

THE MONASTIC RESPONSE TO PAPAL REFORM

SUMMI MAGISTRI AND ITS RECEPTION

Dom Anthony Marett-Crosby

THE LIST OF MEDIEVAL SONS AND DAUGHTERS of Saint Benedict who have spearheaded reform in the church is a not a long one. We may speak perhaps of Anselm, Lanfranc and their contemporaries in the heady new world of Anglo-Norman England and we may also pause amidst the Cluniac monks at the heart of the Gregorian reform. Thereafter the number of monks whose reforms extended beyond the cloister may be counted on the list of one hand. Within even this brief enumeration, the number of genuinely English monastic reformers is even fewer – Dunstan, Ethelwold and Oswald, the fathers of the 10th century English renewal, are in truth lonely figures. Because of this, the issue of reform and the response it elucidated provides a good way into the heart of English monasticism where reform in general did not find a ready home.

More specifically, this topic offers a way of answering four important questions. In the first place, we need to step back from the history of the English Benedictine Congregation in itself, and ask what authority the Popes were claiming in undertaking the reform of the Benedictines at all. This is a question which has dogged the history of the interaction between Rome and the Black monks, and it brings a second question in its wake - what were the medieval Popes trying to do with monasticism? From this, we may go on to ask how the monks themselves responded, and then finally whether the attempts at reform in the Middle Ages can be judged either a success or a failure.¹

In one sense, the answer to this first question, seems very clear. The success of *Summi Magistri*, the Bull of Benedict XII for the reform of the Black monks in 1336, is demonstrated by its longevity. We still cite it in the first of the General norms of the Constitutions of the Congregation, and its importance was recognised by the great Benet Weldon, who wrote in 1708:

We confess that this body received not its last perfection and property of a congregation until the decree of the Council of Lateran... but this was afterwards changed or rather amplified or better adjusted in the

¹ The text of *Summi Magistri* is in Bullarium Romanum 4 (1859), pp 347-387.

The best study of the impact of *Summi Magistri* is Peter McDonald, The Papacy and Monastic Observance in the Later Middle Ages: The Benedictines in England, Journal of Religious History 14 (1986), pp 117 - 132. In general, see also Philibert Schmitz, *Histoire de l'Ordre de Saint Benoit*, vol 3, Maredsous, 1948, pp 48 -74

year 1300 (*sic*) by Benedict XII... Our ancestors, who were always most obedient to the orders of the Apostolic See, submitted to Benedict's alterations.²

Nor is *Summi Magistri* the only Bull of Benedict XII that has survived into the modern day. He is the only Pope of the 14th century whose theological judgments are cited as authoritative in the modern Catechism of the Catholic Church, albeit for a very different reason. He was one of the great holders of the Papal Office in an age which produced few great Popes, a Cistercian who dealt in a series of careful moves with much of the chaos produced by his predecessor John XXII.³

We must not underestimate the degree to which much that Benedict achieved was done under the shadow of John. One among a number of examples of his actions which Benedict had to resolve resulted from his speculation on the nature of the Beatific vision, which threatened to undermine the role of the Saints as sources of intercession. On his death bed in 1334, the Cardinals forced him to sign a recantation, later the Bull *Ne Super His*.⁴ Benedict had to sort out both of these, and his judgment on the nature of the life of the Saints in heaven, contained in the Bull *Benedictus Deus*, remains the standard exposition of this point of theology. Benedict XII could be judged a fine Pope on this score alone, but his vision extended to a reform of all of the religious orders in the church.

He was not the first Pope to undertake this. The principle that Rome could intervene in the life of religious orders was established in unequivocal fashion in the twelfth of Lateran IV⁵, and in this respect the Council faithfully echoes the view of the Pope who called it, Innocent III. Well before the Council itself, Innocent had become involved in attempts to reform the Black monks of Italy⁶, an approach followed his successor Honorius III in the important Bull *Ea Quae* of 1216.⁷ It was the same instinct that led to the most comprehensive attempt to reform the

² Benet Weldon, Chronological Notes concerning the English Benedictine Congregation, 1708, Ampleforth Abbey Manuscript, SS25, pp 18 - 19

³ Benedict's contribution to the history of the Church is not well served by secondary material in English. See the references cited by McDonald, *op.cit.*, p 117 note 1 and below note 5.

⁴ C Trottmann, *La Vision Beatifique: des disputes Scholastiques a sa definition par Benoit XII*, Ecole Francaise de Rome, fasc. 299, Rome, 1995. Also useful is D Douie, John XXII and the Beatific Vision, *Dominican Studies* 3, 1950, pp 154 - 174

⁵ *In Singulis Regnis*, in Norman P Tanner (ed), *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, London 1990, vol 1, pp 240 - 241

⁶ In the Bull *Tacti Sumus Dolore*, *PL* 214. 1173-4

⁷ Printed in WA Pantin, *Documents illustrating the activities of the General and Provincial Chapters of the English Black Monks 1215 – 1540*, London 1931, vol 1, pp.274 – 6. On the importance of *Ea Quae*, see *ibid.* pp 8, 17.

Benedictines in the 13th century, contained in the statues of Pope Gregory IX *Inprimis*.⁸ The Council of Vienne took this forward,⁹ and 50 years later, Benedict XII clearly acknowledged the tradition in which he was working.

We gain a glimpse of the kind of reform involved over this period through a single issue, that of the eating of meat.¹⁰ The prohibition of this by Saint Benedict is well known, and as late as 1216 it was declared that no meat was to be served in the refectory save to the sick. During the 13th century, however, a new practice emerged, and some monasteries built a second dining room, known variously as misericord or oriole, where meat could be served to those who had special permission. This was observing one aspect of Saint Benedict's precept by not serving meat in the refectory but evidently ignoring the heart of what he was trying to do. The Roman Curia tried to restrain this development by citing the authority of Innocent III, but *Summi Magistri* allowed for half the monks to be absent from the refectory at any one time, in order to be eating meat elsewhere.

To the modern eye, this kind of reform looks suspiciously like straightforward decline. What in truth was going on at a level below the texts and their details? In order to answer this, we need to ask first what was being claimed who adopted the power to impose reform at all.

THE POWER TO REFORM?

What authority did the Papacy have to enforce any change on the monastic order? In order to answer this question, we need to put aside a distinction that may exist in our minds, because it was so carefully created by 15th century canonists. We should see no distinction in terms of authority between Pope and Council in this period. The authority of a Council depended in practice upon the Pope who summoned it, as so evidently was the case with Lateran IV. We cannot therefore understand what happened to the Black monks in this period, as some kind of proto-Conciliarism, but as something to do with the Popes themselves.

Papal intervention in the reform of particular monasteries took a decisive new direction under Innocent III, elected to the Chair of Peter aged 37 in 1198. A century earlier, Gregory VII had coined for himself the title of *Abbas Universalis*, but Innocent brought out its implications.¹¹ In so doing, he turned upside down the Papal privileges that had been gained by most monasteries of Christendom in the early Middle Ages. These privileges, of which that of Cluny is the most famous, ensured that monasteries were quite free of any interference by

⁸ Printed in Matthew Paris, *Chronica Maiora*, vol. 6 Additamenta, Rolls Series, London 1882, ed H R Ward, pp. 235-247

⁹ Tanner, op. cit. vol 1, pp 370 - 373

¹⁰ See above note 1 with David Knowles, *Religious Orders in England*, Cambridge 1948 – 59, vol 2, pp 1 - 7

⁰ In general B M Bolton, *Via Ascetica: a papal quandary*, Studies in Church History ed. W J Sheils, 13, 1984 pp 161-191

local Bishops, by placing the monastery under the direct care of the Pope. In the 9th and 10th century, this meant independence, since the Popes' of that period were in no condition at all to enforce anything. But the 10th century principle of *nullo medio* became a powerful tool of Papal intervention in the 13th century, beginning with the Bull *Tacti Sumus Dolor* of 1202, in which the Pope laments over the state of the monasteries of central Italy. He speaks there of the duty of the Apostolic See to initiate reform, and he calls for the Abbots of that area to come together in a Chapter to make renewal happen.¹²

This new power is revealed in the fresco in the church of the monastery of Subiaco. It shows Innocent III, presiding over the text of a Bull which he granted to that abbey in the same year. Innocent is imperious and proud, his eyes fixed on a far away future, and below him stands Saint Benedict one hand raised in blessing and the other pointing towards the same Bull of the Pope. It is a careful piece of work, emphasising the concordance between Benedict and Innocent, and equally making clear who was to come first.¹³

Yet this kind of fresco reveals the limitations as well as the strengths of the 13th and 14th century Papacy. Innocent was a great man, able to wield huge power, but his successors were sometimes less great, and the power waned accordingly. The reforms of one Pope could easily be modified by another, and all of the great attempts to reform the Black monks in this period were, in the end, watered down. Both Innocent IV and Clement VI issued Bulls dispensing monks from any penalty arising from compliance, and their actions were such that some monks inferred that the whole reform process had been set aside.¹⁴ Thus in the tumultuous visitation of Whitby in 1366, some of the community clearly believed that *Summi Magistri* had been repealed, and even the Visitors had to be reminded that this was not so.¹⁵

In extreme form, this kind of modification could lead to dispensations for whole monasteries to be exempt from reform. The cathedral Priory of Durham was granted this privilege by Innocent IV in 1254, and the Prior was told simply to choose those reforms he wanted from the statutes of Gregory IX.¹⁶

What we see, therefore, is a strange paradox in the exercise of Papal power. The authority was there, claimed by Popes from the Gregorian reform and exercised by some. But it was always an authority *ad personam*, which could only be exercised against the huge practical

⁰. PL 214. 1173 - 4

⁰. The text of the *Bull Accendentes causa devotionis* is PL 214. 1062. On Innocent's visit to Subiaco, Bolton, op. cit, pp. 178 – 179.

⁰. On Clement VI see Pantin, op. cit, vol 3, p22, On Innocent IV see below note 17

⁰. Pantin, op. cit. vol3, p 289 on Abbot William de Burton of Whitby, *abbas illa statuta esse asserit revocata, nec ipsum ad illorum observantia esse in aliquo obligata* (Ch. 38 of the Visitation Acts)

⁰. The Bull *Ex Parte Tua* is printed in *Historiae Dunelmensis Scriptores Tres*, ed. J Raine, Surtees Society 9, 1839, pp lxxxii - lxxxiii

difficulties faced by the Papacy in enforcing its will, and the weight of tradition to the contrary. We might see in this a practical consequence of the famous remark of the *Dictatus Papae* attributed to Gregory VII, *Romanus Pontifex indubitanter efficitur Sanctus*.¹⁷ If there was a sanctity proper to the Roman Pontiff, it was like all sanctity a personal gift, and some simply did not have it.

WHAT WERE THE POPES TRYING TO DO?

There was in the Middle Ages a firm belief in judgment, that evidence of divine displeasure was a judgment upon sin or error in what was called to be perfect, namely the church as Bride of Christ. Over all of the 13th century there hung the brooding shadow of God's evident wrath, which was the only possible explanation for the loss of Jerusalem and the failure of the Crusades. When Innocent called the Lateran Council, he expressed the view that reform of the church was the necessary pre-condition to the recovery of the Holy Land.¹⁸ Monastic reform was thus part of a wider awareness of error, and the renewal of monastic life had in this sense a purpose far beyond the cloister alone.

But we should not stop here. There was a view that monasticism in the Latin church had gone awry, not at the level of principle but in practice. Innocent III himself had a high view of the goal of monastic life, declaring that:

Monks are God's special sons since it is through them that God finds the highest praise due to him.¹⁹ Thus it was all the more necessary that this body should be reformed, and the failings of Black monks were blamed for many things. There are Romans voices to be heard throughout the 13th and 14th centuries identifying the tribulations of the church with the decline of monastic zeal, and around the year 1378 one English monastic Procurator in Curia wrote to his monastery to report that some in Rome were blaming the monks for the vicissitudes of the Great Schism.²⁰

Once the reform of monasticism was accepted as an urgent need, it was regarded as obvious to the Popes that it needed to be directed from a level of governance above that of individual Abbots and Priors. Thus the experiments in provincial chapters of reform begun by Innocent III were codified in 1215, and the structure adopted by Lateran IV became standard. The decree *In Singulis* required triennial chapters, which in England began in the province of Canterbury in 1218 and in the province of York in 1221. The model was explicitly Cistercian, and much has been made of Lateran IV's remark that Black monks should:

⁰. Of the many studies of *Dictatus Papae* 23, see especially Andre Vauchez, *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, Cambridge 1997, pp 23-24

⁰. The Bull to summon the Council, *Vineam Domini Sabaoth*, PL 216. 823 – 827. The call *ad recuperationem videlicet terrae sanctae ac reformationem universalis Ecclesiae* is at 824A

⁰. Cited in Bolton, op. cit. p.164 note 19 from a letter of January 9th 1198.

⁰. See especially Pantin, op. cit, vol 3, pp 79 – 80 (no. 232)

Invite in charity, at the start of this innovation, two neighbouring Cistercian Abbots to give them appropriate advice and help.²¹

Alongside chapters came visitations, under both Episcopal and Papal mandate. Both these measures entered into Canon Law in the Decretals of Gregory IX and they were renewed in all later Papal documents.

Underlying this reform is something more basic. The history of the 13th and 14th century Papacy is bound up with the history of the Franciscans, and the role played by successive Popes in determining what the Franciscan rule actually was. Thus Honorius III had approved a rule in 1223,²² and 7 years later Gregory IX was deemed to have the authority to declare in *Quo Elongati* that the Testament of Francis was to have no binding authority over the order that has taken his name.²³ We must acknowledge the radical claim to authority by the Pope in saying this, especially in the context of an order so deeply committed to the personality of its founder.

I suggest therefore that in the reform of the Benedictines, there is a subtle movement of the same model from the Mendicant to the monastic world. This is especially true of the great statutes of Gregory IX, which uphold specifically Franciscan ideals, albeit in the Benedictine context. Thus the second of the statutes upholds that new novices are to receive specific instructions in the three virtues of poverty, chastity and obedience, the three Evangelical Counsels which were the hallmark of Mendicant spirituality, but play little part in Saint Benedict's vision of monastic formation described in chapter 58 of the Rule.²⁴

Something similar is going on in the repeated emphasis on monks taking their part in the world of learning. This was evidently a valuable thing for monasteries to do at one level, and its effects have been well documented especially in England. But the idea that monks should go elsewhere to take on theological study designed for training a mendicant or pastoral clergy was an innovation in the 14th century, bringing as it did a fundamental change to one aspect of monastic identity. This is expressed without equivocation in the Council of Vienne:

In order to promote Divine worship, we decree that every monk, at the command of his Abbot, should have himself raised to all the sacred orders, unless there is some lawful excuse. Further, in order that the monks may not be deprived to make progress in knowledge, there should be in each monastery which has sufficient means a suitable master to instruct them carefully in the primary branches of knowledge.²⁵

⁰. Tanner, op. cit, vol 1, p. 240 - 241

⁰. The so-called *Regula Bullata*, on which see *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents* ed Regis Armstrong and others, New York 1999, vol 1, pp 99 - 106

⁰. Ibid, pp 570 - 575

⁰. See above note 9. The text of Inprimis 2 reads *Omnibus autem ad religionem ingredi volentibus exponantur saepius et specialius ista tria; scilicet obedientia, continentia et sine proprio vivere; et quod ad haec conversi et monachi sunt astricti* (p. 236)

⁰. Tanner, op. cit, vol. 1, p. 372*

The idea that a Council could require monks to be ordained, and that primary study should be established in monasteries as a tool to this end, coupled of course with the emphasis on university education, is a sign that a model was being imposed quite different from that which monks had become accustomed to. In these decrees, there is a fidelity to Gregory's vision that something of the strength of the Franciscan movement could be imposed on an order which seemed to have lost its way.

HOW DID THE MONKS RESPOND?

If the above account is right, then the question of how monks responded to this change urgently presents itself. We can catch a glimpse of the first response in the immediate aftermath to Lateran IV, and in two great vision narratives. In the first, we hear of a vision of God, enthroned for judgment, in which an unnamed Abbot sees before God's majesty a figure, naked but for the insignia of the Pope. The figure is begging for mercy, and one does not have to be very bright to guess who this is meant to be – Innocent III, reformer of the Benedictines, forgiveness from begging for the sin which he had committed in so acting.²⁶ A few years later, the Cistercian visionary Lutgard spoke to Thomas of Cantimpre of seeing Innocent in purgatory for what he had done, and of his being freed only by her monastic prayers.²⁷

As the reform continued, the visionary element declined, and we can discern four main reactions. In the first place, there is no doubt that some of the Papal reforms were both well intentioned and effective, and many monastic communities adopted them without much hesitation. This is especially true in England, where provincial and later General Chapters functioned effectively until the Reformation. There were visible fruits from this collaboration, notable the establishment of Gloucester College and later the Statutes of 1444, an effective instrument of the internal governance of the Congregation.²⁸

But the reaction of accommodation was always selective. The power of great monasteries was too deeply rooted to be overturned easily, and because of the nature of Papal power, exemptions could be gained from either sympathetic or weak Popes. Gradually, we see the Popes watering down the full extent of the reform imposed by Benedict XII, until by the time of Innocent VII, in his Bull *Regis Pacifici* of 1405, *Summi Magistri* has been reduced to just three issues: General Chapter, the duties of superiors, and the need for monastic study.²⁹ In a sense, the monks had themselves selected from the provisions what they wanted to accept, and the Popes, faced with this ancient power, had accepted this selection.

⁰ *Chronica Minor Auctore Minorita Erphordiensi*, ed. O. Holder-Egger, *MGH*, SS24, p. 196

⁰ *Vita Lutgardis* 2.7, ed. G Hendrix in *Citeaux* 29 (1978), p 169. See also Bolton, *op. cit.* p 184

⁰ Pantin, *op. cit.*, vol 2, pp 187 – 220 (no. 175)

⁰ *Ibid.*, vol 3, pp 88 – 92 (no. 241)

This was in part at least because a reform like *Summi Magistri* implied a machinery for enforcement that contravened other ancient authorities. The power of the Pope to reform the monasteries of England looked like an infringement of the power of the kings, such that in 1338 General Chapter was told that Edward III had forbidden the Papal appointed executors from enquiring into the financial state of any house of Royal foundation. He also denied them any power of coercion and told the General Chapter that two Abbots and two Cathedral priors would not be attending because the King did not want them to.³⁰

Great monastic houses similarly had power of their own. It is notable that the Cathedral Priors of Canterbury and Durham did not attend the first General Chapter after *Summi Magistri*: the former pleaded both illness and the need to entertain an important visiting Cardinal, and the latter simply said he was too busy. During the chapter, the Abbot of Peterborough left early to attend important business, namely the levy of subsidy on the ninth of fleeces in Northamptonshire.³¹ If this was truly important business, then it is clear that *Summi Magistri* was not felt to be important at all. The point, surely, is that the Priors and the Abbots of the ancient monasteries were not easy people to coerce into doing anything.

There was finally some active and substantive opposition to some Papal decisions. This opposition is hard now to discern, but the scattered evidence that we have points to two distinct issues.

Firstly, there were certainly some who believed that there should be no reform at all. In 1383 Urban IV issued a Bull to promote reform of monasticism of England, and sent it to Cardinal Adam Easton at Norwich. During their journey through East Anglia, the messengers from the Pope were mugged, but the only thing stolen was the Bull. With that having gone, there could evidently be no reform since there was no mandate from the Pope to begin it. It is not difficult to guess the likely identity of these thieves - a Papal Bull was only valuable to those who wanted to stop it being enforced.³²

More importantly, there were some that believed that Papal reform threatened the ancient priority of psalmody in the monastic life. The understanding of monasticism in terms of the command to pray at all times is notably absent from the documents of the Papacy, and some monasteries opposed the amendments to the order of psalmody made by the General and Provincial Chapters. Texts like the *Speculum Monachorum* or the Bury account of the origins of monasticism suggest this too, and certainly the reforms of monastic studies and the emphasis on priesthood point in a direction quite other than the priority of psalms.³³ At Cluny,

⁰ Ibid, vol 3, 15 (no. 187) for Royal texts and dispensations

⁰ Ibid, vol 3, pp 15-16 (no. 188) for Canterbury; pp 16-17 (no. 189) for Durham and p. 18 (no. 190) for the Order regarding the Abbot of Peterborough

⁰ Ibid, vol 3, pp 80-81

⁰ WA Pantin 'Some Medieval English Treatises on the Origins of Monasticism', *Medieval Studies presented to Rose Graham*, ed V. Ruffer and AJ Taylor, Oxford 1950, pp 189-215 on the Bury text. On this and the *Speculum Monachorum*, see the forthcoming study by James

of course, the Divine Office and the priesthood had been combined but the Papal reform felt one sided, and monastic studies in Oxford were seen as a distraction from the real business of being a monk. Certainly, that was the view of some of those who studied at Oxford, for whom the attraction of the theological study proved burdensome when it came to returning to the cloister.

Underlying all of this, there a defense of particularity, of a tradition that was properly the monks own. *Summi Magistri* and the other texts looked like an attempt to undermine this, to create out of monasticism an order according to the new model promulgated in the 13th century. Monasticism was not that, and if this was what the Popes were trying to do, then in the end they failed.

Clark