

ADAPTATIONS IN FRANCE—III

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Virginity

IF, in order to remain truly religious, any adaptation must leave untouched the essence of the vows of obedience, and of poverty, it is even more evident that it must not touch the essence of the vow of virginity. One day I was reading various passages from the Directory of the *ancelles* to a Benedictine nun. The paragraph concerning obedience began with these words: 'Fundamentally it is obedience which makes nuns of you.' She exclaimed: 'Oh, no, indeed! If I am a nun it is before all because I am a consecrated virgin!' I think that as a matter of fact she was right. Of the three vows one can say that in substance virginity is, by all that it offers and expresses, the most characteristic of a religious consecration. Perhaps we shall come back to this. In any case it is clear that there can be no toning down in the practice of chastity. Consecration to God is an absolute.

However, in this sphere as with the others a certain adaptation is noteworthy. It lies either in the teaching of the vow of chastity or in the traditional ascetism organized with a view to its preservation.

As a matter of fact there is a considerable advance in adaptation as to virginity or chastity—now-a-days one can speak of them openly. I do not know whether it was the same in English congregations, but certainly in France one approached all such subjects with an exaggerated discretion. Not a few young nuns came to their profession or undertook charitable responsibilities, or educational ones, without having been enlightened about the mystery of love and life other than quite vaguely and veiled with false shame. You can easily understand that this ignorance and confusion caused many doubts and difficulties, and troubled many consciences.

It is interesting to notice that today a far better formation and information is provided as to these matters. Novice mistresses take on the task in their instructions and in private interviews

much more openly and straightforwardly than in the past. Subjects such as chastity, sexuality, life, the body, and even mere hygiene are approached quite frankly instead of with a terrified discretion. Novice mistresses and superiors themselves profit from courses and sessions to which theologians, psychologists, psychiatrists and doctors bring the fruits of their experience and their research. This is moreover occasioned by the atmosphere of a century unfortunately distinguished as an aphrodisiac century. The women who enter religious life are bathed in what one can hardly call a civilization, in a world of pictures, styles, literature; in an atmosphere where the realities of love and life are often nothing but sources of pleasure, eroticism, more or less crude or refined. Some arrive already tarnished by life, in their hearts, in their minds, even in their bodies. By a curious paradox this does not mean that they are more informed, more prepared than the others. What matters is that the novice mistress should explain things clearly and peaceably. This is even more necessary in the case of nuns whose apostolic work mingles them with a world where such conditions are rife.

There is thus in certain respects, a new factor. One talks about chastity. This a preliminary adaptation, necessitated by the spirit of the world in which we live and by the mentality of the younger generation who are soaked in it. It is interesting to note this. But what is far more interesting to observe is the evolution in the *way* of talking about it. A more immediately theological teaching takes the place of the moralizing content—is substituted for the more or less negative warnings and advice about chastity. It is thus from two points of view that the education of virginity becomes more realistic. It has developed simultaneously along two lines. On the one hand the frank direct information we have spoken of, and on the other the luminous and uplifted point of view of a theology of virginity. The attraction for poverty—often rather lyrical—whose existence we noticed in modern youth, is frequently accompanied by a veritable discovery of the consecration to God, with all that this implies in positive values, adoration, prayer, intimacy, tenderness towards the Lord. This sense of the absolute of God in the order of love corresponds with what abandonment meant in the order of earthly possessions.

It is moreover significant that Father Perrin, author of a recent remarkable book on Virginity, should be at the same time the

founder of *Caritas Christi*, a new secular institute. It is the same movement which inspired both the desire for a presence in the world, and also that of consecration to God; that is why one speaks more readily of virginity than of chastity, and why one sees in the virginal vocation the condition if not the substance itself of contemplative life. A virgin is one who does not look at her world, and is not interested to know whether any one looks at her. She is in the world without being of the world, not because of fear of evasion, but because of her desire to return as nearly as possible to the divine source. In such a spirit it is not enough merely to possess oneself. The essential is to keep oneself for God. Virginity thus not only includes moral protection, but also straight-way takes on a theological significance.

We have said that the adaptability of anything is in proportion with its vitality, with its attitude to reality. We must note here a real and profound adaptation with regard to everything concerning the vow of chastity, just as much from the lowly and realistic point of view of carnal things as from the higher level of the reality of God. As a matter of fact, this is not a real discovery but just a return after so many centuries of Cartesianism and Kantianism to Christian health—that of the great apostles, the great monks, the great monastic law-makers. They did not ignore evil indeed, nor the wounds of the flesh, less than we, doubtless, but they only spoke of the perils of the flesh in the light of the seduction of the love of God.

A whole series of detailed adaptations corresponds, in the ascetic order, by which one traditionally guarantees chastity, to this adaptation in religious education and formation. Some of them are at the very concrete level of physical and psychological life, others at the more religious level of observances.

Take first of all the adaptations of rhythm of life. Ten or twenty years ago certain points would have seemed absolute. In our days their modification is almost taken for granted. I mean all those questions of sleep, of rest, of time-table, of hygiene, etc. There is a host of examples—individual or general dispensations, modification of rhythm of life in order to diminish nervous tension, and establish physical equilibrium. This sort of adaptation is concerned with concessions to the mentality, habits and insufficiencies of the present generation. Women who enter religious life now have lived a more open, a more ventilated life. They have been girl

guides. They have been camping. They have travelled, and played games. Religious life can no longer ignore these habits which play a part now in all contemporary life. Thus in most French novitiates the sisters now do gymnastics. That may seem quite the normal thing in England. In France the effect was revolutionary. Furthermore, another strange paradox in the present generation, in spite of the openness and the freedom of the modern world, or perhaps even because of it, a great many candidates are more delicate, more nervous, less stable than those of the past. The rhythm of religious life must take account of this.

Here we must mention that ever more frequently recurring phenomenon of adaptation—psychiatric intervention in the discerning and orientation of difficult vocations, and more precisely of the psychiatrist in the treatment of difficulties over chastity. I know that T. S. Eliot in *The Cocktail Party* gives to his psychiatrist not only the priestly role of director of souls, but also the almost angelic lucidity of a master of destinies. I know also that there are great Catholic psychiatrists, and that at Rome there is a congress of psychoanalysis. Father Plé, whom I replace today, would be more qualified than I to tell you about this. It is quite possible that in certain cases the psychoanalyst is more useful and successful than the exorcist. It remains true, however, that psychoanalysis is severely handicapped by the materialism of its initiators and of those who theorize. Doubtless it is a technique, but it is difficult to purge it of the mystique in which it developed. This is not the place to discuss it, but it is important to have indicated this 'adaptation' in the education of chastity. It is possible, and even desirable, that progress in medical and psychological technique allow the collaboration of psychiatrist, spiritual director and novice mistress, on condition that the transcendence of the spirit is maintained. We should not too readily claim success in the order of adaptation. This question demands attentive reflection on the part of theologians, and a great deal of discernment on the part of novice mistresses.

However, the ascesis of chastity is not limited to psychological conditions, or even to physiological ones. There is more properly a religious aspect of the problem, that of the observances calculated to protect the virginal vocation. One notices here likewise some interesting adaptations. However, these do not arise, as do those of which we have been speaking, from concessions to the

mental atmosphere or the usage of new techniques. They are, rather, exacted by the apostolic vocation. We are about to re-discover the same inspiration which caused the changes of emphasis we noticed over obedience and poverty.

Monastic traditions safeguard the virginity of the heart and of life by means of a separation from the world. The elements of this separation can be reduced to solitude and enclosure. It is in this spirit for example that one asks of a nun neither to make nor to receive confidences. It is in the same spirit that all correspondence passes traditionally through the hands of the Superior. And it is for this reason that enclosure is a real shutting off from the world. In fact, taken literally these restrictions seem scarcely compatible with an apostolic vocation implying presence in the world.

This incompatibility is the greater and the more difficult to overcome in proportion as the elements are understood in a literalism which kills the spirit. This is, alas, often the case with old foundations. The history of the *ancelles* shows that it is slow and difficult to overcome this tendency. One of them recently told me about the difficulties her group had had in adapting the observance of enclosure to their apostolic life. 'In one of our hostels for young girls we had been asked to look on the kitchen as part of the enclosure, and to keep the next room as dining room for our guests. We dined at the same time as these people, but in the kitchen. At this meal we were to read a chapter of the Directory, followed by the traditional reading, we carried out the penances customary in other houses of Sion, eating our soup on our knees, kissing the floor, etc. All this was compatible with a traditional convent life. Over the washing up we had our recreation without even having the permission to associate with the people we received to meals. In face of the reality of our apostolic life our Superiors agreed to the suppression of "spatial" enclosure, and gave us permission to take our meals with the people who came in to dine.' This incident among many others shows that literal interpretation of enclosure in the sense in which it is normally understood made the lives of the *ancelles* impossible and paralysed their activity. Indeed, it is difficult to maintain together in the same life and in the same, often very limited, place, the requirements of enclosure and the necessities of a welcome. Now that things have evolved and the Directory of Sion has really been adapted to the life of the *ancelles*, the rule of enclosure remains but clothed in

another modality. In any case a separation exists, either of time or of place. Thus even in the tiniest residences there is always one room reserved for the sisters who want to work or to pray. Often there is tumult and excitement in the room where visitors are received, neophytes or the local people. But there is always somewhere in the house a place of enclosure and of silence. The spirit of enclosure is kept.

Sometimes this is not enough. It is for the *ancelles* themselves to discover the way in which to guarantee their solitude and their consecration. We shall see in a moment how they organize their silence. One might well apply to them a distinction which was made recently with reference to the priest workers, but which applies equally to any religious apostle. A priest is consecrated but not separated. Let us beware of too ready a criticism, for, quite precisely, 'consecrated' does mean 'separated'. Nevertheless one sees quite well what the distinction implies. Religious living in the world have to work this out in their lives. In not a few cases the situation formerly safeguarded by traditional enclosure seems endangered or compromised. Think for example of the problem of going out at night, necessitated by the rhythm of modern life. Think of the problem of elegance and of dress, that we have already met. This also has its bearing on the problem of chastity. The *ancelles* have to go to the hairdresser; they wear nylon stockings. In a great many details of daily life they are young girls like any others. They are consecrated to God, but they are not, because of this, cut off from the world; for there are whole realms where they must remain present in virtue of their vocation. In many cases this asks of them great courage and lucidity in order to distinguish the veritable will of God. And here again we come across the exigence we have already met—such self-control can only be found in adult beings with a solid formation.

We must appeal to a similar maturity, both religious and human, in adapting the traditional rule concerning confidences and correspondence to the conditions of their professional and apostolic life. We mentioned this with regard to obedience. Certain *ancelles* are held to professional silence. They have to receive and keep serious confidences. Formerly one would doubtless have worried about their chastity—their virginity of heart. Now one trusts their seriousness and their maturity. This is equally true, and becomes more and more so, of all sisters in boarding schools,

hospitals, works of charity, whose jobs imply charge of souls.

Similarly there is less doubt about contacts. We are less obsessed nowadays over particular friendships, which does not mean however that they do not exist! Without hesitation collaboration is allowed between sisters, with all the confidences and sometimes even intimacy that this implies—an adaptation particularly remarkable at Sion where the Directory is most rigorous in the chapter on solitude.

All this is less concerned with broadening out than with maturity. Indeed, it would be illusory progress, in fact a wretched slackening, if this rule of confidence and liberty were not compensated, inspired, animated, vivified by a lofty interior exigence, born of a truly theological conception of virginity—consecration to God.
