

often regarded as the founders of monachism were indebted to a monastic idea already in possession, and received their instruction from others.

There is a kind of theological argument with which all students are familiar. In favour of some doctrine or practice it is impossible to find clear and abundant testimonies in the early centuries. Yet in a later age it is so universal, accepted by different peoples, and even by schismatics, who would never, after their separation, or indeed long before it, have taken it over from the other churches, that it can only be explained as being of apostolic or even of divine institution. Perhaps some scholar will point, by the force of such a developed argument, to the origin of the monastic state. Not only is it promoted by Anthony and Pachomius in Egypt. It is associated in Syria with Hilarion, in Asia Minor with Eustathius of Sebaste, in Mesopotamia with Mar Awgin, in Gaul with Martin. When Patrick evangelizes Ireland, he must of necessity plant it there. When Augustine takes it to Britain, he finds it established there already among the Christian Celts of Wales. In England of our day, the descendants of those who broke with tradition in the sixteenth century have discovered that their forefathers unwisely threw over something without which the fulness of Christianity can hardly be practised or conceived.

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## RETREAT HOUSES, RELIGIOUS AND LAY

By

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In England there is great need for more houses where retreats can be made and quite as urgently for different types of retreat house. There is room for considerable variety, for a network of smaller and larger houses, in towns and out of them, religious and lay. There is a very clear need for a liturgical retreat house, more for women than for men, to whom the existing monasteries are open. There is need for a retreat house sufficiently contemplative and monastic for a genuine spirit of silence to rule; but there is also need for a home for a very free type of retreat where the Christian minority who love the Lord in a neo-pagan age can meet, and such retreats might be the beginning of many genuine friendships and much work for God.

In a retreat we break from our routine life and plunge for a time into another life, so as to turn right way up—if we were previously upside-down—but above all so as to plunge from a more superficial to a deeper and more fully lived Christian life. But if the plunge is not into another and more fully lived life, but into a vacuum with devotional frills, an appendage to a religious life going on behind closed doors, it is apt to lend an air of unreality to the whole, so that the effects fade before the

“realities” of everyday life. The grace of God apart, everything then depends on the strength of prayer of the individual and the preacher’s sterling worth. But the house itself and its permanent inhabitants could be a much bigger contributory factor.

It should be possible to come from one life to another, in coming to a retreat; to come to be part of the household and share the life for the time being. That might even be, quite often, the whole retreat, without any preaching; and certainly a brief experience of living in a more fully Christian sense could make as lasting an impression as any preaching to the mind or the emotions. But of course the aim would not be to make imitation monks and nuns of us all. The elements of life that we should most need to share are the things of their nature catholic, but which we can ordinarily only have in small measure—either because of the busy-ness of our lives or because a devotional fashion has deprived us of our heritage—and primarily, of course, the liturgy. If any of the Benedictine monasteries of women could receive retreatants into guest rooms, refectory and church as monks can do, much of the problem would be solved; because the liturgy needs to be a living thing, a life in which we can participate, not a performance got up for the occasion. This life, centred in Mass with the Divine Office as its setting, could draw us into the life “hid with Christ in God”, unfolded in the Church’s year, as nothing else could do; and if it were the permanent life of the house it would avoid both the sensual aestheticism and the dry (though often amateur) archaeologising that are the Scylla and Charybdis of the “liturgical movement”. For in itself the liturgy is strong with a manifold richness of grace and life and doctrine, at the furthest remove from both sentimentalism and arid intellectualism.

In France the need for such monastic and liturgical retreat houses is met by the congregation of *Benedictines Missionaires*, whose mother priory is in the outskirts of Paris (7 Rue d’Issy, Vanves, Paris). There they carry on the full monastic life, but without enclosure. Guests have their small, white cells in the monastery itself; eat in the refectory—the considerable number of Oblates having a table to themselves—while it continues its normal course with public reading and the rest; and sing Office in alternate choir with the nuns. The fine brick church (the priory is the work of the architect who designed Quarr) has a central altar, with the nuns’ choir facing it from one side and the retreatants’ from the other, while the crypt contains the lay sisters’ chapel. Before the war the Prioress General was hoping that a way might be opened for a foundation in England, and certainly such a house is immensely desirable. Let us hope that it is still a possibility.

The article in *THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT* last year on the Dominican Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament described another French

example of retreatants becoming, for the time-being, part of a contemplative community without enclosure. In both cases one comes fully into a liturgical, contemplative, balanced and intelligent Christian life. Nor are those apparently trivial details of material surroundings to be despised, such as the bare, white-washed cell. The be-carpeted, be-curtained, be-pictured room may set the tone of an hotel, and establish an atmosphere in which silence is not normal—that and the "vacuum" together.

Not that the traditional type of retreat house can be dispensed with; it is still needed, especially for the old and invalids. The different kinds should supplement one another.

And yet a third type of retreat house is quite as much needed and is not, as far as I know, in existence: a house run by men or women who form a community in a common life and stability, but are not monks or nuns. If retreats are to play the part in the life of the Catholic community that they alone can do, deepening it and drawing it away from the infectious semi-pagan activism into a real dependence on the action of God, then there must be more retreat houses, widely scattered. Retreats should be normal in the life of Catholics, not a whim of the pious. But for that there must be a great many more houses and a greater variety of them. Probably only the laity could provide them, and they may well be the right people to do so. It would have to be a vocation, but lay vocations exist and in increasing numbers, people who have dedicated their lives to God, or wish to, but without having any vocation to the religious life in the strict sense.

Such houses would be best small: for a large enterprise needs the whole religious system, a much more planned discipline, to keep it together. They could vary, from the contemplative and quasi-monastic, to the more active and more secular; though nothing but a strong spirit of prayer and a spirit of poverty could hold any of them together and produce a unity out of all the idiosyncracies of human character. Some could be in towns, specialising in the "day of recollection", short retreat and study group, and becoming something of a community centre on people's doorsteps. Some could be in the country with their roots in the soil, growing all they could for their food; besides long retreats they could have people for farming holidays with some of the elements of a retreat. Some could emphasise the land, others study, but all would need Mass, Office of some kind and silent prayer, and—because the world has lost human balance as well as divine love—a reasonable balance of other work.

There is at the moment this double need: an outcrop of "lay vocations" and a need of retreat houses, community centres and houses of hospitality of different descriptions (not only the House of Hospitality in the Dorothy Day sense). A number of attempts have been made to meet both needs; but none, except perhaps

the "Houses of Hospitality", with much success; others are no doubt being made. There seem to be two types of lay vocation and apostolate: one goes out from its community centre amongst people in their ordinary avocations and attempts to permeate society without itself being assimilated to it; the other rests in its centre but opens its doors in hospitality and draws people in. The first is the normal vocation of the individual Christian in society, but with the addition of community life and backing. Such a vocation may well come to the fore as the pressure of the neo-pagan state increases, for the ideas and standards of their fellow citizens will force Christians to seek the support of community and to be more whole-hearted in their Christianity, if they are to remain Christian at all. It is an extension of the principles of the Orders founded since the 16th, or even the 13th, century. Dominican and Franciscan tertiaries would seem well suited to it.

But there is another type of lay vocation and apostolate: the community that works as a community and not when dispersed as individuals; that works by sharing its life, drawing others with itself deeper into Christian life whose end is union with God. This would be more contemplative in ideal and more allied with the older monastic ideas and would seem best carried out by Benedictine Oblates, whom one cannot imagine, *as such*, in the other type of apostolate. This second type of community fits better into the spirit of monastic stability. For it was not for nothing that St. Benedict made this one of his religious vows: it is essential to the shape of the life and its family character. This stability should, incidentally, make Benedictines and Benedictine Oblates more fitted to go "back to the land" than the post-13th century mobile, centralised Orders; yet it is Dominican tertiaries who have taken the lead, which is strange, for the monks are countrymen and the Friars Preacher of their nature town birds.

The need for monasteries and lay communities whose apostolate is carried on by hospitality is urgent. A great part of the inhabitants of our once Christian countries are living in a post-Christian era. The extent to which Christianity has become a matter of history, something heard of but not known as a living fact, is startling. They need to know, to see, to experience the life, more even than to hear. They need to see Christian charity, to see, especially perhaps in an economically-minded age, Christian poverty, to see Christian worship. Neo-paganism is also the milieu of Catholics and other Christians working in office and factory and receiving passive mass entertainment. But it is not only that intellectual and moral ideas are emptied of their Christian content, that whatever is grasping and self-seeking—money-getting, lustful—has full rein, and that there needs to be a perpetual conscious rejection of all this. In addition the whole pat-

tern and balance of life is upset and has become mechanised, irresponsible, for the majority, and utterly uncreative. We have become sterile. And this mangled pattern of life, in the family, in work and in recreation, is a thing which the need of a roof and bread and butter forces on nearly everyone, whether they understand the evil or are only vaguely dissatisfied and out of gear. But it is very dangerous and leads to insanity if man will no longer be fully man.

Community centres seem the only remedy that could be immediately applied: for the permanent members of the communities; they will arise most naturally, as they always have done, in the right direction. Colonies of families—neighbourhood communities—may yet prove possible, in spite of past difficulties; they will arise most naturally, as they always have done, round an existing abbey or house of hospitality. The community of a single house—of lay vocations—might be a less ambitious beginning and prove more practicable, although it presents difficulties enough.

If some ten to fifteen men or women had five to fifteen acres of land, a reasonably sized house for guests and a good library, there is no end to the good they could do. But they would have to regard it as a stable vocation, involving celibacy, whether promised or not, and a spirit, at least of poverty and obedience; and involving prayer and hard work, creative work. Hard work there would be in plenty: cooking and house-work, vegetables and hens, probably cows and bees; carpentering and sewing . . . And in all these things guests too could share. Rather town workers could come in order to break with routine and get again into the right relation both with God and with natural things, the land and the work of their hands. This is needed as well as prayer and is best in relation with prayer, as it would be in such a house.

There could be Mass in a neighbouring church or in the house if it came to have a chapel, and a morning and evening Office, perhaps Lauds, Vespers and Compline, and, besides that, time for mental prayer. No more Office would be possible on weekdays at first, whatever the ultimate aim, and this might not be a bad thing, as projects have failed before now through attempting to build too large a spiritual superstructure on a foundation weak in fraternal charity and the homely, practical things.

But the "practical things", the manual work, would have to be prevented from running away with the whole of the time and energy of the place, as they very easily could do, for then the main end would be lost. As much food as possible needed for their own use should be grown, but the land work should extend to no further ambition and the rest of the upkeep of the place would have to depend on the alms of guests. In addition to prayer, after the first start perhaps, study, especially scriptural

study, should become a feature. We need to go back to our sources for new vitality: Scripture, liturgy, the Fathers.

If guests participated in prayer, study, work, meals, for periods, it could act as a real time of renewal; and in addition the house could be used by priests as a place for preached retreats. But the backbone of any such venture would have to be a spirited group of people who avoided activism on the one hand and crankiness on the other. There would be many pitfalls, but the need is great.

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## REVIEWS

THE DIVINE PITY. By Gerald Vann, O.P. (Sheed & Ward; 8s. 6d.)

The truths of spiritual teaching remain the same, but the world and the needs of the world change from one generation to another. The ancient truths must appear in a new dress. Not the least of Fr. Vann's gifts is his deep understanding of the contemporary mind, of both Catholic and non-Catholic, and his ability to express the ancient truths in language that will appeal to it. Everything in this book is real, in touch with reality, dealing with the real needs of real people. God is not an abstraction, prayer is not a mental drug, and the spiritual life is not "a self-regarding soul-culture." Here are no faded clichés, no pious jargon, no trace of the state rhetoric of a by-gone age. With penetrating vision, Fr. Vann goes to the heart of *things*: detachment and attachment, "to care and not to care"; being before doing, "to love is to *be* something", "worship is not a part of the Christian life: it is the Christian life"; the eternal present of God in which the fleeting moments of beauty can endure, humility, docility, joy in God; consciousness of our brother's needs, a thirst for justice and transfusing all, the Divine Pity, of which the author possesses so large a share. These are some of the themes of his deeply human yet wholly Christian book. Fr. Vann, and this is his second great merit, has made a synthesis of spiritual teaching in which he finds room for the values of the newer, individualist piety which is given depth and breadth by its union with the more ancient tradition, at once spiritual and liturgical, which has led so many souls to Christ.

At the same time, it is not a comfortable book. The author gets at you and won't leave you alone. Indeed, at times he batters at one a little too long with his abundant vocabulary—certainly the effect on the poor reviewer who has to read on, is a little overwhelming—and perhaps the style could be a little simplified in the interests of shorn lambs. For I am convinced of one thing, that all Catholics ought to be given this doctrine and will profit enormously from reading this book. If it were practised—!

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