

Episode 5: St. Romuald & the Camaldolese Order

St. Romuald renewed the eremitic life in the tenth century.. and injected a new life and discipline in the monasteries in his day.

He was born in Ravenna Italy in 956 A.D. into a noble family. He grew up in luxury and the love of pleasure. Although he gave in to his vices over and over again he promised God he'd do something for His honor and glory and he admired the hermits of long ago who fled the world and gave themselves over to God and His glory.

When Romuald was twenty years old his father got into a fight with a relative over some property and they decided to settle it by having a duel. His vicious father wanted him to be there to watch. He didn't want to but his father threatened to cut him off from the family fortune if he didn't. His father won the duel but Romuald was horrified at his father's crime. He ran away to a Benedictine monastery to pray and do penance for his father's sins.

He was a beautiful example to the monks there. He performed great sacrifices, prayed, and wept. As he did these he became purified of his vices and grew to love and fear God above everything.

The monks were a good example to him. He learned about eternity and the contempt for the world and in a short time he begged the abbot to accept him as a penitent.

It was a common thing for men and women who'd done serious crimes to join a monastery or convent to live there to pray and do penance for their sins.

He stayed there for seven years. He was so prayerful and penitential that some monks became very jealous of him so they planned to murder him. Both Romuald and the abbot knew what was going on so instead of punishing the plotting monks the abbot allowed Romuald to leave the monastery. It sounds like he had his priorities backwards!

He went to Venice and lived under a holy hermit named Marinus where he became more and more holy. Eventually they went out of the city and into the wilderness to live as hermits.

Many people came to Romuald for his teaching so he and Marinus established a monastery with Romuald as the superior. But everything he taught he practiced himself first as any good superior and teacher should do.

He demanded that his students be first: very fervent in their prayers, telling them that it would be better for them to recite one psalm with fervor than a hundred with less devotion. He was very strict regarding his own fasting and mortifications but he was more lenient with the others.

Just like St. Anthony of the Desert St. Benedict and all the holy monks and nuns before him Romuald was tested by the devil. The evil one would tempt him to fall into his old vices or try to make him feel bad for leaving his family and fortune behind.

The demons would tell him that his prayers and penances were offensive to God or that no man could possibly do what he set out to do. They tried to use fear to turn Romuald away from his vocation.

But he fought against the evil ones first off by not engaging them and second by keeping up his rigorous prayer-life and penances. For five solid years he was tempted but he fought with every fiber of his being and with constant prayer and penance and grew in even greater holiness.

Because of Romuald's efforts and spiritual progress his father was converted. He repented of his vicious ways and entered a monastery by Ravenna to pray and do penance for his sins. He wasn't as strong as his son and was giving in to the devil's temptations to leave the religious life and return to the world.

Romuald found out and wanted to visit his father to try to talk him out of it. But the local people didn't want him to leave. So they came up with the idea that they would just kill him and then they'd keep his body there with them like a good-luck charm.

Obviously St. Romuald was informed of what they planned to do to him. So he pretended to have gone crazy. His plan worked because his "fans" quickly dropped their insane devotion and didn't bother with him anymore. Our crafty saint was then able to get away and got to his father before he abandoned the religious life.

After encouraging his father with prayers and tears his father stayed praying and doing great penances for the rest of his life and he died in great holiness.

His most famous monastery was called Camaldoli near Arezzo in Tuscany. It was given to him by a local prince named Maldoli in the year 1009. He used the Benedictine rule but modified it so that there would be eremitic and reclusive aspects of the order and changed their habits from black to white.

The hermitage was about two miles away from the monastery surrounded by the beauty of the forest. There was a chapel dedicated to St. Anthony of the Desert for visitors to pray in with cells for the porters.

The hermits had their own cells each with their own walled garden. They were allowed to have a fire burning in their fireplace all the time because of how cold it was. And each cell had its own chapel where the hermit if he was a priest could say Mass.

They were also allowed to walk in the woods whenever they wanted. Food was brought to their cells each day and they had as much wood and supplies as they needed. They were allowed this so that they wouldn't have any worldly necessity get in the way of their prayer and contemplation. There was also a church where all the hermits would gather to do pray the Divine Office.

Another type of solitude that St. Romuald added was that of a recluse. A hermit could ask his superior to be a recluse and that meant that he would be shut up in his cell never speaking to anyone except the superior and the brother who brought them their necessities. Their prayers and mortifications were more severe and more frequent. St. Romuald always living the example he wanted his monks to follow himself lived this life for several years.

The monks of St. Romuald called themselves Camaldolese after this great monastery and even today follow the life of their beloved founder very closely.

They keep silence to make atonement for the vain words people speak, they live as hermits to atone for people who meet together in groups to plot against God and His Church, and they prove that in their solitary life the only aloneness is to be without God.

St. Romuald, pray for us.

Preview

St. Romuald was a great reformer of monasteries in the 10th century. He wanted to be a martyr and traveled to Hungary with some of his monks in the hopes of being martyred but he became very sick as soon as he got there and had to leave. It was a sign that he wasn't destined to die there for the faith.

On his way back he established monasteries in Germany and tried to reform many others but this brought him the anger of lax abbots and bishops. They tried to shut him down at every turn and had him driven out of their territories.

He heard that a Venetian became the abbot of a monastery by paying the bishop for it so he went to try to reform the wayward abbot. But the abbot wouldn't tolerate St. Romuald's interference so he tried to kill him. By then St. Romuald was used to people trying to kill him.

It's obvious that the monastic life was in serious need of reform when so many abbots, monks, and bishops tried to kill a holy man for trying to bring the monasteries back to their original holiness. Although he didn't die a martyr in Hungary he had a sort of martyrdom at the hands of the people who should have appreciated him the most - his fellow Catholics.

Sources:

Butler's Lives of the Saints: St. Romuald:
<http://www.bartleby.com/210/2/071.html>

Holy Family Hermitage:
<http://www.camaldolese.org/>