

FATHERS AND CHILDREN OF THE CHURCH*

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The title of this paper ought to have been expanded with a sub-title which said something more or less like this:- "Observations of a son of the Catholic Church on the teaching of Fr. Benedict Calati, faithful disciple of Gregory the Great, chief of the Fathers of the Christian church of the West." All I have to say, in fact, is nothing but an expression of my awareness of the Fathers of the Western Church gained from the constant attention that a Camaldolese monk such as I am has tried to give to the reading of the Fathers. For more than forty years I have been helped along the way to God by my abbot and spiritual Father in the monastic life at Camaldoli in Italy.

"Amongst the foundation documents of primitive Benedictine monasticism we must surely find a place for the dialogues of Saint Gregory the Great which deal with the lives and miracles of the Italian Fathers (*de vita et miraculis Patrum Italicorum*)."

These are the opening words of a famous article by Fr. Benedict Calati entitled "*The Dialogues of Saint Gregory the Great: an investigation into monastic spirituality*", published in two parts in the Camaldolese quarterly magazine *Vita Monastica* 49 (1957) 61-70 and 50 (1957) 108-116.

In the view of Fr. Calati (Professor of mediaeval monastic spirituality at the Monastic Institute of the Roman theological faculty of the Anselmianum), an investigation into the spiritual thought of the great Pope of Rome was a necessary complement to the very interesting research which he had carried out in tracing the patristic sources of the founding Fathers of Camaldoli (Saint Romualdo, Saint Peter Damian, Saint Bruno of Querfurt, and the Blessed Rodolfo), which they made use of in the middle-northern parts of Italy during the eleventh century.

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In order to support with yet more evidence the importance of Gregory the Great as the chief of the Western Fathers, Fr. Calati continues thus:-

“The Benedictine tradition is unanimous in recognising in the *Dialogues* one of the most significant patristic documents concerned with monastic spirituality in general and Benedictine spirituality in particular. They have, moreover, exercised an enormous influence, together with other works of Saint Gregory, upon the Latin Fathers from the seventh and eighth centuries up to the twelfth. Confirmation of this influence is given by the presence of Gregorian works in all the catalogues of mediaeval monastic libraries.” (“Investigation,” 61)

Of the four books in which Gregory the Great puts forward the best of his spiritual insights, it is obvious that Benedictine monks value above all the others the second one, which deals with what can be defined as “the first synthesis of Benedictine spirituality”.

1. *The return to Paradise is the central theme of monastic theology.*

The “return to paradise”, a fundamental idea in the theology of Saint Gregory, bears a very precise reference to that part of Genesis where man, first put by God into Paradise, and then immediately punished because of his disobedience, cannot return so long as that Paradise remains forbidden to him by his Lord. However, the use of the return to Paradise for hagiographical purposes (as Fr. Calati draws our attention to in a polemical point concerned with confronting those who disparage the spiritual formation of the old monks) is equivalent to having a modern historical viewpoint that is quite different from the ascetical presuppositions of the middle-ages! (cf *Ibid.*, 61–62) In fact “man was made for Paradise; because of sin, he was expelled and driven out into exile.... Through the incarnation of the Son of God and through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on our hearts, the life of blessedness comes back for us all. But in this “way of return” there are some masters, those who are taught by the Holy Paraclete and have a vocation to confirm in faith about things invisible and heavenly those who are not yet as strong and established. They are witnesses of Paradise” (*Ibid.*, 62).

2. *The Monastic life leads man to Paradise*

The Monastic enclosure is in fact “Paradise regained”. Fr. Calati quotes, to reinforce what Gregory says in the *Dialogues*, from the *Letter to Theoctistes* of the

same Pope of Rome, in which the monastic life is likened to angelic life and to the life in Eden when man and woman lived “extra carnem, extra mundum”. The same opinion was held in every monastic establishment throughout both the East and the West. The Camaldolese tradition often mentions the heavenly aspect of a hermitage as the Garden of Eden and of a cell as Paradise, but the idea had already been widely aired in the traditions of the ancient Fathers of Christian monasticism. There are many witnesses that one might cite; but staying with the study of Fr. Calati, we might mention the description made by Saint Peter Damian in his *Letter to Hugo*, the Abbot of Cluny, of that great conventual house as “a Paradise watered by four rivers which are the pure doctrine of the holy Evangelists” (Ibid., 63). And Fr. Calati comments on this thus:-

“The holy monks are genuine witnesses of the return to the life of Paradise through that greater hope which they have by the grace of the Holy Spirit. From this it is possible to take them as models for those who are still young in the spiritual life and who ought, therefore, to receive as humble disciples the experience of others of Paradise who “experimentum invisibilium per Spiritum Sanctum iam habent”. In this way the “examples of the holy Fathers” are of the same importance as the holy doctrine which is received by means of the *lectio* and *meditatio* of Holy Scripture. And thus the examples of the holy monks, just as much as Holy Scripture, lead to love of the kingdom of heaven; and further more, the examples are in a more understandable language. They are in fact “any of those, as Gregory says, who are burning with love for the kingdom above on high, more by deeds than by words”. Finally one can say that the monastic life allows one to enjoy in advance upon earth the life of Paradise and of Eden, be it by meditation upon Holy Scripture, which sets us upon the way for seeing and reaching God, or be it through the examples of the holy monks, which restore and anticipate the friendship of blessed spirits” (Ibid., 63–64).

3. *The need for a master to point out the way for the return to Paradise.*

In Saint Benedict the Western monastic tradition has recognised the master *par excellence* of the monastic life. The teaching which Saint Benedict has given to us is found principally in his *Regula monachorum*. But it is necessary to add that Saint Benedict himself stresses the need for a living master who is physically near to the monk and who interprets for him those requirements of the rule which presuppose continual attention and personal oversight only from a Father or Master who is available daily and nearby for the monk. Master Benedict of Norcia restricted his

teaching to the writings of his Rule; but he also, indeed perhaps more so, proposes himself as a model of monastic perfection. In each case it is this second aspect which Gregory the Great indicates to his readers as “a light put on a candlestick to illuminate all the house”. In doing this the Pope of Rome describes then the monk of Norcia as “*spiritu omnium iustorum repletus*”, applying to Benedict a spiritual quality known beforehand in tradition, both in the East and in the West, which is met with in the perfect monk and above all in the monastic legislators and founding Fathers of monasteries, both conventual and eremetical, a kind of memorial of the lives of just and holy men recorded in both the Old and New Testaments. In reality “beneath mediaeval hagiography, and beneath its spirituality, is the historic idea of the divine economy which we find in the Bible”, explains Fr. Calati. “The saint is he who puts himself on this historical level. Here is found the essence of the state of Eden and also of the miraculous, as well as of the gifts and the direct action of the Holy Spirit. In this context one can conclude that ancient hagiography is much more historical than the modern type, considered methodologically rather than philosophically” (p. 64). The historic, we ought to make clear, is not the same as the historiographic, and even less like the historicist.

4. *The Teaching of the Master is a programme for life.*

The return to Paradise, which Fr. Calati presents as a coming together of both the teaching enshrined in the life of Benedict and the scheme of Gregory the Great, has two distinct elements: that of ascetic detachment, and that of mystical participation in the lordship of God.

The ascetic detachment of the monk

At this first stage the master presents and explains a kind of gradual stripping away of the monk. It consists of the following steps:-

- (a) Withdrawal (*recessit*): “deliberately simple and un-wordly-wise, *solī Deo placere desiderans*.”
- (b) Hiding oneself in a solitary place, “preferring troubles to the praise of men, and preferring suffering for the love of God rather than being lifted up on high”.
- (c) Becoming like a monk, that is to say, recognising the Lord as the one master, explains Fr. Calati, as Adam did in Eden at the moment when “his solitary life had the character of a condition theological and charismatic, intimately connected with the state of paradise. Saint Benedict chose to turn this expression simply into *vir Dei*, or in fact one instructed directly by God, because (as Pope

Gregory says) “there are some who are trained within by the direct instruction of the divine Spirit and who therefore, although not having outwardly a school of human discipline, do not lack the guidance of an interior master.... John the Baptist did not have a master. The Spirit of Truth did not make the Forerunner join visibly a group of fellow-disciples, but left him free outwardly to be instructed inwardly. It was the same with Moses: he was instructed in isolation in the desert; he learned from the angel that commandment which he had not received from humans. And so also with Benedict, concludes the Camaldolese monk: He was put into that “school of the Holy spirit”, superior to human instruction, after the beginning of his conversion,” (Ibid., 65–66). It is not strange, then, that his hagiography describes him as *Vir Dei Benedictus* from this first moment of his own personal “return to Paradise”.

- (d) To be tested. To have stability in the life of Paradise it is necessary to conquer; but the paramount temptation remains the “temptation of the flesh”, because since Adam and Eve remained marked by the sin of the flesh, (in fact “having seen that they were naked, they sewed together the leaves of a fig tree and made aprons for themselves”), so also the gift of virginity discloses that new state of affairs in which monks find themselves living in a paradisaical space as “sons of the resurrection” who “neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like the angels in heaven”. Fr. Calati then explains that if in the hierarchy of the temptations of the ascetic the first are always sexual ones, the reason for this is found in the fact that from the beginning the monk is put in close and direct union with God in the historical Paradise of the Bible and nothing shows that more clearly than virginity. Although this gift may not be given equally to everyone, Saint Gregory insists that it is an important revelation “propter experimentum Spiritus Sancti”, above all for those who are called to be Fathers and masters of others in the way of faith (cf Ibid., 67).

Mystical participation in the lordship of God

In the second stage we ought to observe a progressive participation on the part of the monk in the “virtutes” of the first Adam. Concrete signs that one has acquired such a mastery are the gifts that accompany the *vir Dei* in his overcoming of temptations of the flesh from then on. Relying faithfully upon Gregorian texts, Fr. Calati says concerning this:-

- (a) There is a *paternitas spiritualis*, known personally in the gift of virginity.
 (b) There is a *dominium supra res*, shown through a series of miraculous or

marvellous events spread throughout the life of the just man who has become the new Adam. This dominion over created things, explains Fr. Calati, which always accompanies the life of the *vir Dei* (who at the same time resembles and is connected with one or other character of the Old or the New Testaments), is not just a simple coincidence; but it has historical value insofar as the biblical drama is fulfilled and completed in every righteous man up to the end of time. Like this Benedict, for example, was a *vir Dei*, as were Moses, Elijah, Elishah, David and Peter. We are dealing in every case with an idea found throughout the hagiography of Christian antiquity. (cf *Ibid.*, 68)

- (c) There is a *dominium supra eventus*, strictly connected to the gift of prophecy.
- (d) There is a *dominium supra potentes saeculi*, which is exercised in events which test the courage and fearlessness of the *vir Dei* in confrontations with Kings and emperors.
- (e) There is a *dominium supra daemones*, strongly stressed, because more so than with any other gift it shows that there where the first Adam suffered the aboriginal defeat, the new Adam could show his victorious triumph through the weaponry of Christ.

In reality the whole of the old hagiographic tradition, observes Calati, sees the work of 'Jesus Christ as aimed at destroying the kingdom of Satan in order to spread the kingdom of God on earth in the minds and in the hearts of men. And so because Christian asceticism is seen as a kind of struggle waged against demons that requires the help of the brethren (*vita cenobitica*), it will also be an individual fight (*vita eremitica*) right up to the complete defeat of Satan in pagan territories (*evangelium paganorum*) which are as yet still contested, (cf *Ibid.*, 69–70)

- (f) There is a *dominium supra res spirituales*, a gift which could also be called "charismatic priesthood" at a time when there is overwhelming evidence of the exercise of powers concerned with the salvation of souls, whether through preaching "extra munus stricte hierarchicum", whether through intercessory prayer directed to God on behalf of the dead and for the needs of all sorts of people (*ivi*), or whether through discerning if a spirit is of God or not.

5. *Continual Prayer*

During the journey of the return to Paradise the man of God feeds himself on continual prayer. This contains some fundamental elements proper to the prayer of the monk.

The fact of prayer, Fr. Calati reminds us, controls the interior journey of the return. "As Adam before the fall spoke with God as a friend and as a son, a thing which was not possible after the fall, so the *vir Dei* restored to the original condition of Paradise, regains his own familiarity with his "Lord". [*Vita monastica* 50 (1957) 108]

The prayer of the monk, characterised always by this familiarity and sonship, can assume various forms.

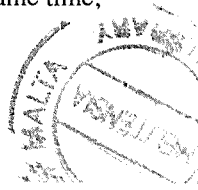
- (a) First of all it can be expressed *cum lacrimis*, as when Benedict, on the occasion of his nurse weeping over a broken wine jar (*capistero*), comforted her by mending it. (p 108)
- (b) One can be raised in gratitude, blessing the Lord in the dividing of the word and the bread, as is recounted in the dialogues concerning the meeting of Benedict with a priest, sent to him by the Lord to celebrate Easter.
- (c) It can accompany the return in itself after a particularly insidious temptation (one remembers the *ad semetipsum reversus* of *Dialogue, II, 2*).
- (d) It can be shared with one's brethren in times of stability through the *orationis studium*, or on specific occasions when one needs the supportive prayer of brothers or sisters around one.
- (e) But it is above all a habit, or better still a kind of daily rhythm, of the monk who lives continually in the presence of God, which is, according to the wonderful expression of Gregory, "*habitare secum in superni spectatoris oculis*".

6. *The Praying journey of the Christian Monk*

"To leave behind all that is alien to our state as sons of God; to re-enter the intimacy of souls redeemed by God, and then to be raised up day after day to enjoy the heavenly joys of contemplation. These are the three stages, explains Fr. Calati, on our journey of the return to Paradise. And indeed, this itself is the model for prayer which Gregory suggested when, after the arrival of Benedict at Vicovaro, he observed: 'Now Benedict has come back to his delightful solitude and he remains by himself (*habitavit secum*) in the presence of God.'" (p 109)

The Camaldolese monk continues:-

"In a negative sense *habitare secum* implies leaving that state which by excessive cerebration distracts us from ourselves (*per cogitationis motum nimium extra nos ducimur*), so that we are and we are not with ourselves at one and the same time,



because not having our eyes on ourselves, we are preoccupied with other matters (*et nos sumus et nobiscum non sumus, quia nosmetipsos minime videntes per alia vagamur*). And that was what Saint Benedict felt in that temptation, by which he was almost overcome, and risked abandoning his solitude; or else it is that interior state in which the slothful monk does not want to be present at prayer and, leaving the Church, wanders about here and there on secular business (*et mente vaga terrena agebat*). Sin is the final experience of this life *extra nos*. In a positive sense *habitare secum* indicates the re-entry into oneself (*ad cor redire*), which is then the true return to Paradise. "I should like to say therefore," Gregory in fact writes, "that the man worthy of reverence is always attentive to self-control, always holds God before himself, always examines himself, and does not allow the eyes of the soul to wander away from himself." (pp 109–110)

7. *The Vision of Paradise*

The experience of contemplation for the monk comes together with the heavenly vision of glory.

"Saint Benedict sees Paradise as the holy Patriarchs and prophets of the Old Testament saw it, as Saint Paul in the New Testament saw it. It is in the luminous trail of this tradition that we find the Father of the monks "full of the spirit of all the righteous". The thought of Gregory the Great always directs us on to the reality of the return to Eden. For this reason the monk, passing from prayer to contemplation, reaches that ecstasy where he may enjoy *in via* the joys which belong to Paradise," (Ibid., 110).

8. *The return (reditus) effected*

After such an experience, contemplative or mystical, of the vision of Paradise, which gives us an awareness of the ephemeral nature of worldly things, there is still the actual return to Paradise to be made. From the *exitus mysticus* we cannot but arrive at the *exitus corporalis*," concludes Fr. Calati (Ibid., 111), "not without first noticing that ancient spirituality joins the ecstasy of contemplation to perfect charity. It would be rash and misleading to infer consequences which are typical of the mentality and thought-processes of modern times from premises which presuppose a mentality totally and typically biblical, such as that of Gregory the Great" (cf Ibid., 110)

Indeed we are dealing with that sabbath rest which crowns a complete life. Gregory writes concerning Saint Benedict:

“The sixth day the disciples spend in prayer and prepare for receiving the Body and Blood of the Lord. Then the disciples hold up their hands, raise their palms to heaven, standing on the right-hand side, and being among the prayers of those who utter their last breath.” “In this way, for Saint Benedict,” comments Fr. Calati, “there begins the mystic sabbath, like the seventh day on which God rested from creating. All mediaeval people thought this was symbolic of the contemplative life, perfected and stable for ever. Two monks both together (and this is the account given by Gregory) saw a roadway covered with carpets and illuminated by very many lamps. This road came from Benedict’s cell, went towards the east, and made straight for heaven. And a man praying at the summit of the road explained to the two monks: ‘This is the road by which the beloved of God, Benedict, climbed up to heaven.’ He is now in his homeland, in Paradise. *Hodie mecum eris in Paradiso!* The life of Benedict indeed shows us, as in this vision, the true way from earth to heaven.” (Ibid., 111–112)

9. *The abiding nature of Benedictine spirituality*

The conclusions which Fr. Calati draws from his thorough explanation of Benedictine spirituality, drawn from the second book of the *Dialogues* of Saint Gregory the Great, remain as milestones for the Camaldolese monk to refer to constantly during the journey of the years which are dedicated to the study, and research into the fundamental elements, of monastic spirituality and the Christian endeavour, using the resources of the Fathers of the Church.

They can be characterised by the following six points:-

1. Constant reference to the sacred history with regard to the return to Paradise by means of the double ladder of humility and prayer. This is a theme that always crops up in the context of the contemplative life, together with perfect charity, a point reached by the ladder of humility and by the ladder of continual prayer. Humility is a mystical ladder, resting on the earth, but which leads up to heaven, as was the ladder seen by the patriarch Jacob. Heaven, or Paradise regained, is indeed perfect charity.

The monastic life is characterised above all else as the way that leads to Paradise.

After the aboriginal sin the course of this “way” inevitably involves that renunciation of the world which the monk effects with monastic asceticism, in which the components are retirement into solitude, *extra mundum* or *extra carnem*

and continuing conversion of life (*conversio morum*). Temptation is inevitable, and by overcoming it and rising above it, achieved most of all by the exercise of the virtues of humility and obedience, the monk is led to the enjoyment of the joys of Paradise. Prayer demands the attention of the heart in such a way as not to permit the eyes of the soul to stray *extra se*; but this is also that particular gift of grace that allows the monk to taste of the vision of Paradise, accustoming him to see everything in God at the same time that he is rendered more conscious of his flight from creaturely things. (cf pp 112–114)

2. *Community and obedience.* The direct teaching of the Holy Spirit is not an ordinary rule; instead, it prevents disciples from becoming teachers of errors. And so it is normal for everyone that the return to Paradise should come through obedience to the abbot. Nevertheless, the possibility of an interior teaching of the Spirit makes monastic obedience perfect freedom, always tending *ad maiora*, and bearing a supernatural and mystical character, not just a disciplinary one. Obedience which is merely juridical, military, or formal undervalues the true worth of the cenobitic life.

There are certain signs to indicate that the soul is put under the direct control of the Spirit: when “the mind, inhabited by the divine Spirit, shows incontrovertibly the virtue and especially the humility which, when harmoniously found together in the same person, are a witness of the presence of the Holy Spirit”, as Gregory teaches us. (Ibid., 114).

3. *The mystical character of monastic asceticism.* The theme of the return to Paradise can be understood only in a biblical context. One is dealing here with repeating in a monastic context the deeds and personages of the bible, using the same scrupulous care and wisdom in both cases. (ivi).

4. *The fruit of perfect asceticism in evangelisation.* The spiritual aspect of Italian monasticism is shown most chiefly in the development of monasticism in the Anglo-German countries first of all and then afterwards in the Romualdine movement of the eleventh century. But evangelisation is seen most obviously in Celtic monasticism.

5. *The Gift of miracles.* Miracles are possible, but not necessary.

In fact the merit of the life is found in the worth of good works, not in the appearance of miracles. (Ibid., 115)

6. *The liberty of the sons of God.* There is the reply of Saint Benedict, famous throughout the middle ages, to the hermit Martin who, to safeguard his *stabilitas in cella*, tied himself with a chain to a tree-stump: "*Non teneat te catena ferri, sed teneat te catena Christi*".

Martin obeyed and undid the chain; but he did not put a foot outside the small area in which he had been confined with a chain of iron. For this iron chain he had substituted the chain of Christ. It was symbolic of all Benedictine spirituality. The monk who is supported and guided by the love of Christ ought always to be free to move creatively on his welcome return to Paradise and so reach the end of the road shown in the mystery of salvation-history. (Ibid., 116)

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