



"Nothing Dearer Than Christ"

Oblate letter of the Pluscarden Benedictines

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"Let nothing be preferred to the Work of God" (HR 43:3).

Goodness of life and wisdom in teaching must be the criteria for choosing the one to be made Abbot, even if he is the last in community rank. Once in office, the Abbot must keep constantly in mind the nature of the burden he has received, and remember to whom he will have to give an account of his stewardship. Let him recognise that his goal must be profit for his monks, not preeminence for himself. He ought, therefore, to be learned in divine law, so that he has a treasury of knowledge from which he can bring out what is new and what is old. He must be chaste, temperate and merciful. He must hate faults, but love the brothers. He is to distrust his own frailty. Whether the task he assigns concerns God or the world, he should be discerning and moderate, bearing in mind the discretion of holy Jacob, who said: "If I drive my flocks too hard, they will all perish in a day." Therefore, drawing on this and other examples of discretion, the mother of virtues, he must so arrange everything that the strong have something to yearn for, and the weak nothing to run from.

From the Holy Rule, Chapter 64: The Election of an Abbot.

MONASTIC VOICES

Son of man, I have appointed you as watchman ['Gregory' means 'Watchman'] to the house of Israel (Ezk 3:17). Note that Ezekiel, whom the Lord sent to preach his word, is described as a watchman. Now a watchman always takes up his position on the heights so that he can see from a distance whoever approaches. Likewise whoever is appointed watchman to a people should live a life on the heights, so that he can help them by taking a wide survey.

These words are hard to utter, for when I speak it is myself that I am reproaching. I do not preach as I should, nor does my life follow the principles I preach so inadequately. I do not deny that I am guilty, for I see my torpor and my negligence. Perhaps my very recognition of failure will win me pardon from a sympathetic judge.

When I lived in a monastic community I was able to keep my tongue from idle topics and to devote my mind almost continually to the discipline of prayer. Since taking on my shoulders the burden of pastoral care, I have been unable to keep steadily recollected, because my mind is distracted by many responsibilities. I am forced to consider questions affecting churches and monasteries, and often I must judge the lives and actions of individuals. At one moment I am forced to take part in civil affairs, next I must worry over the incursions of barbarians, and fear the wolves who menace the flock entrusted to my care. Now I must accept political responsibility in order to give support to those who preserve the rule of law; now I must bear patiently the villainies of brigands. What kind of a watchman am I? I do not stand on the mountain of achievement: I languish rather in the valley of my weakness. And yet, the Creator and Redeemer of mankind can give me, unworthy though I be, both integrity of life, and power of speech. For love of him I do not spare myself in preaching.

Pope St. Gregory the Great - Commentary on Ezekiel, a series of homilies given in Rome in 593: Bk 1, XI, 4-6

To our well beloved son, Abbot Mellitus: Gregory, servant of the servants of God. Since the departure of those of our fellowship who are bearing you company, we have been seriously anxious, because we have received no news of the success of your journey. Therefore, when by God's help you reach our most reverend brother, Bishop Augustine, we wish you to inform him that we have been giving careful thought to the affairs of the English, and have come to the following conclusion. The temples of the idols among that people should on no account be destroyed. The idols are to be destroyed, but the temples themselves are to be sprinkled with holy water, altars are to be set up in them, and relics deposited. For if these temples are well built, they must be purified from the worship of demons and dedicated to the service of the true God. In this way, we hope that the people will continue to gather at their accustomed meeting places, and there be led to know and adore the true God. Since they have a custom of sacrificing oxen to demons, let some other great feast be instituted, such as a day of Dedication or a Festival of the holy martyrs whose relics are enshrined there. Let them then continue to construct shelters of boughs for themselves around the churches that were once temples, and let them celebrate their solemnity with devout feasting. They are no longer to sacrifice beasts to the devil, but they may kill them for food to the praise of God, and give thanks to the Giver of all gifts for the plenty they enjoy. If the people are allowed some worldly pleasures in this way, they will more readily come to desire the things of the spirit. For it is certainly impossible to eradicate all errors from obstinate minds at one stroke

Whoever wishes to climb a mountain, goes up gradually step by step, and not in one leap. Of your kindness, you are to inform our brother Augustine of this policy, so that he may consider how he may best implement it on the spot. God keep you safe, my very dear son.

Letter addressed by St. Gregory in Rome to Abbot Mellitus somewhere in Frankish Gaul, 18 July, A.D. 601. Dear oblates and friends, The year 2004 is the fourteenth centenary of the death of Pope St. Gregory the Great (c. 540-604). St. Gregory is one of the four great Doctors ("teachers") of the Latin Church, with SS. Ambrose (c. 339-397), Jerome (c. 342-420) and Augustine (354-430). He is also known as the Apostle of England; one of the greatest of St. Peter's successors; and one of the most important spiritual influences in the history of the Western Church. Later legend has added other titles of fame to Gregory. He has been credited with organising the prayers of Roman liturgy, composing its music, and giving a permanent new definition to the institution of the papacy. But modern historians tell us that his contribution to the liturgy was probably quite modest: there is not a shred of evidence that he ever wrote a note of music in his life, and his political efforts in fact had no long lasting effect. Nevertheless, he truly deserves his position as patron Saint of the Roman liturgy, and of the papacy: because his doctrine left its indelible stamp on them for 1000 years and more.

Gregory was above all else a man of God: a man consumed with desire for God. He was a monk, a contemplative, a mystic. He could speak of the things of God with authority, because of his deep knowledge and love of the scriptures, and because of his own manifestly authentic experience. His mysticism is one of light, of felt experience, of vision. It thus balances, without opposing, the stream of tradition that emphasises the aspects of darkness and negation in mystical theology. Here is a very typical passage, illustrating Gregory's habitual cast of mind:

"God, in some way, without, however, being known as he is, makes himself seen by a soul that breathes only for him. He makes himself heard in the depths of the heart, without being heard by the ear. He pours himself into the bosom, without going forth out of himself. He lets himself be touched, though he is without a body. He abides with the soul and in her without occupying any place. But if a soul keeps far from her mind all thought of earthly things, in order to love God only, she feels some spark of that divine fire, and perceives some ray of that divine splendour; or if she does not comprehend his excellence and what God is in himself, she knows at least what he is not. For she perceives that he is above every essence. A soul that in this state contemplates the divinity, is ravished in admiration, and so many wonderful things are shown to her that they infinitely surpass all that the mind of man can understand." *Moralia in Job*: V, 34

Those above all who inherited Gregory's spirit and ensured its survival in the Church were the Benedictine monks. It has been well said that the "Benedictine centuries" (roughly the 8th to the 13th) were also the Gregorian centuries. And even after the monasteries lost their dominance, Gregory's influence continued to be all pervasive throughout the Christian West. St. Thomas Aquinas quoted him in his *Summa* more than any other Church Father apart from Augustine. And for later teachers of prayer like St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross, Gregory remained an essential reference point.

I headed this letter with a quotation from chapter 64 of the Holy Rule, because as Pope, Gregory manifested all the characteristics and virtues St. Benedict asks of his Abbot. Indeed there seems to be a natural harmony of

outlook between these two Saints. We see in Gregory the same Christ-centred theology as in Benedict: the same love of order and of peace, the same pastoral sensitivity, the same emphasis on humility, and the same approach to prayer. But whereas Benedict wrote for monks alone, Gregory wrote for all Christians without exception. So he is a centrally important teacher for all who inherit the Benedictine tradition, oblates no less than monks. I even like to think of Gregory as in some way a secular oblate, for though his monastic life had been cut short, he never lost touch with his monastic roots, and his monastic friends. They helped him keep his feet on the ground. Or, in his preferred image, their example helped him to keep the storm-tossed ship of his soul securely anchored in the calm and sheltered waters of prayer. In a letter to his friend Leander, Bishop of Seville, Pope Gregory speaks of his time as Papal envoy in Constantinople:

"I used to flee to the monks' companionship as if to a harbour completely sheltered from the billows and waves of secular business. For indeed the duty that forced me to leave the monastery had plunged the dagger of its constant demands into my former peaceful tranquillity. But when I was with them, and able to give myself to attentive reading of scripture, I drew new life from the daily yearnings of compunction."

May your association with Pluscarden be in some way a similar support for you! In case any reader is a little vague about the period of history in which Gregory's life was set, let me first put him in perspective, before describing something of his life and writings. To go back first then nearly three centuries: in the year 312 Constantine became the first Christian Emperor of the vast Roman Empire. With him, Christianity emerged from centuries of persecution, and came to replace state paganism as the official religion of the civilised world. The century that followed was the age of the great Fathers of the Church, and their struggle against the heresies. The Arian heresy was the most serious and dangerous of them all. The priest Arius denied the Trinity and the Incarnation. He thought that God the Father had in some way created His Son or Word, who could not therefore be called God. The Catholic Church rejected this heresy and others like it, expressing the orthodox faith especially through the first four Ecumenical Councils. Gregory would later declare that for him these Councils were as holy and binding as the four Gospels.

Another epoch-making decision of Constantine had been to split the Empire in two, and to move the principal capital to the new Rome at Constantinople. During the 5th century, the Empire of the West crumbled before successive invasions by Goths, Huns and Vandals. Its last Emperor Romulus Augustus was removed in 476. Italy thus became a Gothic Kingdom; Gaul was taken by the Franks, Spain by the Visigoths, North Africa by the Vandals. Nearly all these invading nations were Arian Christians, bitterly hostile to the Catholic Church. The Angles and Saxons who conquered South and East Britain were pagan. Meanwhile, the Roman Empire of the East remained strong. Indeed it was to endure as the centre of Greek Christian civilisation until it was finally overwhelmed by the Muslim Turks in 1450.

Shortly before Gregory's birth, the Emperor Justinian determined to reconquer the West. He launched a successful invasion of Italy in 533, and established his rule there through an Exarch. This official lived not in Rome, but in Ravenna, and was often to be a thorn in Gregory's side. For the liberating forces, though Catholic Christians, proved themselves often more of a scourge to the people than the Goths had been. Threatened then from the East, most of these forces withdrew, leaving the door wide open behind them. And through that door, soon enough, would come the Lombards: most savage and cruel of all the barbarian nations that had hitherto preyed on the wreck of the Roman Empire.

The Italy of Gregory's life time never ceased to be technically a part of the Eastern Roman Empire. That should have ensured peace: but the reality was almost constant warfare. Nor was the Empire able to protect the people from recurrent famine, or alleviate the catastrophic effects of flood and plague. Gregory thought the situation so dire that the end of the world must be imminent. He often repeated, "our world no longer announces its coming end, but already shows it forth".

Gregory's family was of the high aristocracy, owning extensive estates in Sicily, as well as property in Rome. They had a long tradition of public service; also of fervent Catholic piety. As a young man Gregory himself had held public office as Prefect of the City. But when his father died, he gave everything up in order to enter a monastery he himself had founded in Rome. There he lived very strictly indeed: certainly not according to the Rule of St. Benedict. He permanently damaged his health through excessive fasting. His monastic peace was shattered in 578 when the Pope ordained him deacon, and sent him as his personal envoy for some years to the Court at Constantinople. Gregory obeyed the summons: but he took a group of his monks with him. His most important work, the *Moralia in Iob*, began its life as a series of homilies to these monks. His mission

accomplished, he returned to Rome and his beloved monastic life. But when Pope Pelagius died in 590, Gregory's experience and abilities made him the obvious candidate, and he was duly elected.

There survive also homilies on the First Book of Kings (probably only as edited by a later hand) and on the Song of Songs. The wonderful Homilies on Ezekiel were delivered during the terrifying Lombard siege of Rome in 593. According to legend, it was while preaching these homilies that the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove was seen whispering in Gregory's ear. At their end he movingly breaks off, crushed by his anxiety and grief, never to resume.

Why, then, has so little been made of this great Pope in his centenary year? Why are his writings, once so widely read, now scarcely even obtainable? As far as I know, the last complete English translation of his *Morals on Job* was made in 1844. There are no popular paperback translations, to my knowledge, in print, of any of his works. One reason could be Gregory's unfashionable other-worldliness, and pessimism about the prospects of any lasting happiness in this world. Yet there is a paradox here, for perhaps there never was a Pope more deeply engaged with the world of his time, or one who took more direct practical measures to help the poor and afflicted of his age.

And indeed one reason I believe Gregory is so relevant for us today is precisely his grasp of the essential unity between two aspects that are often considered opposed. He constantly taught that both contemplation and action are essential for all Christians. Mary and Martha need each other: or in another favourite image, it was necessary for Jacob to marry Leah, figure of the active life, who bore him many children, in order to deserve Rachel, figure of the contemplative life, whom he loved above all things. For the goal of our life and our chief desire must always be union with God. But that union must follow the image of Christ: and Christ spent himself in service of his neighbour. Not only that: it is precisely meditation on divine things that drives us to active works of charity for our neighbour. Yet the pull of the world, even though full of miseries, can draw us away from God: so we have to return all the more to him, only source of true freedom and joy.

Another reason for Gregory's lack of popularity today could be found in his whole approach to scripture. His homilies tend to be long-winded, repetitive, and full of digressions. Above all, the unprepared modern reader can find his allegories quite disconcerting. Gregory delights to find hidden meanings in every tiny detail of the most obscure passages. These can seem to us no more than flights of fancy, scarcely connected at all with the literal meaning of the text. To give one example: the four living creatures of Ezekiel's vision (Ezk 1:5ff) are interpreted as the four Evangelists, themselves figures of all holy preachers who take the Gospel to the four corners of the world. At times, says the prophet, they went forward, or stood still, or were raised up. So, says Gregory, holy preachers go forward when they reach out to help their neighbour; they stand still in so far as they keep custody of their own soul, and they are raised up to the contemplation of God.

This approach to scripture in fact mirrors Gregory's approach to all reality. He sees in all things an outer and an inner layer, a superficial surface and a hidden depth. Our task, for him, is to pierce through the "husk", whether of the literal word, or of the actual event in our life. Only then can we taste the delicious fruit of the divine mystery hidden within. Even if we find Gregory unconvincing in the details, he manifestly does reach, through them, into the depths of divine wisdom. He really did draw all his doctrine and practice from his *lectio divina*, or reading of the scriptures, taken as a whole. There he found Jesus Christ; there he found his high moral ideals, and his all embracing compassion. And what he found in scripture, he loved. He can still inspire us to drink deeply with him from these same refreshing and life giving sources.

"Sacred scripture bids to the heavenly country and changes the heart of the reader from earthly desires to the embracing of things above. By obscure sayings, Scripture exercises the strong, and by humble words persuades the little ones; it is not so shut up as to be dreaded, nor so open as to be contemptible." (*Moralia* XX 1.1)
Reading the Bible was also, crucially, Gregory's route into prayer. It was the same for St. Benedict. It is a route that is being more and more re-discovered in our own day. The Holy Rule adds that we should always pray "with all humility and purity of devotion. For God regards not our many words, but our purity of heart, and tears of compunction" (HR 20). This was Gregory's programme also. "Compunction" is one of his favourite words. It refers to that piercing of heart we experience when deeply struck by the reality of our sins or of God's goodness and love. It tends to cast us down: but then, when we are sufficiently detached from all false joys and empty vanities, God is able to raise us up to himself in contemplation. My last excerpt sums up Gregory's own experience of this. It is a familiar passage from the *Dialogues*:

"All creation is bound to appear small to a soul that sees the Creator. Once it beholds a little of his light, it finds all creatures small indeed. The light of holy contemplation enlarges and expands the mind in God until it stands above the world. In fact, the soul that sees him rises even above itself. When it is rapt above itself in the light of God, all its inner powers unfold. Then when it looks down from above, it sees how small everything really is that was beyond its grasp before." Dialogues, II, 35.

Mention of the Dialogues leads me now into controversial waters. For I am convinced that the main narrative of this strange work was not written until some 60 years after Gregory's death; though passages such as that just quoted are genuinely his. It seems most likely that Gregory, for thirteen centuries regarded as Benedict's biographer, had never heard of him. Therefore we also know almost nothing about the author of our Rule. But this is surely no threat to us Benedictines, spiritual sons and daughters of both Saints. Now certainly together in heaven, they together insistently and urgently invite us to come to Christ, and with them to find all our life, all our joy, in Him.

Post scriptum. A considerably expanded version of this letter (three times the length, with much more quotation from St. Gregory) has now been produced as a Pluscarden Pamphlet, number VI: "St. Gregory the Great and his Spiritual Legacy". It is available from the Abbey @ £2, or £2.50 including postage.