THE RULE OF ST BENEDICT FOR OUR TIME
Written in the first half of the sixth century, The Rule for Monks is a short document of 73 little chapters preceded by a prologue. Its author, Saint Benedict, was born about 480 in Norcia in Italy about 30 miles from Spoleto. After having withdrawn from the world for three years, living alone in a grotto, he established twelve small monasteries at Subiaco for his disciples who had come to group themselves around him. About 530, he was forced by local jealousies to move away to Monte Cassino about 110 miles south-east of Rome. On the summit he built a monastery. (It was there that he died, standing in an attitude of prayer, on 21st March 547.)

A Rule? With what aim in mind?

To guide the monks’ lives in their new foundation, Saint Benedict, with his rich and long experience, produced our Rule. Concise, to the point of being a pamphlet easily slipped into a pocket, it goes to the heart of things. Bossuet (1) has said about it that it is a précis of christian thought, meaning by this a digest of the christian life. It is not in itself a tract on spirituality nor a cold and impersonal set of rules. It is a work with the particular aim of organising very concretely a way of living monastically, in a community, where the search for God is facilitated by being removed or apart from the world.
As with every form of christian monastic life, it is inspired by the example of Christ led into the desert by the Holy Spirit or taking himself off into the night on a mountainside, alone to pray. The desert, in Holy Scripture, is the privileged place for coming face to face with God. The Hebrew people knew the austerity of the experience and benefitted from it, to be purified from the temptation, forever-returning, of idolatry.

Elijah and John the Baptist are the great figures of the Bible who were attracted and marked by desert life.

In the third and fourth centuries, in Egypt, influenced by Saint Anthony (252-356) and Saint Pakhom (292-347) there was a veritable exodus into the desert. Fervent Christians, anxious to avoid an easy compromise with comfort and to live the Gospel in its radicality resolutely chose a precarious and simple way of life which forced them to live only for God and to rely only on Him. Far from the cares of the world, in fasting and in silence, they kept to a life of unceasing prayer and looked for an approach to God through the purifying of the heart. Fierce solitude became a personal encounter with God.

The desert and poverty: two keys to the Divine.
A source of balance

By various ways this heritage of strong and original evangelical experience filtered through to Saint Benedict. In his wisdom he knew how to extract the permanent elements and adapt them to the men and conditions of his time. His biographer, Saint Gregory the Great, (Pope from 590 to 604), retained principally from his Rule the sense of balance. It is just this spirit of measure in all things and of discernment which have assured for this little work an influence across the centuries and brought it in time to all the continents. Benedictine monasticism, implanted in countries of Europe, America and Africa, has shown how its message can go beyond the epoch when it was developed. Should one really be surprised? The anthropalogy of the Rule is essentially biblical and Saint Benedict’s sole desire was to help mankind discover and follow the Christ.

We will now touch upon some aspects of the Rule which can help anyone who accepts to open themselves up to a way of thinking which for all its antiquity remains forever new.

You will worship the Lord your God

When the Hebrews wanted to make a journey into the wilderness to offer a sacrifice Pharoah simply increased their
workload. (Ex. 5.) It was out of the question, for him, to let them use up their energies on anything but building the earthly city. The economy and productivity must come first.

In our days it is much the same. Too bad if man himself is crushed, when our evolved societies, wanting to make us forget God, by a more complex strategy, increase at once the load of work and the load of leisure until man has not enough spirit left to think of God. Sunday becomes a day like any other and our holidays are dissociated from Holy Days or religious feasts. In certain countries, the strategy is even more subtle and the state takes charge of religious education but with the element of faith removed, neutralised. In short, religion is a cultural accessory (rather than a way of faith). What becomes of man in all this? Like sheep without a shepherd, we err and stray in search of « values » to give sense to our lives.

The Liturgy: the practice of God’s presence.

For Saint Benedict, however, nothing is preferable to the work of God undertaken in the liturgy when public worship is offered to our maker. Dom Guéranger (2), himself, affirms that prayer is for mankind the first of his riches. The liturgy is the meeting of man with God. It is the elevation of human intelligence to its highest truth. It is the refinement of
the senses penetrated already by the eucharistic presence and drawn to the promised resurrection. It is the familiarity with the mysteries of the life of Christ. It is the opening to and reception of the life-giving action of the Spirit. It is the communion and friendship shared at the heart of the congregation assembled to worship God three times holy and thrice in love.

**Praising God with a pure heart**

Saint Benedict devotes no less than thirteen chapter (8-20) to setting down the order of the different offices, according to whether the day is ordinary or a feast or a Sunday. Careful, however, to educate the worshippers in spirit and in truth as the Father would wish (John 4,23) he takes great pains to indicate what attitude of the soul is needed to worthily approach such an undertaking. It is only after having dealt with the great monastic virtues by which purity of the heart is arrived at (Chapter 4 on the Tools for Good Works, Chapter 5 on Obedience, 6 on Silence and 7 on Humility) that he takes on the task of setting out the Divine Office. It is clear: for Saint Benedict, the Liturgy implies a conversion of the soul. One does not stroll into the realm of God. Even if God has so abased himself towards our condition we are never to suppose that we have no effort to make to raise ourselves towards Him.
Walk in my presence

At the root of humility, as its shoot and first manifestation, Saint Benedict placed the fear of God; not the fear that makes one run away, but the awe and apprehension of one’s whole being before the majesty and beauty of God. To teach man to live in the presence of God, is to awake in him the sense of what is good and of what is not, of what pleases God and of what displeases Him. When Yahweh was preparing the covenant with Abraham, he said to him, « Live always in my presence and be perfect. » (Genesis 17,1) One could almost say: If you walk in my presence you will become perfect. To live in the presence of God is progressively to become conscious of the profound link from one’s very nature which exists between Him and us. It is, little by little, to model our conduct on His. It is to open a dialogue which becomes the secret prayer of the heart or the public glorification of His grandeur and goodness.

The adventure of human existence is to go towards the discovery of God. To deprive man of this happiness is to disable him and to frustrate God of the happiness of loving us.

Fatherhood and authority: what is there to fear?
- Contrasting points of view -

To talk about the up-to-dateness
of a monastic Rule does not necessarily imply that there is a convergence between the teaching it proposes and the sensibility of the age with which it is compared. However, in what appears, at first sight, far removed from our habitual way of thinking is often hidden a reminder of values which it might be well to reconsider. An examination, however cursory, of current ideas in contemporary reflection reveals a sort of incertitude: are we really sure that we were right to have abandoned certain ideas we had thought were out of date? Let’s take up two points where the Rule of Saint Benedict is at odds with our present way of thinking but of which we are beginning to rediscover the necessity: the idea of fatherhood and that of authori-

A question to reconsider

The political and philosophical history of the last two centuries reveals profound changes which have affected European society. The need for emancipation which arose in the XVIIth century in France, and the discoveries of psychoanalysis at the turn of XIXth and XXth centuries together ended up in a reassessment of the ideas of authority and the fall into disrepute of paternali-

stic notions. All authority was felt to be authoritarian and all paternity paternali-

stic. The cultural revolution of May 1968
in France tried to push even further this liberation. Now, voices are raised more and more frequently especially among educationalists to denounce the profoundly troubling effects in a person’s make-up caused by the absence of a father in our society.

Growing up

From the start of his Rule, in the second chapter, Saint Benedict talks about the Abbot. He doesn’t begin by envisaging the community, to which later on he will give a person in charge, no, he begins with the Father of the monastery. This is very revealing about the idea he has of authority. It is not first and foremost a position of power but one of fecundity. Authority comes from the latin augere: to augment or increase. The Abbot is the one who engenders in his sons the spiritual life. There are no brothers if there is not a father. He helps his monks to grow in the grace of baptism. His fatherhood is a participation in the unique fatherhood of God from whom all fatherhood on earth and in heaven takes its name (Eph. 3,14-15). It is the means for a monk to understand and live his life as a child of God.

For him who has taken on this charge the position requires qualities about which Saint Benedict waxes at length in the two chapters which concern the Abbot (2 & 64). There is first of all a de-
votion, which implies patience and selflessness. There is a sense of the good of the whole community which demands realism and prudence. There is the ability to transmit a teaching drawn from the Gospel. There is the art of inciting spiritual growth while being aware of the slow movement of grace. Firmness is not ruled out. The Abbot needs to know how to say no and sometimes how to reprimand an offense. But the Abbot, according to Saint Benedict is a man of God. In his hands authority is subservient to the plans God has for each of his children.

For anyone who wishes to know the idea the Church adopts about authority there is, in these pages, a teaching rich from experience. Let us risk suggesting that in these two chapters there might be a way to rehabilitate the idea of parental authority based on their vision of fatherhood which could contribute to a rediscovery of the fair and healthy idea of paternal authority in the family and in all education. It is, of course, understood that to transfer these principles requires some adaptation.

**Liberty and Freedom: the virtue of obedience**

If the authority of the Abbot is that of a father who devotes himself to the spiritual growth of his monks, these latter like to respond to him with an obedience at once eager and generous, as befits
their role as sons.

« We are of those who burn to submit themselves to be free. »

This provocative quotation does not come from monastic sources. It is taken from the work The Voices that Cry in the Desert by Ernest Psichari (1883-1914). But it is typical of the link this author discovered between obedience and inner freedom. After a time of living without strict principles, he came to understand that true freedom comes at the price of discipline and necessary retrenchments.

It is no surprise, then, that in the Rule of Saint Benedict obedience has an essential role, because this document aims to lead man to God by liberating him from the tyranny of sin. Obedience is the focal point where all the composing elements which make up a monk come together. It is the touchstone, the practical test, of the three great theological virtues. It takes for granted a steady gaze of faith. It is inspired by the hope of eternal life. It is the love and imitation of Christ.

Towards the imitation of Christ

Obedience produces as many benefits as it has facets. It is the limbering up of the will to render it docile and receptive to the action of the Holy Spirit. It is the wisdom that teaches how to be led by another’s judgement. It is the purification of a liberty that is too often the slave of a whim or caprice. It helps to build an ide-
al community by channelling all the individuals’ wills to the same goal. Above all; it is the imitation of Christ, and it is here that its fundamental merit resides. Among the various motives that bring someone to a monastery the most important is always a love of Christ which wants to show itself in a resemblance. The first step of humility is unhesitating obedience which comes naturally to those who cherish Christ above all.....Men of this resolve unquestionably conform to the saying of the Lord: I have come not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me (John 6,38). (Rule, Chapter 5).

Rooted in the Gospel, obedience thus appears as a hommage rendered to God. The monk offers to God his will and puts it at His disposition. If religious obedience is a sacrifice it is not an alienation. It is a communion of wills and thus becomes the realisation of the beautiful definition of friendship left to us by the classical culture of the Greeks and Romans: idem velle, idem nolle, the same desires, the same repugnances, which is to say, to wish for what the other desires and not to wish for what the other dislikes. The Other, here, is God himself.
Obedience : a good thing that leads to true freedom

The ancient world knew slavery: that of domination and of constraint. Paradoxically, let us dare to say, our society knows another bondage, that of liberty, any old way! Does such liberty make us really free?

In the Apostolic Exhortation on the consecrated life (Vita Consecrata) of 25th March 1966 John-Paul II considers the religious vows in dialogue with the modern world. He sees there a response to the great challenges thrown up by the world with which to confront the Church. He writes this about obedience.

The third challenge comes from these notions of freedom....In effect, the promotion of freedom is a genuine value, closely connected with respect for the human person. But who does not see the aberrant consequences of injustice and even violence, in the life of individuals and of peoples, to which the distorted use of freedom leads? An effective response to this situation is the obedience which marks the consecrated life.

For many people obedience can only be, in the best of circumstances, a necessary evil. But for Saint Benedict it is a blessing, oboedientiae bonum. These two
words open Chapter 71 of the Rule which deals with the question of the obedience which the brothers offer to each other. When obedience thus becomes the servant of fraternal life is it not worth the trouble to try it out.