

Life of the Spirit

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LAY OR RELIGIOUS?

BY

THE EDITOR



OUR treatment of the question of lay contemplatives in the August issue of *THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT* raised an interest which was not surprising in view of the numbers who are seeking some form of dedicated life in the world. In particular the letters to the Editor (only one of which was short enough for publication!) showed a considerable diversity of opinion on the nature of the constitution of a society of lay contemplatives. This divergence of opinion often seemed to rest on a lack of understanding of the distinction between religious and lay life. One writer suggests a new religious order, which would be 'a band of secret contemplatives and their lives would be entirely dedicated and quite informal'. The rules suggested include 2 hours a day the minimum for prayer; a solitary life; the member should be able to pray at night 'if so inclined'; he should be self-supporting—'no habit, no vows, no constitutions . . . no admission or demission'. 'The member would simply settle down in a place and try to convert it by prayer. His active work being merely the outward expression of his prayer.' Each individual would have simple direction from a 'Director'.

The advantages suggested in such a society are that having 'no vows to break and no community to scandalise' the individuals would need little training except simply by attaching themselves at will to a teacher whom they would follow in the same way as the Indians gather in groups consisting of a teacher and his disciples. The authority would thus not be absorbed by one single individual. Again the lay worker being master of his own day can organise more time for prayer than is provided for the members of active religious orders. 'Moreover the pressure of the common life, although it is the great school of charity, almost eliminates that physical solitude and silence which greatly help towards contemplative prayer.' 'What is needed is not a new institute but a revival of the old profession of hermit or solitary within the context of modern life.'

All this suggests that the ideal of a group of lay contemplatives will simply turn out to be an enthusiasm of several lay people for the contemplative ideal of the Christian life. An individual who is on his own and can live thus solitary is bound to aim at some kind of contemplation if it is true that the Christian life is fundamentally a contemplative life. A Christian is bound to give some time to prayer when his job allows it, and he is bound to be hospitable and apostolic as the writer also suggests. There is no description here of anything other than a general call to prayer addressed to all well disposed Christians, and there is no property whatever on which to base the idea of an order. The idea as stated is not that of a religious order at all; the writer is considering not religious but lay life.

But the description of this type of lay Christian life in contrast to modern religious orders shows a lack of understanding of the nature of religious life. Unless this confusion is dispelled the aims of 'secular institutes' will be entirely misconstrued and their possibilities for the sanctification of their members and those for whom they work will be lost. The ideals of a 'secular institute' are to set up a religious order in the very heart of secular life; hence it is to be contra-distinguished from the lay life however sanctified and holy the latter may be. A religious order is constituted principally by the vow of obedience, which involves the member in a system, a way of life, in which he would not otherwise be involved. The vow subordinates him to superiors and correlates him to fellow members, and from this subordination and 'ordination' springs the Order—or Congregation—or Institute. An organisation of some sort is essential to the idea of the religious state, and it is precisely this static element from which the nature of the 'State of Perfection' is derived. The Gospel of our Lord of itself provides the royal way of perfection, to which no other constitution or set of rules need be added in order to lead the soul to the height of supernatural love—which is synonymous with Christian 'perfection'. But embraced by that way are many tracks which may be followed by the individual according to his vocation. One may follow the track of the priesthood, two more may choose that of married life to which our Lord gave the special means of a sacrament. And the track of religious life is one which is specially dedicated by the vow and the added rules and constitutions. The Church has from the beginning recommended this 'state' as being a very direct path to perfection; but no guarantee is attached to it, so that the secular priest or the family man may very well attain more rapidly to a higher grade of the love of God.

The vow which subordinates the member to the organisation in fact turns all his actions into acts of religious worship, because the vow is itself an act of the virtue of religion and so far as it is brought to bear on life as a whole it brings this new quality to the component parts of that life. In the middle ages laymen used publicly to dedicate themselves to a pilgrimage or even to a crusade, and to that extent and for the period promised the good actions which followed took on a new character from this promise. The religious by vow adds this quality to his life, that is why he is called a 'religious', since the all-embracing vow is an act of the virtue of religion. The exact articulation of the organisation to which he has committed himself depends on the individual 'Order' and upon the general guidance of Mother Church. Sometimes it may become dangerously overweighted with meticulous and detailed rules and injunctions, at other times it may threaten to cease being an organisation through lack of a determining rule; but within those two extremes lie almost infinite possibilities of ordering life in religious service. There are the strictly enclosed contemplatives whose service is specially directed to the service of silent prayer or of liturgical prayer; others are embraced by rules suited to a service of God in works of mercy, in teaching, or in missionary work. The common life entailed by these rules and constitutions is very varied; sometimes they leave a great deal of solitude as with the Cistercian despite his intensely social life, or with the Carthusian in his isolated cell; sometimes almost every moment of the day is shared with others. This common life may incidentally bring with it a considerable amount of comfort and freedom from worldly worries which face the good lay Christian. It may on the other hand provide a great deal of stress and tension. But these are not the aims of the common life, which is directed quite simply to the perfection of religious service, growing up into love. The common life of such religious rules brings into play all the Christian social virtues of 'affability', gratitude, liberality, truth-telling and above all that of fraternal charity. And in the ages when the Church knew and encouraged hermits and anchorites, it was generally understood that they had first perfected themselves in some such way of religious service so that they would not be looking for a way of escape or of self-centred devotion in those various districts of the Christian desert. As a rule the solitaries remained attached to some form of religious organisation by their vows—in fact it must have been an application of the vow of obedience which permitted a woman like Mother Julian to leave her Benedictine Abbey and take up her position in the little cell outside her church in Norwich. In these days the Carmelite life still admits and encourages its

hermits within its enclosure walls.

The Secular Institutes which have grown up in modern times have been attempts to reap the advantages of this religious service while remaining in more immediate contact with modern secular life. This necessarily demanded the abandonment of a considerable number of the traditional rules of the religious organisations hitherto recognised—the religious habit is an obvious example. But it could not envisage the forsaking of the principles of vow and constitution which lie at the foundation of religious life. The secular institutes are in fact attempts to re-apply those very fundamental principles. Those who have recently been endeavouring to apply them within a contemplative framework have not abandoned this general aim—indeed if they did they would be simply considering the best way for a layman to attain to the Contemplative ideal of the Christian life. But that is not the quest. Every individual Christian must indeed seek that for himself. But should he wish to be supported by vow and some form of common life, without entering a cloister of brick or stone, should he wish to belong to a religious organisation whose rule would direct his every movement towards the religious service of private prayer, without his having to don a special garment or live the intensely social life of the Cistercian Abbey, he must set about the elaboration of a constitution which will receive the approbation of the Church and thus with the sanction of authority place him in the state of perfection.

There are other devout Catholics who find themselves with a certain amount of time to spare from their daily work and who have no special social ties which bind them to family or relatives; such men and women are to be encouraged from every pulpit and from every director's confessional to undertake the contemplative life seriously. On occasion such people may be even advised to adopt some form of eremitical life—but if it involves the continuation of a life of work among their fellow human beings it will be only a metaphorically eremitical life, because the practice of the social virtues in their work will be one of their principal occupations. Nevertheless all these individual vocations to a life of prayer are glorious signs of the presence of the Spirit dwelling in his Church leading chosen souls to perfection according to his own unpredictable breathings. No one should dare to scorn these vocations or to regard them as being merely the manifestation of envy arising in the hearts of those who have been unable to live the constituted religious life. Constituted religious life is not for all, particularly perhaps in these days. But it still remains of great importance to realise the distinction between religious and lay life. False comparisons arising from a misconception of the nature of religious life will only lead

to foolish rivalry. In the house of God there are many mansions and each has its own ground plan, different in design from all the others.

In conclusion an extract from another letter about the August Editorial will help to clarify the nature of this contemplative life in the world: 'The story of St Jane Frances de Chantal seems rather relevant—"When Madame had M. de X as her director she prayed for two hours a day and upset the whole house. Since she has had M. de Genève she prays all day and upsets no one." . . . Contemplation is a matter of the kind of prayer not the amount of time one gives to it; and if the right thing is achieved the time question will solve itself. Would it not help if we concentrated on that interior discipline of mind and will which must be there before the Holy Ghost can take over?'

PAROCHIAL SPIRITUALITY

BY

ILLTUD EVANS, O.P.



HE parish church is the place of God's meeting with his children. God's house is the Christian's home, and home is the place to which you return.

The life of grace is for the members of Christ a common life, whose redemptive source is one, whose end is one.

Its unity is symbolised by, indeed is effected on, that altar-stone of sacrifice which gives to the church its meaning and reveals to the people of God their destiny.

Within the single circle of Christian life there are infinite varieties of Christian living. Each soul unique: but for all alike the need and fact of redemption, of incorporation in Christ the Lord of all. The irony is that the life of the Spirit, which is primarily the common life of unity, of being made one with and through Christ our Lord, should so largely be considered in terms of individual perfection. Degrees of sanctity there most certainly are, and the heights are more exhilarating than the plains. But unity precedes diversity; the source from which St Teresa and Mrs Flaherty alike draw their strength is available to all.

But the economy of grace is achieved amongst men; thus are their wants supplied, their desires fulfilled. And the Incarnation reaches down to all that is human save sin. A man's natural need for meet-