

MONKS AND THE WORLD

BEDE GRIFFITHS, O.S.B.

IT was only to be expected that in the great effort which has been made in recent times in France to go back to the sources of Christian tradition and to recover its principles, an attempt should have been made to reconsider the nature of the monastic life and its place in the life of the Church. Of these attempts the most remarkable is the work of the Oratorian Père Bouyer on *Le Sens de la Vie Monastique*. It may be a matter of surprise that this should be the work of one who is not himself a monk. But the reason for this becomes clear when it is seen that for Père Bouyer the monastic life is simply the life of Christian perfection. 'To be a monk', as he says, 'is simply to be an integral Christian.' Viewed in this light, the first chapters of his book form one of the most memorable studies of the ideal of Christian perfection in modern times. They are distinguished from the work of Père Garrigou-Lagrange on the same subject in that they are based not on the teaching of St Thomas and the Carmelite mystics, but on the doctrine of the Fathers, and especially the Greek Fathers. This gives his view a richness and depth which is lacking in the work of Garrigou-Lagrange, but it also brings with it certain dangers. This becomes evident in the second part, where he turns from the theory to the practice of the monastic life; for he bases himself here largely on the teaching of the Fathers of the Desert. Now this teaching has, of course, immense value, and the fundamental principles of prayer and asceticism and spiritual perfection were laid down at this period for all time. But there were also defects and excesses in their outlook which make them often dangerous guides, and one does not feel that Père Bouyer has altogether escaped the dangers. As Father Aelred Sillem pointed out in a review in *The Life of the Spirit*, the fact that the Fathers of the Desert went out into the desert 'to fight with demons' is not really of much relevance to the vocation of a monk today.

In all that concerns the practice of a monastic life there is in Père Bouyer's outlook an absence of the virtues of modera-

tion and discretion, which it was precisely the work of St Benedict to make the basis of the monastic life, and one feels that in this the author's lack of experience of the actual conditions of monastic life betrays him. The same cannot be said of a more recent work published by the abbey of Pierre-qui-Vire.¹ Though the founder of Pierre-qui-Vire, Père Muard, was originally not a monk but a secular priest, whose conception of the monastic life recalls that of De Rancé, this work is nonetheless in the true Benedictine tradition and shows a deep understanding alike of the spirit of St Benedict and the character of the Rule. And yet one does not feel that even here the monastic life has been given its full significance or adequately related to the Christian life in the world. In this book, as in that of Père Bouyer, the monastic life is seen as the life of Christian perfection, but there is still too much tendency to regard it exclusively. There is surely an urgent need to insist that the life of perfection is open to all Christians without exception. Every Christian is in virtue of his vocation as a Christian 'called to perfection'; all Christians are alike 'called to be saints'. The command to love God 'with one's whole heart and whole mind and whole soul and whole strength', and to love one's neighbour as oneself, is given to all. It sometimes seems to be suggested that the way of the 'commandments' is a kind of lower way which is made for the ordinary Christian, while the way of the counsels is the higher way for the few. But the real fact is that the commandment to love God and one's neighbour to the utmost of one's capacity is given to all alike and constitutes the common goal of all Christian life. The counsels are concerned not with the end but with the means, and it is this which specifies the different forms of Christian life.

But if the way of the counsels embodied in the religious vows of poverty, chastity and obedience forms the traditional and time-honoured way towards Christian perfection, it would be a grave mistake to suggest that there is no other way. There are many Christians living in the world today who have felt the call to dedicate their lives to the service of God and their neighbour without entering the religious

¹ *Moines*, *Temoignages*, Cahiers de la Pierre-qui-Vire (Desclée de Brouwer; 78 fr. Belge).

life. For many married people the sacrament of marriage has become the God-given means by which they can sanctify their own souls and their families and consecrate their lives to the service of God. Among the unmarried there are many who have felt the call to a contemplative or an apostolic life which is as entirely dedicated to God as that of a religious. It is true that there are many obstacles in the world to the realisation of this ideal, which it is precisely the purpose of the religious life to remove. But there are also dangers in the religious life which are not so often recognised. It is becoming increasingly clear that religious poverty is not now, generally speaking, a state of poverty in comparison with the ordinary standards of the world. It is a state of security, which many people outside the religious life have reason to envy; and its general standard of life is not below that of those who would be considered comfortably off in the world. A Christian therefore who would experience poverty, as Léon Bloy for instance, or still more St Benedict Joseph Labre experienced it, will be likely to seek it outside rather than inside the cloister. In the same way the vow of obedience, though it has its own very definite grace, may easily lead to a lack of responsibility in the individual, which compares unfavourably with that of a man who has to make his own way in the world, while striving to subject his every action to the will of God. One has only to think of St Thomas More, and to ask oneself whether he would have necessarily been a greater servant of God if he had become a Carthusian, as he once intended, instead of Lord Chancellor.

This is not to disparage the religious life but to affirm simply that there are many diversities of vocation within the Christian life and that all are alike necessary to the perfection of the Church as a whole. It is disconcerting, to say the least, to find Père Bouyer supporting a view of St Maximus the Confessor, that marriage can never be more than an 'indirect' way of serving God and that the 'direct' way belongs exclusively to monks. The writer on *Monks* from Pierre-qui-Vire does not go so far as this, but there is still a tendency to set the monk apart, not only from the laity but even from other religious, as a model of perfection. The suggestion is made that while the Christian in the world has for his mission to

testify to the goodness of creation and of human liberty by the right use of created things, the religious has to testify to the fact of sin by the renunciation of their use. But is there any intelligible sense in which a religious can be said to give up the use of creatures? As has been said, the standard of life in the average monastery today differs very little from that of the rest of the world. Monks and religious alike make use of all modern conveniences like electric light and power, central heating, telephones, and often also wireless and the cinema, of motors and tractors and every type of machinery. In what sense can they be said to renounce the use of these things? The answer is surely that a monk or a religious does not give up the use of things; he gives up the right of private ownership. This is what really distinguishes the monastic and religious life from the Christian life in the world. It is a continuation in the life of the Church of that community of goods which was practised by the apostolic church, when 'no man called anything which he possessed his own, but all things were in common'. It is to this ideal of Christian Communism that the monk is called to witness, and so far from giving up the use of things, it is precisely his mission to set an example of the right use of all things in the service of God.

It is strange that this communal aspect of monastic life scarcely enters into the consideration of the book under review. On the other hand, it is most welcome to see the duty of manual work given its right place in the monastic life. The author shows how this was basic not only to the idea of St Benedict but to all early monastic tradition. 'Then are we truly monks', said St Benedict, 'when we live by the labour of our hands as did our Fathers and the Apostles.' In these days it has become more than ever necessary to insist that a monastery should be self-supporting. This is not merely an economic necessity; it is an integral part of the monastic vocation. It is one of the principal means by which a monk may learn to sanctify his soul and consecrate the powers of his body as well as of his soul to God. But it is also the way in which he can affirm his solidarity with all men, upon whom God has placed this necessity of labouring for their daily bread. 'One cannot affirm too energetically', says the

writer on *Monks*, 'the duty which the monk has to take his part in the suffering of labouring humanity and to range himself freely on the side not of those who are privileged by fortune but of those who supply by the labour of their hands for their own needs and those of their neighbour.' In this he is simply following Cassian, the great authority on primitive monasticism, and indeed the example and teaching of St Paul, who said: 'If a man will not work, neither shall he eat'. This is not to say that a monk may not do other kinds of work as necessity may require, but that manual work should always be held as a basic necessity.

If we say, then, that the monastic life is a life of men or women living in community, having all things in common and living as far as possible by the labour of their hands, we have come near to its traditional basis. In the course of time monks have undertaken many other kinds of work: literary, artistic, intellectual, and also missionary work, preaching and teaching. In all this there is nothing inconsistent with the monastic ideal, as long as none of these things is considered to be an end in itself, and all are made directly subordinate to the one end of the monastic life which is the praise and service of God. But in what respect does the monastic vocation differ then from any other religious vocation? Here again there seems to be a tendency to suggest that the monk is called to the simple direct service of God, while other religious have some secondary purpose. This comes very near to the distinction between the active and contemplative life. But it seems to be recognised now in many quarters that this distinction is often rather artificial. Is not contemplation the end not only of all religious life but of all Christian life, if with Père Garrigou-Lagrange we identify contemplation with Christian perfection as the perfect love of God? Had St Francis and St Dominic, St Ignatius and St Alphonsus any other purpose than to lead their sons in the way of perfection to the perfect love of God? But it may be said that they had a secondary object, to preach or to teach or to minister to those in need. But can such a secondary object really be separated from the first? Was not the ideal of St Dominic, as expressed by St Thomas, *contemplata aliis tradere*? Is not all Christian activity, all apostolic work

which is worthy of the name, an overflow from contemplation, that is from the love of God? Should not preaching and teaching and nursing and every kind of Christian work be a means of growing in the love of God, so that the love of God and of one's neighbour is one thing, not two? In this sense, then, it would seem that all religious life and all Christian life can be called essentially contemplative in its aim and all activity is ideally either a means to, or an overflow from, contemplation.

But when this has been said, it remains true that in practice it is very easy for the goal of contemplation, of the perfect love of God, to be lost sight of in the activity of the moment. This is only too obvious not only for the Christian living in the world but also for the majority of religious. For this reason it is necessary that there should be in the Church certain orders for whom contemplation is made more exclusively the end of their life, and all activity which does not directly tend to contemplation is excluded as far as possible. This would seem to be the function of the monastic life, especially of the stricter forms, within the Church. It is to bear witness as a corporate body to the one supreme end of all Christian life, the consecration of all man's activity, all labour of body and mind and soul, to the service of God in the perfect love of God and one's neighbour. But while we recognise the value and necessity of this, it is surely necessary to insist, likewise, that all human activity which is not sinful can thus be consecrated to the service of God, and that it is possible to love God perfectly in every state of life. We are all alike, men and women, married and single, lay and religious, members of one Body, endowed with the gifts of the one Spirit, called to serve God according to the diversity of the graces which we have received, one in this way, one in that; but all alike tending to the same goal of perfection and using the means which God has placed at our disposal, all alike necessary to one another, supplying one another's deficiencies, until 'we all reach perfect manhood, that maturity which is proportioned to the completed growth of Christ'.