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## **Philip Rousseau. 'Cassian, Contemplation, and the Coenobitic Life', Journal of Ecclesiastical History 26. [photocopie]**

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## CASSIAN, CONTEMPLATION AND THE COENOBITIC LIFE

tive life owes none of its superiority to the absence of practical application and hard work.

This readiness to admit the active and imperfect character of the eremitic life is worth the historian's notice; but of far greater importance, when viewed as a factor in monastic history, is Cassian's willingness to attribute more than exterior or visible qualities to the exercises of the coenobite. This he undoubtedly does. The description of progress in prayer by the abbot Isaac, for example, already referred to, unfolds an ascent through various stages. First come the four categories of 'obsecratio', 'oratio', 'postulatio' and prayers of thanksgiving (drawing upon the phraseology of St. Paul, in I Tim. ii. 1).<sup>1</sup> Already these last, the 'gratiarum actiones', have an ecstatic quality, the prayers of men who were 'ad illam ignitam et quae ore hominum nec comprehendi nec exprimi potest orationem ferventissimo corde raptantur'.<sup>2</sup> Then comes what Cassian calls the 'sublimior adhuc status ac praecelsior', namely the prayer that places a monk in an intimate relationship with God now recognised as his father.<sup>3</sup> The private and withdrawn prayer of Christ himself is also presented as an example worthy of imitation. At this stage the ecstatic terminology becomes very marked. Christ calls his followers to a degree of union 'quae omnem transcendens humanum sensum nullo non dicam sono vocis nec linguae motu nec ulla verborum pronuntiatione distinguitur, sed quam mens infusione caelestis illius luminis inlustrata, non humanis atque angustis designat eloquiis, sed conglobatis sensibus velut de fonte quodam copiosissimo effundit ubertim atque ineffabiliter eructat ad deum, tanta promens in illo brevissimo temporis puncto, quanta nec eloqui facile nec percurrere mens in semet ipsam reversa praevaleat'.<sup>4</sup>

What calls for particular notice is that throughout this description of growth in prayer there is no emphasis on the solitary life as such, save the reference to Christ praying to his father in secret. Even this must be read in the light of Isaac's comments on 'cubiculum' (in the phrase of Mt. vi. 6: 'when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret'). This hidden prayer is perfected, he says, when the monk rids his heart of distraction; when he allows his prayer to move him deeply; and when the content of his prayer is known to himself alone.<sup>5</sup> All this is compatible with the coenobitic life: indeed, the 'cubiculum' is not only the cell, but the heart itself.<sup>6</sup> Isaac creates an image of stability rather than of solitude: an oasis of peace and perception, unaffected by physical setting; a safe framework within which to achieve sustained effort. It is like the isolated and persevering concentration of a reader in a

<sup>1</sup> *Con.*, ix. 9.

<sup>2</sup> *Con.*, ix. 15.

<sup>3</sup> *Con.*, ix. 18.

<sup>4</sup> *Con.*, ix. 25.

<sup>5</sup> *Con.*, ix. 35.

<sup>6</sup> See Rousseau, 'The spiritual authority of the monk-bishop', in *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s. xxii (1971), 391-2.

