

There is the crux in our modern life. For long now the civil power has shaken off the royal mantle of Christ and dared to stand alone in its own power and not 'in the power of Christ'. The law of Christ is ignored in public life. There is little attempt at social justice, no recognition that Christ is at the basis of the building we call society. Christ has been hounded out of education, out of public morals, his laws flouted, divorce, abortion and vice encouraged. We, as citizens of the kingdom, as vowed followers of Christ the King by our baptism, and vowed to be Christ's soldiers by Confirmation, must make Christ reign once more.

Firstly in our own hearts, making his life our law;  
 Secondly in the family, making Nazareth our model,  
 Thirdly in society, rejoicing in the guidance of his Vicar and  
 in the just commands of our king.

Fourthly in international affairs, where jungle rules still reign.  
 Thus will restoration of Christ's kingdom come; for King he  
 is. Hail, Christ the King!

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## PSYCHOLOGY AND THE RELIGIOUS VOCATION

BY  
 'MEDICUS'

READERS of the LIFE OF THE SPIRIT have good reason to be grateful to Père M. J. Nicolas, O.P. for his fine exposition of 'The True Basis of Religious Life'. At the beginning of his article he raises one of the most difficult problems facing religious orders at the present day. He is acutely conscious of the difficulties that modern temperaments have in adapting themselves to the traditional system of religious life with its discipline and restraints, particularly in the older and the strictly enclosed Orders. With great sympathy and frankness he recognises that these difficulties have to be faced both from the point of view of aspirants themselves and that of Superiors who try to help them.

Père Nicolas considers the problem first as one of health. Since the Editor has invited discussion, perhaps some comments may be permitted from a medical and especially a psychological point of view.

Health, in its narrowest sense, is not in question; freedom from serious bodily and mental disease is of course essential. It is rather a question of temperament, character and psycho-physical constitution.

In any group of novices there may be one or two who cause special anxiety. Apart from those who leave of their own accord or have to be told they have no vocation, there are some whose vocation seems perpetually in doubt. They vary greatly in temperament and character; some are highly strung, sensitive, proud,

strongly individual and independent in spirit, yet eager to become good religious. They tend to alternate between elation and depression, are easily discouraged but desperately afraid of failure. Others, more serious and solemn, take life hardly, are a prey to constant depression, worry perpetually over trifles and can never make up their minds. The constraints of religious life keep them under constant tension and they wilt under the strain. Others again do not 'mix' easily with their brethren; they seem to be in the community but not of it, in spite of genuine attempts to adapt themselves.

With these and other types there may be doubt and difficulty from the beginning. If they survive the novitiate, should they be admitted to profession? After profession they sometimes break down, but recover after a change of scene and a less restricted way of life. Later should they be allowed to take solemn vows? Some will succeed and become more or less stable, but there are extreme cases in which sheer will-power will carry such individuals on, strained almost to breaking point, for several years; they may reach final vows and even the priesthood only to become shipwrecked later on. Such final break-down is the more liable to occur in enclosed Orders of women; it may mean that a religious some years professed must, under medical advice, leave her convent and seek dispensation from her vows, with no hope of attempting any form of religious life again. After rest and treatment such persons recover and remain normal so long as they live in the world, but religious life is impossible for them. Cases like this do occur and it is not surprising if a certain uneasiness is felt and admitted.

By contrast there is the group of novices, fortunately still numerous, whose stability seems almost assured from the first. They have their difficulties but meet them with sturdy common sense. Many come from good Catholic families, others are converts to the Faith. Not necessarily robust in body, they are able to adapt themselves psychologically and become steady and stable. They make the religious life their own life; quietly and unobtrusively they carry on the routine foot-slogging work of their community and as subjects, superiors and holders of various offices they are the backbone of their Order. Many reach great holiness and perfection of charity; some few are outstanding in intellectual gifts and achievement. In religious life they are the salt of the earth.

But even such as these are sometimes conscious of strain under which they may temporarily break down. The most modern amenities do not make religious life easy and if they did it might be in danger of losing sight of its true end. The dilemma, as Père Nicolas is so well aware, is that it must maintain its character as an 'effective denudation' and at the same time be practicable for modern souls.

Can these modern difficulties be analysed more closely? Père Nicolas gives the clue: 'We must . . . face the fact that the monastic life is in profound contradiction not only to the vices of the present world but also to its mentality, its ideals and whole outlook; much more opposition is met with than formerly in those souls who give themselves to it'.

The problem may be considered as psychological, educational and spiritual.

We are all children of our time; the mark of our civilisation is the combination of materialist philosophy and astounding technical progress; this finds its ultimate logical expression in Communism. As Catholics we reject the false philosophy; technical achievements in the material order are not evil in themselves; inevitably we make use of them, they are part of the stuff of our daily lives. But psychologically we are not immune from the effects of having to live in such an atmosphere. While believing in transcendent and spiritual values we are prone to judge things from the standpoint of the materialist, to appraise them for their technical perfection or practical utility rather than their intrinsic or ultimate worth. By adopting empiric standards we become impatient of authority and tradition; we tend to despise earlier ages as inferior and to assume that what is new is better than what is old, as if, as G. K. Chesterton says somewhere, what is done on Wednesday must be better than what was done on Tuesday. Ends and means become confused and means exalted into ends; technical perfection is invested with almost a moral value. We do not exactly worship efficiency but may tend to think and act as though it were a moral virtue. Even in religious matters this may be apparent; perfection in liturgical ceremonies and rendering of plain-chant is very desirable but it can easily be thought of as an end in itself and any lack of it criticised as almost a moral fault. Utility can become the criterion of any course of action; accuracy and precision are so obviously necessary for good work that they may seem all-important; we come to expect them, almost as a right, in everything, from medical and surgical treatment down to typewriters, spectacles and artificial teeth. In the religious state there must be a reversal of values, life must be ordered to spiritual ends; the novice, however spiritually minded, is apt to feel his world has turned upside down; he has to learn that the mere usefulness of an action is no longer a compelling reason for being allowed to carry it out. Even the renunciation of small amenities may be felt at first as in a sense a lowering of standards.

Owing to the increased slavery of modern life, and the lack of creative activity, we cling to our little freedoms, to the free use of our leisure to do what we will and go where we will. It is a true instinct that prompts the Christian to escape this slavery, to offer his life instead to him whose service is perfect freedom, but the adjustment needs more than a change of heart; the

activity of mind and body has been conditioned by the world he has been brought up in, and constraint of either or both as in religious life can be felt as an intolerable strain.

Education is no less implicated; it has become more and more technical. Catholic schools have to equip their pupils for worldly careers; only a small proportion will enter religious life or the priesthood. Religious teaching and character training may be excellent but the influence of secular ideals and outlook is bound to make itself felt. Modern education—except under Nazism and Communism—tends to encourage initiative, independence of thought, frank directness of speech and manner, an individualist outlook that accepts little on authority or tradition, seeks rather to prove by trial and error and is impatient to experiment with life. Such soil can and does breed saints, but their growth may be slow and difficult and adaptation to the traditional ways of religious life is far harder than formerly. Such independence of spirit is not lightly to be condemned; it may well be a reaction against the levelling down of human society to the uniformity of the herd or the hive that threatens us more and more as our civilization declines. Under Divine Providence such characters can be the stuff of saints and martyrs and may save the world.

Home influences are even more important. A good Catholic family, especially if it is large, can be an oasis in a desert of unbelief. In such families there can sometimes be effected a synthesis or at least a *modus vivendi* between Catholic principles and the modern practical outlook. They are the more likely to send sons and daughters to be the upholders of religious life in the future.

Père Nicolas's solution of these problems must commend itself for its breadth of vision and its charity. The Church today is very much alive to the needs of modern souls and may perhaps allow some mitigation of the more rigid enactments and observances in some Orders; not so much, it is to be hoped, a mitigation of *Rule* as an adaptation in accordance with the modern outlook of practical common sense.

Spiritual problems are bound up with those of mind and body. In any large group of those seeking to enter religious life there may be one or more whose spiritual life has entered upon a distinct phase. Active mental prayer has given place to passive contemplation. By no merit, choice or effort of their own they have been brought by God to enter and pass through the 'Night of Sense' described by that great psychologist St John of the Cross as 'the entrance and beginning of contemplation'.<sup>1</sup> Such souls are likely to be less rare among aspirants to religious life, especially those no longer very young, than among the laity in general.

Contemplative experience is a fact, as much so in the 20th cen-

<sup>1</sup> *Dark Night of the Soul*, Book II, Ch. 2, *Works of St John of the Cross*, Eng. Trans. by E. Allison Peers, Vol. I, p. 400.

tury as in the time of St Teresa and St John of the Cross. It is not a product of neurosis or hysteria; this is recognized by Catholic psychologists such as Allers: 'It seems altogether mistaken to interpret the "night of the soul" and similar phenomena in terms of neurosis or of purely natural categories'.<sup>2</sup> But great caution is necessary in deciding that it is genuine in any individual as the risk of delusion is grave. In some cases it may develop comparatively early in the spiritual life; it is not holiness, though a powerful means towards it; 'a non-contemplative soul may have more charity than others who are contemplative'.<sup>3</sup>

Psychologically it presents problems of its own. Contemplative prayer involves consciousness of God's action upon the soul. As de la Taille puts it: 'Charity in the case of the mystic is not only infused but consciously infused'.<sup>4</sup> And again: 'The soul knows and feels itself invested with this love by God'.<sup>5</sup>

From a psychological point of view the change-over from meditation to this consciousness of God's action during prayer is bound to make a profound difference to the individual, and since soul and body are one the effects are really psycho-physical. As contemplation develops it may tend to become habitual, and quite apart from special phenomena such as raptures and ecstasies, it may then be felt as a psycho-physical state which can become more or less continuous even outside set times of prayer. Much has been written on mystical phenomena mainly by clerical authors, but so far this state itself has been but little studied from the modern psychological approach. Obviously the difficulties would be great.

Contemplation if already granted to a soul will naturally influence its vocation; some such souls, especially if quite young, may be able to enter an Order, not necessarily a contemplative one. Others find their vocation in married or celibate life in the world or in the secular priesthood. For a very few a solution is more difficult; their whole bent is towards prayer but temperament or their psycho-physical state makes them unfitted for community life; they seem to need more freedom and it is possible that their real vocation is to a life of comparative solitude. The outstanding modern example is Charles de Foucauld. After 5 years as a Trappist, and a model of humility and obedience, he was told that monastic life was not his vocation. Ordained a secular priest he spent the rest of his life as a hermit-missionary in the Sahara, a life of solitude, almost continuous prayer and terrifying austerity.

His is an extreme case and such a vocation must be very rare. But Fr Conrad Pepler, O.P., points out<sup>6</sup> that in the 14th century,

<sup>2</sup> Rudolf Allers: *The Psychology of Character*, Eng. Trans. by E. B. Strauss, New Impression 1943, p. 327.

<sup>3</sup> de la Taille, S.J.: *Contemplative Prayer*, Eng. Trans. by a Tertiary of the Order of Mount Carmel, 1929, p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.* p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* p. 13.

<sup>6</sup> *Life of the Spirit*, Aug. 1946, pp. 44-47.

a period of turbulence and decline, a great host of mystics poured out a flood of mystical writings all over Europe, and he draws a close parallel between that century and our own age. Moreover, not a few of these mystics, for example Mother Julian and Richard Rolle, were anchoresses or solitaries. It does not then seem impossible that the vocation to solitude may revive even in these times, however unfavourable they may appear. To quote Fr Pepler: 'What we look for today are St Catherines, Mother Julians, Walter Hiltons to give purpose and form to the mystical unrest in men's souls'.

Modern spirituality tends to be simple and direct and is eager to go straight to the heart of things. It seeks to return to a theocentric and Christocentric outlook, to leave the hot-house of intensive spiritual self-culture for the keen air of the mountains where God dwells in secret. Elaborate methods are put aside; it would avoid continual self-regard, the digging up as it were of the seeds of virtue to see if they are sprouting. In the natural order too this is sound psychology. In character-training 'many goals—including the ideal of perfection—are unattainable if directly striven for. Rather does perfection come to him who does not seek it (and is thus not self-seeking) but seeks that which is perfect'.<sup>7</sup>

Contemplation would seem to be in full accord with this attitude. The prayer of the contemplative is a simple looking-forth towards God and conscious communion with him, without distinct images or concepts and without regard of self.

In conclusion, perhaps a doctor may be allowed to refer to a subject not strictly relevant but which may have a bearing on the future development of religious life. A second world war has left a host of maimed, lame and blind and of others in some way disabled. There are those too whom accident or disease has left crippled or deformed. Children are growing up with bodies mutilated in air raids, road accidents and from other causes. Sound perhaps in constitution and often strong in spirit, many of these will reach the normal span of life. Nowadays they do not seek pity or mere charitable support; they ask to support themselves, to be as independent and 'normal' as possible, to share the burdens of active life as far as they can. Must such as these be for ever debarred from any form of religious life? For many of course ordinary religious life is impossible. In these days the Church has shown herself favourable to many innovations to meet the needs of souls; may we not hope that in due time she may allow people thus handicapped to form religious associations adapted to their special circumstances? They might well be joined by others, whole in body, who feel called to a similar form of life combined with service of their less fortunate brethren. Apart from contemplative ideals, such organizations could find scope for active work, as for

<sup>7</sup> Allers, *op. cit.* p. 204.



instance in the education and training of those similarly handicapped.

Already the Church allows some opportunities to the disabled; a man with an artificial leg can be ordained a priest; if a priest becomes blind he may be given permission to say Mass and can preach and hear confessions. Today the blind can receive a first-class education; might not a man blind from childhood some day be allowed to reach the priesthood? A number have already been successful and distinguished in the Anglican ministry.

Religious associations of the kind suggested would be an eloquent protest against the materialism of the time. The word 'rehabilitation' is often used nowadays; to restore the sick and injured as far as possible to health and activity is a good Christian work, but too often now there is the implication of making the sufferer self-supporting so that he may not be a burden upon the State. For the materialist the corollary of rehabilitation is euthanasia; if the disabled cannot be made fit enough to look after themselves and to work, the modern pagan state would prefer to see them painlessly killed. To Christians it is left to show that in this world the life of the spirit can triumph over bodily infirmity, so that at the last day the body, gloriously risen and once more perfect, may be re-united to the soul in life everlasting.

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## HOURS WITH ST JEROME

By

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THOUGH perhaps most people who are at all familiar with them appreciate the writings of St Augustine, comparatively few feel any attraction for those of St Jerome who, unlike St Augustine, has left us no sermons or devotional treatises, his work consisting for the most part of technical Commentaries and minute disquisitions on difficult passages of Holy Scripture.

Both Saints have left us a vast correspondence. But how their letters differ! If we except Augustine's earlier ones, his philosophical discussions during his first days as a Christian, the remainder are for the most part the outpourings of a shepherd of souls; the same is true of his sermons which lend themselves to quotation at every turn and wherein the devout can always find food for their souls. St Jerome, too, has left us many spiritual letters. But we get the impression that such letters were not his life's work; he writes them almost under protest as though feeling that they are stealing time from the real work to which God has called him, that of translating and commenting on the Bible. This work, and the controversial work thrust upon him by the needs of the Church, procured him many enemies who slandered and calumniated him in most ungenerous fashion. He himself attacked no one save in self-defence, but when he did speak out there was no