

## THE DAUGHTERS OF ST CATHERINE OF SIENA

A DOMINICAN INITIATIVE

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WHEN the Holy Father gave to the Christian world both the Apostolic Constitution *Provida Mater Ecclesia* and the Motu Proprio *Primo Feliciter*, it was not to present the Church with something novel in the search for Christian perfection but rather to set the seal of his approval on a form of life, wholly given to God, already being lived by many who, for various reasons, were unable to enter a religious Order or who perhaps felt that a consecrated life in the world gave them greater scope for the exercise of their apostolate. It was natural—and indeed eminently desirable—that some of the attempts at the dedicated life in the world should be grouped around the contemplative Orders—Benedictines, Carmelites, Dominicans—for the fact that such a life is lived *in* the world makes whatever contact with a centre of contemplative life is possible all the more valuable and indeed essential. It will not, then, be surprising to come across a group seeking this form of life, attached to a Congregation of Dominican nuns, that of St Catherine of Siena whose mother-house is at Etrepagny, Eure, no great distance from Dieppe, a congregation which, although undertaking active work such as teaching and nursing, is primarily contemplative. The name of this group is the Daughters of St Catherine of Siena.

The bond between the Congregation and the Group—which hopes later to obtain recognition as a Secular Institute—offers to the latter's members the advantage of profiting by the Congregation's long experience of religious life, an immense benefit, both for the Sisters' training period and for their life as professed members of the Group. A group or Secular Institute founded from the enthusiasm of one woman alone, or indeed of two or three, even when initiated with utter disinterestedness and as the fruit of prayer, risks failure through the promoters' very lack of experience.

The religious state is characterised by the vows, by separation from the world and by common life. Yet the example

of history shows us that it is not necessary to the pursuit of perfection that the separation from the world should be absolute or the common life continuous. Did not St Catherine of Siena herself belong to a state of perfection, although living her life outside convent walls? Many other instances may be cited.

The Daughters of St Catherine of Siena are unmarried women or widows, normally between the ages of twenty-one and fifty at the time of their entry into the Group, who seek the perfection of charity by means of a life consecrated to God by the three vows, but lived in the world, and who as a Group form an integral part of the Dominican Congregation already mentioned. They receive their training from a religious of the Congregation, a training admirably adapted to their life in the world and comprising a degree of initiative and freedom not usually granted to religious living in community. The Group is placed under the jurisdiction of the Prioress-General of the Congregation and under the direct authority of a religious delegated by the Prioress-General for that office.

Members of the Group have the privilege of staying in the houses of the Congregation. When in the convent, where special accommodation is set apart for them, they wear the Dominican habit, participate in the Divine Office in choir, and are admitted to the refectory and to recreation with the community. Once a year they make an eight-days' retreat in one of the Congregation's convents. Apart from their periods of formation, members of the Group may stay in the houses of the Congregation each time they ask to do so. They naturally at all times recompense the Congregation for the expense so incurred.

Apart from such periods of residence in the convent, each member of the Group resides in her own home. Where two or more members reside in the same town or sufficiently near to each other, a centre is set up under the authority of a Vicar who is responsible to the Superior of the Group. Regular weekly or fortnightly meetings are held at the centre and the Sisters may even reside there if circumstances permit.

*Formation:* This follows the traditional stages of postulancy, noviciate, temporary and eventually final profession.

The postulancy varies from eight to fourteen months, during which time the postulant must reside not less than fifteen full days in the convent. She must also be in regular contact, by letter if distance prevents personal visits, with the Superior of the Group.

Admission to the noviciate depends on the decision of the council of the Daughters of St Catherine, consisting of the Prioress-General of the Congregation, the religious designated by her as Superior of the Group and three professed D.S.C.S. The noviciate, which begins with the clothing ceremony<sup>1</sup> and is preceded by an eight-days' retreat, lasts one year, during which time the novice must spend at least four weeks in the convent. Her formation, given by the Superior of the Group, will include instruction in the doctrine and history of religious life, more especially of the Order and Congregation to which the novice has the honour to belong; instructions on the three vows and the way they are observed among the Group; instructions on the observances and customs of religious life, as, for instance, the chapter of faults. It will also include a course of instruction on the Gospel and a study of the Mass and the Dominican liturgy.

When the noviciate has been completed, the Council pronounces admission to profession, or otherwise. The first and second profession are each for one year. Vows are then renewed for three years, after which they are taken for life. The vows, of poverty, chastity and obedience, are pronounced publicly, the profession being made into the hands of the Prioress-General of the Congregation, or of her delegate. They are to be interpreted in conformity with the constitutions of the D.S.C.S. and, pending recognition of the Group as a Secular Institute, have the force of private vows.

The vow of *poverty* involves the submission of the *use* of the Sister's worldly goods to the control of a Superior. She retains the ownership of what she may possess or acquire. Such control is exercised with a very great prudence and delicacy and full consideration is given to the Sister's social status.

<sup>1</sup> Away from the convent the novice wears under her secular clothes the Dominican tertiary scapular.

By the vow of *obedience* the Daughter of St Catherine consecrates her whole activity to the service of God, within the Group, in conformity with its constitutions and with the plan of life which she drew up and sought approval for at her first Profession. She will further submit to her Superiors for their approval any notable changes that may occur in her circumstances or occupations. Within these limits the Sister is free and is indeed encouraged to use her initiative.

After their first Profession, the Sisters belonging to a centre come under the authority of their Vicar, whereas Sisters not so attached remain under that of the Superior of the Group.

*Observances and Spirituality:* When at the convent, the Sisters follow the *horarium* and rule arranged for them by the Superior of the Group in relation to the exercises of the community. Outside the convent, in addition to the meetings at the centre for those belonging to a vicariate, and, for the Sisters not so attached, regular correspondence with the Superior of the Group, the Sisters assume the following obligations:

Each day they will hear Mass, make one half-hour's mental prayer—which should if possible be continuous, recite the Little Office of Our Lady according to the Dominican rite,<sup>2</sup> and five mysteries of the rosary, devote at least fifteen minutes to spiritual reading or religious study. Superiors have power to dispense from a part of these exercises in circumstances of necessity. The Sisters further undertake to recite the Suffrages for the benefactors of the Group and for the dead of the Order, the Congregation and the Group.

The spiritual life of the Daughters of St Catherine is regulated by and has the support of observances which are really the adaptation of the ascetic practices of religious life to the condition of Christians living in the world. The life is pre-eminently Dominican and is thus characterised by the note of contemplation, which includes serious and systematic study of the things of God according to each one's capacity, apostolic work for souls, and penance. In the case of each

<sup>2</sup> Those who already recite the Divine Office are given every encouragement to continue, provided they have the necessary time to say it properly.

of the three vows, the Daughters of St Catherine will bring their external conduct as well as their inward dispositions into harmony with the vow. Poverty, for instance, consists in the conscientious exercise of a profession for those who need one, and in the laborious earning of one's daily bread; for all, in the use of their worldly goods in the service of the duties of their state of life and of their neighbour—and not for their personal satisfaction. Such other religious observances as penance, work, common life, silence, are similarly transposed to the plane of a Christian life in the world. In the matter of dress the Sisters must strive to acquire that happy combination of sobriety with elegance which should be characteristic of a Christian woman who has consecrated her life to God.

Every Daughter of St Catherine of Siena will have at heart the sanctification of her neighbour and the salvation of souls. Frequently a Sister devotes herself to some special form of apostolate which may or may not coincide with her professional activity: in all cases the Sisters strive to exercise an apostolate by the Christian influence they diffuse around them in the circle of their family and friends. The Group approves of every sort of apostolic activity for its members: parochial, social, intellectual, medical, through the exercise of hospitality, etc., etc. Opportunity may be given to the Sisters to collaborate in the work of the Congregation of which they form part.

As an illustration of this point of the Constitutions, we may add that some of the Daughters of St Catherine are teachers in the *Ecoles Libres*, a profession exercised in conditions which, as anyone who has lived in France well knows, call for the exercise of heroic virtue in the matter of poverty and self-sacrifice. Here the apostolate exercised is, besides the important work of general education, that of teaching the catechism, preparing children for their first Communion, etc. One Sister, who is a trained nurse, exercises an apostolate among the sick, working in the Congregation's hospital at Levallois-Perret. Another is a social worker in an institution for unmarried mothers—of the type that has been trained in vice from childhood. Yet another works in a children's hospital at Rouen, employed by the State solely to amuse the

sick children and make them happy.<sup>3</sup> One Sister, though working hard herself as a teacher, has adopted a child in danger of losing her faith.

But what is important in the apostolate of the Daughters of St Catherine is the spirit that underlies it—it may be an action as simple and seemingly insignificant as the lending of a book or an invitation to a meal, yet behind it there is self-emptying to put oneself in the place of another, to look at a problem from the other's point of view, not to dominate, not to patronise, not to impose one's own ideas nor to offer a panacea for every trouble, but, for the love of Christ, to *give* oneself to another soul, becoming through self-effacement the humble instrument through which God may pass.

The examples given are taken at random. The Group does not aim at any specific form of apostolate and therefore does not provide any technical training for apostolic work. As will be gathered from what has been said above, the organisation of the Daughters of St Catherine is directed towards an intensity of spiritual life, which will necessarily issue in a genuine and supernatural apostolate. Because of this character of their activity the Daughters of St Catherine must guard against any multiplication of external activities, for their apostolate must be the outcome of recollection and prayer. The spirit of adaptability of which they give proof must not be exercised to the detriment of the regularity of their observance. They know that in the salvation of souls it is supernatural means which are predominantly important, and that unless springing from the interior life the most energetic activity is powerless to effect conversions.

The Daughters of St Catherine are not religious living in the world, but laywomen who desire to give themselves to God as such because they feel that their place is in the world. The formation given them has this end in view and as a

<sup>3</sup> She was asked how she dealt with the painful task of telling a child that he or she must die. She replied that she told the story of the little chick inside the egg who did not want the shell to break and thought himself so warm and comfortable, but who, once outside, exclaimed: 'What a fool I was to want to stay inside that horrid shell, when this lovely world is a thousand times more wonderful!'

consequence the Daughter of St Catherine feels completely at home in the world and fits in with her family, professional and social milieu. The vows she takes will consecrate her to God as a laywoman and not as a religious. Her visits to the convent, whether of long or short duration, are in no wise to withdraw her from her secular status, but to prepare her to live her life as a laywoman in a more fully Christian way. The D.S.C.S. have a considerable share in the government of the Group, the vicariates depend entirely on the Sisters who compose them—thus a D.S.C.S. is expected to use her initiative. The contact with the Congregation in no way detracts from the Group's secular nature but merely serves as a guarantee of its Christian and Dominican character.

The Group, which began its existence in 1947, has centres in France and in French Canada. It has received episcopal approbation with the rank of 'pious union' for the dioceses of Paris and Evreux in France and for the diocese of Saint Jean (Province of Quebec) in Canada. Anyone desirous of further information should write to:

*La Reverende Mère Supérieure du Groupe des F.S.C.S.,  
Couvent des Dominicaines,  
64 rue des Plantes,  
Paris XIVe, France.*



## POINT OF VIEW

### QUAKER SILENCE

'Not by strength of argument or by a particular disquisition of each doctrine and convincement of my understanding thereby cause I to receive and bear witness of the Truth, but by being secretly reached by the Life. For, when I came into the silent assemblies of God's people, I felt a secret power among them, which touched my heart; and as I gave way unto it I found the evil weakening in me and the good raised up, and so I became thus knit and united unto them, hungering more and more after the increase of this power and life, whereby I might feel myself perfectly redeemed; . . .'