

THE CATHOLIC FELLOWSHIP OF THE SICK

MARY JACKSON

FOR the last twelve years there has been increasingly engaged in France a great new labour—a gigantic labour, indeed, to make both more human and more holy the great, grey, hidden world of the chronically ill or disabled. It began very simply in 1942 when a group of invalid girls met a certain invalid priest at another girl's bedside. There indeed was the archetypal idea, the gathering together in charity and friendliness of the isolated sick, with the hope of priestly instruction in their common and difficult vocation.

The movement of the Catholic Fellowship of the Sick is now fully organized in several dioceses and has the full and formal approval of the hierarchy. Its manifesto is apparently the little book of Fr Thierry-d'Argenlieu, O.P.,¹ who, chronically ill himself, is one of the leaders of the movement.

There exists an enormous new world of the sick, declares Fr d'Argenlieu, partly as a result of war conditions and poor housing, but more due to the advance of medicine. 'A whole world has been brought into being', he says, 'that used not to exist when both people's vitality was greater and when mortality was higher, too.' Vast numbers of chronic invalids live isolated, suffering also from a degree of psychological isolation, for it is true, as Charles du Bos remarks, that 'physical suffering is a very favourable soil for other kinds of suffering, moral, emotional or spiritual, which sprout, flourish and proliferate therein.'

The sick have, however, objectively a very special task, as theirs is to show forth the signs and seal of the Crucified of whom they are the living witnesses and the reflection, so that theirs is not only a private but a social vocation which, Fr d'Argenlieu declares, 'the best of them, in reaction against the individualism of the last century, desire to rediscover and realize in communion with all their brethren in suffering.' And why? 'Because', he says, 'they have the feeling that (the public mission which is theirs) reaches endlessly beyond their own personal littleness.' There must always remain the primacy of the sufferers' own contemplative life, but these people now seek to revive a sense of the christian and apostolic community of the sick.

There has emerged, then, a movement thus defined: 'The Catholic Fellowship of the Sick is a movement directed by the chronically ill or

¹ *La Fraternité Catholique des Malades*. Par Paul Thierry-d'Argenlieu, O.P. (Editions du Cerf; Blackfriars.)

infirm which will gather all the sick of the parish or a diocese into the charity of Christ, in a spirit of fellowship so that altogether they may bear their trials better, help each other and develop all their potentialities, both natural and supernatural, so as to be of greater fruit there where God has placed them.'

It is implied that stoicism is not enough, that behind the convention of stoicism there are special risks for the permanent invalid of depression and even despair. It is asserted, too, that it is much easier for the infirm to overcome his inferiority complex and allow his personality to emerge in the company of his fellows in affliction. There occurs here a theme already familiar in the experience of the priest-workers in Germany, the conviction that an ordinary route to the discovery and the promulgation of the evangelical answer to the problem of pain is christian fellowship in trouble. And there is a particularly beautiful note of brotherly love struck when Fr d'Argenlieu suggests that 'one ought to have a very great desire to *receive* from the least of the brethren'. (That is true especially in the Through-the-Looking-Glass world of the sick.)

The key spirit of the movement, then, is an awareness of a mission now formally confided by the Church to those willing to embrace it to bring all the permanently sick to Christ. But the cornerstone is the priest as spiritual educator. (A telling remark of A. Malraux is quoted here: 'God only knows the trials he is going to lay upon the priesthood, but I believe that the priesthood must become difficult again.') The priest must be 'an educator—of consciences that are adult'.

And so the simple pattern of action emerges. A central group of apostolic-minded invalids has sought out, with a great tact, all or any of the parish infirm and there are days spent by them in common, days which are a cheerful and a tonic blend of retreat, social and 'any other business'. There are full or less full retreats for these disabled and the multitude of minor doings that a valid circulation of life will produce, individual visits, Christmas and Easter presents, circular letters and reciprocal small services. The movement is strongly directed, however, and will not dissipate itself in the shallows of material trivialities. It is alert to direct individuals towards the contacts to help them intellectually, morally, spiritually. Very soundly Thomist, it is wary, too, of any taint of 'dolorisme'—and does not lose sight of its aim to restore to the sick as rich a natural functioning as possible.

What of the relevance of all this to the English scene? Are the assumptions of the movement sound here, too? That the sick constitute in some ways a world apart, anyone who has spent some time in a general ward or even in visiting a physiotherapy clinic knows is true. It is a perhaps terrible fact. A gulf yawns between the worlds of the fit and of the unfit, in spite of the endless gay and gallant efforts to bridge it by

jokes and the rest. Within that terrible solidarity differences of class and mentality are perfectly clear and comparatively unimportant.

Can the sick indeed be effective charge-holders, in spite of the managerial assumptions of the fit which tend to relegate the unfit to the position of minors? There can be no doubt of the facts here either, once it is realized that the sick may have very strong characters indeed. Strength of character, after all, may very well be for them an occupational likelihood.

Is there a need for widespread and thorough spiritual education of the infirm in their vocation?—where, Père d'Argenlieu remarks, they will always be novices. Can a void cry out? The magnificent and humble stoicism of the wards is, of course, evident. But the spiritual life therein seems to be numb, or at most a mere ache. Meanwhile the chronically ill or disabled accumulate and wait, a great, grey, hidden *Pays du Mission* indeed, spiritually something of a tundra region. May it yet blossom like the rose!

REVIEWS

A MAN APPROVED. By Leo Trese. (Sheed and Ward; 7s. 6d.)

All who enjoyed *Vessel of Clay*, as well as many who were irritated by the literary form there adopted, will profit from Father Trese's second volume on the priesthood. This small volume was originally given as conferences at a priests' retreat.

His ideals are high, but, as we should expect from the writer, he is severely practical in his application. The application in a few cases is not very apt when transferred to English conditions; as, for instance, when we are warned of the unfittingness of a priest indulging in Chryslers and Cadillacs or expensive summer 'cottages'. It will be a pity if the English priest decides that he already is a poor man, and so the chapter does not apply! It is not hard to see that Father Trese would rightly condemn any excessive pandering to personal comfort and love of possession.

The greater part of this little volume deals with the distinctively priestly work, which is the same in all parts of the world. He has a telling way of impressing us that nothing matters like the Mass. Because of the Mass, the neglect of a single morning meditation brings irreparable loss. Nor should we be content to say Mass anyhow. If we take the trouble to say it with exemplary care and reverence, each Mass is a silent sermon on faith.

Confessions, Father Trese reminds us, must never be hurried. The salvation of the eternal soul before me may depend on the loving care with which I listen and help it.

Nor will Father Trese let us be careless about our sermons. I am glad