

6

ST BENEDICT AND GREGORY THE GREAT

In the general decay of civilization that came about during the incessant wars of the sixth and succeeding centuries, it was above all the Church that preserved whatever survived of the culture of ancient Rome. The Church performed this work very imperfectly, because fanaticism and superstition prevailed among even the greatest ecclesiastics of the time, and secular learning was thought wicked. Nevertheless, ecclesiastical institutions created a solid framework, within which, in later times, a revival of learning and civilized arts became possible.

In the period with which we are concerned, three of the activities of the Church call for special notice: first, the monastic movement; second, the influence of the papacy, especially under Gregory the Great; third, the conversion of the heathen barbarians by means of missions. I will say something about each of these in succession.

The monastic movement began simultaneously in Egypt and Syria about the beginning of the fourth century. It had two forms, that of solitary hermits, and that of monasteries. St Anthony, the first of the hermits, was born in Egypt about 250, and withdrew from the world about 270. For fifteen years he lived alone in a hut near his home; then, for twenty years, in remote solitude in the desert. But his fame spread, and multitudes longed to hear him preach. Accordingly, about 305, he came forth to teach, and to encourage the hermit's life. He practised extreme austerities, reducing food, drink, and sleep to the minimum required to support life. The devil constantly assailed him with lustful visions, but he manfully withstood the malign diligence of

Satan. By the end of his life, the Thebaid¹ was full of hermits who had been inspired by his example and his precepts.

A few years later—about 315 or 320—another Egyptian, Pachomius, founded the first monastery. Here the monks had a common life, without private poverty, with communal meals and communal religious observances. It was in this form, rather than in that of St Anthony, that monasticism conquered the Christian world. In the monasteries derived from Pachomius, the monks did much work, chiefly agricultural, instead of spending the whole of their time in resisting the temptations of the flesh.

At about the same time, monasticism sprang up in Syria and Mesopotamia. Here asceticism was carried to even greater lengths than in Egypt. St Simeon Stylites and the other pillar hermits were Syrian. It was from the East that monasticism came to Greek-speaking countries, chiefly owing to St Basil (about 360). His monasteries were less ascetic; they had orphanages, and schools for boys (not only for such as intended to become monks).

At first, monasticism was a spontaneous movement, quite outside Church organization. It was St Athanasius who reconciled ecclesiastics to it. Partly as a result of his influence, it came to be the rule that monks should be priests. It was he also, while he was in Rome in 339, who introduced the movement into the West. St Jerome did much to promote it, and St Augustine introduced it into Africa. St Martin of Tours inaugurated monasteries in Gaul, St Patrick in Ireland. The monastery of Iona was founded by St Columba in 566. In early days, before monks had been fitted into the ecclesiastical organization, they had been a source of disorder. To begin with, there was no way of discriminating between genuine ascetics and men who, being destitute, found monastic establishments comparatively luxurious. Then again there was the difficulty that the monks gave a turbulent support to their favourite bishop, causing synods (and almost causing Councils) to fall into heresy. The synod (not the Council) of Ephesus, which decided for the Monophysites, was under a monkish reign of terror. But for the resistance of the Pope, the victory of the Monophysites might have been permanent. In later times, such disorders no longer occurred.

There seem to have been nuns before there were monks—as early as the middle of the third century.

Cleanliness was viewed with abhorrence. Lice were called ‘pearls of God’, and were a mark of saintliness. Saints, male and female, would boast that water had never touched their feet except when they had to cross rivers. In later centuries, monks served many useful purposes; they were skilled agriculturists, and some of them kept alive or revived learning. But in the beginning, especially in the eremitic section, there was none of this. Most

¹ The desert near Egyptian Thebes.

monks did no work, never read anything except what religion prescribed, and conceived virtue in an entirely negative manner, as abstention from sin, especially the sins of the flesh. St Jerome, it is true, took his library with him into the desert, but he came to think that this had been a sin.

In Western monasticism, the most important name is that of St Benedict, the founder of the Benedictine Order. He was born about 480, near Spoleto, of a noble Umbrian family; at the age of twenty, he fled from the luxuries and pleasures of Rome to the solitude of a cave, where he lived for three years. After this period, his life was less solitary, and about the year 520 he founded the famous monastery of Monte Cassino, for which he drew up the 'Benedictine rule'. This was adapted to Western climates, and demanded less austerity than had been common among Egyptian and Syrian monks. There had been an unedifying competition in ascetic extravagance, the most extreme practitioner being considered the most holy. To this St Benedict put an end, decreeing that austerities going beyond the rule could only be practised by permission of the abbot. The abbot was given great power; he was elected for life, and had (within the Rule and the limits of orthodoxy) an almost despotic control over his monks, who were no longer allowed, as previously, to leave their monastery for another if they felt so inclined. In later times, Benedictines have been remarkable for learning, but at first all their reading was devotional.

Organizations have a life of their own, independent of the intentions of their founders. Of this fact, the most striking example is the Catholic Church, which would astonish Jesus, and even Paul. The Benedictine Order is a lesser example. The monks take a vow of poverty, obedience, and chastity. As to this, Gibbon remarks: 'I have somewhere heard or read the frank confession of a Benedictine abbot: "My vow of poverty has given me an hundred thousand crowns a year; my vow of obedience has raised me to the rank of a sovereign prince." I forget the consequences of his vow of chastity.'² The departures of the Order from the founder's intentions were, however, by no means all regrettable. This is true, in particular, of learning. The library of Monte Cassino was famous, and in various ways the world is much indebted to the scholarly tastes of later Benedictines.

St Benedict lived at Monte Cassino from its foundation until his death in 543. The monastery was sacked by the Lombards, shortly before Gregory the Great, himself a Benedictine, became Pope. The monks fled to Rome; but when the fury of the Lombards had abated, they returned to Monte Cassino.

From the dialogues of Pope Gregory the Great, written in 593, we learn much about St Benedict. He was 'brought up at Rome in the study of humanity. But forasmuch as he saw many by the reason of such learning to fall to

² *Op. cit.*, xxxvii, note 57.

dissolute and lewd life, he drew back his foot, which he had as it were now set forth into the world, lest, entering too far in acquaintance therewith, he likewise might have fallen into that dangerous and godless gulf: wherefore, giving over his book, and forsaking his father's house and wealth, with a resolute mind only to serve God, he sought for some place, where he might attain to the desire of his holy purpose: and in this sort he departed, instructed with learned ignorance, and furnished with unlearned wisdom.'

He immediately acquired the power to work miracles. The first of these was the mending of a broken sieve by means of prayer. The townsmen hung the sieve over the church door, and it 'continued there many years after, even to these very troubles of the Lombards'. Abandoning the sieve, he went to his cave, unknown to all but one friend, who secretly supplied him with food let down by a rope, to which a bell was tied to let the saint know when his dinner had come. But Satan threw a stone at the rope, breaking both it and the bell. Nevertheless, the enemy of mankind was foiled in his hope of disrupting the Saint's food-supply.

When Benedict had been as long in the cave as God's purposes required, our Lord appeared on Easter Sunday to a certain priest, revealed the hermit's whereabouts, and bade him share his Easter feast with the Saint. About the same time certain shepherds found him. 'At the first, when they espied him through the bushes, and saw his apparel made of skins, they verily thought that it had been some beast: but after they were acquainted with the servant of God, many of them were by his means converted from their beastly life to grace, piety, and devotion.'

Like other hermits, Benedict suffered from the temptations of the flesh. 'A certain woman there was which some time he had seen, the memory of which the wicked spirit put into his mind, and by the memory of her did so mightily inflame with concupiscence the soul of God's servant, which did so increase that, almost overcome with pleasure, he was of mind to have forsaken the wilderness. But suddenly, assisted with God's grace, he came to himself; and seeing many thick briars and nettle bushes to grow hard by, off he cast his apparel, and threw himself into the midst of them, and there wallowed so long that, when he rose up, all his flesh was pitifully torn: and so by the wounds of his body, he cured the wounds of his soul.'

His fame being spread abroad, the monks of a certain monastery, whose abbot had lately died, besought him to accept the succession. He did so, and insisted upon observance of strict virtue, so that the monks, in a rage, decided to poison him with a glass of poisoned wine. He, however, made the sign of the cross over the glass, whereupon it broke in pieces. So he returned to the wilderness.

The miracle of the sieve was not the only practically useful one performed by St Benedict. One day, a virtuous Goth was using a bill-hook to clear away

briers, when the head of it flew off the handle and fell into deep water. The Saint, being informed, held the handle in the water, whereupon the iron head rose up and joined itself again to the handle.

A neighbouring priest, envious of the holy man's reputation, sent him a poisoned loaf. But Benedict miraculously knew it was poisoned. He had the habit of giving bread to a certain crow, and when the crow came on the day in question, the Saint said to it: 'In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, take up that loaf and leave it in some place where no man may find it.' The crow obeyed, and on its return was given its usual dinner. The wicked priest, seeing he could not kill Benedict's body, decided to kill his soul, and sent seven naked young women into the monastery. The saint feared lest some of the younger monks might be moved to sin, and therefore departed himself, that the priest might no longer have a motive for such acts. But the priest was killed by the ceiling of his room falling on him. A monk pursued Benedict with the news, rejoicing, and bidding him return. Benedict mourned over the death of the sinner, and imposed a penance on the monk for rejoicing.

Gregory does not only relate miracles, but deigns, now and then, to tell facts in the career of St Benedict. After founding twelve monasteries, he finally came to Monte Cassino, where there was a 'chapel' to Apollo, still used by the country people for heathen worship. 'Even to that very time, the mad multitude of infidels did offer most wicked sacrifice.' Benedict destroyed the altar, substituted a church, and converted the neighbouring pagans. Satan was annoyed:

'The old enemy of mankind, not taking this in good part, did not now privily or in a dream, but in open sight present himself to the eyes of that holy father, and with great outcries complained that he had offered him violence. The noise which he made, the monks did hear, but himself they could not see; but, as the venerable father told them, he appeared visibly unto him most fell and cruel, and as though, with his fiery mouth and flaming eyes, he would have torn him in pieces: what the devil said unto him, all the monks did hear; for first he would call him by his name, and because the man of God vouchsafed him not any answer, then would he fall a reviling and railing at him: for when he cried out, calling him "Blessed Bennet", and yet found that he gave him no answer, straightways he would turn his tune and say: "Cursed Bennet, and not blessed: what hast thou to do with me? and why dost thou thus persecute me?"' Here the story ends; one gathers that Satan gave up in despair.

I have quoted at some length from these dialogues, because they have a threefold importance. First, they are the principal source for our knowledge of the life of St Benedict, whose Rule became the model for all Western monasteries except those of Ireland or founded by Irishmen. Secondly, they give a vivid picture of the mental atmosphere among the most civilized

people living at the end of the sixth century. Thirdly, they are written by Pope Gregory the Great, fourth and last of the Doctors of the Western Church, and politically one of the most eminent of the popes. To him we must now turn our attention.

The Venerable W. H. Hutton, Archdeacon of Northampton,³ claims that Gregory was the greatest man of the sixth century; the only rival claimants, he says, would be Justinian and St Benedict. All three, certainly, had a profound effect on future ages; Justinian by his Laws (not by his conquests, which were ephemeral); Benedict by his monastic order; and Gregory by the increase of papal power which he brought about. In the dialogues that I have been quoting he appears childish and credulous, but as a statesman he is astute, masterful, and very well aware of what can be achieved in the complex and changing world in which he has to operate. The contrast is surprising; but the most effective men of action are often intellectually second-rate.

Gregory the Great, the first Pope of that name, was born in Rome, about 540, of a rich and noble family. It seems his grandfather had been Pope after he became a widower. He himself, as a young man, had a palace and immense wealth. He had what was considered a good education, though it did not include a knowledge of Greek, which he never acquired, although he lived for six years in Constantinople. In 573 he was prefect of the City of Rome. But religion claimed him: he resigned his office, gave his wealth to the founding of monasteries and to charity, and turned his own palace into a house for monks, himself becoming a Benedictine. He devoted himself to meditation, and to austerities which permanently injured his health. But Pope Pelagius II had become aware of his political abilities, and sent him as his envoy to Constantinople, to which, since Justinian's time, Rome was nominally subject. Gregory lived in Constantinople from 579 to 585, representing papal interests at the Emperor's court, and papal theology in discussions with Eastern ecclesiastics, who were always more prone to heresy than those of the West. The patriarch of Constantinople, at this time, held the erroneous opinion that our resurrection bodies will be impalpable, but Gregory saved the Emperor from falling into this departure from the true faith. He was unable, however, to persuade the Emperor to undertake a campaign against the Lombards, which was the principal object of his mission.

The five years 585–90 Gregory spent as head of his monastery. Then the Pope died, and Gregory succeeded him. The times were difficult, but by their very confusion offered great opportunities to an able statesman. The Lombards were ravaging Italy; Spain and Africa were in a state of anarchy due to the weakness of the Byzantines and the decadence of Visigoths and the depredations of Moors. In France there were wars between North and South.

³ *Cambridge Medieval History*, II, chap. viii.

Britain, which had been Christian under the Romans, had reverted to paganism since the Saxon invasion. There were still remnants of Arianism, and the heresy of the Three Chapters was by no means extinct. The turbulent time infected even bishops, many of whom led far from exemplary lives. Simony was rife, and remained a crying evil until the latter half of the eleventh century.

All these sources of trouble Gregory combated with energy and sagacity. Before his pontificate, the bishop of Rome, though acknowledged to be the greatest man in the hierarchy, was not regarded as having any jurisdiction outside his own diocese. St Ambrose, for example, who was on the best of terms with the Pope of his day, obviously never regarded himself as in any degree subject to his authority. Gregory, owing partly to his personal qualities and partly to the prevailing anarchy, was able to assert successfully an authority which was admitted by ecclesiastics throughout the West, and even, to a lesser degree, in the East. He exerted this authority chiefly by means of letters to bishops and secular rulers in all parts of the Roman world, but also in other ways. His *Book of Pastoral Rule*, containing advice to bishops, had a great influence throughout the earlier Middle Ages. It was intended as a guide to the duties of bishops, and was accepted as such. He wrote it in the first instance for the bishop of Ravenna, and sent it also to the bishop of Seville. Under Charlemagne, it was given to bishops at consecration. Alfred the Great translated it into Anglo-Saxon. In the East it was circulated in Greek. It gives sound, if not surprising, advice to bishops, such as not to neglect business. It tells them also that rulers should not be criticized, but should be kept alive to the danger of hell-fire if they fail to follow the advice of the Church.

Gregory's letters are extraordinarily interesting, not only as showing his character, but as giving a picture of his age. His tone, except to the Emperor and the ladies of the Byzantine court, is that of a head master—sometimes commending, often reproving, never showing the faintest hesitation as to his right to give orders.

Let us take as a sample his letters during one year (599). The first is a letter to the bishop of Cagliari in Sardinia, who, though old, was bad. It says, in part: 'It has been told me that on the Lord's day, before celebrating the solemnities of mass, thou wentest forth to plough up the crop of the bearer of these presents. . . . Also, after the solemnities of mass thou didst not fear to root up the landmarks of that possession. . . . Seeing that we still spare thy grey hairs, bethink thee at length, old man, and restrain thyself from such levity of behaviour, and perversity of deeds.' He writes at the same time to the secular authorities of Sardinia on the same subject. The bishop in question next has to be reproved because he makes a charge for conducting funerals; and then again because, with his sanction, a converted Jew placed the Cross and an image of the Virgin in a synagogue. Moreover, he and other Sardinian

bishops have been known to travel without permission of their metropolitan; this must cease. Then follows a very severe letter to the proconsul of Dalmatia, saying, among other things: 'We see not of what sort your satisfaction is either to God or men'; and again: 'With regard to your seeking to be in favour with us, it is fitting that with your whole heart and soul, and with tears, as becomes you, you should satisfy your Redeemer for such things as these.' I am ignorant as to what the wretch had done.

Next comes a letter to Callincus, exarch of Italy, congratulating him on a victory over the Slavs, and telling him how to act towards the heretics of Istria, who erred as to the Three Chapters. He writes also on this subject to the bishop of Ravenna. Once, by way of exception, we find a letter to the bishop of Syracuse, in which Gregory defends himself instead of finding fault with others. The question at issue is a weighty one, namely whether 'Alleluia' should be said at a certain point in the mass. Gregory's usage, he says, is not adopted from subservience to the Byzantines, as the bishop of Syracuse suggests, but is derived from St James via the blessed Jerome. Those who thought he was being unduly subservient to Greek usage were therefore in error. (A similar question was one of the causes of the schism of the Old Believers in Russia.)

There are a number of letters to barbarian sovereigns, male and female. Brunichild, queen of the Franks, wanted the pallium conferred on a certain French bishop, and Gregory was willing to grant her request; but unfortunately the emissary she sent was a schismatic. To Agilulph king of the Lombards he writes congratulating him on having made peace. 'For, if unhappily peace had not been made, what else could have ensued but, with sin and danger on both sides, the shedding of the blood of miserable peasants whose labour profits both?' At the same time he writes to Agilulph's wife, Queen Theodelinda, telling her to influence her husband to persist in good courses. He writes again to Brunichild to find fault with two things in her kingdom: that laymen are promoted at once to be bishops, without a probationary time as ordinary priests; and that Jews are allowed to have Christian slaves. To Theodoric and Theodebert, kings of the Franks, he writes saying that, owing to the exemplary piety of the Franks, he would like to utter only pleasant things, but he cannot refrain from pointing out the prevalence of simony in their kingdom. He writes again about a wrong done to the Bishop of Turin. One letter to a barbarian sovereign is wholly complimentary; it is to Richard, king of the Visigoths, who had been an Arian, but became a Catholic in 587. For this the Pope rewards him by sending him 'a small key from the most sacred body of the blessed apostle Peter to convey his blessing, containing iron from his chains, that what had bound his neck for martyrdom may loose yours from all sins.' I hope His Majesty was pleased with this present.

The Bishop of Antioch is instructed as to the heretical synod of Ephesus, and informed that 'it has come to our ears that in the Churches of the East no one attains to a sacred order except by giving bribes'—a matter which the bishop is to rectify wherever it is in his power to do so. The Bishop of Marseilles is reproached for breaking certain images which were being adored: it is true that adoration of images is wrong, but images, nevertheless, are useful and should be treated with respect. Two bishops of Gaul are reproached because a lady who had become a nun was afterwards forced to marry. 'If this be so, . . . you shall have the office of hirelings, and not the merit of shepherds.'

The above are a few of the letters of a single year. It is no wonder that he found no time for contemplation, as he laments in one of the letters of this year (cxxi).

Gregory was no friend to secular learning. To Desiderius, Bishop of Vienne in France, he writes:

'It came to our ears, what we cannot mention without shame, that thy Fraternity is [i.e. thou art] in the habit of expounding grammar to certain persons. This thing we took so much amiss, and so strongly disapproved it, that we changed what had been said before into groaning and sadness, since the praises of Christ cannot find room in one mouth with the praises of Jupiter. . . . In proportion as it is execrable for such a thing to be related of a priest, it ought to be ascertained by strict and veracious evidence whether or not it be so.'

This hostility to pagan learning survived in the Church for at least four centuries, till the time of Gerbert (Sylvester II). It was only from the eleventh century onward that the Church became friendly to learning.

Gregory's attitude to the emperor is much more deferential than his attitude to barbarian kings. Writing to a correspondent in Constantinople he says: 'What pleases the most pious emperor, whatever he commands to be done, is in his power. As he determines, so let him provide. Only let him not cause us to be mixed up in the deposition [of an orthodox bishop]. Still, what he does, if it is canonical, we will follow. But, if it is not canonical, we will bear it, so far as we can without sin of our own.' When the Emperor Maurice was dethroned by a mutiny, of which the leader was an obscure centurion named Phocas, this upstart acquired the throne, and proceeded to massacre the five sons of Maurice in their father's presence, after which he put to death the aged Emperor himself. Phocas was of course crowned by the patriarch of Constantinople, who had no alternative but death. What is more surprising is that Gregory, from the comparatively safe distance of Rome, wrote letters of fulsome adulation to the usurper and his wife. 'There is this difference,' he writes, 'between the kings of the nations and the emperors of the republic, that the kings of the nations are lords of slaves, but the emperors of the

republic lords of freemen. . . . May Almighty God in every thought and deed keep the heart of your Piety [i.e. you] in the hand of His grace; and whatsoever things should be done justly, whatsoever things with clemency, may the Holy Spirit who dwells in your breast direct.' And to the wife of Phocas, the Empress Leontia, he writes: 'What tongue may suffice to speak, what mind to think, what great thanks we owe to Almighty God for the serenity of your empire, in that such hard burdens of long duration have been removed from our necks, and the gentle yoke of imperial supremacy has returned.' One might suppose Maurice to have been a monster; in fact, he was a good old man. Apologists excuse Gregory on the plea that he did not know what atrocities had been committed by Phocas; but he certainly knew the customary behaviour of Byzantine usurpers, and he did not wait to ascertain whether Phocas was an exception.

The conversion of the heathen was an important part of the increasing influence of the Church. The Goths had been converted before the end of the fourth century by Ulphilas, or Ulfila—unfortunately to Arianism, which was also the creed of the Vandals. After the death of Theodoric, however, the Goths became gradually Catholic: the king of the Visigoths, as we have seen, adopted the orthodox faith in the time of Gregory. The Franks were Catholic from the time of Clovis. The Irish were converted before the fall of the Western Empire by St Patrick, a Somersetshire country gentleman⁴ who lived among them from 432 till his death in 461. The Irish in turn did much to evangelize Scotland and the North of England. In this work the greatest missionary was St Columba; another was St Columban, who wrote long letters to Gregory on the date of Easter and other important questions. The conversion of England, apart from Northumbria, was Gregory's special care. Every one knows how, before he was Pope, he saw two fair-haired blue-eyed boys in the slave market in Rome, and on being told they were Angles replied, 'No, angels.' When he became Pope he sent St Augustine to Kent to convert the Angles. There are many letters in his correspondence to St Augustine, to Edilbert, king of the Angeli, and to others, about the mission. Gregory decrees that heathen temples in England are not to be destroyed, but the idols are to be destroyed and the temples then consecrated as churches. St Augustine puts a number of queries to the Pope, such as whether cousins may marry, whether spouses who have had intercourse the previous night may come to church (yes, if they have washed, says Gregory), and so on. The mission, as we know, prospered, and that is why we are all Christians at this day.

The period we have been considering is peculiar in the fact that, though its great men are inferior to those of many other epochs, their influence on

⁴ So at least Bury says in his *Life of the Saint*.

future ages has been greater. Roman law, monasticism, and the papacy owe their long and profound influence very largely to Justinian, Benedict, and Gregory. The men of the sixth century, though less civilized than their predecessors, were much more civilized than the men of the next four centuries, and they succeeded in framing institutions that ultimately tamed the barbarians. It is noteworthy that, of the above three men, two were aristocratic natives of Rome, and the third was Roman Emperor. Gregory is in a very real sense the last of the Romans. His tone of command, while justified by his office, has its instinctive basis in Roman aristocratic pride. After him, for many ages, the city of Rome ceased to produce great men. But in its downfall it succeeded in fettering the souls of its conquerors: the reverence which they felt for the Chair of Peter was an outcome of the awe which they felt for the throne of the Caesars.

In the East, the course of history was different. Mohammed was born when Gregory was about thirty years old.