

Gateway Tower, Crossraguel.

“THE MONKS OF CLUNY”

An Address delivered in the precincts of
Crossraguel Abbey on 16th July 1933

BY

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*“The house that is to be builded for the Lord must be exceeding
magnifical, of fame and of glory throughout all countries.”*

- I. Chronicles xxii. 5.

Next time you travel to Glasgow by rail, look out of the carriage window immediately after you have passed Paisley Station. There on the right hand you will see Paisley Abbey, within recent years restored to something of its ancient dignity and glory. There is a shadowy tradition that Sir William Wallace, the knight of Ellerslie and the Scottish patriot, received his schooling in a seminary attached to the Abbey.

Here today we are gathered in the Cloisters of Crossraguel Abbey. The Bruces of Carrick were neighbours of this monastery, and we are often told, on what authority I am not aware, that Robert, afterwards King of Scotland, was taught as a youth by some of the inmates of this place. Crossraguel and Paisley, however, have a more definite association than that of their possibly having been the schools in which two great Scottish heroes were trained. These two institutions belonged to the same monastic Order, that of the Cluniacs, whose parent house was in Burgundy, among the French vineyards. Of course, Paisley and Crossraguel, while owning allegiance to the same head and observing the same rule, were very different in standing and influence. The one was a large and wealthy house in the centre of Scotland, the other a comparatively insignificant foundation in a remote part of the country. Still, Crossraguel in its prime was a more extensive establishment than one might judge from the few buildings that are still standing around us here. The plan of these monastic institutions always conformed more or less closely to a set design, and from what we can see today we can estimate that this Abbey once covered and enclosed a very considerable area of the surrounding lands that are now laid off in fields and meadows.

It may be helpful to say a word or two in passing about the monastic system in general, its origin and purpose. The first point to be borne in mind is that the inmates of these establishments were not, as often supposed, all or nearly all priests. Monasticism was not, in the first instance at least, a definitely clerical movement. In many

great abbeys, crowded with indwellers there might be only a dozen or so priests or even fewer, just so many were as were requisite to provide for the spiritual necessities of the brethren - in confession and so forth - and to celebrate the series of Masses that were the crown of all sacred worship. To the shelter of the cloister came not only those who followed the clerical vocation but others also - men broken by disappointment or crossed in love or humbled by sin, or who for some other reason found themselves incapable of serving God as they desired so long as they remained in purely secular surroundings and fellowships.

Monasticism, the system of which this institution here in its structure and communal life was a typical example, is not even confined to Christianity. Buddhism has also its monasteries, with their own special rules and observances. The system is the outcome of an instinct and feeling widespread throughout mankind, namely, that a man can serve God better and do better by his own soul if he leaves the world, with its material engrossments, its dangerous excitements, its manifold temptations, and retires to some place of seclusion where, either in solitude or in the fellowship of others like-minded, he may give himself very largely to meditation and religious observance, undisturbed by distraction and apart from contamination. In Christianity this feeling expressed itself at a very early period. Long before the time of Benedict, the great organiser of Christian monasteries, men had been trying, in their own ways, to work out their salvation through religious retirement. It would be far too long a story to attempt to speak of the series of earlier monastic devotees and anchorites. What Benedict did, when he founded the Monastery of Monte Casino in the 6th Century, was to devise a system by means of which the lives of those who wished to retire from the world for religious reasons might be regularised, directed, and controlled to the best advantage.

In the famous Rule which he drew up, and which became the model for innumerable religious houses, provision was made for the moral, intellectual, physical, and religious well-being of all who

accepted it. The monk's time was spaced out so that he would be a man of labour, for the good of his health; a man of study for the cultivation of his mind; a man of prayer and worship, for the salvation of his soul and for the manifestation of God's glory. But as time passed, many of those who lived in houses that professed to be governed by the Benedictine Rule almost forgot its precepts or played lip-service to its behests. One hundred, two hundred, three hundred years, and you might have entered an increasing number of monasteries only to find their life and discipline far astray from their profession. Lax morals; easy living; slumber when there should have been study; greedy indulgence in meats and drinks by those who should have been spare in diet; idleness when there should have been steady labour in the garden and farm, slovenliness and neglect in prayer and Divine worship - these, by the 9th and 10th centuries, had grown all too common. So the time had come when there was need for someone to arise and bring the spirit of Benedict back again, making the monasteries what they professed to be and what indeed they must be, if there was to be any chance of their survival - homes of industry and study, and purity and prayer and piety.

It was at Cluny in Burgundy that one of the first and greatest attempts at monastic revival and reformation was undertaken, under Berno and Odo, two of the great founders of the house. Berno actually began the work. The Duke of Aquitaine had expressed a desire to endow a new abbey on his lands, and he consulted Berno, a churchman who was alive to the clamant need of amending and purifying the life of all such institutions, and as to where it should be placed. The site which Berno fixed upon happened to be already occupied by the Duke's own hunting kennels. The great man demurred to Berno's choice. "Drive out the dogs," said Berno, "and put monks in their place, for thou canst well think what reward God will give thee for dogs and what for monks." "So the Abbey of Cluny began to be built, a monastery eventually so extensive in size that the Pope of Rome and Louis of France, each with his full retinue could stay there at once, without a single monk having to leave his cell.' The discipline of the place was a model of strictness and propriety;

the abuses by which so many religious houses had been crippled and disgraced were given no footing within its walls: St Benedict had come to life again and his famous Rule was re-enacted. "Here there was no private property, no indulgence in forbidden foods, no pandering to the flesh. Men, sparing in diet and disciplined in obedience, devoted themselves to the worship of God." To this house, during the lifetime of its founder came Odo, the man who was to make the name of Cluny known and honoured far and wide. He too had been horrified by the corruption and disgrace into which so many of the monasteries had lapsed. Monks and abbots living in hatred and jealousy of each other, and sometimes in the scandal of open sin: the brocaded vestments turned into dresses for their women: the communion plate melted into earrings and ornaments: Sunday revellings in the monasteries: gluttony, drunkenness, poisoning and murdering; suppression of all attempts at reform - these things revolted Odo's sensitive soul, which was as delicate as his fragile body. In Cluny he found something different, a spiritual atmosphere such as his nature craved for, devotion to duty, purity of life, deep and intense piety, and an orderly round of unremitted services and Masses, the "Opus Die" in all its glory and fullness. Odo succeeded Berno as head of the new monastery in 927, and when his own death took place in 942 Cluny had become the head and mother of a multitude of religious houses that had put themselves under her jurisdiction and set about reforming themselves on the lines of her ideal.

Very soon the new monastery was second only to Rome itself as a centre of religious influence. A tree had been planted whose branches shot high up and far out. So ripe was the time for such a movement as began in Cluny, so sick were all right-thinking men of the corruption into which monkery had fallen, that the name of Cluny spread from Burgundy far overseas, into England and Scotland. Thus we have in the West of our own country these two religious houses, Paisley and Crossraguel, both of which were founded to show men (as Berno and Odo had zealously affirmed and abundantly proved) that monasteries had still a large and valuable place to fill in the

religious life of mankind, and that within their walls it was still possible for earnest men to live usefully, peacefully, purely, piously.

The influence of Cluny, then, was of the nature of a reform, a return to a more conscientious observance of the rules laid down by St Benedict. But when once the Order began to grow in numbers and in reputation, the world discovered that there had come into being a new vigorous organism, with fresh distinctive aims and methods of its own. Let us look at one or two of the features by which the monks of Cluny were differentiated from others.

A passing reference may be made to the careful observance of the Rule of Silence in these houses. Taciturnity, as it was called was always more or less strictly enjoined on all monks. There seems to have been a superstitious dread of the sound of the human voice in ordinary speech; conversation was only permitted at certain times and in specific places. The monks' "parlour" must have been a popular in the abbey, as there the brethren could let their tongues wag with some freedom, undeterred by the risk of rebuke. Elsewhere the monasteries were homes of silence - at least so far as the rule was faithfully observed. In this respect the Cluniac houses were specially strict. But while you may forbid men to speak aloud, you can hardly prevent their finding other ways of holding communication with one another. Those in charge of convict prisons know this. So the monks of the Cluniac abbeys gradually developed a highly elaborate kind of "deaf and dumb alphabet", an extensive series of signs and gestures, by means of hand and head and eye and lip, through which they could converse almost as freely as by audible speech. Thus of course the purpose of the Rule of Silence was completely defeated. This feature of these religious houses is only a comparatively trifling matter, not without an aspect of comedy and absurdity, and we need not dwell on it further. Two other characteristics of the monasteries of this Order, however, deserve a little closer attention.

The first of these is the fact that all Cluniac establishments wherever they were situated, were in direct subordination to the

parent abbey far away in Burgundy. The Cluniac houses were priories directly under the supervision of the Abbot of Cluny, the autocrat of the Order. They had no initiative of their own. The second is that the Cluniac houses came to be famous for the splendour of their ritual, for the richness of their music, for the gorgeous display of gold and silver and jewels and costly woven cloths, in sacred vessels and vestments and church furniture. This was not part of the founders' intention. The Cluniac movement began quite simply, but gradually it blossomed out into a wealth of artistic craftsmanship and display. It set forth religion so as to make it appeal to the eye and the ear. It wedded devotion and aesthetics. Now these two features, which were part of the tradition of this abbey where we are gathered today, were at once sources of strength and germs of decay in the lives of the monasteries of the Cluniac order.

The fact that there was direct subordination of all houses, wherever situated, to the parent house in France, made the Order very solid, coherent, and self-contained. The prior of Cluny was an autocrat, a monarch, a sort of Pope. In fact it was the autocratic power of the head of Cluny that the ideal of the unquestioned and absolute rule of the Papacy over all Christendom was partly due. Hildebrand, afterwards Pope Gregory VII., the man who was the great champion and consolidator of Papal power in the Middle Ages, had in his youth some association with the abbey of Cluny. Some have believed that he was for a short time a monk there, but this is now denied. However that may be, Hildebrand saw how strong this new monastic Order had grown through its having one supreme head, whose word was law, and he gave his life to securing for the Bishop of Rome the same absolute authority over the Church of Christ. The Cluniac system of subordination gave the Order a solidarity like the stones of a wall grouted with hot-run lime. Yet this same principle of subordination was also a source of weakness. For it meant that everywhere except in France, the Cluniac houses were foreign institutions, and were looked upon with a certain measure of suspicion. In wartime there was always the risk of arrest or confiscation of the property of these un-English abbeys, who owed

allegiance to a proud ecclesiastic in the enemy's country. This suspicion may have been allied to another instinct, with which we cannot but sympathise, namely, the dislike and dread of a type of religion trolled from some power or source at a distance external, autocratic. One of the chief factors that brought about the Reformation in these islands was the desire to cast off the domination of the Pope - a foreign religious ruler. It is doubtful whether Cluny managed to retain complete control of her daughter houses in Scotland until near the end of their career. Probably the binding tie was weakened if not broken long before the Reformation. The Scottish people never yielded easily or pleasantly to external control of their religious affairs. This was for long a very healthy aspect of our national genius. It used to be one of the glories of Scottish religious life that it was the spontaneous expression of the spiritual aspirations of the people themselves. One reason why the church after the Reformation grew and prospered was that its members had a very largely a free hand, and were able to assist in its development along the lines that were suited to the national instinct and desire. The Scots, ever a democratic folk, found in Presbyterianism a religious system akin to their own spirit. They have always been encouraged to seek in the life of their Church an outlet for their for their own racial talents, in thought, in devotional utterance, in practical service. Long may this native-born genius continue to exist and be developed! Long may it be prized and appreciated! Of course there is always the danger that a church may become so self-centred and self-contented in its aims that it grows insular, provincial, un-Catholic. But it would be a bad day for our land if our countrymen should ever cease to take a keen interest and pride in the church of their fathers, and become content to take their religion spoon-fed, ready-made, or second-hand, without discriminating, and not realising their duty to pour into it, in thought and worship and activity, the very best of their own life-blood, their own ripest and most hard-won gifts of faith and service. It was a distinct disadvantage to these Cluniac houses that they stood for an alien and imported system of government and life.

Secondly, the monks of Cluny laid hold of a great truth when

they said that in worship the very best must be given to God, that nothing can be too fine or costly or beautiful for His praise and service. Religion should be as impressive in its forms as man's taste and skill can make it. We in Scotland, after having forgotten this truth for two or three hundred years are only now waking up to a sense of it again. Still, there was a seed of danger lurking even in the luxuriance of beauty into which the Cluniac system flowered in the days of its full artistic splendour.

A monastery, according to St. Benedict was to be a place of labour, study, and worship. But so engrossed did the brethren of Cluny become in the richness of their worship that often they had no time or care for anything else. Labour was neglected, study declined; only "opus dei" - the round of services and Masses - was worth thinking about; that was the be-all and the end-all of cloistral life. Thus other valuable aspects of religious discipline came to be largely overlooked. Such is ever the peril of ornate and sensuous worship; The more beautiful it grows the more apt it is to become an end in itself and a sham substitute for the activities of vital religion. When this takes place, then the Puritan instinct in man gets its innings, and you find a return to simplicity, austerity and what ever seems to savour of personal spiritual experience. The overgrowths of ritualism which the monks of Cluny encouraged had to be pruned away by another order that very largely replaced them, that of the Cistercians, with more modest and plainer customs of religious service.

That aestheticism in worship has serious and ever-present dangers may be illustrated from the life of another great branch of the Christian Church - the Russian or Greek Orthodox in the East. When the Great War ended in 1918, I was serving as an Army Chaplain at Solonika. After the Armistice I was sent for six months to Georgia in the Caucasus, and there it was my custom to attend - often several times a week, - the services of the Cathedral in the great city of Tiflis. Most impressive was the ritual, even to one who knew not a word of the language; splendid music, gorgeous vestments, every priest a dramatist and a consummate artist in bearing and utterance. The

worship was a constant joy, a wonderful spectacle to the eye and a glory in the ear. Certainly, it seemed to get home to the people, just where our dull and humdrum services often fail. But what of the other and deeper sources of spiritual satisfaction which we expect to reach in the Church of God? These were far to seek, as the most thoughtful of the people themselves were swift to acknowledge. I remember once discussing the Cathedral services with a pious Georgian lady of very high rank, and saying how deeply their splendour moved me "Ah, yes," she said, "they are beautiful, but there is a great want compared with your simpler kind of worship. The defect is that our priests do not speak to the people." What she meant was that preaching was practically non-existent. Religious teaching counted for nothing at all. There was hardly any attempt to bring home the simple saving truths of the Gospel, or to instruct the worshippers in practical morality or personal devotion. The clergy were so busy with art and music that they had no time for study, and no inclination to stir up the gift of prayer. The Church was so engrossed in ceremonial and display that there was little or no thought for philanthropy or Christian service. There was the tree, in full and splendid foliage, but when you went up to it and touched the leaves, you found it was fossilised and dead. Perhaps it was one element in the decline of these great churches of which we have been speaking, that from their worship, so perfect in form, spirit and life and earnestness had evaporated. Religion must not only feed the senses: It must waken the mind and touch the heart.

The history of the monastic system is a long one, it stretches over many centuries, but the period of the fully organised activity and splendour of these institutions was comparatively brief. There was a long process of gradual decline, prior to the Reformation, before they almost all decayed and disappeared or were suppressed. Why did they pass away? Internal corruption was part of the cause. The great reforming movements were never permanently successful. The old abuses crept in again and again. The Plagues of the Middle Ages were another element in the decline. The monasteries were thinned out by the Black Death, to such an extent that they could not carry on

their work. Then there was frequently a great encumbrance of debt, incurred by building schemes of ambitious abbots or through waste of revenues. But no doubt the chief reason why the monasteries disappeared was that the religious instinct gradually assumed other and healthier forms of expression. The time came when "God deserted the cloister" and led men out into the world again. After all, it was not natural or profitable that so many strong useful lives should be secluded in these places, and should be making so small a contribution to the religious and social needs of mankind. Apart from the inevitable moral danger, there was here a great waste and leakage of spiritual power.

The Abbey of Crossraguel had a long period of decay before it was finally closed at the Reformation. By that date its membership had shrunk to some ten monks, a quite insufficient number to carry on the labour and worship. You can see for yourselves how at some time or other the Church had been contracted. But it should be instructive to us today to think of this place, as it was at its best, when this little community thrived, men here living their quiet contemplative lives, cultivating these peaceful fields, fulfilling the offices of Divine worship without break or intermission, praising God day and night, rendering to Him the best that they could learn or create, making this fair house of God sweet with songs and beautiful through every aid which art and taste could provide or suggest.

“The House that is to be builded for the Lord must be exceeding magnificent” - that was the text from which the Cluniac Order preached its sermon to mankind, an impressive and memorable discourse that has its lessons for us still. As this old Abbey was associated with a monastic brotherhood so closely wedded to taste and ornament, perhaps its elegy may be more fittingly written in verse than in undecorated prose.

Let us compose it thus -

Crossraguel of Long Ago

Crossraguel's cloister-garth to-day
Is silent, save when song-birds call,
Or casual comers' voices stir
Soft echoes from the crumbling wall.

How changed this scene from long ago
When through the church the brethren went,
Advancing with glad shriven hearts
To celebrate the sacrament!

Then rose the flooded tide of praise
To touch the topmost rafters high -
“O Salutaris Hostia!”
Et “Veneremur cernui.”

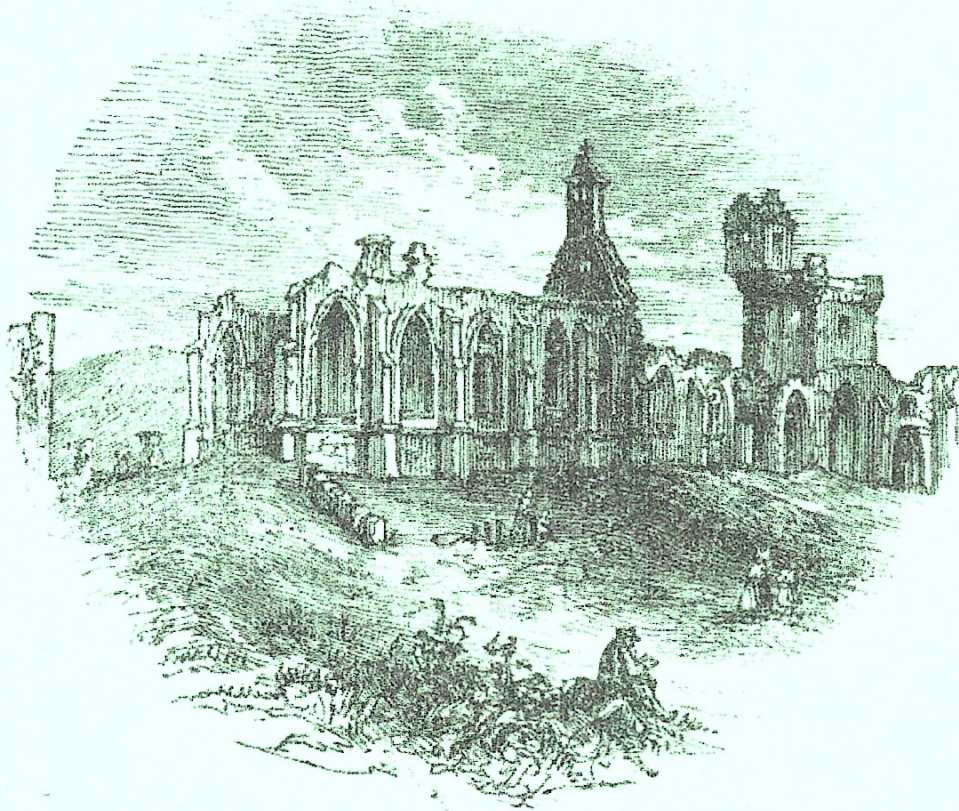
Then wine-red gold and silver clear
Of chalice, cross and cresset shone;
Gemmed vestments sparkled, censers waved -
It was a sight to dream upon!

Now we, the children of an age
In art less gorgeous and profuse,
Seek to serve God through planer forms,
And cultivate a simpler use.

Gone are the days when men their years
Might here reclusely wear away:
No longer shelters faith within
The precinct wall, the pillared bay.

Out in the world his task awaits
The servant of he people's Christ -
To be His voice, above life's din
Sweet-sounding, His evangelist.

Yet may we with esteem recall
Crossraguel's Cluniac choristers:
God make our piety as warm,
Our worship as ungrudged as theirs!



Crossraguel Abbey.

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