

SECULAR INSTITUTES AND THE LIFE OF MARY

BY

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THE stimulating article of Fr Oswin Magrath's on Contemplative Secular Institutes has raised issues which must have been in many minds since the publication of the Constitution *Provida Mater Ecclesia*. After the priest and religious has spoken, a lay person may perhaps be allowed to present the same idea from a different angle.

It was surely not without a special significance that the Constitution was issued on the Feast of the Purification of our Lady, and there can, indeed, be no better guide for 'contemplatives in the world' than she, who led the sublimest life of contemplation in the most humble circumstances, as what seemed to her neighbours a carpenter's wife in a small town. The Queen of contemplatives had no need to cut herself off from her fellow creatures in order to enjoy an unbroken communion with her Creator. Inflamed by her perfect charity she brought the Child in her womb to the mother of the Baptist. When her hour had come she meekly submitted to the laws of a pagan state and went to an overcrowded village to give birth to her Redeemer. She was one of the multitude who went up to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover where she had to sorrow over the sudden loss of her Son; she rejoiced with the happy couple at Cana, redoubling their joy by soliciting the first miracle of Jesus. She stood by his Cross together with the pardoned sinner and St John and, lastly, surrounded by the disciples, she became the Mother of the Church and of us all who are her children.

In the lives of the old hermits and monks of the East there are many traits, inevitable in such extraordinary circumstances, which are 'more admirable than imitable'; but who could say of the Mother of God that there was a single action in her life that could not and should not be imitated by her children? Those, then, who would lead a life of contemplation in the world could do no better than form themselves on Mary, the safe way to attain to union with Christ.

Now Mary wrapped her Child in his swaddling clothes with her own hands. She had no one to do it for her, and, as she did that herself it is safe to assume that she also did all the housework that women of her station in life were wont to do, submitting in so doing to the effects of the curse pronounced on the first Man in Paradise.

But to this curse there is attached a blessing. For work, if done for the love of God and our neighbour, has an immense sanctifying power. We therefore think of an Institute of contemplatives in the world who earn their living like other people by the work for which they are suited, whether in the professions or in factories, in offices or hospitals, on farms or in domestic situations. This work will not only be the indispensable means of making a living, but also an inestimable discipline with regard to the spiritual life.

But how, it may be asked, are they supposed to find the time to lead the contemplative life while having an ordinary job in the world? The answer is simple: by giving to God the greater part of the time that others spend on cinemas, sports, parties and other amusements or hobbies. Seeing that people ordinarily give at least two and a half to three hours a day to such activities, that leaves time for Mass, an hour's mental prayer and spiritual reading, and at least the Little or the Day Office—and much more, of course, during week-ends and holiday time.

But prayer alone is not enough—the salt of prayer is penance. Though there will normally be an element of penance in one's work, yet some voluntary austerities have always been considered a necessary feature of the contemplative life.

Though the Apostolic Constitution envisages pre-eminently the active Apostolate in the world, there seems to be no reason why it should not be applied also to the contemplative Apostolate similar, for example, to that of the Dominican Nuns of the Second Order. Except, of course, enclosure and community life, all the other elements, prayer, Office, penance, work would be there, and the Dominican Third Order Rule with its great flexibility would be an admirable framework into which to fit an Institute as desired by the Constitution. Apart from the principal means of this Apostolate, the silent influence of a life devoted entirely to the pursuit of union with God, those more active forms that are compatible with it, such as writing, painting, etc, which are also allowed to the Second Order, would be a very suitable subsidiary means. And just as the Nun in the parlour would not refuse advice and encouragement to a soul who asked her help, so the 'contemplative in the world' would perform the same spiritual work of mercy for those that come her way, but, just as her Sister behind the grille, she would not take the initiative but wait for the opportunities God sends her.

Naturally, a life like this needs at least as much training as an active Apostolate. This would be given at the Community House, the need for which is so strongly emphasised by the Constitution. St Catherine of Siena's doctrine of the 'Inner Cell' would fit admir-

ably such a life of contemplation lived in the world. To develop this habit of recollection in the midst of the occupations and noise of everyday life would be one of the principal tasks of the formation given. Among other subjects for training would be the right use of corporal penance, the question of relaxation, indispensable for a balanced contemplative life, and the relations to others, the handling of which will require much tact so that sufficient time and solitude for prayer might be secured without offending against charity. As on all these points and many others the needs of the individual differ greatly according to the special circumstances of each one's life (in contrast to the uniform life of a Community), much care and psychological insight will be required on the part of those responsible for the training.

But the labour spent on this training of 'contemplatives in the world' would be well worth while. For our paganised contemporaries have practically no means of coming into touch with contemplatives in monasteries, and so lose all the benefit of personal contact with just the type of person they most need. But to have genuine contemplatives, distinguished in nothing by their external appearance, and hence approached without prejudice, in every walk of life—this would really be a leaven that might be expected to leaven large lumps of indifference and even hostility.

PROLOGUE

TO THE

COMMENTARY ON ST JOHN'S GOSPEL

BY

ST THOMAS AQUINAS¹

I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne high and elevated: all the earth was full of his glory: and his train filled the temple. (Isaias 6, 1-3.)



THESE are the words of a contemplative and we may almost put them into the mouth of John the Evangelist as a perfect description of the purpose of this gospel. For as St Augustine says: 'While the other Evangelists tell us about the active life, John in his gospel raises our minds to the contemplative life'.

In the words of our text John's contemplation is described in three

¹ Translated by Bernard Delany, O.P.