



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



Monks, Priests, and Laity by Father Timothy Horner, OSB

[In the turbulent waters of our times a sweet-water current is especially welcome. One such current seems to be an increasing interest by lay people in monastic life and an increasing desire to apply at least some monastic practices to lay life. Moreover this interest seems to be directed more to the monastic aspects than to the priestly aspects of a monk's life. Father Timothy therefore looks at the relationship, both historical and theoretical, first between the monk and the priest, and then between laity and monk. Ed.]

In our lives we all have a natural need for society and a natural need for privacy or solitude. The blend varies from individual to individual. The loner has one blend, the extrovert another. In religious life, this has taken the form of the need to flee from the world (*fuga mundi*) and the need to be involved in the market place; and again the blend has varied both from individual to individual and from order to order: The Carmelites have one blend, the Jesuits another, and we are in between.

Christian monasticism started when early Christians fled to the desert, in Egypt especially, to escape both the periodic persecution practised by the Roman Empire and the prevailing atmosphere of corruption permeating pagan life in the cities. The earliest monks were hermits, living by themselves, though often within easy reach of fellow-hermits. They were not priests.

It was not long, however, before those who felt more strongly the need for society experimented with living in community, leading a cenobitic (or communal) rather than an eremitical (or hermit-like) life. The leading figure among the hermits was Antony (c.251-356), among the cenobites Pachomius (c.292-346). Pachomius decided for both practical and spiritual reasons that cenobitic life had many advantages. Unfortunately, his first companions took the view that they were all sensible, mature men, who did not need pettifogging rules and obedience to a superior. The result was disaster. Pachomius had to 'kick the rascals out' and start again. Those who were monks in the late 1960s may empathize with him. On his second attempt he insisted on a strong superior and a rule, and the attempt was successful.

Pachomius was a teacher, preacher, interpreter of God's word, and he thought of the monastery as a mini-church, applying to it terms such as Body of Christ, Temple, Vine, People of God, terms that the Bible applies to the Church as a whole. So one would expect him to want priests in his communities, for they soon multiplied, and yet not only did he not want to become a priest himself but he was quite hesitant about accepting priests into his communities. When there was a move to have him ordained, he hid himself until Bishop Athanasius had gone away, and if a priest sought to be a monk, Pachomius would accept him only if he would be a humble monk. There is no evidence to show whether any of his early rascals were priests, but if they were that might account for the strength of his later attitude. In any case, there was an obvious danger of a priest who took any pride in his status as a priest, going on to disdain an abbot who was not a priest.

When we turn to Saint Benedict (traditionally 480-547) we find that his *Rule*, unlike its immediate predecessor, *The Rule of the Master*, does allow for priests in the



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monastery, whether they come from outside or are chosen from among the monks, but is cautious about them. Again, the reason is humility. Neither he nor Pachomius mentions that there is a difference of focus between the priesthood and monastic life. The priesthood is more apostolic, bringing God to the world; monastic life is more contemplative, seeking God. And so it is said that diocesan priests tend to be extroverted and monks introverted, though we all know many exceptions to each part of that belief.

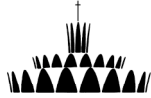
All this means that while we observe the increasing clericalization of monks as time went on, we must always remember that the two men who had the most influence on the early development of cenobitic monasticism, Saint Pachomius and Saint Benedict, were hesitant, and even a little wary, about admitting priests to their communities. We must also remember that both men saw their monasteries as fully part of the Church. They were in no way anti-ecclesiastical or anti-clerical, but were orthodox, and loyal to bishops and secular priests, with whom they had a good relationship. They just were not part of the hierarchical structure. It may be apropos to mention here that we too have seen ourselves as fully members of the local church, and have enjoyed a cordial relationship with the archbishops from Cardinal Ritter to Archbishop Burke, and with the other bishops and priests of the archdiocese.

And yet, despite the provisos in the *Rule*, by the time we get to the end of the eighth century when Charlemagne wished to standardize monasticism by having all monks follow a single rule—up to his time there had been a number of Latin Rules being observed by various monasteries—most monks were priests. This was due to external pressures. Devout Christians wished to have many Masses said for themselves and those they loved, and many monk-priests were needed to meet this demand, the generosity of these Christians being crucial to the finances of the monasteries of the time. Also, no doubt, benefactors to the monasteries, then as now, came to hope for a variety of ministries for which priestly orders were mandatory or customary.

When we come to our own family tree of Westminster – Dieulouard – Ampleforth – Saint Louis, for whose history see *In Good Soil* pp. 9-11, the following is the state of affairs:

Westminster. This abbey was founded in the tenth century just outside what were then the city limits of London. It soon became the royal abbey where the kings and queens of England were crowned, and developed a close relationship with royal affairs in general. E.H.Pearce in *The Monks of Westminster*, (Cambridge U.P. 1916) shows that, from the thirteenth century until its dissolution by Henry VIII in 1540, the community consisted mainly of priests. In view of the common practice of those days, and even more so because of the abbey's involvement in the affairs of both church and state, it is likely that this was so from its earliest days. When the abbey was briefly restored under Mary Tudor, the monks were again mostly priests.

Dieulouard. On November 21, 1607, the last surviving monk of Marian Westminster, Father Sigebert Buckley, clothed two young men as novices for the English Benedictine Congregation, and in particular for the community of Westminster. They found a home in northeastern France at Dieulouard, north of Nancy and on the Moselle. By 1621, there were in residence



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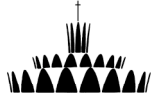
thirteen professed monks and two laybrothers, with fifteen priests elsewhere, most of them on the English Mission. Of the resident monks some we know to have been priests and some were young men in formation. Since a chief work of this monastery, as of the other English Benedictine houses abroad, was to provide priests for the English Mission—it was later called its chief active work—and since this meant primarily celebrating Mass and administering the sacraments, it was necessary for the men to be priests. We may note as we pass that the idea of laybrothers, popular with several other Benedictine congregations, never caught on with the English Benedictines.

Ampleforth. The monks stayed at Dieulouard until the spread of the French Revolution to the far corners of France forced them to leave in 1793. By that time the penal laws in England were a dead letter, and after some wandering, the monks found in 1802 a new home at Ampleforth in North Yorkshire. There the community was always overwhelmingly priestly until, towards the end of the twentieth century, some recognition began to be granted to the idea that it was possible to be a full choir-monk without being a priest. This may have had some connection with the gradual reduction of the number of parishes staffed by Ampleforth monks.

Saint Louis. Ampleforth founded our abbey as Saint Louis Priory in 1955. We became an independent priory in 1973 and an abbey in 1989. The monks who came from Ampleforth were all priests and most of those from here who applied to become monks wanted to be priests too, but we accepted with little, if any, reluctance that there was no necessity for all our monks to be priests. Those who did not wish to be priests were as welcome as those who did, but under the Constitutions of the English Benedictine Congregation, they could never be elected abbot.

From this summary we see that the earliest monks were hermits and not priests. The cenobites, too, who followed them were almost all non-priests. They lived a very intense Christian life based on the Gospels and on a rule, or on the guidance of an *abba*, or both. Some additions, which had their roots in the Gospels, were made to their way of life, and later became crystalized as poverty, chastity and obedience. It was these (especially when they became formalized as vows) and not priestly ordination, that distinguished the hermits and cenobites from 'ordinary' laity, and continue to distinguish the monk as such from, for example, the parents, parishioners, and other friends who make up the Abbey Family.

For Mass the hermits and cenobites relied on non-monastic priests. Saint Benedict's *Rule* allows, though hesitantly, for a priest or priests in the monastery, but outside pressure, mostly in the form of demands for many Masses, led to an ever-increasing need for priests, so that by the eighth century most monks were priests. When we come to the royal abbey of Westminster this need for priests was reinforced by the demands of both church and state. At Dieulouard the need was for priests to return to England at the risk of their lives in order to provide Mass, the Sacraments and other ministrations for the persecuted Catholics. After the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829,



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the Missions established in England and Wales before emancipation still needed priests, so monks of the English Benedictine Congregation normally became priests. Only in the last few decades has the idea of non-priestly choir monks achieved any recognition.

Two conclusions may be drawn from all this: first, that Brother X in solemn vows as a choir-monk is neither more nor less of a monk than Father Y in solemn vows as a choir-monk. One may be a better monk or a worse monk than the other, but neither is *more* of a monk than the other.

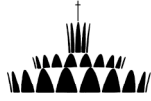
Secondly, this ‘clericalization’ of monks has affected both the priest-monk’s view of himself and the view of him held by those outside the monastery. Father Terrence Kardong in his *Benedict’s Rule: A Translation and Commentary* believes (p. 514) that in western monasticism it has always been a problem both for the individual monk who is a priest to put a true value on himself as monk, and for monks collectively to convey to the outside world the value of their lives as monks. There is a real danger that monk-priests “simply become clergy in their own minds”, and a corresponding danger that those outside the monastery see them simply as clergy. In other words, the monk-priest can easily come to believe that simply by carrying out his priestly ministry he is living his monastic vocation to the full. Similarly, because of these outside perceptions, “the lay character of monasticism needs much more emphasis than the priesthood.”

With all this said, we must add that in no way are we wishing to suggest that monks should not be priests, nor that monastic priesthood should be confined to those who will be involved in work in a parish. Priesthood adds a dimension to the work of the monk-priest because he has powers that the non-priest has not: he can celebrate Mass, hear confessions, anoint the sick, and sometimes administer Confirmation. Further, can his power to consecrate bread and wine, to bring Our Lord onto the altar at Mass, fail to overflow into the rest of his life? Of course, both priest and non-priest can receive Our Lord in Holy Communion with equal devotion, but perhaps they draw closer to him in slightly different ways.

For the rest of this essay we shall consider some of the lay aspects of monastic life, and then some ways in which the lay character of monastic life might affect our relationship with the world outside the monastery.

It is common to see monastic life as a combination of prayer, work, and community life. This is useful as an analysis, but we must remember that the three are not separate in fact; they interpenetrate. The monks in the desert used, while hoeing their rice, to repeat such verses from the psalms as, “God, come to my assistance; Lord, make haste to help me,” a verse that we still use at the beginning of most of the Hours in choir.

Our prayer in choir consists of psalms, readings from the Bible or other good sources, hymns, and prayers. The only reason why laity should not do the same is the amount of time we spend in choir. But many laity do recite a shorter form of our Office (or *opus Dei—work of God*) or recite some of the psalms, and find that helpful for their spiritual life. Our prayer outside choir consists of personal prayer, that is meditation or contemplation, and what was called spiritual reading and is now given Saint Benedict’s original name of *lectio divina*, or *divine reading*. Both of these activities are entirely open to laity and are, in fact, practised by many. Personal prayer is a loving conversation with God, and can take as many forms as any other conversation; it is no perquisite of priests or monks. In *lectio*, what is read is mainly the Bible (hence *divina*) and as more



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encouragement has recently been given to study of the Bible, *lectio divina*, which is a way of reading the Bible for one's own spiritual growth, has also been more widely practised. Several of the monks are doing this with groups of laity with mutual benefit and enjoyment. It is good to have present someone who has some knowledge of the Bible, but that person does not have to be a priest.

When we come to the Mass, the monk-priest is, as we have seen, really different; but when the monk-priest is not celebrating or concelebrating, it is hard to see that he is participating in a way that differs either from that of the laity or from that of the monk who is not a priest.

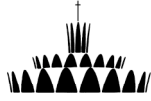
This brings us, or has already brought us, into the area of work. As we have seen, there is a real difference between monk-priests and both non-priest monks and laity simply because of the extra powers that the priest has. We need to ask, then, since it applies so much to our community, whether in the classroom a monk-priest is any different from a non-priest monk or from a layperson.

How can one tell? And yet one might guess that the answer to the first is “no”, and to the second “possibly not”, on the grounds that any difference would arise not from the priesthood but from the monastic training which the monks have received and the lay person has not. To the second question we say “possibly not” because it has been our experience that there have been members of our faculty who have absorbed so much of the Benedictine spirit that, if you put Mr. X in a Benedictine habit, he could well pass for Father or Brother X—and the same is true, *mutatis mutandis*, of Mrs. X. It is also quite possible that, had they had the monastic training, they would be as Benedictine as any of us. This may be the appropriate place to interject that the priestly part of a monk-priest's training equips him mainly with the knowledge he needs as a priest. His academic courses give him the material to teach, and indirectly affect his style of teaching, because one tends to teach, at least at first, either in the style in which one was taught oneself, or in any other style but not that one. It is his monastic formation that has most effect on what kind of man and what kind of monk he turns out to be.

In the area of Community life it is hard to see much difference between the monk-priest, the monk who is not a priest and the layperson. Life in a monastic family has many of the same supports and irritants as life in a lay family. It is peculiar to Benedictines and to others who follow the *Rule of Benedict* that the monk makes his profession of vows for a particular monastery, and expects to spend the rest of his life there. This increases the similarity between a lay family and a monastic family, and is a source of support and security. But in both, what Saint Benedict calls “thorns of contention” are apt to arise. When they do arise in a monastic family between two or more monks, they cannot be eliminated by sending one or more of the monks to other houses—as can happen in those orders which are organized into provinces. In lay and in monastic families, joys are intensified by the joy of the other members and sorrows are alleviated by their sympathy and support; patience is a central virtue, and is needed on many other occasions and when things are not put back in their proper place.

Finally, let us look briefly at some activities that might be affected by the lay character of monasticism.

There is in our times a considerable amount of lay interest in Benedictine spirituality. If you happen to share it, you might wish to read either or both of two books



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by Esther de Waal: *Seeking God: The Way of Saint Benedict* and *Living with Contradiction: Reflections on the Rule of Saint Benedict*. They may be found either at amazon.com or at abebooks.com, the latter being the cheaper. The interest has spread even wider than spirituality, and Kit Dollard, Anthony Marett-Crosby, OSB and Abbot Timothy Wright, OSB have produced *Doing Business with Benedict: the Rule of Saint Benedict and Business Management: a Conversation*. Further evidence of lay interest comes from the German abbey of Koenigsmunster, which recently reported 23,000 overnight visitors. The article did not mention the period covered.

What is the cause of this interest and how should we cater to it? The central cause must be in choir, since that is the centre and ballast of our life. Perhaps it is the presence of God—“where two or three meet in my name, I shall be there with them” (Mt 18.20)--; perhaps it is the repetition of the poetry of the psalms, always the same and yet often so new; perhaps it is curiosity over so many men spending so much time in an occupation that has no measurable product. Whatever the reason, those who stay for Vespers after our weekday Conventual Mass seem to feel rewarded, and perhaps we should do more to encourage others.

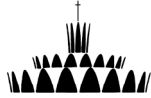
We are blessed with a faithful group who take part in this Conventual Mass of the monks. Some are certainly attracted by the variety of celebrants and the consequent variety of style and point of view; but then similar numbers take part in the weekday Masses of the parish, where there is no such variety.

A number of the monks have people who come for spiritual guidance, especially in prayer. There our forte should be in praying the psalms and in *lectio divina*, of which we have already spoken. We need only add of the latter that it is well done in little groups, but can also be well done on one's own.

Humility is a virtue on which Saint Benedict lays great emphasis: he has been called the Doctor of Humility. He means, of course, not the hang-dog attitude by which it is sometimes portrayed, but recognizing that God is God and we are not, and acting on that recognition. To downgrade the gifts God has given us is to be rude to the giver; but it is ruder still not to thank him for them, and worse to imagine that we have somehow fashioned them ourselves. If we can do anything by word or example to restore this shining virtue to its rightful esteem, we shall have done well.

We are greatly blessed in having both of our major external works, the school and the parish, physically on our campus, which is our home. This means that the natural place for our hospitality is in our home, which is true of laity too. While preserving the natural need for privacy that we mentioned at the beginning—and monks need as well time to be alone with God—we try to be as hospitable as we can to all who come to our campus.

Let us conclude with a brief look at the Benedictine attitude toward ecumenical activity. We have two characteristics that may help us here. First, as we said above, although monks have historically been fully loyal to the Church, they are not normally part of the hierarchical structure. This could certainly make us less daunting in dialogue with other denominations or other faiths. Secondly, our focus is on spirituality and liturgy more than on theology. One can think of a number of great, Benedictine writers on spirituality and liturgy, but only one Benedictine world-class philosopher and theologian springs to mind, and he is Saint Anselm. Although liturgists can get very hot under the



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collar about liturgy, it is probably easier and less disputatious to pray together than to theologize together. In no way, however, is this to suggest that monks would be woollier, more eager to compromise, more syncretistic than others. We are saying that prayer might be a more promising starting place for ecumenical activity than theological debate.

Episcopalians do in fact relate easily to Benedictine spirituality and liturgy, and to medieval English spirituality, which was much influenced by the monks. Prayer, the psalms, *lectio*, are highly ecumenical, and if *lex orandi, lex credendi* (how we pray is how we believe) is true, then the more we pray together the better, and the more likely we are in the end to achieve theological agreement.

There is so much more that could be said “had we but worlds enough and time”, but our aim has been not to exhaust the subject but to suggest the affinity of laity and monks and to put forward a few ways in which that could be realized.

So what is the upshot of all this for us here and now? First, the monk need not be a priest, nor does being a priest make him more of a monk. His spirituality may be slightly different from that of a monk who is not a priest, but will not be *eo ipso* better or worse. It may well be that for one monk it is better to be a priest and for another better not to be. Secondly, we have seen that for almost the whole period of Christian monasticism there have been strong external pressures on monks to be priests. With the increasing shortage of priests, it is reasonable to suppose that those pressures will grow stronger. Thirdly, the lay character of so much of monastic life leads laity naturally toward an affinity for monks and vice versa, whence the apparently rather widespread lay interest in applying the *Rule*, or parts of it, to lay life, and the popularity with the laity of monastic practices such as *lectio divina*. In our case this lay character contributed to a very important feature of our fifty years in Saint Louis: the close cooperation between the monks and “Inc” (formally “Catholic Preparatory School for Boys, Incorporated) and in particular between Father Columba and Mr. Fred Switzer. The degree of accountability and transparency between the Priory and our lay supporters, now between, especially, the Abbey and the Abbey Society and our Advisors, is still remarkable, and in the early days was unique, or at least very rare. The very terms accountability and transparency were hardly ever used back then in the context of lay supporters. That they were put into practice from our earliest days must be part of the reason why the Abbey Family is so lively a reality. And for this we thank God with all our hearts and minds and voices.