

The “Archangel of the Monks”

As the fourth abbot of Cluny to merit the glory of the altars, history remembers St. Odilo as the synthesis and living example of the spirit of this mythical institution.



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Through the gift of vocation, God traces out a specific path of sanctification for each of His children and provides natural and supernatural abilities that favour the fulfilment of this individual and unique calling. But He also invites us to place these talents, in one way or another, at the service of Church and neighbour.

In one of his epistles, St. Peter the Apostle exhorts: “As each has received a gift, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who utters oracles of God; whoever renders service, as one who renders it by the strength which God supplies; in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ” (1 Pt 4:10-11).

Looking back over the two-thousand-year journey of the Holy Catholic Church, we see that Providence calls some souls to fulfil special missions. They do not accomplish their vocation in the ambit of their social relations, for their action is destined to reach a broad-

er field, frequently even the Church as a whole.

They are providential persons, chosen to fill preeminent roles, and as such to indicate God’s plans to their contemporaries. Aided by supernatural discernment, they have special insight into the errors of their age; they perceive the snares of evil and the needs of the good, and point out the course to be followed to ensure the expansion of God’s Kingdom. It follows that they are often endowed with human qualities that complement their mission.

In this article, we will consider one such figure in the Church’s past: St. Odilo, Abbot of Cluny. But, to better appreciate his work and that of his monks it is necessary to analyse the complex historical crossroads in which he lived.

A world immersed in chaos

The unrest that threatened the West in the ninth and tenth centuries prompted uncertainties and apprehension. With the collapse of the Carolingian Empire and an onslaught of barbarian attacks, society was weakened in its very roots.

Plagued by doubt and fear, the people sought refuge under feudal lords, men of arms who committed themselves to protecting them in exchange for services. Nevertheless, while professing the Christian Faith, the moral conduct of the majority of them was not in keeping with the obligations imposed by Baptism. They unscrupulously took advantage of the opportunities generated by anarchy to expand their domains, protracting bloody rivalries.

In the religious ambit, there were equally grave reasons for fear: the intrusion of sovereigns in ecclesiastical appointments, combined with the lax customs of the clergy, opened the doors of the Sacred Hierarchy to unworthy candidates who readily stooped to political plotting and worldly ambition in order to indulge their disordered passions. The problem took on staggering proportions, culminating in the famous Investiture Controversy.

Europe lacked a power capable of confronting the errors that were being spread in the temporal as well as the spiritual spheres. To the

surprise of all, this power silently emerged from a cloister, where poor, obedient, and chaste monks began a daring work of reform. As exemplary sons of the Church who “embodied the only element of stability in a disoriented West,”¹ they “forged ahead and, as it were, initiated a complete reversal in Western monasticism, drawing closer to the people, not only concerning themselves with their own sanctification, but also the moral reform of the Christian world.”²

Cluny and its holy abbots

Burgundy, a wine region in central-eastern France, is still home to the tiny city of Cluny, where, in the year 910, Duke William the Pious granted some lands to St. Berno, who wished to start a monastic community there under the rule of St. Benedict.

“There are places blessed by a special design that cannot be foreseen and whose secrets are known to God alone. Cluny is one of these

places.”³ From all appearances, the new foundation would be just another monastery, like so many others built at that time. Nevertheless, when its Roman-style walls started welcoming a stream of young vocations who requested admission, it was obvious that an *élan* of fervour set these men of God apart.

In fact, the Cluniac monks understood the need to initiate a work that stood out for utter fidelity to the precepts of religious life. With great enthusiasm they dedicated themselves to prayer, labour, study, charitable works and, especially, to the liturgical office, so that it could be affirmed that “the life in Cluny was a totally Benedictine life.”⁴

Their love for the Holy Mass was noteworthy; it led them to promote uninterrupted daily celebrations from daybreak until midday, and the assiduous reception of the Eucharist by all the monks. The secret of Cluny’s dynamism has been the subject of speculation for cen-

turies, but we can attribute the most profound reason for the power that the abbey would attain to these two factors.

It is fitting to further recall that for two centuries the monastery was led by great abbots, truly outstanding figures who ably and wisely outlined and guided the new form of consecration to God. The rule of St. Berno, St. Odo, St. Mayeul, St. Odilo and St. Hugh furnished ample recognition for Cluny, prompting numerous monasteries to unite themselves to it, eventually numbering 1,500 affiliated entities spread throughout Europe.

“The expansion of Cluny was due to the monastic quality of some eminent personalities at its forefront, who were capable, from its origins, of leading the community that truly desired reform. Combined with this was the superiority of the well-defined statutes, the brilliant organization of international orientation and its central location in the heart of the Latin West.”⁵

St. Odilo, the fourth abbot to merit the glory of the altars, is the one who seems to best sum up the spirit of this mythical institution, having been called the “Archangel of the monks”⁶ by St. Fulbert, Bishop of Chartres, his friend and admirer.

Cured by the Blessed Virgin

He was born in Auvergne, around the year 962, into a family of noble lineage and princely ancestry on his mother’s side. His illustrious birthright did not exempt the infant from



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View of the Cluny monastery complex today

Francisco Lecaros

the struggles of this valley of tears, for this third son of Béraud, Count of Mercœur and the equally noble Gerberge, fell victim to a grave illness which left him paralysed. He could only move his little hands and feet with great difficulty.

However, a lofty design hovered over the child. While still in his early childhood, during a trip, the family left him with the baggage in front of a church dedicated to the Virgin Mary, while they restocked their supplies. Feeling a mysterious urge to enter the holy building, he dragged himself as best he could to the door and, with touching tenacity, managed to make his way to the altar dedicated to the Queen of Heaven. There, he took hold of the altar cloth, and in an attempt to stand up, he suddenly felt a miraculous influx of strength. He was cured!

This prodigy was the beginning of an intimate and filial relationship with the Mother of God that would last his entire life. Later, perhaps to confirm his gratitude, he consecrated himself to her as a slave, tying a rope around his neck and placing the end of it at the foot of a statue of Mary, while reciting a pious offering. “From that instant”—Dom Jacques Hourlier comments—“Odilo is no longer a free man: he had ‘given himself’ to Our Lady, just as, long ago so many others had transferred their liberty into the hands of a lord.”⁷ With this act, he in some way anticipated the slavery of love to Our Lady taught centuries later by St. Louis Marie Grignon de Montfort.

His fragile health barred him from following a military career, as was the custom among nobles at that time. Accordingly, he entered the illustrious school of Saint-Julien de Brioude, of whose chapter he be-



With the meek and humble he was gentle and affable; with the proud and evil he became fearful

St. Odilo according to an engraving reproduced in “Saint Odilon Abbé de Cluny,” by Pierre Jardet

came canon. However, a chance encounter with St. Mayeul, Abbot of Cluny, sealed his destiny: he would be a monk in that abbey. God blessed this fortunate meeting from the outset; a profound friendship united the two in life and in death. The young Odilo, at only 26 years of age, bowed like a son before the venerable figure of the octogenarian abbot, becoming his disciple.

Monk of eminent sanctity

When he embarked on the novitiate, Odilo’s sole desire was to dedicate himself to the contemplative life. His longing was crowned with blessings from Providence, for there was no humbler, more hardworking, or sacrificial monk in the whole house, nor one who prayed with more recollection or conviction. Whoever saw him, even without speaking to him, felt urged to grow in love of God.

The soul of this unpretentious Cluniac monk seems to have been moulded since his birth in accord with the precepts of the rule, and the entire Benedictine ideal shone in it. His brothers in habit who were awed and overjoyed at the privilege of sharing his company, were unanimous in acknowledging the perfection of monastic life in him.

This opinion was shared by St. Mayeul, who elected him as his successor. When he died, in 994, the heavy cross of governing the abbey fell upon the young shoulders of Odilo.

St. Odilo, according to a disciple and contemporary

Those studying the life of St. Odilo sooner or later refer to the writings of the monk Jotsald,⁸ his contemporary, disciple and biographer, who left a precious firsthand account of the rich personality of his superior.

Odilo had a firm step and an admirable voice. He spoke eloquently and the mere sight of him awakened joy. His angelic countenance, his serene gaze, his movements, gestures, and posture expressed uprightness and purity. The simple fall of his robes bespoke his lofty dignity, and the respect that he had for himself and others. There was something luminous about him that beckoned others to imitate and venerate him. The light of grace present within him shone from his face, giving expression to the beauty of his soul.

He was of average height and had an elegant bearing. His visage expressed both authority and benevolence. With the meek and humble he was gentle and affable, but with the proud and evil he became fearful; they could scarcely look him in the eye. His liteness accentuated

his vigour and, later, his pallor did not diminish his glow of noble distinction. He emitted seriousness and peace.

When he kept silence, he was occupied with the Lord; when he spoke, his theme was the Lord. "Examining his sermons and many of his letters, one senses, like the taste of sweet and delightful honeycomb, the flavour of prudent eloquence, and the enchantments of amenity and grace."⁹

Mirror of virtues for all of society

His extensive rule spanned 55 years. A curious phenomenon played out during these decades as well as in the administrations of other abbots. On one hand, the temporal powers wore themselves out with infighting. On the other, Cluny continued to conquer souls by the practice of Christian charity. In the Cluniac monasteries, peace and order reigned; everyone was dedicated to fruitful works, imitating the example of Odilo's dedication. The contrast between these two situations naturally drew the hopes of the inhabitants to the holy abbot and his spiritual sons, and the latter never disappointed the people's hopes.

When the care-worn, those who had no one to

turn to or those who had despaired of a solution knocked on the abbey doors they were given wise counsel; the hungry received a serving of food that many times saved them from death; the sick were guaranteed treatment and lodging; and the dead benefitted from the Masses and prayers offered on behalf of their souls. Thanks to the zeal of Odilo the Commemoration of All Souls was established in the Church, on November 2. From within the walls of these monasteries a new historic era was forged, which impeded the complete collapse of the West.

His venerable figure was testimony that holiness was the solution for the grave problems of human society. Over the course of time, sovereigns began to take note

of this truth and came to drink from the fountain of his wisdom. It could be said that St. Odilo was linked to all the important questions of his age and influenced, directly or indirectly, the principal decisions taken at that time, both in the Holy See as well as the Christian kingdoms.

The consummation of a holy career

Jotsald describes the death of the abbot with unction and piety. He reports that, even while experiencing physical weakening, the 87-year-old monk undertook a trip to the monastery of Souvigny in October of 1048. There, he continued to perform his duties with perfection despite increasing debility.

On the last day of that year, his health showed signs of the approaching end. Although bedridden, he asked to be brought to the church, in order to recite Vespers with the community, and he summoned the strength to intone the Psalms. The holy abbot confronted death with his natural and noble firmness. Hours later, on the early morning of January 1, 1049, he surrendered his soul to God. "With neither tremor nor agony, his eyes gently closed and he slept in peace."¹⁰ ✧



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The tombs of St. Mayeul and St. Odilo
Priory church of St. Peter and St. Paul, Souvigny (France)

¹ DANIEL-ROPS, Henri. *A Igreja dos tempos bárbaros*. São Paulo: Quadrante, 1991, p.439.

² GARCÍA-VILLOSLADA, SJ, Ricardo. *Historia de la Iglesia Católica. Edad Media: La Cristiandad en el mundo europeo y feudal*. 6.ed. Madrid: BAC, 1999, v.II, p.243.

³ JARDET, Pierre. *Saint Odilon, abbé de Cluny. Sa vie, son temps, ses œuvres*. Lyon: Emmanuel Vitte, 1898, p.51.

⁴ DANIEL-ROPS, op. cit., p.592.

⁵ HALLINGER, Cassio. Cluny. VI - Cause dell'ascesa e della decadenza.

In: PIZZARDO, Guiseppe et al. (Dir.). *Enciclopedia Cattolica*. Città del Vaticano: Ente per l'Enciclopedia Cattolica e per il Libro Cattolico, 1949, v.III, col.1890.

⁶ GARCÍA-VILLOSLADA, op. cit., p.242.

⁷ HOURLIER, OSB, Jacques. Saint Odilon, abbé de Cluny. In: *Revue d'Histoire Ecclésiastique*. Louvain. Fasc. 40 (1964); p.31.

⁸ JOTSALD. *De vita et virtutibus Sancti Odilonis abbatis*. L.I, c.2-6: ML 142, 899-901.

⁹ Idem, c.6, 901.

¹⁰ JARDET, op. cit., p.751-752.

The Cluniac Reform

The Cluniac experience emphasized the primacy of spiritual goods, inspired and favoured initiatives and institutions for the fostering of human values, and taught a spirit of peace.

The Cluniac monks devoted themselves with love and great care to the celebration of the Liturgical Hours, to the singing of the Psalms, to processions as devout as they were solemn, and above all, to the celebration of Holy Mass. They promoted sacred music, they wanted architecture and art to contribute to the beauty and solemnity of the rites; they enriched the liturgical calendar with special celebrations [...]; and they intensified the devotion to the Virgin Mary.

Great importance was given to the Liturgy because the monks of Cluny were convinced that it was a participation in the liturgy of Heaven. [...]

A spiritual Europe took shape

It is not surprising that before long the Monastery of Cluny gained a reputation for holiness and that many other monastic communities decided to follow its discipline. Numerous princes and Popes asked the abbots of Cluny to extend their reform so that in a short time a dense network of monasteries developed that were linked to Cluny, either by true and proper juridical bonds or by a sort of charismatic affiliation. Thus a spiritual Europe gradually took shape in the various regions of France and in

Italy, Spain, Germany and Hungary. [...]

The abbots of Cluny with their spiritual authority, the Cluniac monks who became Bishops and some of them even Popes, took the lead in this impressive action of spiritual renewal. And it yielded abundant fruit: celibacy was once again esteemed and practised by priests and more transparent procedures were introduced in the designation of ecclesiastical offices.

Fostering of charity, culture and peace

Also significant were the benefits that monasteries inspired by the Cluniac Reform contributed to society. At a time when Church institutions alone provided for the poor, charity was practised with dedication. In all the houses, the almoner was bound to offer hospitality to needy wayfarers and pilgrims, travelling priests and religious and especially the poor, who came asking for food and a roof over their heads for a few days.

Equally important were two other institutions promoted by Cluny that were characteristic of medieval civil-



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The clock tower and holy water belfry of the the abbatial church of Cluny

ization: the “Truce of God” and the “Peace of God.” In an epoch heavily marked by violence and the spirit of revenge, with the “Truces of God” long periods of non-belligerence were guaranteed, especially on the occasion of specific religious feasts and certain days of the week. With “the Peace of God,” on pain of a canonical reprimand, respect was requested for defenceless people and for sacred places. [...]

Furthermore, as happened for other monastic foundations, the Cluniac monasteries had likewise at their disposal extensive properties which, diligently put to good use, helped to develop the economy. Alongside the manual work there was no lack of the typical cultural activities of medieval monasticism such as schools for children, the foundation of libraries and *scriptoria* for the transcription of books.

BENEDICT XVI, Excerpts from the *General Audience* of 11/11/2009