

3.2.1. Dom Anselme Le Bail (1878–1956) Abbot of Scourmont 1913–1956

This article, by Armand Veilleux,⁴⁵ published in French in Collectanea Cisterciensia (63 [2001] 224–33) and in English translation in Cistercian Studies Quarterly (38 [2003]: 27–34), is reproduced here with several additions and modifications to adapt it to the context of this chapter.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The years 1892 to 1914 were years of great spiritual vitality. It was the time of great conversions among men of letters: Verlaine, Bloy, Huysmans, Claudel, Péguy, Psichari, Massignon. In those same years, Bergson, at the *Collège de France*, rediscovered the heartfelt knowledge of mystics, and Blondel, reviving the approach of Augustinian ontology, taught that deification was the logical transcendence of every human action.

During that same time, several great abbots deeply influenced the orientation of our Order by rediscovering, if not the authentic Cistercian spirit, at least the spiritual and even contemplative dimension of the monastic life. We have presented several in the preceding chapters, namely Dom Lehodey (§ 2.4.1) and Dom Chautard (§ 2.4.2), who were personally involved in a movement of foundations in distant countries which heralded the great expansion of our Order a few years later. However, while these great masters had been nourished by a personal reading of the *Rule of Saint Benedict* and had acquired a certain knowledge of Saint Bernard, their contact with the Cistercian tradition proper was limited.

Between the two world wars, there was not only considerable numerical growth in the Order, but also a rediscovery of the Cistercian spirit, and the spiritual riches of the great masters of Cistercian spirituality were rediscovered, beginning with the abbot of Clairvaux. In this respect, no one was more influential in the Order than Dom Anselme Le Bail and the entire movement he engendered, a movement that was first spiritual and then intellectual.

FORMATION

Emmanuel Le Bail was born on December 31, 1878, in Brittany, which gave two Abbots General to the Order: Dom Ollitrault of Kéryvallon and Dom Dominique Nogues. His mother died two years later in giving birth to a child that would not

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survive. Deprived of the tenderness of a mother, he was not deprived of all affection. After primary school, he began his Greek and Latin “humanities” at the minor seminary of Sainte-Anne-d’Auray in 1892. Six years later, wanting to be a missionary, he requested admission to the novitiate of the Holy Spirit Fathers. He received the habit on September 29, 1898, and made first profession for three years on October 10, 1899. But then he needed to fulfill his military service. He was called to serve at Lorient in his native Brittany. At his return he undertook his philosophy studies at the scholasticate of Chevilly near Paris, with an exam taken at the Sorbonne, then his theology studies. He received minor orders in July 1903; three months later he had to renew his vows for a period of five years, and advanced to the subdiaconate. But he hesitated. And because of his hesitations, the Superior General, Bishop Leroy, dismissed him from the Congregation. After a retreat at Timadeuc, he decided to go to Scourmont, without even saying goodbye to his family. Was it his missionary spirit that made him choose distant Belgium rather than Brittany? We will never know.

He knocked on Scourmont’s door May 21, 1904, at the age of 26, and was admitted to the novitiate with the name of Br. Anselme. His novice master was Fr. Alphonse Bernigaud, who held this position until 1907. In 1905, Fr. Alphonse had the idea, which was original at the time, of using the Rule of Saint Benedict as a formation manual. Not having a great knowledge of it himself, he gave his novices homework on the Rule. Br. Anselme was captivated by this Rule and did his homework with great zeal. He filled a huge notebook, which was finished on May 10, 1906. He was thus in possession of a vast synthesis that he would continue to develop throughout his life as monk and abbot.

Ordained a priest on August 24, 1909, he was named master of the lay brothers and also of the novice lay brothers (their novitiate being distinct from that of the choir novices at that time) by his abbot, Dom Norbert Sauvage, who had recognized the innate talents of a formator in Fr. Anselme. He not only taught them the Rule but also liturgy, which was becoming one of the principle nourishments of his spiritual life. No one else at this time would have thought to teach liturgy to the lay brothers, unless it would be to give them a course in the rubrics. The young Fr. Anselme explained the liturgical cycles to them after the manner of Dom Guéranger, and the Sacrifice of the Mass. He composed a small manual for them entitled *The Divine Office of the Cistercian Lay Brother* (1910), where he presented the Office of the Paters and Aves as a veritable “prayer of the Church.”

In 1911, he became master of the choir novices. He then took up his novitiate notes and produced a complete exposition of the doctrine of Saint Benedict from the very text of the Rule. At a time when almost everyone, including the monasteries, used Rodriguez for religious formation, Anselme Le Bail adopted the Rule

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as a manual of formation for monks. He also formed them in liturgy, contemplative prayer, and the interior life. Dom Godefroid Bêlorgey, who was his novice during the second part of his novitiate, delighted in saying that he owed his entire monastic formation, all his doctrine and great attraction for prayer and the interior life to Dom Anselme Le Bail.

During his two years as novice master, he put together a complete novitiate program and wrote two articles on “The Rule of Saint Benedict, Manual of Spirituality” and “The Liturgy in the Formation of Novices,” which would be presented by Dom Norbert Sauvage at the General Chapter of 1913, during the retreat of the superiors at Cîteaux.

But this General Chapter of 1913 chose Dom Norbert as Procurator of the Order, which led him to resign as abbot of Scourmont. On October 4, 1913, Dom Anselme was called to succeed him as abbot.

THE DIFFICULT CIRCUMSTANCES OF HIS ABBACY

In order to estimate accurately what Anselme Le Bail accomplished in his community of Scourmont and in the Order as a whole, we have to keep in mind the difficult circumstances of his time in office.

Scarcely elected abbot, he was mobilized less than a year later and served as a military chaplain until April 1919. Throughout those years, he was continually in touch with the members of his community, several of whom were also serving in the army, and he continued their formation through a periodical he published on a regular basis, *Le moine soldat*. Scarcely two years after he came back to Scourmont, the Order entrusted him with a difficult mission in the Congo, where the abbey of Westmalle had founded the monastery of Bamania in 1894, and which little by little had become more a missionary congregation than a Cistercian monastery. This task kept him busy for a whole year⁴⁶.

Whether at Scourmont or away, Anselme Le Bail was the soul of his community. Throughout this period it continued to grow along the spiritual lines drawn by their abbot, faithful to his motto: *Abba, pater*. Under his leadership, the Scourmont community developed a spirit of its own, which generated both admiration and mistrust in the Order. Thus the General Chapter, while freely using Dom Anselme’s talents and experience, did not fail to give him a slap on the wrist from time to time. At the General Chapter of 1930, he was strictly enjoined to preach retreats in Cistercian monasteries only—he had done so in several Benedictine monasteries—and not to absent himself from his monastery for more than twen-

46 See § 3.1.1, the section on this foundation in the Congo.

ty-four hours without the written permission of his Father Immediate, which permission was to be renewed for each journey. In 1937, he was ordered to remove the wash-basins that had been set up in the dormitory cells “against the tradition of the Order.” In general, however, trust prevailed. Thus year after year he was one of the king-pins of all the commissions created by the General Chapter. In 1920, he was a member of a commission entrusted with helping the Definitory harmonize the Constitutions with Canon Law. In 1922 and for many years afterwards, he was a member of the Architecture Commission, which had to approve all the building projects in the Order. Also in 1922, he was a member of the commission set up to resolve the question of Westmalle’s foundation in the Congo. In 1933, he was a member of the special commission for *Collectanea*, the review he held so dear and of which he was truly the father. From 1932 onwards, he was the secretary of the Liturgy Commission and in 1937, a member of the commission in charge of revising the *Usages* of the nuns.

Meanwhile, with the number of monks at Scourmont growing, Dom Anselme considered making a foundation. In 1926, he traveled to Spain looking for a favorable place, but in vain. In 1928, however, he agreed to assume responsibility for Caldey, a monastic island since the sixth century, recently abandoned by an Anglican monastic community that had converted to Catholicism. He led the group of founders there in January 1929⁴⁷.

Then came World War II. In 1939, following England’s and France’s declarations of war on Germany, twenty-four monks were mobilized. In May 1940, during the invasion of Belgium and the beginning of hostilities on the Western battlefield, all his monks under thirty-five were mobilized. Stoically, Dom Anselme stayed at Scourmont with about a third of the community, but eventually they had to leave the monastery, as it was occupied by German soldiers until the end of the war. Once again he published *Le moine soldat*, in order to continue his pastoral service to monks on the front.

Shortly before the war, Dom Anselme had seen a need for the Order to be open to dialogue with non-Christian religious traditions of the Far East, as had Fr. Henri Le Saux and Fr. Jules Monchanin. Fr. Monchanin, before leaving for India, had given a conference to the Scourmont community in the fall of 1938. Dom Anselme spoke with him at length and invited Fr. Albert Derzelle to join their conversation. They even agreed that Fr. Albert would join Fr. Monchanin in Tamil Nadu the following year, after studying Sanskrit in Paris for six months, in order to help him prepare a monastic foundation. Since Caldey Island was British, Dom Anselme felt it could be a step toward a foundation in India. The war, however,

47 Cf. § 3.1.1, the section on the purchase of the Anglican monastery.

put an end to this project, which was then replaced, so to speak, by the wave of foundations in Africa in the 1950s (Scourmont founded Mokoto). One of Dom Anselme's disciples, Fr. Francis Mahieu (Acharya), who had entered Scourmont precisely in view of making a foundation in India, took it upon himself to make this foundation, which, as Dom Anselme had foreseen, had to be made outside the Order. It was eventually incorporated into the Order in 1996, thus bringing it full circle.

These many activities did not prevent Dom Anselme from publishing *L'Ordre de Cîteaux—La Trappe* (Paris: Letouzey-Ané, 1924), as well as several articles on Cistercian spirituality, especially the very important article on Saint Bernard in the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*.

ABOVE ALL, A FORMATOR

All this activity, important as it was for the Order, was secondary for Anselme Le Bail. It was merely a kind of outward reflection of his activity within his own community. He wanted to be the community's "father", but in full accordance with the great Christian tradition's use of the word. He was above all an outstanding formator, always concerned with Christ being born and growing in his community and in each single monk.

In an unpublished paper *La formation à Scourmont*, in the chapter dealing with Dom Anselme Le Bail's time as abbot, Fr. Colomban Bock enumerates nine characteristics of Dom Anselme's abbatial service:

- 1 Returning to Benedictine and Cistercian spirituality by teaching the *Rule of Saint Benedict*,
- 2 Returning to the purity of the monastic ideal of early Cîteaux by teaching Cistercian spirituality,
- 3 Reforming the study program and ushering in a monastic humanism,
- 4 Restoring the liturgy through teaching on the spirit of the liturgy and through study of Cistercian liturgy,
- 5 Setting up a program of monastic and priestly formation,
- 6 Establishing a monastic library adapted to these different objectives,
- 7 Appointing masters in spiritual matters and a group of qualified teachers,
- 8 Setting a balance between the requirements of obedience and the holy freedom of the children of God,
- 9 Calling for personal responsibility, respect of personalities, and encouragement of individual initiatives.

FORMATION OF THE COMMUNITY

In 1913, Fr. Anselme became abbot. There were several changes of novice master during the war, but after the war he appointed Fr. Godefroid BÉlorgey as novice master, from 1919 to 1928. Under this extraordinary team of abbot and novice director, these were the golden years for formation at Scourmont. Dom Anselme continued to be actively involved in formation for the novices and for the entire community as well. Having “discovered” the Rule and the liturgy, he went on to rediscover the Cistercian fathers, especially Saint Bernard. Beginning in 1923, he introduced a course on Cistercian spirituality, giving one hour a week to the novices himself. From that time on, however, his major concern was monastic formation for the entire community.

The phrase “monastic humanism”⁴⁸ rightly expresses Dom Anselme’s attitude and desire. He wanted all the monks of his community to behave as adults and to be eager to develop their own personalities. He wanted to teach them the art of reflection, how to think for themselves, how to enter more deeply into the meaning of Christian and monastic life and the requirements of their state in life. He wanted them freely to embrace the goodness of life, not out of fear, but in a total freedom and for the love of God. He wanted to be the *abba* who teaches, encourages, and enlightens, not the policeman who supervises and corrects.

His teaching was rooted in tradition, especially Cistercian tradition, for which he had a deep respect. This respect, however, did not prevent him from rethinking it by asking questions in a new light and stimulating intellectual curiosity and personal study. His high intellectual rigor led him to analyze a question or a situation thoroughly before evaluating the various elements and drawing up a synthesis. He also strove to develop in the monks of his community a rigorous critical sense. He sent several to higher university studies in Scripture, theology, and canon law, not out of mere intellectualism, but rather to lay the foundation on which to build an enlightened and open spiritual life.

He thoroughly studied any questions he dealt with. Thus, in his daily chapter talks for a period of nearly thirty years, commenting on the Rule, he spent two and a half years on chapter 7 and an equal amount of time on prayer.⁴⁹ His sermons (we did not call them homilies at that time) for solemn professions were veritable treatises of spirituality, often using a current event as a starting point. Thus in 1940, a few days before the invasion of Belgium, at the solemn profession of a monk, he publicly stated how to react if the war were to come. The sermon he

⁴⁸ Phrase used by Fr. Colombar Bock, see above.

⁴⁹ Rule of Saint Benedict, chapter 7, is on humility.

pronounced when his community was expelled from Scourmont in 1942, without knowing if they would return, is a true masterpiece.

A serious intellectual formation is impossible without a good library. Dom Anselme devoted all his energies to the creation of one of the largest monastic libraries in the Order, which counted all the great collections, such as the *Patrologia Græca* and the *Patrologia Latina*, Mansi's collection of the Councils, important dictionaries such as the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, and the *Acta Sanctorum* of the Bollandists. Able to ask for help in this area as in others, he put various competent persons in charge of establishing the different parts of the library. Fr. Joseph Canivez was in charge of setting up the canon law section. Frs. Alphonse Bernigaud and Benoît Attout had charge of the Scripture section. For philosophy it was Fr. Ignace Van Vlasselaer, and for theology Fr. Thomas Litt.

He encouraged the publication of books by the most competent of his monks, especially the *Acta Capituli Generalis* by Fr. Canivez, a classic text used by all the historians of the Order at the time, which has not yet been replaced, even though it is now out of date.

As early as 1923, Dom Anselme conceived the idea of a collection of writings by the Cistercian fathers of the first centuries of the Order and proposed its publication. He had drawn up a precise and detailed plan of what could be a complete Cistercian *corpus*, many elements of which have not yet been published. The only publications resembling this project today are the large Cistercian Fathers series brought out by Cistercian Publications (a publishing house set up by the US Region) over the last thirty years, and Fr. Robert Thomas's Pain de Cîteaux series⁵⁰. Dom Anselme's project was presented to the General Chapter of 1924 but was not accepted, being considered too intellectual. The periodical *Collectanea*, the publication of which was approved ten years later by the General Chapter of 1933, was a sort of compromise solution. Thanks to its first editor, Fr. Camille Hontoir, a monk of Scourmont, and Dom Anselme's close involvement, this periodical was immediately helpful in making the Cistercian fathers known and in generating desire to read them.

Even a brief resume of Dom Anselme Le Bail's formation activity would not be complete if we did not mention his untiring work for the formation of nuns in the monasteries under his care, Soleilmont and N.-D. de La Paix. He was personally involved in the transfer of the latter from Fourbechies to Chimay in 1919. Between 1928 and 1937, he was active in the formation of about fifty young girls sent by Dom Simon Dubuisson, the abbot of Tilburg and former monk of Scourmont, for

⁵⁰ The important collection *Sources Chrétiennes*, at the initiative of some French monks, inserted into its program the publication of works of the Cistercian Middle Ages. In 1990 the complete translation of Saint Bernard was begun.

their formation at Chimay. On July 15, 1937, they left as a group to found Berkel. He also preached many retreats in other monasteries of nuns.

In the last years of his life, spent in a wheelchair following a stroke, he continued to form his community through his silent and prayerful presence, since the care of the community had been entrusted to an apostolic administrator, Dom Gueric Baudet, who became his successor in 1956.

DOM ANSELME LE BAIL'S HERITAGE

At Scourmont, we can feel Dom Anselme's presence and influence in every corner of the cloister. What about his influence in the Order as a whole?

The Order is indebted to him for the whole movement of *rediscovery* of our Cistercian fathers in the last three-quarters of the twentieth century. We might wonder, however, whether this movement has always maintained the direction Dom Anselme gave it and the spirit with which he inspired it. Dom Anselme knew how to combine great scientific rigor with an equal spiritual freedom and a deep spirit of prayer. Workshops on our Cistercian Fathers, which have become more and more frequent over the last forty years, cannot always be said to possess the same characteristics. Today the writings of our twelfth-century fathers are readily used for *lectio divina*, often without the preliminary effort of a serious study that would open their authentic meaning. As a result, these texts, a bit esoteric for modern readers, have been used in order to arouse pleasant religious feelings. Moreover, even though the writings of some of our Fathers have come out in critical editions of solid scientific value, not all publications about Cistercian writers have that same rigor. Most of them are no more than *fervorinos*, which Dom Anselme would not have appreciated in the least.

His method was different and much more demanding. His first step was to analyze the text itself as seriously as possible, even in a technical way, in order fully to understand the author's message, putting it in its historical and spiritual context. The second step consisted in an effort to reflect personally and to assimilate this message in a spirit of prayer. Finally, as a third step, rather than inculturating oneself to the past (the great temptation in current monastic formation), the method consisted of assimilating the spiritual vitality received from contact with the Cistercian fathers, in order continually to reinvent a Cistercian spirituality rooted (or "inculturated" as we would say today) in our current world. Dom Anselme's chapter talks for solemn professions are excellent examples of a monastic doctrine solidly rooted in tradition, but they also reveal a free spirit ever able to rethink—and daring to rethink—this tradition according to the context in which it is lived.

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Dom Anselme Le Bail published little. He did however write a great deal, not in view of publication, but in order to assimilate everything he had learned from the Rule and the Fathers, and to prepare his classes for the community of Scourmont. Although he did not hesitate to write the article on Saint Bernard in the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, at a time when the latter was not well known, and some other studies on Cistercian life, he never considered himself a writer by vocation. He was first of all a formator. All his activity was directed toward the formation of the monks of his community, whom he wished to be adults, impregnated with the Gospel, the *Rule of Saint Benedict*, and the Cistercian Fathers, living the tradition with freedom and lucidity in the world of today.

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