

Life of the Spirit

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PROVIDA MATER

BY

M. T.

I WAS in Rome in March 1947 when the 'Provida Mater Ecclesia' was published. The interest it aroused was great. All the newspapers commented on it at once, and one had to go to the Vatican itself to find a copy of the *Osservatore Romano* containing the official version in Latin, as everybody had been buying it and asking those who could to translate it for them. I consider it a great grace to have been there at that time, and still more to have known personally an eminent member of the Commission of the Congregation of Rites who had been working at the Apostolic Constitution for a very long time and who explained it willingly to us, as soon as it was issued. The immediate and obvious 'uses' of the Constitution were two. The first one, the historical one as it clearly appears in the text, is the 'promotion' of some of the already existing Societies to the State of Perfection. Until then the societies could not be 'congregations' or 'religions' as they did not possess all the necessary requisites such as vows or common life for instance. But they had been in existence for a long time, and doing a lot of good, especially in the apostolate. There they were, having on one hand fulfilled the exigencies of the life of perfection in the world, and on the other hand responding to the demand of our pagan world of today which asks for a new kind of apostle who will work from the inside of life, permeate it as it were. This could not be done by 'congregations' but only by those who had great possibilities of movement and a form of life adapted to such necessities. For all these reasons the Holy Father had thought it just to elevate to the State of Perfection on a par with the religious those among the existing societies which provided a full security.

Besides this, the *Provida Mater* gave the opportunity to modern societies of the 'congregational' type, who were feeling most acutely the need for new conditions in which to work, to be 'more at ease' though remaining in the State of Perfection they had embraced. In fact, when we look upon the problem of apostolate as it is today, we see that it is very difficult to carry on the type of apostolate

which our modern conditions of life require, while remaining more or less shut up in the 'convent-like' type of life. As Christians we cannot overlook the problem of the apostolate and we must take a broad view of it. We must not limit our vision to trying to convert one individual or even a few individuals. Our neo-pagan world of today embraces all the so-called 'civilised' countries which are rapidly decaying into a new form of paganism, not because the individuals are losing the faith, but because the very conditions of life are pagan, in their conception, in their structure, in their basis as well as in their aims. The efforts of the apostles must tend to modify those institutions themselves, trying to bring them to more truth, more humanity, more christianity. This cannot certainly be done if we content ourselves with working from the outside. We must struggle from the inside, we must penetrate the pagan world and not keep apart from it, and, as the Holy Father puts it himself in the Apostolic Constitution, we must 'lead in every place and time a real life of perfection, to embrace this life in cases in which religious canonical life would be impossible or unfit, to re-christianise intensely the families, the professions, civil society through direct and daily life, perfectly and fully consecrated to its sanctification, to exercise the apostolate in numerous ways and fulfil offices which place, time or circumstances prohibit to priests and religious'.

It is clear that to lead such a life the members of these societies cannot be bound to common life as a rule and to 'regulated' contemplative life. They will not be 'religious': '. . . as they don't admit the public vows of religion and don't impose on their members common life, those Institutes are not, and cannot properly be called "religious". They are not submitted to the legislation which rules over religious and societies of common life, and therefore will not benefit from that legislation.' We can say that, on the whole, the stress is laid on the 'substance' rather than on the 'form' of the State of Perfection. Total consecration to God is required, in the spirit of poverty, obedience, chastity. The form it takes does not matter so long as that exists. This implies the existence of Superiors and of Constitutions, in an organic society.

More recent texts lay more emphasis on the initial document. In *Primo Feliciter* dated 12th March 1948 we find more particulars as to the members of the Secular Institutes: 'a multitude of souls, hidden in God with Christ and who, in the middle of the world, consecrate their lives to our Lord. They are, by divine Providence, the *sal indeficiens* in this tasteless and corrupt world, the unfailing and illuminating light in this gloomy world, the small and efficient leaven which must work everywhere and always, in all classes of

citizens, intimately mixed with the masses of the workers, so that through their word, their example, their manifold action, they should succeed in making them ferment in Christ. Their own particular feature will then be to maintain the secular character in order to exercise perfection in civilian life. Therefore their life, secular in form, must be in keeping with the exigencies of perfection. They must consume their whole life, consecrated to God, in the apostolate, seeking perfection. Then each must always practise purity of intention, union with God, generous renunciation and love of souls. This apostolate is not a passing thirst for souls and a burst of zeal: it is a reason and a form of life. And not only shall this apostolate be exercised faithfully in the world, it must be something which comes from the world itself therefore, something like an urgent need from the professions, the deeds, the places, the circumstances corresponding to the particular condition of those who live in the world.' . . . This text speaks for itself.

On the whole, it seems that the Editor, in the October issue of *LIFE OF THE SPIRIT*, describes rather the existing modern congregations, which are really 'religious', than the prospective Institutes. He gives too great an importance to the question of vow, as an act of the virtue of 'religion' which, as we have seen, is no longer required, and all through the article the Editor uses the word 'religious' to describe members of a secular institute whereas they must not in fact call themselves so. Shall I say that the expression 'remaining in more immediate contact with modern secular life' does not say enough? We must not be afraid of going further than that; the apostle must belong to that life, be in it, a fragment of it himself, and the spirit of this new life is at the antipodes of the ideals of solitary or eremitical life. May I add too that if 'common life' is not required in order to follow the necessities of apostolate, it does not mean that each member will be entitled to live by himself and follow exclusively his own ideas . . . far from it; 'community life' remains. Whereas living together in itself is purely artificial, a community of aims and action, though the members may be dispersed, will be very important. The spirit of a 'team' is a feature of the new modern apostolate, in reaction to the individualistic mind of the last century. Now, they will put together all they have and all they are, not so much the material riches, but what have far greater value: their ideals, their aims, their efforts, their experience, their failures, their Faith, their hope, their prayer, their sacrifices. Perhaps they will not meet more than once a month, but the 'community life' will certainly be more real, more helpful, more in keeping with the apostolic line than the 'common

life' of some convents, where the inconveniences of living together are felt, and much of the rest disappears.

It is true that such a life will be much more difficult than the traditional 'congregational life', and therefore it must be based on a very strong and deep spiritual formation, supported by a very keen sense of union with God through the various activities of daily life. But there again the 'form' of that life should be adapted to the new circumstances.

I must confess that when I read the article in the August issue, I was puzzled: how could a Christian—i.e., one belonging to Christ, one of Christ's disciples, one of those who want to follow him and witness for him—make up such a time-table as the one proposed by a welfare-worker? It seems scarcely a human life. Where is the time to be social—God has placed us in the midst of society to have intercourse with other people, to read something else than 'spiritual reading', to go to lectures whether to widen our knowledge or to improve our professional equipment? Is it not necessary to go occasionally to some play, to be able to discuss with one's fellow-workers, to see one's own friends and relatives, to be a human being?

The extracts of letters quoted in the October issue give the same impression, that the freedom from 'the pressure of the common life' is to be welcomed because it gives more time for private prayer. Surely this is selfish? It disregards altogether the needs of our neighbours. My impression is that the writers are looking for the utmost 'comfort'; I mean they wish to eliminate all that could be an obstacle or simple difficulty to their leading a quiet, contemplative 'solitary' life, conducive to the kind of perfection that they have chosen for themselves. trying to forget that the rest of the world is going to the devil . . . I dare say they would pray for it too. But the thirst for souls, the haunting thought of the Mystical Body of Christ which we must help to complete as living members of it ourselves, where are they?

We cannot but see that the problems of today are not those of 50 years ago, and our way of being Christians and obeying the call of the Lord, must be different too. We must not be afraid of changing methods; we must not be afraid of going ahead. Let us not forget that there are priests and religious who are working in factories, leading the ordinary manual worker's life, in order to be 'among those masses' as the Holy Father says, celebrating Mass for them in their own lodgings and explaining the Gospel with their own simple everyday words. Let us not forget that all the others are our neighbours. And what shall we answer to our Lord when he asks us what we have done for them?

NOTE.—The author of the above article is an ardent apostle in the *Missions de Paris* and writing from the French point of view has to some extent misunderstood the purpose of the previous writers on this subject, which was simply to investigate the possibilities of applying the *principles* of *Provida Ecclesia* to a solitary life which is often almost forced on the good Christian 'in the world'. But the writer's points are well worthy of consideration and put a challenge which no layman or cleric can lightly pass by.—EDITOR.

GOD'S COMMANDOS

BY

MARIE DESBOTTES

LIFE today is puzzling for many men and women. The problems and the answers to them are far from clear-cut; nor are they confined to those living entirely worldly lives; there are many seeking the things of the spirit who are having a time of difficulty and perplexity. The lay contemplative comes in for his or her fair share of these difficulties.

It seems to these men and women that they have been given a very clear mandate by God. They are to live in the world and yet give him whole time service; they are to follow as closely as they can the way of life that our Lord and his blessed Mother trod. They are increasingly aware of our Lord's words that some devils are only cast out by prayer and penance. It becomes more and more clear that most of our devils today are of this category and that God is leading these souls by a way of prayer and penance which is literally demanding whole-time service. Love, prayer, penance, silence; cells of love and contemplation living and working in an enemy territory to win souls for Love himself. . . . God's Commandos in fact.

All this seems clear; wherein lies their problem? First within themselves; they doubt that they have heard aright, it is so difficult to live in the world and not become one with it. The very generosity of their love makes them feel that they should join one of the great contemplative Orders, and frequently they are free to do so, except for one extraordinary barrier. . . . God does not give them the vocation for this life! Secondly, looking at the problem objectively there are so many dangers; to go 'free lancing' for souls is all very well, but when storms and stress arise there is a lack of dedication and of a Rule to keep them on their way, so the free lancing may well become a spare time hobby when their hearts and intentions are not engaged elsewhere. There is also the danger of diletantism. We all know how easy that is; to sit back with our pieties and our