

The Life of the Spirit

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THE DOMINICAN SISTERS OF THE EUCHARIST

BY

K. E. POND.

From its very beginning the Dominican Order has always manifested its vitality by giving effect to new ways of spiritual and apostolic life. It was not by the well-trodden path of enclosure, stability and retirement from the world that St. Dominic chose to lead his friars. His experience with the Albigensians had shown him that to meet the needs of the time other means must be found. Those means he had the vision and the courage to adopt. What struck his contemporaries about St. Thomas seems to have been his novelty¹, an imputation of which he might well be proud for it was his courage in bringing forth old truths in a new form that gave to the Church his synthesis of Aristotelianism and Platonism. It is not surprising, then, to learn that in the 20th century, as in the 13th, the Order of Preachers finds new ways, especially suited to the conditions of the time, of fulfilling its vocation of *contemplata aliis tradere*.

For St. Thomas contemplative life consists in an operation of the intellect for which man through love acquires a certain aptitude², and he teaches that various operations of the mind, and such activities as hearing, reading, consideration, etc., have their place as necessary prologomena to and concomitants of

1 cf. Guillelm de Tocco: *Vita S. Thomae Aquinatis* cap. xiv (ed. Prummer)
"Erat enim novos in sua lectione movens articulos, novum modum et clarum determinandi inveniens, et novas adducens in determinationibus rationes: ut nemo, qui ipsum audisset nova docere, et novis rationibus dubia diffinire, dubitaret, quod eum Deus novi luminis radiis illustrasset"

2 II-II Q.180 Art. 1.

contemplation³. Surely, therefore, intellectual life may be intimately linked with contemplation and thereby be completely surrendered to God? Such a conception of religious life is, however, far from common. Many women of the present day have in their university life, or professional training, acquired habits of study and an intellectual formation which have become almost part of their being. Some of them are attracted by religious life but fear that unless they join a teaching order, to which they feel no call, they must completely renounce all intellectual life upon entering the cloister. They are not at all sure that it would be right to do so. Such a step seems tantamount to the amputation of a limb or the frustration of some bodily function, only to be consented to when the limb is diseased or the function utterly and permanently disorganised.

It was for the purpose of enabling educated Catholic women of the 20th century to achieve the ideal of contemplation through intellectual life that the Very Rev. Père Brisset, O.P., then Prior of the Dominicans of St. Jacques, Paris, established in 1920, at Sens (Yonne), the Dominican Sisters of the Eucharist. The congregation was canonically erected and affiliated to the Order in 1923. The sisters are regular tertiaries living in community. As such they are not bound to enclosure. Whilst as Dominicans they seek to live to the full the high purpose of the Order, to pass on to others the fruits of contemplation, it is in the means they adopt to carry out their purpose that the difference between this fresh shoot and the older orange-wood lies.

In order to fit themselves for the life of contemplation the Dominican Sisters of the Eucharist spend several hours each day in the study of Scripture and theology. Such study is supplemented by regular and systematic lectures and by periodical examinations, for the personal effort of the mind towards the acquisition of divine knowledge needs guidance and discipline. The training given is complete. It is given solely that when fully professed each sister may be capable of the three hours' mental prayer daily which the Rule prescribes as a minimum and which may even be lengthened if superiors think such prolongation is wise in a particular case. With such an intellectual formation, lasting as it does over a period of years, vagueness, spiritual dreaming, or false mysticism, can find no place.

The Liturgy has always held a very important place in Dominican life. At Sens both the Divine Office and the Office of our Lady are recited daily, the conventual Mass and much of the Divine Office being sung on feasts. Here again considerable time is devoted to the study of Latin and plain-chant in order that mind as well as heart may join as completely as possible in

³ II-II Q.180. Art. 3. ad 4.

the worship of the Mystical Body.

Manual work holds an important place in the life of the Dominican Sisters of the Eucharist. They have no lay-sisters and all must take their part in keeping the monastery clean and in good order. In order that such tasks shall not encroach on the time devoted to prayer and study, labour-saving appliances are allowed. Far from proving irksome, such labour provides a safety-valve for the fatigue which constant application to study might otherwise produce. It is a salutary form of penance which benefits body and soul.

In two ways chiefly do the Dominican Sisters of the Eucharist share their life of contemplation with those outside. Firstly they throw open their houses with generous hospitality to anyone wishing to make a private retreat. Such retreatants share as far as possible in the life of the house, but are left in solitude and freedom face to face with God. The Sisters are there if the retreatant wishes to consult them or finds her solitude too great a strain, but otherwise the work is left to God. Their freedom from enclosure makes it possible for them to receive retreatants in a much more natural way than would otherwise be the case. The other way in which these nuns transmit their life to the outside world is through their contact with their own families. To go to the bedside of a near relative who is dying or in danger of it is considered part of the nun's vocation. After the sacraments of the Church have done their work, who is better qualified than a contemplative religious to help her mother or father meet their last hour with Christian resignation and fortitude? Courteous esteem for the family of the religious is a carefully cherished tradition among the Dominican Sisters of the Eucharist. Visits of near relatives take place at the monastery without grilles or witnesses. In the same spirit letters from her family are given to the religious unopened.

The principal monastery of this community is at Sens, Yonne⁴. It is situated to the extreme north of the city, built on what was formerly a swamp which has been cleared by the nuns themselves with almost incredible labour. A flourishing kitchen garden and well cared for farm, both tended by the nuns, have replaced the swamp. As true daughters of St. Dominic the sisters have attached great importance to the erection of proper monastic buildings. These were constructed in 1931. Ample provision is made for space, light and air. The church is lighted by an immense lantern around which are grouped the oratories which thus look directly on the sanctuary, for the cell of each religious opens into an oratory, thus providing the fullest possible opportunity for adoration in solitude of the Most Holy Sacra-

⁴ The Dominican Sisters of the Eucharist hope to make a foundation in England after the war.

ment. There is a daughter house at Servoz, near Chamonix, high up in the French Alps. As yet⁵ it has no monastic buildings—the convent consisting of wooden chalets—but the life lived there is the same. Both at Sens and at Servoz the nuns, among whom several nationalities are represented, are beloved by the people round them. At Sens during the unemployment crisis they gave work to many on the construction of their church and monastery. Servoz is a tiny village without doctor or chemist, and it is to the convent that the peasants come for help when they are ill. A store of simple remedies is always kept and in times of sickness the Prioress or some other experienced nun goes to the sufferer's home and gives what help she can. Before the nuns came Servoz was a hot-bed of anti-clericalism. Many Catholics failed to practise their religion and there was great hostility to the Church. Now numbers have returned to the sacraments.

As a safeguard against hasty judgments and false estimates of the religious life, those wishing to enter the congregation are allowed to spend a month as 'Aspirants', at the end of which time anyone who feels she has made a mistake is thus free to return to secular life without having entered upon the canonical postulancy. The month is passed in a prolonged retreat devoted to the study of religious life as lived by the Dominican Sisters of the Eucharist, and in sharing that life as far as possible. As long a period as ten years may elapse between entry as an Aspirant and final profession.

As this paper has tried to show, the spirit of this congregation is essentially one of freedom. Belonging as they do to the Dominican Third Order the nuns are not bound to enclosure and this removes many difficulties in their contact with those who need their help. Their Rule is based more on fidelity to conscience than on the exact observance of minutiae. Much is left to the sense of responsibility and generosity of the individual religious, who within certain limits, is allowed to arrange her time as seems best to her. The hermit spirit is very marked as the oratories for silent prayer testify. It would be difficult to find a congregation whose way of life exhibits a greater sense of proportion. Manual work provides relief from intense application to study, no severe fasts or other corporal austerities are required; from time to time lectures are suspended and the greater part of the day is spent out of doors. The training of the Dominican Sister of the Eucharist is a training for freedom and responsibility in the exercise of the sublime vocation to which she has been called, a freedom and responsibility rendered possible only by the completeness of her surrender.

⁵ I write, of course, of the time just before the war.