

## The Trappists in Europe

The Abbey of Our Lady of New Melleray, located some twelve miles southwest of Dubuque, Iowa, houses the monks of the Reformed Cistercians commonly called Trappists. The founding of this monastery amid the undulating hills not far from the Mississippi three years after Iowa became a State, constitutes a chapter of a story which extends through the centuries.

In the year 1098 a small band of monks, dissatisfied with the laxity of their brethren at Molesme, France, set forth to find a new home where they could follow, unmolested, a strict observance of the ancient Rule of St. Benedict. Led by their saintly Abbot Robert, their Prior Alberic, and their Sub-Prior Stephen Harding, and carrying with them only the necessary vessels and vestments for celebrating mass and a breviary, they came to the dense and cheerless forest of Citeaux in the Duchy of Burgundy. Here in a vast solitude they stopped to clear a space for a monastery. The Duke of Burgundy learning that some pious monks had settled upon his domain sent provisions and gave them cattle and land.

Within a year, however, Abbot Robert was ordered by the Pope to return to Molesme where the

monks were clamoring for his restoration. Alberic succeeded him as Abbot at Citeaux and Stephen Harding became Prior. Under their jurisdiction the white habit with a black scapular was adopted — probably to contrast with the Cluniac monks — the meals were reduced to meager proportions, and lay brothers were introduced in order to permit the choir monks to devote more time to the Divine Office. These reforms, together with the practice of silence and strict observance of the Rule, have characterized the Cistercians through the ages.

With the death of Alberic in 1109 Stephen Harding became Abbot, and, according to the Cistercians of to-day, he was the true founder of the Order. He promulgated the "Charter of Charity", a collection of statutes containing wise provisions for monastic government which are still followed, and applied the rule of poverty to the community as much as to the individual members. During the dark days when it appeared that the glory of Citeaux would fade for lack of postulants, it was he who had the honor of receiving St. Bernard into the Order with thirty of his followers, friends, and relatives, many of whom were of noble birth.

The entrance of St. Bernard and his companions into the ranks of the Cistercians in 1112 was a signal for extraordinary development of the Order. It increased rapidly, branch monasteries were founded, and many congregations came under their rule. The

white-frosted monks acquired wealth through donations, and by their agricultural labors and economy — riches which they expended for the instruction of their followers, for charity, and for the extension of the Order. Travellers spoke of their hospitality. Their intellectual efforts produced manuscripts; their zeal helped spread the Romanesque and Gothic architecture throughout Europe; and they cultivated the arts of engraving and painting. This period of swift and brilliant development was the golden age of their history.

Then came a decline due to many causes. The disorders attendant upon the Hundred Years War led to a relaxation of discipline within the monasteries; the widely scattered abbeys made the visits of superiors increasingly difficult; and the practice of appointing "abbots in commendam" or abbots who might receive the revenues of the office without, perhaps, ever visiting the abbey over which they were supposed to rule, permitted habits of comfort to creep in, far from the intentions of the holy founders. Religious strifes, too, resulted in the formation of branches of the Cistercians.

Reform, however, was not far distant. The Abbé de Rancé (1626–1700) after a brilliant start in the world gave up his honors and his fortune and retired to the lonely solitude of the Abbey of La Trappe in the present Department of the Orne near Normandy. There as Abbot he succeeded in re-

instating an observance of the Rule of St. Benedict and the practices of the early Cistercians. The news of the piety and fervor of the monks at La Trappe spread throughout the monastic world. Just as the reforms of Citeaux had earlier restrained the growing laxity among the followers of St. Benedict, so now the reforms of the Abbé de Rancé brought the Cistercians back to their former glory. Thus the term "Trappist" has become indicative of extraordinary sanctity and austerity among the followers of the Order.

Next, the French Revolution played a part in the ancestral history of the Trappist abbey in Iowa. When the wrath of the Constituent Assembly fell upon the monasteries of France in the confiscatory decree of 1790, La Trappe was no exception and the next year beheld the monks scattered, the monastery buildings thrown down, and the land left uncultivated. In this state the abbey remained until it was repurchased and reinhabited after the overthrow of Napoleon.

One group of the monks at La Trappe fled to Switzerland under the leadership of Dom Augustine de Lestrange where they secured the ancient, deserted monastery of Val Sainte (Holy Valley). Here they followed again the austerities of La Trappe, and the Order prospered until the wars of Napoleon again made them wanderers.

In the meantime filtrations of monks had gone out



BROTHER TIMOTHY IN THE GARB OF A LAY BROTHER

from the mother house of Val Sainte to other parts of Europe. The Abbot of Val Sainte turned his attention to Canada also, and plans were made to establish a monastery there. In 1794 a band of monks under the leadership of Father John Baptist proceeded to London on their way to the New World. Although the English laws against Catholics and religious orders were still in force, this band of Trappists was received and protected by the British government under the pretense that they were French exiles. Their friendly reception in England caused them to abandon the Canada project and the monks settled down in a monastery built for them near Lullworth.

Here they remained from 1796 until 1817. Many Irish and English postulants joined the Order and the Abbot, unwilling to conform to the governmental warning to receive only French novices, obtained permission from the French King, Louis XVIII, to return to France. The Abbey of St. Susan of Lullworth was therefore abandoned and the community, numbering some sixty monks, embarked on July 10, 1817, aboard the frigate *La Ravanche*, which had been loaned them by the French King.

A month later found the community settled in the deserted monastery of Melleray in the Province of Brittany. Its buildings had survived the storm of the French Revolution and, although the lands were held by different owners, Dom Antoine, the Abbot,

secured a new home for his followers, partly by purchase and partly by donations.

But peace was short lived. The revolution of 1830 in France which deposed Charles X and placed the "Citizen King", Louis Philippe, on the throne engulfed the monks of Melleray Abbey in difficulty. They were accused of plotting against the new monarchy, of harboring Irishmen and Englishmen hostile to the new King, and of rebelling against the new régime. Accordingly, the expulsion of those monks under governmental suspicion by the French authorities left only a handful of French monks at Melleray, while the rest, embarking on a sloop of war, the Hebe, at St. Nazaire set sail for Cork, Ireland, where they arrived on December 1, 1831. For many years the abbey at Melleray languished but at length it revived and to-day is one of the greatest monasteries of the Order.

Before the storm had burst upon Melleray, Dom Antoine had sent emissaries to Ireland to seek a location in anticipation of the expected expulsion. Through their efforts a site was secured in the County of Waterford, near the town of Cappelquin, where the land was cleared and a monastery erected. Thus was established the Abbey of Mount Melleray, the mother house of the abbey in Iowa.

The Trappist abbey in Ireland prospered, and grew in numbers so rapidly that in 1835, even before the new abbey was completed, it was necessary to

send a few brethren to England to found another monastery. For a few years the overcrowded condition was relieved but scarcely more than a decade had elapsed before the population of Mount Melleray had again outgrown the monastery. It was in this exigency that the Abbot, Dom Bruno Fitzpatrick, turned his attention across the Atlantic, as a possible location for some of his monks.

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