

The Birth of the Cistercian Order

A Monk that is very seldom mentioned is Stephen Harding, an Englishman by birth and the place of birth was at Sherborne in Dorset in the year 1060, Stephen came from a wealthy family and he was heir to a large estate, however, he was placed into the Abbey of Sherborne called St Mary the Virgin and was founded by St. Aldhelm in 705 AD, a Benedictine Abbey, here Stephen would receive his early education.

Stephen would later throw off the cowl and travel to Scotland, Paris and Rome to study further, as a travelling scholar, Stephen was a very educated young man, he spoke French, Norman and Latin.

On returning home from Rome he stopped off at the Monastery of Molesme possibly for a rest and to meet other Monks, whilst there he was very impressed by Robert the Abbot, at this point he decided to stay and join the Monks of Molesme, they were also (Benedictine's), Robert later on would become a Saint.

Stephen would eventually become a very strong supporter of Robert, Stephen and twenty other Monks, were given authority by Hugh, the Bishop of Lyons to travel to Cîteaux to institute a reform in the new foundation there, Cîteaux being the first Cistercian Monastery, some time later in (1099) Robert was recalled to Molesme, Molesme it was said was, corrupt and lazy.

Stephen became Prior of Cîteaux under Alberic, the new Abbot, in (1110) Alberic died, Stephen was away from the Monastery at the time, and in his absence was elected as the new Abbot.

The number of Monks was very low, there were none to fill the spaces of those who had died, things were so bad that Stephen and the other Monks were reduced to begging at doors to get food and alms, this was all due to the strict rules of the Cistercians, it seemed that nobody wanted to join them.

Then in 1112 a young man called Bernard aged about 23 years along with around thirty friends arrived and joined Stephen and his Monks, after this the Order became seemed to change for the better, a sort of miracle in a way for the Order, Bernard would eventually make the Cistercians stronger and he would also later become a Saint.

A year later Stephen founded his first colony at La Ferté, and before his death he had established twenty Monasteries, he was a fantastic organiser, he instituted the system of general chapters and regular visitations and, to ensure uniformity in all his foundations, he drew up the famous "Charter of Charity" or collection of statutes for the government of all Monasteries united to Cîteaux, which was approved by Pope Callistus II in 1119.

Stephen was now growing old and was infirm, he later went blind, due to this he retired from his post and designated Robert de Monte to be his successor, Robert was accordingly elected to the post by his brother Monks, Robert only held the post for two years.

Stephen Harding died (March 28, 1134) aged 74 years, there is a great deal of gratitude owed to this man, through him and his fellow Monks of the early years when times were hard, they struggled through and were the pioneers, the founders of the Cistercian Order of Monks, Stephen served at Cîteaux for 25 years, Stephen was the third Abbot of the Order and he is considered through his leadership as being the father of the Cistercians.

Stephen was responsible for laying down the rules for the Cistercians, they had to be in isolated locations near rivers, they would have to be hard workers, their Monasteries would have to have high walls around them so that they were totally secluded.

If we look back, Stephen would see the start of the Crusades, he would have seen the beginning of the Knights Templar Order and would have spoken to them at some

point. Stephen died two years before Hugh de Payne, one of the founding members of the Knights Templar Order, and their first Grand Master who passed away in 1136. Stephen would have seen the Order grow and grow, he would have seen monasteries opened up in England and Scotland, he was around when Balantrodach (Temple) Midlothian, Scotland, was built.

It has been said that when he lay dying, Stephen heard those around him whispering that he had nothing to fear. Had he not led a virtuous life of hard labour and love of God? but Stephen told them that he was afraid he had not been good enough, that shows us how humble this great man was, Stephen was buried in the same tomb as his predecessor, Alberic, died (1109) in the cloister of Cîteaux.

As stated earlier, Stephen was responsible for founding twenty Monasteries, Clairvaux being one of them in (1115) it would be later on that Bernard became Abbot and from there on the Order accelerated becoming even larger, Bernard would eventually become Abbot of Clairvaux.

Stephen wrote Carta Caritatis ('Charter of Love') a very important document for the Cistercian Order, establishing its unifying principles.

Stephen Harding was canonised in 1623.

What was Cistercian life like?, it certainly was not for the slackers, their program was very strict as you will see.

The day in a Cistercians Life

Morning

3.15 am Rise, 3.30 Vigils, 4.15 Meditation, 4.45 Mass, 5.30 Breakfast then Lectio Divina, 6.45 Lauds, 7.30 Farm Work, 8.00 Office Work, 8.45 Terce, 9.00 Housework, - Gardening, 11.45 Sext, 12.00 Noon Lunch.

Afternoon

1.45 pm None, 2.00 Work, 4.30 Lectio, 5.20 Supper, 5.45 Meditation, 6.00 Vespers, 6.30 Lectio, 7.15 Chapter, 7.30 Compline Salve, 8.00 Retire.

Such was the life of a Cistercian Monk, I can't imagine anyone working these hours today, but this was not just one day this was seven days a week, this workload would greatly affect any man or woman today.

The Cistercians were the hardest working Order of Monks, the other Orders were more at ease and possibly had time off for rest.

Two things that they wore that was different to the other Orders of Monks was, that on their feet they wore shoes, not sandals, and of course the white habit.

I came across something that was useful not only to the Cistercians but other Orders of Monks was, that they used a certain type of Herb, if they were working in the fields or whatever, they would soon work up an appetite, they had a certain Herb that they would chew that took away the pangs of hunger, the downside to this was that the taste was vile.

Sources:

Cistercians in the British Isles

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