

# The Spirit in the World—II: The Institute of Our Lady of Mount Carmel

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'Don't you think it would be nicer to be a proper nun?' This question, seriously addressed by a priest to a member of a secular institute, reveals the unfortunate lack of understanding of the vocation to a secular institute. Why 'proper nun?' Because in his mind was the erroneous idea that members of secular institutes are, since they take vows, some sort of nun, semi-nuns, not quite the right thing.

But women in secular institutes are *not* nuns in the world, not nuns in mufti. They are lay women who keep their lay status, even though consecrated fully to God by the practice of the evangelical counsels, poverty, chastity, and obedience, and dedicated to the apostolate *in* the world.

It was to make this absolutely clear to all who knew us and to all who would come to know us, that we, an institute dedicated to our Lady of Mount Carmel, were led three years ago to take a most decisive step. I say 'led' because we believe that our decision was taken under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

At that time we were, with the exception of two members who were living and working in the world, all engaged in running a retreat house at Allington Castle, Maidstone. Judged by the usual standards, this work appeared very successful (though 'success' in God's work is really an unmeasurable thing). Yet each of us felt more and more strongly that we were not living according to the provisions of *Provida Mater Ecclesia*, the 'charter' for secular institutes drawn up by Pope Pius XII in 1947, that we were not following the kind of life implied in our vocation to live in the world sanctifying the professions, that we were in fact in some danger of becoming 'semi-nuns'.

Now one of the provisions laid down for secular institutes is that they should possess at least one house to be used for administration, formation, reunion, days of recollection, retreats, etc. We owned no such centre, for the castle was the property of the Carmelite Order. So,

our decision taken, we had to find a suitable house. Where and how and when are simple words, but one could hardly guess the complex issues they involved. Indeed, the story of the search and finding of the new centre is a minor saga of the Holy Spirit, who throughout all difficulties was manifestly leading us. And we expect him to go on leading us and we must be ever prepared to follow his guidance.

Carmelite tertiaries came to carry on the work of the castle and we moved to our large Victorian house in Chislehurst, Kent, on a glorious sunny day, 1st May 1958.

So from serving pilgrims at the shrine of our Lady and St Simon Stock, Aylesford, Kent, to running retreats at Allington, we had, through chrysalis stages, emerged into our true life, and if we remain faithful to the Holy Spirit we shall probably develop in ways as yet unseen, for does not God write straight in crooked lines?

What then is our vocation? The general aim is Christian perfection and the full exercise of the apostolate in the world. The specific aim is the establishment and development of Christian life in society through its members exercising charity and justice in the world, especially in their work and milieu. We are to be witnesses to the presence of Christ in the world through the fulfilment of the duties of our state in an integral Christian way and a spirit of love.

And in practice? First the training. A six months probationary period is followed by a period of three years, during which time the candidate receives spiritual formation by correspondence and directed reading, but principally by visits to the centre. These visits are arranged to suit the candidate's work and way of life, and may be at week-ends or for a more prolonged period of residence at the centre.

During the formation period, the candidate continues her customary work in the world. Vows are taken at the end of this period and renewed annually for nine years before final vows are taken.

We are not a large group. Our numbers at present are ten. Seven of these are finally professed, the others in training. A recent application from an Italian girl who spends some months annually in England is of interest, as we have always hoped that the institute would, in time, spread to other countries.

In our work, whether as cook, teacher, registrar, secretary, clerk, or whatever it may be, we are to exercise 'a full apostolate'. This does not mean hours of activity but that our whole life is an apostolate, a delivering of Christ's message. The apostolate for us embraces every moment, every event, every person. God-centred, our lives must reach

out at all times to all. It may be to children, to our colleagues, to casual acquaintances, to the milkman, the commercial traveller, the stranger. If we are to witness to the presence of Christ in the world, we can do this only by being Christian and trying to love truly all Christ's brethren. Genuine personal interest shown by a friendly word or gesture can appear very trifling, yet it is often by such trifles that the depths of our personality are touched and influenced. Many 'trifles' of love lead to an opening of the heart as we have all experienced. And it is only when the heart is opened that true communication can take place. St Augustine says that from the outside we go within and from there, finally, above. This is how we try to act with all with whom we come in contact.

These contacts we often strengthen not only by prayer but by the normal channels of the world, visits, sharing entertainment, maybe a visit to the pictures, a game of golf, a cocktail party, a concert or a holiday, remembering St Paul: 'Whether you eat or whether you drink, do all for the glory of God'.

To 'do all for the glory of God' should be, of course, the life purpose of every creature of God. Like many phrases this has almost become a cliché devoid of dynamic inspiration. How can we give glory to God? Only in the measure in which we are Christ-like, for only in his Son is God 'well pleased', and with us, only in so far as we become conformable to the image of Christ. To strive after such an ideal we must get to know him, study him in the gospels, love and imitate him and walk always in his presence. Christ-like in our prayer—simple and direct and uniting it with that of the Church, the mystical body of Christ.

Christ-like in our work. Diligent, honest, uncomplaining, accomplishing all to please God who sees in secret.

Christ-like in our love. All-embracing, selfless, sensitive to people's needs, personal—not giving the impression we 'are out to do good' to them, but to love them for what they are.

Christ-like in our submission to God's will. To say a daily *fiat* to all, with joy if possible, with surrender when our weakness prevents this, and with humble admission of failure when we are afraid to walk on the waters, or even, sometimes, to step into a puddle!

To strive after such a Christ-life needs the strength of Christ, for 'I can do all things in him who strengtheneth me'. No idle boast if our life is really one with his. All who seek God know that to develop this life, the seed of which is implanted in the soul at baptism, they must cultivate it and protect it against death-blights. Therefore in our insti-

tute we draw the necessary nourishment from prayer, the sacraments, the vows, and a particular devotion to our Lady as Queen and Mother of Carmel.

Prayer, not prayers; devotion, not devotions. We aim at this by a simple unifying attitude to our life—the practice of the presence of God which must vivify each moment, taking up every act whether of worship or work, recreation or rest, right into the heart of Christ. There must also be a daily period of mental prayer, flowing especially from the study of Christ in the New Testament. We actively participate in the liturgical life of the Church by saying, in English, at least Prime, Vespers and Compline.

Daily mass and communion brings us into the redeeming sacrifice of Christ, into the closest contact with the mystical body of Christ, 'for we, being many, are one bread, one body, all that partake of one bread'.

Here we make our daily offering of ourselves in union with Christ's offering to the Father. Here we draw strength and refreshment from the source of life itself, a strength enabling us to live our vocation daily, to become so penetrated with Christ, that little by little we might come to know something of St Paul's 'I live, now not I, but Christ liveth in me'.

The practice of three evangelical counsels is, of course, the essence of the 'state of perfection'. It was Pope Pius XII who included secular institutes with religious orders and congregations in the 'state of perfection', because of the complete consecration of their members to God even though living in the world. It is true that the fulfilment of these vows cannot be in the same pattern as that of religious life, especially as regards obedience and poverty. The latter has been more difficult to work out in practice, because in secular institutes members retain the right of ownership but forfeit independent use. A very strong sense of the spirit of poverty, of detachment is necessary, for as St Thomas points out 'It is difficult to possess goods and not to love them'. How true! But following the prescriptions of our constitutions and with prayer and a serene living in the providence of God, we find that the vow can be lived; that the spirit of poverty can grow and develop while we 'use the things of the world as though we use them not'. Moreover we have found it even exciting to realise—at times acutely—the delicate attentions of God.

And wrapping us all round is the 'world-mothering air' of our Lady to whom we are specially dedicated. Under her mantle and holding her hand we walk our daily road, trying to imitate, as children do, the

ways of their mother. Her feasts are days of joy and simple celebration. Her *Ecce ancilla Domini* is the response we learn to repeat, sometimes haltingly, but knowing that a mother always understands the lisping language of her child.

A willing response to God must entail self denial. There are renunciations to be faced in living the vows, in living in the world but not being of the world. We must not exaggerate these, but in a spirit of love be prepared to share whatever life Christ chooses for us with him. At times the sense of aloneness in the midst of the world will invade the heart; at times the sense of failure—so little to see in a hidden apostolate; at times the need of silence and rest from the jarring worldliness of the world, a world we yet must live in and truly love. 'God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son'.

Do we undertake any specific works? Normally our apostolate is individual and not in groups. We are ready to co-operate in the work of the Church at the bishop's request. Two members of our Institute in different parishes train the choir in plain-chant; another instructs converts and catechises children; another continues her work in the cell-movement. These are as it were 'sidelines' for we do not think of the apostolate so much in terms of a few hours of church activity as of a whole lifetime of loving co-operation with God's providence.

Is it 'nicer to be a proper nun'? Who can say? Can the hand say to the foot, 'It is nicer to be me'? So in the mystical body of Christ, the Church, can one make a comparison between a secular institute and a congregation? All members are needed, and all, guided by the Holy Spirit, fulfilling their own special functions, have their own beauty, and contribute to the life of the whole mystical body.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>For anyone who wishes to know more, we recommend *This is our Life*, by Teresa Melia, published by the Paraclete Press from 6 Woodlands Rd, Bickley, Bromley, Kent, 2s.