

ADAPTATION IN FRANCE—IV

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THE examination we have made of each of the three vows reveals at least in principle the various domains where problems of adaptation might be, and in fact are, posed. What we have noticed is sufficient to indicate in what directions their possible solutions lie.

Nevertheless, before concluding it would be interesting to consider certain of the most important dimensions of the religious life. As we have already spoken of observances in dealing with virginity, it will be enough to consider rapidly three kinds of cases particularly instructive: first of all prayer and silence; in the second place, formation and intellectual work; and finally questions of hierarchy and government.

PRAYER AND SILENCE

In all that concerns prayer and silence, it is clear that the life of the *ancelles*, or of any nun more or less involved in the world, as also the life of sisters in a secular institute, does not profit by the guarantees offered by a stable existence in a convent. The way in which they try to maintain, whatever it may cost, the pre-eminence of prayer, is a noble example of an adaptation guided by a sense of the essential.

Let us deal first with prayer in common. In spite of being so few, and of the lack of co-ordination in their occupations, and of the overwork of their lives, the *ancelles* insist on a minimum of prayer in common. Whatever happens, they maintain Lauds and Prime in the morning before Mass, and Compline in the evening at the end of the day, before solemn silence. The rest is said in private, except on holidays when the re-assembly of everyone at the house of formation allows the whole Office to be said in common and regulates the day around the liturgical hours, as in any other monastery. Thus the recitation of the Office throughout the year is adapted and reduced according to the conditions of a working life.

This prayer in common takes place in one of the rooms of the residence, although each hostel hopes sooner or later to possess an oratory.

There is another adaptation the need of which is being felt all over France, and with regard to which the *ancelles* like many other nuns of all Orders are groping for a solution, while things mature; the question of the nature of the Office. Like many nuns, under the growing influence of biblical and liturgical movements, they would like to say the Roman Breviary. But here they come up again the difficulty of its length, that of Matins in particular. And the question of the Latin is also a difficulty. Of course they would like to say the Office in French—or in Hebrew.

For the moment, anyhow, they have suppressed various traditional prayers of the Congregation which added their length and their weight to a prayer in common already sufficiently reduced. Likewise they abandoned various old-fashioned hymns which tradition considered almost sacrosanct. And all this not without hesitation or drama! They recite Compline in French instead of the former evening prayers, and they vary between the breviary and the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin according to the day. In addition they often organize biblical holy hours which help them to become more aware of their vocation.

However, in addition to Mass and Office, the *ancelles* are drawn towards a sufficiently long time of silent prayer, at least an hour daily according to their possibilities. This is an important point which cannot be stressed enough. It is the basis of the spirituality of many similar ventures, the sisters of Foucauld in particular. It is the essential of any apostolic life. A postulant without this longing for silent prayer would be considered as not having a vocation.

Clearly their difficulty is to find the place and the time for silence. The time-table of each residence makes what provision it can. Their Directory demands of the *ancelles* to keep to it whatever it may cost. It may happen that that is not enough, or that on a certain day such-and-such a sister can no longer find the presence of God even in silence because she is too tired, or too overwrought. This was foreseen, and a wider, more calming, system of silence than the simple daily rhythm was provided for. Thus every *ancelle* has one day of silence in her week; and a day of recollection every month gathers them all in the house of their formation. They spend a part of their holidays here, all together, what can be spared from holiday camps they direct or other occupations. In addition, when they feel the necessity it is always possible for them to ask for a few days rest, or even a few weeks or months, to

gather themselves together again in calm and silence, to find in prayer the distance necessary with regard to the cares of an apostolic life. Alongside the silence of rule they have thus adapted the rhythm of true silence against the rhythm of modern life. It is weekly, monthly, yearly. It is fitting that God's workmen should give their Lord the time that others give to their leisure, or their homes.

The same reversal of this rhythm has occurred in relation to silence in the refectory. It has not always been thus. The change-over was the object of a slow conquest, almost a revolution. This is what one of the sisters wrote to me: 'At the beginning we always maintained silence in the refectory, as in school. Having the same kind of work as people in the world, we left straight after meals, some to our training schools (nurses, social assistants, domestic workers), others to their jobs. The interval between the end of the meal and the departure was supposed to be spent in some religious exercise—examination of conscience, spiritual reading, Office. And so it was quite impossible to come together to exchange ideas, to talk about our work. We lived in community but we didn't have a community life! And because of that, nervous tension, individualism, clashes arose because of lack of contact on the human and fraternal level. We felt the necessity of a family atmosphere, and obtained permission to speak at meals.' It was difficult indeed to find a method of adaptation which would maintain the essential of the observance. At present the *ancelles* talk at meals. They even invite guests. But on every occasion they begin by reading the Rule, and finish with Holy Scripture even when they are entertaining Jews or unbelievers. They also talk over the washing-up. In fact, it is the only time when they can meet each other in relaxation, and as a family. The time which they would have given to recreation is spent during the day in moments of silence. In Lent, or on holiday when they can take their recreations normally, meals are in silence, and there is reading. Unless, of course, a guest is invited. Many other modalities in the practice of silence could be enumerated. The essential is to notice the constant care to maintain the reality of their silence in a form new and adequate to their circumstances. This is only possible if their souls are possessed by silence, radiating it, so to speak, from inside. It is another way of manifesting the two indispensable qualities we have already met more than once: a deep concern for a theological life, and a real religious seriousness.

Once again, *a propos* of silence and prayer, we have found the same need for religious and human maturity. That is the essential condition which allows for adaptation. Now there is a region where a whole series of adaptations has been undertaken most successfully—that which concerns the religious and the human formation of the sisters.

It is perhaps in this sphere that adaptation has been clearest and most decisive. It must be recognized that apart from one or two magnificent but rare exceptions the intellectual and religious formation of nuns leaves much to be desired. Often they were insufficiently prepared for their professional tasks; they knew nothing of many worldly affairs which an ordinary human being should know, and above all they were not sufficiently instructed about the glory of their creation and their place in the Church.

For some years now people have been aware of this lack, and have attempted to remedy it, first of all as regards superiors and novice mistresses, but also for the mass of nuns. This does not mean of course that the present generation is more intelligent and more enlightened than those who have gone before. From certain points of view it is in fact just the contrary! Nevertheless it is evident that, due to the evolution of the social structure and of the university system, young girls acquire a higher degree of culture than thirty years ago. They have learned, with more or less reason and security, expression and judgment, and once inside a convent they retain the taste and the need. This curiosity is not always a bad thing. On the other hand it is certain that the urgency of all kinds of questions raised in the modern world, scientific, moral, philosophic and above all religious questions invite the consideration of the serious-minded, and call for the means of formulating a methodic and definitive reform. It is only normal that contemplative souls and future apostles feel the need of exploring for themselves these questions and their answers. It was the duty of the Church and of religious orders to fulfil this need.

This concern with formation and information has developed in three directions—technical knowledge, knowledge of the world, and theological knowledge. To be brief, I will simply give a rapid sketch of the cycle of study such as has been conceived for the *ancelles*. But here as elsewhere their particular case is only a

reflection of a general mentality. The instructions of the Holy Father at the congress of Mother Generals in 1952 encountered in France a territory already prepared, and encouraged desires which were only asking to be encouraged.

With reference to the *ancelles* whom we have taken as example, when a postulant enters it will be about five years before she goes out into an apostolate, her formation finished. This period is even longer when in addition to her religious formation she has to undertake a special preparation for a job, such as social worker or nurse.

The years are spent in general more or less like this: A year's postulancy, very free, during which the sister comes into contact with the various residences in order to learn from living experience the different aspects of the life and the vocation of an *ancelle*. One year of canonical novitiate in company with the contemplative and teaching novices of the Congregation of Our Lady of Sion. This plan is adopted for the sake of the unity of the Congregation, but we need not conceal the fact that in practice it presents difficulties and doubtless in its turn demands an adaptation. This year in common is followed by another year of novitiate amongst the *ancelles*, at the end of which the first vows are taken. Then begins a two or three years' scholasticate consecrated rigorously to Holy Scripture, history of Israel and the Church, the great theological treatises, catechism and even Hebrew. After this comes the professional formation for those who have no job as yet.

Clearly this formation might seem very lengthy. Five years to form one of the staff in a local hostel, or a mother's help! Doubtless, but this adaptation of religious formation to intellectual and doctrinal needs is quite the reverse of a concession to intellectualism. They do not make blue-stockings of these young people. In order to understand this it is enough to remember the exigencies of an apostolic vocation. This longer formation has as its aim to form the personality more solidly—and to prepare the sister to attack graver and more urgent problems. The world into which she is sent is complex and hard, full of questions, error and anxieties. It is the task of the apostle to recognize the problems, and to show up the illusions in the name of truth. After all, even if this relatively technical formation should never be explicitly used, there is a deeper reason for this prolonged study of divine

truth. She learns to know God, quite simply. Study for a nun is first and foremost at the service of faith and of the contemplative life.

ORGANIZATION OF HIERARCHY AND GOVERNMENT

As regards the organization of authority and obedience, the *ancelles* are still too few to make any definite account possible. The placing of superiors and the distribution of communities are still in the experimental stage. We can, however, trace the direction which must be followed in adapting the traditional régime of Sion to the new apostolic needs facing these little communities.

First of all, as we have had occasion to see already, like many other recent apostolic foundations the *ancelles* are divided into little groups of three or four. Four seems to be the smallest number which can justly be called a community, that is to say a group providing a common life from which the sisters can derive real spiritual help and in which they can together give witness of the fraternal life of the gospels. This minimum would be necessary if only for practical considerations, such as the recitation of the Office and the cooking of meals!

Each of these little communities is headed by a member 'responsible' for the house, who is like an elder sister or the captain of a team, and who has to organize everyday life and give ordinary permissions.

The effective authority remains in the hands of the local superior, who directs several houses or residences in the same town or district. These superiors are nominated, like all the other superiors of the Congregation of Sion, by the Mother General and her council.

In towns where there are not yet enough sisters to have a superior or where there is no one fit to undertake this post, the *ancelles* are answerable for their life and their undertakings to the local superior of the nearest house of Sion. This is far from being an ideal solution, and as you can see, it gives rise to a host of practical problems, time-table, travelling, various permissions, above all understanding, because you will appreciate how vastly different are the two ways of life. This obligation of having recourse to a superior of the teaching branch has long been the case. I have known such cases myself. It is a transitional stage from which the *ancelles* are being liberated the more they grow in number and in importance.

Holding the highest place, that is to say at the top of the pyramid of 'responsables' and local superiors, is the superior of the *ancelles*. She is responsible for the whole branch to the Superior General. Actually, at the present time, the superior of the *ancelles* is a member of the central council of the Congregation. She was formerly head of the school in Paris and has kept her position as councillor. It is clearly desirable that the situation should be safeguarded by Law, for it is normal that the apostolic branch should be directly represented within the central council of the Congregation. From the point of view of authority and obedience, the constitutional link, set out in the formula of profession, seems to be assured by this personal connection of the superior of the branch with the central council. Canonically, then, if we leave aside the intermediate position of the 'responsable' which in the last resort is no different from the position of minor officials in large communities, the situation of an *ancelle* is the same as that of any other sister in the congregation.

There is, however, a difference in the spirit in which authority is exercised. This will become clear from two facts: *First*, the practical direction of the work, the staffing of the residences and the choice of occupations are decided by the superior, but she takes all her decisions only after consulting a council called the 'conseil de direction' which comprises local superiors and certain 'responsable' for the more important houses. Sometimes the Mother General of Sion takes part in these meetings. *Secondly*, the direction of the work, the readjustment and correction of various experiments are accomplished by periodical meetings called 'réunions de travail' which assemble all the sisters having an important apostolic commitment. There is no question here of soviets, but inner councils under the guidance of religious and theologians.

Nothing is finally settled in these different institutions, but we can observe the same balance between *dependence on the superior*, and the *maturity* required by the task—the same balance with the same dangers and consequently the same requirements.

In the same realm of organization I would instance just one very important case of adaptation, the more important in that we are dealing with a congregation of long standing—there are no longer any lay sisters among the *ancelles*, though they are still numerous in the other branches of Sion. I can remember the time when they

were divided into lay sisters and choir sisters. This distinction has been abolished under pressure of circumstances, because of the identity of the apostolic task. I could give examples of former lay sisters who have become 'responsable de residence', in charge of houses, and who, in all probability, are future superiors. Much could be said on this point. I simply offer the fact for your consideration, because it seems to me a very important adaptation.

CONCLUSION

This paper has been very long, and I do not want to extend it unnecessarily. On the other hand, many important points could still be made. We have not spoken, for instance, of the community life of the sisters. But it is obvious that certain existing forms of apostolic life would change its shape. Moreover, I am aware of having touched on a host of questions from a very restricted view point. I have spoken to you of the *ancelles*, because it is the subject I know personally. They are, let me repeat, not the only ones. Lastly and above all there are many other problems besides those we have discussed. It would be interesting, for example, to see what has already been done in France along the lines desired and officially laid down by the Holy See. Still, I think we have sufficient material to be able to draw some conclusions.

We have chosen as a basis for our consideration a rather notable example of adaptation—the development of the *ancelles* of Sion. You have seen for yourselves the continuity of inspiration and vocation. Sion was founded in the nineteenth century for the apostolate to the Jews. The *ancelles* have done nothing but take up and in some ways deepen this original ideal. And it is in their faithfulness to this original vocation that they have been able to develop new forms. Certainly there has been a change, and a considerable one. It is enough to compare the two Directories, that of the teaching sisters and that of the *ancelles*, or rather the old with the new, because the teachers themselves are on the way to adapting their own life.

But this change takes place on the level of what we may call 'a way of life'. Nothing has been changed on the level of the *spirit* or of the spirituality. We have seen an adaptation in the way of life. The vows remain untouched in their substance as do the observances in their reality.

If we try now to sum up the determining factors and reasons of such an adaptation, we can put them under two heads, or rather at two opposite poles.

There is an adaptation which is made so to speak *from above*, coming from a new or more acute realization of the original vocation. Thus in the case of the *ancesses* and similar communities, this factor has been the urgency of the apostolic work. An Order or a Congregation, the Church in fact, adapts itself when it becomes conscious of its *vocation* and its *mission*. It is this need for adaptation from above which is behind the return to the essential of vows and observances we have seen in their various forms: *abandonment* and poverty, *consecration* and virginity, *service* and obedience.

But there is also an adaptation due to pressure *from below*, so to speak, coming from the obligation of speaking the language of our contemporaries, of using their techniques, of sharing to some extent their way of life—in a word, coming from the needs of the times. We have had to meet the demands of fashion, for instance, and of psychoanalysis. There is no reason to be surprised that adaptation should include these aspects. It is an inescapable law, the law of our human condition, the law of the Incarnation itself. As we know, God himself submitted to the limitations of our flesh and our time. But our world is wounded by sin, and experience has shown that an adaptation governed entirely by pressure *from below* is full of dangers and deceptions. There is the danger of compromise with the world. That would be, not an adaptation of the religious life, but its dissolution.

What I hope to have shown by the various experiences I have described is that the best, and indeed the only, way of avoiding the dangers of an adaptation governed by factors *from below* is precisely a more fervent acceptance of, and fidelity to, the factors making for an adaptation *from above*.

In other words, we must face the paradox that adaptation is possible only on condition of being faithful to what is essential. The only guarantee of a successful development of new forms, of a balanced change in the manner of the life, is a return to the source of the vocation, to the source of the spirit. For in every vocation it is the original spirit which is eternal and which can continually give life to new forms.

Let us not be in a hurry to believe that we have refound this

spirit in all its purity. Very often we petrify the spirit in a letter, or in a way of life too ancient or too new. Every Congregation knows the struggle between die-hards and radicals, ancient and modern. Such quarrels grow up because both sides consider only factors *from below*, whereas problems of adaptation must be governed only by factors *from above*.

The few experiences we have seen have shown us, by the facts themselves, the conditions of such an attitude. We have seen that if these adaptations have met with some success, and possess some solidity, it is because they have been based on two things: *first*, on a deep sense of 'the absolute' of God, and *secondly* on the maturity of an adult, capable at the same time of dependence and freedom.

Sense of God, maturity of conscience. If you like, consecration and maturity. These seem to be in fact the conditions of any adaptation of the religious life. Two conditions which, in the last resort, are only one. For what is maturity of a religious life if not the quite personal awareness of the absolute of God? *The sense of God in a mature conscience.*

Religious life is essentially a consecration. I think I can say that we have reached this conclusion, the same truth, from the facts, and shown that awareness of this consecration is at once the soul and the guarantee of all adaptation.

When I was asked to take the place of Father Plé in this conference and told the subject, adaptation, my first inclination was to refuse it. I thought the subject useless, and I said to myself, 'Why do these sisters need to be told about adaptation? If they are really living they will adapt themselves. Anyone who is really alive does not ask such questions.'

I hope I have convinced you that I believe in adaptations. Nevertheless my conclusion remains the same. Sisters, if you want to adapt your life, live! And as St Dominic said to his brethren: 'Keep the fervour of the spirit.'