

Cluny: A Light from the Past

A successful reform, and its message for today

by Thomas E. Woods, Jr.

Over the past year, many traditionalists have begun to learn of a canonical structure known as an apostolic administration. Such an arrangement would make an order of priests – such as the Society of Saint Pius X, to whom the idea was reportedly proposed – answerable to the Pope alone, and would allow them to operate without interference from the local bishop.

It is an extremely attractive idea, to be sure, and one whose advantages cannot all be listed here. Most obviously, it would allow the work of true reform to be carried forward without being sabotaged by unfriendly bishops. It would also address the difficulties traditionally associated with the indult: unsympathetic pastors, little or no parish life, weddings and funerals frequently denied, architecture unsuited to the traditional liturgy, and the like. Under an apostolic administration, traditional priests could establish entire parishes of their own.

This kind of structure is not altogether without precedent. During another desperate period of Church history, a similar arrangement was granted to a small group of reformers whose accomplishments would rank among the most impressive in Church history.

The year was 910. For the past century Europe had been ravaged not only by the disorder and war brought on by the infighting among the heirs of Charlemagne, but also and more importantly by wave upon wave of invasions by the Vikings, the Magyars, and the Muslims.

Monastic discipline had all but collapsed throughout the West. Simony, the sale of clerical offices, was rampant, and clerical celibacy was in many cases a distant memory. When a poor monk named Erluin suggested that his monastery return to strict observance of the *Rule of Saint Benedict*, his fellow monks ripped out his tongue and blinded him. So much for that.

But in 910, an institution was founded whose influence would extend far beyond anyone's expectations, and that would play a historic role in reforming monastic life throughout Europe. In that year, William the Pious, Duke of Aquitaine, established the monastery of Cluny fifteen miles northwest of Mâcon in Burgundy. Immediately after doing so, he renounced any authority he might have enjoyed over the institution as a lay ruler. Lay control of churches and monasteries had been the source of much mischief in those days, and thanks to Duke William, it would not interfere with Cluny's great work.

That great work was nothing less than the restoration of religious life in Europe. Cluny would be blessed with a number of saintly abbots, who were determined to direct religious life according to the traditional Benedictine model – and then to spread their work and influence beyond the walls of their abbey. It would become a key center of Church reform, with no fewer than four reforming popes eventually emerging from Cluniac backgrounds.

Although Cluny was not alone in promoting monastic reform, it played a role vastly disproportionate to its size.

Its plan consisted both of founding new houses across western Europe and in encouraging existing monasteries that contained anything of the reform spirit to become affiliates. Here was where Cluny departed from standard Benedictine practice: while each such monastery had previously been entirely independent of all others, Cluny introduced a centralized system of administration



Musician on a capital from Cluny.

Thomas E. Woods, Jr., holds a bachelor's degree from Harvard and a Ph.D. in history from Columbia University. He is currently a professor of history at Suffolk Community College on Long Island, and associate editor of The Latin Mass.

through which it governed the houses under its charge. Thus all the Cluniac monasteries operated under the authority of the abbot of Cluny. Cluny's abbot, though he traveled a great deal, could of course not be everywhere at once, so the day-to-day operations of affiliated monasteries were overseen by priors – appointed not by each individual community, as had been standard in the Benedictine tradition, but by the abbot of Cluny. Every monk, in turn, was expected to spend some time at Cluny itself. Over time, Cluny would come to direct many hundreds of monasteries: 314 by the twelfth century, and 825 by the fifteenth. As many as a thousand others, while not subject to Cluniac control, would adopt its constitutions and spirit.

On a regular basis Cluny held a general chapter at which all the priors were to be present. These meetings symbolized Cluny's great work of bringing together into one great federation so many of the previously isolated islands of reform sentiment. Thus the great Church historian Msgr. Philip Hughes writes: "In that age of general dislocation, when unity of any kind seemed but an impossible dream, and when alone the monasteries retained a semblance of stability, the importance of the new departure that bound up in one huge federation all these cells of new religious life, can hardly be exaggerated."

In order to allow Cluny to undertake its spiritual mission without outside interference, Wil-

liam of Aquitaine had declared it independent of all lay control, including his own; there remained, however, the question of ecclesiastical control. From the beginning, Cluny had worked to gain exemption from the control of local bishops, some of whom were hostile to its mission and many of whom had attained their offices through simony. At first, this exemption took the form of Pope Gregory V's declaration in the late tenth century that "no bishop or priest should dare to enter the venerable monastery of Cluny for the ordination of priests or deacons, for the consecration of a church, or for the celebration of Mass, unless invited by the abbot." In 1016, Pope Benedict VIII declared Cluny "absolutely free



A postcard of Cluny, France.

from the authority of kings, bishops, and counts, being subject only to God, Saint Peter, and the Pope."

This was precisely what Cluny had been seeking all along: an implicit reform mandate from Rome and, much more importantly, immunity from the bishops in carrying out that reform. Top churchmen doubtless recognized that all too many of the bishops had been appointed for the wrong reasons; recall that Cluny took hold before the outbreak of the so-called investiture controversy, in which the Church struggled to reclaim from secular authorities the right to name Church officials, including bishops. With bishops who had often been awarded their offices in exchange for a fee, or

for their loyalty or other service to a secular ruler (or indeed because they were fortunate enough to be related to some secular ruler), and with abbots of monasteries also generally appointed by kings, dukes, and counts as well, it was essential that these potential sources of corruption be bypassed entirely.

This is not to say that Cluny encountered no obstacles. Some bishops were annoyed at Cluny's privileges and resented the Pope's special arrangement with this meddlesome monastery. This frustration became all too apparent when in several cases the two sides actually

found themselves in violent confrontation, such as in Clermont and Mâcon. The French historian Henri Daniel-Rops records an incident at

Under an apostolic administration, traditional priests could establish entire parishes of their own.... Most obviously, it would allow the work of true reform to be carried forward without being sabotaged by unfriendly bishops.

Orléans in which, after one of the bishops had seized a vineyard belonging to the abbey of Fleury (a Cluniac house), the religious "won it back by the use of a most curious instrument of warfare in the shape of two caskets full of sacred relics, before which the episcopal troops fell back in disorder!"

Such incidents aside, Cluny's work proved especially fruitful. By the time of Peter the Venerable's tenure as abbot (1122-56), the *Catholic Encyclopedia* reports, it had become "second only to Rome as the chief center of the Christian world." Even in its early years it gave the Church a small litany of saintly abbots: Saint Odo, Saint Maieul, Saint Odilo, and Saint Hugh. It had managed all

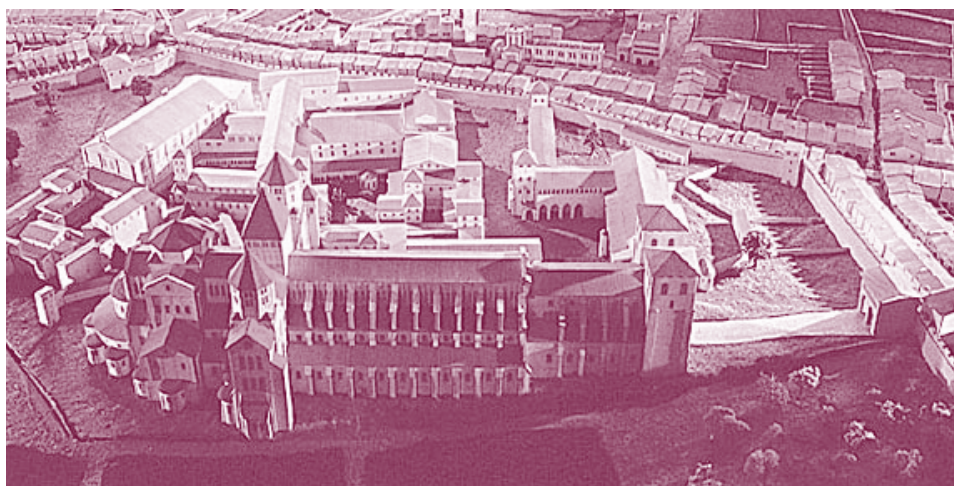
this with a congregation that had begun with Saint Berno, the first abbot, and twelve companions.

(Although not directly pertinent to our purpose here, it should probably be noted that the Cluniac order was suppressed and its beautiful abbey, one of the treasures of the Middle Ages, destroyed during the atheistic barbarism of the French Revolution. Remember that the next time someone tries to argue that religion alone causes fanaticism.)

We should not be too hasty in drawing comparisons between the general collapse of the ninth and tenth centuries and the disastrous situation the Church faces today. The differences are clear enough. For one thing, the problem that Cluny and other Church reform movements faced, awful as it was, almost certainly constituted less of a threat to the Church's long-term health than do the problems of our day. The problems of the religious orders then were primarily matters of discipline – scandalous and lamentable to be sure, but at least susceptible of relatively straightforward remedy. Bishops and abbots guilty of simony or even of violations of celibacy may certainly have been corrupt and despicable, but they did not attempt to impose new dogmas or a supposedly updated version of Catholicism on the poor souls under their authority.

The problem today is far worse. Since Vatican II, a liberalism utterly alien to traditional Catholic thought has insinuated its way into every aspect of Catholic life, even among many people who consider themselves orthodox and exemplary. Disciplinary scandals abound now as then, but in addition to these problems our adversaries have attempted to remake Catholicism altogether, offering us a substitute that bears more resemblance to liberalism, Modernism, and the Enlightenment than to the traditional faith.

Having inserted this caveat, however, the example of Cluny is indeed quite pertinent to our present impasse, for it shows how resilient the Church can be, under the worst of conditions, when even the tiniest minority



Photograph of a model of the Abbey Church of Saint Pierre in Cluny, France.

of her members is passionate about genuine reform. Where there's a will, there's a way, as the saying goes, and the case of Cluny reminds us of just how much can be accomplished in the Church by a small band of rebuilders.

The success of Cluny also demonstrates the potential of the canonical structure referred to today as an apostolic administration. By allowing the Cluniac houses to bypass the authority of the bishops – who, in their day as in ours, were so often opponents of true reform – the Church gave this divinely inspired movement the room it needed to carry out its mission. Even though our situation is arguably worse than what Cluny faced, the immunity from the bishops that Cluny enjoyed would

give us the ability to rebuild at least one segment of the Church. That is what Cluny did, and the rest of the Church ultimately followed.

Even though our situation is arguably worse than what Cluny faced, the immunity from the bishops that Cluny enjoyed would give us the ability to rebuild at least one segment of the Church. That is what Cluny did, and the rest of the Church ultimately followed.

Moreover, as Msgr. Hughes noted, this special arrangement allowed all the little cells of reform to be brought together under one umbrella, under the protection of the Holy See. That is what this structure could do today: take all the isolated (and often frustrated and demoralized) centers of Tridentine devotion around the globe, and regularize and unite them into a vibrant structure that would guarantee traditional Catholics the sacraments and spirituality that are their birthright, and that historically have borne such great fruit throughout the world. This is the message that a single tenth-century monastery, with a vision for true Catholic reform, has for us today. ✠