

MODERN DISLOCATIONS IN RELIGIOUS LIFE

II. APPLICATIONS

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MANY of the problems of modern religious life may be traced back to the over-emphasis of one or other of the two elements already discussed in a previous article: the individualistic asceticism of the solitary, and the collective life of the liturgical servants of God. It is therefore possible that the solution of these problems may be sought in the realisation of a balanced monastic life paying more conscious attention to the two main sources of its natural existence. First, then, the modern difficulties springing from the individualistic and ascetical element in religious life. These are multiple, but they may usefully be classed as they refer to three main topics: Penance, Contemplation, and Perfection.

In the first place the penitential side of monastic observance has thrived too much upon the neoplatonic suspicion of the body, so that today the rules regarding the giving up of the good things of life have taken on a positive, objective character. The vows in particular may be regarded as entirely negative principles and that negation is paradoxically regarded as a virtue. Poverty, for example, is always a 'holy virtue'. However strenuously the preacher may insist on St Thomas's teaching that poverty is not in itself a virtue, the good religious immediately after the sermon comes to confess sins against 'the holy virtue of poverty'. This attitude is summed up in the general assumption that *agere contra* is the true way of salvation. Any natural instinct or emotion, instead of being trained and integrated into the whole life, has to be suppressed. This attitude may be seen in the practice of screening the altar, or of reciting divine office on a single note. The natural satisfaction of artistry conveyed to the religious by means of the full liturgical ceremony and chant of the Church is sometimes viewed with distrust. It seems to be part of the bodily side of human life that has to be done to death by mortification so that the soul, pure and freed from emotional entanglement, may wing its solitary way to the pure Spirit of the Creator.

The consequences of the insistence upon acting against all natural inclinations, however justified this may seem to be from a superficial reading of St John of the Cross, and however much the manuals of spirituality may insist upon 'stripping' self from self, are often very serious. Quite a number of religious are struck down by what is generally called a 'nervous breakdown'. Or it is possible, under stress of this sort, for a religion to remain within the community as an instrument of penance to the other members, always odd and out of place, flaring into passionate anger or relapsing into a numbed cynicism which casts a spell of frigid congealment in his vicinity. Sometimes, apparently as a result of constantly going against nature, he or she may have to leave the community for mental treatment, have to be dispensed from perpetual vows, or perhaps enter an asylum for the mentally afflicted. The human psyche cannot be ceaselessly submitted to this crushing process without encouraging some natural compensation in the behaviour of the crushed individual. At best this type of asceticism would seem to amount only to a natural sort of yoga or individual technique, which, if it lack the support of a full doctrine of the Word made flesh, can easily end in the excesses of a dancing dervish, or in the self-conscious agony of a neurasthenic.

In the matter of Contemplation, it is not an unknown experience to find that the religious regards himself as on the way to some form of enlightenment. By practising this form of negative asceticism, or individual yoga, he hopes to attain to the special sort of contemplation which is granted to those who have dispossessed themselves of the entanglements of passion. A constant insistence is placed upon contemplation as an act or experience rather than upon the contemplative life which is organised more formally in every moment of the day for the perfect love of God. And contemplation itself is reckoned in intellectual terms and therefore too closely tied up with discursive meditation. The individual religious will sometimes strain towards some sort of *simplex intuitus veritatis*. He will think less of the virtues of faith, hope and charity, and more of the intellectual gifts of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes this is linked up with a considerable reading of the great Spanish mystics and with a self-examination as to the point attained in the ladder reaching up towards contemplation rather than as to the perfection of the Christian life. In particular

this emphasis may lead to a very imprudent and harmful illuminism, especially among those who do not encourage study and the exercise of the human reason. This is far too common a feature of the lives of religious, especially women who are not allowed food for mind and imagination other than that provided by the modern spiritual reading which is 'devotional' and sometimes almost devoid of sound reasoning. Reason and culture are set aside as part of nature and the physical side of man, and all reliance is placed upon the immediate inspiration of the Spirit of God. 'After all', they say, 'if we know God we know all things; then why should we worry about all this study of books?' Experience over the past centuries has taught religious men and women the necessity of that study and culture which in earlier ages the monk or nun had often acquired before becoming a strict contemplative, but which later was denied him as the fear of humanism increased.

In the practical order this illuminism shows itself in the impetuous following of what are known by the unlettered as 'hunches', that is, the 'feeling' that such-and-such a line of action is to be adopted. After considerable prayer, but with little reflection, religious will often make very rash decisions—this is seen, for example, in deciding a vocation and pressing some young person into the cloister on account of some strange 'coincidences' which are taken as a sign of God's intention. The Holy Ghost, they feel, takes the initiative and guides their destinies; and the virtue of prudence is neglected.

Finally, in the matter of Perfection, on account of the latent esotericism within this ascetical element, there exists among religious a frequent, though unexpressed, inclination to regard the men and women who have not taken the three vows as being of necessity destined to a low place in heaven. The non-religious belong to a lower caste who cannot in their natural weakness reach anything but lower-grade jobs in the house of the Lord, while they themselves are the honoured guests and friends of the King of heaven.¹ There is often a slight air of superiority about a religious in his treatment of the laity. And in the theoretical order the conclusion that the perfect are those only who have literally left everything to follow Christ leads easily to a mental manicheism of the 'perfect' *versus* the rest. Consequently those who come into contact with a religious community (are employed by

1 This point has already been thrashed out in the pages of *LIFE OF THE SPIRIT*, during 1951.

religious, for example) are often treated with little respect. Children brought up in religious schools are encouraged to believe that the 'good' and 'devout' among them must necessarily have a vocation to religious life, because moral goodness is equated with the state of perfection.

To turn now to the other element in religious life, that of the common service of God, the effect of the increase of liturgical worship at the expense of the worship of work has led in most cases to the deadening of the liturgy or to its abandonment. In the first case the older religious orders still retain the full choral observance of the divine office and conventual Mass, but as these came to occupy too much time they have been reduced to the minimum of solemnity. A mumbled or growled office, at any time that may be convenient to the members of the community, gives the final *coup de grâce* to the tenuous connection between the natural and the supernatural rhythm of their lives. Vespers and Compline are hastily 'got through' immediately after dinner; Matins and Lauds for the following day are anticipated at five in the afternoon. The official prayer of the day has little connection with the life of the day. Indeed, the calls of the natural life have on occasion been allowed to upset the rhythm of the life of prayer, as when Vespers, the evening prayer, has to be said before the midday meal on fast days because the hungry religious could not wait till eventide for his meal. So it has come about that the chief vehicle of prayer and grace has become a penance, a burden alike to the community and to the individual who is bound to 'make it up' if he has been absent from choir. Fixed times for meditation and annual retreats have been introduced as substitutes for this lost opportunity. But the office remains almost as a corpse dragging along with the community and impeding its activity.

There is no time left for the community labour of growing food for all the members, or for making the furniture of the house. Food and furniture are alike brought from the local industrial stores, and the members of the community released at intervals from the choir leap like jack-in-the-boxes to their various occupations in schools or in the apostolate. Religious often experience strain in observing divine office together with the active life. They praise it as a noble ideal; and had the office remained a live thing

(as of course it still remains for a great many individuals) it would indeed have been such. But if it is allowed to be a penitential burden, then the community life tends to break down. Lectors in Theology and Philosophy are granted the 'privilege' (*sic*) of not attending choir; and each member becomes preoccupied in his own job in the community. Without common work and common prayer, the individualistic principle of asceticism is granted full play to break up the common life.

The result of the appearance of the common worship as a burden has led many modern congregations and institutes of religious to abandon the office, either altogether for non-clerical orders, or in common choir for the priestly orders. The effect of this denial of one of the common principle of religious life has led to a substitute 'office', for the human psyche will have its compensations. 'Meditation' and popular private devotions take on the aspect of a liturgy. But without the contact with the *Benedicite omnia opera Domini* of liturgical prayer, this meditation itself is likely to become extremely arid, as the mill of the imagination is thrown so few grains of divine truth to grind for eucharist. Outside the church and formal prayer, the little customs and rules of the house are magnified into sacrosanct rubrics, the infringement of which is in effect a direct insult to God in the worship paid to him. The life of many religious is made extremely hard and the position of superiors as high priests celebrating the sacred mysteries all the day long, as is occasionally manifest in the cloister, is a consequence of the abandonment of the true liturgical principle in the common life. Moreover, in such communities there is often little compensation through a common work. All the religious may be engaged in the same occupation—teaching, for example—but it is often of a purely utilitarian character, carried out sometimes with an accent on the financial needs of the house, or at best on the idealist level of 'conveying truth to the Infant Mind' or with some other unreal slogan of that nature.

We are certainly describing the worst symptoms of the malaise among religious orders, and no doubt we over-paint the picture in trying to represent tendencies which, even when operative, are almost always entirely unconscious. Indeed, there are many features of religious life today which counteract these inclinations towards excess. For example, the many active religious orders which are concerned with human persons rather than with their minds

alone are much more secure from the tendencies described. Thus, the brothers and sisters concerned with nursing have often a simplicity that is born of the perfect Christian spirit, and it carries the mind back to St Basil when he brought hospitals and hospices to the doors of his monasteries so that his monks might be held to reality, i.e. to charity. To receive the tormented, embrace the leper is a constantly recurring feature of religious life. But even here the modern religious will sometimes avoid this reality, when for instance the monastic infirmary becomes more or less a closed premises on account of the 'busyness' of the brethren and the sick monks are whisked off in ambulances to secular nursing homes and hospitals. An old monk used to say that this, in particular, showed the weakness of modern religious life, because originally the infirmary had been one of the principal buildings of the monastery, on a footing with the church, the chapter house and the refectory, but in the modern monastic building it is the first thing to be jettisoned when economy in building is demanded.

Another activity which brings religious down to earth and to the full human life is, of course, the missionary activities. Here we find the ascetic principle exercised to the fullest extent as the missionary has to leave, not only his family, but his country as well. As a rule he also spends a great deal of his life battling with really hard poverty, in his own life and in the lives around him. But the whole of his life is objectively devoted to the service of God's kingdom among his fellow creatures. His breviary and his Mass often become for him oases of divine assistance and comfort in days of strenuous labour for the common good. Moreover, he finds himself among simple people whose whole existence moves to the rhythm of the elements so that he can derive great support from the primitive spirit around him. For this reason it is the missionary orders which are the most flourishing in modern times.

The final point to consider in this question of the needs of modern religious is naturally the remedies for these dislocations. And here the success of the foreign missionary orders points the way to a solution. It is clear that the two elements—the individual-ascetic and the communal-liturgical—must both be exercised to the full and both together in a balanced harmony. It is dangerous to suggest that the modern man cannot stand up to the rigours of the medieval life. That is true, perhaps, but the reason lies in the

fact that modern man has been uprooted from the soil and from the natural growth springing from the soil. If the liturgical side of his life is made to vibrate with the manual labour of craft and countryside as well as of choir, the modern religious will bear the austerities of his vows in their most exacting moods. But it would be impossible to set about this harmonising until the vows had been turned to their positive purpose. The religious must come to live the ascetic life in such a way that his poverty sanctifies the good things of this life, that his chastity sanctifies bodily things and common life in society, that his obedience sanctifies the liberty of man. The ascetic life must have the poison of manicheism carefully drawn away from it, so that the religious can aim, not at being wholly passionless, but at having life and having it more abundantly. Poverty, in the eyes of St Benedict, does not lead his monk to despise material creation; it turns the vessels, the ordinary utensils of kitchen, field, and all, into holy vessels, used in the service of the Lord.

In other words, the full life of the service of God constantly counteracts the wrong tendencies towards individualism and manicheian dualism in the ascetic life. Liturgy, in the sense of common work for God in choir and in maintaining the natural livelihood of all under God, must be made a *part* of religious life, instead of being, as it often is in practice, an accidental addition. It should, therefore, be celebrated in choir in such a way that nothing is scamped or treated as mere observance. Liturgical prayer (the choral office and solemnisation of the Mass) must be made sufficiently practical to lie within the capacities of the average community, in such a way that it would always be regarded as a 'privilege' to attend. This would seem to imply some very profound liturgical reform, into which we cannot enter here. But as regards the second aspect of the liturgical element it would surely be possible to reintroduce common work in tune with the livelihood of the religious. In this respect, teaching according to the ordinary secular curriculum of modern education is insufficient. The making of habits, of shoes, and the cultivation of the soil have something real and concrete that fits naturally into the life of the religious. Fancy needlework and even vestment embroidery and other similar ladylike occupations, do not seem of themselves sufficient. But the nursing of the sick may supply for a great many other common works, particularly if the first

sick to be nursed are those of the community itself. There should be an insistence on a work that has some direct connection with what might be called the elemental work of the cosmos.

Again, the mortifications and penances of modern religious should be full-blooded and rigorous, but they should be as far as possible directly related to this divine work, the *Opus Dei* in its widest sense. Abbot Butler points out in *Benedictine Monachism* (pp. 40-45) how very little trace there is of any artificial mortification in St Benedict's Rule. The monks do not eat bitter herbs or take on other uncalled-for torments. There is, of course, a danger of becoming purely utilitarian in the matter of penance, developing what might be called an athlete's mortification. But if the works of penance are immediately related to the outpouring of Christ's blood daily on the altar, they will be kept in perspective. It is for this that the religious has come into the cloister, to be 'uselessly' nailing himself with Christ to the Cross.

Here also the doctrine of the true relation between Christian action and Christian contemplation could be of considerable assistance when applied to the type of communal work undertaken by the religious. Work in which the moral virtues are principally applied should in any case tend towards contemplation, whatever that work may be. But there are evidently certain types of work which more easily dissipate the personality, and others which, of their nature, tend towards union and integration. The action of an intense industrial character needs to be counter-balanced by action of a more relaxing type; not that many religious are as yet given to such occupation, but some are.

Many remedies could be suggested in this sphere, but in particular that of a contemplative study of the divine word in the Scriptures and the Fathers—a serious return to St Benedict's ideal of *lectio divina*—would seem to be the most imperative for all religious. We need not enter into this discussion here. But in conclusion it may be said that the insistence upon *lectio divina*, upon true Christian activity, upon the work and worship of God—all these would demand a slowing down of the present pace of the life of most religious men and women. Such a *rallentando* presents, perhaps, the most serious problem today, and until that is solved it remains unlikely that the modern religious will ever regain the complete balance of the liturgical and the ascetic principles in their lives and institutions.