

Stranger at the Priory

by Gene Tunney



STRANGER AT THE PRIORY

A farmer visiting Portsmouth Priory might well think, "What a wonderful farm this is!"

An educator would likely think, "What a great modern school is growing here!"

A religious man would hardly help feeling, "God has brought this place and these men very close to Him."

All would be right, but perhaps only a Benedictine would understand that the farm, the school, and the church are but different forms of the same worship, or that they are all operating in modern America under the oldest written constitution still in use – the Holy Rule of St. Benedict.

ONE EVENING AFTER COMPLINE

We had just returned from the final divine service of the day. Most of the black-robed monks had gone to their cells where they would keep silence until morning, which is the rule after singing Compline. But, because of me, the Prior had given a few monks special permission to talk.

I had thought I would feel a trifle silly – a layman, not too bright on the details of my church – sitting there in a very worldly sport coat. But I soon forgot that. For one thing the Benedictine Order was founded because St. Benedict believed that Christianity was a practical religion, and his monks are practical men. Then, too, the Benedictines have fourteen centuries of training in hospitality. In the middle ages their monasteries were the favored resting places for weary travelers.

Father Prior suggested that I start things rolling by asking any questions that might occur to me.

"Anything at all. We're not touchy, and certainly not easily shocked. We've all lived in the world. We've been scientists, sociologists, athletes, and all that. Some of us have even been Protestants."

I had come here for the purpose of asking questions, but the ones I thought of didn't seem to make much sense, even to me.

"You might start out with the one everyone begins with" – this from

Father George, a monk whose secular experience had been in cities, but whose delight was now the Priory Farm. "Why don't you ask us why anyone wants to be a monk anyway?"

"The boys in our Priory School say it's because we were disappointed in love. They have a different story for every one of us."

"Well — " I began, but I've been around long enough to know when I'm being kidded. I made a mental note that while St. Benedict in his famous Rule, frowned on loud and foolish laughter, he didn't rule against a sense of humor, and that I had best walk a little softly.

"It's sometimes a difficult thing to explain to a layman," said Father George. "But the reason for becoming a monk is the simplest thing in the world to us. Each of us has had a call to worship God, and for us the answer to that call cannot be a part-time job. We feel that it is the most important thing in all the world, and we try to worship God by word and deed every waking moment of our lives."

I reached into my pocket for a cigarette, remembered where I was, decided I shouldn't smoke anyway, and accepted a cigarette from a monk sitting beside me.

"Just what is a Priory anyway?" I asked.

"It's a monastery with fewer than twenty monks. If we had more, we could become an Abbey. That's where Westminster Abbey got its name, you know. It was a Benedictine monastery once."

"And do you want to become an Abbey?"

"I think it is inevitable, although several of us will regret losing the modest simplicity of the smaller place. It is, perhaps, easier to be humble in a humble place. But what is really in the heart does not change, and we will be better able to serve more people and fulfill God's purpose."

I hope I am spared long enough to see a great Abbey Church built here," said one of the older monks. "You've seen where we worship now. It keeps the rain off, and we can all squeeze in, but all of us dream of what could be here."

I asked where the money for such a church might come from, thinking that the great world-wide order of Benedictines might have funds for such purposes.

"No — that's an odd thing about us Benedictines. We are the oldest of all Catholic orders. But in the exact sense, we are not an order at all. There is no governing body that controls all monasteries. For all practical purposes, each is a separate unit, joined to the others only by a common observance of the Holy Rule, and by a feeling of brotherhood. Our income is from our school, our farm, and our friends. We are fortunate to have good friends, for the school and farm do not earn enough to allow for capital expenditures. We are grateful to our friends, and to God for their friendship."

I looked at my watch.

"No hurry," said the Prior.

"But don't you get up at some unbelievable hour?"

"We get up early, but not just because we want to do what the books call 'mortify the flesh'. We get up early because we need an early start, and because each of us has a lot of interesting things to crowd into a day. But I honestly don't think you can pick up much more in a single evening anyway. You can't really understand us until you know more about Benedictinism. And you can't understand Benedictinism until you know a few things about St. Benedict himself. And to do that you really ought to have a little background on the Roman world of the Sixth Century. It's all here."

He started pulling books down from the well-lined walls.

"A little light reading," he suggested.

"All right," I agreed. "I'll read up on ancient Rome. But what time do you fellows actually get up?"

"Don't worry, we'll call you!"

When they did call me, and when I came down to a very pleasant breakfast, it was after eight o'clock. It took me quite a while to find out when they got up, because everyone said it was of no importance. But I found out. Confidentially, it's four-thirty.

A LOOK AT ANCIENT ROME

I've been out of school too long to remember much Roman history, but I picked up quite a lot that night and some since.

Sixth Century Rome should be required reading for everyone who thinks the world is in a mess today. Rome – and indeed all civilization – was in a much worse way at the time of St. Benedict's birth.

The "Eternal City" which had stood proudly beside the Tiber for a thousand years and ruled the entire world for half that time lay in ruins under the Barbarian foot.

St. Jerome, lamenting the sack of Rome by the Visigoth, Aleric, had said, "The human race is included in the ruin."

When the Barbarian Odoacer dismissed the boy Emperor in 476, the last pretense of Roman rule disappeared. The Empire died, but the agony of the people had only started. For the Huns under Attila and the merciless Lombards were still to come.

Into this appalling world, St. Benedict was born somewhere near the turn of the century. The exact date of his birth, the names of his parents, and his family circumstances are known only to legend. The place of his birth was Nursia, a town some seventy miles north of Rome, whose Sabine citizens were noted for their toughness of fibre and rough virtue.

It seems likely that his family background was deeply religious, for his sister, Scholastica, also became a saint. Nor could the family have been poor, for at around the age of fifteen, he was sent to school in Rome. But his sensitive soul was repelled by the brawling city where the oriental world, the barbarian north and the remains of the decadent Empire bubbled in a bath of sin.

Hardly more than a boy, he decided to become a monk rather than to follow in the evil footsteps of his schoolmates. "Knowingly ignorant and wisely unlearned" he set out on the path that led to his becoming "The Father of Western Monasticism."

Christianity, as well as civilization, was at a low ebb. In the face of what had happened in the few hundred years since Christ was on earth, many true Christians became discouraged. Christianity seemed a bright, unobtainable idea. Despair and laxity ruled, even within the Church.

Not wishing to be drawn into this trap, the young St. Benedict did not associate himself with any existing religious group, but established himself in the mountains at Subiaco, thirty-five miles west of Rome. Here he lived

in a cave for three years, eating the food of charity, worshipping God, and no doubt considering the problem of convincing doubting Christians that Christianity was indeed a practical, livable religion. At first St. Benedict was alone at Subiaco, but other holy men were attracted to him, and when he left Subiaco to found the great monastery at Monte Cassino, several small monasteries had grown up around his cave. Actually, we know very little of St. Benedict. The only contemporary biographer was Pope Gregory the Great. But he was more interested in the many miracles of St. Benedict than in the man himself. Apparently his direct personal influence upon his contemporaries was limited, and it was not by his personality, his activities, or even his holiness that he influenced so deeply his own and future generations.

St. Benedict's influence was through his Rule, a document nearly unique in all Christian history, which has influenced the lives of each succeeding generation of monks in much the same way that the gospels have influenced the lives of succeeding generations of Christians throughout the world.

It would be a happy thing if we could know more of this great and holy man, but, after fourteen hundred years so many facts have been forgotten, so many writings have been destroyed that we can hardly hope to know more about him than we know from his Holy Rule.

And perhaps that is the way it was meant to be.

TOMORROW AT 8:30

"Take your time, that's pretty good coffee," said Father Prior. "When you finish, we'll stroll around the grounds. I doubt that you've ever seen a more beautiful place for a school, or for a farm, or for a church."

"I don't know how you do it," I answered. "None of you ever seem rushed. You have a large modern farm to run, a school of unusually high scholastic standing, a lot of athletic teams to coach, dormitories to operate – and, if my mathematics are right, you put in about four hours each day singing the Divine Office."

The Prior smiled.

"You can do an amazing amount of things if you work a 112-hour week. Our work and our pleasure are so closely tied together that we can't tell them apart."

“But –“ he continued before I could ask a question. “Don’t think that we’re looking backward. We’re proud of the tradition of fourteen hundred years – but that tradition was built by people who looked forward!

“Our teaching methods are modern, because we are modern people, living in a modern world. We’ve got one hundred and forty boys here, from half the states in the union, and from a lot of foreign countries, too. Nearly all of them are getting ready for college, and when they graduate from Portsmouth Priory they are ready. About half of them go to Harvard, Yale, Georgetown, or Princeton.”

I suggested that the monks must be excellent teachers.

“Most of them are. But don’t get the idea that the faculty are all monks. Half of them are laymen, seven of whom were attracted from University faculties. Some of the monks were teaching in universities and colleges, too, before they joined the Order. There are two reasons for having lay teachers. Most obvious, of course, is the fact that the monastery is so inadequate that we couldn’t house enough monks for the size faculty we need. But, even if we had plenty of room, we would still want laymen on the faculty. They keep the rest of us on our toes – keep us from getting too ingrown and complacent.”

You cannot walk about the 225 lovely acres bordered by Narragansett Bay without feeling that God had a lot to do with its choosing. There are flat areas for athletic fields and tennis courts, a tempting trout pond, surrounded by woods and acres of rolling farmland.

As though reading my thoughts, the Prior said, “The way we happened to acquire this beautiful property was almost a miracle. I’ll tell you about it later. Have you heard of Father Leonard Sargent and Father John Hugh Diman?”

Fortunately I had heard of both of these men whose names loom so large in American Benedictinism ... both converts to Catholicism, each largely responsible for Portsmouth Priory as it is today. Father Leonard, dreaming of a purely American Benedictine community, bought the property and founded the monastery in 1918. Father Hugh, who, as a Protestant, had already founded St. George’s School in Newport and the Diman Vocational School in Fall River, entered the Catholic Church at the age of fifty-four and in 1926 – then sixty-three – was assigned by his Abbot to establish the Portsmouth Priory School.

“They were both in the great Benedictine tradition,” said the Prior. “Father Hugh Diman felt that religion as a living force in deepening and enriching personality had been almost completely eliminated from the public schools, and with it the most powerful instrument for the development of character. He wanted a school of such high scholastic standing that no Catholic family would ever feel it necessary to send their sons to non-Catholic schools. And he wanted it to be a school that the rank and file could afford. We’ve achieved his first objective and maybe, in time, we can reach his second, too.”

We were now walking toward the farm buildings – the gym and the dormitory, St. Benet’s – “but we’re not impatient. After all there were only the farm buildings when we started. And a great organization grows from the inside out. If you start with Faith and work with earnest zeal you’re bound to grow, slowly indeed, but soundly.”

“What’s the next step?” I asked. “You must be planning ahead.”

The Prior smiled.

“I could name you about eleven buildings that we need right now,” he said. “But our greatest need is a real Abbey Church.”

“So the visitors could come to church here, you mean?”

“They’re most welcome, and they do come now to our little church. But that’s not the main reason. St. Benedict believed, and we believe, that the purpose of our lives is the Opus Dei – the Work of God – the actual worship in choir that we offer eight times a day every day of the year. The church is therefore the trunk of our tree, the farm and school are branches. Unless the trunk grows soundly, the branches will wither. We simply have to have an adequate church before we think of expanding the other functions that depend so directly upon it. We’ll have one, too, never fear. We have friends all over America who feel about it just the same way we do.”

Father James, a former All-Metropolitan basketball forward, passed us, headed for the courts to coach his tennis team. The Father and the Prior nodded slightly, without speaking.

“You don’t do much talking here, do you?” I asked.

“No – we don’t have a strict observance in the Cistercian sense – but St. Benedict points out to us the wastefulness of idle chatter. And I guess, in

the average man kept a record of his daily conversation – then deleted everything he had said that was wasteful or harmful – he wouldn't be much more talkative than we are. We talk when we have something to say, except during certain periods of silence. Look, here comes Father George. Watch that dog of his bringing in the sheep!"

The sheep, almost a trademark of Portsmouth Priory, were being moved from one meadow to another. When they were moved to Father George's satisfaction, he came over and joined us.

"I'm usually proud of those sheep," he said, after the Prior indicated that the rule against talking was temporarily suspended. "But there's a coal mine across there, and somebody has topped one of the roads with coal dust. Now we've got mostly black sheep. Come, take a peek into the barn."

Inside rows and rows of cows were being milked by machine. It looked like any other great modern dairy barn.

"We like to have everything as modern and efficient as possible," Father George said. "We keep up-to-date in our methods, even though we are 1400 years old."

We cut the meeting a little short, because the Prior thought I might enjoy seeing the boys at their mid-morning lunch. The monks realize that no fifteen-year-old boy can last from breakfast to lunch without help, so "mid-morning snacks" are official.

The boys looked exactly like what they were, typical American young men of pre-college age from all parts of the United States. They had one thing in common – while they did not fear the monks, nor seem to feel the restraint of any rigid discipline, they obviously had the greatest respect for them. A quiet word from a monk was all that was needed to settle any situation or to get any chore quickly done.

As Father Bernard, who is in charge of the dining room, put it: "I wish all American kids could get what we're trying to teach these boys – that material and scientific progress is not to be sneered at – and yet it will leave only an aching void unless it is given a significance by being linked to God and His truth. If these boys get one thing and only one thing from Portsmouth they will understand that achievement is impossible without God's help and that anything else – no matter how the world may regard it – is worse than worthless."

The Prior and I walked toward his study.

"You'll have to excuse me for about an hour while I catch up with some things that need to be done. Would you like to walk around the grounds some more, or try some more light reading?"

I chose the light reading.

A LITTLE MODERN HISTORY

I said earlier that it is impossible to visit the lovely acres of Portsmouth Priory without feeling that God had much to do with its choosing. In the Prior's study I found certain records and yellowed news clippings that again gave me the same feeling. But I'll have to start before the yellow clippings were printed.

As Benedictinism spread from Monte Cassino throughout the world, the monasteries adhered closely to St. Benedict's idea that they were "families." The monks were sons, the juniors respecting the seniors, and all deferring to the head of the house – the Abbot or Prior.

Furthermore, like other families, they were supposed to be part of the community in which they lived, to set a Christian example for all the other families, and to contribute work useful to the whole community. In seeking to carry out this ideal of useful citizenship, Benedictines became leaders in education, architecture, agriculture, and statesmanship. It is probably not a coincidence that the Benedictines have furnished more Popes than any other order.

While Benedictines flourished throughout the world, it grew with a special ruggedness in England, where family life and good citizenship meant so much. Although at one time, anti-Catholic persecution had reduced all Benedictinism in England to one monk, it is nevertheless true that the order has been established there for over a thousand years and flourishes today as never before.

Two of the great British Abbeys are directly responsible for Portsmouth Priory and its school. One is the Abbey of St. Gregory the Great, usually called Downside Abbey, in Somerset, near Bath. The other is the Abbey of Fort Augustus in Scotland.

Before World War I, a group of American monks studying at Downside

dreamed of establishing a Benedictine Abbey in the United States with a purely American tradition, staffed by American monks. They were encouraged in this dream by the Abbot of Downside. The leader of this group of Downside Americans was Father Leonard Sargent who, before his conversion, had been co-founder of an Episcopal monastery. He began to raise money for the projected American Priory.

A singular coincidence was the fact that the Most Rev. Matthew Harkins, Bishop of the Diocese of Providence, who had studied under Benedictines, wrote to Downside at this time suggesting that the American group might well consider a site on Narragansett Bay.

At that time, Hall Manor, present site of Portsmouth Priory was not on the market, Mr. Hall, proprietor of the Adams House in Boston, being in full life and health. Yet there was, and is, no other place in the area as suitable for a Priory.

When enough funds had been collected for a start and Father Leonard was ready to leave for America, the first World War postponed the whole project. He returned to America anyway, identified himself with the Newman School in Hackensack, and continued to raise funds for the American Priory.

In 1918 Father Leonard was visiting in Newport when a friend suggested that Hall Manor at Portsmouth might be for sale, and, if so, that it was an exceptional site for a Priory. Until that moment Father Leonard had never heard of Hall Manor – but he was as charmed with it as I was – or as you would be, and purchased it from Mrs. Hall. There were only 60 acres then, but the house and cottage were completely furnished, there were horses and cows in the barns, sheep in the sheepfold, and a never-failing spring of fresh water. As the caretaker told Father Leonard, “all he had to bring were his trunks.”

But he had more to do, of course, he had a community to build at Portsmouth Priory, officially named after Downside Abbey, the Priory of St. Gregory the Great. It was slow going for several years, and meals were often uncertain, but extra vitality for the Priory was being prepared at that other great British Abbey, Fort Augustus.

Here a famous American educator, noted as the founder of St. George's School, had come as a convert to the Catholic Church at the age of fifty-six. Now in his sixties, Father Hugh Diman had lost little of his energy. The Abbot of Fort Augustus, recognizing Father Diman's unusual abilities,

and seeing the opportunity at Portsmouth, decided to bring both together. Accompanied by several English monks with teaching ability, Father Diman came to Portsmouth Priory in 1926 and opened the Portsmouth Priory School. Immediately the community began to grow, slowly but healthily. Applicants sought to join the Benedictine Order. Parents, impressed by the high scholastic standing of Portsmouth sent their boys in increasing numbers.

As American monks were educated and took their place in the Benedictine Order, the British monks returned to Fort Augustus.

Today while Portsmouth Priory is spiritually attached to the English Congregation, it is truly American, with American monks, and keyed to American needs. With the help of its many friends, this great Priory and school will increase in value to the nation and in service to God as the years go by.

Reading back over this chapter, I find too many things fitting together to be mere coincidence. Again it seems as though God wanted this monastery and this school in this place and chose the men who put it there.

AS I WAS LEAVING

As the monks gathered in the Prior's study that evening, I thought maybe I ought to make a little speech of departure. I looked at Father George, Father Bernard, Father James and the others and wondered just what to say.

Should I say that the world has too few standards, and that they were giving boys what they needed most, training that stands on a sound foundation of Faith. Coming from me that might sound presumptuous.

Maybe I could point out that they were leading lives in which service was its own reward, a rare thing in today's world of demanding much and offering little. But I felt sure they knew that.

Should I thank them for their hospitality? Certainly, but you can't make a speech out of that.

What I finally said went something like this ...

“It's been great to be here and see what you men are doing. I've never had my eyes opened to anything like this in my life. Father Prior says

that friends help you build your new buildings. You ought to have millions of such friends. And you would, if people could come here and see your work as I have. Since they can't, of course, maybe someone ought to write a book for you. As a matter of fact, when I get home, I think I will!"

And that's what I did.

Dom Gregory Borgstedt
Dom Bede Gorman
Dom Hilary Martin
Dom Peter Sidler

*Prior
James
George
Bernard*

Gene Tunney
World Heavyweight Boxing
Champion (1926 - 1928)

