

A LEAGUE FOR PENANCE

BY

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IN a recent review of Thomas Merton's *The Waters of Silence* the reviewer concludes with this stirring challenge: 'Thomas Merton writes for the world, and he writes, as he must, of a special glory of Catholic life that, despite its wonderful growth, inevitably remains the privilege of a small minority. A harder and more insistent task must be to reveal the depth and delight of the common life of the members of Christ whose lot is to live in the world, so that they, in union with the hidden ones, may sanctify it. Would that there were another Merton who might show, with something of his skill and grace and popular appeal, how the "Waters of Silence" may flow into a world that dies for lack of them.'

The world does indeed show signs of this dying, a dying not merely through the major crises of international strife and threats of atomic warfare. These are the most obvious signs of the moribund condition of the world, but they are the external manifestations of more personal diseases in many individuals' hearts. The hideous cruelties and oppressions which have appeared at our very doors spring up from a generation that tries to live without God or religion. Despite the external signs a great deal of kindness and compassion and readiness to help remains in the most apparently godless heart; and yet this natural goodness is so hedged about by indifference that it cannot emerge from its own fortress to make contact with God. On occasion a sudden shock of disaster, of war or disease will draw the heart out towards God—and then the world has invented a substitute in easy sentiment which deadens the deeper need for God and the soul soon retires again within the walls of its indifference.

In this way suffering has become more and more meaningless. We do not have to visit the horrifying concentration camps, where men are made into senseless beasts, to realise this fact. It can be found close at hand, for example, in our own hospitals. Here quite often the name of God is mentioned only as a swear-word; chaplains are only welcome when there is

nothing specifically religious about them. People die and are taken to the mortuary without a prayer on their lips or on anyone else's. Not that anyone in particular can be blamed for this state of affairs. The patients are brought up without knowledge of God and they do not want him even when they are in agony or dying.

What is perhaps worse is that those who do believe in God and profess to love him so often adopt a similar attitude and may be less conspicuous even in natural goodness. Having been fed on the Eucharist, the sacrament of love, men and women can be more unkind and indifferent to the needs of others than the pagan. Hardened by tales of distress, they confine themselves to their own needs—possibly 'spiritual' needs, but certainly their very own. Their own sufferings may be attended to, and 'offered up', but outwardly there appears a hardened shell of complacency, together with lack of sympathy and even bigotry which allows the pain of others to pass unheeded.

Certainly the only answer to this state of the world is that of love—the mighty power of the Charity of Christ which can shatter all hearts, draw them out of their self-made fastnesses, and renew the face of the earth in its very agony. This is the only way 'the Waters of Silence' can flow afresh. Those who live in the world must be linked with those 'hidden ones' in some special act of charity which will be aimed at converting the word in that very point where it is reaping the foul harvest of its godlessness and from which it is itself seeking an escape. The charity of Christ offers no opium for the pain of man, but it alone gives the power to turn that very pain into a creative act of regeneration and new life.

How can such a vast programme as that of turning the godless pain of the world into channels of love be even thought about? It would seem that our Lady's requests, particularly at Lourdes and Fatima, point to the answer. She asks for universal prayer and penance. The Blessed Virgin has apparently come specially to intervene in the great calamity of the world; and her intervention seems to be addressed in a special way to those who are willing to consecrate themselves as her penitents and fellow sufferers or victims with her Immaculate Heart. That is perhaps the most significant message that comes from Fatima.

It has been suggested that this special invitation from the Mother of God might most effectively be answered by some sort of League which would emphasise this aspect of her call and give people throughout the world a concrete way of acting up to the invitation simple in its application and turning vague or general aspirations into a practical channel. It would be a League of Penance.

Such a League should be wide enough to include the sick and suffering with those who are active and healthy of all ages. If it is to be of general appeal it should have no complicated set of rules, nor even many set prayers—for the sick especially can find such additional pieties a burden and to those who are busy they become merely an anxiety. In its foundations it must consist simply of men and women who are willing to offer themselves in union with the sorrowing Mother and the infinite sufferings of her Son. At Fatima she said, 'See how my divine Son is hurt by these sins'. And her appearance is so often in an attitude of sorrow; she looked down in sadness upon Lucia, her tears flowed at La Salette. She seems to ask people to co-operate with her as she stands at the foot of the Cross. She wants them to forget self and to become in some way her penitents, to make amends for the indifference of the world which does not know sin nor how it hurts her Son. And the root of this penitential life is simply that of the FIAT of the agony in the garden, the FIAT which has always been the characteristic word of Mary. She asks, then, for companions who will stand with her at the foot of the Cross and share in the creative and redemptive suffering of her Son for the conversion of sinners.

The spirit of such a movement can be found in almost every aspect of our Lady's life, in her 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord', and in her similar commission to others—'Whatever he shall say to you, do ye'. She was in particular a contemplative of the highest order, living in the world and undergoing the ordinary penances of a daily life in the society of men who did not recognise her Son. The penance she asks for is a simple, ordinary, daily thing—to stifle at birth all unloving, jealous thoughts of others, to wish for them what one should wish for self, to see God's will perfectly fulfilled in his way. This penance can overcome not only the bitterness of

suffering but the hardness of heart, too, and casualness and indifference towards others. In such simple ways the true spirit of penance can break forth into love and unite the spirit closely with that of our Lord—'Lord, who dwells in me, do you act in and through me as you did on earth'.

Such might be the spirit of a League of Penance. It would have to be conducted without the modern means of propaganda, in secret and under cover of a very normal and ordinary life in the world. A bond could be fashioned between small groups or individuals, between the hale and hearty and the lonely sufferer. These simple people could unite in making reparation for the sins of the world in union with our Lady's suffering, immaculate heart and that of her Son. It would be enough for those who felt drawn in this way to make some formal act of consecration, a promise or even a vow to remain the penitent of the blessed Virgin Mary.

The League might follow some such rules as these:

- (a) A formal vow to become a victim with the Immaculate Heart of Mary.
- (b) Daily Mass and Holy Communion where possible. A spiritual offering through our Lady in union with the sacrifice of the Mass can be made. Our Lord's sacrifice is undoubtedly the meeting-place for all who belong to such a group.
- (c) The daily recitation of some part of the Rosary.
- (d) Recollection and prayer during the day according to circumstances.
- (e) A regular retreat for those who belong to the League.
- (f) In general to offer to our Lady the sufferings of those one knows or hears of; and a resolution to show others the love which our Lord has for them.
- (g) It might be possible to provide some sort of link with members by means of a 'circular letter'.

It might be fruitful for those who are interested to consider this idea during the penitential period of Lent and so to make that season more profitable and in closer union with the Mother of Sorrows.