'Put nothing before the Work of God' (*RB* XLIII). Why not?

Introduction

In the foreword to her Life of St Serafim, Iulia de Beausobre reports an incident that occurred in the winter of 1933, while, as a political convict, she was interned in a lumber camp south-east of Moscow and employed nursing the sick. Early one morning, she was accompanying an ailing woman from the hospital's provisional comforts into the silent immensity of a landscape covered in snow and defined on all sides by solid walls of birches and pines. Suddenly, she says, the patient

> clutched at me, gasped and gaped. Straight ahead, beyond the pale streak of the fence, a pitch-black fir tree leapt towards us stretching far up into the steaming sky; shafts of rays like moonlight shot out of it, throwing into relief great downward-sweeping ribs of various grey—the branches. The light seemed to issue from inside the tree, but the trunk remained velvet dark. Could it be the sun rising behind? We faced east, but miles of tousled thicket blocked the way between tree and sun. 'Father Serafim!' exclaimed Kilina in a rapture, 'a mark of pity, of comfort for you and for me from him; given to us through a redeemed creature, a redeemed tree!'[1]

Beausobre discovered that her domain of Temniki merged with Serafim's Sarov some thirty miles from the camp. She was within an easy day's journey of the wilderness where the Saint had lived, prayed, fought, suffered, and, in November 1831, left the world an extraordinary testament through the mediation of Nikolai Motovilov, who saw Serafim transfigured in light and heard him explain the heart of the Christian calling: to be recreated through the Holy Spirit; to see Adam's dignity restored and royally crowned with the victory of Christ. Serafim's message was explicitly addressed to 'the whole world'.[2] We hear it. We are moved by it. Yet Serafim's very example can make it seem impossibly remote. Not perhaps since St Francis of Assisi has the world seen a living icon of Christ in such finely chiselled relief, and what we know of the making of

[1] *Flame in the Snow: A Life of St Serafim of Sarov* (Springfield: Templegate, 1996, first publ. 1945).
[2] *Entretien avec Motovilov*, trans. by Madame Mouraviev (Orbey: Arfuyen, 2002), p. 84.

that picture, of Christ's paschal sacrifice mysteriously re-enacted, fills us with awe. Like Francis's communion with the crucified Seraph, Serafim's thousand days and nights spent on the rock that was at once Golgotha and Tabor is an experience so extreme that it places him, we may think, beyond our reach. If such is our impression, we can find a more accessible pattern for ourselves as dedicated Christians, as monks and nuns, in the tree, the *redeemed* tree, that suddenly rose transfused with light, splendidly *itself* against a background of frozen uniformity, at a time and in a place of great darkness. 'The monastery', proclaimed John Paul II in *Orientale lumen*, 'is the prophetic place in which creation becomes praise of God' (§9). In this particular case, the grace of the Holy Spirit had become so fully incarnate in a man of flesh and blood that the memory of him could make a tree of the wood shout for joy. The tree's destiny is ours. When the Rule exhorts us to rise in the night to give God praise (XVI.5)[3], it summons us to affirm in deed and truth that darkness has been conquered, that we are resolved to rise, again and again, from the night of sin and fear, proclaiming with Alleluias that the Spirit of the risen Jesus, the Spirit that is light, shines through our own leaves, branches, and dead wood, even while our trunk, like that of the redeemed tree, remains visibly of this world. I propose to reflect on the monastic Opus Dei in three different gradations of that light: to trace three perspectives on its spiritual meaning for our life in Christ. First, however, we must consider the light briefly in its wellspring, as it shines forth in the prayer and self-offering of Jesus.

The exemplarity of Christ's prayer

In laying out the Church's norms for the Divine Office, the Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* draws a vast perspective:

> Christ Jesus, high priest of the new and eternal covenant, taking human nature, introduced into this earthly exile that hymn which is sung throughout all ages in the halls of heaven. He joins the entire community of mankind to Himself, associating it with His own singing of this canticle of praise (§83).

The song is Christ's. If the Church, his bride, can be said to sing it *to* him, it is in so far as she unites her song with his. Their one voice utters 'the very prayer which Christ

[3] Roman-Arabic numeral references are to Chapter and Verse of the Rule following the divisions of *RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English with Notes*, ed. by Timothy Fry and others (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1980).

Himself […] addresses to the Father' (§84). We must remain firmly focussed on that prayer if we are to place ourselves consciously within it.

The account left us in the Gospels of Jesus's communion with the Father through the Spirit is suspended, as it were, between two symbolic pillars: two pivotal moments in which Christ appears as the foundation of truth by which earth and heaven are drawn together. The first of these is his descent into the River, where he marries a world of promise to one of reality, transposing the future tense of prophecy into the present. He is conscious of his passage through the waters as 'fulfilment' (Mt 3:15), and so is the Baptist, himself a bridge (on one bank the greatest, on the other, the least), who testifies to the horizontal, historical axis of the event. Christ utters no word, makes no gesture, and the action he performs is not in itself extraordinary. He follows a throng of anonymous others. But while they drown individual loads of guilt in the Jordan by intention, he carries the totality of sin in his body and for real (cf. John 1:29). The categorical 'in him' that underpins the Christology of the Pauline corpus with locative force becomes effective here, on the threshold of God's Israel, as Christ enters fully, freely into his mission. The crossing happens secretly, but silence is broken when the Father's voice erupts in jubilant approbation. It establishes a vertical axis of praise—praise that, in this instance, resounds from heaven to earth. It reminds us that Christ's offering is directed, not towards a faceless Transcendence but to a Father who receives it thankfully and seals the exchange by sending the Spirit in the form that once flew forth from Noah's hand, hovering upon the waters, unable to find rest for its feet in a drowned and stricken world, yet now coming to 'abide' (Jn 1:33) on the first fruit of a new creation.

The cruciform structure that faith thus discerns in the Baptism assumes abhorrent, literal shape on Calvary, where the second pillar of Christ's prayer rises as a scandal. 'If you *are* the Son of God, come down!' (Mt 27:40). The exclamation was first heard amid wagging of heads, chiefly as a mockery, but perhaps also, on the part of some, as an entreaty, a hope against hope. Do we stand altogether aloof from the unseeing crowds? The sight of Christ naked and exposed seems too humiliating, both for him and for us, his followers. The Cross, however, is incongruous only if we let it surprise us, if we fail to see its imprint on the whole of Christ's life and teaching. We have discerned its figure in Jesus's Baptism, outlining a novel dispensation of grace, and

it is instructive to note how the Gospels present that event in a dialogic relationship with the Crucifixion. It must suffice, here, to indicate resonances. At the Jordan, the Father's voice is heard, but not the Son's (Mk 1:9-11)[4]; on Golgotha, the Son speaks while the Father is silent (Mk 15:24-37). When Christ is baptised, the Spirit comes down (Mk 1:10); on the Cross, he yields up his Spirit to the Father (Lk 23:46). Among penitents in the wilderness, God restores the world to himself by taking on its sin (Jn 1:29); before a motley crowd in the City of David, he bestows himself to the world in a new mode of uncircumscribed presence, revealed when the Sanctuary curtain tears from top to bottom (Mk 15:38; Mt 27:51). While the Baptist sees Christ 'taking away' sin (Jn 1:29), death itself, the wages of Adam's fall, is cancelled when Jesus expires: graves open, and the dead rise (Mt 27:51ff.). The 'fulfilment' inaugurated in the water is 'accomplished' on the rock (cf. Jn 19:30). Placed side by side, as panels in a diptych, the two scenes show a flow of life circulating, Spirit-filled, from heaven to earth, earth to heaven, then cascading forth over human history as fire (cf. Acts 2:3). The channel is Jesus's body. The current is the Spirit. Christ is the crux of dispossession, ever receiving, ever giving himself. He is the nexus of union outward and upward, in time and eternity.[5] The Cross as such—that is, as symbol—manifests what Joseph Ratzinger with potent paradox has called 'the absoluteness of the relative' manifested by the incarnation: the fact that Being, both human and divine, belongs within the category of relation, where that term, no less than 'substance', is understood as an original manifestation of the real.[6] The scandal of the Cross inheres, not in the figure (which, as John saw, is 'glory'), not in the vulnerable exposure it displays, but in the wood and the nails: in our response. The clear delineation of Christ's gift was so far incommensurate with a twisted world that men seized the body 'given' (Lk 22:19) and froze it in a gruesome caricature of the grace it bestowed. But to no avail. When Christ destroyed death by dying, even the wood of shame stood forth resplendent with light, as a sign of victory. To this day, its honouring provides for monks the year's most important marker of time after Easter.

[4] In the case of parallel texts, only the Marcan reference is given.

[5] What we otherwise know, especially from the Fourth Gospel, about Christ's prayer reinforces the schema. 'The Son can do nothing of himself'; 'Without me, you can do nothing' (Jn 5:19; 15:5). 'I and the Father are one'; 'May they be one, as we are one' (cf. Jn 17:11, 22).

[6] See *Einführung in das Christentum*, 2000 edn (Munich: Kösel, 2006), pp. 168-77, based on exegesis of the Johannine texts cited in the previous note.

1. The vertical axis of prayer in *conversatio*: David's dance

It is no coincidence that the Baptism and Crucifixion are the two New Testament scenes most readily drawn on by the visual arts in attempts to depict the Trinity. They show us the inner truth of Christ's nature as being-in-relation. Thereby they reveal something of God's essence. Nor is it a coincidence that our own life in Christ begins with a rite that fuses the two events into one. It is by baptism into Christ's death that we receive the Spirit of sonship in which we cry 'Abba!' (Rm 6:3; 8:15). We have arrived at the first degree of light, the first insight, by which our monastic Office can be understood, for when we sing it wisely it places us before God in a living relation of sonship. Everything St Benedict says about the Liturgy of the Hours flows from his conviction that in this mode of prayer we stand 'in the presence of God' (XIX.6), who has been pleased to count us as sons (*Prologue*.5). This attitude of worship calls to mind several biblical paradigms: Enoch, who walked with God and was 'seized by him' (Gn 5:24); Abraham, who was commanded to walk before the Lord (Gn 17:1); or Moses, who stood before the Lord at the bush and received the ineffable Name (Ex 3:1ff.). But of all Scriptural heroes, it is David who for all time remains the model of prayer and who, so St Ambrose argues throughout his *Apology for David*, is set before us by Providence precisely because his example can realistically be imitated.[7] We shall get a clearer picture of our prayer by considering his.

A defining moment in the cultic history of Israel is recounted in 2 Samuel 6, where the Ark of God is brought up to Jerusalem. It had been kept at Shiloh from the last days of Joshua till the early maturity of Samuel, when the sanctuary was compromised by the sons of Eli, whose shadow lingers over the second chapter of the Rule as a warning for perpetuity (II.26). Hophni and Phineas cannot be blamed, however, for the abduction of the Ark. It was 'the elders of Israel' who brought it into the battle they lost to the Philistines (1 Sam 4:3). Their action suggests a misconception—or rather, a forgetting. The heart of Mosaic discourse about God was the Lord's immateriality, the impossibility of confining him to any place or object. In the desert, that lesson was inculcated by teaching and by the experiential catechesis of travel. No sooner had the people settled in the Land than the temptation arose to localise both the sphere of God's action and the extent of his presence. By bringing the Ark to the

[7] *Apologie de David*, ed. by Pierre Hadot, Sources Chrétiennes 239 (Paris: Cerf, 1977).

battlefield, the elders would remind the Lord that his territorial interest was at stake and encourage him to fight on their behalf. The strategy failed, and the fate of the Ark over the next twenty odd years points to a crisis in the Israelites' notion of what it meant to speak of God 'present' among them. On the one hand, it was evident that *something* divine resided in the Ark: the tradition of the Fathers proclaimed it; the pitiful remnants of Dagon displayed it. But the fact remained that the Lord, for all his being there, had not won the battle. He had been present, yet absent. In the provision made for the Ark in Abinadab's dwelling on the hill (1 Sam 7:1; cf. 2 Sam 6:3), we sense a degree of perplexity: relief, perhaps, that the sacred object was back in Israel but at the same time out of the way. The Ark remained in dignified obscurity throughout the reign of Saul. David himself approached it only after a decisive victory over the Philistines, the account of which resounds with echoes of the exodus: Israel's fighters move at the bidding of the Lord, who 'goes out before' the army; the ranks of David's enemies are parted 'as water is parted'; their idols left in a heap (2 Sam 5:17-25). A narrative bridge is thus extended to the outset of the story which began with Hannah 'before the face of the Lord' (1 Sam 1:15), and propped up by references to the election and the promise.

Having triumphed in war, David made for Abinadab's house with 'all the people' to fetch the Ark and carry it north with terrific noise: 'David and all the house of Israel were dancing before the Lord with all their might, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals' (2 Sam 6:5). The character of this celebration is vividly rendered by the LXX, which has the crowds παίζοντες ἐνώπιον κυρίου: they were '*playing* before the Lord', in the sublimity and simplicity of that term, and with something of play's thoughtlessness. When Uzzah reached out his hand to prop up the Ark in an awkward bend, he was struck dead. David recoiled in fear. 'How can the Ark of the Lord come into my care?' (6:9). There was risk involved, and for three months the Ark was confined to a private house, where it bestowed such blessing that the king took heart and returned to it. The procession resumed 'with joy', now accompanied by sacrifices, and David entered his city as King and Priest, yet still dancing 'with all his might' before the Lord. The sight was too much for his wife. Saul's daughter 'despised him in her heart' (6:16)—and probably also to his face, for David assured her that he would not cease to play and dance before the Lord and humble

himself further still, to the extent, if we follow the LXX, of seeming to her ἀχρεῖος, that is, quite useless (6:22).

A long excursus has led us into what may be familiar waters. In each of us, the Davidic impulse to pour out our heart in praise is tempered by a Saulide rationality which looks for sensible, efficient solutions of outward decency. To Queen Michol peering from her window, the extravagance of the monastic Office—the time it claims from profitable work, the space it occupies in our Rule, its songs and rituals—can seem preposterous. But she was destined to die without progeny (1 Sam 6:23). It is the gratuity of our worship that makes it fruitful. At other times we may carry the divine presence into our private wars, as weapon or shield, but at the Divine Office we lift up our soul towards God for his own sake. That is perhaps why St Benedict believes the Lord to be especially present when we gather in Choir to praise him (XIX.2). Adoration draws the vertical axis of our prayer by which, with the Son, we grow in the Spirit towards the Father. Before any consideration of the benefits of the Office, of what we find in it or get from it, it seems important to insist that it is, in the sense established above, fundamentally useless. It is our dance, our play before the Lord. Which is not to say that it is trivial. We know from observation (if we have forgotten the experience) what earnestness marks a child absorbed in play. The Rule teaches us what David learnt at high cost, that we must serve the Lord with fear (XIX.3). At the same time we perform our service with the confident freedom of sons and daughters who have the run of their Father's house. The inner dynamic of our song is the mystery of our calling: the stupendous certainty that our immersion in the water of life prompted the Father's delight, blessing, and choice. By regular praise, we confirm our first response. Our turning to the Lord in the seven daily Hours is the ritual confession of the *conversatio* for which each day calls seven times seventy times. It is a small death by which we yield up our spirit, and the economy of grace is allowed to continue.

2. The horizontal axis of prayer in *oboedientia*: David's tears

We have observed the Ark's transfer from the periphery to the heart of Israel, where it is established alongside David's residence in a complementarity to which the narrative draws our immediate attention. When the king has danced the Lord's Ark into Zion, he at once conceives a plan to build it a house like his own, of cedar (7:2). The Lord objects:

not to the *idea* of a house but to the building of one *now*. Since giving the Law on Sinai, he has not required a permanent dwelling, but has moved among the people in a tent (7:6). What the Lord once did for the collective reality of Israel, he is doing now for the king in particular. 'I took you', says the Lord, 'from the pasture […] to be prince of my people Israel; and I have been with you wherever you went' (7:9). From following sheep, David has become a leader of men. He is the effective sign of God's guidance for the final leg of the journey from Egypt. His mission is to conduct Israel to the place appointed for them, where the Lord himself 'will plant them' (7:10). The sequence to be followed is clear: first Israel must be rooted on Zion; then a house can be built, not by David, but by his seed, whose throne will endure for ever. He will be a son to the Lord, who will be his Father (7:12-14).

A symbiotic relationship is thus formed between the nation to be planted, the Lord's house to be built, and the lineage of David, to endure for ever. A threefold presence is consolidated to establish Jerusalem as 'pole of the earth' (Ps 47:3), true north to the Abrahamic spiritual compass. It charges with sense the great sign (in the Johannine sense) of Christ's Pasch, when as King and Priest the Son of David brings the ultimate sacrifice in the 'temple of his body' (Jn 2:21). It also makes our understanding of ourselves as the Church praying 'in' the body of Jesus conceptually possible. We have before us the horizontal axis of our prayer in Christ, its second, ecclesial dimension. To be a member of Christ is to be part of a social context, to be placed within a set of dynamic relationships. The tension of simultaneous unity and multiplicity which, in the realm of theology proper, can, as we have seen, only be hinted at through paradox or apophatic language, confronts us, in the economy of our salvation, with a mixed metaphor: with a body that is a city, where the Son of David contains his Jerusalem. The Church, says Augustine in a celebrated passage, 'begins from the earthly city and ends in the heavenly city'.[8] It originates in David's Zion, is recast in the crucible on Calvary, and abides for ever in the festal throng of the heavenly Jerusalem.

The monastic community is a privileged manifestation of this mystery, and never more so than when it gathers in Choir. At each canonical Hour we enact and reinforce the order of our particular society, by which each has a place proper to himself, determined by the time of his acceptance into the whole (LXIII.4, 7f.). Our position is the

[8] *Enarratio in Ps 147* XVIII. *Sancti Aurelii Augustini Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 3 vols. ed. by E. Dekkers and J. Fraipont, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina XXXVIII-XL (Turnhout: Brepols, 1956), III, 2155.

pledge of our belonging and an affirmation of our identity. If a monk, to St Benedict's way of thinking, is defined as one who serves under a father (I.1), he is by implication also one who serves among brothers. The supreme importance attached to this experience of fraternity can alone explain the effectiveness of displacement or exclusion as sanctions against faults (XLIII.4ff.). The material configuration of Choir is reflected in the performance of the Office, every part of which is to be executed with order, reverence, coherence, and discretion (VIII-XX). The ascesis of song provides an effective gauge of observance. For while our minds must concord with our voices (XIX.7), our voices must no less be attuned by our minds. Only a shared intention continually nurtured can ensure the unity of sound by which we perform our praise, not only together, but as one. We are touching the mystery of obedience, by which we submit to standards that transcend, or even contradict, our instincts in order to build up communion. From the outset of the Rule, St Benedict puts squarely before us the example of Christ, obedient unto death (VII.34), and stresses that the monk's special participation in Christ's sufferings comes through the unspectacular virtue of patience (*Prologue*.50). It is a cause for spiritual joy that Choir provides ample scope for its exercise.

We know in faith that the community united for the Divine Office is a sacrament of the Church, of Christ praying in and through his members. Yet it can be hard to assimilate this knowledge experientially. The constant repetition of the Office—its sheer ordinariness—can blunt our sense of it as an ecclesial event. Distractions, even boredom, militate against an awareness of Christ in our midst. Like the people in the plains of Philistia, we know the Lord is there, but see no evidence of his presence: the foe gains the upper hand; Israel, though equipped for war, is scattered. Again, we may learn from David, who, a couple of decades after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, was forced to flee the city before the coup of Absalom. Zadok the priest prepared the Ark, too, for departure, but the king instructed him otherwise:

> Carry the Ark of God back into the city. If I find favour in the eyes of the Lord, he will bring me back and let me see both it and the place where it remains. But if he says, 'I take no pleasure in you', here I am, let him do to me what seems good to him (2 Sam 15:25).

David knew he was the bearer of a promise that pertained to Israel's destiny, yet did not arrogate to himself God's presence, which he saw transcending the political reality of his

reign. His attitude signals recognition that experiences of absence and fragmentation are intrinsic to the life of the earthly Jerusalem. The unity of one nation under one king round one sanctuary held together just long enough for its memory to become a symbol of eschatological hope. The departure of David, now an elderly man, from the presence of the Lord, barefoot, tearful and with covered head, accompanied by the wailing of the land (2 Sam 15:30, 23), provides a prototype of the exile that recurs throughout the history of Israel, of which we ourselves are part. Saint Benedict would have us begin each night's vigil of prayer with the song (Psalm 3) the Psalter tells us David sang at that time, while he walked and wept (IX.2). The thematic tension between that Psalm, in which Jerusalem is glimpsed dimly in the distance, and the last Psalm (Psalm 133) prescribed at nightfall, set within the Temple precincts, illustrates the contradiction we sometimes find between experience and aspiration in public prayer. It is comforting to remember that it is a constitutive element of the Church's liturgy. To refer again to Augustine, our prayer is a pilgrims' song, with cadences suspended between time and eternity. Only little by little, as we move forward, are our mournful chants remembering Zion enlivened by the 'inner music' we hear sounding delightfully from the house of God, where the scattered voices of the Church on earth are united and perfected in a single, everlasting symphony.[9]

The supra-temporal character of the praying community is present in Benedict's reminder that we perform the Work of God alongside the angels (XIX.5). The line from Psalm 137 on which he leans has been variously interpreted. In the Rule of the Master, we find angels making up a front row in Choir: an arrangement envisaged so literally that any monk who, while at prayer, needs to blow his nose is reminded to do so over his shoulder.[10] Modern, practical expositions, meanwhile, have no qualms about passing the verse by.[11] Valuable light is shed on it in Dom Augustin Calmet's classical commentary from 1734, which explains the angelic presence by reference to Conrad of

[9] *Enarratio in Ps 41* IX (Dekkers and Fraipont, I, 466f.).
[10] *La Règle du Maître*, 3 vols. ed. by Adalbert de Vogüé, Sources Chrétiennes 181-3 (Paris: Cerf, 1964), II, 217.
[11] Georg Holzherr, in *The Rule of St Benedict: A Guide to Christian Living* trans. by monks of Glenstal (Dublin: Four Courts, 1994), does not comment on the passage. Nor does de Vogüé in *Reading Saint Benedict: Reflections on the Rule*, trans. by Colette Friedlander, Cistercian Studies 151 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1994). De Vogüé does address it in his learned notes to *La Règle de Saint Benoît*, 7 vols., Sources Chrétiennes 181-186, with a final, independent volume (Paris: Cerf, 1972-77), notably in II, 564.

Heisterbach's *Exordium Magnum*.[12] This account of the heroic age of Cîteaux recounts how, one night at Vigils, St Bernard's eyes were opened to see that each brother in Choir had for companion an angel who noted every syllable he uttered in psalmody. Some angels wrote with gold, some with silver, some with ink or water, while the quills of a few were quite still. The quality of lettering matched the brethren's prayer: gold stood for an undivided heart's intention; silver, for pure, though less fervent devotion; ink, for plain good will. The merits of the fainthearted were recorded with water, while monks asleep or apathetic received no marks.[13] There may be more here than just a pretty story. The angels make one other appearance in the Rule, in Chapter VII, where they move up and down the Ladder of our ascent towards God, reporting our actions, good and bad. In Bernard's vision their ambassadorship is translated into the liturgy, to ensure that no single act of true prayer goes unrecorded but is immediately raised up before God.[14] We are shown that our worship even now is effectively joined to a communion that exceeds the extension of the Church in time and space; that the manner in which we, men and women devoted to a priestly service, bring our sacrifice of praise has cosmic impact. Even as we strive to voice the implicit prayer of unpraying mankind, our own too earthbound offering rises on angels' wings. Christ's one 'canticle of praise' resounds from the ends of the earth to the heights of heaven through a pulsating chain of mediation. The Divine Office embodies the Church's economy of charity and is thereby an apprenticeship for the choirs of heaven, where we shall stand before God *as* praise without end, because love will be endless.[15]

3. The heart-piercing of prayer through *stabilitas*: David's vision

Once Absalom is dead and his rebellion quashed, the Davidic saga moves rapidly to a close—not, however, before reporting a prayer David spoke 'on the day when the Lord

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[12] *Commentaire littéral, historique et moral sur la Règle de Saint Benoît* (Paris: Emery, Saugrain & Martin, 1734), p. 418f. The account of Bernard's vision can be found on p. 100*f.* of Bruno Griesser's edition of the *Exordium magnum cisterciense* (Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1961).

[13] The motif has deep roots in the ascetic tradition. Cf. Dorotheus of Gaza, *Discourses and Sayings* trans. by Eric P. Wheeler, Cistercian Studies 33 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1977), p. 176*f.*

[14] 'O wonderful kindness of God', exclaims Conrad: 'Even as no evil goes unpunished, so no good deed, however small and however carelessly performed, will be without reward.'

[15] Augustine, *Enarratio in Ps 141* XIX: 'Sine fine erit laus, quia sine fine amor' (Dekkers and Fraipont, III, 2059). On the interplay of human and angelic worship, see Erik Peterson's *Das Buch von den Engeln*, 2nd edn (Munich: Kösel, 1955).

delivered him from the hand of all his enemies' (2 Sam 22:1-51, of which Psalm 17 is a parallel version). As a first-person account of the inner experience underlying the foregoing catalogue of observable events, it serves to shed light on a third aspect of the Opus Dei. If the vertical and horizontal axes we have identified as intrinsic to prayer can be figured in the shape of a cross, it is because they intersect in Christ. Western Christian tradition has sharpened the focus further still, and seen the lines meeting in Jesus's heart. For the prayer of Christ to become truly my own, I must likewise put my heart at its disposal. I must let it pass through the seat of my memory, will, and understanding, which cannot but be opened wide in the process, to enable greater alacrity of progress in the way of God's commandments.

The prayer which in 2 Samuel is presented as a prolix *Nunc dimittis* exemplifies the structure we have examined. David, in the grip of death, cries out from Sheol to the Lord, who answers from his temple in heaven, descends canopied by darkness, reaches out, and draws the sufferer out of mighty waters (vv. 5-17). The form of the Hebrew verb *mashah*, 'to draw forth', used here has only one other occurrence in the Masorah, in Exodus 2:10, where it explains the name Pharaoh's daughter gives *Mosheh*, the child she has drawn from the Nile. In Martin Buber's opinion, the etymology was intended from the beginning to designate, not only Moses's rescue but his call to draw Israel forth from the flood.[16] Both layers of meaning are active in the present context, which in a Christian reading also carries other resonances in the brief thanksgiving that follows: the Lord, says David, raised me from the water and put me in a broad place because he was well pleased in me (v. 20). In the LXX the phrase corresponds, lexically and grammatically, to the form of the Father's words in the synoptic Baptism narratives. The prayer continues with a profession of obedience and ensuing 'righteousness' (v. 21ff.). It is by God's fidelity that David has conquered his enemies (v. 31ff.) and been placed at the head of a people sprung from many nations (v. 44). For this the king will bless and extol God among the nations, for he 'shows steadfast love to his anointed, to David and his descendants for ever' (v. 47ff.). The joint experience of Israel is owned as a personal drama of perdition, redemption, righteous war, conquest, and communion, which culminates in thanksgiving.

[16] *Moses: The Revelation and the Covenant* (New York: Harper, 1946), p. 36.

Reared as we are in schools of criticism, we may for two reasons baulk at this manner of reading. We may, first of all, disallow the procedure at work in the text itself, which appears to subvert an historical substratum into metaphorical autobiography, forfeiting an original 'objectivity'; secondly, we may be embarrassed to suppose a Davidic source for the poem in 2 Sam 22, when it is clearly an interpolation into a narrative that, in any case, reached its final, didactic form several centuries after David's demise. Discernment is called for. While intelligent criticism, sensitive to sources and genres is indispensable for reconstructing textual history, it plays of its nature an ancillary role in the liturgical, performative reading of Scripture. Such reading is an ecclesial act, presupposing other readings, some of which are enshrined in the Bible. We enter a community of interpretation, and do well to heed Bernard's advice: 'geramus morem Scripturae': let us draw our attitudes and understanding, our hermeneutical behaviour, from the Scriptures themselves.[17] Franz Rosenzweig taught the same approach in a different way by his habit of referring the sign 'R' in editions of the Hebrew Bible not to 'Redaktor' but to 'Rabbenu', 'our Teacher'.[18] We do not in this way abdicate our intelligence. On the contrary, we resolve to accommodate our mind to the mind of Scripture. A rich tradition since Origen has considered such accommodation, exercised in the Church, the surest way of putting on the mind of Christ.[19] Rightly understood, this method is no less 'objective' than the quest for a supposed 'originality' that attracts our modern, scientific mindset. At issue is not a *carte blanche* to read myself into any and every passage of Scripture, but a decision to let the Scriptures perform their exegesis of me, trusting that the inspiration which guided the composition of the biblical canon at every stage remains alive, active, and accessible in the Church. In so far as I permit myself to rise towards a biblical consciousness, sensitive to the intertextual resonances that make the Bible a symphonic commentary on itself, I shall be equipped to profess the Deuteronomic creed, 'Not with our Fathers, but with us' (Dt 5:3), and, in the

[17] *Super Cantica* LXXIV.2 (*Sancti Bernardi Opera*, ed. by J. Leclercq, C.H. Talbot and H.M. Rochais (Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1957-77), II, 240).

[18] Martin Buber, 'Zu einer neuen Verdeutschung der Schrift', appendix to vol. 1 of *Die Schrift: Verdeutscht von Martin Buber gemeinsam mit Franz Rosenzweig*, 4 vols. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1992, based on the 1954 edn), p. [7], n. 1.

[19] See William Yeomans's study of Origen under the heading 'Écriture Sainte et vie spirituelle' in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, 17 vols. (Paris: Beauchesne, 1937-95), IV, 147f. Cf. the Second Vatican Council's Constitution *Dei Verbum*, notably §§5 and 11-13.

Church, to see it assume a form more particular still: 'With me' (cf. Gal 2:20). 'Today.'[20] 'Here.'[21]

St Benedict's only explicit teaching about the Scriptures, in Chapter LXXIII, shows a tropological bias and stresses the Bible's value as a norm for right living. Even a cursory look at a source index, however, reveals the all-embracing span of Benedictine biblical culture. Almost too large to be apparent is the place of the Psalter in the Rule. Monks inhabit the Psalter as an edifice, as an enclosure of stability. It has fairly been said that entering a monastery is tantamount to entering psalmody.[22] It would be vain to look to Benedict for a theological engagement with the Psalms, but we *can* know a fair amount, from internal evidence, of what the Psalms meant to him. The Psalter speaks for itself. It is a panorama of creation's history and destiny; a chronicle of Israel's formation, election, exile, and exodus; a celebration of the Law, exposing sin and expounding the prospect of forgiveness; an exploration of the human heart in its complexity; and an anthology of glory. The progressive 'Davidisation' of the Psalms, which occurred over centuries, enabled a confluence of perspective, whereby this range of salvific experience could be rehearsed in its universal aspect and at the same time applied to a personal biography.[23] This approach paved the way for the New Testament's use of the Psalter to interpret Christ, drawing on Jesus's own references and his post-resurrection assertion that the Psalms speak 'about me' (Lk 24:44). The apostolic Church developed its organisation and ministry in the light of the Psalms (Acts 1:20). By Benedict's day, their christological dimension was increasingly brought out in the liturgy. Liturgical reading enabled (and enables) the corporate search for Jesus in the Psalms, and makes it possible for us to find ourselves in them, through him. The Rule shows us how. The monk's vocation; his obedience and progress in humility; his relationship with the abbot; his self-giving at profession: all are regulated with reference to the Psalter, which serves as the primary 'mirror' for monks, an ever-present standard of self-examination and conversion.

[20] As in the great 'Hodie' antiphons for Christmas, Pentecost, the Assumption. *Antiphonale Monasticum pro diurnis horis* (Paris: Desclée, 1934), pp. 249, 524, 1018.
[21] As in the Introit for the Dedication of a Church: 'Terribilis est locus iste: hic domus Dei est, et porta caeli' (Gen 28:17, 22). *Graduale Triplex* (Sablé sur Sarthe : Solesmes, 1979)
[22] Robert Le Gall, *La Saveur des Psaumes: Entrer en psalmodie* (Chambray-lès-Tours: CLD, 2000), p. 11.
[23] A thesis expounded in Jean-Luc Vesco's *Le Psautier de David*, 2 vols. (Paris: Cerf, 2006).

This is surely the background against which to consider the end of Chapter XVIII, which concludes the legislation for the Office. Benedict has devoted much space to distributing Psalms for each Hour, but stresses that the arrangement is one of convenience that can freely be changed. The weekly recitation of the whole Psalter from Sunday Vigils, on the other hand, is obligatory and non-negotiable. More is at stake than a mere, potentially exchangeable devotion. In subordinating a weekly Psalter to the recurrent dawning of the Lord's Day, Benedict lays down a defining cycle of monastic prayer that is focused on Christ's resurrection. Even as the feast of Easter—for which the monk's life should be a continuous Lent of preparation (XLIX.1, 6f.)—is the climax of the liturgical year, so the weekly round provides a Paschal journey in miniature, with the Psalter serving as our privileged point of access to the saving work of God in Christ. It is evident that nothing could outweigh this celebratory unfolding of our redemption. When Benedict lets us put nothing before it (LXIII.3), he asks us to perform single-mindedly what by baptism we have become and by monastic profession we have promised we always will be.

Conclusion

We set out from the forest of Temniki. It is time to return. What Iulia de Beausobre witnessed in 1933 was the Pentecostal seal on a life radically configured to Christ's death and rising. Almost a century separated her from the biological termination of that life, hundred years during which Russia had been radically changed: the interval between Motovilov's vision and Iulia's corresponds to the gap between Pushkin's *Yevgeni Onegin* (completed 1830) and Anna Akhmatova's *Requiem* (begun 1935). In spite of social turmoil the legacy of a holy life continued undiminished, lodged even in inanimate things, as a sign that radical assent to recreation in the Spirit transforms not only the assenting subject, but the world she or he inhabits. When Theodora Bosanquet, Henry James's devoted assistant, reviewed Iulia's biography of Serafim in 1945, she remarked that the stark facts of the Saint's life present a contrast to current misunderstandings of the contemplative life as 'a peaceful kind of escape.'[24] The notion is shared by many of our contemporaries, for whom the thought of monks and nuns chanting in Choir represents trance-like peace, otherworldly ecstasy. We know better. The song we sing is

[24] *Tide and Time* 29 September 1945, p. 816.

Christ's. It is alive, active, and redemptive. It bears the imprint of the Cross and is charged with the Spirit of the risen Jesus. No 'spirituality' of the Divine Office can encompass the grandeur of this sacrifice of praise. Iulia de Beausobre, while engulfed in the terrors of imprisonment, encountered an old nun who assured her she must one day leave Russia and convey a message to 'our brethren beyond the border'. She must tell them

> that they should keep burning on the altars of their hearts the flame that is tortured out of ours. If only some of them keep it burning, we will find it in our prayers, in our sleep and in our flight away from our tormented bodies. It will shine to us as a glowing beacon of light in the numbing darkness, and we shall be comforted and Christ will rejoice.[25]

The flame she was to pass on was the light she had seen, the light Serafim identified as the fullness of Christian living. By entering Christ's prayer, we become that flame's kindling. It circulates in us like sap, even when the soil in which we stand is frozen, even when our roots bypass the living water, even when we are stripped of foliage and exposed to winter storms. We know it, by faith, as light, even in darkness. We know we cast fire upon the earth, even when we cannot feel its warmth. So it may happen, by pure grace, that someone, somewhere will perceive a radiance issuing from chipped and battered trunks and find in them, as in the redeemed tree of Temniki, a mark of pity and comfort. And Christ—the whole Christ, in all his members—will rejoice.

[25] Constance Babington Smith, *Iulia de Beausobre: A Russian Christian in the West* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1983), p. 40f.