

MONASTIC AND MASONIC ORDERS; A PARADOXICAL PARALLEL KAREL MUSCH ©

1. Some Introductory Remarks

I intend to explore with you some dimensions of the similarities of monastic and Masonic orders. Not because I am one of the source-seekers of our craft, however honourable their efforts may be. I feel myself duly warned by Daniel Ligou in his "Dictionnaire de la Franc-Maçonnerie" where he cites the work of Bro. Bernardin in his "Précis Historique du Grand Orient de France". Bro. Bernardin has studied 236 authors on the history of Free-Masonry and finds 38 different explanations, ranging from the Tower of Babel and the Flood to ancient India, the Tower of Killwinning or Atlantis with a majority finding for ancient Greece, ancient Rome or the cathedral builders of the roman or renaissance period. I definitely do not want to add to this list.

In the second place, it is advisable for non-English to be prudent with remarks about our origins. It can not be my aim to challenge the introductory remarks made by the editors of the Lodge Quatuor Coronati in introducing a translated article in one of the first issues by a German Br. Cramer on our sources as "too visionary and impracticable for Englishmen and possibly for Germans also".

I also heed the words in the Introduction of Gould's History of Free-Masonry (p.4): "Much of the early history of Free-Masonry is so interspersed with fable and romance, that, however anxious we may be to deal tenderly with long-cherished legends and traditions, some at least, of these familiar superstitions - unless we choose to violate every canon of historical criticism - must be allowed to pass quietly into oblivion". A fate I would want to avoid.

The real, underlying, personal reason for undertaking this research is that I am inspired by Masonic life as well as by monastic life and by the Rule of Benedict, having the privilege to sometimes work with one of the advocates of that Rule, the Dutch professor Dr. Will Derkse. From time to time seeking the tranquillity of a monastery in my Burgundy and on the other hand working in Dutch and French lodges makes me not only nomadic between two countries, but also between two disciplines. The concept of frontiers or boundaries, as a form of curtailment, is growing anathema to me. More and more I seem to perceive frontiers as an invitation for communication.

I feel privileged to participate with some brothers in a search to further spirituality and inspiration in Free-Masonry. At our place at Le Chemin we organised a retreat as in a monastery for some 8 Masonic Brothers. We share a need for this aspect and intend to go on working together. The retreat will be an annual event in summer, with one or two winter meetings in Holland.

As for the more historical and research aspects of my presentation, I must say that the majority of my sources are in French. Now for someone living and working partly in Burgundy this may be easily explainable, but I am afraid it is more complicated than that. A lot of my research was done in the library of our Order at The Hague. The available sources were a bit limited, and most of them were in French, so I cannot exclude the possibility that I miss some important sources.

It is comforting that Br. Acaster in his Inaugural Address as President of the Manchester Association for Masonic Research in 2002 says that he embraces "the opportunity to draw from information outside the United Kingdom". You see, I come to do exactly the opposite, hoping to learn from you and to discover some new British sources for my quest.

In the Transactions of the Lodge Quatuor Coronati 1, (1886) Br. Woodward reminds us of "the suggestions made at various times of a Knightly, a Benedictine or a Monastic" origin. I tried to find the earlier material on which Br. Woodward could have based this statement but did not succeed. However, I would like to share with you the material which did prove to exist in an accessible way.

My presentation deals very briefly with monastic orders in general and gives some insights in Benedict. Then I try to analyse three dimensions of the similarities between monastic and Masonic orders. First going into the similarities of the Rule and the Ritual, then giving some material on monastic lodges and finally a very modest minute on sign-language. Trying to prevent the word conclusion I will end by expressing my longing to continue my research.

2. Monastic orders

Christian monasticism as we came to know it, was born in Africa and the Middle-East. In the 3rd and 4th centuries the phenomenon came to Europe, from what we now call Egypt and Syria. The first Rule of monasticism we know about is the one of Pacôme written about 320 AD. What can be considered the Rule of Augustine dates from 390 AD. The origins of monasticism lie in the desert and in asceticism. In his introduction to a recent Dutch translation of the Rule of Augustine, Professor Fens reminds us that probably the most strict monastery on earth, La Grande Chartreuse, near Grenoble, is still called the desert.

Monasteries were centres of civilisation, far from peopled by backward monks who were busy burning books and heretics. On the contrary, monasteries were organizing schools, agricultural development, administration of justice (Klosterhaft) and the development of science. We must not forget that the innovation of religion started in monasteries: Esramus and Luther were monks. It is significant that the Church tolerated the monasteries in such a way that monasticism did not disengage itself from the Church. Escaping from the world to follow, to imitate the strict words of Christ were and still are the fundaments of monasticism. Monasticism can be considered a protest against the secularization of Christendom, says the German theologian Bonhoeffer, but how to prevent it from becoming an alibi for Christianity?

The more the profane power and economics influenced monasticism, the more the religious influence waned, including the erosion of asceticism. The history of monastic orders is littered by examples of the growing worldly power of the monastery and the diminishing religious authority. The more influential monasteries became in the worldly sense, the more subject they became to the rules of the worldly power play. Time and time again this called for reform-movements, that wanted to return to the simple, ascetic life: Citeaux in reaction to Cluny, Trappists in reaction to Citeaux.

Monasticism is centred about daily rituals, prescribing the time and content of meals, services to be held, songs to be sung, the hours spent studying or working. To some this seems a monotonous existence. But in essence monotony frees the mind, allowing it to wander and wonder.

Monotony is a binding factor in Free-Masonry and in monasticism. We do not call it so, we use the word ritual, meaning the same thing.

3. Benedict of Nursia

Born in Nursia he lived from 480 - 550. He was born into a well-to-do family of land-owners. What we know of him comes mostly from one of his monks who later became Pope Gregory (590 - 604). Gregory wrote the Dialogues, a book about the lives of Benedict and other Saints.

The life of Benedict was a bit of a paradox. After he set out to lead an ascetic life as a hermit he was so successful that he gathered a following (which must be a confusing experience for a hermit). The master attracted apprentices every time. He started a monastery, went away, and started again: the famous Monte Casino which was so horribly destroyed by the Americans during WW II and which was later restored. His Rule was from about 530 AD.

If you compare the rule of Benedict with the other Rules one cannot fail to notice the simplicity and the ease with which he directs monastic life. Some Rules, for instance the Celtic version of monasticism can be very strict, almost a penal code.

The Rule of Benedict was one of the most written and read manuscript in the Middle Ages. His was the most influential rule. That may well be because of the intriguing mélange of strictness and forgiveness. Benedict gives very detailed instructions for the daily rituals, including which Psalms to sing at which days. In Chapter 18 however he states that "if this distribution is displeasing to anyone, he should arrange them otherwise". A wise acceptance of differences and changing possibilities.

4. Similarities and Differences

In this paragraph I will give some examples of the Rule, relating them to our Craft, bearing in mind that it is not primarily the historical or analytical aspects that inspire me but most of all the spiritual wisdom that speaks through these rules.

1. Listening

The first words of the Rule are: "Listen my son, to your master's precepts, and incline the ear of your heart."

Some older Freemasons in Holland remember with some melancholy the ancient rules in which E.A. were supposed to refrain from talking in the Lodge. They were supposed to listen to their Master until they were considered to have made sufficient progress to be passed. The term used in the original Latin is *Ausculata*. Although not a native speaker of Latin we do know that *ausculata* means listening with devotion and concentration. This introduction to the Rule also illustrates the importance of obedience.

2. The vows

The Rule knows three vows: *stabilitas*, *conversio* and *obedientia*. *Stabilitas* means that you have chosen a monastery and you will remain there. It is a question of loyalty to the community, in our case the lodge. People will grow, we each have that capacity and Benedict is a strong believer in that capacity. But we must grow where we were planted. Faith, being dependable those are qualities that flourish in the lodge.

Conversio means that in entering the order you must be willing to change fundamentally. It is like working in an operating theatre. We cannot do that if it is a bit sterile. Neither can one be a bit pregnant, a bit monk, or a bit Free-Mason. We have our mission and that is all-consuming. In Dutch ritual at closing the Lodge, we are commanded by our Master to go West and make ourselves known as Free-Masons, meaning of course that we must act as such. Our Master does not invite us to be a Mason a little bit, but to whole-heartedly do our utmost.

The vow of *obedientia* seems to be the hardest of all, at least to some. Promising obedience to the Master, as we do, is not obedience to a person. In that sense it is not a matter of leadership, but a form of obedience to the chair, on which one day we ourselves may be sitting. As we obey our Master we do not do what we are told, but we do what is necessary.

3. *The ritual*

The Rule gives much attention to what we would call the ritual: the day is divided into various parts on the ground of very specific directions, what when to do, what to sing.

The rhythm in the monastery is determined by the ritual, just as the rhythm in our lodge.

4. *The Abbot*

As in Lodges the Worshipful Master in monasteries the Abbot is the supreme authority. An Abbot is chosen from among his brothers, preferably unanimously.

- He is chosen for his merit of life and wisdom of doctrine.
- His duty is rather to profit the brothers than to preside over them.
- He must be learned in the law, that he may have a treasure of knowledge from which to bring forth new things and old.
- Common sense, prudence and being considerate are considered important qualities.

Choosing your masters to obey them is a form of 'obedientia', the obedience to the Rule. The Rule rules also the chosen, they too are subject to the law, as are our W.'.M.'..

5. *The Cellarer*

In monastic life the Cellarer is an important functionary. He needs to be a very wise man, sober, not a great eater himself. He is not to vex the brothers with contemptuous refusal. He should be as a father to the community, who should not be a miser. Benedict thought of everything, because in Chapter he gives directions for the measure of drink. He states that "wine is by no means a drink for monks but that it is impossible to persuade monks of this. At least let us agree to drink sparingly". I am not familiar with English custom, but in most of our Lodges this seems to be good advice.

6. *The Porters*

Monasteries know a functionary who can be compared to our Tyler. In Holland we do not really know the Tyler who stands outside the Lodge, by the way. In any case between Master and Tyler there is a specific relationship, representing respectively the East and the West. This axis forms one of the fundamentals in the way in which the Lodge can be connected to the world, to the West. Worshipful Master and Tyler represent the opening to the East and to the West, respectively. In our ritual the Tyler plays a specific part in the initiation of a Candidate, checking his credentials, before admitting him in the Lodge, just as in the English ritual the Tyler prepares the Candidate. Porters of the monastery have a similar role. They should be somewhat older and wiser brothers, able to receive guests and question them about their credentials.

7. *Those who are absent*

Brothers who are absent are commemorated always at the last prayer. This is very much like the Tylers' Toast we know in our ritual in which just before closing the Festive Board, absent brothers are remembered and we wish them a safe return home.

8. *Novices*

According to the Rule novices are supposed to be silent. Very seldom are they permitted to talk.

In Dutch ritual we have the custom that before passing and raising, the Candidate presents himself with a speech explaining what he has learned during the period of being an Entered Apprentice or a Fellow Craft. Entered Apprentices especially are expected to comment on the Lodge and its proceedings. This is a peculiar similarity with the Rule because in Chapter 3 it is stated that every time important business needs to be done, the Abbot should call together the whole community and state the matter to be discussed. To these meetings all are invited because the Lord often reveals to the younger what is best. The speech of the Entered Apprentice is meant to hold up a mirror to the older brothers. It also confirms the fact that really there are only Apprentices.

9. *The good zeal.*

The only zeal allowed to monks is the fervour with which they should anticipate one another in honour, endure one another's infirmities (whether in body or in character), always asking themselves what benefits another. A worthy zeal for any Mason, one would think.

10. *Receiving brethren*

The ceremony of initiation is reflected in Chapter 58 of the Rule. No one newly come is to be granted an easy entrance. Only if the newcomer persists in knocking on the gate and he is seen to bear patiently this harsh treatment and difficulty of admission for four or five days is he to be admitted as a novice. A senior, the master of novices is assigned to him to guide him through his novitiate, a functionary like our Junior Warden who is responsible for the Entered Apprentices. Just like in our Lodges the Rule provides for those who, having left, want to be received again.

11. The workshop

The words used by Benedict in this Chapter (4) are the same as we use in our craft: the French version or the Rule calls the place where we work : "l'atelier", which is exactly the same word as my French brothers use in naming the Lodge, just as it is in Dutch, "werkplaats".

12. Hierarchic structure

Below are summarised the hierarchies of the monastery and the Lodge:

Abbott	Worshipful Master
Cellarer	Steward
Porter	Tyler
Master of novices	Junior Warden
Weekly Reader	Orator
Deans	Officers
Novices	Entered Apprentices
Professed Monks	Fellow Craft
Seniors	Master Mason

In addition to the similarities there are of course differences, some of which are rather interesting, because they may teach us something. For instance in Chapter 68, a guideline is given in case a brother is commanded to do an impossible task. In such cases the brother should accept the burden in obedience. If the burden exceeds his strength he should speak of this with his Superior "in a quiet way and at an opportune time". If the Superior persists the brother should obey him, out of love for the Superior and trusting in the help of God. In Chapter 69 brothers are forbidden to defend each other on any ground. Breaking this rule calls for the most severe punishment. It seems to me that we as Masons could benefit from some of these Rules.

5. Monastic Lodges

An interesting dimension of the similarities between monastic and Masonic orders is the existence of monastic lodges. I did find French sources, indicating a more than spiritually shared parenthood between the monastic and the Masonic orders.

In the XVIIIth century various Masonic Lodges were erected in Benedictine monasteries. Now keeping in mind the attitude of official Roman-Catholic Church towards Freemasonry I found this rather interesting. The famous Ferrer-Benimelli mentions in his "Archives Secrètes" that in the last 40 years of the XVIIIth century an impressive number of Free-Masons were active in the Catholic Church either as monks or as priests. He gives examples from all over Europe, concentrating however on France and never once mentioning England! The study of Ferrer-Benimelli is important too because of its impressive lists of sources as well as its lists of clergymen, monks and other functionaries (among whom are to be found bishops, priors etc.). We can cite three examples among over a hundred, the sources of which can be found outside Ferrer-Benimelli as well.

* On June 24 1778 a Lodge was founded in Fécamp in the monastery 'L'Abbaye Royale de la Très Sainte Trinité'. Out of 29 monks in this monastery 9 got permission of the prier to join this Lodge. The Lodge itself was built on the grounds of the monastery. The name of the Lodge was 'La Triple Unité'. Other founding members of the Lodge included a priest, a taxman, an officer in the army, an engineer and a commissary of the navy. All founding members were Master Masons, implying that they had been Masons rather longer. In the years after the foundation other monks join and some priests. These Masonic relations were helpful for the monastery during the French revolution. The city council, one of whom was a Mason as well, refused to execute the laws to prohibit the monasteries in France. This Lodge is tyled (closed) in 1790, refounded in 1811, tyled again in 1828, refounded in 1860 and tyled in the year 1940.

* In the monastery at Ferrières-en-Gâtinais the same thing happened. The Lodge Sainte-Émilie is created in 1786 and is located in the monastery. Four of the eight monks join the Lodge.

* Even in the famous abbaye of Clairvaux a Lodge called "La Vertu" was erected in "L'An de la Vraie Lumière 5785", in 1785.

I intend to study additional sources in the archives of the Grand Lûge and the Grand Orient of France returning of course to Ferrer-Benimelli for further guidance. I will as well try to find more material on the monastic lodges in the archives of the proper departments. Generally these prove to be very rich sources indeed, as I found out when researching the history of our house in Burgundy. Lastly I hope to extend the research I was enabled to do in the library of the Benedictine monastery of La Pierre Qui Vire into this direction.

6. Sign language

Knowing there are Brethren here who are interested in sign language and its development I hesitate to address this issue, supposing that this dimension has been studied in depth. On the other hand, the statement of Br..Acaster I cited before invites me to share some of my own sources. As an Annexe to my speaking notes I have included a copy of the

bibliography of a Dutch work (also written in French) by Rijnberk. If interested I could give you an elaborate list of works from the site of Hamburg University who have a department specializing in this issue.

According to Rijnberk "il a été relativement peu écrit sur les signes monastiques": relatively little has been written about monastic sign language. However, he presents some 40 sources, some of which can also be found on the site of Hamburg University (with 42 titles). I have not yet started researching these sources, concentrating as I did on the monastic theme as such. However, I find this subject interesting because of the rich symbolism. For instance the rule of silence after Evensong, by singing Psalm 140 and after the first morning service, singing Psalm 50, getting as it were permission to speak again. There has never been a total rule of silence, according to Rijnberk. The rule of silence was meant for certain moments and certain periods. Sign language was not intended as a means of communication, replacing spoken language. It was simply a means of making one-self understood whenever really necessary. I find this dimension promising. Rijnberk mentions the Cistercian sign of the martyr, which is like c o t. This sign also means death. We all remember being introduced to the sign of the E.A. promising that we would rather have our t c than b the sts of our C.

Conclusions

One can not but agree wholeheartedly with Reynaud, when he states "Il serai peu conforme à la vérité d'établir une filiation directe entre la Règle de saint Benoît et les anciennes Règles du Métier de Maçonnerie (..). Mais on peut parler d'une évidente parenté spirituelle", saying something like: it would be little according to truth to establish a direct link between the Rule of Benedict and Masonic rules. But one can talk about a shared spiritual parenthood. In essence this statement is the same as Neville Barker Cryer's when he says 'similarities are not sources'.

It behoves us to be prudent in the extreme to avoid unrealistic speculations about our roots. Up to now the research does not yet allow to draw conclusions. Maybe the word consideration suits better what we can do with the material collected so far. We work on some dimensions i.e. similarities in the rules of monastic and Masonic life, the existence of monastic lodges, the similarities in sign-language. These may point in certain directions, but they do not tell us anything about our roots, other than that we may share a common ancestor, a source of inspiration that guides us through life, monastic, Masonic or profane. To me in any case the Rule of Benedict and monastic life as such, form a fountain of wisdom and inspiration, complementing Masonic practice and in that sense, aiding me at working my rough Ashlar.

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¹ In some cases I could not yet complete some detail in the full reference. They are indicated by ?.

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