

Le Temps des Moines: Clôture et Hospitalité, by Danièle Hervieu-Léger,
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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 as the sociologist whose interpretations of European religion and society are by far the most analytically sophisticated, compared to offerings from other French and European countries or from North America.

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. Discreetly putting aside the conventions imposed even on scholarly discourse by French habits of *laïcité*, she demonstrates her erudition and the elegance of her writing, while also discreetly conveying her attachment to a deep and ancient history. The book illustrates the multi-faceted character of the monastic institutions and their resonance with the Catholic Church as a whole, the origins of Vatican II, and the evolution of the ecumenical movement. It offers the insights of a privileged and highly erudite insider on St Benedict's Rule, the changes in the laws (temporal and ecclesial) governing the life of monks since then, the debates about 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.

Well 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 loss of about one thousand Benedictines in Europe between 1789 and 1815. Finding themselves literally without a roof over their heads, monks sought refuge in neighbouring countries and private houses, but this crisis was followed by renewal, with a growth from 1,500 Benedictines around 1850 to 6,000 at the end of the nineteenth century. The history reflects, in France, the church's oscillating and often tempestuous relations with the state and with anti-clerical politicians throughout the nineteenth century. This occurred against the 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 evident in its anti-Dreyfusard positions. Eventually, the church's role in state education 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 re-found a Benedictine community which both itself grew in number and influence and gave birth to 'daughter' communities elsewhere; the book chronicles a series of other foundations and re-foundations, located in places whose names resonate with 'la France profonde' like Mesnil-Saint-Loup, la Pierre-qui-Vire, and En-Calcat. The reversals of the late nineteenth century were followed by the shock of the First

World War, when 25,000 priests and seminarists were called up and 3,000 killed. Although some moved to Switzerland rather than serve a Republic accused of persecuting the church, most rallied to the national cause. The end of the war marked a definitive turning point: the numbers of seminarists would never experience renewal as they had in the nineteenth century; gradually, the monasteries had to face the reality of secularization. Thus began a process that 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—which Catholics and the church are still trying to absorb. To mention only the liturgical changes brought about 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 congregation, not to speak of the theological controversies to which the Council gave rise.

For some, the word 'enclosure' (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 monastic life—variations which inspire differences between the great traditions. There is monastic life as total seclusion, as among the Trappists, a seventeenth-century offshoot of the Cistercian order, who devote themselves to their salvation, almost dissolving their silent life into death, devoid of all but the barest social contact even with their families, save obedience to their abbot and regulated common meal times; once elected. Until not so long ago, the abbot

commanded absolute obedience, sometimes described as the representative of Christ and thus carrying quasi-divine authority, sometimes described 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 insight into the doubts and queries which inevitably arise from reflection on a regime defined in which detailed, even hair-splitting, regulation, coexists with spiritual commitment. In a twentieth-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, an interviewee speaks of practices verging on the masochistic—the only allusion to sex in the entire book. As in other strictly observant religious traditions, where everyday life is so heavily ordered around niggling rituals, issues which seem trivial to the outsider - for example whether one delays Vespers until the midday meal - are absolutely fundamental to insiders. In the face of such elaborate habits and deep memory, the bishops at Vatican II gave up their attempt to define monastic life.

Religious orders and monasteries have many callings—whether as a home for individuals in search of union with God or communities devoted to the daily and annual cycle of prayer and commensality, or as farmers, artisans, and producers of wine and spirits. That is without counting the extremely important role as educators, which hardly appears here because it is not for monks living an enclosed life. All these callings were thrown into crisis by the post-conciliar haemorrhage of religious and the cultural convulsions of the late twentieth century. The *double éthique* underpinning the complementarity of priests/religious (the *virtuosi*) and laity, on whose behalf

the former work, pray, and do penance and for whom they intercede, was also 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 were established, and, despite its deeply conservative exterior, 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 monastic life has found other forms—for example, in unremarkable houses where monks live among the people, but still monastically. Some monasteries now offer board and lodging and welcome tourists, developing the vocation of hospitality in the book's title, as well as continuing their farming and artisanry, with an enhanced environmentalist commitment.

This is where Hervieu-Léger's story ends, but not the book. It is certainly long, but some chapters almost stand as books on their own. It is not written in a difficult style and is free of sociological jargon and conveys an almost relaxed familiarity with the world and the language of both Church and the orders. 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 the nineteenth-century renewal, and the author's evident ease of access to the monasteries, all 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 they could fulfil. Of course, being concerned with building institutions,

they have interests and those interests can involve bitter conflicts, but monastic life does not only allow, it also forces its denizens to think, while denying them the satisfaction of absolute certitude. One of the book's great successes is to make readers aware that life for many religious over the last two centuries has not been one of contemplation, but one of constant intellectual struggle.

Religious have on too many occasions paid the ultimate price in recent times: for example, in 1989, six Jesuits, their housekeeper and her daughter were murdered in El Salvador's Universidad Centroamericana and, in 2009, Sister Dorothy Stang was assassinated in the Brazilian Amazon—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 civil war—narrated and dissected in Xavier Beaubois's film of 2010 *Des Hommes et des Dieux*—the final pages bring out the interconnection between enclosure and hospitality as it unfolded in the most painful and tragic of circumstances. Having decided, after extensive discussion and despite dire warnings, to stay in their priory, the nine monks had them were kidnapped and killed. In all probability, their fate was sealed by initiatives like regular meetings with a local Sufi order and 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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