.

So it was that the people who had come to Colan were not hermits in the strict sense. They longed for a more solitary and simple lifestyle than what was offered by the cenobitism of their time. They were gathered at Colan and united by the same aspirations and the same ideals. They only needed an abbot in order to become a cenobitic community. And when they gave themselves an abbot in the person of Robert, they became a cenobitic community and Molesme was founded.

Now two things happened. The first thing that happened was that Molesme, because of its new spirit, developed rapidly and tremendously, but it did so within the context of the existing monastic system, and therefore was somewhat reclaimed by the system. Because it was a fervent abbey, it was highly appreciated, and therefore it not only received many candidates, but also had many benefactors and received many donations, and it became a large, prosperous abbey, more or less in the same style as the other abbeys of the Cluniac tradition. This was not what Robert and his first companions had wanted.

But then a second thing happened, and it made the difference. it was that Robert was a first class cenobitic abbot. Which means that he was someone who knew how to communicate an ideal, who was able selflessly to let the whole community, or at least some elements of that community, keep alive the original aspirations and realize them in various ways, with or without him. And more than that, while encouraging new foundations of a new style out of Molesme and even taking part in some of them, he never lost the esteem and love of his community who always wanted him back. Molesme was clearly a community that had an abbot and did not want to lose him. Robert was not an abbot who had a community to bequeath to somebody else of who had communities to divide among various monastic heirs. He belonged to a community.

After various groups had left Molesme for different new ventures, including the foundation of Aulps in 1097, there was still a group of monks who shared a common vision and a common desire - a vision and a

desire that they had in common with their abbot. And the day came when they finally left, and as the text of the *Exordium Parvum* says, "**they left with their abbot**". This expression could perhaps be considered as a casual way of speaking to which not too much importance should be given, if it were not for the fact that it reveals a pattern that we find in all the Primitive Documents of the Order. Let us now look at some of those Primitive Documents.

It is, first of all, significant that the *Exordium Parvum* begins with a "We" and not with a "He". "We Cistercians, the first founders of this church. . ." (*Nos cistercienses, primi huius ecclesiae fundatores*). It is therefore established, from the very first line, that the founding of Cîteaux was the work of a group of monks, and also that it was not just the foundation of a monastery or a place, but the foundation of a community - a church. And they want to show how their way of life and their "coenobium" began.

Of course Robert, as abbot of the monastery of Molesme, had an important role to play in preparing the foundation. Nevertheless he did not go alone to see the Apostolic Legate Hugh, in Lyon. He went with "certain brothers of that coenobium", that is, Molesme. And the Legate accedes with joy "to their request". And, therefore, Hugh writes a letter to "Robert, abbot of Molesme, and to the brothers with him desirous of serving God according to the rule of saint Benedict. " In the body of the letter Hugh gives the name of at least some of these brothers: "you, Abbot Robert, and also Brothers Alberic, Odo, John, Stephen, Letald, and Peter, but all those, too, whom you would decide in keeping with the Rule. . . to add to your company. . . " Everything here is very clear. Hugh receives the request of a group of monks and he listens to the desire of that group of monks, and to those who will join them. At the same time, that group of monks is not a group of rebels, who contest the authority of their abbot, but monks who are making this request in union with their abbot.

N° 6 of Chap. III of the *Exordium Parvum* that stresses how these monks, while still at Molesme, gathered often together to deplore the way the rule was observed, may very well be a later interpolation. It is however consonant with the rest of the EP in underlying the collective project that the foundation of Cîteaux was.

Then, chap. IV describes how the early community of Cîteaux grew and became an abbey, when, right from the beginning, abbot Robert received from the local bishop the shepherd's staff by which the monks were confided to his pastoral care. This corresponds to the language of the Rule of Benedict, where the possessive adjective is attached to the monks but not to the abbot in any description of their relationship. The monks must love, respect, obey **their** abbot. The abbot must love

and serve not "his" monks but the monks that are given to his care. In other words, in the RB the monks *have* an abbot. The abbot does not "have" monks and does not "have" a community. What he has is the pastoral care of a group of monks who, with him, form a community. (You would never have received Christmas or Easter greetings from "abbot Benedict and the community of Monte Cassino" or from "abbot Robert and the community of Cîteaux. . . .")

Then Robert is called back to Molesme as he had been before. Here something else must be noted. It would be rather unthinkable, in our days, that an abbot who left with a split-group to make a new experimental foundation, would be called back by his community. Most probably, the community would be so hurt by the whole thing, that they would not even want to see him, at least not for a long time. The fact that every time Robert leaves the community of Molesme for a new venture he is called back by the monks of that community shows the quality of relationship between Robert and the community of Molesme. He is their abbot; they feel they have a right to him.

And the other aspect not to be neglected, is that when Robert returns to Molesme, the young community from which he departs does not fall apart. It continues to grow. Because it was a cenobitic foundation and not a one-man project.

Robert does not even think he has the authority or the right to appoint a new Superior at Cîteaux. Once Robert has left, the community of Cîteaux gathers in Chapter and in the regular way elects its own abbot, choosing one of its brothers, Alberic, who had been prior at Molesme and was at the heart of the movement that had led to the foundation of Cîteaux.

One of the first acts of Alberic, still according to the EP, was to decide, "with the counsel of the brothers", to send two monks to Rome, to ask for the Roman protection on their community. The Cistercian preoccupation is not a question of the rights and privileges of an abbot in relationship to another abbot or to a bishop; it is a question of the rights of a community, along with its abbot.

They go to Rome with a Letter from Hugh, Archbishop of Lyon, where we find the beautiful phrase that I have chosen as the title of my talk. Hugh recommends to the Pope these monks who left Molesme "with their abbot", in order to be faithful to "their decision" to live the Rule strictly.

After the reception of the Roman privilege, EP XV introduces the list of decisions made by the brothers, with these words: "Thereupon that abbot and his brethren, not unmindful of their engagement, unanimously

enacted a statute to establish and keep the Rule of the Blessed Benedict in that place. . . " (*Dehinc abba ille et fratres eius, non immemores sponsioni suae, regulam beati Benedicti in loco illo ordinare et unanimiter statuerunt tenere. . .*) Here we should note not only the "unanimity" in the observance of the Rule but also the expression "the abbot and his brothers". . . If the abbot, in the way of speaking of Benedict, does not "have" a community or monks, he does have "brothers", like everybody else.

After the death of Alberic and the election of Stephen, there is a remark in the EP that is still more striking than anything else we have heard so far. The text says that "it was in his (Stephen's) time that the brethren, together with that same abbot, forbade the duke of that region or any other Lord to hold court in that church at any time".

What is the meaning of that expression "with their abbot"? Is it simply that the role of the abbot is reduced to giving his permission or to exercising a veto right? . . . No, I think that the whole cenobitic context shows clearly that the real meaning is that it is only when they are in communion with the abbot whom they have chosen as the representative of Christ in their midst that the brothers become a real community, and it is only then that they can make a community decision.

In the **Exordium Cistercii** we find the same insistence that we found in the EP on the collective preparation and realization of the foundation of Cîteaux. N° 3 of Chap. I describes how these monks dialogued among themselves while at Molesme, and how, with a common accord, after a common decision, together with their abbot Robert, they tried to realize what they had decided.

There is, however, an evolution in the language, that demonstrates the importance gradually assumed by the person of the abbot. Ch. 9 n° 4 says that an abbot should not be sent to a new foundation without at least twelve monks. It is no longer a question of a group of monks leaving with their abbot, but of an abbot leaving with a group of monks. A new mentality is already manifesting itself here.

The first sentence of the **Carta Caritatis** certainly uses the same way of speaking as the EP. It begins like this: "Before the Cistercian abbeys. . . father abbot Stephen and his brothers established that. . . "

It is only with the second redaction of the CC that we find, at the end, for the first time, the mention of "the monks of an abbot", as if an abbot could "have" monks. It is in Chap. II, N° 27, where it is

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said that no abbot will keep monks of another abbot of our Order without this abbot's agreement. This is no longer the language of the Rule.

One thing that is also somewhat surprising in the CC is the number of paragraphs dedicated to the order of priority of the abbots of the various Cistercian monasteries, when they happen to be together. Who goes before whom and who gives his abbatial seat to whom. There is certainly already a certain expansion of the abbatial role - not to say the abbatial "ego".

But there is something much more important than that in the CC. It is the fact that the communion between the monasteries is conceived in a very cenobitic way. In this the Cistercians were great initiators.

Saint Benedict wrote a Rule for monasteries; and although he founded various monasteries himself, he did not foresee anything concerning the relationship between monasteries. The autonomy of a monastic community is something very precious and monks have always been jealous to preserve it. It can also be a weakness, however, in time of crisis - whether internal or external. For that reason, the need of certain institutional bonds between monasteries was felt very early. In Western monasticism, the first attempt at creating such institutional bonds was made at the time of the Carolingian reform with Benedict of Aniane. The reform of Cluny, which basically continued in the same direction, arrived at an impasse. The Carolingian reform had stressed again the role of the abbot, but at the same time had weakened the authority of the local abbot in its efforts at a centralized control of the reform throughout the whole kingdom. With Cluny the freedom from the external intervention of the feudal lords was acquired, but at the cost of the local autonomy. The role of the abbot of Cluny was enlarged to such a point that all the monks of all the dependent houses were "his" monks and made their profession for "his" abbey of Cluny.

One of the original features of the Cistercian reform was, for the first time in the history of Western monasticism, to find a balance between the autonomy of each monastery and their communion in one juridical body through the bonds of charity. The monasteries are united through charity, but also through the sharing of the same vision of monastic life and the same observance. The system of filiation and the institution of the Visitation are seen as services of the communion. A right and a duty of vigilance is assigned to the Father Immediate, but no authority in the internal affairs of his daughter-houses. There is an authority above all the communities, but it is not personal; it is collective. It is the authority of the General Chapter.

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We have then, a monastic Order - the first monastic Order in the strict sense in Western monasticism. That Order is conceived as a community of communities. Cîteaux was able to develop this because of its very strong cenobitic orientation.

It would be interesting to study how this cenobitic spirit of the early Cîteaux was either maintained or modified by the following generation, especially in some filiations like that of Clairvaux, when powerful and brilliant abbots like Bernard came into the picture. Was Clairvaux a community that had an abbot or was Bernard an abbot who had a community? - This, however, would deserve a whole separate study.

In any case the early Cîteaux did not consist of a group of hermits living under the same spiritual father, but a community of brothers living in solitude under a Rule and an abbot. And I would like to suggest that this was perhaps the most important aspect of their return to the Rule.

Kalamazoo, May 11, 1998

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