

Monte Cassino

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The Catholic Worker, Mar 1944, p. 4, 5

Summary: Describes the monastery of Monte Cassino, the birthplace of the rule of St. Benedict, and its occupation by the German army. Quoting John Cardinal Newman, reflects on how often the patient work of monasteries is often undone by invaders. Notes the monastic spirit's ability to restore itself after destruction thereby preserving tradition. (DDLW #943).

MONTE CASSINO! To most of those who are reading the papers these days, the name means a mountain held by the Germans as an observation post over in Italy where their sons or relatives are fighting. In the **Catholic News** of February 5 General Clark said that the reluctance of the Allied armies to shell church property held up the advance in Italy since the famous monastery was being used by the Germans.

To those of us who are oblates of St. Benedict, Monte Cassino means the holy place where St. Benedict composed his rule which has been used for the last fourteen hundred years and is still being read and pondered on by tens of thousands this present day.

St. Benedict started living a hermit's life at Subiaco, in a cave, forty miles east of Rome, but after a few years, when disciples began gathering round, he removed to Monte Cassino, a mountain half way between Rome and Naples. It was in 529 that he built there, on the top of the mountain, the monastery which, according to my oblate's manual, "was destined to become the most famous in the history of the Church."

A great deal has been written about the destruction of famous cathedrals, shrines, churches, monasteries, libraries, works of art, these last 25 years. But the work of destruction goes on. Probably Monte Cassino will fall again, as it has fallen in the past.

The fact that it has happened many times before does not help much to assuage the grief at its happening again. I was thinking as I read about it yesterday that three members of the Catholic Worker staff are over there in that very section, one of them a Benedictine oblate (Joe Zarrella), one a Franciscan tertiary (Louis Murphy) and Gerry Griffin, who is probably doing all the griping, for he is a dour soul. His last letter tells me that he is working in the mountains in Italy, and in just as much danger from the muddy, mountainous roads, as from the

shelling. All three of them love the Benedictine tradition, and so I am going to give the following quotation, which I have just come across in Newman for their consolation, as well as for the solace of other readers of **The Catholic Worker**.

It is from an old volume published by Longmans, Green & Co., in 1891, volume two of Newman's historical sketches, and the one I quote from is called the *Mission of St. Benedict*. It is reprinted from Atlantis of January, 1858, and is sixty-five pages long. What long essays they wrote and published then, how solid, how leisurely and how comforting!

He is writing, Newman is, of the repose of the life of the monks, "intellectual and moral." The complete lack of "effort, bustle and excitement." A life lived for the day without solicitude for the morrow." In speaking of their work of reconstruction, he writes magnificently of what they have accomplished.

"When the bodily frame receives an injury, or is seized with some sudden malady, nature may be expected to set right the evil, if left to itself, but she requires time; science comes to shorten the process, and is violent that it may be certain. This may be taken to illustrate St. Benedict's mode of counteracting the miseries of life. He found the world, physical and social, in ruins, and his mission was to restore it in the way, not of science, but of nature, not as if setting about to do it, nor professing to do it, by any set time or by any rare specific or by any series of strokes, but so quietly, patiently, gradually, that often, till the work was done, it was not known to be doing. It was a restoration rather than a visitation, correction, or conversion. The new world which he helped to create was a growth rather than a structure. Silent men were observed about the country, or discovered in the forest, digging, clearing, and building; and other silent men, men not seen, were sitting in the cold cloister, trying their eyes, and keeping their attention on the stretch, while they painfully deciphered and copied and re-copied the manuscripts which they had saved. There was no one that "contended or cried out," or drew attention to what was going on; but by degrees the woody swamp became a hermitage, a religious house, a farm, an abbey, a village, a seminary, a school of learning, and a city. Roads and bridges connected it with other abbeys and cities, which had similarly grown up; and what the haughty Alaric or fierce Attila had broken to pieces, these patient meditative men had brought together and made to live again.

"And then, when they had in the course of many years gained their peaceful victories, perhaps some new invader came, and with fire and sword undid their slow and persevering toil in an hour. The Hun succeeded to the Goth, the Lombard to the Hun, the Tartar to the Lombard; the Saxon was reclaimed only that the Dane might take his place. Down in the dust lay the labor and civilization of centuries – churches, colleges, cloisters, libraries – and nothing was left to them but to begin all over again; but this they did without grudging, so promptly, cheerfully, tranquilly, as if it were by some law of nature that the restoration came, and they were like the flowers and shrubs and fruit trees which they reared, and which, when ill-treated, do not take vengeance, or remember evil,

but give forth fresh branches, leaves, or blossoms, perhaps in greater profusion with richer quality, for the very reason that the old were rudely broken off.

"If one holy place was desecrated, the monks pitched upon another, and by this time there were rich or powerful men who remembered and loved the past enough to wish to have it restored in the future. Thus it was in the case of the monastery of Ramsey, after the ravages of the Danes. A wealthy Earl whose heart was touched, consulted his Bishop how he could best promote the Divine glory; the Bishop answered that they only were free, serene, and unsolicitous who renounced the world, and that their renunciation brought a blessing on their country. 'By their merit,' he said, 'the anger of the Supreme Judge is abated; a healthier atmosphere is granted; corn springs up more abundantly; famine and pestilence withdraw; the state is better governed; prisons are opened; the fetters unbound; the shipwrecked relieved.'

"He proceeded then to advise him to give ground for a monastery and to build and endow it. Earl Alwin observed in reply, that he had inherited some waste land in the midst of the marshes, with a forest in the neighborhood, some open spots of good turf, and others of meadow; and he took the Bishop to see it. It was in fact, an island in the fens, and as lonely as religious men could desire. The gift was accepted, workmen were collected, the pious peasants round about gave their labor. Twelve monks were found from another cloister; cells and a chapel were soon raised. Materials were collected for a church; stones and cement were given; a firm foundation was secured; scaffolding and machinery were lent; and in course of time a sacred edifice and two towers rose over the desolate waste, and renewed the past."

It all sounds very serene, written from back in 1858 and read 3,000 miles away in my own quiet hermitage on Long Island. But down here there are maneuvers in the woods, and the sound of guns at night, and the constant sound of airplanes during the day; set up in a Catholic cemetery nearby are anti-aircraft batteries we too use church property as I have seen not only in Seattle on the west coast, but near at hand on Staten Island, for soldiers and their camouflaged huts and trenches and guns.)

And I cannot help but think of Monte Cassino and all the country round about ravaged and laid waste by opposing armies, and wonder what escape is there for the monks at Monte Cassino? Are they packing their belongings like the peasants and trying to save them from the devastation of the world?—those manuscripts copied by monks these past fourteen hundred years—works of St. Jerome, St. Augustine, St. Bede, St. Leo, the Acts of the Apostles and the Gospels, the epistles, the classics.

Difficult as it is to take the long view, to look on events in the light of history as that apostle to the world, Peter Maurin does, I am sure that the monks of Monte Cassino as they have done for so many thousand years, will see things in the light of eternity. Monte Cassino will stand as the church will stand, and the gates of hell shall not prevail.