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A COMMUNITY OF ENGLISH BENEDICTINE NUNS IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

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WE HAVE A DETAILED ACCOUNT of our first years in Paris, 1651-1695, signed by the first Prioress of the eighteenth century, Dame Agnes Temple, Dame Theresa Cook and Dame Elizabeth Cook. Then our record states that nothing very material appears to have transpired in our Community from this period until the commencement of the French Revolution. So the first ninety years of the eighteenth century found a small but fervent Community of about twenty religious living a quiet secluded life and keeping on an even keel. During this time two things stand out, the poverty of the community and the simplicity of their life.

POVERTY

Our records state we were able to subsist till now (1683) without charge to our monastery of Cambrai, through the great generosity of our French and English benefactors, a thing in which we plainly see the hand of God. To give a concrete example I take the year 1693 when famine laid France waste. In our extremity we wrote to Porte-Royal. The Abbess (Racine's aunt), Mère Agnes de Saint-Thècle, immediately assembled her community: money there was none to spare, but they sent a very beautiful chalice to Paris to be sold for us. The lady who undertook the errand was fortunate enough to get far beyond their expectations from an ecclesiastic who was touched by the story of our poverty. When the money was brought, our Prioress, Dame Agnes Temple said, 'We could not be more obliged than we are to our sisters of Port-Royal. Never has help been more opportune. There was not a single morsel of bread in our house and nobody would sell it us on credit any more. At this very moment my Community is prostrate at the feet of Jesus Christ, the living bread, to ask Him for the material bread which we need.'

Seventy-seven years later we find Dame Placida Brindle, one of our choir nuns, telling the same tale. In a letter to her parents, in 1770 she wrote, 'We make our vow of poverty, true it is not to enjoy those satisfactions we might have had in the world. We take what is given us as a poor beggar would an alms, if it is agreeable we are thankful for it; if not we take it with the same thankfulness; and what is very comfortable, we live without solicitude for the morrow, and our heavenly Father often makes good his promises of seeking first the kingdom of heaven though our good religious many times in the morning have not wherewith to buy our dinner; what father in the world, if he had so many children, would not in such straits begin to murmur for fear he and his children might come to great distress, but here we have no complaints, but a holy confidence in God, who always sends it to us before noon and sometimes even wonderful.'

Later she writes, 'that you will have the goodness when you have occasion to send me some English needles, the French ones are so poor that we English have great difficulty with them. One of my good sisters told me to ask for 1000, but if your money is low, I

could not expect so many, let them be of all sorts such as we work with in the world, with good points.' And she asks her friend Priscilla in her charity to buy her a pair of scissors, those I brought are too delicate and good for nothing for what I want them, that is to cut out our habits, our woollens, and all our clothes; tho' not too big nor too little. In our old Paris Customs it is stated that all wearing apparel is made to the common (medium) size, as much as can be, and that even those who are much less than the common size, the things such as gimps, night veils etc. are made so that if those who die before they are worn out these things may be worn by others who are larger. The Fathers of Vatican II would approve, this being poverty in fact as well as in spirit.

We were often urged to take pensioners, but did not do so because it was contrary to our retired manner of living and against the spirit of our venerable beginners. However the profit our nuns made by making peppermint drops, pastilles and distilled water of peppermint was a great assistance to the community, and shows that our sisters, though they depended so much on Divine Providence, did not neglect such means to help themselves as were compatible with our state. This work is described as follows in the old Paris Customs. 'They have in the garden a house which they call the still house, in it is stills fixed proper for distilling the simples, such as peppermint etc. They make on cold stills ratafiata, and cordials for the infirmary and sick, such as aniseed water, carmes water etc. They begin stilling in July and the infirmarians attend to it till finished for about a week or twelve days. They hear Mass every morning and communicate at the Infirmary, dressed in their oldest things, and are dispensed from all the regular acts, this work being considered as one regular act, and they rise early and go to it every day till finished. They take their meals at the same time as the community and attend the work going on. They retire to a room where is an oratory etc. where they make their prayer and say their Office, one while the other stays below. When it is a feast they do not go down. They remain at work when they do till 8 p.m. It belongs to the Infirmary to make the peppermint drops, though she has help from the other nuns when they work at it.

In the old Paris Customs it is rather astonishing considering their poverty to find they employed two men-servants, maids and washers. One man was the sacristan-without and he looked after the chaplain, did all the buying and selling, and helped the other man, who was the 'gardener-within' who had a house at the bottom of the lower garden where he lived, slept and ate. The maids swept the stairs, cloisters and dormitories, 'but never the Choir or Chapter Room. The washers were let in every three weeks and did the wash at the end of the garden where the gardener's house, the hens and pigs were. The nuns went the next day to do the folding, otherwise they never went to that part of the garden.

SIMPLICITY OF LIFE

The life in Paris was one of simplicity, hiddenness, with nothing spectacular about it for we had no desire for public notice. This is stated clearly in the report about us the Abbe Deplasse made in 1779 to the Commission of Regulars: 'The object of the institute of these religious is to pray unceasingly for the conversion of England. Thus their prayers, good works and the sacrifice of their liberty have for their object to draw down the blessings of heaven upon England and to obtain for their country the grace of conversion.

Nothing can be more edifying than this monastery, and one can say with absolute sincerity that it contains as many saints as religious. They have no dealings with anybody whatsoever; relegated to an extreme corner of Paris they are unknown by the world.' Dame Placida had written the following in a letter to her parents in 1770, that is nine years before this report was made: 'We make our vow of chastity and obedience and perpetual enclosure. We offer ourselves and all our actions for the conversion of England, joining our poor endeavours with all the holy missionaries labouring in that kingdom for the conversion of souls'.

From Marnhull in 1798 Dame Placida wrote to her friend Priscilla: 'In our convent in Paris till the Revolution we lived as in a desert, free from the noise of the world, though in a great city, so well enclosed and barred in that no one could come near us, but as happy as a well-ordered hive of bees who only mind their business, but I must tell you the life I was there to lead was very different from that I had been accustomed to, and fit it should be, or I know not how I should get to heaven. You know I was fond of doing my own will, there I must do the will of another, I must not eat so often nor fare so daintily. The nice tea and toast with hot spiced wine on a cold winter's night I found no more. I must get up at 3.30 a.m. on a cold frosty morning and go down to choir, see no fare till 8.30 a.m. and that for a short time. I thought nuns had only to pray and do fine work but found it quite contrary, for though there was time to pray there was also a time for work and that very hard, strong words for a Lancashire woman! But God was so good I found more solid comfort than ever I tasted in the world.'

Apropos of hard work the old Paris Customs state, 'But here the nuns have to do all for themselves.' For example, Dame Placida, a choir nun, tells her parents in a letter of 1778 that she has 'white-washed her cell this summer and thinks it is as white as if it had been done by one of that trade.' When writing to postulants the one thing they are asked to bring is dark blue check material for aprons and sleeves as it is so expensive in France and of poor quality. In their intellectual life there was the same simplicity and they wanted Benedictine confessors: 'because we desire to walk in simplicity... and in these dangerous times neither to decline to the right hand nor the left, and to be esteemed so indifferent without entangling ourselves in controversies or policies, spiritual or temporal.'

Also their attitude to austerities is well described as follows: 'So that in discretion which is the mother of all virtues it was fittest for us to take upon us only such duties as we might cheerfully perform and was consistent with preserving our health, rather than strive to practise the nicety of some things and have many of the religious infirm, and others still desiring dispensations as we find in those monasteries that endeavour to practise these particulars.' They lived an austere life but did not go to extremes. The spirit of the Paris convent was tranquil, gentle, kindly, with nothing rigid or harsh. Contentment reigned supreme. This spirit runs through the old Customs and in Dame Placida's letters such expressions as 'not to overcharge the mind but keep it at liberty for mental prayer.' The reason given for rules about offices: 'By this means the interior of the convent is never disturbed.' 'The one who does not go to the folding rings the bell for reading,' Their cells are to be left tidy by a fixed time except when they are poorly or are called late. This kindly consideration is all so reminiscent of the Holy Rule.

This truly Benedictine life was suddenly interrupted by the French Revolution in 1789-1795, making regular monastic life impossible, but such was the spirit of the

Community, that on their return to England in 1795 they settled down at Marnhull and lived as if they were in Paris, rising at 5.30 a.m. for Matins. The Community passed through this severe test, even taking a postulant to prison with them and she was eventually professed at Marnhull. The last five years of the eighteenth century were spent at Marnhull. The Abbe Edgeworth visited them there in 1796. He wrote later to congratulate Mother Theresa Joseph Johnson, the Prioress, on the spirit of union and charity in the community. He said: 'Sit down at Marnhull as if you were never to stir.' It is clear from Dame Placida's letter in 1798 to her friend Priscilla that they followed his advice. She describes life at Marnhull. 'We never go out of our enclosure which consists of a large fine garden and a court in front of the house all walled round. We are 16 in number and have lost 7 (by death) since the Revolution. We have everyone a cell, wear our religious habit (NB Resumed 21 November 1795 in a little ceremony.) We rise to Matins at 3.30 a.m. and I thank God I am able to do it. (NB Within a week of her death at Cannington in 1807 she was found on the floor trying to dress and in fear of being late for Matins. Go as near as we can with our religious duties, we keep silence all the morning till after dinner which is at 11 a.m. but on fast days an half-hour later. Once this would have been a hard thing not to speak sooner, but now it would be as troublesome to talk.'

I would just conclude by saying that Colwich in the eighteenth century does appear to be the kind of monastery of which our Holy Father St Benedict would have approved with its Benedictine spirit and interior life. The Dalai Lama asked Thomas Merton if there was any depth of spiritual life in his monasteries. Merton replied, 'That is what the life is all about, but some monks think it is about something else.' I think it is obvious what our eighteenth-century nuns considered of paramount importance.