

Life of the Spirit

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RELIGIOUS LIFE¹

BY

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It is with a consciousness of our own sins and failings that religious life makes its appeal to us. We enter the cloister because we are conscious of evil in our hearts. It is not indeed of itself a sufficient motive to force anyone into religious life far less to keep him there, this consciousness of sin, the mere sense of sin. We were drawn by the fact of positive love of God. It is not the mere escaping from danger. To look upon a cloister as a place from which is shut out temptation, a haven of rest, cannot be a motive. It does not take us long to find we cannot escape temptation as long as we have our own hearts, from them we cannot escape. A stricter relationship with the outside world may alter our temptations; that's all. We do not shut out the worst offender—ourselves. And so if we looked upon the cloister as a haven of escape it will not have taken us many days to find out our mistake. It is true one may find, as the letters of St Bernard and others show, that it is a motive, but it does not represent the whole truth for that would be to act not as Christians but as cowards.

We may not, without sacrificing what God made us to be, shirk responsibility. The parable of the talents show us this, they were to be traded with. Religious life is *our* vocation because God gave us gifts that can only be used here. Gifts of body or mind or soul which would not be put to such good advantage outside. We joined religion not to escape work, but to find work and abundance of it, not to save ourselves trouble—that were sheer laziness. We come here to work and take our vows, not to be saved trouble but to be more free. Chastity, not that we despised family life—the Holy Family is the supreme type—but that such work as we are capable of may occupy us entirely.

Religious life, if it has any meaning, means that we advance to the thick of the battle. We wage a warfare against spirits in high places, and no high wall can shut out the evil spirits. In some ways life is more sheltered than outside—it is easier to approach the sacra-

¹ From a Retreat preached in Edinburgh, July 1932.

ments; and helps there undoubtedly are. But it may happen that the lives of lay people are less tempted. I am perfectly sure that the majority of people in religious houses are *much* more tempted than those outside. Evil keeps as best it can an even pace with good. Once a human soul is determined to seek a higher life temptations are redoubled, more subtle, and desperate, spiritual temptations—narrowness, jealousy and envy—to make so magnificent an ideal of religious life is bound to draw temptation.

It is so easy to despise those outside and set a store on mere externals. Because I fold my hands properly and wear my habit correctly to suppose that I am better than others. The Church teaches us that the worst sin is pride, and can the best of us dare say that the demon of pride leaves us alone? He is there knocking at our hearts. To come into religion is not to escape but to increase temptation, it is an escape from certain things but in other ways life is harder for us. Religious life means a determined search for God—to work more not less—not to have more set time for prayer, but that we may love God more. One person may be more perfect than another but not so holy. It is possible for a cloistered religious to be perfect—religious duties perfectly performed—lives run perfectly, whereas another soul nothing like as perfect may have far more love of God, a longer purgatory but a higher place in heaven. Love and docility don't always go together, one child may be more docile, the other more vigorous, more *loving*. That which gives us our place in heaven is just our love of God. Some souls are capable of great villainy but of great love—the violent bear away the Kingdom of Heaven. Do you call yourself violent? Would you say your love merited the name of love? That heroic temperament which greets you in the lives of the saints, have you it? In a congregation some poor soul that falls into some external sin, an outcast, despised and looked down upon—it may be that soul is capable of greater things than the others who despise it. Who knows what the ending of that soul may be? Lived badly—died well. A debt to be made up after in purgatory, but in all our years of patient service we may never have touched the height that soul reached. It isn't keeping away from things, but *doing them*—violence—that is the measure of divine love.

Religious life is no escape from temptation. We are aiming at that high perfection the more perfect following of the Son of God. We cannot escape responsibility because of obedience—a certain amount, but we don't escape everything. I observe my vow of poverty but not to be troubled about the morrow—to give up everything for God. It is searching things out. The only motive is love. We take our vows then that we may devote ourselves more flamingly to the knowledge and love of God. Would your ~~superiors~~ are using them for this purpose?

Has your work taught you God's dealings with man? Our work can show us deeper depths of God's greatness. Our Lord must have taught St Joseph to see the beauty in the grain of the wood which the plane laid bare. Are you more patient than you were? Have you used that person towards whom you have an antipathy to help you to a broader, a wider view—to deepen your knowledge, to quicken your love? God chooses each one and has set you here together to get good, to get help, to be taught virtue. Has it? What has community life done for you? Has it given you patience—strength—peace, has it widened or narrowed you? Feelings are beyond our control—judgments are not.

Religious life is not an escape, it is a profession as any other profession—architecture, music, teaching, song—to be used to its fullest, not dodging, not trying to escape: else it is mere fantastic nonsense. We must weigh our souls, our love, our desire and see whether love keeps us going in religious life. Not the cloister will save us, nor the habit; these may easily stunt us. We must have breathing through us the Wind of God, setting us high on the hills, walking like rational creatures in his world. He has made us, he can inspire us, *and he will*. We must keep unsullied our ideals, we shall fall short often, but let us keep on, have great ideals, never sink or flag, never scoff at any greatness, a great life is the folly of a master. *Violence*. We became religious for love. Are we really inspired by love of God? Ask ourselves this and remember what a flame it was that lured us across the threshold of the cloister. Am I still striving for that purpose for which once I came?

' A S O N E ' S S E L F '

BY

MADAME ISABELLE RIVIERE ¹



ALL human misery comes from avarice: corporal misery from the refusal to give one's belongings; spiritual misery from the refusal to give one's time and one's heart.

All the sufferings, acute or dull, all the bitterness, the humiliations, all the grievances, the hatred and despair of this world, are an unsatisfied hunger. Hunger for bread, hunger for help, hunger for love.

From the little lad who heaves great sobs because his mother slaps him for no other reason than that her nerves are on edge, to the

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