

# The Great Traditions of Prayer

In every age, the conditions in society provide the setting for particular forms of prayer. In the Western world there are major religious movements, Benedictine, Franciscan, Carmelite, Jesuit, etc., which enshrine these links. Though each style of prayer developed in specific circumstances - and is best understood in the light of that starting point - these varied insights into communication with God continue to have relevance. Together they form a rich mosaic of prayer for the present day.

## **The Roman Era: The Fathers of The Desert**

In the first centuries after the Resurrection, society was still dominated by pagan values and leadership. Away from the busy cities of the Mediterranean some men and women sought God in the silence of the desert. Singly, or in loosely coordinated groups, they pondered on the Scriptures in a life of reading, prayer and manual work. Disciples came and put themselves under the guidance of a Desert Father or, later, Mother. The task of these disciples was to become aware of the movements of their own hearts and to reveal to their chosen prayer-guide that growing consciousness of the springs of their desires and choices. They would then ask for a 'word'. This 'word', always brief and often obscure in itself, was to be pondered over, prayerfully, until the disciple discerned the next step in his/her path towards God.

## **The 'DARK Ages': The Benedictines**

After the breakup of the Roman Empire in the West, Europe became a patchwork of separate States. People lived in small self-contained villages which required the cooperation of all the members for survival. The monasteries set up by the Benedictines were religious 'village communities' - small worlds which could exist with very little contact beyond the walls. The rhythm of the Church's year and each day's liturgical hours provided life's pattern and pageant. This cycle - changeless and yet infinitely varied - and its discipline, made space for a peaceful contemplation of God.

## **Medieval Towns: The Friars**

Trade and increased skills brought groups of crafts together in small towns. No longer secure in an unchanging setting, the individual person was more vulnerable yet more valued; and the call to follow Christ was more consciously addressed to the ordinary person in everyday life. Into this world the Dominicans brought both profound teaching and the simple human devotion of the rosary. In such towns the poor man, Francis, awakened a