

Reviews

THE NUN IN THE WORLD, by Cardinal Suenens; Burns and Oates, 12s. 6d.

The basic directives of this highly stimulating and much-discussed book seem to be these: 'If she belongs fully to her time and is rooted in the world as it is, the religious can only realistically . . . accept the conditions which will allow her to fulfil her proper mission in the Church today' (p. 64); and under the heading *Adaption is no Relaxation*: 'A religious life more religious because more apostolic, a more intense life of prayer, a more exacting spirit of renunciation, and a more authentic supernatural spirit'. (p. 133)

Far from depreciating the vocation of what the Cardinal calls the 'classic' religious life (p. 36), he so fervently believes in its efficaciousness that the religious, on reading his book, may well feel overwhelmed by her responsibilities. The traditional community appears to him as a kind of spiritual powerhouse, capable of christianising and turning into apostles a whole generation of young women. It is good to be told how much the Church—for we may take the Cardinal to be her authoritative spokesman—expects from the nuns of the teaching and nursing congregations, most of which go back to the nineteenth century, and who may have felt during these last decades as if they were considered superseded by the more recently founded secular institutes. He echoes the deep conviction of many of us that it is the nun in her habit—though possibly a habit simplified and rid of some of its starched accessories—who is destined to be a sign of Christ and the Church in the midst of the world, and not only among those, comparatively few, who happen to meet her within the walls of her convent.

The Cardinal would also seem justified to stress the directly apostolic character of every religious vocation, since it was the aim of the founders that their daughters should go as apostles into the new or neglected sectors of their contemporary society to conquer these for Christ. An apostolate within the school or the hospital may have been sufficient in a narrower and less unstable world; it is not so now when the pull of the religiously-indifferent or openly pagan environment tends to be stronger than even a fully Christian upbringing. But at the present time, so the Cardinal says, there is—because of professional requirements and overcharged timetables—not sufficient time for the directly apostolic action within the convent; and there is even less, and certainly less training and experience, for the apostolic approach to the wider circles outside. These circles, however, are not at all impenetrable to the influence of the nun, who brings with her something of the goodness and love of the Master to whom she openly professes to belong. If the rules allow it and if they are given the proper training in apostolic methodology, nuns today will be able to exert a far more widely felt influence than they have done until now.

Should rules be so revised, and should—this is the other condition stipulated by the Cardinal—time be so allocated as to allow the individual nun greater initiative and a personal sphere of apostolic activity outside her convent? The answer will surely be Yes, if one reads carefully the excellent historical analysis given in Part One: most rules are decisively influenced by the attitude towards women at the time of their elaboration. Since then, however, woman's position in the world has changed tremendously, and the field in which she can exercise her activity, both professional and apostolic, is incomparably larger than that of her sisters in the past. As were her founders in their time, she should continue to be a pioneer, realizing today, as then, her evangelical ideal within her self-chosen community, but limiting herself no longer to the traditional activities of school and hospital; she ought to enlarge these to include the circles beyond those committed to her immediate care and thus use all her gifts, both natural and supernatural, to get her message across to the pagan world by means formerly unthought-of, but now within her reach.

When Cardinal Suenens advocates something like the emancipation of the nun he in no way means to attack, or expects major superiors to change, the permanent foundations of all religious life. What the Church, so he says, asks of its most dedicated members is that the conditions of their lives should be such that they might become the most useful instruments for a Christian renewal of the world. His criticisms, as well as all the reforms listed, might seem formidable in the aggregate, but to no congregation do they apply *in toto*, and there is probably none that has not yet set out to realize one or the other of *The New Dimensions of the Apostolate* (sub-title). There is nothing that should cause fear or indignation in this frank book. On the contrary, it is encouraging to hear from someone in the Cardinal's position that by her vocation the nun is 'the immediate extension of the priesthood', (p. 99) and that, faithful in an adult, responsible way to her vows and her rule, she need not fear the risk of confronting modern men and women in any way of life accessible to her and in need of the Word Incarnate.

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THE BOW IN THE CLOUDS, by Daniel Berrigan, S.J.; Burns & Oates, 21s.
NEW SEEDS OF CONTEMPLATION, by Thomas Merton; Burns & Oates, 25s.

Vae mihi si non evangelizavero, a principle which surely implies 'understood of the people' in one way or another; and no question facing the Church is more urgent than that of finding a language such as people will understand—people whose grandfathers at least seemed to meet what the Church said with understanding, though perhaps with disagreement. Your typical modern hearer shows a fine quality of courteous interest; he listens, but is totally baffled. Yes, he will tell you, it all seems to hang together in a way; but what's it all in aid of? what does it have to do with me? why should I bother?