

THE BENEDICTINES

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By

DOM DAVID KNOWLES
MONK OF DOWNSIDE ABBEY

With an Introduction by
J. HUGH DIMAN, O.S.B.

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. THE RULE OF ST. BENEDICT	
1. Introductory	vii
2. The Rule	i
II. BENEDICTINE DEVELOPMENTS	
1. Early Developments	22
2. The Middle Ages	26
3. Modern Times	35
III. BENEDICTINE ORGANIZATION	39
IV. BENEDICTINE WORK	49
V. SOME BENEDICTINE CHARACTERISTICS	62
VI. THE BENEDICTINE SPIRITUAL LIFE	
1. The Monastic Discipline	71
2. Benedictine Prayer	75
3. The Appeal to Tradition	79
4. The Abbey and the Monk	83
5. Conclusion	88

INTRODUCTION

The writer of the following pages is already well known to American readers by his admirable little volume on the American Civil War.* In the present book he brings into play the same qualities of analysis, of sympathy and of just discrimination as in the earlier one, but exercises them upon a very different theme.

Benedictines have already had a life of fourteen centuries. This is a long period to compress into a volume of this size, and Dom David Knowles has wisely refrained from attempting a detailed narrative. Instead he has used the past only to throw light on the present and he shows himself more intent upon giving his readers an insight into the contemporary life and spirit of an ancient and almost world-wide religious fellowship than he is upon the external vicissitudes through which it has passed.

Amidst so much that is instructive and illuminating, there is one thought to which the author often recurs and which may perhaps be recommended for special consideration. He says near the close of his book that religious orders are "most valuable not for what they do, but for what they are." This is particularly true of Benedictines, for, unlike most religious orders, they have no prescribed works outside the daily rou-

**The American Civil War*, by David Knowles, Oxford University Press, New York.

INTRODUCTION

tine of their monasteries. On the other hand no exterior work, undertaken from the right motives and under obedience, is denied to them. St. Benedict himself had no program, either of missionary activity, nor of charitable action, nor of social reform beyond the daily round of prayer, of reading and of work in his own monasteries. What was accomplished by his followers however outside the monasteries is well known. In the centuries immediately following St. Benedict's own day, the face of Europe was almost literally transformed by his monks. Waste lands were redeemed, roads were built, the ignorant were taught, and missionaries carried the faith to the farthest confines of Europe. Later the ancient classics were copied and preserved, all the arts were fostered and pursued, and in the Seventeenth Century the Maurist Congregation in France brought historical science and research to their highest point of development.

The torch lit so many centuries ago, but still burning brightly, was carried across the Atlantic in the middle of the Nineteenth Century by Dom Boniface Wimmer and his companions, and to-day stately abbeys, among the greatest in the world, may be visited in the wide stretches of our own Western land.

These great achievements were the fruit of Benedictine life, but the seeds were sown in the quiet of monastic routine. Always and everywhere monastic works are fruitful only as they spring from the love of God, deepened and ripened in the silence and prayer of the cloister. All orders are built upon this root principle, but it is the privilege of Benedictines

INTRODUCTION

to be able to witness to its truth by fourteen centuries of experience.

This thoughtful presentation of some of the deeper aspects of Benedictine life will without doubt strike a responsive chord in the souls of many American readers. It is to be hoped too that this little treatise will help to make it clear that Benedictines in our own day and in our own land, have their mission no less truly than they had it in Europe in those by-gone times that have been named after them, the Benedictine Centuries.

J. HUGH DIMAN, O. S. B.

