

SANCTITY

A REPLY TO SOME OPINIONS RECENTLY EXPRESSED IN 'LIFE OF THE SPIRIT'

Sir,—Isn't it time LIFE OF THE SPIRIT threw open its windows wide on the subject of Sanctity?

You invite a postcard's worth of comments and suggestions; and Mr Donald Nicholl's article in the September issue sends me searching for not one postcard but a whole packet!

St Benedict talks about the ladder of perfection. I heard one of his monks recently warn us of the antics made by 'spiritual' people in the attempt to climb a ladder which is not there. 'Spirituality' is a difficult and dangerous subject to write about; its very nature eludes such material things as words. But to begin to differentiate between 'lay' and 'religious' spirituality really makes one's head spin—and I fear in a quite literal and topical sense it makes me see red.

'The urgent need', writes Mr Nicholl, 'is for lay spirituality written by lay men and women. At present lay persons wishing to intensify their spiritual life by reading, have little choice but to read works written by religious, and dealing specifically with the problems of life in an Order. Helpful as such reading always proves, *the effect of transferring its applications to the difficulties facing, say, grocers and shop-stewards, inevitably produces a sense of unreality.*' (Italics mine.) It is necessary in fairness to Mr Nicholl to read this sentence in the context of the whole article, but it touches on a theme which he himself deplores and which we look to LIFE OF THE SPIRIT to do its utmost to straighten out: namely, this very cleavage between 'religion' and 'the world'. It is a pity that while recognising the 'powerful and harmful influence . . . still exercised by the assumption that there stretches an unbridgeable gulf between the world and the saints', Mr Nicholl seems, in the sentence already quoted, to cut away still more from the banks of the gulf.

Or does he?

Is the 'sense of unreality' the outcome of an unreality actually existing in the spirituality of many 'spiritual writers'?

In other words, have we gradually evolved a sort of spiritual class-distinction with two different sets of values, so that the grocers and shop-stewards find themselves faced with an altogether different path to holiness from that of a monk or nun?

One is sometimes tempted to wish that a modern Savonarola would make a vast bonfire of the vanities of 'spiritual writers', and

send us back to the Scriptures and the works of the early Fathers and Doctors before 'religious life' had crystallised so disastrously as it has. But then we should miss the genius of St Teresa of the Child Jesus of Lisieux, who put into one phrase what I am trying to spill over my packet of postcards. Her sister remarked on the struggles she must have been through to attain to such a degree of perfection as they saw in her. 'Oh, it is not *that!*' she replied. 'Holiness does not consist in this or that practice. *It consists in a disposition of the heart*, which make us always humble in God's hands, well aware of our weakness but audaciously confident in his fatherly goodness.'

What is the difference there, between 'lay' and 'religious' spirituality?

We are all people—human beings contending with the same setback of original sin. If God calls some by an act of his own choice to dedicate their lives exclusively to his worship, they have a greater responsibility to share its fruitfulness with their fellow men. A strategist's business is to direct the soldiers in the fring-line; a doctor's, to use his science for the healing of his sick brethren; that of a priest or religious, to offer the fruits of his theology and contemplation to his fellow Christians in the stress of the world. If there is a difference between 'lay' and 'religious' spirituality it must be somebody's fault for befogging the issues. Does the smile of the milkman belong to a different class of virtue from St Teresa's smile to the peevish old invalid after cutting her bread for tea?

In the refectory of an enclosed convent, *The Story of a Family* was read aloud, with great profit and edification to the nuns, because in spite of its tiresomely pedantic and moralising style it is of great documentary value as the true story of a saintly family. There is a tendency to forget that monks and nuns were born and brought up in ordinary human families, and that nowadays they share the common penalty of mankind in their bondage to forms, permits, controls and the rest of the bureaucratic diseases, demanding the practice of the same virtues of patience and mortification—or of fortitude in resistance to oppressive State-slavery.

Mr Nicholl wants lay writers of spiritual guidance. Has he not read the works of Dietrich von Hildebrand—in particular his *In Defence of Purity*, which, written by a married man, gives a clearer and more sublime teaching on virginity as the transcendence of sex than anything the present writer has come across in many years of spiritual reading? Is he ignorant too of the writings of that illustrious and saintly layman Friedrich von Hügel, of Eric Gill, Jacques Maritain, Margaret Yeo, the two Sheeds and their own rising genera-

tion, to name but a tiny group? We have surely never been so rich in lay writers, who are by no means a class apart from 'religious' spirituality. The novices in the same enclosed convent are instructed from Sheed's *Theology and Sanity*, to their own delight as well as their mistress's.

'To each according to his need; from each according to his capacity.' May we plead for a truly Christian policy of 'levelling' in the widest sense of leading us all together to the Heart of Christ? Let us, as St Thomas advises, care not *by whom* anything is said but consider *what* is said. To many of your readers, the writers of articles are simply a name; if the Christian name is not given, we have no idea whether they are priests, religious men or women or lay men or women. That is excellent. The confusion around the subject of contemplation was superbly cleared away in the first issue of 1950 by 'John Corson', who may be an Abbot or the father of a family for all we know—he certainly understands how to present his subject.

It is to be hoped that Mr Nicholl speaks over-pessimistically of the rarity of happy marriages and happy families. If his experience has been of the tragedies, mine has equally been of a far greater proportion of happy unions. But the lack of *sanctity* in marriage would seem to come from an extraordinary lack of any such understanding as von Hildebrand gives in the first part of the book quoted above. He is pointing out the highest ideal, which will only be reached by a few; many, alas, will regard it as an exaggerated idealism. But masterpieces of art are often unpleasing to the untrained critic—and God's masterpieces, the Saints, must appear exaggerated to those content with a lesser degree of union with him. Is it not the work of religious as much as of layfolk to keep this high ideal before the world? And can we not all in our own proper spheres be 'edified' in the literal sense, i.e., 'built up' in our spiritual life, by the virtue we recognise in each other?

There is a story—a Bedouin yarn with a moral—that tells of a King who sent his Grand Vizier to spy out a city he wanted to take. The Vizier in disguise went to a shop and asked for bread. The baker assured him that *his* bread was stale, whereas his neighbour would sell him the freshest, whitest bread. Every other shop was the same: fruit, vegetables were not up to much here—try my brother over there. . . . The Vizier returned to the King to advise against his intention. Ten years later the experiment was repeated. This time the vendors eagerly offered their wares as the best in the world—*far* superior to any other in the city. The Vizier now urged the King to

make war; he would easily capture the city, for the inhabitants were no longer of one heart.

Another story takes the last of my postcards. In it, the Kingdom of Heaven is likened to a marriage-feast which a king made for his son. When all was ready the invitations were sent out . . . and refused. Eventually the empty places were filled with the down-and-outs from the highways and hedges. Only one of the guests was thrown out, not having on a wedding garment. We are not told whether he was an ecclesiastic, a religious or a layman. Presumably the missing garment would have covered his robes, habit, or evening dress. In the Kingdom of Heaven there would be no distinction.—
Yours faithfully, 'A MOTHER OF FIFTEEN.'

P.S.—Since writing the above, the following fact has been related to me, and guaranteed as true:

Some years ago in a Carthusian monastery, two lay brothers were re-opening a grave for the burial of a monk who had just died. Their spades hit on an incorrupt body. (Charterhouse poverty excludes coffins.) One of the brothers fled to the Prior with the astounding news. 'Fill in that grave and start on the next one', was the unemotional reply.

Which explains the scarcity of Carthusian canonisations.

CORRESPONDENCE

To the Editor, LIFE OF THE SPIRIT

Sir,—Will you allow me to make a few points in answer to Q.S.'s letter in your October issue on an organisation for the contemplative life in the world?

1. Surely everyone sincerely trying to lead a truly Christian life is 'guided in a very special way by the Holy Spirit'; but this does not preclude their joining a particular organisation, whether in the world or in the cloister, to obtain the help that comes from a common aim and rule.

2. This rule, it is true, would have to be more elastic for lay people than the rules for cloistered communities; but the rules of the approved Secular Institutes, for example, have such elasticity as to enable members to pursue their different callings in the world.

3. 'Lay contemplatives' should not be negatively defined as frustrated religious vocations, but positively as pronounced vocations to a contemplative life in the world, suited for it by temperament and circumstances. . . . The main purpose of bringing them together would be to give each other mutual support and the life itself greater efficiency. A group of them would do much to prevent 'crankiness' (a very acute danger in such a life) and to bring greater force and vigour to the contemplative apostolate.—Yours, etc., S.W.