

A MONASTERY FOR THE SICK¹

By

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EW ventures in religious life are being called forth by the Holy Spirit within the Church. Among these the religious communities for the sick which have come into being during the past few years in France are not the least interesting.

At a time when illness has become to a great extent a social phenomenon—and paradoxically this is bound up with the great progress of medicine in prolonging the life of the sick—in a country which counts at least five hundred thousand tubercular cases, a very great number of cardiac cases, and more than a hundred thousand cases of paralysis; at a time, too, when great national movements for their protection and help are being organised, it is fitting that those for whom suffering and illness have a significance in the Cross of Christ should be united and brought together. The hour seems to have come for this world of the sick to become itself fully conscious of its place in the spiritual plan.

Women have shown the way. For nearly twenty years the *Institute of Jesus Crucified*, which already numbers several dependent houses, allows sick people to share the blessing of religious life. In their turn the Dominican Sisters of Sainte-Marie have made a magnificent start. Other analogous foundations have since been outlined. Several attempts have also been made for male invalids to live the religious life—but in vain. Accidental circumstances have hindered their beginning.

At this moment there remains only the Priory of St John at Champrosay, in the Commune of Draveil in Seine et Oise, but its providential history gives great hope.

Several invalids after having lived together for some months next door to the seminary of St Jean Changis found in 1946 a large property close to an important sanatorium and answering wonderfully to their designs. From that time they lived there under the auspices of the Cardinal Archbishop of Paris and the Bishop of Versailles, Mgr Roland-Gosselin. Encouragement came from all sides.

Unlike the Dominican Sisters of Sainte-Marie, the Brothers of St John have not considered it necessary to become attached to any existing Order. They have formed their own rule and, apart from the Gospel, claim only the Rule of St Augustine, which is particularly

¹ Translated from *La Vie Spirituelle*. The word 'monastery' is used here in a large and primitive sense.

wide, profoundly human, and comprehensive of all their needs. It is true that from the first the Religious who has been at their head is a Dominican, and that they find in the near proximity of the Dominican House of Studies (the Saulchoir at Etiolles) an invaluable support both intellectual and spiritual. They have also a very great affection for the Order of Preachers, and yet at the moment it does not look as if Providence asks of them a closer bond with this great Order.

Gathered from all quarters, spiritual and temporal, they are united by the bond of charity, that sweet fraternal charity of which St John is the Apostle and Doctor. Their unity and their spirituality they derive from the end which they propose to themselves. It might be defined by the following formula: 'For those who suffer, by those who suffer. For the sick by the dedicated sick'. Is it not true that those who have suffered have a special grace to understand the sufferings of others? And the sick themselves are more capable than others of helping and understanding the sick and representing them before God. And what if these sick are at the same time dedicated religious? And that is why the two aspects of the end in view harmonise perfectly: to realise a form of religious life which is at one and the same time both traditional and new (*nova et vetera*), adapted to the capacity and the needs of the sick, thus permitting the realisation of many vocations, both priestly and religious, which would otherwise be prevented by the very fact of ill-health.

But also, and above all, their aim is to *take charge spiritually* by prayer and action of the *immense world of suffering and sickness*: to enlighten it with the light of Christ. In order to realise this end they wish:

- (a) to set up a monastery.
- (b) to ensure its apostolic radiation.

To set up a monastery. That is to say, first of all, not a house of rest and retreat, but truly a house of God, a house of prayer. They wish that all day long the praise of God and thanksgiving should go up from their midst. They wish to be a centre from which all who are sick shall feel themselves spiritually sustained and carried towards God. To offer to God, in Christ, the sufferings of mankind, and to bring down upon suffering men the light and grace of God.

A monastery? That supposes also an austere and generous life and a permanent dedication by the vows of religion. The young who enter there intend, in spite of their maladies and even because of them, to do something with their lives. And it is the paradox of this enterprise that it gives to the infirm, the sick and those of poor physique the possibility of a life which would seem to be open only to men

capable of generous asceticism. For them asceticism consists above all in the acceptance and offering of their state, and in the exactions of their life in common.

A monastery? That means an organised community socially fruitful, a body where each member contributes to the good of all. What is the purpose? To take charge of the world of suffering and sickness. This end polarises all the energies, temporal as well as spiritual, of the monastery. The different activities (and contemplation even is itself an activity, the highest of all) should be ordered harmoniously towards it. Each vocation should be used to its full extent for the good of the common work. The bed-patient and the intellectual at his table, or the Priest celebrating the Holy Sacrifice all have their place in the monastery, as well as the manual worker doing his bit for the winning of the daily bread. The brothers in fact wish to live by their work as far as they possibly can, since this seems preferable to living in a hospital or sanatorium at the expense of the State. This remunerative work will give to their life both equilibrium and asceticism. Moreover submission to the human law of work appears to them in harmony with their real poverty. . . .

Without seeing these invalids it is difficult to realise the courage and generosity that are demanded of them; for it is not always easy to combine the running of the house, the intellectual and manual work, and the necessary time for rest, with prayer and all the spiritual elements of life in common.

As for the *apostolic radiation* which has already been inaugurated, it must develop little by little. The Brothers by providence installed in the sanatorium would wish some day to go out to the world of sickness and bring to it the sweet light of the Cross of Christ.

Not all, however, will be called to the outside apostolate. The Brothers will have to live in the monastery to ensure the stability of the life, and above all that of prayer. Others will be at the service of guests, or attend to correspondence. By pooling their experiences and ideas they will endeavour to fill the rôle of vanguard to the world of sick to which they have committed themselves. They will endeavour to contribute a better conscience towards the problems which face it, particularly spiritual problems, and to work with one heart at effectively solving them.

Different kinds of apostolic services are envisaged: The sacerdotal service properly speaking, i.e., preaching and the administration of the sacraments. A service of friendship and exhortation, and mutual help, spiritual as well as material. Priests and laity can both find employment here. The Priests (doubtless in the minority at least at first) will be at the service of their brothers in the monastery or their

sick brothers outside. They will be found wherever a priest is needed, in so far as obedience will sanction their absence. But such a system of mobility must allow for periodic re-invigoration in the atmosphere of community life.

Within the immediate radius of the community will live others, the 'sympathisers', who, not being capable of the entire religious life, want, however, a religious atmosphere which will afford help and support to their work.

Finally, even now the monastery is a rallying centre for a numerous community of 'absent brethren', a kind of 'Third Order' gathered around the priory and united to it by a spiritual bond and a periodic 'message'. From all corners of France and beyond they unite themselves to the prayer and sacrifice of the Brothers of St John and promise in union with them certain daily spiritual exercises. It goes without saying that the rock upon which this apostolate is founded is the continual prayer of the monastery.

The Brothers recite the divine Office, but only partially, so as not to overburden the sick people's time-table; also the Rosary, and above all, daily Mass. As for the Office, the question of Latin, which is a difficulty for the unlettered, has been solved provisionally as follows. All the psalms are said in Latin, also the hymns, but in addition to any personal preparation the Father Superior makes a systematic commentary on them. As for the rest of the Office, the Chapters, Lessons, Prayers, etc., they are simply read in a good French translation. This seems to be a happy solution, and allows the whole community to forge for itself one single heart and one single soul in the same prayer and the same spirit.

It would be premature to try to determine what is the spirituality of this newly-born community. Its ambition is tremendous. They would wish to constitute a sort of church in miniature, a mystical body in little where, thanks to a great mutual understanding and great flexibility on the part of authority, very differing spirits and temperaments will find room to expand. Those who compose it are united quite simply around Christ and the Gospel.

One cannot but be struck by the effort of fraternal charity there is in this house. This is why they call themselves Brothers of St John—St John, the doctor of that charity so difficult to practise amongst the sick and those of weakened physique, especially when their infirmities are so diverse. Was it not St John who was found at the foot of the Cross, and stayed there with the dying Saviour up to the last hour? Is it not St John whose gospel is so spiritual, who can help to counteract that turning in on self, and give to spirituality

that theological atmosphere so necessary for the ill who are always tempted to turn in on themselves?

The Brothers like to express their purpose and the witness they wish to bear in this formula: 'Joyous in hope, in the charity of Christ'. This charity expresses itself in their counsels or 'Chapters'. These regular chapters are designed not only for the individual self-accusation of external faults, but also towards the formation of the collective ideal. In a meeting held twice a week the brothers discuss together their ideas for progress, both personal and communal, working mutually for the spiritual development of their institution, and the best ways of bringing this about.

It is hardly necessary to insist on the grandeur of this vocation for the sick. Considered in the light of the redemption by the Cross it is much rather a vocation of choice than of reprobation, as there is sometimes a tendency to think it.

The Brothers hope that they may be joined by some who are in good health. These will bring a precious element of equilibrium into the work and the spiritual life. They will also be a help and comfort in their midst, provided of course that these vocations of the healthy join with those of their sick brethren in the one same ideal of understanding and taking charge of the world of the sick and suffering. May there be many such vocations.

Let us ask of God that this happy beginning, which seems so useful at a time when a whole world of sick is becoming conscious of its existence and aspiring towards a real liberation, may know how to find in the charity of Christ the only power that truly liberates.

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