

## RELIGIOUS SISTERS

BY

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THIS book<sup>1</sup> is an important contribution to the literature of the spiritual and religious life; how important we shall discuss presently. The Foreword tells us that it is a translation of papers read at the *Journées d'Etudes* by a number of priests, secular and regular, which were later arranged by the Editor of *La Vie Spirituelle* for the benefit of French religious sisters and published in two volumes under the titles *Directoire des Supérieures* and *Les Adaptations de la Vie Religieuse*. The former was intended for superiors and the latter for religious women in general. The translation is presented in one volume, with certain modifications of the original which are indicated in the text, and the addition of a very helpful chapter by an English doctor, R. E. Havard, M.D.

There can be little doubt that a book of this kind, which faces many present-day problems with wisdom and courage, is long overdue. Many religious orders and congregations of women are going through a very difficult time. In what degree this is due to a shifting of priorities in the needs of the world-apostolate under the influence of the Holy Spirit is a question no one can answer. Something of the kind is undoubtedly happening, so that in some places our novitiates are full to overflowing and in others vocations are few, and many of those who are joining leave during their novitiate and even later. But in my view the over-all picture of the English scene is not as similar to the present low level of the French novitiates as this book seems to imply; and some of our British convents have already forestalled its learned contributors, many of whose recommendations and adaptations have already been put into practice. The value of this book will be to show many of our

<sup>1</sup> *Religious Sisters*. Being the English version of *Directoire des Supérieures* and *Adaptations de la Vie Religieuse*. By various authors (Blackfriars; 15s.)

own sisters what is already being done by an increasing minority of our own convents under stress of modern needs and conditions rather than to provide an example of what is being done in France for our enlightenment and imitation. Our sisters should, of course, have the courage to learn from their contemporaries abroad, but in my opinion the Church would greatly benefit if the reverse were also true.

This does not mean that a spirit of mediocrity has not descended upon many of our British religious institutions. There is no gainsaying this fact. And to such convents this book will be an enormous help and will show them how to adapt themselves without compromising with the spirit of the world on the one hand and without inclining to a dangerous spiritual isolationism on the other. The truth seems to be, in England at any rate, that the chief danger confronting us is ignorance, and that the more successfully we can dispel this ignorance the more clearly shall we see that a full, fervent, and uncompromising dedication to our religious ideals is precisely what is needed in these difficult days. This truth has to be brought home to our sisters; and here at hand is a book specially designed for this purpose, provided it is used in the right way. It enlightens, not by confronting us with new, 'modern' ideals, but by giving us the vision to see the old truths and principles in a new way against the background of present-day needs. In that sense is it an 'adaptation'.

The subjects treated fall into five parts: The first deals with The Theology of the Religious Life. This is concerned mainly with the vows—Poverty, Chastity and Obedience—and their corresponding virtues, and with observances, prayer and the liturgical life. The chapter on the Vow of Chastity by Dom Massabki, O.S.B., in this section calls for special mention, and is extremely well done. The second and third parts of the book are for religious superiors, the first treating of their office and the second of the knowledge they require in the wise fulfilment of their duties. The chapter on Psychology in this section contributed by Doctor Hava'd is particularly to be recommended. The fourth part deals with the Vocation and Training of Religious, and the fifth with Adaptations in Modern Religious Life, which contains a very helpful contribution from the pen of a Carmelite Father, Victor de la Vierge.

This is indeed a wise book and written by able men of such wide experience that it might seem almost impertinent for a reviewer to offer any criticism, though in a sense I think the criticism I have in mind will enhance its value rather than otherwise. Let me admit at the outset that the illustrious contributors have recognised that the only satisfactory method of teaching religious subjects is through the enlightenment of their superiors. For instance, Père Plé writes in his Preface: 'Superiors are generally elected or appointed without any specific preparation and this inevitably increases the burden of their office that is already a weighty one, as well as a particularly delicate one in the present contingency. We thought, therefore, that it might serve a useful purpose to produce a book which would enable them to review and co-ordinate their knowledge of the religious life, while at the same time acquiring some data indispensable to the discharge of their office.' This promise has been most generously fulfilled. But we have to ask ourselves two questions: Will superiors read it; and having read it, what means are at their disposal of passing on their knowledge to their subjects? I am not suggesting for a moment that superiors would or could boycott this book; the very suggestion is absurd. But the fact must be faced that many religious sisters do not assimilate truth very easily through the printed word; and for this reason it is time we recognised that something has gone wrong with the learning-process in our religious orders of women, and that, for this, we priests must shoulder the main burden of responsibility. In our conferences and retreats we flog outworn methods when something fresh is called for. We so overburden our sisters with work that all mental integration, under existing conditions, becomes well-nigh impossible, and we then fail to provide for them those mental situations through which alone knowledge can be acquired. One would normally expect our sisters to revitalise their own minds, and so be able to adapt themselves to the demands of the modern apostolate. It is only our neglect as priests which makes a book like *Religious Sisters* now necessary as a part-solution of the problem. The root trouble with our sisters is mental stagnation.

Let me repeat. The authors of this book are quite aware of this—particularly Père de la Vierge (pp. 175 seq.)—but as

it is the cardinal problem it should, to my mind, have been dealt with more specifically. It is perilous, indeed, when our sisters have everything in common and yet are unable to learn how to develop a common mentality; when they discuss, and are eager to discuss, everything with the sole exception of the life they are living and the principles governing it. We cannot instil knowledge into the minds of others; we can only provide the conditions and the inspiration for its acquisition; of its nature knowledge is the fruit of an immanent mental activity. It is useless to write books for our sisters unless they are provided with the means of assimilating the ideas they contain; and for this, some sort of discussion is essential. There is no other way of presenting truth relative to the apperceptive powers of the individual sisters. Conferences, whether given in retreat or out of it, are inadequate. The religious life of our sisters awaits some method of instruction akin to the tutorial system in our universities. In other words, spiritual discussions should figure largely in every retreat we give and wherever possible be substituted for spiritual reading. If this could be insisted upon by higher authority and discreetly regulated by local superiors, as in fact is now being done in some of our convents, then every sister could be inspired to think and to reflect, and encouraged both to contribute to and to profit by the knowledge of others.

It has been said that this innovation will mean a major revolution in some of our institutions. Perhaps so. It is never easy to dig people out of an accepted mode of life; but it must be done, and done quickly. As I have indicated, this adaptation has already been devised and accepted with ever-increasing fruit by some of our own convents, and here as in other ways our sisters are pioneers. But it should be accepted by all. And as a text-book to help in these discussions, and to avoid error, I know of nothing comparable to the book now under review.

One final suggestion: to publish a book of this calibre without an index is surely a mistake. The reader is often plagued by the thought that this or that might usefully have been said, only to find that it is said later on. In such circumstances an index is imperative. Is it still too late to provide one?