

your heart. Believe in him and you see him. He is not before your eyes and yet he possesses your heart. For if he were not with us what we have heard would be a lie: *Behold I am with you even unto the consummation of the world* (Matt. 28, 20).

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## THE MEDIEVAL GUEST

BY

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HE exhortations and counsel of St Benedict in his Rule on the reception of guests are too well known to be repeated here. Their importance however can never be sufficiently stressed and their wisdom and beauty can never be sufficiently praised. There is in the Luxembourg Museum of Paris a painting by Dauban of a stranger being received by a convent. It is a perfect interpretation of the 53rd chapter of the Rule, with a poignant beauty and a moral for all humanity.

Doubtless there were guests even among the primitive communities in the deserts of Nitria and the Thebaid, although such a speculation is beyond the scope of the present essay. During the earlier history of the monasteries, the 11th and 12th centuries for example, hospitality was a *sine qua non* of monastic life. In some cases, indeed, as of the abbeys of Reading and Battle, the foundation-charters indicated that the providing of such hospitality in the district was the motive of the founder.

The relationship between Church and State, between Church and Society, was then very different from what it is today. The Church was closely interwoven with the entire national fabric. The monastery was church, school, inn, sometimes bank, and often judicial court. It was the forerunner of the large guest-house type of inn that we know today. Such lodging-houses and ale-houses as existed were inadequate and could not compete with the comfort of monastic guest-houses. Thus it was that nobles with their retinues, ministers and prelates, aristocracy and peasants, planned their journeys, as near as possible, to touch points at which religious houses were situated, for the monks provided good beds, clean linen, good liquor, meat and bread, and often entertainment.

The normal stay of visitors was two days and two nights, but the privilege was often abused, particularly by the influential. Hospitality became, economically, such a heavy burden on many houses that Edward I forbade anyone to eat or lodge in a religious house unless such a person was the founder or had been invited by the

superior and even then his consumption was to be moderate. His successor, Edward II, had fewer scruples, and his visit to the abbey of Peterborough in 1310 was said to have cost the abbot £1543 13s. 4d. Earlier, many houses had suffered from the prolonged and frequent visits of King John, and Jocelyn of Brakelond has described John's visit to Bury St Edmunds, when the only present the King left behind was a silk scarf—which his servants had borrowed from the sacristan of the abbey and never paid for. The higher secular clergy were equally exacting; bishops with large corteges often made a convenience of monasteries while on journeys of diocesan visitation, and even archdeacons on parochial missions would be accompanied by a score or so of horsemen. But perhaps the classic instance of this form of abuse is presented in the early sixteenth-century record of a man who arrived with wife and seven children at a guesthouse and did not leave it until nearly seven years later, though doubtless this period embraced the eve and aftermath of the Dissolution.

Religious houses for women suffered particularly in this respect. Gentlewomen made temporary homes of them, often staying for a year or more. The reception of large numbers of fashionable laywomen created many anomalies, and was in a large measure responsible for the disorders and laxity which prevailed in such nunneries as the Fontevraultine house of Nuneaton.

Originally, the upper western claustral range (except in Cistercian houses) was allotted to guests. Later, the larger houses extended this further westward or built a special house (*domus hospitum*). The Carthusians invariably ranged the guest-quarters around an outer court or Little Cloister. Guests were not, originally, allowed within the enclosure, and they encountered the convent only in church. Such an arrangement prevailed at the abbey of Monte Cassino right up to its recent destruction.

At the Cistercian abbey of Fountains at the beginning of the 13th century, Abbot John of Kent built a guesthouse 'to receive Christ's poor as well as the great ones of the world'. Today however the remains of two guesthouses can be seen, indicating that 'the great ones' were later segregated. This pertained at Kirkstall and other Cistercian houses. At Cleeve Abbey there seem to have been four separate guest-houses, one for the upper classes, one for the poor, one for travelling Cistercians (those on business, not the *gyrovagi*) and one for religious of other Orders. The double guest-house was also to be found at such Benedictine houses as those of Canterbury and Evesham. This arrangement cannot be strictly regarded as a later innovation, however, for it can be seen on a ninth-century plan of St Gall.

At Glastonbury, 'the guesthouse was an apartment for the entertainment of strangers, and for the reception of travellers. Here all persons, from the prince to the peasant, were entertained, according to their rank and quality. And none were commanded to depart, if they were orderly and of good behaviour'. Later, it became the practice to entertain the aristocracy in the superior's house, the better classes in the guesthouse, and the poor in the almonry or gatehouse.

In such circumstances it is not difficult to see why the guestmaster or hosteller should be a man of high vocation, moral integrity and goodwill, a man of great tact, patience and experience. His duties could be exacting, his obligations numerous, his responsibilities infinite, and his vocation sorely tried. In addition to being responsible for the welfare of guests and the furnishing of their quarters, he might be called upon to provide medical attention or to see that the horses of travellers were newly-shod and cared for. The latter constituted no mean task; at St Albans there was stabling for three hundred horses, while the abbey of Abingdon had a special endowment to meet the cost of shoeing horses of guests.

At the Augustinian house of Barnwell the hosteller was to have 'elegant manners and a respectable bringing-up'. His duties were minutely laid down. He had to maintain 'cups without flaws; spoons of silver . . . sheets not merely clean but untorn . . . fire that does not smoke . . . writing materials' and a host of amenities in a guesthouse strewn with rushes underfoot.<sup>1</sup>

At Durham the 'Geste Haule' on the east side of the curia had separate lodgings and was served from the prior's kitchen. The guestmaster here was known as the 'terror' (terrarius), and he was 'appoynted to geve intertaynment to all staitis' and to care for 'the goodnes of ther diett, the sweete and daintie furnetur of ther lodgings, and generally all things necessarie for travaillers'.<sup>2</sup>

The presence of guests often led to unavoidable interruptions of the daily monastic life. At Clairvaux under the abbacy of St Bernard guests arrived and departed so frequently that St Bernard quietly complained of the loss of solitude and the interrupting of his writing and preaching to the brethren. 'I will go forth unto the guests, lest anything be found lacking in that love whereof I am even now discouraging unto you'.

The arrangements for guests were most strict in the Cistercian houses (if we except the Carthusians). According to the Statutes, when a new abbey had been built, women were to be allowed to visit it for nine days but could not pass a night in it. The usual practice

<sup>1</sup> *Customary of Barnwell.*

<sup>2</sup> *Rites of Durham.*

of monks generally in the thirteenth century was to prohibit all women visitors except noble ladies and the sisters of the monks. The wisdom of these strictures can be gauged from the embarrassing consequences which often followed the admittance of women as guests. As in the Cluniac guesthouses of Lenton (where Henry III stayed in 1230), where, in 1263, the wife of Nicholas de Cantlow gave birth to a son who was duly baptised in the priory church on Palm Sunday.

Guests also created, indirectly, certain anomalies. Although St Benedict had prescribed that the Silence after Compline could be broken on account of guests, this was obviously not the ideal and was, perhaps, a regrettable compromise. Diet too was affected. Lanfranc, following earlier tradition, prohibited the eating of meat and luxuries to all monks except those in the infirmary, but by the end of the 12th century such fare was allowed to those dining in the abbot's room and to those dining with guests.<sup>3</sup> The precedent being established, there was some tendency for this state of affairs to develop, and Geraldus Cambrensis has recorded a dinner at Canterbury, at which he was a guest, whereat sixteen courses were served with an abundance of wines.

Both the *Regularis Concordia* and the *Carta Caritatis* decreed that superiors should always eat in the refectory, at a separate table, while guests normally dined in their own quarters. The general practice seems to have been a combination of the two, the guests sitting at the abbot's table in the refectory.

During the later Middle Ages, when society became more complex and monastic administration more involved, the practice crept in whereby the Superior had his own dwelling and household. One immediate result of this was a more complete segregation of social classes than already existed. While hospitality was still dispensed to all, the reception of the affluent was carried to extremes and entertainment was on a lavish scale.

The Benedictine houses of Durham, Winchester, Norwich and Finchale and the Augustinian houses of Maxstoke and Dunmow hired players, mummers, jugglers, minstrels and musicians. The account rolls of these houses refer to *mimi*, *joculatores*, *jocatores*, *lusores* and *citharistae*. At Finchale there was an apartment known as 'le Playerchambre'.

Richard Whiting, last Abbot of Glastonbury, sometimes entertained five hundred persons of fashion at a single sitting. Some allowance should be made however for the unique position in affairs of State held by mitred abbots at the beginning of the 16th century. Such lordly feasts were often diplomatic gestures, and were more than

<sup>3</sup> *Lanfranci Statuta*.

offset by the generous alms distributed to the poor of a very wide area twice a week.

Such men as Abbot Whiting, living in a new age of hedonism, yet saw Christ in the common man. And many a common man found Christ in a monastic hostelry. The guesthouse dispensed not food and drink merely. It gave out love, hope and charity—and peace.

Tradition has it that Dante knocked one evening upon the door of a remote convent in the Apennines. On being asked what he wished, he replied simply, *Pax*.

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## C O R R E S P O N D E N C E

*To the Editor, LIFE OF THE SPIRIT.*

Dear Sir,

A few months ago one of your readers, Mr G. Sexton, called the writer's attention to a remarkable book published in New York just before the outbreak of the last war. This book, *The Following of Christ*, carries the *imprimatur* of Cardinal Hayes, Archbishop of New York; but owing probably to the unsettled condition of world affairs during recent years, it seems to have been overlooked on this side of the Atlantic. It professes to give conclusive proof that *The Imitation* was originally written in low German by Gerard Groote, the founder of the Brethren of the Common Life; and that Thomas à Kempis—a member of the same Order—was given the task some years later of translating and copying the low German MS into Latin. It is stated that this manuscript was discovered in 1921 at Lubeck by the city librarian, and was edited by Dr James Van Ginneken, S.J., of Nymegen. After the Introduction, which amplifies these points, the remainder of the book is given up to a translation from the Lubeck manuscript into English, by a Joseph Malaise, S.J.

Assuming for a moment (perhaps a wide assumption) that all the facts in the Introduction can be verified, there is a very good case indeed for attributing the authorship to Gerard Groote. And when comparing the translation with the Latin of Thomas à Kempis, the case becomes even stronger.

This is the briefest hint of the book's purport, and there are many ramifications, such as alleged alterations and additions made by à Kempis. Many questions also remain to be asked, such as—was the Lubeck MS lost in the terrible air bombardment of that city, and what is known of the translator Joseph Malaise?