

REBIRTH AND RESPONSIBILITY:
CISTERCIAN STORIES FROM THE LATE TWELFTH CENTURY

Brian Patrick McGuire

At the end of the twelfth century the Cistercian Order was engaged in a process of reaffirming and reasserting the values and ideals that had characterized the early decades of the order.¹ From the 1170s until the early thirteenth century a number of *exemplum* collections were issued, especially at Clairvaux, which summarized the conviction of the brethren that their order was unique and had a special role to play in the church. In the *Exordium Magnum Cisterciense*, which was composed between 1190 and 1210, for example, spectacular sayings and deeds of Bernard and of the first abbots of Clairvaux were edited on the basis of both oral and written traditions.² We can look at the *Exordium Magnum* as a conservative document that carefully took diverse materials and gave them a uniform appearance. In the process some of the more unusual stories were weeded out or toned down, as in the case of the fifth abbot of Clairvaux, Pons.

Pons had become abbot of Grandselve, a Clairvaux daughter, in 1158. In 1165 he became abbot of Clairvaux, and then in 1170 was elected bishop of Clermont-sur-Ferrand, where he remained until his death in 1189.³ Several chapters were devoted to Pons in the *Exordium Magnum*, some of them based on material already collected by Herbert in his *Liber Miraculorum* from 1178-81. One of Herbert's stories deals with Pons' promise to a wayward young monk that if he remained faithfully in the monastery, he, the abbot would guarantee the young man's salvation.⁴ Conrad of Eberbach, the editor of the *Exordium Magnum*, made this story into a little sermon of edification urging the brothers to remain true to their vocation.

There is another version of this same story that emerged at Langheim, a Bavarian house of Ebrach, which in turn was an offspring of Morimond. Here a monk named Engelhard compiled a collection of *exempla* for the nuns of a nearby house at Wech-

terswinkel. Twenty-five years ago the great and little-known Cistercian historian and philologist, Bruno Griesser, brought this collection to light and provided a good review of its contents.⁵ Griesser noticed the story of Pons but did not indicate its parallelism with the *Exordium Magnum* story. He printed only the first and last lines of the story, so it was only when I saw the Paris manuscript from which Griesser worked that I realised that here was a fresher and much more striking version of the story concerning an abbot's devotion to one of his monks.

The story is quite simple in Engelhard's version. A young man comes to Grandselve and is taken in. He does well for three years and impresses everyone with his religious devotion. But then he begins to doubt, and his physical appearance reveals his state of mind: "His face sadder, his look harsher, his speech more bitter, his movements slower...". He was going from bad to worse.

Everyone was concerned, but especially the abbot. It is at this point in a staccato narration with brief, vivid phrases, that Engelhard used an image that is well-known in cistercian literature but unusual in *exemplum* collections. The abbot changed from being the monk's father into his mother, for he had to prepare his own interior so that he could again give birth to the man and remake him in Christ: *Fit mater ex patre, parans uterum ut iterum parturiat et reformet in filio formam Christi deformatam*.

Here follows a long and exciting conversation between monk and abbot. The abbot cannot understand what has gone wrong. The monk is sure he is damned. He cannot control his sexual urges. And yet he concedes that he has confessed all his sins to the abbot. This kind of dialogue became a favourite procedure in Cistercian storytelling, as we can see in the 1220s in Caesarius of Heisterbach's *Dialogus Miraculorum*.⁶ But Engelhard has an intimacy in the narrative that Caesarius rarely achieves. One senses the same type of closeness between abbot and monk as is revealed in some of the correspondence of Bernard of Clairvaux and Peter the Venerable of Cluny when their mutual friendship with Nicholas of Montieramey was mentioned.⁷

At this point the abbot makes a promise that is also mentioned in the *Exordium Magnum* version of the story, but there it is not nearly so dramatically presented: "If I wish to bear your sins and make you absolved from them, will you be consoled and serve God and not desert the monastery?"

The monk is overwhelmed. Of course he wants such an assurance. The abbot gives him his hand in a gesture that is not feudal because it implies fidelity but not the subordination implicit in the feudal gesture with the two hands covered by the lord's two hands. The abbot says a prayer for the monk and offers himself to God for the monk. This is the moment of spiritual rebirth, and it leads to an embrace that is in harmony with what we otherwise know about how Cistercian monks touched each other on important occasions of reunion.⁸

The remainder of the story is more conventional. The monk lives on another three years in an exemplary manner. But before he dies, he has a vision in which his own salvation and that of the abbot are assured. The abbot will get a double reward because he saved not only himself but also the monk.

The logic of the story is based on a phrase in the second chapter of the Rule of Saint Benedict, which deals with the abbot. On the last day, Benedict warns, the abbot will have to render account (*rationem reddere*) for the monks entrusted to him. The abbot in our story did not have to make his special promise to the monk because he was already, as abbot, responsible. But the bond between abbot and monk is dramatized here by combining the idea of responsibility with that of motherhood and rebirth. This image is in turn linked to the more egalitarian concept of offering one's life for a brother. The abbot goes so far as to remake his monk in the image of Christ. In the resulting rebirth, all pain and doubt that have accumulated in the young monk's first three years in the monastery are wiped away.

The moral of this story in terms of personal responsibility and sharing of souls is emphasized in the next tale in the collection. This concerns the good monk Gottschalk, whom our writer Engelhard says he knew because he had been a member of

the community at Langheim. When Gottschalk died, his finger could be found pointing to the place in the Psalms calling for the gates of justice to be opened. His salvation was assured by this sign, but Engelhard also points out that Gottschalk did not go to heaven alone. Shortly after his death a young brother announced that he was going to die also and be with his Gottschalk. According to Engelhard, heaven is accessible not for lonely individuals but for friends who help each other.

In itself, this is a conventional moralization, but Engelhard adds that these stories should encourage churchmen and help them in trial, "so that they be not only fathers but also mothers to those in trouble". The image of motherhood returns at the end of this story and is combined with the image of the double crown waiting in heaven for the person who offers himself for the salvation of someone else. Gottschalk gave himself up for his friend, so his friend quickly followed him to heaven. Pons did not die so quickly, but his offering of self for the troubled monks became a rebirth that guaranteed his own salvation.

Elsewhere I have dealt with the ramifications of the abbot's or friend's responsibility in Cistercian literature.⁹ Here I want merely to point out the significance of the two stories. When Engelhard wrote down the stories, he said that Pons was still alive, so this gives us a *terminus ante quem* for the collection as a whole, 1189. It might seem surprising to us that a monastic writer would have dared writing about a living person as if it were already certain that the man was a saint, but Bernard's friend William of Saint Thierry had done the same for him before his death in starting his hagiography. The two stories here can be looked upon as reflections of Cistercian optimism that members of their order would get to heaven, the same point made in the *Exordium Magnum's* more laboured version of the Pons story. But Engelhard's telling of the story has a buoyancy about it which borders on a sense joy in the realisation of the promises of sanctity and motherhood.

There are no linguistic literal borrowings between the Langheim and Clairvaux versions of the story of Pons, and I am inclined to think that Herbert of Clairvaux in the late 1170s

and Engelhard, perhaps in the early 1180s, were independently drawing on an oral tradition about Pons as abbot at Grandselve in the early 1160s. If this is the case, it points to the way Cistercian monks in various parts of Europe were telling the same stories about themselves: regular contacts among the monasteries made stories circulate fast.¹⁰

Bruno Griesser worked mainly with Paris Bibliothèque Nationale MS Nouvelle acquisition lat. 2627 (abbreviated as P), from the end of the fourteenth century, but based on an earlier manuscript from the end of the twelfth century. According to Griesser's informant, Mlle. d'Alverny, the writing indicates a provenance from Southern Germany or Austria. He also looked at a manuscript from the early thirteenth century containing the same collection of miracles and stories, formerly in Posen, but now in Warsaw, Count Raczyński MS 173 (here abbreviated as R and used as the basis for text). In a later article on Engelhard, Griesser added a third manuscript, Zwettl 13 (13th c. abbreviated as Z and most easily available today from the microfilm collection at St. John's Abbey, Collegeville Minnesota).¹¹ Here the Pons story begins at the bottom of f. 228va. There are few significant differences between the three manuscripts, which all seem to have emerged from the South German-Austria area in which Engelhard himself lived and about which he wrote.

The publication of these stories divorced from their context in a much larger miracle collection will perhaps distract from the fact that the tales are part of conventional Cistercian exemplum literature. But the emphasis on motherhood as an expression of the abbot's responsibility to his monks deserves more attention. Twelfth- and thirteenth-century monastic writers were fascinated not only with miracles and marvels. They were also concerned with mutual human bonds.

1. See my "The Cistercians and the Transformation of Monastic Friendships", *Analecta Cisterciensia* 37 (1981) 1-63, esp. 1-3. (Unless otherwise noted, the articles or books mentioned in these notes are my own.)

2. "Structure and Consciousness in the Exordium Magnum Cisterciense: The Clairvaux Cistercians after Bernard", *Cahiers de l'Institut du Moyen-Age grec et latin* 30 (1979) 23-90. The *Exordium Magnum* (EM) was edited by Bruno Griesser (*Series Scriptorum S. Ordinis Cisterciensis* 2: Rome 1961).
3. Griesser, EM, p. 123, n. 4.
4. EM II, 26, pp. 126-9. Here the brother is called Bernard. In the Engelhard version the brother is not given a name.
5. Bruno Griesser, "Engelhard von Langheim und sein Exempelbuch für die Nonnen von Wechterswinkel", *Cistercienser Chronik* nr. 70 (1963) 55-73, esp. 62-3.
6. "Friends and Tales in the Cloister. Oral Sources in Caesarius of Heisterbach's *Dialogus Miraculorum*", *Anal.Cist.* 36 (1980) 167-245, esp. 169.
7. See the relevant section in the chapter "The Age of Friendship" in *Friendship and Community: The Monastic Experience 350-1250* (*Cistercian Studies* 95: Kalamazoo, Michigan 1988).
8. Apparently it was accepted that monks who met after a long absence kissed each other. The General Chapter in the later twelfth century warned that the practice was being abused, an indication that the gesture was popular among monks! See *Friendship and Community*, p. 383.
9. See the article "Taking Responsibility: Cistercian monks and abbots as their brothers' keepers", forthcoming in *Cîteaux: Commentarii Cistercienses*.
10. See the analysis in "Friends and Tales in the Cloister" (note 6 above), esp. pp. 223-6.
11. Griesser, "Engelhard von Langheim und Abt Ego von Prufening", *Cistercienser Chronik* 71 (1964) 22/37.

R f.47v

DE PONTIO EPISCOPO ET MONACHO EIUS^a

Bonus diabolus invidet a principio hodieque non cessat. Sed pius est deus providens eis, ut eos non noceat. Probatum est hoc nemo qui nesciat etsi rarus qui digne deo respondeat.^b Dicam ex multis unum quod accidit nuper, ut sonans de propinquo plus delectet et in laudem dei deum diligentes amplius excitet.

In grandi silva res gesta est. Domus illa cisterciensis ordinis est et filia clarevallis. In hanc venit iuvenis miles, militaturus deo. Pulsavit. Apertum est ei.¹ Susceptus, probatus et monachus factus est. Crescebat in dies, tendens ad perfectum, et proficiebat in monachismo supra multos^c coetaneos suos in ordine suo. Gaudium ex hoc omnibus sed pre omnibus abhati quod tale parturisset, /f. 48r/ in quo formatus est Christus. Triennio sic agebat; actus ipse a spiritu currebat bene, sed impeditus est et temptatus ab eo qui temptat. Vulnus

acceperat bonus miles, sagittatus in obscuro. Lassescere cepit et tedere, fluctuare a pusillanimitate spiritus et tempestate. Virus serpebat in pectore. Apprehendit cor dolor et pervenit gladius usque ad animam.² Vultus tristior, visus asperior, sermo acerbior, actus segnior, loquela paratior, et ipse ad levia quoque mobilior. In peius versus est homo et iam totus alter ex altero.

Animadversum est hominem esse subversum. Movit omnes. Universi turbantur,^d precipue pater. Commota sunt omnia viscera eius.³ Fit mater ex patre, parans uterum^e ut iterum parturiat^f et reformet^g in filio formam Christi deformatam. Mulcet, fovet, blanditur. Fodit parietem et ecce ostium in pariete.⁴

Confessus est et non negavit se vere peccatorem, se mole criminum, se torrente iniquitatis et pelago iniusticie obrutum, nec iam pertinere se ad deum cum ille sit iustus et reddat unicuique secundum opus suum. "Quid," inquit, "non perdat me deus si recte iudicat repugnantem sibi usque hodie nichilque omittentem^h horum que libido suggereret? Quid iusto, quod honesto contraireret?"

Nullum erat pratum, immo pravum, quod non mea luxuria pertransiret. Nichilque tam horridum quod spiritus meus et bestialis /f. 48v/ et brutusⁱ horreret. Sic omnem vitam decurri,^j currens sine sensu, preter rationem agens, et quia deum nescivi^k iam et ille me nescit. Unum superest ut revertar ad seculum et reliquum vite non perdam, ne et laborem hic et ibi nichil accipiam. Nam maior est iniquitas mea quam ut veniam merear.

Abbas pavet auditu. Male se vigilasse doletur.¹ Lupum non cavisse conqueritur. Ovem trahi et volendo iam sequi inter suspiria longa causatur. "Quid est sic loqueris, fili dulcissime? Unde hic tibi tam repentinus interitus? Currebas bene. Quis te impedivit?⁵ Iam eras prope perfectum. Letabamur ad cursum tuum. Nunc est ut lugeamus ad casum. Que, rogo, tua peccata^m times? An non omnia michi confessus es?"

"Nichil", ait, "celavi tibi."

Et abbas: "Si ego peccata tua portare voluero⁶ et te ab hiis fecero absolutum, ut vis consolari et servire deo, nec deserere monasterium?"

"O!" exclamat ille, "Quid loqueris? Quid de nichilo loqueris? O ego, carceres horridos atque perptpetuos, O ego lacus scenosos atque ranosos, Oⁿ gladios, O^o ignes, scorpiones et genus omne penarum! O denique blandum mihi omne quod sevit. Sua-ve mihi omne quod dolet. O levis et brevis mihi omnis crucia-tus et passio, dum modo securus fierem de remissione^p coram deo."

Tum abbas: "Accede", inquit, "huc, et da mihi manum tuam. En hodie te absolvo. Peccata tua omnia super me accipio, et de his omnibus reddam rationem in die iudicii deo.⁷ Te absolvo. Te libero." Oransque, "Deus," ait, "qui presens /f. 49r/ re-spicias, confirma sententiam meam. Huius hominis peccata de me exige. Ipsum insontem et innoxium habe, nichilque huic impu-tans, totum de me debitum eius exquire."

Satisfactum est monacho. Ruit in faciem,⁸ gratias agens, et a primo incipiens hilariter et fiducialiter egit, servens in proposito, in conversatione proficiens, bonum certamen cer-tando, cursum consummando, fidem servando.⁹

Triennium post implevit, et in hoc brevi consummatus ex-plevit tempora multa. Placita enim erat deo anima illius. Propter hoc properavit educere illum de medio iniquitatum.¹⁰ Raptus denique est, ne malitia mutaret¹¹ intellectum illius aut ne fictio deciperet animam illius.¹² Deductus ad mortem, biduo iacuit, nichil loquens, nichil gustans, nichil sentiens. Tunc in se rediens, abbatem vocat. Venienti lumina, nam hec sola movebat, reverenter inclinatur. "Pater", inquit, "et vere pater. Tua vestigia^q debeo^r adorare, terram in qua stas debui lambere, sed et me ipsum suppedaneum tibi prebere. Per te sal-vatus sum. Tu mihi vite provisor et corone. Tu mihi salutis et gratie, tu mihi denique totum quod habet celum honoris et glo-rie."¹³

Et abbas: "Unde hoc scis?"

"Ex revelatione. Biduo illo in celo fui. Quid me manet vi-di, sed et meritum tuum et premium revelatum est mihi. Duo lecti sericis strati erant et purpura. Unus coronam auream gemmatam habens unam, et alter duas. Nichil his umquam simile visum est. Nichil quid his^s equaretur auditum. Dictumque /f. 49v/ est michi: 'Lectus unus cum una corona tuus est. Alter

cum duabus abbatibus tui. Et unam meruit pro conversatione sua et alteram pro tua conversione. Nam quod ait scriptura: Sicut Christus posuit pro nobis animam suam, ita et nos debemus pro fratribus anima ponere.¹⁴ Hoc iste implevit, ponens animam suam pro te. Quo facto et te salvavit et se."

Sic dictum, sic et factum est. Surgentibus a mensa fratribus prandie, leto fine defungitur, angelis coniunctis in gaudio, posteris profuturus exemplo, sed et glorie duplicatur^t illi qui se pro illo dedit periculo. Abbas Grandissilve tunc fuit huius rei cooperator et testis. Inde abbas factus Clarevallis at modo Clarimontis archiepiscopus est. Hodieque ut fertur superstes, sanctus omnium testimonio, merito clarus et beatus premio, cui iam olim stratum est in celo.

DE GODESCHALCO MONACHO^u

Referam simile de vicino. In domo nostra res accidit, cuius non unus aut duo sed tota domus in his qui tunc fuere testis existit. Fuit apud nos vir vite venerabilis gratia^v Godescalcus et nomine, qui^w hic seculo valefaciens arenam Christi fortiter pugnaturus intravit. Multa pertulit antequam veniret ad perfectum, hostem manifeste persequentem et male sibi nunc fugam, nunc suspensionem, nunc subversionem, nunc quamlibet interfectionem importune suggerentem.

Commotus ipse totam domum /f. 50r/ commovit,^x compatientibus ei ceteris et metuentibus dei iudicium, hostis dolum, fratris interitum. Affuit tamen dextera dei de celo, pugnans pro eo, et victorem constituens, tandemque perfectum in omni genere virtutum faciens. Quid humilitatis, quid caritatis habuerit sciunt omnes qui sciebant illum, cum vultus hilaritas,¹⁵ operis alacritas, sermonis suavitas, suavissimi spiritus eius essent indicium.^y Hic cum ad altare aliquando communicaturus accederet, vi quodam invisibili repulsus est, adeo ut manum repellentis sentiret in pectore, indeque mente confusus et indignum se reputans, abscedere meditaretur. Tunc ad se respiciens, videt aperiri pectus suum, et omnia interiora sua suis oculis clare apparuerunt.

Et ecce videt intra se parvulum sedentem, candidiorem nive, sole pulchriorem, ipsumque animam suam intellexit, et hac fiducia communionem sanctam sanctus accepit. A die illa et deinceps ita fervebat in spiritu,¹⁶ ut igni posset equari et inter ceteros homines angelus estimari.

Huic ego cum ceteris^z astiti dum^{aa} obiret qualemque vitam duxerat, talem sortitus est finem. Ex laico monachus fuerat, ex illiterato didicerat psalterium. Hoc die noctuque ruminabat, idem et in morte sollicitus accitabat. Psalterium tenebat et terebat in lecto, hoc manu, hoc mente complectens, patiens egritudinis, patiens omnium, ceterum omnino non ferens ut quis tolleretur ab eo psalterium. Inter /f. 50v/ moriendum legit, legens simul et moriens, et illuc perveniat: *Aperite mihi portas iusticie.*^{bb} *Ingressus in eas confitebor domino. Hec porta domini, iusti intrabunt in eam*¹⁷ et in hoc versu reddit animam.

In eodem digitus eius inventus est, tamquam ostendens quod porta domini aperta est ei, in quam ingressus et domino confessus est ipse. Vultus eius roseus, quem numquam mutavit infirmitas, quem nec mors ipsa fuscavit, sed tamquam crapulatus a vino vivente pulchrior perduravit.

Vir ille magnus coram domino, ad palatium solus ire non debuit. Fratrem iuvenem cuius mortem nemo speraret pedissequum habuit. Is illo exportato clamavit, rogans fieri sibi^{cc} feretrum in brevi necessarium, scire dicens se quod non esset ibi nisi unum, quodque ille teneret qui obisset ante pusillum.

Tardantibus instabat, rogans ut +vel+ cultellum suum ad caput iacentem acciperent et feretrum pararent. Parant et necdum perfecto iam indigebant, nam frater ille mox obiit et Godeschalci ad regnum comes fuit.

Sint hec temptatis scintilla solatii. Sint prelati humilis et modesta suggestio, illis ne tribulando deficient, istis ut non patres tantum sed etiam matres se afflictis exhibeant, ne coronas simplices amittant illi, ut duplices glorias apud regem glorie acquirant isti.

a Z no title; P adds cliii. b Z respondit. c Z milites.
d Z add. et. e P uter. f P pariat. g P add. et. h
Z obmittentem. i Z brutus et bestialis. j P decucurri.

k Z nescivi deum. l P & Z dolet. m Z add. sic. n Z
 add. ego. o R add. O. p Z ad remissionem. q Z vestigia
 tua. r Z debui. s P om. t R & Z duplicator. u Z no
 title; P adds cliii. v P gratie. w P tunc. x R totam
 domum commovitur Z movit totam domum P totam domum commovit.
 y P iudicium. z Z cum ego ceteris. aa Z & P cum. bb
 after these first words of the quotation, R and Z have only
 the first letters of the remaining words, thus indicating that
 it was assumed the quote was sufficiently well-known to the
 monastic audience that it was unnecessary to write it out in
 full. cc P om.

1. Cf. Matt 7:7, Luke 11:9.
2. Cf. Ps 36:15: Gladius eorum intret in corde ipsorum.
3. 3 Kings 3:26.
4. Cf. Ez 8:8 Cum fodissem parietem, apparuit ostium.
5. Gal 5:7.
6. Cf. 1 Pet 2:24: Qui peccata nostra ipse pertulit in corpore suo.
7. Cf. Regula Benedicti 2:37-8.
8. Cf. Gen 29:13; 50:1.
9. 2 Tim 4:7.
10. Sap 4-14 (Z has iniquitatis).
11. Cf. sap 12:20: Per quae possent mutari a malitia.
12. Raptus-illius: Sap 4:11.
13. Cf. Missae ordo (the "little elevation": omnis honor et gloria.
14. 1 Jn 3:16.
15. Cf. Prov 16:15: in hilaritate vultus regis.
16. Cf. Act 18:25; Rom 12:11.
17. Ps 117:19-20.