

+Saint Benedict, Abbot
Homily given at Our Lady of Clear Creek Abbey
July 11, 2024

Homily of the Right Reverend Dom Philip Anderson, Abbot of Clear Creek Abbey
In the Name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Then Peter answering, said to him: Behold we have left all things, and have followed thee: what therefore shall we have? (Mt. 19: 27)

Dear Brothers and Sisters
My Very Dear Sons,

The consequences of Saint Benedict's flight to the wilderness in order to serve God alone are incalculable. How paradoxical this is: he abandons family and friends, his fellow human beings, but in so doing renders them a greater service than ever he could have by remaining in the usual walks of life! The theme is well known to monks, who also remember that much of our Western civilization hinged on that decision of the young man from Nursia. Not only did monastic life powerfully prosper in his wake, but even the outcroppings of the monastic project served to sustain the institutions that made the Middle Ages and that thing we now call "Europe." By leaving one world, Benedict built a new one.

One of the most astounding chapters of this story of Benedictine Europe is that of the great Abbey of Cluny.

The history of this Benedictine monastery located in Burgundy (now part of France) spans some 880 years from its establishment by William I, Duke of Aquitaine, in 910 to the execution of its last monks, Martyrs for the Faith, during the religious persecution of the French Revolution. Cluny gave to the Church four Popes, including Blessed Urban II, who in 1098 called his former monastery the "light of the world." The great abbey also provided a number of saintly statesmen, who, as trusted counselors to Popes and Emperors, had a considerable effect on the development, both religious and political, of the Western society of their time. Saint Odilo, the fifth abbot of Cluny, vigorously promoted the "Truce of God," whereby belligerent Christian lords had to limit fighting among themselves to certain days of the week. He also instituted the Commemoration of All Souls on November 2nd, a liturgical practice later adopted by the universal Catholic Church. Cluny's church, demolished in the aftermath of the French Revolution, was the largest in Christendom until St. Peter's Basilica in Rome was built.

The Abbey of Cluny truly set the standard for monastic observance in the West for several centuries, having over 800 monasteries under its authority—many more if one counts the monasteries that followed its customs without being directly affiliated with the "motherhouse" in Burgundy.

Many things have changed in the world since the time of the Cluny. Fundamental principles remain the same, the Faith is the same, human nature is the same, but the political and social landscape of the world has taken on vastly different shape. Furthermore, culture, that synthesis of human expression and aspirations—especially Christian culture, described very aptly as "the best which has been thought and said" (Matthew Arnold)—seems now almost to be dying. If Faith is

like a precious stone, like a diamond, and if culture can be compared to the ring that holds the diamond on someone's finger, then the diamond of our Catholic Christian beliefs is in danger of dropping off, of losing contact with the circle of human life. Catholics and many others ask themselves what is to be done.

Myles Connolly, writing in the early 20th century, but with far-reaching prophetic insight, gives us a clue. He is speaking in the following passage about a famous Catholic university located on a hill, but what he says applies even better to a Benedictine monastery.

A great desolation grows about us but up there is the warmth of a fireside and the loveliness of a garden. [U]p there is a shrine for those who are going to war, for those who will see the shivering void beyond the rim of faith. Once heroes built fortresses against the Mongol and the Saracen; now they must build fortresses against the whole world. Once they fought with spear and pikestaff against hordes of riding men. Today they must fight against pride and indifference and knowledge, against agnosticism that like a poison gas decomposes the minds of the earth. (*Mr. Blue*, chap. 6)

In the end it all goes back to the promise given to Saint Peter. Responding to the latter's question about what recompense he might have for following Him, Jesus makes a most amazing statement, saying:

Amen I say to you, that you who have followed me, in the regeneration, when the Son of man shall sit on the seat of his majesty, you also shall sit on twelve seats judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And every one that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands for my name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and shall possess life everlasting. (Mtt. 19:28-29)

What about the challenge Pope Francis continually presents to all Catholics—to priests and religious in particular—telling them to “get out of their comfort zone” and preach the Gospel to the poor? Is not the idea of a monastic citadel tending in just the opposite direction? In fact, the positive impact of Cluny, to return once more to that famous abbey, the impact of Cluny on the poor outside its walls was quite considerable. Each day immense amounts of food and clothing were given out to all that would come to the monastery. There were no Social Security numbers in those days: men did not receive checks. Instead of being numbers the poor were persons. True solidarity—or to use a more Christian word, true charity—in the profound sense, comes from the love of God originating in the life of Faith nourished by the Sacraments and prayer. There must be new ways of reaching out to the poor of our day, but the economics of the Gospel remain the same. A hundred-fold on earthly possessions: such is the return promised, not to mention the most important of all: eternal life (*ibid.* and see Mtt. 13:8).

All of this begins in silent prayer. The day when large monasteries return, and with them, radiating from their contemplative center, the great active orders of religious men and women, a very large part of our social woes will have found a solution. Health care will become truly affordable once again, when legions of consecrated human beings are working solely for the love of God. Yes, we monks do “go out” but in our own way, by means of our adoration in spirit and truth that, by the power of Faith, moves mountains and men and embraces the whole world of human beings, who are all potential saints. May Our Blessed Father Saint Benedict return to earth in our time and renew in us his indomitable spirit. Amen. Alleluia.