

Life of the Spirit

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DIFFICULTIES FOR LAY CONTEMPLATIVES

BY

THE EDITOR

RAST issues of THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT have contained several articles on the possibility of living a contemplative life while remaining in the lay state. In particular the Pope's encouragement of 'Secular Institutes' in his *Provida Mater Ecclesia* was considered in relation to the contemplative ideal; for although the papal document is intended for lay organisations directly concerned with the active life and active apostolate it does also set the seal of approval on the general idea of living a specially dedicated form of life while remaining in the world. Beneath the surface of ordinary catholic life today there is such a turmoil of enthusiasm for some sort of religious life in the world that the *Provida Mater Ecclesia* marks the beginning of a new era in the religious life of the Church. And as one minor consequence of all this the Editor has received many comments both of approval and of criticism of the articles mentioned above. Among the comments it would therefore seem desirable for the assistance of those aspiring to such a type of contemplative life to select a few constructive criticisms. By this means we hope to assist the hesitant or the faltering or the dubious to understand what is implied.

It is easy as well as necessary to begin by describing the ideal in which lay people may group themselves with a view to assisting each other to lead lives of prayer parallel with the lives of those within the cloister. But when it comes to the stage of working the ideal out in practical detail many obstacles appear and the higher and more desirable the ideal the greater will be the practical difficulties. Among correspondents have been those who have already tried to lead a regulated contemplative life while sticking to their posts in civilian life and their experience is of value. For instance, one of the greatest difficulties for those who have attempted this sort of thing is that of *time*.

To adopt a mode of life which is progressively contemplative seems to demand a considerable amount of time every day. Contributors have suggested that the whole divine office could be managed every day and that anything up to two hours should be spent at Mass and mental prayer. Against this it has been urged that professional and manual workers alike cannot gather so much time for prayer, and it is argued that such estimates are based on the false idea that people who earn their living spend several hours a day in recreation. For married people of course the amount of spare time is reduced practically to nothing if they have to work for their living; but even the single man or woman besides working hours has the hours of travel to and from work, domestic duties, shopping, etc., and prayer and the spiritual life are not things which can be attended to entirely in a state of relaxation. Here is the day of a Welfare Worker wishing to lead a contemplative life:

- 6.30 a.m. Rise, short morning prayers.
- 7.0 Mass followed by breakfast, etc.
- 8.0 Set out for work. Travel used for Prayer, Little Office, etc., 1 hr +.
- 9.15-5.30 Working hours. $\frac{3}{4}$ hr. for lunch.
- 5.30-6.45 Travel—Prayer, Spiritual Reading.
- 7.0 Supper and necessary jobs till 9.0.
- 9.0-10.30 Spiritual Reading, Prayer, etc.

A strenuous life demands seven or eight hours sleep and when a man or woman lives at the high pitch suggested in the above horary he will find it difficult to maintain it over a long period. The point of the legislation for Secular Institutes is that a quasi-religious life should be open to those who earn their living, it is not intended merely for those who do not have to work. And this means that a member's average day will often demand eight hours or more for neutral work or things connected with it. Time, then, is a serious difficulty, though the nature of the work of course plays a great part in this aspect of the problem.

Then the organisation of an 'Institute' is essential to the life of a lay contemplative because otherwise the dangers of becoming self-centred, conceited or censorious are overwhelming. Those who are attracted by such a life are usually desirous of becoming 'solitaries' at once. One has written, 'I wonder whether the attempt to bring these solitaries into line with the Religious Life in its highly developed form is as sound as it looks?' And certainly at first sight the extremes of the full religious life on the one hand with its organisation of vows and rules and on the other the lonely working man or woman striving to live constantly in the presence of God do not

seem designed to meet and intermingle. An institute means a central house where members may be trained according to the spirit of the vows and the ways of prayer and penance. But how can a man who has begun his career interrupt it in this way? And if it be modelled on the full religious life how can he avoid falling between two stools, becoming neither a monk nor a professional man?

'All must be done under obedience', to quote again, 'but if those exercising the obedience are trying to make the solitary into a "sort of" religious, may it not be that unfruitfulness will result?' The questions of poverty and the degrees of withdrawal from the world are also raised, and this, too, belongs to the possibility and nature of lay organisation for the purpose of encouraging prayer and penance in a corporate way.

To this and similar difficulties the main solutions are the same. First of all it must be remembered that what is proposed is a very special type of vocation. It is not offered to every individual Catholic as the more or less necessary way of living the life of prayer. It is a specialised way of contemplation. And like all special vocations it can only be regarded as a personal call to one whose circumstances permit it. Thus married people with a family have their own special vocation which does not permit them to seek an extraneous way of prayer in an Institute. And certain types of employment also by the extent to which they occupy the person will prevent an organised contemplative life. For this reason the problem of time will often be a guide as to whether a man is called or not to such a life. If the minimum of time can be found without danger of strain, if opportunity can be found for short periods at some place of 'novitiate' then a person may regard these as external signs suggesting the possibility of a vocation.

It is a new form of life and it would certainly be a great mistake to impose upon the new lay group the system and ideas, even though in modified forms, of the old style of religious life. It is already more than difficult to continue the religious life in its older dress even for those wholly given to it; it would ruin the new Institute to try to make monks and nuns of its members. An organisation built up on the spirit of obedience and humility is most certainly required in order to prevent the inevitable evil of conceit and separation if attempted without direction and co-operation. But the distinction between life and state must be emphasised and worked upon; for the 'state' is the organisation built up hitherto by public vows and habits and special types of rule. The state of perfection so far established is fashioned according to the circumstances of a Christian milieu, and as such it has to be modified at

least in accidentals as the milieu changes. But the life is the same in ideal for all. The *spirit* of obedience, of chastity and of poverty is not the special property of 'religious' but of all who belong to the Christian religion. The way of contemplation is open to all and is in one form or another the vocation of all. The progress of the soul in the spiritual life is in general the same, a progress, a growth, developing towards the perfection of vision in heaven.

Thus the solitary life in the normal Christian development can come only after the Christian has practised the social virtues. He cannot begin as a solitary, and so he must have some sort of training and direction first, and some life within the confines of a community. Contemplative gifts can only fruitfully develop after, or at least in conjunction with, a strongly ascetic life of penance. This Christian way of life has been organised in a special way in the 'state' of perfection proper to religious. Now the same life seeks a new organisation, a new state, which will be proper to 'Secular Institutes'. It should therefore be possible to organise a 'state' in which the ordinary mundane work of a secular job could become part of the ascetic training leading to contemplation. In this way the amount of spare time necessary would at first be limited. It would be against the ordinary progress of Christian 'life' to begin as a contemplative in the world with hours spent on one's knees. In the first stages there is much to be *done*, and activity predominates. Here, as in many other directions, training would be urgently required, and a training proper to this new and specialised state of Christian life.

It would seem urgent, therefore, for those who are intent upon this contemplative way in secular life to settle down to study the essentials of Christian life including the spirit of the counsels of perfection, but to forget the particular forms which the organisation of states has so far taken. Christians are sufficiently aware of those as it is. It is always easier to remember the static exterior organisation, and thus to forget the interior life. Difficulties, then, must be measured by the rule of Christian life after having made clear its distinction from the Christian state.

An interesting supplement to *La Vie Spirituelle* has recently appeared under the general title of *Les Adaptations de la Vie Religieuse*. As well as the general treatment of the problems of modern religious life there is a short discussion on *Communautés Laïques* which consists of a description by two young women of their particular mode of life in a lay organisation. Thus 'Claude' says that she was seeking to establish 'a contemplative life, a silent witness of the Christian work and love in the midst of the poor of

the world'. The Supplement evidently has an appeal to those interested in the question of religious life and the special form of Christian life for laymen.

'BE YE THEREFORE PERFECT'

BY

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WE use the word 'perfect' in so many contexts that it is easy to lose sight of its etymological meaning ('*per*', thoroughly, '*facere*', to make). We need to look to its roots in order to understand St Thomas's use of the term. He speaks of 'first perfection' and 'second perfection' (I. 73. 1). 'First perfection' is God's gift to every man as he enters upon this life; he has a nature which is perfect, 'thoroughly-made', in that it lacks none of the finely-adapted faculties proper to a rational being. Activity is the very *raison d'être* of these faculties and in bestowing them on a nature God imparts to it the ability to act, to operate. He who 'created heaven and earth' has been prodigal even of his power, since he willed to create a world which should mirror his omnipotence as well as his goodness. God could have fashioned the universe as something already fully perfect and therefore changeless, had he not wished that its beauty should be not merely static, like that of a great painting, but full of life and movement, in which the component parts contribute actively to the beauty of the whole. Hence it is that every creature is created perfect 'substantially' and is granted the power to achieve the further and accidental perfection to which God has destined it.

God, as the architect of the universe, has to direct the activity of his dynamic creature towards the accomplishment of his vast design. This he does by assigning to the hierarchy of created agents a corresponding hierarchy of ultimate ends, so that each agent in attaining its appointed end makes its contribution to the beauty of the whole. 'Second perfection', the 'making' of oneself, which God has placed in the power of the creature, consists in the very activity by which it attains its ultimate end. (I. 73. 1.) God ordained that men, the noblest work of his hands, should achieve the highest perfection and should achieve it in being united with himself. Now 'It is charity which unites us with God', St Thomas tells us. 'He that abideth in charity abideth in God and God in him'. (II-II. 184. 1.)