

THE APOSTOLATE TO THE COMMUNITY¹

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IS it the mission of Christianity only to save the souls of those whom we can persuade to come to church, or is it equally part of our mission to Christianise society? Father Michonneau and his collaborators in the parish of St Colombes in Paris have long been convinced that too exclusive a concentration on the first of these tasks is responsible for the relative failure of the Church among the industrial masses of the continent. In his parish, a few years ago, not more than five per cent of the total population could be regarded as practising Catholics. His book is an impassioned plea, fully supported by the late Cardinal Suhard and blessed by Archbishop Cushing of Boston, for the adoption of more realistic methods in dealing with such a situation. To begin with, they were convinced they had no right to spend all their time attending to the needs of the five per cent who were faithful, and forgetting the ninety-five per cent who were growing up with little knowledge of Christ and no knowledge of the Church.

So they determined to visit everyone in the parish, of whatever belief or unbelief. Further, they organised meetings in the houses of approved and instructed Catholics in every district of the parish. Catholics persuaded unbelievers to join in a discussion in a private house, which lasted perhaps for several hours, though anyone could come and go as they liked. The discussion would be on religion, but adapted to the needs of those present, and the priest might look in. I would like to underline this method of spreading Catholic influence as eminently practical, and one which would be possible almost anywhere. People shy of coming to the presbytery will not mind joining in a home discussion.

The policy in all this is to influence the community rather than the individual. Most of our modern industrial masses think and act as a community. To influence the individual, one must influence the community or the collective. Such a policy might not immediately lead to individual 'conversions', but would at least gradually change the community attitude towards Christ and the Church.

Father Michonneau seems to think that this mission of Christianising the community is more important in most parts of the world, as he

¹ *Revolution in a City Parish*, by the Abbé G. Michonneau (4th Impression, Blackfriars Publications; 12s. 6d.)
The Christian Mission, by Max Warren, General Secretary, Church Missionary Society (SCM Press; 7s. 6d.)

understands it, than the work of looking after church-going Catholics. Consequently, he is sceptical of many of the methods used by recent generations designed mainly to save our present flock. Such methods would include most of the social activities which often absorb so much of a priest's valuable time, without producing proportionate results either in the community outside, or—sometimes, it is feared—even among their own members. He is critical of the traditional method of presenting the traditional round of low Masses and little-understood high Masses, and rosary and benediction, with the personal sacraments as required. All these are necessary, but they are traditionally put before the people in such a way that they mean little to the pious Catholics who remain faithful out of a sense of duty, and nothing at all perhaps to the unbeliever, if he is ever persuaded to be present. The liturgy must be explained, the people must be instructed, the priest must be audible, everything must be done to arouse and maintain the people's interest. Further, for the sake of unbelievers and lapsed Catholics, services must be introduced which will form a bridge to the genuine liturgy. Thus, during Holy Week, services are held in the evening at St Colombes, which are popular adaptations of the Church's liturgical office in the morning. On the previous evening they have symbolic representations of the next day's Gospel performed by the young people, hymns and prayers from the liturgy, with perhaps a translation of the reproaches.

Any non-Frenchman reading this book will realise that our conditions are in numerous ways different from those of the continent. Most of our unbelievers are nominal Protestants; and this often makes the approach of the Catholic priest a more delicate matter than in France. Further, though many priests would be inclined to agree with Father Michonneau regarding the unrewarding nature of purely social parish activities, the problem of avoiding mixed marriages is always more acute in this country than in Catholic countries of the continent. Obviously there is no question of applying their methods in detail. But the spirit is surely apostolic, and no English priest could fail to be immensely stimulated and shamed by the devotedness and unworldliness of all that the clergy of St Colombes are attempting. They have had much success on any standard, as statistics show, and as such indefatigable apostles could scarcely fail to do. The book is a challenge to all priests of our age; and, whether we agree or not, we could not fail to benefit by reading it.

The book by the Secretary of the Church Missionary Society (Church of England) is, it seems, chiefly inspired by Father Michonneau's book. Mr Warren is convinced that we are living at the beginning of a new era. Indeed, he seems to suspect that it may be the final

era. It is an era in which all Christians have a great mission to the world, in obedience to their Christian calling. Every activity of man comes under God; and, if man has forgotten this, it is largely the fault of Christians, who too often have forgotten their duty to the world in which they live. The men who must be brought back to God are not a mass of isolated individuals, who are to be individually won over. Each individual is involved in a network of relationships which have become part of their very selves. To influence them we must influence the relationships, the society, in which they live.

Traditional Christianity has tended to be escapist. It has either tried to escape from society into God, or to escape from God into society. To win over the world it must remain attached vertically to God and horizontally to the society around it. God is the God of society, and everything in it. He is the God of history, even of Communist history. The Christian's duty is to proclaim his faith here and now, i.e. where and when God gives him the opportunity. We must be filled with an even greater messianic sense of mission than the Jew, Karl Marx, and his Russian followers.

It will be seen how Mr Max Warren takes as the thesis of his book, and applies to the mission field, the principle of the Abbé Michonneau, that it is especially the Church's work in our modern world to bring back Christianity to the community, and not to rest content to look after the pious Catholics who come to Mass, together with the comparatively small number of individuals on the fringe. Many of our modern Catholic Action Societies have seen the same principle, and they are organised to influence the community. We must not succumb to the temptation to make them 'parochial'. No one can read these books—especially that of Father Michonneau—and fail to recognise that the world mission of Catholics is of the utmost importance, that it is part of the obedience we owe to our Saviour, and that we should support any society which, with the Church's blessing, can make any contribution towards this result.



REVIEWS

Religious and Contemplative Life

LA VIE PARFAITE. By Dom Jean Leclercq. (Editions Brepols; 45 Bel. francs.)

The important part of the title to this book is its subtitle 'Points de vue sur l'essence de l'état religieux'. It does not set out to give an all-round treatment of the religious life, but rather to discuss certain aspects which, in the opinion of the author, have in recent times been left out in the cold. He has written a truly original book.