

BLACKFRIARS
THE CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE IN
THE WORLD

THERE seems to be a special need in our time for new forms of the contemplative life, lived not behind grilles and high walls, cut off from the world as much externally as internally, but lived in the midst of the world, open to its needs, but not contaminated by its vices. This form of life is nothing new; on the contrary, it is older than other forms, for it is the life lived by our Lord, our Lady and the Apostles as well as by the Christians of the first centuries. All through the history of the Church there have been men and women who, though remaining "in the world", have combined a life of intense contemplation with the life of the Apostle who goes out to seek what is lost—we need only think of Saints like Catherine of Siena, Francis de Sales, Bl. Anna Maria Taigi or the Curé d'Arx.

But, it may be argued, they were saints, souls with a unique vocation specially chosen by God—is it possible for a person less abundantly gifted to live in our distracted paganized world a life that can be truly called contemplative? There are many souls today who, despite their admiration for the life of the Contemplative Orders, yet feel the need and the attraction for this other kind of life. The world seems to cry out for it in its very blindness and indifference, and where there is a need God will not withhold the means of satisfying it. With such a call to a life of contemplation without "leaving the world" in the physical sense, there seems to be no reason to ignore the opportunities. For the contemplative life in this noisy world is so difficult that there need be little fear of illusion.

There must, of course, be a definite and irrevocable interior break with the "world", that is the first condition. No man can serve two masters—we cannot enjoy the amusements, successes and admiration of the world and at the same time enjoy God. For the contemplative life is essentially the life of enjoying God, and there is only one way to it, which is The Way. And he who called himself the Way was born in a stable, had no place where to lay his head during his ministry, and died on the Cross. Unless we tread the same Way, in whatever form it may present itself to us, we cannot be his disciples.

Therefore the first condition of the contemplative life in the world is a break with our own natural desire for the life of ease. This break must be as inconspicuous as is humanly possible. The one great danger of the contemplative life in the world is to stress one's "otherness", to take up "attitudes" and to repeat by one's behaviour the words of the Pharisee: "I thank Thee, God, that I

am not like other men". It will be necessary, especially in the beginning, to avoid anything that might strike other people as odd and ostentatious; for true union with God seeks to hide itself, as all the lives of the saints show. The life may become noticeable when human action disappears and God is the sole agent in prayer, so that the body is no longer under the control of the human will; but this is a phase which is never permanent as a "life" and which belongs to a much later stage. Rather than in external practices the complete break with the world shows itself in our attitude to suffering and mortification. We must be ready to take up the Cross when it comes; and usually it comes in a very inconspicuous but all the more crucifying form—misunderstandings, illnesses, failures in one's profession, slights from our friends, material needs. These pinpricks are more difficult to bear precisely because they are small and the soul cannot appear as a hero to herself even when she bears them tolerably well, and often she will have the humiliation of bearing them very badly. But the true contemplative will not always wait for the penances sent by God; he will anticipate them by voluntary mortifications. The contemplative life is the life of love par excellence, and love must be proved by doing and enduring unpleasant things for the Beloved. It goes without saying that mortification must be performed under obedience; and it is one of the special difficulties of the contemplative life in the world that there is comparatively little opportunity to exercise this essential virtue. Every occasion of humble obedience must be gladly embraced; for a contemplative life without the sacrifice of the will is a contradiction in terms. In the cloister the vow is taken and superiors help in its fulfilment. In the world the least that can be done is a thorough obedience to the director, but also, as far as possible, to other persons who exercise lawful authority, whether in connexion with one's work or in the family. Again, the one great danger to avoid in the life of penance in the world is to make it conspicuous. Much can be done without attracting any notice; at meals the would-be contemplative can pass over his favourite dish and eat rather what he dislikes: he can abbreviate his sleep—subject always to the approval of the director and without prejudice to his health; and, instead of undertaking exhausting slimming cures or "keep fit" classes with the "children of this world", there is no reason why the contemplative in the world should not use the old-established methods of discipline and hair-shirt to make his soul "fit" for the Kingdom of God.

Yet penance is, after all, only a means, though a necessary one, of the contemplative life. Both its essence and its goal is union

with God in prayer. This prayer, too, can be crucifying. Its first requirement is regularity. It is little use praying two hours one day when one "feels like it" and not at all the next. True, it is more difficult to be regular in the world than in a religious community with its fixed hours. The only way to achieve regularity in prayer is to work out a timetable of spiritual "duties" and keep to it despite all temptations—and they will be many—to abandon it, except for calls of duty or charity. The best time for prayer, and one where there is the least likelihood of unexpected interruptions, is the early morning, before Mass. To get up at half past six, or even earlier, in the morning, may sound rather hard, but after a short time it can become quite easy, provided one has the courage to go to bed early enough to get the necessary sleep. And, if God sees a soul generous enough to follow this rather irksome rule he will often give her so much sweetness, especially in the beginning, that the early morning prayer becomes the most desired hour of the day. This contemplative time before Mass will make all the difference to our Communion which will increase in fervour and fruitfulness. For it is especially at the time of prayer that God infuses into the soul the desire for virtue and for growing union with him, together with an increasing realization of her own incapacity to attain them. Then the knowledge that God in his mercy has provided an infallible means of the most intimate union with him will bring hope and consolation. For if religious in their convents, protected by vows and the foresight of superiors, need the Divine Food for the support of their spiritual life, how much more men and women in the world, exposed to so many more dangers. So the Blessed Sacrament will become more and more the strength-giving source of their contemplation and the heavenly "delectamentum" before which all the delights of this world become insipid.

Besides the Mass, Holy Communion and mental prayer, the Church provides another great means to help the supernatural life of grace. All Contemplative Orders give a large part of their time to the recitation of the Divine Office, the unsurpassed food of prayer. The contemplative may not have time to say the whole Breviary Office, but the Day Hours or the Office of our Lady should not be beyond his capacity. It sounds much, but then there can be no contemplative life in the world without restricting purely social activities. Worldly amusements are almost naturally dropped in so far as mental prayer, once seriously embraced, becomes so absorbing that other pleasures seem burdensome in comparison. Cinemas and theatres, parties and novels, should begin to disap-

pear almost by themselves, and the time gained thereby may be quite considerable. Also friendships with no spiritual affinity will be given up for prayer—usually without much conflict.

One day, perhaps only after years of spiritual consolation and happiness, the contemplative in the world may feel himself isolated, cut off from his fellow beings, an oddity. And this may just be the moment when God, too, withholds his sensible graces, and the "dark night" descends on the soul. The dark night, unrelieved by the support that community life, despite its own severe trials, may give at such times, can be very bitter. For there may come the feeling of loneliness and uselessness in a world buzzing with activity, with everybody round about "doing things", hoping and planning, possibly even drowning the feeling of interior emptiness in a whirlpool of distractions. Is the contemplative to do the same, throw himself back into the life of the world until the trial is passed? The temptation to do so may be strong. Yet it would be the sure way to lose everything. For this feeling of emptiness and uselessness is one of the most effective means of purification from spiritual self-seeking, the great enemy of the contemplative life. The one way to overcome these trials would seem to be to accept one's own uselessness and spiritual dryness with humility, to continue in prayer and mortification, and to wait as patiently as is possible for the Lord to show his face once more. For the uselessness is only apparent. The author of the "Cloud of Unknowing" calls contemplative prayer a "work", and such it is, though an invisible one. A contemplative can know only in heaven how many souls have been saved through his sufferings patiently borne; to continue in the apparent uselessness of arid prayer is one of the most eloquent confessions of faith that can be offered to God.

The effects of such a life will not always be unfelt and invisible. Its first unmistakable fruit is a deep interior peace, a peace "not as the world giveth", unstable, easily shaken by the smallest upset, but as our Lord promised to leave with us, a peace that cannot be taken away. This does not mean that its presence will always be consciously realized, though the contemplative may often be inundated with it, especially in prayer; but he can know that it is there by the stability of his whole life and his tranquil acceptance of the struggles and sorrows that are the lot of all human beings. And if God so wills it, this peace will one day make itself felt also among others. For though the beginner may be thought boring by many of his old friends, when he has made progress and has been purified and established in humility by suffering he will find that he gradually begins to attract people very powerfully. This will be

the beginning of a more active Apostolate. "Let your light so shine before men . . ." It is not by arguments that the world will be converted. When the first Christians began to leaven the world of antiquity the pagans did not say: "Listen to their cogent reasonings!" They said: "See how they love each other." They could not at once see that behind that love for each other there was that greater love of the First Commandment; but they saw their union with God reflected in their love for their fellowmen. It is by this warm apostolic love springing from the hidden source of contemplation and radiated into the world by the contemplative that the world will be converted. For he, who has for long years been a Tabernacle in which the Lord was present and active, indeed, but still hidden, will one day become a Monstrance, showing him forth in his life and in his very being.

It is this that the world to-day needs more than any other thing. The rush to films and dancehalls is often only the perversion of the God-given desire of the human soul for beauty and love. To live a contemplative life in the world means to show to it, simply by living it, the true life for which man was created, and thus to win souls to their Creator. *Contemplata aliis tradere*—this vocation which St. Thomas regarded as the highest is surely the one best suited to this end; and the more souls in the world embrace it as far as their circumstances and capacities permit the greater will be the hope of bringing back a paganzed world to its Lord.

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DOMINICAN CONTEMPLATIVES

THE perfection of the Christian life consists essentially in Charity; principally in the love of God, secondarily in the love of our neighbour. (*Sum: Theol: II-II, 184, 3*). The source and exemplar of all Charity is the Uncreated Love which is the very life of the Blessed Trinity, while its plenitude is possessed by the Soul of Christ, of whose fulness we have all received. Each Religious Order strives in its measure to reproduce some aspect of this "Charity of Christ which surpasseth all knowledge" (*Eph. 3, 19*), the contemplative life pertaining directly and immediately to the love of God, while the active life is more immediately concerned with the love of our neighbour. (*II-II, 182, 2*). Yet St Dominic, by founding an Order whose purpose was contemplation ordained to the Apostolate—*contemplari, et contemplata aliis tradere*, has perhaps come as near as is humanly possible to combining the two lives and the double aspect of Charity, in a single vocation. St Catherine, herself an outstanding example of the realisation of the