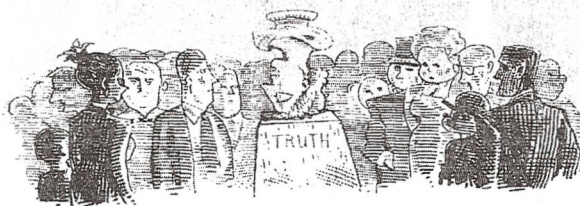


JONATHAN AITKEN



Benedictine Beauty

DOES THE MONASTIC LIFE HAVE any relevance to modern life? I've been pondering this question since my recent journey to one of the most influential Benedictine monasteries in the world—Ampleforth Abbey in North Yorkshire. It is one of over a thousand religious communities both Catholic and Anglican that still obey the medieval Rule of St. Benedict, a profound and timeless guide to spiritual living. Ampleforth runs two outstanding boys' schools and many parishes across northern England, and it has founded several communities in the United States including St. Louis Abbey in Missouri. This abbey's 19 Catholic monks also run a local parish as well as a large and outstanding school for boys in grades 7-12. Such educational and pastoral work clearly makes the Benedictines relevant to the 21st century, but what is the contemporary meaning of the monasticism that is the lifeblood of the order? In TV interviewer speak: What's the point of it all?

Staying as a guest of the Ampleforth community of nearly 100 monks opened my eyes to three fascinating features of Benedictine life. My impressions came from participating in the daily offices of Matins, Lauds, Terce, Vespers, and Compline; from conversations about the Rule of St. Benedict; and from absorbing the rhythm and atmosphere of life in the monastery. The three features that calmed my worldly restlessness and fed my spiritual hunger I will call the beauty of humili-

ty, the beauty of hollowness, and the beauty of holiness.

St. Benedict put great emphasis on humility. The chapter on this subject is the longest one in the Rule. It opens with the exquisite words of the 131st Psalm:

*Lord I am not high minded
I have no proud looks
I do not occupy myself with great matters
Which are too high for me.*

Telling his followers that the summit of their endeavor should be to achieve profound humility, Benedict sets out a 12-step plan for this purpose. It is said that the same structure inspired the authors of the 12-step Alcoholics Anonymous plan, but no recovering alcoholic faces half so formidable a challenge as a professing Benedictine. For each one of St. Benedict's 12 steps to humility are spiritual mountain climbs such as "not to like having our own way" (No. 2); "to accept without complaint really wretched and inadequate conditions" (No. 6); "to believe in our hearts that we are less important than others" (No. 7); and "to make the humility of our hearts apparent by our bodily movements" (No. 12). This last step becomes mysteriously apparent when you come inside a community of monks. Whether it is serving their guests at meals, or gliding in silent anonymity through the cloisters, or slipping into

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their stalls in the chapel to kneel in prayer, the monks' outward movements are the harbingers of their inner humility. I had always thought that the exhortation of the Old Testament Prophet Micah, "Walk humbly with your God!" (Micah 6:8), was a purely spiritual edict. To see a community of religious men fulfill the spirit of the command by the natural flow of their physical movements is beautiful to behold.

The word hollowness does not appear anywhere in the Rule of St. Benedict. Yet close observers of the Rule in action have said that a good monk is like an empty vessel, patiently waiting to be filled with the glory of God. In a recent address to the Congress of Abbots at San Anselmo, the Dominican leader Dom Timothy Ratcliffe offered a perceptive insight on this theme: "Your monasteries disclose God not because of what you do or say but because the monastic life has at its center a space, a void in which God may show himself. I wish to suggest that the Rule of St. Benedict offers a sort of hollow center to your lives in which God may live and be glimpsed."

This thought may bring us close to one of the more mystical reasons why monasteries are surviving in our noisy, crowded, over-pressured 21st century. It is that God's glory sometimes needs a space, an emptiness, or a silence in which to reveal itself. This is nothing new. Consider the biblical and spiritual importance of the empty tomb; the space at the table in the supper at Emmaus after Jesus vanished; the void between the wings of the cherubim where God dwelt as the Israelites came out of Egypt; or the still small voice of God that Elijah heard in the silence after the earthquake, wind, and fire had battered him on Mount Horeb. Such examples of theophany (encounters with God) are almost impossible to feel in our jostling, bustling, intrusive secular world where the Internet, the TV screen, and the traffic jams push God out. A monastery offers a beautiful hollowness that welcomes God in.

BEAUTY IS AT THE CENTER of the Benedictine way of life. During my visit to Ampleforth I heard it in the sung office, saw it in the luminosity of the dawn breaking over the Howardian hills after 6 A.M. Matins, felt it in what St. Benedict called "the great silence" that his Rule imposes on the community after Vespers. Yet although these experiences were all beautiful, they were secondary to a higher experience in this realm—the beauty of holiness.

The beauty of holiness envisaged by St. Benedict is all about down-to-earth practical living in a community. His rule is often prosaic in its blunt simplicity. He describes the monastic life as "the workshop in which we are called to work with steady perseverance." This image of a monk as a workman patiently chiseling away with his tools day after day in the service of our Lord struck a particular chord with me because I was in Ampleforth to visit the monastery's carpenter. He had been born into a family of great wealth and political influence but his monastic vocation had enabled him to become a superb woodcarver, the creator of many fine pieces of Ampleforth

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furniture and its school library bookshelves. This 72-year-old monk had been a much loved member of the community for five decades, but suddenly his life was in turmoil. For in his youth he had committed a sex offense. It came to light 36 years later. Full of regret he humbly and remorsefully entered a plea of guilty. It was a blow not only to him but to the entire Ampleforth community, which suffered much hostile publicity. So how did these Benedictine monks cope with this drama?

The precepts in St. Benedict's Rule about transparency, accountability, making peace with enemies, and never despairing of the mercy of God all came into play in my friend's saga. Nothing was covered up, certain disciplines came into effect, obedience to the abbot was honored, and my friend has now begun serving a two-year prison sentence. Yet when he comes out of jail he will come back into the monastery—loved and prayed for by his brothers and, in the words of the great hymn, "ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven." None of this has been easy, but the Ampleforth community's response to this fallen sinner displays a beauty of holiness that not many other Christian communities have recently matched when dealing with similar problems.

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