

AN OPEN LETTER

To any recent convert from Anglo-Catholicism who thinks
he may have a Carthusian vocation

PETER F. ANSON

Dear Fellow Convert,

I AM writing this letter at the request of the Prior of Parkminster. He seems to think that because I 'went over to Rome' more than forty years ago and decided that I had a Carthusian vocation even before I ceased to be in communion with Canterbury, I might be able to explain to you, better than he can do, why all converts, especially recent ones, should recognize that the Carthusian life is in the literal sense an extraordinary and abnormal one; and whilst it is most admirable to fall in love with the golden heights, no one dare take this thing to himself unless God calls him. This is just common-sense. God does not call the world as a whole by abnormal ways. Few men have the vocation to climb Mount Everest. Perhaps it has never struck you that at the present time there are less than six hundred Carthusian monks in the whole world, of which the Catholic population is reckoned to be about 423,000,000? These figures are enough to prove that a Carthusian vocation is only granted to a tiny élite.

As I have never met you I cannot be certain if, like myself, you had the feeling that reception into the Holy Roman Church was really nothing much more than walking out of one room into another, because the furniture and decorations are more or less the same. I hope that this has not been so and that you have already seen with complete clearness the vital differences between the Church of England and the Church of Rome. Strange to say, the extreme Protestant often has a clearer conception of these basic differences than the average Anglo-Catholic. Not to have this conception fairly clear at the outset is to court trouble later on. What I become convinced of the longer I am a Papist is that conversion, i.e. the change of allegiance from the authority of Canterbury to that of Rome, is not an instantaneous event effected by the abjuration of heresy, a profession of faith, and baptism, conditional or unconditional. I agree with a holy Carthusian monk, now dead, who used to say that we are lucky if we

are converted when we come to die, and he used to add: even after. Our conversion merely begins with our formal reception into the Fold of Peter. It continues until we have received the Last Sacraments, and probably after this in Purgatory.

It is quite possible that, like myself, you were an Anglican Papalist who frequented Roman Catholic services almost as much as those of the Church of England, and were as familiar with the *Missale Romanum* as with the *Book of Common Prayer*? Maybe you were accustomed to the use of the Roman or Benedictine Breviaries? Perhaps you took it for granted that there was no need for you to be given any formal instruction before you were received into the *Sancta Ecclesia Romana*? Speaking for myself, I would have been almost insulted if any priest had suggested that I ought to study the 'penny Catechism' or that any 'cradle Catholic' could teach me anything. It is possible that, even now, you tend to look down on the Catechism as a kind of potted theology, quite useful in its place, but extremely inadequate. I dare say that you would explain that because you found your way into the Holy Roman Church and absorbed the Faith on a higher level, e.g. by active participation in the Divine Office and the Liturgy, meditation on the Scriptures, and the study of St Thomas Aquinas, you have no patience with what you regard as little more than substitutes for true religion? Or again, it could be that the basic reason for wanting to become a Carthusian is because you are convinced that the monastic life is the norm of Catholic faith and devotion, therefore the only logical thing for you to do is to waste no time in the truncated form of Catholicism which you feel exists in modern parochial religion, but rush into what your intellect believes is the most perfect expression of Christian living?

You must forgive me for being reminiscent, but by recalling some incidents in my own life-story I can make myself clearer. A brief visit to Parkminster before I entered the novitiate of the Anglican Benedictine community on Caldey Island had infected me with Carthusian microbes. No sooner had I been received into the Catholic Church in 1913 than I was determined to test my vocation to the Carthusian life. I was told that it was a little unbecoming for one so recently converted, and reminded that it was risky to offer myself to a specialized form of Catholic and religious life without a period of waiting and a preliminary test.

But I refused to be convinced. Eventually the then Prior of Parkminster agreed to allow me to spend four weeks in a cell, my Superiors at Caldey hoping that this would cure my restlessness.

Looking back forty-one years I wonder how I could have been so stupid, but there will always be children who try to run before they can have learned to walk, and I was one of them. It never struck me in the summer of 1913 that I was merely an infant in the nursery of God's Church. I took it for granted that I was already a full-grown adult. After this month's trial of Carthusian life I returned to Caldey, still unconvinced. It was not until about eleven years later, when I had reverted to lay-life, that I began to acquire the elements of what might be called a 'Catholic mentality'. This gradual initiation was the result of close contacts with ordinary Catholic layfolk in various parts of Europe—Glasgow-Irish, French fishermen and sailors, '*contadini*' in Tuscany and Umbria, plain outspoken Catholic families in the industrial towns of the north of England, and others in remote parts of Scotland where the 'Old Religion' had managed to persist after the Reformation. Very slowly and almost unconsciously deeply-rooted 'Protestant inhibitions' disappeared, until at long last it dawned on me that when I made my submission to the Holy See of Rome I had little more than a vague and distorted conception of Catholic life and practice. Or, to put it differently, I had put the cart before the horse. I had got my sense of values all wrong. I really did believe that nobody could claim to be a 'proper Catholic' unless he or she joined a Religious Community, preferably one of the strictly enclosed and purely contemplative Orders.

At the age of sixty-five I can see much more clearly that, like many another convert—possibly yourself?—my urge for solitude was a partly subconscious running *away* from something, not a running *after* something. My motives for wanting to become a Carthusian were negative rather than positive. Now the Carthusian life is most definitely not a way of escape from the ugly realities of contemporary life in the world—noise, crowds, worry, and—dare one say so?—close contacts with the majority of our co-religionists whom we may not find altogether sympathetic or congenial. The Carthusian life is, and always has been, not a form of escapism but the vocation of a very small minority of Catholics. Do you really believe that you are one of these picked men who possess the requisite mental and bodily qualifications? Remember,

too, that it is a most inelastic and rigid form of monastic observance, which cannot be modified to suit an individual. Has it struck you that only a mere handful of the countless converts who have sought admittance to the novitiate at Parkminster during the past seventy years has persevered? 'Neither do they put new wine into old bottles.' Carthusian bottles are very old; that is why they are not suitable for new wine, i.e. converts.

The difficulties which would confront you sooner or later are psychological as well as physical, difficult to explain because they are so subtle and elusive, though largely because you do not happen to be a 'cradle Catholic'.

So I would urge you, should it be practical, to postpone the moment and familiarize yourself with normal Catholic life in the world before you think of experimenting with the abnormal. I may be wrong, but I have the feeling that it is unwise for any convert to enter a Carthusian novitiate until he is firmly convinced that the man or woman in the street is capable of the same union with God by saying the Rosary, making the Stations of the Cross, dropping into the last Mass on a Sunday morning, and just managing to make his or her Easter duties, as an enclosed monk who chants the Divine Office in choir, and who has a profound knowledge of mystical theology.

It is impossible for any human being to measure the height or depth of holiness; these will only be revealed at the Last Judgment, I suppose. Only God knows what is going on in the heart, and also *how much it costs*, or may cost, to be an ordinary Catholic and follow the normal routine. It may cost a person comparatively little to become a Carthusian, though I doubt if that is ever possible; but it certainly may cost them a great deal more to be 'just ordinary'. The best place to hide a pebble is on the beach, and it would be a funny beach if all the pebbles took to their heels and went into enclosed monasteries! To sum up: it is not until one is humbly and deeply conscious how close to 'the heart of the matter' the poor, humble Catholic in the world is—that one dare think even of contemplating life in the cloister, much less leading it. One must so *love the world* that one *gives one's life for it*. The apostolic vocation is at the root of everything, and, oddly enough, without a deep sense of it, few men have ever persevered as Carthusians.

Granted that you may be called to the contemplative life rather

than to the active, it could well be that you will find it in the world and not in any enclosed monastery. For material solitude is not an essential to leading a contemplative life; it can be an obstacle. There are more and more men and women today who are discovering this fact; finding that *their* way to God lies in a factory, on the land, or in other jobs which lack the external glamour and romance of a venerable Monastic Order founded in the early Middle Ages, but where the obedience can be perhaps more rigid and the poverty harder to endure. There are the increasing number of new Congregations and Secular Institutes which make provision for leading a contemplative life in the midst of the world. But there are other ways of seeking solitude to souls whom God has not chosen for the way of marriage or the cloister; to a vocation of their own, wider in a sense than either of the others, 'more unselfish, carrying perhaps never a reward on this side of death. . . . These are the fairy godmothers of their surroundings, sharing their limited time and money with the younger folk who turn to them when they despair of their own homes. And some share not time nor money only, but what is more blessed, a silent sympathy. They are God's silent, eloquent ones, who listen to the grumbles of those who have none to whom they dare tell them at home. . . . These others are silent, they just listen, and they become almost the confessors of the community where they live. People will go to them, but don't always remember to return with gratitude. . . . There is no life lonelier than the soul's that has had to live through the world in single blessedness, unlimited by walls of cloister or home, touching wider margins, yet on that account more alone. . . . God knows what He is about. He gives to every soul a capacity, brings them souls that they can manage, whose lives they can refashion and send back remade.'¹ So it could be that you will find the solitude you are seeking, not in a Carthusian cloister but by another road which you have not yet thought of. There are so many ways that lead to God, that it is wiser to make sure, so far as is humanly possible, that one has taken the right road, and is not obliged to turn back afterwards.

May you be guided aright.

Yours devotedly,

PETER F. ANSON

¹ Bede Jarrett, O.P., *The House of the Lord*, p. 130.