

## Regular Canons

In the course of the eleventh century there developed a current of spirituality which aimed to bring canons back to the apostolic way of life, looking back to the first Christian community at Jerusalem, as described in the Acts of the Apostles: so, specifically, to the renunciation of private property and communal ownership of the goods of the community. At the Lateran Synod of 1059 the Church regulated the canonical way of life, thanks to the interventions of Hildebrand, the future Gregory VII, who held the decisions of the council of Aachen responsible in the main for the decadence of houses of canons. In this way the world of canons was split, according to whether or not private property was renounced and the communal life chosen. Thus there grew up a distinction between 'secular canons' and 'regular canons'. A non-trivial proportion of the communities opted for the reform, spreading out from Rome to the whole of Italy, to France, especially in the South, to Southern Spain, and as far as Austria, England and Ireland. Elsewhere, hermits attracted disciples and formed new communities. Still elsewhere, such communities crystallized around large hostels supervised by smaller priories. A characteristic of this period is that these communities of canons were unconnected with each other and therefore relatively fragile, an exception being the regular canons of Prémontré, which, not long after its foundation in 1121 gradually adopted a stable structure, taking aspects of the Cistercian order as a model. In 1138 Innocent II insisted that communities in the same region should combine together under a rule following Cistercian customs. Only in 1215, at the Fourth Lateran Council, were regular canons bound to meet annually in provincial chapters, to discuss their way of life as a religious order. Also borrowed from the Cistercians was the practice of nominating at the chapter visitors charged with the task of going out to the various communities to stimulate the canons to greater fervour and if need be to reform their common life. Benedict XII, in his bull *Ad decorem Ecclesiae Sponsae*, 15 May 1339, promulgated the first regulations regarding admission, training, the daily chapter, weekly meetings, studies, food, the habit, the library, the maintenance of archives and the administration of the endowment, moveables and landed property. The canonical way of life nonetheless, laboured under many difficulties as it developed, and it was not until the sixteenth century that some new congregations of canons came into existence. The community of canons regular, given their great diversity, drew on various rules for canons: the rule of St Chrodegang of Metz, the rule of Aachen, the *Regula ss. Patrum*, the *Regula Gregorii PP VII pro Canonicis regularibus*, the rule of Porto, the *Consuetudines* of Saint-Ruf of Avignon, the *Consuetudines marbacenses* in Alsace, the *Ordo Officiorum Ecclesiae Lateranensis*, etc. But the rule of the canonical life became known - a person standing

for the movement - as that of Saint Augustine, even though the communities drew inspiration from by texts Augustine which varied a great deal, such as the *Ordo monasterii* and the *Regula ad servos Dei*. Despite all the differences between them, regular canons have the following in common: divine worship, pastoral care of parishes, evangelization, and education. In 1959 John XXIII brought most of the congregations of canons together into a confederation under the leadership of an abbot primate.

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