

Recensiones

Joseph A. GRIBBIN, *The Premonstratensian Order in Late Medieval England* (Studies in the History of Medieval Religion, vol. 16). The Boydell Press, Woolbridge 2001. XVIII + 283 p. Illustrated. Pound 45.00/\$ 75.00.

In the Introduction of this wonderful book the author writes: „This book will therefore attempt to fill a gap in our knowledge of the late medieval English Premonstratensians by analysing their visitation records of the late fifteenth and the early sixteenth centuries, and other primary sources, the activities of the visitor and commissary-general at that time, Richard Redman, along with other aspects of the Premonstratensians, mainly within the context of the monastic enclosure“ (p. XVIII).

In the first part Gribbin treats his subject in six chapters:

1. The Establishment of the Premonstratensians in England and the Development of the Provincia Angliae.
2. The Visitation Records of the Late Medieval English Premonstratensians.
3. The Visitation of England's Premonstratensian Abbeys, c. 1478-1500.
4. The English Premonstratensian Liturgy.
5. Learning, Spirituality and Pastoralia: English Premonstratensian Manuscripts, Books and Libraries in the Later Middle Ages.
6. Richard Redman O. Praem.

These chapters are followed by a conclusion: From Cessation to Disolution.

The second part consists of appendices:

1. The Visitation Itineraries of Richard Redman in Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 1519.
2. Maps of Redman's Proposed Visitation Journeys, 1478, 1491 and 1500.
3. English Premonstratensian Visitations, 1458-1503.
4. Fornication among the English Premonstratensians, 1475-1500.
5. The Date of John Capgrave's Life of Saint Norbert.

The book is completed by an extended bibliography and an Index.

The English Premonstratensian abbeys were divided and organized in three circaries: The Northern with 7 abbeys, the Middle with 12 abbeys and the Southern with 11 abbeys, altogether 30 abbeys. They were relatively small. The average number of members was 15 or 16. Six abbeys had 10 members or less. The bigger ones had approximately 20 members and the biggest ones more than 20, but never more than 30. So the communities were small, since not all the members resided in the enclosure.

The study of Gribbin gives a very lively description of the situation of the English Premonstratensian houses for the period of English history

under consideration here. The extant visitation documents of the other exempt orders don't bear comparison with the details or extensiveness of the Premonstratensian visitation records. That's why it is so important. We owe these visitation records to the activity of abbot Richard Redman of the abbey of Shap. Next to his task as an abbot he was successively bishop of Saint Asaph, Exeter and Ely and as such he also played an important role in English politics. In the structure of the Order he was the representative of the abbot general of Prémontré in England. From about 1458 until 1505 he functioned as visitor and commissary-general. He convoked the chapters of the circary and averagely every three years he held a visitation in the abbeys.

Gribbin has written his book with a very strict scientific account to the historical truth. Each assertion or proposition is accurately documented. The jargon which he uses is taken from the monastic terminology, probably because there are no equivalents in the terminology of the canons regular. The picture which we get of the English abbeys is summarized by Gribbin as follows: „A tolerable mediocrity was more frequently noted than a dangerous decline“ (p. 91). The celebration of the liturgical offices in most of the abbeys was satisfying or even very good, but in about six abbeys it left much to be desired. In theological matters the English Premonstratensians generally were not up to date. Works from Scholasticism were not or hardly found and older theological books and studies prevailed. The theological and exegetical writings that belonged to the English White Canons were largely conservative (p. 138). The English Premonstratensians were hardly in touch with contemporary currents of spirituality (p. 148).

Of the abbey of Topholme is reported: „The canons had little motivation towards reading and intellectual activities“ (p. 166). One may consider this as a general tendency. The abbeys had relatively few students at the universities. Most of them studied canon law. The relative poverty of the abbeys was the reason that there were so few students (p. 170). The Premonstratensians generally were not numbered among the narrow spiritual elite, who read and promoted contemporary forms of mystical literature (p. 173).

In his conclusion (p. 206) Gribbin says: „As a group of medieval religious, the white canons exhibited many of the frailties common to humanity, some more than others, but they were not, as a body, wholly depraved or completely devoid of spiritual motivation: back-sliding and mediocrity, of varying degrees, were more prevalent tendencies“.

Printer's errors are found on pages 10, 93, 129, 140, 183, 187 and 188. The standard expression ‚Bona culina, bona disciplina‘ is phrased by Gribbin with the following words: ‚bonum culinam, bonum communitas‘ (p. 79).