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BENEDICT OF NURSIA & THOMAS CRANMER

This Sunday, March 21st, marks the death of two figures in Christian history: Benedict of Nursia, a 6th century monastic, and Thomas Cranmer, 16th century archbishop. Benedict (c. 480-c. 550) is a key figure in the development of monasticism in the western church. Like others, he found the church of his time worldly and compromised: for the sake of a fuller living out of the gospel, he withdrew from Rome into the wilderness and gave himself up to the solitary life of prayer. Disciples gathered, and eventually he founded a monastic community at Monte Cassino, which was dispersed thirty years after his death. He also left a Regula, a comprehensive Rule of Life for a monastic community, a family united by obedience to its fatherly abbot, and in the opus dei, the work of God, which is prayer. His rule was gradually adopted more and more widely until it was imposed on all the monasteries of the western church by Louis the Pious, the son of Charlemagne, in 817. Monte Cassino was refounded and rebuilt more than once (the last time after its complete destruction in World War II). It is to this period that we trace the emergence of a Benedictine Order that shaped so much of European civilization (and which runs the school in Savannah that bears its name). Yet by the late Middle Ages, Benedict himself might have been chagrined by the state of Benedictine monasticism. Even the more austere abbeys had become wealthy and worldly institutions, cushy clubs for the well-connected.

Enter Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556), a humanist and theologian plucked from obscurity in Cambridge to become Archbishop of Canterbury, and one of the chief advocates of Protestant reform under Henry VIII (who was not much interested) and his son, the short-lived boy-king Edward VI (who was). A thousand years after Benedict, Cranmer played an important role in the dissolution of the English monasteries, a process completed by 1540. Yet like Benedict he was moved by zeal for the Gospel, a zeal to follow Christ more fully, which made for a sharp break with the worldliness of a compromised institution. And, like many saints of the early church, he died for his faith.

For after the death of Edward VI in 1555, his firmly Roman Catholic half-sister, Mary, came to the throne, and restored England to the Roman obedience. Moved by bitter animus against Cranmer (who had annulled her mother's marriage to Henry VIII and thus consigned her to legal bastardy), she insisted on his destruction. In prison Cranmer's

spirit was gradually broken down by friars imported from the realm of Mary's husband, Philip II of Spain. Cranmer signed a series of humiliating recantations, in preparation for a great show trial, designed as a propaganda triumph for the Papacy. On the morning of his execution, Cranmer was led to the University Church in Oxford, there to read his recantation to a great assembly of notables. In the course of his recitation, however, it became clear that Cranmer was recanting his recantation. Pandemonium broke out, and Cranmer was pulled from the rostrum. Hustled to the stake, he fulfilled the promise which he made in his last shouts in the church, "forasmuch as my hand offended, writing contrary to my heart [a reference to the recantations he had signed], my hand shall first be punished therefore". He stretched it out into the heart of the fire for all to see, repeating, "this unworthy right hand", "this hand hath offended", and also the words of the first martyr Stephen, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit". In the ashes his heart was found unburnt. It was March 21st, the feast of Saint Benedict.

In some respects, Cranmer and Benedict are opposed: Benedict at the beginning of a monastic tradition, Cranmer at its end. Yet they are united in this, that their chief monument consisted in the ordering of prayer, first by Benedict in his Rule, and then, on the basis of the tradition which Benedict helped to shape, by Cranmer, in the Book of Common Prayer. Cranmer approved of the dissolution of the monasteries: but in the Prayer Book we see the positive side of that reform, namely, that the whole nation should become a monastery, a community united in prayer. Nowadays, prayer is often treated as a means to an end, a kind of consciousness-raising exercise designed to mobilize the gathered community to go out and make the world a better place. For all their other differences, Benedict and Cranmer agree in this: prayer is not the means to the end of world-improvement: it is rather the activity in which the world attains its end in God.

GGD

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