

WORK ¹

GABRIEL OF ST MARY MAGDALEN, O.C.D.

ARTICLE EIGHT of the Apostolic Constitution *Sponsa Christi* speaks of work and asks that it should be organised in such a way that by its means, together with other legitimate resources, it will be possible to ensure the support of the convent.

It is this ruling of the new Constitution which, in many convents, will make its consequences chiefly felt, and which demands a generous correspondence on the part of nuns. On this account we would make both the idea proposed and also its practical outcome clear, explaining at the same time its importance from the spiritual point of view.

Everyone knows the distressing condition in which many convents found themselves during, and principally after, the last world war. Daily bread was often lacking and this is still the case with regard to a number of convents, where the nuns find it difficult to exist. Various factors have contributed to this painful state of affairs. It was in many places the destruction caused by the war; then the devaluation of money which has lessened dowries and reserves of capital, reducing actual income to insignificance; at the same time and fundamentally for the same reasons, alms have diminished.

To sum up, various sources of income, common in past times, have nearly or altogether ceased to be represented on the budget; it is therefore understandable that in many communities the economic equilibrium has been threatened, or entirely upset, with the result that the nuns are faced with misery.

In certain countries financial difficulties had already begun to make themselves felt after the first world war, but as these took on minor proportions, many communities found a way of adapting themselves to these difficulties, and

¹ From a Commentary on *Sponsa Christi*. The author and translator have kindly granted leave for the publishing of two chapters of this Commentary in *THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT*. The whole text may be obtained in English from Monastero S. Giuseppe, Via Ancilotto, 6, Roma, Italy.

avoided a crisis, or succeeded in overcoming it without serious inconvenience. In other countries, and this is the case in Italy, the disaster came more suddenly and was more violent so that the consequences have been felt everywhere and often very seriously.

Appeals to the Holy Father have multiplied to such a degree that the Holy See is not able to relieve so much need solely by means of charity; it is necessary to find means to adjust the situation, and a timely remedy is indicated in article 8 of the Constitution. Among reasons revealing the need for a 'renewal' in cloistered Orders, the explanatory part of the Constitution emphasises in the first place the state of economic misery of many convents.

One of the principal means, if not to say *the* principal means, for carrying into effect the aforesaid 'renovation' is contained in the provisions of article 8. And it is indeed a case for 'renovation' because in many convents there is no actual existing tradition of productive work. This must not cause surprise, for it is simply explained by the economic condition of past times, when the principal means of support depended on capital and income, while now the economic centre of gravity is rapidly becoming, or has become, that of work. When currency was of gold a certain quantity of it secured the livelihood of its owner. Now money has become merely a token, subject to continual devaluation, and may even entirely lose its value. Therefore intelligent parents of today, rather than leave their children a certain sum of money, prefer to spend their substance in giving them an education which will make them capable workers, whether this work be intellectual or manual. They are right; for persons of today their real insurance consists in their capacity for work. The time will come for nuns also—and in a certain sense it has already come—when the most secure dowry for a young girl wishing to enter a convent will be her capacity for work.

Indeed the central disorganisation observable in the economic world must inevitably have its repercussions also in the economic life of our convents. So that in convents also from now onwards it will be necessary to depend more entirely upon work in order to balance the budget; and in proportion

as previous resources diminish, perhaps even to vanishing point, it is clear that income derived from work must increase.

Many have realised this for some time past, but it was difficult to make it understood in surroundings which are not in direct contact with the life of the world; now however as the Holy See has spoken, nuns, as devout daughters of the Church, will trustfully welcome its ruling and will yield a filial obedience. Our nuns in fact have always been busily engaged with work; anyone who has the opportunity of following their life closely will have become aware of this. Their hands are always occupied. However, for the most part their work has been almost entirely directed to maintaining the possessions of the community in good order. Poverty has been practised particularly by means of economy, it has been sought to make things last; darns and patches have therefore been multiplied, time being taken up in excess of what a more rational economic organisation would allow. To be practical in this matter: a piece of new material could often advantageously take the place of many darns. Those who desire to produce must take account of the time factor. Our holy Mother Teresa understood this well, and wrote in her first Constitutions: 'The Office is to be recited throughout (i.e. to be said, not sung, therefore shorter), as also the Mass, so that there will remain, please God, a little time in which to earn a living'. Here we see the holy Mother Teresa saving time at the expense both of the Mass and the Divine Office, in order to give her daughters time to earn their bread. Notice that our Mother's first idea was that her daughters should gain their living by the work of their hands, together with the alms sent to them by Divine Providence, and it was only when constrained by force that she accepted an income for some of her convents; and this only followed the express and insistent advice of the great Dominican theologian, Father Banez, whom she did not feel it right to oppose. Nevertheless the preferences of our holy Mother were always for convents without incomes, so that for us now to return to an economic organisation based on labour is only to return to our holy Mother Teresa's primitive plan which was always her favourite. This how-

ever certainly requires organised effort. A number of convents have already made this effort, and often successfully. There are several communities who really live by their work, or almost do so, and this without having sacrificed any traditional observances. Their example should strengthen and console those now faced by the 'renovation' requested by the Holy See.

While asking of nuns this effort for the organisation of productive work, Holy Church has acted in a most motherly way, being anxious not only to secure their material subsistence, but also to help their spiritual life in the best way possible. Therefore before giving expression to her requirements, as set forth in article 8, Holy Church, in the explanatory part of the Constitution, has represented to nuns in the happiest way how it is possible to combine this more intense application to work with that search for union with God which is characteristic of their contemplative life.

These teachings are so rich, and may be foreseen as so fruitful, that they could serve as a basis for a 'mysticism of labour'. . . . These teachings contain an appreciation of work both moral and spiritual, which we may well take into account of in our lives, and for this reason we must not neglect some explanation of them.

The Constitution begins by assigning to work its place in life both human and moral. Work is a law of human life, which life we must work to sustain. 'The man who refuses to work must be left to starve', writes St Paul (2 Thess. 3, 10). This famous saying of the great Apostle—without however any reference to him—finds place, under the formula, 'he who will not work shall not eat', even in the Soviet Constitution. The law is truly universal and imposes itself also on contemplatives, as we see in this Constitution.

Besides, work has, according to Genesis, both a penitential and a satisfactory side to it. 'Still thou shalt earn thy bread with the sweat of thy brow' (Gen. 9) said God to Adam after his fall. Man is also morally rehabilitated by work. Not only this; man is ennobled and humanly perfected by work, both because in avoiding idleness he avoids so many occasions of evil-doing and also because work itself, consisting of a systematic application of various faculties,

serves to develop in them their natural aptitudes and so perfects the man himself.

We must add that work, besides being a human law, is also precisely a law of religious tradition. The ancient Benedictine Rule teaches *Ora et labora*. Also the Carmelite Rule in its paragraph on manual work, as well as the corresponding chapter of the Constitutions of our holy Mother Teresa, show that work has always held a place of honour in the Carmelite religious tradition.

Nuns however must not see in work only a noble occupation in accordance with the exigencies of human nature and religious tradition; there is in work something still more uplifting, for when it is accomplished under the conditions set forth by the Constitution *Sponsa Christi* it becomes a great instrument of spiritual progress. This is the most interesting part of the Holy Father's teaching.

The Constitution explains that for work to be done from the supernatural point of view it must fulfil the following conditions:

1°. It must be undertaken with a pure intention (*sancto proposito*), that is to say, proposing to self the holiest end that can be, namely, the glory of God and the good of souls from whence to draw the double love which should burn in the heart of every contemplative.

2°. It should be accompanied by the exercise of the presence of God, by frequent remembrance of God keeping the heart turned towards him during the work itself.

3°. It must be undertaken under obedience (*ex oboedientia capiat*). This point most immediately renders it an instrument of spiritual progress. Since union with God takes place by means of the will, and is realised by the transformation of the human will into the divine will (St John of the Cross, *Ascent*. I, n. 2), all that tends to unite our will with the divine will becomes an effective means of progress towards divine union. Now work imposed by obedience and regulated by it comes to us as a secure manifestation of the divine will, of which the commands of the Superior are the normal expression. Thus the religious who works under obedience, who wills, that is, to execute the work imposed upon her, in her very application to the work itself unites

her will to the divine will. Indeed, the more the work costs, and the greater the effort required, the more intense becomes the act by which the human will is united to the divine will. It is therefore clear that work done under obedience becomes an instrument of divine union. And it is undoubtedly the exercise of the presence of God which will help the soul to maintain this interior disposition during working hours.

4°. It must be combined with a voluntary self-mortification, and sacrifice. This is largely arrived at if we work under obedience, because in so doing we renounce our own will, and also because work is a continuous source of sacrifice and self-immolation, if only on account of the distaste which has to be overcome.

Even if it must be said, speaking of corporal mortifications, that fatigue caused by work voluntarily endured for a long time is neither the grandest nor the most praiseworthy form of mortification, still it is much less exposed than is the use of instruments of penance to little moral imperfections, and has the great advantage of being a hidden mortification usually known to God alone to which very commonly those with whom we live pay no heed. Often a Superior reluctant to allow the use of instruments of penance will easily permit the assumption of fatiguing work.

We may therefore conclude with the Holy Father that work so undertaken becomes 'a powerful and constant exercise of all the virtues'. It is an expression of love towards God, because undertaken for his love; of love towards our neighbour because it is done in order to procure bread for the community; it becomes prayer because accompanied by the practice of the presence of God; it is eminently an exercise of obedience, a continuous practice of spiritual and corporal mortification, and finally also a great exercise of poverty.

(To be concluded)