

Understanding Cistercian Architecture

Origins of Cistercian Architecture

Europe has many 12th and 13th century abbeys that are splendid examples of cistercian architecture. These structures use form, lines, proportion, space and natural light to express a way of prayer. These structures touch many people, who enter them, with a sense of life (by this I mean beauty, harmony, integrity, etc.) and with the Spirit of life (awareness of something living and divine that comes from God).⁽¹⁾ Here is architecture expressing a contemplative approach to prayer and the sacred. How did this architecture come about? Whence did it arise?

When I gave the conference on the paternity of St. Benedict⁽²⁾ in the Exordium Series, I stated that I do not view the *Rule of St. Benedict* simply as a document of evangelical tradition, a document of monastic tradition, and, a kind of juridical document for monks who style themselves as Benedictine. Rather, I hold the *Rule* primarily as a document of paternity that gives expression to Benedict's deeply and devoutly monastic and Catholic spirit.

As disciples and sons of St. Benedict, we are called to be nourish with his spirit, and express this spirit in a way of life (a spirituality) and in a theology. Furthermore, it is our vow of *conversatio* according to the *Rule*, that enables us to make this expression. This vow maintains the bond between our spirit and Benedict's spirit, and, recreates our monastic life in an contemporary expression. Although some aspects of this expression may not found in the *Rule* itself, nevertheless, they flow from the *Rule* and form a continuum with it.

An example of such an aspect is cistercian architecture. Cistercian architecture is not part of the explicit ideals neither of the *Rule*, nor of the first founders of Citeaux when they came from Molesme with Robert, their abbot, in 1098.

I see cistercian architecture as a creation resulting from a life style which flows out of a cistercian spirit and has its source in the thoroughly monastic spirit of St.

Benedict, and consequently, in Cassian⁽³⁾ and Evagrius,⁽⁴⁾ and in the "pure prayer" of the ancient Egyptian monks and nuns.

Cistercian artistic asceticism in art and architecture is a development of a specific understanding of the *Rule of St. Benedict* inaugurated by the monks who came from Molesme and expressed by them in a special interpretation or life style based on simplicity and poverty.

"Stricter", *arctius*, is usual description people give to this interpretation or life style. I prefer to use the other meaning of *arctius* that the Oxford dictionary of medieval Latin⁽⁵⁾ offers as the first of several meanings for the stem *arto*: namely, to fix firmly or closely in or with someone else, to pull together tightly, to bond firmly together.

The first monks of Citeaux embraced an asceticism regarding the *Rule* for the sole purpose of being bonded firmly with the deeply monastic and Catholic spirit of St. Benedict. This specific approach to the *Rule*, the way of life, that resulted from decisions taken to express this approach, is what I label as *cistercian*.

Several of their decisions, now known to us as Statutes 10 and 20 of the 1134 codification, dealt with the virtual elimination of superfluous and excessive vestments, gold, silver, jewels, sculptures and paintings. These two statutes were legislated between 1115 and 1119. There is also in this same codification of 1134, Statute 80.⁽⁶⁾ This norm provides ascetical limitations for manuscript illumination and stained glass. Again, these statutes, as such, were probably not in the mind of the Molesme monks and Robert when they arrived at Citeaux in 1098. They were, undoubtedly, a direct development of a basic desire for an authentic living of the *Rule*. Statutes 10 & 20 are contained in the *Exordium Parvum*, approved by the ten abbots of the Order in the General Chapter of 1119.⁽⁷⁾ The process and choices that culminated in these decisions and their codification gave birth to cistercian liturgical art,⁽⁸⁾ and cistercian architecture.

Towards the end of 1125 is the accepted date for the appearance of St. Bernard's-

(9) *Apologia ad Guillelmum*. (10) This document is an important stimulus in the development of cistercian artistic asceticism. This work is, in part, an attack on the superfluity and ostentation that has crept into monastic life style and into architecture and decorations of monastic buildings. It criticizes certain art forms as a spiritual distraction destroying monastic *meditatio*. An important note is the use of the term *meditatio* in the *Apologia and* in Statute 20.

The practice of monastic *meditatio*, meditation, is not a meditation in the abstract, thinking about a thing abstractly with no really practical application to one's life in the context of a change for the better. Monastic meditation is to think, to reflect upon the words of Sacred Scripture with the sincere intention of making a change in one's heart and life in the moral and practical order. Monastic meditation is thinking about something with the intent to do it, to prepare oneself for it, to present it to one consciousness so as to ardently desire it, and then, to do it. *Meditatio* is the heart of Benedict's vow of *conversatio*, a constant renewal of one's life in God. (11)

Bernard's use of the term *meditatio*, in the *Apologia*, suggests that underlying his approach to monastic architecture is a monastic concept of the mind as found in Cassian. For we know that Cassian's *Conferences* played an important role in the formation of cistercian monks

Cassian's Seventh Conference gives a succinct philosophy of the mind. The mind is always changeable and manifoldly changeable. It runs about and flies everywhere due to its nature of changeableness. The mind needs a certain foresight into where it will move and into what will occupy it. The mind needs experience to learn the things with which to equip its memory (*memoria*). The mind needs to know to what purpose to direct its unceasing movements. The mind needs to know why it should acquire the power to remain fixed in one direction.

For a monk, this direction is to focus on the love of God, on the recollection of God. The Tenth Conference compliments the Seventh Conference by giving the mind that focus. The conference lays out the importance of not getting caught up

in images and pictures understood as "photos" of God. This approach results in nothing other than descent into curiosity and mental distraction with disastrous effects. True, the human mind does need something to hold on to, a technique, to keep it focused on and directed to God. The technique, to rid the mind of images, is a monastic way of prayer using the Word of God, Sacred Scripture.

Furthermore, Cassian holds that there are concepts that can articulate, even embody, something of the divine and of God. Such concepts promote progress into God's presence. Cistercian monks would develop form, lines, proportion and natural light to construct conceptual architectural forms that could lead a person into God's presence and be a worthy setting for a liturgical use of the Word of God, Sacred Scripture and for monastic *meditatio*.

Cassian's monastic formation, in its turn, was influenced by Evagrius. One aspect of Evagrius' approach to contemplative prayer was that all created things can lead a person into the discovery of aspects of the divine.⁽¹²⁾ Created things are not primarily for personal enjoyment and aesthetic delight. They are to lead one into a spiritual dimension of life: a sense of life and the Spirit of life. For the human mind is immaterial, like God who is immaterial. We use what is created, not to become like a creature, but to experience a return movement into God's presence. The early Cistercians used this principle to create an architecture that would do precisely this: experience a return into God's presence.

These early cistercian buildings, especially churches, are superb examples of architecture portraying a spiritual dimension to life. The *Apologia* inspired and influenced cistercian stone churches such as Clairvaux (1135-1145), Fontenay (1139-1147), Citeaux (1140-1150), and Pontigny (1140- 1170),⁽¹³⁾ and Alcobaca, (1153-1252)

As I just mentioned, cistercian architecture, and art for that matter, is to lead a person into the presence of God and be a worthy place for the use of the Word of God, the Sacred Scriptures. Although Bernard has beauty as an essential element in his contemplative system, beauty is not the primary focus of cistercian architecture and art. The primary focus is to create a worthy place for the use of

the Sacred Scriptures, for *meditatio*, for prayer. This primary focus is in accord with the medieval mind which art and architecture as essentially a *science* capable of giving a certain knowledge.⁽¹⁴⁾ As a science, Cistercian architecture is to speak of the knowledge of one's vocation, of knowledge of a spirituality proper to one's vocation, and of a knowledge of God. Cistercian architecture expresses a specific way of life. To state this another way, the cistercian life style was in search of an architecture. 12th and 13th century cistercian abbeys reveal that this search was highly successful.⁽¹⁵⁾

Conclusion

It is my personal belief that the twenty one monks coming from Molesme with Robert, their abbot, sought an interpretation of the *Rule of St. Benedict* that was, for all practical purposes, wholly ordered to contemplation.⁽¹⁶⁾ They instituted an asceticism whose purpose was to bind them in their way of life ever so closely to the spirit of the Father, St. Benedict. The pure prayer of the Egyptian monks as taught by Evagrius and Cassian nourished that spirit. Bernard of Clairvux, himself formed monastically in that same spirit, would develop principles that both safe guarded this monastic prayer and gave birth to what we know today as cistercian architecture.

Asceticism fostering pure monastic prayer, an *arctius* interpretation of the *Rule of St. Benedict*, use of proper images leading into God's presence, private and communal (*Opus Dei* and liturgy) monastic *meditatio*, are elements that gave birth to a cistercian asceticism for art and architecture. Study and familiarity with these origins and nature of this architecture will help us to deepen our own monastic prayer, be nourished by Benedict' spirit, and create an edifice that will testify eloquently as to who we are as Cistercian monks here at New Clairvaux.

Statute 10

What is permissible or non-permissible for us to have of gold, silver, jewels, and

silk. Altar cloths and the garments of those ministering are to be without silk except the stole and maniple. No chasuble is to be had, unless of one color. All ornaments, vessels, and utensils of the monastery are to be without gold, silver, or jewels except the chalice and the fistula, which two alone we are allowed to have when of silver and gilded, but by no means when golden. [\(17\)](#)

Quid liceat vel non liceat nobis habere de auro, argento gemmis et serico. Altarium lintheamina, ministrorum indumenta, sine serico sint, praeter stolam et manipulum. Casula vero nonnisi unicolor habetur. Omnia monasterii ornamenta, vasa, utensilia, sine auro et argento et gemmis, praeter calicem et fistulam: quae quidem duo sola argentea et deaurata, sed aurea nequaquam habere permittimur. [\(18\)](#)

Statute 20

Concerning sculptures, paintings, and the wooden cross: We forbid sculptures or paintings in either our churches and in any rooms of the monastery, because when attention is turned to such things the advantage of good meditation or the discipline of religious gravity is often neglected. However, we do have painted crosses which are of wood. [\(19\)](#)

De Sculpturis et picturis, et cruce lignea. Sculpturae vel picturae in ecclesiis nostris seu in officinis aliquibus monasterii ne fiant interdiciamus, quia dum talibus intenditur, utilitas bonae meditationis vel disciplinae religiosae gravitatis saepe negligitur. Cruces tamen pictas quae sunt lignae habemus. [\(20\)](#)

Statute 80

Concerning letters and windows: Letters are to be made of one color, and not depictive. Windows are to be made white, and without crosses and pictures. [\(21\)](#)

De litteris et vitreis. Litterae unius coloris fiant, et non depictae. Vitreae albae fiant, et sine crucibus et picturis. [\(22\)](#)

1. The phrases *sense of life* and *spirit of life* come from William of St. Thierry's work on *The Song of Songs*, # 67. Here William teaches that the soul, a person, will never know itself, what it is and what it is capable of unless it finds itself in the light of God's countenance - that is God giving the grace to a person to come to an experience in oneself of personal integrity, beauty, harmony etc, and thereby coming to an experience of the Spirit of life. *Blessed is that person....such a one will not go forth after strange things by covetousness or by actions bred of curiosity*. This teaching is basic for an approach to cistercian architecture which strives to avoid curiosity and greed. (author). William of St Thierry, *Exposition on the Song of Songs*, # 67, CF 6, tr. Mother Columba Hart OSB., (Spencer, MA; Cistercian Publications, 1970) p. 54.
2. St. Benedict of Monte Cassino, born in 480, died in 547.
3. John Cassian, born in 360, died in 430.
4. Evagrius of Pontus, born in 346, died in 399
5. Oxford Latin Dictionary, ed P.G.W. Glare, (Oxford at Clarendon Press, 1983) p. 177.
6. There is absolutely no historical basis for Statute 80 to be dated 1134. In theory, it could have originated at anytime and have been written down after 1119 to 1152. Most probably, it dates from 1149-1150. Conrad Rudolph, *Early Artistic Legislation of Citeaux*, CS 89 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications 1987) p. 21.
7. Joseph Canivez, *Statuta Capitulorum Generalium Ordinis Cisterciensis*, (Louvain, 1933) Vol 1, p. 2. Footnote 1.
8. Conrad Rudolph, *ibid*, p. 21. This entire paragraph comes from Rudolph.
9. St. Bernard of Clarivaux, born 1091, died 1153.

10. Jean Leclercq, OSB, *Introduction to Cistercians and Cluniacs: St. Bernard's Apology to Abbot William*, CF 1 (Spencer, MA; Cistercian Publications 1970) p. 11.
11. Jean Leclercq, OSB, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, tr. Catharine Misrahi, (New York; Fordham University Press, 1967) p. 18-22. These pages present a good understanding of *meditatio*.
12. Jeremy Driscoll, O.S.B., *The "Ad Monachos" of Eagrius Ponticus*, (Studia Anselmiana 104; Rome 1991) p. 15ff.
13. Jean-Francois Leroux-Dhuys, *Cistercian Abbeys*, (Koln, Germany; Koneman, 1998) p. 37.
14. M. Kilian Hufgard, O.S.U., *Saint Bernard of Clairvaux: A theory of Art Formulated From His Writings and Illustrated in Twelfth-Century Works of Art*, (Lewiston, Queenston, Lampeter; Edwin Mellen Press, 1989) p. 19. In footnote 21, Hufgard gives further references.
15. Peter Fergusson, *Architecture of Solitude*, (Princeton, NJ; Princeton University Press, 1984) p. 4ff.
16. This phrase comes from Constitution 2 of the *Constitutions of the Cistercians of the Strict observance*.
17. Conrad Rudolph, *ibid*, p. 4.
18. Canivez, *ibid*, p. 15.
19. Conrad Rudolph, *ibid*, p. 6.
20. *Canivez, ibid, p. 17.*
21. *Conrad Rudolph, ibid, p. 22.*

22. *Canivez, ibid, 13.*