

## The Medieval Christian

At the beginning of the twelfth century, Rupert, abbot of Deutz (+1130) composed a treatise on monastic life entitled *De vita vere apostolica* (On the Truly Apostolic Life). What later generations might find disturbing, Rupert defended boldly by suggesting that monastic life, the *vita monastica*, was the true pattern of life for the church. "If you desire to consult all the testimonies of the Scriptures," said Rupert, "they seem to say nothing other than that the church originated in the monastic life." (2) He also wrote, "It is evident that monks, insofar as they are monks, take their form [of life] from the apostles; therefore, all apostles were truly monks." (3)

Only a few years later, Gerhoh of Reichersberg (+ 1169) would write that "whoever has renounced at baptism the devil and all his trappings, . . . even if that person never becomes a cleric or monk, has nonetheless definitely renounced the world Whether rich or poor, noble or serf, merchant or peasant, all who are committed to the Christian faith reject everything inimical to this name .... Every order and absolutely every profession in the Catholic faith and according to the apostolic teaching, has a rule adapted to its character; and under this rule it is possible, by striving, to achieve the crown of glory."

What both statements offer is a description of Christian life, the *vita christiana*. What remains so striking is the Lord under the gospel's rule and live by the orders of the single greatest Abbot or Father "Pater in the Christian life. This expansion of the *vita christiana* from the monastery to the market place signaled a new perception of the laity in the medieval church.

**Monastic Spirituality:** We cannot readily ignore the fact that the inner force of the church in the first feudal age (700-1050) was nourished by monastic life and ideals. It was in the monasteries that the Roman virtues of *ordo* and *stabilitas* were baptized and promoted for the external good of the church's gradual expansion throughout western Europe and the spiritual welfare of those who entered her doors. However, it is one thing to suggest that the *vita monastica* was the inspiration of Christianity in the West, and another to imply that the two were synonymous. Nevertheless, from the viewpoint of some medieval monastic writers, life in the monastery was, indeed, the realization of Christian life. As Rupert of Deutz contended, being a Christian meant being a monk.

Was this simply a form of religious arrogance? Certainly in the eyes of monks it was not, for we know that these writers based their position on an interpretation of history which promoted the notion that monastic life was the direct descendant, the

imitation, of the primitive Christian community at Jerusalem described in Acts 4:32: "Now the company of those who believed, were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common." Unity of heart and soul, common property, renunciation of the world - these were the spiritual and material values monastic writers spoke of as the true marks of the *vita christiana* which the monastery continued to preserve in critical periods of political and economic instability. By the abandonment of private goods in favor of a common life of prayer, the monk imitated the *vita*, the inner life, of the first Christian community.

In effect, this position suggested that the monastic life manifested what the church should really be about: the holiness of God mediated to human beings, but a holiness separated from the world. "The monk leaves the world. Like every Christian, he detaches himself from it. But even more, because of special vocation, he separates himself from it. " However, what St. Augustine had envisaged as the necessary tension between the City of God 'and the City of Man gradually collapsed as the earthly city (the secular world) was either absorbed into, or forgotten by, the City of God (the monastery). In the sacralized world of the feudal monastery, paradise was restored, so that the monk, through prayer, could surrender himself to the delights of heavenly contemplation. As Jean LeClercq has suggested, medieval monastic writings clearly nourished the desire and yearning for celestial life. "Everything in monastic culture is judged according to its men and women for its fulfillment in the world?"

By strongly emphasizing the inner experience of grace to the exclusion of its social dimension, the marks of the church's holiness would not be found in preaching, catechesis, or the celebration of the sacraments among the people, but in being virtuous and living more humbly than anyone else. It is not surprising, then, that the eleventh-century reform of the clergy advocated by Gregory VII, himself educated in a monastic school, was based on an austere penitential code inspired by monastic discipline.

At the same time, we should recognize the intimate bond which linked monastic life and secular culture, a bond which eventually led to the crisis of spirituality which shook western Europe in the second feudal age (1050-1300).<sup>(12)</sup> Although monastic writers promoted a highly sacralized world view, monastic centers were actively involved in the training of theologians, administrators, and missionaries who served not only in the church but also in the courts and palaces of secular rulers. Monasteries also established charitable institutions which distributed food and clothing to the needy, shelter for pilgrims and travelers. In addition, tax

systems, juridical structures, and the execution of legal decisions were often administered by monks. In the static atmosphere of the first feudal age, monastic life existed in a symbiotic relationship with the simple and fixed order of vassalage, an order represented by the traditional threefold structure of society: the knight (who held the sword of temporal power), the priest (who wielded the sword of spiritual power), and the monk (who shed tears of constant prayer).

**Cultural Change:** Three significant factors reinforced this religious and cultural rigidity. First, throughout western Europe, and especially in Germany, France, Italy, and England, low population density had become the norm. Coupled with low agricultural productivity, no major movement in population or produce emerged. Second, because of the chronic disrepair of bridges and roads, and owing to the absence of any postal system, minimal communication took place between regions and political centers. Finally, though some trade existed, it was small in volume and dealt mainly with luxury items. Economic historians have shown that, in this same period, a long-term flow of currency to the East drastically reduced the circulation of monies in western Europe.

Thus, we see a society marked by little movement, a society conveniently ordered into a vertical and paternalistic system undergirded by attachment to agriculture and fidelity to oaths of vassalage. At the same time to emerge in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the permanent value of monastic the sine qua non of Christian spirituality was called into question.

It has been likened to a great thaw and a Russian spring. Other commentators, being more precise, have called it a commercial revolution and the flowering of medieval culture. No matter the name we give it, the emergence of new forms of life and thought in the later Middle Ages implied technical skill, intellectual vigor, commercial wealth, and deep spiritual yearnings which gave birth to systems and institutions we continue to rely upon in the twentieth century. By comparison to the social rigidity of the early Middle Ages, the eruption of new life in the West during this cultural springtime was remarkable.

Once again, we can observe several socioeconomic factors which influenced the life of the church and, thereby, the spirituality of the laity. First, the population of western Europe began to increase steadily in the second feudal age. New villages were created as land was reclaimed through marsh draining, as forests were cut for the expansion of farm production, and as roadways were gradually repaired. Second, a notable had begun around the middle of the eleventh century. Milan, Genoa, Venice, Paris, and Cologne became centers of trade which prompted a

corresponding growth in banking houses. In conjunction with an upsurge in trade, this period witnessed the emergence of a distinctive class of merchants who competed alongside more stable agricultural and pastoral labor groups. At the same time, a variety of guilds emerged independent of services imposed by the restrictions of vassalage.

New educational opportunities also appeared with the change in economic and social conditions. Monastic institutions, the stronghold of early medieval education, found themselves in competition with the dialectical method of urban schools sponsored by the secular clergy and the friars. Thus, another force entered into the social history of the period: civil servants and intellectuals schooled in the midst of thriving urban centers.

Third, with the expansion of commercial life, new trade routes opened between the West and the Byzantine and Islamic East thus precipitating an influx of new commodities as well as new ideas and methods in science and philosophy. Concurrently, the West experienced a gradual thaw in frozen wealth with a corresponding increase in the circulation of market-valued currency.

These socioeconomic factors - increasing population, land reclamation, urban growth, expansion of education opportunities, new trade routes, an emerging merchant class - shaped a new consciousness in medieval culture which strongly influenced the religious spirit of medieval urban life, a spirit which but we do know that any epoch of great vitality has served as a hothouse in which experiences have burst forth in exotic as well as conventional appearance. This was certainly the experience of later medieval society when, for example, Aristotelian and Islamic thought entered the West and won either begrudging interest or unfettered applause. As M.- D. Chenu suggests, the emergence of scientific inquiry moved the medievals to contemplate and study "the harmony of the cosmos ... the place of man in the universe ... where he was himself a nature ... where he tried to exercise his mastery in full consciousness of his own reason for being." This scientific concern for the natural world of human existence found its counterparts in the growing naturalism of Western art and theological interest in creation as an instrumental manifestation of the Creator. Simply stated, the medievals of this period developed and encouraged a new sensitivity to the position of humanity, all men and women, in the universe.

It should not be surprising, then, to discover the skepticism which greeted such curiosity concerning human nature. While the monastic viewpoint tended to diminish the necessity, use, and enjoyment of things in the world (in the quest for

the new Jerusalem, who needed to enjoy the created order?), the emerging interest in festered an enthusiasm for the "laws of nature, an awareness of the demands of reason, and the value of social structures."

In this environment, where new forms of scientific, theological, and commercial activity abounded, the identification of the *vita christiana* with the *vita monastica* gradually crumbled. Though movements of monastic reform had used the model of the apostolic life, the *vita apostolica*, as an ideal which would govern the renewal of monastic culture, the success of such efforts did not, in the end, greatly influence the religious experience of the laity. As the secular world bubbled with unprecedented activity in thought, commerce, and art, monastic writers tended to be more puzzled and confused than tolerant or responsive to those new forms of cultural and religious vitality which were swirling around them. And as European culture moved away from the stability of vassalage and monastic religion, the rigid cohesiveness of feudal life began to disintegrate.

**Lay Spirituality:** Nevertheless, enthusiasm for the *vita apostolica* as the primary model of the *vita christiana* did not diminish. Rather, its attractiveness as way of Christian life was grasped, at least intuitively if not consciously, by those men and women of the church who, in desiring to live the gospel intently and experience Christ's life tangibly, became promoters of lay religious movements independent of the monastery and, at times, pleasure of the call to live a Christian life, albeit in a variety of shadings which ran from lay to the blatantly heretical Cathari. All persons - lay as well as clerics, monks, and friars - were called to imitate Christ and his disciples, so the leaders of these movements suggested. Thus, Christian life in the secular world could be lived as a full-fledged vocation and one in which the fullness of grace was potentially operative. As we are told by James of Vitry, all Christians, by virtue of their baptism and adherence to the rule of the gospel, participate in the *vita christiana*.

The second characteristic which marked many of the lay movements was a circumvention of the existing religious institutions. Through their pursuit of the *vita apostolica*, popular movements offered an alternative to the traditional dependency of the laity upon a diluted form of clerical or monastic spirituality. As participants in this ideal, emphasis was placed upon those aspects of Christian life which had been cherished in monastic culture but now were promoted in the secular world: fraternal charity, study of Scripture, voluntary poverty, active proclamation of the faith.

This "evangelical awakening" involved the occasional usurpation of the episcopal prerogative to preach the faith, a claim which, in the hands of the French and Italian Cathari, prompted papal preaching missions to correct their errors, a bloody crusade to eliminate their leaders, and an episcopal inquisition to silence their teachings and practice. By claiming the right to preach and teach Christian doctrine, the Cathari blurred the distinction between doctrinal preaching (*articuli fidei*) and public exhortation in the faith (*verbum exhortationis*), a distinction made quite clear by Innocent III in 1201.

At the same time, a doctrine of spiritual dualism was being preached by certain groups, notably the Albigensians, which promoted a gross contempt of material goods, the body, and sexuality - a contempt paralleled in the heretical teaching which denied the human nature of Christ, the value of the sacraments, and the established ministries of the church. In essence those groups which were heretical taught in both theory and practice that divine truth was vouchsafed only to the simplest and poorest hearers, a teaching which tended to separate gospel from theology, experience from learning, and spirit from matter.

And yet it is important for us to discern in these popular movements, whether orthodox or heretical, the fundamental yearnings of the spirit which they experienced. Margaret Aston suggests that popular religion "amounted to an endeavor to live with the inexplicable and intolerable." In the face of the unknown, popular belief was, for the most part, attached to the concrete and the tangible, not because popular spirituality was necessarily materialistic, but because visible or literal forms could readily express the presence appreciation of the mystery of Christ, an appreciation which captured the spiritual thousands. By their devotion to the humanity of Christ, witnessed in the popularization of the creche at Greccio and a pronounced devotion to the historical life of Christ, the Franciscans channeled the popular preference for an affective spirituality in a direction both orthodox and meaningful.

Concurrently, the Dominicans, prompted by their speculative bent, encouraged the literary-historical study of Scripture, an effort which had parallels in the vernacular translations of Scripture made by Valdes, a lay evangelist who also promoted active study of Scripture among his followers. The two mendicant orders, Franciscans and Dominicans, engaged the popular religious spirit which desired to experience the life of Christ and to understand the Christ of Scripture. Though born themselves in a new religious milieu, they served as midwives at the birth of a new understanding in spirituality, one which attempted to situate the activity of grace wherever people responded to it in faith, whether in the cloister or the city square.

The imitation of Christ and his disciples, the study of Scripture, the desire to communicate the faith, and need - these were the ideals which shaped the evangelical project of many lay movements in the later Middle Ages. Once the break with monastic spirituality had begun, the *ministerium verbi inter gentes* ("the ministry of the Word among the people") could rightly become an experience and project in which a variety of persons could participate. Obviously, it would be wrong to assume that the laity emerged as prominent leaders in the organization of the church. But it would not be incorrect to suggest that whenever the church "seeks to find its proper theater of activity in the world, it has proper recourse to laymen, who are familiar with and inhabit this world, and not first to clerics who have more or less abandoned it."

That the *vita christiana* was planted, nourished, and came to fruition in a variety of forms both bizarre and normal attests to the extraordinary hungers of the medieval spirit and the desire which many medievals experienced to translate those yearnings into some visible form of life or devotion. That these lay movements turned, not to the established *vita monastica*, but to the "rule of the gospel" testifies to the perduring strength and ability of the word of God to serve as a source of spiritual renewal in every age. For we know that the spirituality of the laity which emerged in western Europe during the later Middle Ages heralded a new appreciation for the activity of grace present in every order and profession of the Catholic faith, an activity bound not by the social sluggishness of cloister or church, but present in the encounter between grace and nature, Christ and culture, the gospel and secular existence.