

THE LITTLE SISTERS OF JESUS

BY

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FATHER DE FOUCAULD, the modern Desert Father, has a world-wide renown and considerable interest has been shown in his Fraternities, the Little Brothers of Jesus, which have sprung, as it were, from his very life-blood. But less is heard of the Little Sisters of Jesus, who are in many ways quite different from the usual type of religious Congregation. They lead a contemplative life and yet it is lived not inside an enclosure but outside, amongst the materialistic workers of France as well as the nomadic Infidels of the Sahara. It is a life of poverty, labour and love; its purpose is to imitate as closely as possible that of Jesus the Carpenter in his workshop, Jesus the Lover of mankind who, in his public ministry, shared the life of the common people, his heart and soul overflowing with love for God and man.

Thus the desire of the Little Sisters is to live among the poor in such a way as to be identified with the poor. And their poverty is authentic for they have no secure background of dowry, income or organised charity; their Fraternities are maintained by the work of their hands. In factory, workshop and field they share with their fellows the hardships and uncertainties of their lot; but they do so in a spirit of joy and pride as they realise in their own lives how Jesus Christ toiled for his daily bread. And, as workers among workers, they are always seeking by sympathy, understanding and friendship to manifest to all his unique love for them.

This life of loving service differs completely from mere humanitarian work of that of secular Catholic Action, for the Little Sisters are a Contemplative Order. To many, this fusing of two such contrary aspects of the Religious life may seem practically impossible. In order to explain how its achievement has been gradually evolved we must go back to the beginning, to October 1936, when the first two Little Sisters left their homes in France, inspired by the longing to follow in the footsteps of Father de Foucauld by living a self-sacrificial life of charity amid the nomadic tribes of the Sahara. Installed in a tent at Boghari they soon found their time fully occupied in good works; dispensing, visiting, helping in soup kitchens, nursing in hospital and catechising the Europeans. But they remained unsatisfied, for such a life lacked the spiritual source

of contemplation prescribed by Father de Foucauld. The idea of a religious foundation gradually took root in their minds, and in June 1938, with this in view, they set off on a pilgrimage to pray for guidance at his tomb at El-Golea.

Here they met Monseigneur Nouet, the Prefect Apostolic of the Sahara, and also Father Voillaume, the Founder of the Little Brothers of Jesus. They told these two men of their great longing to live and work amongst the poor nomadic Mussulmen of the desert. As a result of this meeting the work at Boghari was taken over by a Religious Congregation, whilst the two Little Sisters received a year's training in the Novitiate of the White Sisters at Birmandreis. On 8 September 1939, as Professed Religious, they had the joy of knowing that their dream of a new Order, the Little Sisters of Jesus (of Father de Foucauld), was now an established fact. An outsider might well have been forgiven for regarding this as a somewhat temerarious experiment which would prove short-lived, especially as it coincided with the outbreak of war. Nothing daunted by this event, however, the two Little Sisters set off on a voyage of exploration to determine the site of their first mission. Their final choice was that of Sidi-Boudjman—a tent amid the nomadic tents of the Sahara—where they lived until 1940. In that year, having worked out the details of their Constitutions, they returned to Lyon-Sainte-Foy; and in 1941 they opened their first Novitiate at Turet, in Aix, directed by the Dominicans of les Tourelles. Later, when the conditions of war enforced a hasty evacuation, the novices were given hospitality at Rosarie by the nuns of the Sacred Heart and by the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary.

As the movement of the allied troops prevented the return of the Saharan Sisters to North Africa, they devoted the time from 1942-1944 to studying arabic at Paris, a course of action which was made possible through the kindness of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary at Lyons, where they established their Centre. After the liberation of Marseilles they returned again to the Sahara. This time they took with them the papal approval of their Constitutions, granted them by the Holy Father at a private audience shortly before.

In April of the following year, 1946, they set out for Tunis to organise a house of studies in arabic for their novices destined for Islam. For their Novitiate had been made possible—whilst awaiting one of their own—by the hospitality of the Sisters of Notre Dame. Four months later their first Fraternity of Workers was founded

at Aix in France and, in the same year, a Fraternity of Probation for ten Little Sisters at El-Abiodh-Sidi-Cheikh near the Little Brothers of Jesus, the Fraternity at Sidi-Boudjnan being temporarily abandoned.

Certain changes occurred in 1947. A new Fraternity of Administration started at Marseilles, the Novitiate was transferred from Tubet (Aix) to a house to be shared with the nuns of the Blessed Sacrament at Notre-Dame de la Seds (Aix), leaving Tubet still as the Mother House, the Fraternity of the Postulate, the Fraternity of Adoration, a place of welcome for all who are drawn by the light of Father de Foucauld.

Thus, under the protection of divine Providence, in spite of the tremendous difficulties caused by a world war, the Little Sisters of Jesus have been established as a Religious Order on the lines laid down by Father de Foucauld; a hidden contemplative life of prayer and praise in a Fraternity of Adoration, its centre being our Lord himself in the Blessed Sacrament—yet a life lived out amongst toiling humanity in poverty, humility, labour and brotherly love, as was that of their Lord and Master.

Like our Lord, the Little Sisters desire nothing which will make their lot different from that of the worker and native, nothing which will prevent them from being like them—really and truly poor. For this reason they desire their Fraternities to be self-supporting; the Missionary Fraternities and those of Adoration to be adopted and sustained by the Worker Fraternities. In addition this characteristic of absolute poverty must be manifested by their mode of living wherever that may be. Their fare is of the simplest, omitting at all times meat, wine and coffee; their dwellings, their method of travel, their clothing, all must be identified with those of the poorest amongst whom they live. Thus the blue blouse and shawl of the French worker are worn in the Worker Fraternities of France, the white dress and black cloak of the Arabian women in the Sahara. The only distinguishing mark of the Little Sisters is their emblem, a heart surmounted by a cross, the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the symbol of their Apostolate which is offered up in Immolation for the whole world, and for the Redemption of Islam in particular.

For amid their hard and absorbing labour in the factory or on the land, as also in their nomadic life of service among the pagans of the desert, the main purpose of the Little Sisters is that of the direct apostolate through the silent and hidden radiation of the interior riches of their contemplative life out into that exterior one of work, poverty and love. This would seem to be a new form

of contemplative life, purposing in a close identification with the people not only to provide an outpouring of Christ-life but also to find a support for such a life in intimate union with Jesus. The keynote of this identification is love, the desire to be united in the deepest friendship with all, to be all things to all men. But to remain true to this high ideal amid the materialistic evils that surround them, the Little Sisters must safeguard that authentic life of a Religious, in which are preserved the necessary spiritual powers in all their traditional wisdom, by submission to the hierarchy of the Church and to the rules of the Holy See.

As in Europe so in Northern Africa. Although their apostolate seeks to elevate the inhabitants unobtrusively on both the material and the spiritual plane, yet it is an apostolate of love containing no hint of benevolent patronage. The Sisters offer friendship to the poor native pagans, and they desire, quite simply, to become one with them. This can only be brought about by living in their midst, visiting them, accepting their hospitality, sharing their meals, nursing their sick. In order to deepen this contact the Little Sisters strive to eliminate the differences between themselves and the Mussulman poor. They give up their European dress and customs, their native tongue. In their endeavour to become truly absorbed in their primitive surroundings they adopt—except for prayer—the local language, the local ways and methods, all that is not, in fact, incompatible with the Christian and Religious life which must be carefully preserved.

There is no doubt that this is a difficult task which will require years of adaptability, but it is a task which must also be preceded by a thorough study of the language, customs and traditions of the field of the apostolate, as also of its religion, in a spirit of respect for all truth contained in such worship insofar as it may lead to a real desire to know, love and serve God.

It may be thought that this ideal is too high, that a contemplative life lived amid the bustle of the world, in the midst of its lusts and temptations, is not only a dangerous experiment but too formidable for achievement. Yet who can say it is an unattainable ideal since Jesus of Nazareth leads the way! A special vocation carries with it not only the risks and the difficulties of that state but the grace to overcome them. Moreover this vocation is gradually built up by a long period of religious training lasting six or seven years. In addition, as professed religious, when they are exhausted by their labours and constant contact with men, they return to the Central Fraternities of Adoration to refresh themselves anew in the light of the Blessed Sacrament—like Mary of Bethany at the

feet of Jesus—that they may give themselves more abundantly to their fellow creatures. In the vastnesses of the desert surrounded by the problems and perils of the Mohammedan world, no less than amid those of the modern materialism of Europe, it may be truly said that he who has called his Little Sisters will be ever present with them. Jesus of Nazareth leads the way.

A DOMINICAN RETREAT HOUSE IN SWITZERLAND

BY

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SWITZERLAND, these days, is to most of us the promised land of material enjoyments, the land flowing with milk and honey, where the Englishman, tired of the never-ending austerity diet, can for a few holiday weeks eat butter and cheese and cake and cream to his heart's content. But if he should not be only materially-minded he can also find spiritual enjoyments which perhaps he did not expect.

On the beautiful Lac de Neuchâtel of the fascinating, ever-changing play of colours, there stands the lovely old town Estavayer-le-Lac. It is a medieval place, with a thick wall and a castle, uneven, narrow streets, with a fine old parish church in the baroque style so frequent in Switzerland, and a convent of Dominican contemplative nuns which can boast of six hundred years of unbroken existence. Six hundred years of Mass, of liturgical chant—and these nuns chant beautifully—of contemplation—this means an atmosphere impregnated with the prayer and with the peace of the life of Mary.

Quite near this Convent a Dominican Retreat House was opened in 1943, in the middle of the war, and flourished at once. It is beautifully situated, many of its large, airy rooms overlook the Lake. It is run by a very charming and experienced Dominican Tertiary who receives guests for private as well as for preached Retreats; the ideal is, perhaps, to combine the two—to have a few days in private before by way of preparation, or afterwards to ruminate on what has been heard.

The Retreats are normally preached by Dominican Fathers, and