

THE INHERENT ROLE OF BEAUTY

IN THE MONASTIC TRADITION OF ST BENEDICT'S RULE

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It is not so very long since the idea of development first began to have radical influence on our understanding of Catholic belief and practice. Before the idea of development became respectable, and still in some minds today, every idea was static and stability meant immobility mental as well as physical. Newman was a pioneer of the change and it was on the feast of the Purification in 1843 at the height of the Oxford Movement that he preached a sermon in the University Church of St Mary the Virgin which proved to be a doctrinal watershed. Its subject was The Theory of Developments in Religious Doctrine. .

This is how Newman began:

“St Mary is our pattern of faith both in the reception and in the study of divine truth. She does not think it enough to accept, she dwells upon it; not enough to possess, she uses it; not enough to assent, she develops it.”

Of scripture he went on to say: “Its half sentences, its overflowings of language, admit of development; they have a life in them which shows itself in progress; a truth which has the token of consistency; a reality which is fruitful in resources; a depth which extends into mystery.”

And it was not only in scripture that the seeds of development and hidden meanings were to be found. He spoke also of poets as being “possessed, ruled, guided by an unconscious idea;” [and that was more than fifty years before Freud and Jung.]

He insisted on “the reality and permanence of inward knowledge, as distinct from explicit confession;” and he noted that “even centuries might pass without the formal expression of a truth, which had been all along the secret life of millions of faithful souls.”

This idea of doctrinal development brought Newman into the Roman Church. In his day the Roman theologians were indulgent but not enthusiastic. It has had a chequered history since then. In the ice age of the Modernism it was chilled to inanity. It came into its own in Vatican II in a largely hidden and unacknowledged way. It is needed today and has a future in the face of fundamentalism and literalism as well as the explosion of human knowledge about the nature of the world - about mankind, about its origins, about the meaning of life, about its spiritual roots.

The idea of development is important also for the tradition of the scripture-saturated text of RB. Today historical analysis about what it did literally mean in the sixth century is in fashion, but that cannot be enough. Understanding of how it has survived and its developing meaning in each age - the development that kept it alive - is also important. You won't learn how to prune a tree to get more fruit from it simply by a minute examination of its seed.

The Rule has been alive in many different times and cultures through 14 centuries; and during that time it has developed, grown, diversified, matured and branched into new creativeness; it has cast new images and been the spiritual source of new perspectives - spiritual, literary,

musical, artistic. It has thus acquired new meanings, new resonances that were unsuspected by its author. This growing richness has stayed with it and broadened its influence. It is not a dead text belonging only to the past - to be treated like some obscure writing from a dead civilisation. It has remained alive from one age to another and it has often acquired surprising new leases of life.

It has done this in the late 20th century when the laity are making it their own, in spite of - or perhaps because of - the grey and spiritually depressive secularism of the age, when laity are supposed to be effectively alienated from all that is sacred and thus set free for a decent, slow, spiritual death in the throw-away society. They have seen something in RB which fits their spiritual need. It is an entirely new phase in monastic history, the end of which is not in sight. I think that it is beauty - open and hidden - that draws them.

Mature old wine can recall not only the sun and the soil of the vineyard but also the long, dark vigil in a cool cellar. It is the same with Benedict's Rule. To read it is to recall its tradition, its history, its development, the changes it has brought to human life, what it has done to the human heart through the ages, what the human heart has made of it and how it may touch the human heart today. What is this attraction of the Rule? Where do we look in the Rule - how do we look at it to find the secret of its ever-new beauty, for surely it is not the mundane practical usefulness of the Rule that has kept it alive. If we look for something unique and special in RB it may well turn out to be the eternal beauty to which it is a guide and from which it draws its hidden power for evangelisation.

Hans Urs von Balthasar has taught me that, if you are going to bring the concept of beauty into your theology to stand beside truth and goodness, you must look for a transcendent form - a focus of transcendent reality that radiates that beauty. If such a source of beauty is to be found in the Rule, it lies not in a theory about how to organize monastic life, nor in an ascetical programme, nor in any of the institutions nor the artifacts nor the gems of culture that RB has given to the world. It does not essentially lie in writing or scholarship or architecture and creative arts, nor yet in education and evangelisation. Those are all side-effects of the inherent beauty of the Rule - at best reflections of essential beauty; but they are not the source of inner beauty itself; they were, none of them, in fact what St Benedict aimed at when he wrote the Rule at Monte Cassino.

Men & women have been drawn through the ages to RB by the beauty of a person - the incarnate Son of God - Christ himself. He stands at the centre, at the heart of the Rule. He must, St Benedict insists, be preferred by monks to absolutely everything else. "Let them put nothing whatever before the love of Christ." The love of Christ and its power for healing and leading us to eternal life radiates all the attraction that draws men and women towards Benedictine life today, whether they are monks and nuns or lay people.

The Rule, then, is a radically incarnational document. St Benedict himself did not lack appreciation of Christ's love and concern for us. You can tell that when he writes in the Prologue: "What gentler encouragement could we have than that word of the Lord calling us to himself in such a way. We can see with what loving concern the Lord points out to us the path of life."

In today's developing church von Balthasar can write a more vivid meditation on that theme of God's love for us:

"God created a heart for himself and placed it in the centre of the world. It was a human heart and it knew the impulses and yearnings of the human heart, was experienced in all the windings and wanderings, changes of weather and drives - experienced in all the bitter joy and joyful bitterness which any human heart has ever savoured. The human heart most foolish, most obstinate, most fickle of all creatures, the seat of all fidelity and of all treachery; an instrument richer than a full orchestra and poorer than a grasshopper's empty chirping; in its incomprehensibility a mirror image of God's own incomprehensibility. This it was that he drew from the world's rib as it slept, and he fashioned it into the organ of his divine love. With this weapon he already stood in the middle of enemy territory, like the warrior in the belly of the Trojan horse, and he already shared fully in the world's bustle, knew all from within."

von Balthasar's language would have been impossible for Benedict, living, as he did, under the threatening shadow of Arianism. Yet what Benedict wrote looks forward bravely to the Church's perceptions of today. The Rule is not a dead but a living document - a document not only of the past but also of the present and the future. Christ is still the centre of the Rule, attracting by his truth and goodness indeed, but most profoundly and universally by the irresistible beauty of his self-giving, which we call love. It is so much needed today that it must be expressed in the language of today.