



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



The Path to Rome: or There and Back Again

by Father Ambrose Bennett

[Father Ambrose writes here of his experience at Sant' Anselmo, the Benedictine House of Studies in Rome. As can be seen from what he writes, it is possible and laudable to learn about a great deal more than theology and monasticism. Ed.]

I have borrowed the title of my account from both Hilaire Belloc and J.R.R. Tolkien, not with any presumptuous intent to claim their literary reputation but because they have captured most clearly my own feelings after having spent three years in Rome studying theology for a bachelor's degree, in preparation for ordination. And my sojourn is not over yet: I am still in Rome, now working on a licentiate in Monastic Studies. So the story is still in progress.

It was in the spring of 2001 when Fr. Abbot informed me that he would be sending me to the Collegio Sant' Anselmo in Rome to do my theology. Needless to say, I was delighted at the opportunity since I had never been to Europe and had never imagined the possibility of being able to spend several years there. I was sure that learning Italian would be no big problem since I already spoke Spanish and understood French and Latin, and had even done a correspondence course in rudimentary Italian some years ago. I was a little uneasy about my difficulty with directions and unfamiliar places, but the thought of seeing the Eternal City far outweighed any such worries.

That spring of 2001 was an unsettled time for our community since we were still in the midst of "trailer time"--our 18 months of trailer-park monasticism as our new monastery was being built. The old monastery was no more, and the new was not ready yet. It was on the Feast of the Transfiguration that we finally moved into our new quarters; the words of the Gospel for that day were never so apt: "Lord, it is good for us to be here! (Lk 9:33)" It was indeed good to be free of the impermanence that we all felt during trailer time. Yes, I know: "We have here no lasting city" (Heb. 13:14)--but monks vow stability and are not normally mobile. Having a proper monastery once more was a tremendous relief for all of us.

However, the situation was different for me: no sooner was I settled in my new cell than I left for Italy, flying out on August 31 and arriving September 1 at Fiumicino Airport in Rome.

I was met at the airport by a monk of St. Leo's Abbey in Florida, who drove me into the city and to Sant' Anselmo. I was exhausted and still reeling from the long trans-Atlantic flight and already feeling some culture shock at the idea of being in Italy. Somehow Italy for me was a place one read about in books or saw in movies, not a real place I might see in person. The very next day, I went by car with to a little town in the north of about 5,000 inhabitants, called Urbania, in the region of the Marche, not far from Urbino. Urbania has an Italian language school that was recommended by the prior of Sant' Anselmo to all new students. I spent the entire month of September there, practicing Italian and getting to know the Austrian monks and many other lay and clerical students, as well as a Croatian layman and a Slovak priest who shared an apartment with me. I learned to appreciate cappuccino and gelato, not to mention Italian bakeries. The town



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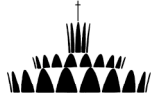


itself is very small and picturesque, like something out of the film "Life is Beautiful." I think the prior recommended Urbania precisely because it is small and out of the way, and therefore not distracting to monastic and clerical students. In addition, the language school arranged weekend trips to Urbino, Assisi, Gubbio, Florence, and Ravenna; and I went one weekend with the Austrian monks to the Marian shrine at Loretto. All of these places were breath-takingly beautiful; Loretto in particular appealed to me because it remains primarily a place of pilgrimage rather than tourism. The devotion to the Mother of God has never struck me more strongly than at Loretto. And yet, despite Urbania's pleasant surroundings, by the time September had come to an end, I was glad to return to Rome.

By that time, of course, the September 11 attacks had already taken place. It was a bizarre time: I was in northern Italy, when these previously unthinkable events occurred. The first parallel that occurred to me was not Pearl Harbor or any event in modern history: I thought first of the sack of Rome by the Arian Goths in A.D. 410--and the horror and dismay that prompted St. Augustine to write his *City of God*. The words of St. Augustine never seemed so relevant to me, as they did at that moment. The attacks were not simply a tragedy or an atrocity but, at a deeper level, a symbolic event: the attempted destruction of the very nerve-center of the temporal power by Islamists who had previously attempted the Pope's assassination in Spain and in the Philippines. So it was evident that this was an attack on both the temporal and spiritual dimensions of what remains of Christian civilization. And I was soon to go to Rome itself, once the seat of empire and still the capital of Christendom. I felt as if I were simultaneously thrust forward into an unknown future, and also made almost a contemporary of St. Augustine. It really was like going back to the future.

Contemporary Rome itself is, of course, entirely different from the rural north: a city of five million (7 or 8 million with the outlying suburbs), noisy, full of foreign tourists and pilgrims; and at the very moment when I arrived, there was a wedding taking place at the Church of Sant' Anselmo. So I had to crash someone's wedding just to enter the Collegio! I was soon to find out that the Aventine hill is a fashionable area in which to get married, and that the weddings never cease at Sant' Anselmo--not what one would immediately expect in a monastic church! Once I pushed my way through the wedding crowd, I was issued my key at the porter's office and moved into my room at Sant' Anselmo, with the usual hassles involved in getting the phone service hooked up, and getting my e-mail working.

Sant' Anselmo is not an ordinary monastic community because there is no core of permanently resident monks--all of us, including professors, are just "passing through" for a period of time. That means that no one at Sant' Anselmo makes a vow of stability to Sant' Anselmo itself; each of us remains a monk of his own house and subject to his own abbot in his own country. This gives the Collegio the look of a monastery since the monks live, work, and pray according to a monastic horarium; but Sant' Anselmo does not, and cannot, function as an ordinary Benedictine house. The monks come from such different strands of the Benedictine tradition that to impose a uniform cohesion would be impossible: our monasteries of origin range from purely contemplative houses to mission stations, from French traditionalists to more liberal American and German interpretations



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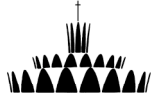
of monastic life. As English Benedictines, we favor a *Via Media*, of course; but at Sant' Anselmo, that, too, is just one possibility among many.

This diversity manifests itself even in the liturgical life: each resident must choose to belong to one of the liturgical-language chapels, whether Italian, Latin, English, French, or German. Each of these groups has its designated chapel and celebrates Lauds and Mass each morning, Monday through Saturday. The other hours of the Divine Office are in Latin: Sext, Vespers, and Compline. The Sunday conventual Mass is in the church, with the Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei sung in Latin, and the rest of the Mass in Italian. The goal is to provide a monastic liturgical life that all can accept, even though no one is wholly satisfied or entirely at ease; but it works well enough. I belonged to the Italian group for the first year, as the prior recommended; and beginning in the second year, I have been in the Latin chapel. I have to admit that I have often thought that it would be better to abolish the separate language chapels and have a single daily liturgy for all of Sant' Anselmo--that would vastly simplify things and also make it possible to celebrate the liturgy more fittingly, given the combined resources of 120 monks! But that idea has been suggested before and met with great opposition since a great many people want to worship in their own language; and in an international community, this is only possible if there are different liturgical-language chapels.

LECTURES AND CLASSES AND COMMUNITY LIFE

Perhaps the biggest surprise was the Roman model of theological education. Instead of the typical American university model (i.e., relatively few hours spent in class and lecture, with more time for reading and for writing papers), the Roman approach is for the student to spend long hours in lecture, learning from the *magister's* own words. Instead of a syllabus with required reading clearly distinguished from recommended reading, most professors suggested several books or texts that would illuminate the subject matter. However, with some exceptions, no particular text was strictly required; the students had considerable latitude about what they chose to read and study for a given course. In part, this was due to the diversity of the students themselves: in addition to cultural and linguistic differences, one could not assume a similarity of educational experience or philosophical formation. Some, like the Germans and Austrians, were already well-versed in all sorts of philosophy and were quite capable of reading Greek and Latin. Others had a more limited educational background or had done their philosophy in such different settings that professors could not assume a common background. For that reason, the professors typically recommended several different books in different languages, in order to attend to the needs of the students. All of this was mystifying to me at first, since I was used to a more clear-cut syllabus; and when I first saw the reading list, I was alarmed, thinking I was expected to read all of the listed works. But that isn't the Roman model. It is also true that, most of the time, one can get by with reading and studying the professor's lecture notes and hand-outs; but in order to get a good grade, one does have to do some reading and thinking. There are fewer papers to write, but more lectures to attend.

The exams are usually oral. I remember very well how nervous I was at my first oral examination: the professor had each of us sign up for 15-minute time slots. He had given us a list of questions to prepare. Each of us was to speak on a topic of our choice



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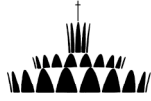


for about five minutes; then he would choose one question from the list and ask the student about it. Finally, the student would himself choose a question from the list and answer it. Having never done an oral exam before--still less, an oral exam in Italian--I was very uneasy going into the examination; but it wasn't so bad after all. Quite often, if the professor is sure that you know the material in question, he will move on to another matter dealt with in the course. Many professors will allow the student to do the exam in English or in any other language known to the professor; so even the Italian barrier is not always there. Except when dealing with a professor who is a native English speaker, I always preferred to do my exams in Italian--in part, because I wanted to counter the stereotype that Americans always expect others to speak English but never bother to learn the language of the country they are in. I had the feeling that most professors were pleased that a student would at least make the effort to take the exam in Italian.

All in all, I think the coursework was about equal to what one would encounter in an American seminary or school of theology though the emphasis in Rome is placed on oral rather than on written communication. I noticed a difference in expectations between Italian and American students, too: while American students were used to the professor asking the class questions in order to foster discussion, the Italians expected the professor to lecture rather than to ask questions. I distinctly remember that the Italians were displeased when an English-speaking professor (from Northern Ireland, I believe) sought to carry on the class in a seminar form: they thought he was short-changing them with regard to the expected lecture. On the other hand, the Americans and other Anglophones preferred a combination of lecture and discussion because that was closer to the model they knew in college. As always at Sant' Anselmo, the differences in background were evident in both professors and students.

The same differences made themselves known in the encounter with monks from different countries and different types of observance. I became close friends with a French monk from the traditionalist Abbey of Le Barroux and found that we actually had much in common despite our utterly different family backgrounds. I had the same experience with a Bavarian member of the Teutonic Order, whose mother-house is in Italy (in the region called Lana by Italians and the South Tyrol by Austrians). I was actually surprised that the Teutonic Order still existed, as I thought they had ceased to exist at the Reformation. It seems that the Teutons (if that's the right noun) have either survived or been re-founded as monastic and clerical order. I also became friends with a Hungarian monk of Pannonhelmo who was pleasantly surprised that I knew something about Cardinal Mindszenty and about the Church in Hungary. There were interesting parallels between the Hungarian Benedictines' history and that of the English Congregation. My Hungarian friend was under the impression that all Americans were a-historical in their mentality and would know nothing about other countries. So perhaps I helped to undermine slightly a stereotype of American boorishness. I hope so.

In addition, I met other monks of the English Congregation from Downside, Douai, and Buckfast; and, as hard as it is to define or explain, I really did feel I had most in common with the other EBC monks at Sant' Anselmo. I suppose that must be due to the common history and the personal ties that still connect St. Louis Abbey with Ampleforth and with the other English houses. To my great amusement, an Austrian monk who had just remarked on how "typically American"--meaning loud and brassy--a



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certain American monk was, told me, "But you don't seem American at all--you seem much more English than American to me." Maybe that comes from my having attended an Anglican school and read so many English Catholic writers! It was a backhanded compliment, I suppose, but still a compliment.

At meals, it simply happened spontaneously that students tended to sit with those who spoke their own language. It's not required or planned--it's just an example of how birds of a feather will always flock together. So I usually (though not always) sat in the so-called English ghetto, composed mainly of English and American Irish residents (the Irish preferred not to call it the "English" ghetto). Spaniards and Latin Americans had their area, as did Koreans and Arabic-speakers. Africans seemed to go to different areas, depending on whether they were English- or French-speaking. And yet, often enough, my usual "ghetto" seat might be taken, especially when it was a special occasion, so that I sat instead with people I didn't know. And those were often especially interesting occasions.

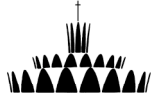
At times, I did indeed resent some of the anti-American attitudes of my confreres; but I found that those who took their own nationality and culture and their particular monastic traditions seriously were actually more tolerant of Americans, even when they disagreed with our government or disliked some American cultural influences. I saw the wisdom of Fr. Isaac Hecker, the founder of the Paulist Fathers, in describing the situation of an American Catholic in 19th-century Europe:

Neither do we wish to plant our American ideas in the soil of other nations. The mission of the American Catholic is not to propagate his form of government in any other country. But there is one wish he cherishes in respect to his fellow-Catholics abroad: he wants to be rightly understood, and that is a wish not easily granted...In such things, most men are what their surroundings have made the--you might say all men are, if by the word surroundings you take in the sum of influences, external and internal, to which they are subject. Where will you find a man whose most potent teachers have not been his race and country? [...] Europe is not your home; your home is far away and far different, and you expect sooner or later to go back there. Therefore you are not to blame for not understanding them, nor are they to be blamed for not understanding us. When we are abroad, unless called upon to speak, ... it is better for us to keep our mouths shut. So should foreigners act when in this country.

I do not blame Europeans for not understanding us. I only wish to call attention to the many difficulties in the way of getting into the minds of Europeans true views of American affairs... For what is commonplace in this country is striking and singular elsewhere, especially in a state of society so differently organized.¹

From my years at Sant' Anselmo, I came away feeling that barriers of language and nationality can be transcended to a certain point, and yet that one's own particularity is never left behind. My sense of American nationality and of belonging to a distinct family within worldwide Benedictinism (that is, the English Congregation) have actually been sharpened and strengthened by the encounter with so many monks who are so

¹ Isaac T. Hecker, *The Church and the Age: An Exposition of the Catholic Church in View of the Needs and Aspirations of the Present Age* (New York: Catholic Publication Society, 1887), 109-111.



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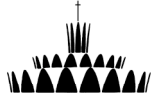


different from me. And yet, I don't see my attitude as a contentious sort of self-affirmation: rather, it's a matter of realism about our own finitude and of the necessity for faith and charity to become "incarnate" in the circumstances in which God has placed us. We have to be realistic and acknowledge the order of charity: that we have a duty of charity to all but in a special way to those whom God has especially entrusted to us. The Rule of St. Benedict is premised precisely on this insight, with the intention of ordering a stable community. And despite the absence of a fixed and stable community, Sant' Anselmo is indeed profoundly Benedictine in requiring one to recognize the practical exigencies of a community life that includes such a diversity of brothers. When I made my retreat at Subiaco before my diaconal ordination, I read St. Gregory the Great's *Life and Miracles of St. Benedict* and was struck by the incident in Chapter 6, when St. Benedict performs a miracle for a pious Goth who had become a monk at Subiaco. Surely if Benedict could welcome both Roman and Goth alike into his monastery, then we can do the same in our own time. However, neither the Rule nor the *Life of St. Benedict* indicates that this will always be easy.

SOLEMN PROFESSION AND ORDINATION

When I left for Rome, I was not yet solemnly professed. My profession was set for January 1, 2002; that meant returning to St. Louis the day after Christmas since first-year students at Sant' Anselmo are expected to be there for Christmas and Easter. In preparation for solemn profession, I needed to make a retreat; and, to my delight and amazement, the subprior Fr. Johannes Paul Abramowicz, arranged for my retreat at Monte Cassino. Dom Giuseppe of Monte Cassino gave me several conferences on the Rule and on the vows, and I made my very first confession in Italian--a bit daunting since my Italian was still rather shaky. But Monte Cassino itself was a deeply moving place for me. In the winter, the clouds often surround the mountain upon which the immense monastery sits--it almost seemed as if it were floating on clouds. The guestmaster, Dom Germano, was most hospitable and showed me around Monte Cassino, with special attention to the rebuilding that had taken place after the Allied bombing during the Second World War. It was all especially poignant because Dom Germano had been a boy in the school before the bombing: he remembered what Monte Cassino had been before the war, and how it had been levelled, and how it had risen again. He also told how St. Bertoldo, the abbot of Monte Cassino, had been martyred by the Muslim Saracens in the eighth century, when the abbey had been destroyed, only to be rebuilt again. He also recounted how another abbot, Desiderius, had been twice elected pope and eventually reigned from Monte Cassino rather than Rome, out of fear of the Roman nobility. At Monte Cassino, one gets a sense of historical perspective on contemporary crises in the Church and in the world. That, in addition to prayer at the tomb of St. Benedict and St. Scholastica, left a lasting impression on me, as I made my final vows on the morning of January 1, 2002, in St. Louis.

I had a similar experience two years later, when I made a retreat at Subiaco, where I stayed with the tiny community that lives in a lovely medieval monastery, covered in frescos, on the very site of St. Benedict's cave. It still has the feel and look of early monasticism and is therefore quite different from Monte Cassino--which dates from the Renaissance and from the later Baroque period. It was at Subiaco that I re-read two



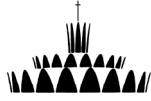
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works by St. Gregory the Great: *The Life and Miracles of St. Benedict* and the *Regula Pastoralis* (Pastoral Rule or Pastoral Care). This time, it was a private retreat, without conferences; but I had none other than Gregory the Great as my retreat-master, on the very sight where much of St. Benedict's life was lived out and where his miracles were performed. Since I was preparing for Holy Orders as a Benedictine monk studying in Rome, I thought I could do no better than to learn the meaning of monastic priesthood from one of the greatest popes of all time. It is said that the *Regula Pastoralis*'s teaching on the pastoral office is derived in large measure from St. Benedict's teaching on the role of the abbot in the monastery. As the work of St. Gregory, who sent the missionary monks to England, the *Regula Pastoralis* was the standard work on pastoral care throughout the Middle Ages. I was struck by how its teaching is perennially valid for anyone who is to be ordained. At last, I was ordained to the diaconate in December, 2003, on the day after Gaudete Sunday. All of Sant' Anselmo was present for the occasion.

The rest of my third year at Sant' Anselmo was spent mostly with writing my thesis for the bachelor's degree in theology. I was comparing the exposition of the Eucharist as sacrament and sacrifice in the Roman Catechism of 1566 with the exposition in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1992). I wanted to examine both the continuities and the differences between the Roman Catechism (also known as the Catechism of the Council of Trent) and the 1992 Catechism since I thought this would illuminate for me the source of many present-day disputes and unresolved issues in the Church's Eucharistic catechesis and practice. It was truly an enlightening experience to research this matter. I was also fortunate in having chosen a suitable topic, about which relatively little has been written so far. The Tridentine Catechism is all but forgotten among most Catholics, including priests and catechists; and yet it is perhaps the single most important source for the new Catechism. In addition, the choice of a topic is not easy: an overly-broad topic is unmanageable, but a too-narrow topic is trivial and uninteresting. By closely analyzing the Eucharistic teaching in the two universal catechisms, I could do a thorough job while addressing issues that are intellectually interesting and which have important consequences for the way in which the faith is lived and communicated.

In July 2004, I came home to St. Louis, after having traveled in England with Fr. Bede, who had just finished his degree at Oxford. It was to be a brief summer: only two months to sort out things in the library (I am the monastic librarian in absentia), to prepare for ordination, to learn how to say Mass, and a host of other things (including helping my mother find me a chalice for my ordination!) But the great day finally came: on the feast day of St. Augustine, August 28, I was ordained to the priesthood by Archbishop Raymond L. Burke. And although the rite took place in my own monastery and not in Rome, it was the goal toward which my studies in Rome had been directed. The academic aspects, as well as the personal and social interactions at Sant' Anselmo and my travels to monasteries and shrines, all culminated in my ordination; and the fact that it took place on St. Augustine's feast day reminded me yet again of Rome and of the *City of God*. For some people, including St. Benedict himself, Rome has not been an edifying place. Indeed, Benedict had fled the city to become a monk. And yet, for all that, St. Benedict was very much a Roman in spirit, and wished to follow the Roman practice in the singing of the canticles (Chapter 13 of the Rule); and, when Monte Cassino was



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destroyed, his monks took refuge in Rome! For me, my time in Rome has not been an experience of either a new "Babylon" nor of a New Jerusalem; but rather a deeper awareness of the City of God of which St. Augustine spoke, and a gratitude for having received in Christ a Kingdom that cannot be shaken (Heb. 12:28).