

Le Temps des Moines: Clôture et Hospitalité, by Danièle Hervieu-Léger. Paris, Presses Universitaires de France 2017. ISBN978-2-13-078652-8. pp. 709. 27€

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This book may come as a surprise to some people, given its author, its content and not least its size. Danièle Hervieu-Léger has for some time stood out (in my view) as the sociologist whose interpretations of European religion and society are by far the most analytically sophisticated when compared with rival offerings from other French, European, or quasi-European countries or from North America.

Now, at the start of her retirement, Hervieu-Léger has produced a monumental account of the dramatic fluctuations experienced by French monasticism and monastic life since the Revolution. Discretely putting aside the conventions imposed even on scholarly discourse by French habits of *laïcité*, she has demonstrated her erudition and the elegance of her writing, while also conveying a discrete texture of attachment to a deep and ancient history. The book illustrates the multi-faceted character of these institutions and their resonance with the Catholic Church as a whole, with the origins of Vatican II, and with the evolution of the ecumenical movement. Its frequent references back to St Benedict's Rule, to the changes in the laws (temporal and ecclesial) governing the life of monks since then, to the debates over reclusion, austerity, asceticism, liturgy, prayer, as well as love, the good of the world, and inevitably the changing understanding of what it means to be religious or to be a person of faith in contemporary Europe.

Even before the Revolution, French kings had been gaining control of monastic life and monasteries, but the Revolution and Napoleon's rule, combined with efforts at state control of churches elsewhere, forced the closure of monasteries leading to a decline of 1000 in the number of Benedictines in Europe between 1789 and 1815. Finding themselves literally without a roof over their heads, monks sought refuge in neighbouring countries and in private houses; but this crisis was followed by renewal, with a growth of the number of Benedictines from 1500 around 1850 to 6000 at the end of the 19th century. The history reflects, in France, the church's oscillating and often tempestuous relations with the state and with anticlerical politicians throughout the 19th century. All this against a background of upsurges in popular religious faith, as expressed in the fevered response to Bernadette's visions at Lourdes in 1858. Renewed controls and the dissolution of the Society of Jesus in the 1880s were not long-lasting but fired up ultramontane Catholicism as evidenced in its anti-Dreyfusard positions. Eventually the church's role in state education was ended in 1905, and church property was transferred to the communes in 1908. Some monasteries were seized by the authorities and their occupants expelled, although these measures were applied unevenly.

The renewal of monastic life is described through the lives and achievements of a few extremely strong and innovative personalities, starting with the famous Dom Guéranger who brought the ruined abbey of Solesmes back to life in the 1830s to refound a Benedictine community which was to grow and also give birth to 'daughter' communities elsewhere; the book chronicles a series of other foundations and refoundations, located in places whose names resonate with 'la France profonde' like Mesnil-Saint-Loup, la Pierre-qui-

Vire, En-Calcat and so on. After the reversals of the late 19th century came the First World War in which 25,000 priests and seminarists were called up and 3,000 killed. Although some rejected the call-up to serve in the army of a Republic accused of persecuting the church, and moved to Switzerland, for the most part they rallied to the national cause.

The end of the war marked a definitive turning point: the numbers of seminarists would never experience renewal such as had happened in the 19th century, and gradually the monasteries had to face reality of secularization. Thus began a process that eventually culminated in the Second Vatican Council and one of the surprises of this book is the story of the very important role of the monastic orders and certain of their intellectually prominent members in paving the way to that turning point – a turning point which Catholics and the church are still trying to absorb. To mention only the liturgical changes brought by the Council, it was in monasteries that Mass began to be pronounced in the vernacular and that initiatives were taken to shift the focus of celebration from officiating priest to the congregation.

For some the word enclosure itself (the 'clôture' of the title) means a threshold, rather than a wall: to be cut off from the world is to adopt a cast of mind, not necessarily to be hidden or held behind a wall. Throughout the narrative the book explains the many dimensions and meanings of the concept of enclosure and more broadly of monasticism or the monastic life – variations which inspire differences between the great traditions. There is monastic life as total seclusion, as among the Trappists, a 17th century offshoot of the Cistercian order, in which the religious devote themselves to their salvation, almost dissolving their silent life into death, devoid of almost any social contact even with their families, save obedience to their Abbott and regulated common mealtimes; once elected, the Abbott commands absolute obedience, having sometimes been described as the representative of Christ and thus carrying quasi-divine authority, sometimes as the head of a family, but this has been softened somewhat in the last century in parallel with the greater value placed on monastic life as life in community. There is a long discussion of the meaning of asceticism which also offers an insight into the doubts and queries which inevitably arise from reflection on a regime defined so much by detailed, even hair-splitting, regulation on the one hand and an intangible spiritual commitment on the other. In a 20th century discussion of fasting one authority worries that it loses its point if it is not part of a daily routine and becomes a 'mere' affliction or self-punishment. Indeed in one conversation we hear an interviewee speaking of practices verging on the masochistic – the only allusion to sex in the entire book. Even – perhaps in particular – where everyday life is so heavily ordered around niggling rituals, issues which to the outsider seem trivial, like whether one delays Vespers until the midday meal, are absolutely fundamental to insiders (as in all strictly observant religious traditions). In the face of such elaborate habits and deep memory, Vatican II gave up trying to define the monastic life.

Religious orders and monasteries have many callings – whether as individuals in search of union with God or communities devoted to the daily and annual cycle of prayer and commensality, or indeed as farmers, artisans and producers of wine and spirits. And that is without counting the extremely important role as educators which hardly appears here because that is not for monks living an enclosed life. The postconciliar haemorrhage of religious and the cultural convulsions of the late 20th century brought profound self-

questioning. The 'double éthique' underpinning the complementarity between priests and religious (the virtuosi) and the laity on whose behalf they work, pray and do penance, and for whom they intercede, was undermined by the blurring of charismatic privilege in a world where Catholic discourse is peppered with the words 'People of God'.

The monastic life started in the desert of the Middle East, long before monasteries, and it continues to show its capacity for sometimes painful reappraisal and renewal. Monasteries are points of stability in our navigation of the cities of Europe and Latin America even if the monastic life has found other forms – for example in unremarkable houses where monks live among the people, but still monastically. And some monasteries now offer board and lodging and welcome tourists, developing the title's hospitality vocation, as well as continuing to develop their farming and artisanry, with an enhanced environmentalist commitment.

This is where Hervieu-Léger's story ends, but not the book. It is long, to be sure, but some of its chapters almost stand as books on their own. It is not written in a difficult style and is thankfully jargon-free of sociological. On the other hand readers will notice a certain intimacy with the world and the language of the Church and of the orders themselves. The emphasis on personal stories, the detailed discussion of the rules and regulations established by Popes, Bishops and Abbots, over centuries, the light touch brought to the classic texts of St Benedict and the leaders of 19th century renewal, and the author's evident ease of access to the monasteries, give the reader the sense of being a guest in an intimate and rarefied society. I felt I was being introduced to a large number of men (they are all men) sometimes consumed by the pursuit of an ideal, driven by a desire to do the right thing, but never absolutely sure it was a desire that they could fulfil. Of course, being concerned with building institutions, they have interests and those interests can involve bitter conflicts, but the monastic life does not only allow its denizens to think – it forces them to do so but denies them the satisfaction of absolute certitude. One of the great successes of this book is to make us aware that life for many religious over the last two centuries has not been one of contemplation, but rather of constant intellectual struggle

Religious have on too many occasions paid the ultimate price in recent times. I recall the murder of six Jesuits, their housekeeper and her daughter in El Salvador's Universidad Centroamericana in 1989, and the assassination of Sister Dorothy Stang in the Brazilian Amazon in 2005, among many others in Latin America since the 1970s. In its powerful Epilogue *Le Temps des Moines* reminds us that not only in theory or theology is monasticism a matter of life and death. Returning to the killing of seven Trappist monks in the Algerian town of Tibhirine in 1996 during that country's macabre civil war – narrated and dissected in Xavier Beaubois' 2010 film *Des Hommes et des Dieux* – these final pages bring out interconnection between enclosure and hospitality. Having decided after extensive discussion and in spite of dire warnings to stay in their priory, the monks had held fast to their liturgy, their daily routines and their rules of diet and work. In all probability their fate was sealed by initiatives like regular meetings with a local sufi order and of course by their commitment to open their doors to any in need of medical attention, notably the wounded from any side in the conflict.

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