CHAPTER X

EPILOGUE

OUR study of St Basil and his influence on the later Church is now complete. However, in view of certain widespread misconceptions on the subject, it seems well to add a few words on the real meaning of asceticism, and the value of its ideals for the modern world.

In the foregoing pages we have dwelt almost entirely on the external side of Basil's monastic work, and laid considerable stress on the practical activities which he required from his monks. This was natural, seeing that the special interest of the subject lies in this direction. But it must not be thought that Basil was inspired by motives different from those which have actuated other leaders of asceticism. All alike have had one primary object, the love of God. The love of man has followed from this in most cases as a necessary deduction. In some writers—Basil for example—it has been insisted on with more emphasis than in others; but it has always remained a secondary object. What Dom Butler says of Benedict and his monks is equally true of Basil: "His idea simply was to make them *good*: and if a man *is* good, he will *do* good[1]." The fundamental idea of monasticism has always been that the attainment of the knowledge and love of God is a matter of such importance as to demand the dedication of the whole life. The progress of the great world outside, the triumphs of secular civilisation, even the noble task which lies before the Church as a whole, of consecrating to the service of God the treasures of art,

[1] *Camb. Med. Hist.* I. 540.

science and literature—all these are not primarily for the monk objects of interest. His concern is with the unseen and eternal world. If activities beneficial to the Church and world grow out of his life, so much the better. But he does not set out with the conscious intention of improving the world.

It is clear that such an ideal is strongly opposed to the prevailing spirit of the age. "Other-worldly" is frequently used as a term of reproach, and even devout Christians often condemn the monk's life for its "uselessness[1]." And yet the modern world speaks with two voices in this matter. There are some to whom the idea of a monastery appeals with irresistible force; there rises in their mind the vision of a haunt of ancient peace, and a desire to flee away and be at rest. Who can deny the beauty of Cardinal Newman's words[2]?

"To the monk heaven was next door; he formed no plans, he had no cares; the ravens of his father Benedict were ever at his side. He 'went forth' in his youth 'to his work and to his labour' until the evening of life; if he lived a day longer, he did a day's work more; whether he lived many days or few, he laboured on to the end of them. He had no wish to see further in advance of his journey than where he was to make his next stage. He ploughed and sowed, he prayed, he meditated, he studied, he wrote, he taught, and then he died and went to heaven."

But let us put aside sentimental considerations and ask what value the ideals of ascetism have for our own age and country. Our remarks will have reference only to the Church of England. The problem hardly arises in the English and Scotch Protestant bodies; whilst it would be obviously impertinent for one who is not a member of the Roman Catholic Church to discuss modern Roman monasticism, unless he

[1] The reproach sometimes levelled against monasticism, that its teaching on marriage is anti-social, comes with an ill grace from a society in which perhaps a hundred remain permanently unmarried from economic motives for every one that is a celibate on religious grounds.

[2] *Historical Sketches*, II. 426, quoted by Miss Hodgson in *Ch. Quart. Rev.* Jan. 1912.

had a very intimate acquaintance with the subject. If monasticism is indigenous, so to speak, in the Roman Church, in the Anglican it is perhaps still an exotic. The average Churchman considers it a sort of resuscitated medievalism, and quietly disapproves, or perhaps tolerates it as a convenient method of getting cheap clergy, teachers or nurses. It is seldom that he reflects on the underlying principles of the monastic life.

A clear distinction must be drawn between asceticism and monasticism. Asceticism is a necessary element in all the higher religions, and implies severe self-discipline exercised for religious ends in regard to the natural desires of the body and the attractions of the outside world. Monasticism is the special form which, owing to a variety of causes, the ascetic spirit assumed in the fourth century A.D.[1] Now the particular phase of thought in which Christianity and asceticism were practically interchangeable terms has long passed away. But the ascetic ideal has not ceased to be an element in Christianity, and at the present day its importance is considerable. If the Church is to remain loyal to its Founder, it must not neglect the other-worldly element in His teaching. It can best ensure that a proper emphasis is laid on this, if it has in its midst numbers of men and women pledged to a preoccupation with the unseen world. There is no fear that we shall have too many ascetics. But this is an age of specialisation, and the monk has as legitimate a place as the philosopher or professor. His very existence bears witness to an unseen world.

But it does not necessarily follow that the traditional monastic system is the method of practising asceticism best suited to modern Europeans. In the realm of dogmatics, the decrees of Chalcedon are of great value to the student, and are regarded by some minds as permanently valid conclusions. But there remain many who feel the need of modern categories of thought to express their convictions about God and Christ. Similarly in the case of asceticism. In the Roman Catholic Church the stream will continue to flow in the channel cut

[1] See Chapter I.

deep by the tradition of centuries. But is it necessary for the Anglican Church to revive customs and methods which are frequently unsuited to the constitutions and mental habits of twentieth century Englishmen?

While appreciating to the full the benefits bestowed on the Church by existing communities, one would rather see arising in the future societies of men and women, not bound by the Western monastic tradition, but allowing themselves the fullest freedom both in adapting old rules, and experimenting in new directions. There is much in the Basilian literature that might provide hints for such a development. The spirit of the English race is akin in many ways to that of Greece rather than Rome, and a study of St Basil, the father of Greek monasticism, may be not unprofitable for the English Church of to-day.