

Truth, to all men and women of good will.

Moreover, our present day concern with creation and the right use of the environment would not be foreign to Saint Benedict. He knew from experience, as we have seen, that creation is one and the world one. Thus all are mutually responsible for its welfare, all are at heart intimately bound up together in a worldwide communion, despite human sinfulness and division.

Life in the monastery can be seen as an icon of this. All the members seek to live together in mutual respect with the abbot or abbess as head. The goods of the monastery are shared in common and are to be cherished and cared for as though they were the sacred vessels of the altar. Manual work is highly esteemed, gardens and grounds are cultivated, crops sown and harvested if called for. God is to be glorified in all things, as Saint Benedict puts it, and we are to serve him with the good things he has given us.

So it is that the little world of the monastery is far from being a place of escape or a breeding ground for a selfish preoccupation with personal salvation. Though apart in some degree from both Church and world, it is also firmly at the centre of both, open to God and open to the fullness of created reality. To be at this point of equilibrium is to savour already something of the fulfilment of the Kingdom which is yet to come and which is the object of that Unity for which we all work and pray.

*'That they all may
be one'*



Under a Single Ray - Benedictinism and cosmic unity.

In the ideal the Benedictine monastery is meant to be a self-contained entity, a little world of its own. The separateness involved is intended to lead monks and nuns more swiftly and surely to their goal, union with God and with each other in him. Left at that, though, such a concept would be alarming. How could we justify the apparent selfishness, how distinguish the life-style from that found in the various and weird new sects that are mushrooming in our day? But then the Church in general can give a similar impression to outsiders, though its members know differently. In reality, as the body of Christ, the Church is nothing less than a sacrament of salvation for the whole of creation.

In both instances, the monastic community within the Church, and the Church within the world, there has to be a degree of apartness for identity to be established. There must be some demarcation lines. The important thing is to keep communication open across these borders, for a ghetto mentality spells death.

If monastic communities claim to be places where work and prayer for unity are valid, then such openness is essential. In the first place there must be total openness to the divine, an on-going search to discover and fulfil God's will and attain an ever-deepening communion within the blessed Trinity. This in itself, of course, is the heart and centre of Unity. But once tasted such riches have to be shared. Thus monastic communities, despite their necessary rules of enclosure, are paradoxically found to be wide open to the world.

This two-way movement inwards and outwards is first of all experienced in the realm of prayer. Monks and nuns are specifically

called both to the praise and worship of God and also to standing before the Father, in and with Christ, in intercession for the whole of his creation. We know, from the writings of St Gregory the Great, that St Benedict was a man of deep mystical prayer. In his *'Dialogues'* St Gregory tells us that one night, when at prayer, St Benedict was given a vision of the unity of all things in God, seeing as he did the whole universe contained in a single ray of light. Such an awareness would afterwards inevitably permeate every aspect of life, as indeed can clearly be seen in the pages of his Rule.

The daily praying of the psalms in choir and constant meditation on the Scriptures and the writings of the Church Fathers, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are the frame-work within which monastic prayer develops. The purposed turning aside from so many of the distractions of life outside the monastery, which accompanies this, can sometimes lead to heightened awareness and a more purified prayer, when it is no longer we who pray but Christ who prays in us. It is prayer of this sort that we are invited to share in by our Lord himself in John Chapter 17: *'I in them and thou in me that they may be perfectly one . . . that the world may believe.'*

Monastic openness, however, does not stop with prayer. Admittedly Saint Benedict stresses that it is not expedient for monks and nuns to wander about outside the monastery. Everything necessary is to be contained within the enclosure . . . *'a mill, a garden, the various crafts'* . . . Yet he also remarks in another place, that guests will never be wanting in a monastery. Even if the monks don't go out the world comes in.

Monastic hospitality is of course legendary and the excesses, recorded sometimes in our history books, have to be acknowledged. For Saint Benedict, however, the right sort of welcome given to guests is seen as an obvious fruit of a life lived in Christ, as the gospels make clear. Not only does Christ *pray* in his followers then, but he also *lives* in them, so that their every action is to be patterned on his. Moreover, this presence of Christ is to be recognised in everyone else as well, and that means not only fellow monks and nuns but all comers, especially those in particular need: the sick, the poor, the elderly, strangers, pilgrims.

Guests, Saint Benedict says, are to be received as Christ himself.

There are detailed instructions given in the Rule. Not only are all the normal courtesies to be shown to visitors and food and shelter provided, but spiritual needs are to be catered for as well. A monk or nun is deputed to *'sit with the guest and read the law of God to him.'* Though some of Saint Benedict's suggestions might seem quaint to us now, such as the ceremonial washing of the guest's feet by the whole community, the same spirit of warm hospitality and a willingness to provide spiritual counsel where requested, are still characteristic of Benedictine Houses today. Such a setting has in fact proved to be ideal for ecumenical sharing.

Because the monastic life is nothing else than an attempt to live out the gospel, its authenticity is quickly grasped by the many Christians of differing denominations who find their way to monasteries and convents. All are welcomed and are invited to share in the life and prayer of the community, as far as this is possible. Often enough an underlying sense of oneness is experienced at a very deep level, so that the ongoing differences between the churches are experienced as acutely painful.

In some communities, in fact, more official ecumenical work is done so that monks and nuns become involved in inter-church dialogue. The long tradition of biblical, patristic and liturgical studies among Benedictines has obviously helped to prepare the ground for this. In addition, monasticism is being seen more and more as a means of furthering understanding between Christianity and some of the other world religions, notably Buddhism and Hinduism. Christian, Hindu and Buddhist monks and nuns are not simply engaged in inter-faith *dialogue* but are pioneering inter-faith *contemplation* and monastic encounter, through conferences and long-term exchange visits.

This may seem a far cry from what Saint Benedict laid down in his Rule, but is surely a natural outcome. He allowed for the possibility of monks from other monasteries turning up, and he encouraged hospitality to pilgrims and strangers, and above all *'those of the household of faith.'* It would no doubt warm his heart to see his present day disciples extend this welcome to all who, in the realm of the spirit, are seeking