

that all Scripture is inspired of God and profitable (2 Tim. 3, 16), so the Sisterhood must receive the Superior's commands without distinction; carrying out with alacrity all that is enjoined, with no sadness or constraint, that their obedience may have its reward. And not only should they accept what they are taught in matters of discipline, but even when their teacher forbids them to fast, or advises them to take nourishing food, or suggests any other relaxation as need requires, they should accomplish all alike, believing that whatever she says is for them the law.

*External Relations.* When any necessary business has unavoidably to be spoken of, either with some man, or with anyone responsible or who could be of service in the matter, it is for the Superior herself to speak. And one or two of the Sisters should be with her: such that by their manner of life and years they may safely be seen and spoken with. But if one of these has some useful suggestion to make, she should submit it to the Superior; and anything that has to be said, should be said by her.



## A CARMELITE LAY INSTITUTE

**M**OST of those trying to lead a life of Christian perfection in the world model their spiritual life on one or other of the religious Orders, following its spirit and finding in the ideals of the religious family to which they have attached themselves, if only by ties of affection and reverence, an encouragement, an inspiration and a spiritual strength. It is, then, in no way surprising that the new lay institutes, brought into being in their present form by the Apostolic Constitution *Provida Mater* published in March, 1947, should in some cases grow up under the aegis and protection of one of the older monastic Orders.

Some ten kilometres beyond Carpentras in a rather isolated part of Provence stands the house of Our Lady of Life. The valley is cleft in two by a rocky spur about 300 feet high against which the bold, clearly-defined contours of the fortified church of Venasque stand out; to the right lies the valley of the Axle, turning inwards, to the left that of the Nesque which tapers until it terminates in picturesque gorges. The rather abrupt slopes of the mountains are crowned with sharp ridges of rock. The landscape is austere—it would be almost harsh if the dull yellow of the rocks and the green of the pine, olive and evergreen oak did not in the warmth of the light of morning,

give an impression of softness and clarity; if the air were not perfumed with the scent of thyme and lavender and if the fields (watered by irrigation) were not luxuriant with their green crops and fruit. On the left, about 150 yards from the road, on the further bank of the Nesque, a stone cross is discerned among the trees and one glimpses buildings beyond. Such is the setting of Our Lady of Life. A long path leads down to it. An esplanade for pilgrims stretches in front of the chapel which has been a shrine of Our Lady for many centuries. Old documents relate that St Siffrein, bishop of Venasque, the capital of Comtal-Venaissin (the Venaissin) as long ago as the 6th century, had a chapel built here in the valley at the foot of the rock on which his episcopal city stood. It would seem that the place was shown him by balls of fire which fell from heaven as he was praying to Our Lady as *Mater Creatoris*. The chapel is almost bare. At the entrance is the tombstone of Bohetius bishop of Carpentras (or Venasque) in the 6th century; the piety and gratitude of past ages have covered the walls of the chapel with ex-votos, for the most part crude, grouped together to commemorate the countless miracles wrought there by our Lady. Over the Renaissance altar is enthroned the *Mater Vitae*, Our Lady of Life, a Blessed Virgin whose image conveys something of manly strength softened by kindness. Adjacent to the church on the right is what remains of the former convent of the Minims, the guardians of the shrine until the Revolution; to the left is a scrubby garden; over towards the hill the convent is protected by a building, recently restored, which with its thirty cells, we recognise as the new monastery of the Institute. Everything around is either very old or retains an appearance of solidity, of rusticity, of poverty. On the hill slopes behind stretch the olive trees, the pine groves, and then the evergreen oak, the holly bushes, covering a wide expanse, the solitude of which is disturbed but rarely—by a shepherd or someone shooting game. One might imagine oneself on the very roof of the world. Above the olive trees, about 300 feet up the hill, yet in sight of the convent, are a number of 'hermitages', cells for those who wish to make a day's retreat or to enjoy a brief period of complete solitude.

The Institute is affiliated to the Carmelite Order and consists of a number of the Order's women tertiaries. It will perhaps be recalled that the Carmelite tertiary rule itself is severe. Its ideal is a union of the soul with God more intimate than that between the window and the ray of sunlight or the coal and the fire. The means chosen to attain such an end include a vow of obedience, a vow of chastity according to one's state, the daily recital of Office, practice of mental prayer and of the presence of God, silence, a monthly recollection

day, and days of fasting and abstinence not binding upon ordinary Catholics.<sup>1</sup> The members of the Institute lead at first a Carmelite community life: mental prayer in silence, recitation of the Divine Office in choir, nocturnal prayer three times weekly, take up a good deal of the day. The remainder is equally divided between household tasks (and gardening) and intellectual work in one's cell. The spiritual teaching is that of St John of the Cross, St Teresa, and St Teresa of Lisieux. All that is permitted as religious habit is a black veil worn indoors and a full cloak worn for community exercises, in some sort the modern form of the ample cowl which the monks still use to put on over their working clothes when they go to choir.

The community includes subjects from every sort of milieu. The superior has been a professor of philosophy. Others are secondary school mistresses, teachers in country schools, welfare workers, nurses, a doctor, Domestic Science instructors, others again with no profession or even without clearly-marked aptitudes. After two years' training in the monastery, each member returns, under certain safeguards, to the exercise of her profession. This has enabled them to influence all milieux, including those inaccessible to a religious in her habit.

The training which is given is for the contemplative life. The two years' stay is designed to effect a permanent attachment to supernatural realities, to make people realise, actually and in a practical manner, the divine presence within them. Such a realisation is usually painful. The solitude which appears so attractive to an outsider means considerable suffering for those who surrender themselves to it. It yields up its treasure, that is, a living realisation of the presence of God, only through an interior aridity and sense of utter helplessness which are accompanied by impressions and reactions often most painful. This work in the soul is regarded by the Institute as essential because it is the indispensable basis of the apostolate. It is *never* sacrificed and the principal provisions of the Constitutions are so framed as to aim at its increasing perfection during the whole of life. Thus when a member returns to the world after her two years' formation, the most important obligation imposed on her is that of two hours' daily mental prayer; and during 45 days each year (of which 30 must be consecutive) she has to return to the monastery, one unbroken year in every twelve being spent there too. Everyone receives, too, a practical training and is expected to take part in all household tasks, not excluding the most

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<sup>1</sup> cf. *Way of Perfection for the Laily* (a detailed explanation of the Discalced Carmelite Third Secular Order Rule) by Father Kevin, O.D.C.; Browne and Nolan Ltd., Dublin, 1945.

menial. The Institute considers that those women who are exclusively intellectual or who are unable to attend to anything which is not *technically* religious have lost much of their value. It does not care to receive into its family either those who can only discuss and criticise, nor those who are always troubled about their states of soul. Each must learn to give her consecrated service as circumstances—often completely unforeseen—demand.

The training is completed by an interchange of views on the methods of the apostolate. Outside people with interesting experiences of apostolic work to relate are also invited to participate in such an interchange. Several professors from near-by universities come to Our Lady of Life for regular visits. Thus for all the strictness and austerity of the 'solitude', as we may term it, the door is in no way closed against anything which might enlarge one's mental outlook or which might afford firsthand knowledge of the needs of the apostolate.

No special work is undertaken by the Institute as a whole; its aim is rather to be a living witness to the existence of God, to his inner life, to the supernatural riches which he offers to all. Its outlook may perhaps be summed up in the words of the prophet Elias: 'The Lord God of Hosts in whose presence I stand is living. I am consumed by the flame of his zeal'.

The transition to the activity of the apostolate after two years of silence and solitude needs delicate adjustment. Each member is very carefully watched at this period of her religious life. If necessary longer and more frequent periods of return to the monastery are arranged. It may even be necessary for a sister to change her work in the world for a time. Such changes, however, if necessary, are so arranged that they do not interfere with anyone's immediate specialisation in the form of apostolate for which she seems to have most aptitude and attraction, nor are they allowed to deprive her of the facilities for acquiring her necessary professional diplomas if she has not these already. The Institute has student welfare workers, students at the University, and in Domestic Science, etc. Members take no definite engagement towards the Institute until they have made trial of at least one year's practical apostolate. Experience has shown most clearly that it is in their loyalty and faithfulness to the Institute through this change from a monastic life of much solitude to contemplative life in the world issuing in the apostolate, and *vice-versa*, that souls become detached and make progress, each discovering her true level in the interplay in which, despite the inevitable vicissitudes, contemplation and action find mutual sustenance and support.

The ideals of the Institute of Our Lady of Light would seem particularly suited to the needs of the present time, an age whose great suffering—though for the most part it does not know it—is the want of God. Is not the craze for existentialism an indication of the suffering of a generation which has lost the sense of the infinite? Clearly atheistic and materialist ideologies cannot be fought with intellectual weapons alone. The great apostolic work of Christendom in early times was wrought by those whose testimony to the truth was a real, living witness, brimming over with life; such were St John, St Paul, St Augustine, to whom the Institute looks, after Christ and his Mother, for inspiration. Its hope is that its members may become like the Christians of the first centuries whose living faith stemmed the tide of paganism, Christians to whom theological discussion on the twofold nature of Christ, for instance, or on the procession of the Holy Spirit, with its consequent deepening of faith, were matters of paramount importance because they were living the Christian life down to its very roots in the life of the Trinity.

The initial members of the Institute came to the monastery of Our Lady of Life, with no more resources than the manifest protection of the Blessed Virgin and the archbishop's encouraging blessing, in 1932. During the seventeen years or so which have since elapsed, they have sought to live their ideal and to form a group which shall be its embodiment. Trials and difficulties have not been wanting, a necessary purification if the Institute is to be lasting. Despite the obscurity in which the group has preferred to remain until such time as it should be canonically established, vocations have come freely and spontaneously and the Institute now numbers 40. The members began to feel, some two or three years ago, that the fundamental problems which they had had to face were now solved and that the time had come to give to both the ideal and its organisation a permanent shape by drawing up written constitutions in legal form. This, then, has now been done and as the constitutions are the fruit of experience and codify an organisation already in actual existence, they at once received the necessary approval. The Carmelite Institute of Our Lady of Life was among the first lay institutes to which the Holy See has given its approval since the publication of the Apostolic Constitution *Provida Mater* in 1947.

Anyone attracted by this particular form of self-dedication to God is invited to make a short stay at the monastery, and those desiring further information should write to Madame la Supérieure de Notre Dame de Vie, Venasque (Vaucluse), France.

*Adapted from the French by K.P.*