

INTERIOR SIMPLICITY

Only a very inadequate idea of exterior simplicity can be arrived at if we do not trace it back to its true source: *interior simplicity*. Without this, our resolution to practice exterior simplicity would be without light, without love: it would remain too superficial, too dry to be anything but a feeble, impoverished temporary thing, lacking all vital connection with its principle and its end.

St. Benedict has a phrase that sums up interior simplicity: *Si vere Deum quaerit*.¹ It is nothing but the right intention of the soul, directed toward its last end: God. Here we have the characteristic of the monk: a man absorbed in one exclusive ideal: union with God.

In simplicitate cordis quaerite Illum—"Seek him in the simplicity of your heart" (Ws 1:1). This, says St. Bernard, is demanded by the perfectly simple nature of God.² The monk, turning away from multiplicity, back to unity, tears himself away from created things, among which he has been scattered by the breakage resulting from his original fall, and returns to his principle, God, sovereign and unchangeable unity.³

Grace will make every monk, who does not stop somewhere along the road in his quest for God, a *contemplative* in the sense in which the Church likes to apply this name to the monastic order. *Optimam partem elegit*: he has chosen the best

part, and contemplation is, in the divine plan, the crown of the life of every monk. Contemplation: that is to say, a *simple* gazing upon God, a gaze that is fused with love, and which is the prelude to that *consummation in unity*⁴ and, therefore, perfect simplicity which is the beatific vision.

Love is “the power that realizes unity.”⁵ It first produces unity in the soul, and then it makes the soul *one same spirit with God* (1 Cor 6:17).⁶

“He who finds all things in the supreme Unity,” says the author of the *Imitation of Christ*, “and who reduces all to that Unity, and sees all in that Unity, will ever preserve his heart unmoved, and will dwell in peace in the bosom of his God.”⁷

This is the lesson given by the master in that passage of the Gospel which is so dear to the contemplative orders, where, calling the soul that has poured itself out in activity back to peace, he says: *Turbaris erga plurima* [“Thou art solicitous about many things”] and invites her to enter upon the way of interior simplicity: one thing is necessary, *unum est necessarium*.

The monk is a man of oneness, simplicity: his very name declares it.⁸

According to St. Denis, one of the masters of St. Thomas, monks got their name from “that life indivisible and one, in which the holy union of all their powers leads them to oneness, even to the point of deiform unity. . . .”⁹ Just as the Christian engages himself, at baptism, according to Denis’s forceful expression, “to tend, with all his powers, to the One”¹⁰ the monk declares, in his consecration of himself, that he renounces “every kind, every imaginable form of divided life. . . .”¹¹ He must unify himself by contact with the One, and recollect himself in holy simplicity.”¹²

And again Denis says: “It is impossible to have part, at the same time, in things that are absolutely contrary to one another. No one can cling steadfastly to the One and lead a divided life: it is therefore necessary to gain one’s freedom and become detached from everything that destroys unity.”¹³

Therefore, whoever keeps “his eyes open to the light that makes us godlike,”¹⁴ to use St. Benedict’s words, and “hastens

toward our heavenly country"¹⁵ "goes straight to his Creator."¹⁶ And therefore, for such a one, everything that does not lead to this end diverts him from it, and must be sacrificed. The monk detaches himself from everything that might weigh him down and bind him to the earth. He wants to be *simple*, not *mixed up* with the things that are below him.¹⁷

Thus, as St. Bernard says, "loving God with all its being, despising the earth, looking up to heaven, making use of this world as if it used it not, the soul distinguishes *by an inward and spiritual sense of touch between those things which are for its use, and those which are for its enjoyment*, so that it grants only a passing attention to the things that are, themselves, passing, *simply because it is necessary, and in the measure in which it is necessary*, while embracing in an eternal desire the things that are eternal" (Sermon 50 on the Canticle of Canticles).

The lines we sing in the hymn for Prime point out the way for us to follow in this program of detachment which leads to the glorification of God:

*Mundi per absentiam,
Ipsi canamus gloriam.*

"And, purified by abstinence, may we sing to him a hymn of glory."

Denis says: "It is necessary for us to be brought back from what is manifold to what is one by the power of divine unity, and that we glorify only the divinity, total and single, as the One, the author of all things."¹⁸

This austere concern with which the monk works to remove every obstacle that stands in the way of his progress in union with God has, as one of its consequences, *exterior simplicity* in all his conduct, in the use he makes of created goods, in his clothing, nourishment, housing, his occupations, and all his relations with other men. All of these will be characterized by restraint, poverty, humility, modesty, recollection, and the spirit of solitude, of enclosure, and of silence.

It would be a joy to listen to someone like St. Francis de Sales on this subject. He would compare all these virtues to

the various oils blended together by the artistry of a skilled distiller of perfumes, all having different scents which blend to produce an aroma with its own distinctive charm: simplicity in our every action.¹⁹

So, indeed, "by a vigorous aspiring to the One, being strong in casting aside all that is opposed to him, everything that was in disorder becomes ordered, all that was formless acquires a form in the rays of a life that is all light."²⁰

Returning to God "by the labor of obedience"²¹ the Cistercians were to "follow the Rule as their master"²² since it was, for them, the expression of God's will, and so they would animate and purify, through simplicity of intention, these virtues which direct our outward conduct, by reducing them to the love which seeks to imitate our beloved Savior: for love it is that makes unity.²³ According to the prescription of the Rule they would "hold nothing dearer to them than Christ"²⁴ and they would "renounce themselves to follow him."²⁵ They would give themselves entirely to Jesus Christ, and he would become the exemplar and model for everything that they did. Men would be able to say of them: *Neminem viderunt nisi solum Jesum* ["They saw no one but only Jesus" (Mt 17:8)].

Thus a religious who is really simple will be able to say, under the impulsion of the Holy Spirit: *Scio Deus meus quod simplicitatem diligas, unde et ego in simplicitate cordis mei laetus obtuli universa* ["My God, I know Thou lovest simplicity, wherefore I also, rejoicing in the simplicity of my heart, offered Thee all things" (1 Chr 29:17)].

This simplicity of outlook in the soul of each individual monk is what produces that unity in the monastery which St. Benedict so earnestly desired. St. Bernard, too, exhorts us to desire it in these moving words: "Among us also, brothers, let all our souls be truly united together; let our hearts make but one heart by loving the same One, seeking the same One, clinging to him together, and let them all be filled with like sentiments toward one another."²⁶

BEING TRUE TO OUR IDEALS

Have we taken note of the fact that the Church selects the same oration for the feasts of St. Benedict and of our father St. Stephen? Surely her purpose in doing so is to bring home to us the identity in the spirit of these two saints, who saw eye to eye in their perfect simplicity. More than that, the Church wants to increase our esteem for that spirit by pointing out its identity with the action of the Holy Ghost himself upon these two founders: *excita SPIRITUM . . . ut EODEM nos repleti studeamus . . . in unitate EJUSDEM Spiritus Sancti. . .* The prayer is: *Excita Domine in Ecclesia tua Spiritum cui beatus Benedictus [Stephanus] abbas serviviet, ut eodem nos repleti studeamus amare quod amavit et opere exercere quod docuit. Per Dominum . . . in unitate ejusdem, etc.* "Arouse, O Lord, in thy Church, the Spirit whom St. Benedict [Stephen], abbot, served, that we, being also filled with the same Spirit, may love what he loved and do the works which he taught us to perform. Through our Lord . . . who liveth and reigneth in the unity of the same Spirit, etc."

Truly, it is the Holy Spirit that chooses, prepares, and directs the foundation of every order and gives to it (as he also does to every reform worthy of the name) a special character. It is his wisdom that has conceived a very precise plan in each case. And so we can logically conclude that the perfection of

an order will be *proportionate to its conformity with the spirit of its founders. Quantum . . . tantum.*

Only those institutions which have preserved their original spirit, or have found their way back to it, receive from God the power to produce saints worthy of being proposed by the Church to the worship of all the faithful. But when an order does not drink deeply enough at the source of living waters which sprang up out of the heart of God for its foundation, God may well give it brilliant scholars, and even fervent religious. But his wisdom usually refrains from exalting them by raising them to the honors of the altar, lest he give the impression that he means to consecrate their deficiencies with his full approval.

But when an order has really gone off the rails in some fundamental issue of the primitive spirit, we can almost hear its founder thundering down from heaven this text of Jeremiah: *Dereliquerunt fontem aquae vivae, et foderunt sibi cisternas dissipatas*—"They have forsaken the fountain of living waters, and dug for themselves broken cisterns" (Jer 2:13). If you cut off the stream from its source, it will dry up, says St. Cyprian.¹

It is therefore a matter of obligation for us Cistercians to return often to the study of our ancient Rule, so that we may never forget the fundamental spirit of our reform to which the Church thought it not amiss to grant the title of a true religious order.

The liturgy goes further and urges us to ask yet more: *Perfice pium in nobis sanctae religionis affectum, et ad obtinendam tuae gratiae largitatem . . .* [Lord, bring to perfection the grace of our monastic profession and . . . grant us the full bounty of your grace].² We are exhorted to keep on *progressing* in the love of our order and of our fathers, in order that this love may win us a copious flood of graces. And here it is a question not only of an affective, but an effective love: a love that will translate itself into generous efforts to put into practice everything that is characteristic of our order.

"Never lose sight of our first fathers, the founders of our holy order," wrote the pope, Blessed Eugene III, to the General

Chapter of 1150. He already felt uneasy at the thought that fervor might diminish and, with it, the love of all that he had admired and lived as a humble monk at Clairvaux.

Many other popes also invited the Cistercians, and in the most direct of language, to drink from the source of ancient Cîteaux. These appeals are recalled to mind in solemn terms by these words addressed in the schema of the [First] Vatican Council to all orders in general. "We strongly urge the heads of orders and all religious to be most solicitous in keeping to their observances and regular discipline, and to show themselves to be religious not only by their habit, but *by the virtues and spirit which animated their holy founders.*"³

Among these founders, God raised up St. Stephen and gave him not only the task of leading us back by his example to the practice of the holy Rule, like St. Alberic and St. Robert, but also to establish regular visitations and General Chapters. These institutions not only made the order of Cîteaux a true religious order, but obliged us, in some sense, to follow the advice given by the Holy Spirit in the fifteenth chapter of Proverbs: *Bibe aquam de cisterna tua*—drink water from thine own cistern. And should we have forgotten to do so, they would furnish a reminder.

St. Stephen looked ahead. He knew that Satan would sooner or later begin to cajole the passions or transform himself into an angel of light in order to turn the Cistercians away from the clear-cut ideals of which God, by miracles, had revealed himself to be the author. Here are a few words from the Charter of Charity which bear witness to the farsighted prudence of the holy abbot: "[S]o that if they should ever turn aside from their first resolve and from (which God forbid!) the observance of the holy Rule, they may once more, by our care and vigilance, be led to bring their lives once more into conformity with it."⁴ Not only did the General Chapter of 1119—an assembly that included more than one saint among its number—make this concern of St. Stephen's its own, but Callixtus II, by his bull of December 23, 1119, approved the work as coming from the

hand of God. His words were: "We confirm, with the seal of our authority, the divine work which you have undertaken."⁵

Of course, it is true that the Charter of Charity aimed, first of all, at preventing anything that was contrary to the holy Rule. But after that it went on to prescribe that all the houses of the order should interpret the Rule in exactly the same way as the first fathers of Cîteaux. This charter, drawn up in view of the creation of an administrative organism that would insure this result, makes use of language so clear that a commentary would fall short of its luminous precision. "So now it is our wish," says the charter, "and it is *our express command* to them, that they observe the Rule of St. Benedict in all things *just as it is observed at the new monastery. Let them not interpret the text of the holy Rule in any new sense: but let them understand it and keep it in the very same sense as our predecessors and holy fathers, the monks of the new monastery (i.e., St. Robert and St. Alberic and those of their companions who had by that time died), and in which we ourselves, at this day, understand it and keep it.*"⁶

Only a spirit of faith, humility, and renunciation can keep alive in our hearts true loyalty to the principle of essential simplicity which made our fathers leave Molesme. This same spirit must also inspire us to study what meaning our fathers found in the Rule, and what were the particular observances which they instituted in order to make the spirit of simplicity, which they found in St. Benedict, an actuality in their lives.