

## THE LIFE OF BLESSED ROBERT ABBOT OF MOLESME AND CÎTEAUX

*Here begins the prologue to the life of Blessed Robert, First Abbot of Molesme and Cîteaux.*<sup>1</sup>

Since Jesus, the great priest who, by his own blood entered the sanctuary but once and revealed life for the saints, I consider the work of writing of the lives and actions of these saints as precious. Amid the storms of this present life they have imitated our Saviour, as far as human frailty permits. They have valiantly persevered through the toils of warfare. They glorified Christ Jesus and carried him in their bodies and up to the end of their lives they remained most constant in their commitment to holiness. These are they of whom Scripture speaks: "The way of the just grows like rising light and increases until it is perfect day." These are the stars which the supreme high-priest has constituted in the firmament of the Church. Their brightness drives away the darkness of human ignorance and they show salvation's haven to those who toil on this wide and spacious sea.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a draft translation of the edition of the *Vita* edited by Kolumban Spahr, *Das Leben des hl. Robert von Molesme: Eine Quelle zur Vorgeschichte von Cîteaux* (Fribourg: Paulusdruckerei, 1944). I follow the section division adopted by Spahr. This differs from that found in PL 157, cols 1269-1288. I have omitted Spahr's ample listing of sources and variant readings.

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Among these Blessed Robert, a man of revered life, shines particularly. He was the first abbot of the church of Molesme, whose unblemished holiness is rightly proclaimed as glorious, especially since in our days, scarcely anyone is found who is god-fearing. I have begun to write his life not presuming on my own wit or knowledge, but putting my hope both for the progress and completion of the work now begun in him who makes the tongues of infants eloquent and who, in ancient times, gave the power of human speech to a dumb beast to correct a prophet's madness.

Add to this the order given by the most reverend Lord Abbot of Molesme, Odo and the insistent and devoted demands of the brothers of that place. I considered it totally inappropriate to deny anything to such people lest I appear empty-handed before the Lord. Although I myself do not have the virtue or merit to be able to be an example to others, nevertheless I have undertaken the task so that [Blessed Robert] may not be completely concealed, since he merited to be given in holiness for the adornment of holy Church.

Whoever you are who came as a reader, I ask that you do not inquire about the name of the author. I flee human glory and seek to be praised only by God. So, in this work, I do not give my name. This is to avoid any reduction in the value of the work among the inexperienced because the name of a sinner appears on the very front of the work. If I should say anything crudely or inappropriately I hereby ask pardon of the reader. At the same time I admonish all to whom the present text comes that they do not seek fancy words from me since truth is sufficient of itself and does not want to be coloured by finely-phrased artifice or painted with Jezebel's harlot antimony. Finally let them listen to the Doctor of the Gentiles, the disciple of Truth itself when he says that the Kingdom of God is not in word, but rather in power.

*The prologue ends.*

**1** *Here begins the life of Blessed Robert, Abbot of Molesme and Cîteaux.*

Blessed Robert took his origin in the region of Champagne. He shone, fair like a flower of the field, whose beauty was in goodness of life that was pleasing to

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all who saw it. The fragrance of his holy reputation spread far and wide and invited many to imitate him. I think this holy man is rightly compared to a flower since it is about the saints that Scripture says, “they flourish in the city like grass on the earth.” Now we will show that there was also a certain nobility; praise be to the parents from whom the blessed man took his origin.

His father was Thierry (Theodoric) and his mother was called Ermengard. Both were distinguished according to worldly dignity and most distinguished before God because of the uprightness of their conduct. They had an abundance of temporal goods but they so used them so as to seem more like stewards of the supreme head of the family than like owners of worldly goods. Knowing that those who show mercy to the poor lend to the Lord, they cleansed themselves of the dust of earthly life by the kindness of almsgiving. Although their situation was to be in the flesh they did not live according to the flesh, but in all their thoughts and longings they dwelt in heaven, adorning their crowns with works of virtue as if with the glory of precious stones. I say this to demonstrate that there was a holy root from which our saint drew his growth, like a shoot on the tree of life.

Because we have made mention of his parents, we should briefly tell the story of how the Holy Spirit went before him with the blessing of sweetness, while he was still enclosed in his mother’s womb. For when his mother was pregnant, the virgin Mary, the glorious mother of God, appeared in a dream having in her hand a golden ring. She said to her, “Ermengard, I will that the son whom you bear in your womb will be espoused to me by this ring.” With these words, the Blessed Virgin left the sleeping woman and disappeared. When [Ermengard] rose from sleep she began to reflect inwardly on what she had seen. The Blessed Mother of God appeared again to the woman, as of old the Lord is said to have appeared a second time to Samuel to confirm his promise. When the days were complete, the woman brought forth a son. When he was weaned she gave him to be trained in literary studies. In these he surpassed all his contemporaries since with a pure heart he drew forth from the fountains of salvation the grace of salvation that he would later bring forth for the people.

When he was fifteen years old, avoiding worldly contagion, he made up his mind to consecrate himself completely to the Lord. So he offered to the Lord the flower of his most pleasing youth. He received the regular habit at [the

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monastery] of St Peter of Celle.<sup>2</sup> There, day and night, he gave himself to prayer and fasting, offering a pleasing service to the Lord, subjecting the flesh to the spirit and the spirit to the Creator.

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<sup>2</sup> The Benedictine abbey of Montier (Moutier) La Celle, founded towards the end of the seventh century.

The time came for God to be glorified in his servant and for the lamp that had been hidden under a measure to be placed on a lamp-stand to give light to the Church. God, in whose hand are the hearts of men, inspired the brothers of the house to elect the man of God Robert, as their Prior. He was certainly worthy, since he who, under the guidance of grace, had learned by long practice to attend to the governance of his own life, was worthy to become the judge and governor of the lives of others.

## **2** *Of a certain hermit and two knights who were converted.*

There was, in those times, in the deep recesses of the forests, a certain hermit who desired to serve God freely and secretly. He punished the flesh with determined fasting and strengthened the spirit with fervent prayers. The Lord looked upon his humility and by a great miracle increased through him the number of God's servants. There were two brothers, according to the flesh, who, according to the spirit, did not have the same mind. Zealous for empty glory and dedicated to showing off their prowess, they were in search of these cursed fairs which are called tournaments. They were on their way when they happened to pass through the forest in which the aforesaid hermit was leading his solitary life. The two of them began secretly to think about killing the other. Both of them were being eaten up by the poison of envy and they were thinking how if one of them died, the survivor would come into possession of the dead man's property. Almighty God, however, knew that they would become vessels of mercy, did not permit them to be tempted above what they were able, but provided the outcome with the temptation lest they put into effect the evil they had conceived. The providence of God permitted them to be troubled by such an evil temptation so that afterwards, when they made progress in virtue, they would not proudly attribute to themselves what they had but rather would redirect it to the one by whose mercy they had been set free.

When they had completed the business which was the purpose of their journey in which they had performed strenuously, in the manner of people of that kind, so that they were carrying back the fruit of human praise from all those who were present, they came, full of success, to their own region and to the place where they had both entertained the thought of killing the other. It was as

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though the place itself admonished them. Rather by God's inspiration they experienced compunction and began to feel repugnance for the wickedness they had planned and they began to be disturbed interiorly about the crime they had conceived. They remembered that they were near the hut of the hermit mentioned above, and so with equal desire they made their way to his little abode. By a humble confession they got rid of the disease-laden virus hidden in their hearts. Once the filth had been eliminated, they gladly prepared an interior dwelling-place for God. Finally, after they were rebuked by the man of God for the wickedness they had planned, they left him, instructed by his salutary admonitions.

The hermit's burning speech was like kindling and stirred up heavenly desires in their minds, completely wiping out in them ambition for earthly dignity and sweetly and soundly creating in them the beginnings of the fire of virtue.

Accordingly, when they came to that place where previously they had thought about rising up against each other, they began to discuss it among themselves and talk about it. One of them said: "Dear brother, what were you thinking in this place yesterday when we passed by?" The other revealed to his brother the thought of his heart. The first replied, "I was thinking exactly the same thing myself."

At once, pierced by compunction of heart they returned to the man of God, and despising the pomps of the world, and treading underfoot all its display, they began to live a spiritual life in company with him, humbly bending the necks of their hearts to carry the sweet yoke of Christ.

Who could doubt that their conversion was due to the merits of Blessed Robert? As the following narrative will reveal, it was by his teaching that they were imbued with regular discipline.

And so God, who consoles the humble, multiplied his servants so that in a brief space of time they numbered seven — by which number is indicated the sevenfold grace of the Holy Spirit by which we know that the salvation of many was accomplished through the instrumentality of his servant, Blessed Robert. The same Spirit prepared these seven men as the seven columns of a spiritual house. Through them the monastic order began to revive. Having sent down its roots to the moisture of grace it began to produce spiritual fruit. Even though it

was thought to have reached its term, at the scent of grace it again germinated and produced foliage like a young plant.

### **3** *How Blessed Robert became Abbot of Tonnerre*

Meanwhile, Blessed Robert's holiness and his favour with God and with people became well-known. He was elected abbot by the monks of [the monastery of] St Michael at Tonnerre. These hermits did not have anyone who could instruct them in regular discipline. Hearing of the reputation of the blessed man, they took the trouble to send two of their brothers to him. When they came to the place in which the man of God was faithfully serving God, they found the Prior of the house in the *auditorium*. They made known to him the purpose and cause of their journey. It was only with difficulty and with much beseeching that they succeeded in being taken to the office of the man of God. The Prior had been pierced by the sword of envy and thought to himself that he would lose if the Lord made provision for the advancement of others by his servant's praiseworthy work. Whence he tried to persuade the brothers of that house and the abbot's companions not to consent to the petition of the brothers who came seeking the man of God as their superior. Nevertheless, Blessed Robert, while welcoming their request and just hopes, would satisfy their desire only on condition that the brothers of Tonnerre persisted in it unanimously. Instructed by such salutary admonitions, accompanied by prayers and strengthened by blessings he sent them back to their own people. He gave them the hope that as soon as the Lord provided the opportunity he would quickly fill them with joy in his presence.

He wanted to reflect for a while on God's plan. Although their purpose was holy and their desire appropriate, he delayed so that the desire would expand and grow so that what they were so eager to seek they would cherish it when they had it and observe it more carefully.

The Lord's man was always thinking not of the things of the world but of those that were of the Lord. When he saw the brothers of that place fall away from

the pattern of justice, he feared that the evil companion would communicate his own blight to one who was radiant and simple and make ugly the beautiful face of his soul, since conduct is usually shaped by those with whom one lives. So he parted company and returned to the monastery of Celle. There, having spent time working hard, he enjoyed the long-desired embraces of the beloved Rachel, drawing forth in joy from the fountains of salvation what he would afterwards give to the faithful for their salvation.

#### **4** *How he was made Prior of St Ayoul*

A city built on a mountain cannot be hidden. Blessed Robert, rooted firmly and founded on the mountain of Christ was again chosen, at the death of the Prior of St Ayoul, to be a shepherd for the humble flock of Christ.<sup>3</sup> He was made prior by the unanimous vote of the brothers in that house and by common desire. These hermits, infused by the love for a heavenly life when they saw how the man of God constantly made progress in God and became better, having sought counsel, sent two of their brothers to the Apostolic See to obtain from the Supreme Pontiff by their prayers that the man of God, Blessed Robert should become the shepherd and father of the little flock of Christ. They knew it was a crime to contradict the Supreme Pontiff or rashly to go against his orders. The Supreme Pontiff heard their proposal and rejoiced greatly. He kindly approved their petition and, strengthening them with the apostolic blessing, sent them back rejoicing to their own. He wrote an apostolic rescript to the Abbot of Celle authoritatively commanding that whoever among the brothers was elected should be given to them as abbot. The Abbot of Celle, knowing what the Supreme Pontiff was ordering, gave up the Blessed Robert to those who sought him. He was sad and grieving but he dared not go against the apostolic command. He saw that their consolation was his tribulation since a firm and incorruptible cedar column was being taken away from his house.

#### **5** *How he was a superior for the hermits.*

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<sup>3</sup>Saint-Ayoul was a priory dependent on Montier-la-Celle, founded in 1048 at Provins, in the diocese of Sens.



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Blessed Robert accepted the office of pastoral care with good will, seeing that his labour was not without fruit because the flock was unanimous in despising the things of earth and seeking those of heaven and therefore they obeyed his salutary admonitions. Whence he again was joined to Leah in the active life for the purpose of begetting spiritual sons. In the inner man he served the Lord in a spirit of humility, but outwardly he fulfilled his ministry with great energy. In that place which is now called Colan they served the Lord in hunger and thirst, in cold and nakedness, fasting and praying, bearing the burden of the day's heat with equanimity. They sowed in tears and rejoicing they carried back to the Lord's barn the sheaves of righteousness. But the sight of fellow-workers is a comfort for labourers so God, who looks on the desires of the humble, added to and multiplied his servants so that quickly they were thirteen and, and as far as they could, the goodness of their lives as well as their number was like those of the Apostles.

### **6** *How Molesme was founded by the blessed man.*

Robert, the Lord's man, considering the unsuitability of the place, left watchmen there and, taking the brothers, withdrew to the wooded pastures named Molesme. There working with their own hands they cut down branches from the trees and constructed from them a dwelling where they could live quietly. They completed an oratory also in the same material in which they frequently offered to the Lord with contrite spirits the saving victims and sacrifice. When they had to bread to restore their strength after long bodily labour, they ate only vegetables.

### **7** *The Bishop of Troyes visits them.*

It happened that the Bishop of Troyes was travelling through the wood in which the men of God were serving God in the utmost poverty and humility. He came to that place at the hour of the meal with a great crowd of companions. The men of God received them attentively but were embarrassed because they had nothing to put before them to eat. The bishop was highly edified at their humility and poverty and, experiencing compunction, bade farewell to the brothers and went away.

## **8** *How Blessed Robert sent brothers to Troyes without any money and barefoot.*

After some time, when the brothers did not have enough even for a meagre subsistence, they took refuge in the counsel of Blessed Robert. He, who never based his strength on gold nor said to what is golden “I put my trust in you”, knew that God would not allow the soul of the just to be afflicted with hunger for a long time. Although they had no money he sent them to Troyes to buy food, in agreement with the letter of the prophet’s counsel: “You who have no money, come, hasten to buy and eat.” When they entered the city of Troyes barefoot, immediately a rumour about them went up to the bishop. He had them brought into him and received them kindly. He showed his love for God in the attention he gave to the human needs of God’s servants. He clothed them new garments in accordance with the rule and sent them back to their brothers in a cart loaded with cloth and bread. The brothers were powerfully comforted by this blessing. They learned to be patient in hard times, even though from that day onwards there was always someone to provide them with the necessary food and clothing.

## **9** *On his move to Aux.*

They persevered in the service of God with great constancy. Many came to them fleeing from the world and rejecting the burden of the world, they placed their neck under the sweet yoke of the Lord. Some from distant regions sent them what they needed to receive the reward of the just because in this present life they provided the just with what was necessary. But since a multiplicity of things gives rise to moral indigence, as they began to abound in temporal goods, they became spiritually empty and their wickedness seemed to grow like an ear of corn. Blessed Robert did not set his heart on an abundance of riches but tried to make more and more progress towards God and to live an upright, pious and sober life according to the regulations of Saint Benedict. When the sons of Belial saw this they rose up horribly against the man of God, provoking him to bitterness and crucifying the soul of the just man by their wicked deeds. Let it not disturb you, O reader, that in that holy community evil claimed the place as its own, since pride invaded heavenly

minds, calling them away from their heavenly country to its own region and hid amid dust and ashes that which was more accustomed to appear in purple and fine linen. Finally the witness of Scripture teaches us that on a certain day the sons of God stood in the presence of the Lord and that Satan was in their midst. So it is that there have always been in the church both the just who make progress and the wicked who are a trial. When the man of God saw that his corrections were fruitless and that the observance of regular discipline was left aside, each one walking according to the depravity of his own heart, he decided to leave them behind lest while he was vainly trying to obtain some spiritual profit in them, he should suffer loss in his own soul, When discord rose among them he withdrew from them and came to a place called Aux in which he heard that there were brothers living who served the Lord in a spirit of humility. When he came to them he was warmly received by them and he lived with them for some time, working with his own hands so that he would have something to give to those who suffered need. He was incessantly fervent in vigils and prayers and served the Lord without tiring. Though he excelled all in holiness he acted as a servant to all, reckoning himself the least of all. For this reason not long afterwards he was elected abbot by them. He took care to act as superior in all modesty, not dominating over the group but with his whole heart serving as a model for the flock, taking great care of the weak and encouraging the strong.

## **10** *How he was called back to Molesme.*

Meanwhile the monks of Molesme repented that they had offended the man of God and had, as it were, expelled him by their disobedience. Now they fretted and wept over both their moral and financial ruin. Now in the house they were deprived, whereas by the merits of Blessed Robert they Lord bestowed on them abundance, even in temporal goods. Having taken wholesome counsel, they approached the Supreme Pontiff and strengthened by his authority, called the man of God back to Molesme. There he was intent on fasting and incessant prayer, and his zeal toward those under him was the zeal of God. In a short time he reformed their observance of monastic discipline.

There were among them four of stronger spirit, namely Alberic and Stephen and another two who after the elementary exercises of the cloister longed for

the solitary struggle of the desert. They left the monastery of Molesme and came to a place named Vivicus. When they had lived there for a short time, on the instigation of the monks of Molesme, they received from Joceran, Bishop of Langres, a sentence of excommunication if they did not return.

## **11** *Taking up residence for the first time at Cîteaux.*

Because they were compelled to leave the place we previously spoke about, they came to a wooded area named Cîteaux by those who lived there. There they built an oratory in honour of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God. Thenceforth neither threats nor prayers could call them back from their purpose. Fervent in spirit they served God untiringly night and day.

## **12** *How Blessed Robert moved to Cîteaux.*

When Blessed Robert heard about their holy way of life, taking with him twenty-two brothers, he went over to them, so that he might share in their purpose and help them. They received him with the utmost warmth and he led them for some time with fatherly solicitude, instructing them how to live and act in accordance with the Rule, and acting as a model and example for them of religious observance and goodness.

## **13** *How he returned from Cîteaux to Molesme.*

The monks of Molesme were disgruntled to lose such a good shepherd and so they approached the Supreme Pontiff with the purpose that Blessed Robert, the Lord's man, should be forced to return to the church of Molesme which he had founded first. When the Supreme Pontiff heard that the new plantation of the Cistercians had strongly taken root, he rejoiced greatly to learn that they were growing in all goodness of life and that, formed by the example of Blessed Robert, they were observing the Rule of Saint Benedict more fervently. Seeing that the monks of Molesme were facing destruction if they were deprived of the presence of the man of God, he wrote to the Archbishop of

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Lyon to the effect that another abbot should be established at Cîteaux and that he should compel Blessed Robert to return to Molesme.

When he learned this, Blessed Robert, who knew that obedience is better than sacrifice and that to be unwilling to comply is like the crime of idolatry, having made all the arrangements relevant to the observance of the new institute, he set over them as abbot, Alberic, a man worthy of God, who had been one of the first monks of the church at Molesme. Thus having made good provision for everything, he returned to the monastery of Molesme which he had founded in honour of Blessed Mary. When Alberic died after two years, Stephen succeeded, made abbot for the Cistercians by Blessed Robert. Thus, since he was the founder of the new plantation, the administration of both monasteries (Molesme and Cîteaux) fell within his purview.

He returned to Molesme with two monks: the Cistercians grieved for his departure, whereas the monks of Molesme rejoiced at his return. A huge crowd gave him an honourable welcome at the town of Bar-sur-Seine, and received him with great boisterousness and praise of God. Robert, however, with his — or rather Christ's — tiny flock, namely the Molesme group entered the place prepared for him by God. He glorified with great happiness of mind the divine providence that had arranged everything for him. With a father's love he nurtured the flock committed to him, teaching them the regular observances — rather he became for them an example of the rule by living among them in accordance with the rule. How the holy man migrated from the prison of flesh and by what signs the Lord showed that his death was precious in his sight, I shall now make known to your charity.

## 14 *Blessed Robert's Passing*

Blessed Robert fought many battles in labouring for the Lord and he was often wearied because this present life failed to satisfy and so he longed with ardent desire to be dissolved and to be with Christ. God heard his desire and chose to reveal to him the hour of his departure many days in advance. Robert, knowing this to be imminent communicated it to the brothers. For some time he was bedridden with bodily weakness and so accumulated the merits of the virtue of patience, in his infirmity gladly boasting of the power of Christ who was preparing a dwelling-place in him. In the 83<sup>rd</sup> year of his age, on 17 April,<sup>4</sup> his body returned to the earth. His spirit was freed to go back to God to whose service he had been tirelessly committed. Earth wept and heaven rejoiced. His sons, the monks of Molesme, whose sole joy and solace he had been, devoutly assisted at the funeral rites of their revered father weeping most bitterly. They did not doubt that he would receive the heavenly reward of his merits, nor that they would receive favours through his merits, but they were very upset that their father's presence had been removed from this light. Because by his just deeds while he was still on earth he had proved that he had been a son of light, God made known in the manner of his death the extent of his merits.

***Inserted at this point is a series of miracles. Kolumban Spahr, the editor of the Vita, notes pithily: "The chapters that follow are legendary throughout" (p. xlvii).***

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<sup>4</sup> *XVo kalendas maii*, some manuscripts read *tertio kalendas maii* (29 April), his feast day. The Cistercian martyrology gives 18 February as his day of death.