

THE SPIRIT OF A NEW CONGREGATION

A NOTE ON MODERN ASCETICISM

BY

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RADICATE *et fundati in cantate* as an ideal for the religious life is not older than the New Testament, but since that time it has been the inspiration of all religion. Each succeeding age has attempted to interpret it according to the spirit of its time, but no comprehensive interpretation has yet been achieved and one wonders what depths of meaning are still to be revealed. Like a jewel flashed in the sun it is continually revealing facets of scintillating beauty, and while one is paralysed by the beauty one now beholds, the beauty of yore is dimmed but not diminished. Man's mind is finite and awaits the ultimate judgment, or appreciation of God, but our faith in the maturing life of the Church moves us to hope that our interpretation of beauty, or charity, is the highest yet known to man. Other men may say 'the old is better': other men have a right to their opinion. It is the Catholic Church.

In our own day a new congregation, with a new spirit and a new asceticism, is discovering a new application of this ideal of the religious life. It is a missionary society and medical, and it seeks to combine the highest sanctity with the most qualified medical science. Not all its members can be doctors, but all its members must be trained to answer, without endangering the tranquillity of their own union with God, the exacting, ceaseless and unpredictable calls of humanity that are most commonly associated with a doctor's life. The life of a doctor is in the hands of his patients, and the doctor who fits the needs of his patients into a preconceived cadre of his own way of life is a professional man without a sense of vocation. It is the vocation of these religious to be doctors and therefore the cadre of their lives must have only the vaguest detail, but there is not one training for the doctors and another for the nursing or the administrative staff—that might lead to pride or jealousy and to invidious distinctions in the family life of the community. In the eyes of God a doctor's duty is not more important nor more urgent than the humblest domestic task, but the doctor's duty is taken as the most unpredictable task for which legislation can be made and around which a spirit can be built. There is one spirit, one unifying goal, to find God by serving humanity, no matter where, nor when, nor how, for these religious do not seek to shun society after the manner of the early anchorites

and the monastic orders. They are prepared to be at the service of the people with their urgent needs and even unreasonable demands and to seek and find God amid the turbulent storms of every day, and to rest with God when the stress of life is over. They do not seek to be withdrawn from the life of the modern world—they enter religion to be sanctified through the circumstances of the life they encounter in their contact with the world.

Efficiency must not suffer, therefore regimentation may have to go, not only for the doctors but for all—not always and never without cause, but as often as duty to our neighbour's good may require. Tranquillity and the peaceful approach to God, the essentials of the religious life, which rule and order were meant to assure, must be preserved—this new asceticism is not built on the heresy of the value of works over prayer—but it must be preserved by the peace that comes from the interior motive of a work done for love and in union with God. Nothing that is done by a soul elevated by grace is inconsiderable in the sight of God and it takes its relative value from considerations of time and place. For these religious the work in hand, the now and the here, are of paramount importance. Its possible inconsequential nature does not matter, nor does the relative importance of the work they might otherwise be doing. This work is their task, their life, their prayer.

The more formal degrees of prayer, vocal and contemplative, can be arranged into the busiest life, but if you insist too much on the times of prayer, the importance given to the circumstances of time and place may overshadow the all important task of charity. When there is much to be got into a small space everything depends on the packing. The religious of the new asceticism would omit nothing but tries to accept the tasks of each day as they come, in God's order not her own. It means great generosity, seizing each opportunity for prayer and work, the result being as often as not an increase in both work and prayer. 'But work might crowd out prayer?' It might. The circumstances would be rare but can be envisaged. Surgeons in London Hospitals after some of the raids are said to have operated for thirty-six hours on end till they were physically incapable of further effort. Had a Sister Surgeon been working among them her Superiors would have had her work even as they without interrupting her work every few hours for Mass or the Rosary or Divine Office. It is not often that Mass or the routine prayers have to be omitted but after a busy night or overcrowded day, who knows? What is permitted to restore health is also permitted to safeguard health and bed can be a preventative as well as a cure. Sanctity is not suicide and for a religious the Mass can often be a greater sacrifice when she is not

present than when she is. How unreasonably grateful one feels to St Frances Cabrini for asking the nun who came to call her in time for meditation and Mass to let her be and bring up her breakfast later as she felt too tired to get up—and she on a first visit in a strange convent! A modern saint can hear the voice of God above the clangour of the bell.

Yet these religious are not trained to expect a lazy or tranquil life. At any moment at home or on the missions God may appear to them under the guise of humanity and it is better to risk being duped than to risk the danger of hurrying past God (even though perhaps with eyes modestly cast down and prayer-book clutched in pious hands). A duty, Mass itself, must be interrupted in order to be courteous or sympathetic, to be Christ-like—nothing matters more than that and our Lord interrupted his Passion to comfort the women of Jerusalem. There is a heavy price on courtesy and gentleness and it is paid in the turmoil of a disorganised life, but from their novitiate (intentionally overcrowded) these religious have been taught to pay the last farthing. A Sister Doctor may be called to the dying, another Sister may be detained by an inopportune guest: the objects of their work differ but the calling, the vocation, is the same. It is God under different guises and God in no matter what guise must come first in the life of a saint. A saint cannot waste time and these religious are trained to sanctity. Sanctity cannot be locked behind doors nor confined within the limits of time, and these religious are so 'rooted and founded in charity' that their charity cannot be put to bed and to sleep with the simple ringing of the bell for night prayers. Their charity does not sleep: out into the night they are prepared to serve mankind in medicine and in kindness or in the simple courtesy of answering letters till sleep becomes the most urgent demand of charity.

Side by side with the minimum of regimentation (so much of which, as nationalisation has taught us, results in a senseless waste of time) there is a minimum of repression. Brains are God-given gifts, freely bestowed, to be used for his honour and glory—they are not to be hidden in a napkin and buried. Superiors, it is recognised, have no monopoly of brains or bright ideas and any Sister who did not make known her suggestions for easing the tension of life or improving the efficiency of the congregation would not be lauded for her docility but upbraided for her stupidity. It is all a matter of approach. If self-obliteration is your ideal, virtue stands in 'asinine' obedience, but if you have to be trained to take responsibility for serious decisions, self-obliteration is the act of cutting away the feet on which you must stand—and no child of God would expect God to be pleased with that act of supreme folly

... and obedience is more difficult when your proffered suggestions have been ignored than when they have never been stated. The Superiors want to know the qualities and wishes of those whose lives they must order. For a girl to hide behind a façade is dangerous. It may prove that she can discipline her exterior but within she may be undisciplined and rebellious. Her perfection consists in the full development of her God-given character and gifts, and for that she must be known as a person—she must therefore be free to express herself, not only in words but in actions and ways. She is likely to be more herself when she is allowed to follow her natural talents, and although by her obedience she must do what she is ordered by her Superiors, nevertheless, her Superiors consider her natural abilities and desires before deciding in which branch of medicine or other work of the congregation she shall be engaged. If these are practical, they will be realised.

Superiors are not segregated by any undue reverential fear and the usual finely graded system of hierarchic subordination has no place among them. There are no allotted places in chapel, for example, no very rigid order for communion. (In themselves, of course, these are not important points, for places in chapel are normally allocated for convenience, having prayerbooks, etc., to hand, and order at communion is ordinarily no more than avoiding congestion—but they are pointers.) This absence of regimentation and repression results in a freshness and unaffectedness, an individualism and naturalness such as is rarely found in congregations of women. The other place in which it can usually be found is in the parlours of contemplative orders for there the presence of the grille makes the presence of other barriers unnecessary. Other orders may at times tend to erect artificial barriers or poses to take the place of the grille and to segregate themselves from the world, but the religious of the new asceticism have no wish to cut themselves off from the world and would pass as normal people in any setting, at Colonial functions or in the student-life of a university medical school. By some paradoxical reasoning, it has been argued that their 'normalness' is a pose which is dropped as soon as they enter their convent grounds, but to be normal is part of their work, and therefore of their religion and their life. It is in their ultimate contact with society, and through their hospitals and clinics with all strata of society, and it is by their desire to be the hand-maids of the needs of this society, that they will inevitably be forced to realise their ambition of being a 'new form of Apostolate designed to adapt itself to the changing needs of the modern world'.

Medicine is their special vocation and they seek the highest

qualifications in all its branches. Here is no ambition to staff the missions with barely trained doctors—it is medicine and not merely the doctor's work that is consecrated to God; it is the root, stalk and flower that are his and the more scientific the qualifications the less unworthy is the gift that is given. Years spent at home in post-graduate training are not looked upon as years stolen from the missions—the missions will reap a rich harvest in skill and in grace. (And may not the missions through the experience they give to these specialists provide the cure for many of our ills and so make some recompense to the lands from which these missionaries come?) These religious are not playing at medicine, nor will they let medicine play second-fiddle to any conventional ideas of the conduct of religion. All branches of medicine are open to them and Cardinal Fumasoni-Biondi, Secretary of the Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith, has been most insistent that it should be all. These Sisters are not to consider the treatment of disease, male or female, as unfitting their state. That is bad medicine and a failing in religion. Hygiene, too, is part of medicine; and therefore, in a film now showing, a Sister Surgeon makes a sign of the cross without touching her forehead and body. Soberly it may look, and to children (if they notice anything exceptional!) a cause of scandal, but a surgeon who has 'scrubbed up' does not touch anything and neither does a Sister when she is acting as a surgeon.

Medicine is their vocation and they are slow to agree to undertake any other work, although by their constitutions teaching can be undertaken. In multiplying activities standards in one branch might be lowered and so till now it is medicine and only medicine that they have undertaken, while teaching is left to congregations which make that their speciality.

The virile common-sense that is evident in the conception of this congregation is to be explained by the fact that the foundress was not moved by any abstract missionary ideal (that alone in this age of the missions would never have justified the founding of yet another missionary congregation.) She had lived in Africa and knew the conditions that prevailed there and which needs were not being met. Her idea was not unshared by others with practical experience of the missions. In 1937, the year when she was opening her first mission house in Ireland, I was in a house for aged and sick missionary-priests. Many orders were represented and the talk frequently turned to past experiences. Much was said about the religious women who then staffed the missions, most was in praise of them but much, too, was said of the way their help was vitiated by the occasions when they could not be got at 'because they had gone to bed', or 'because they were saying Vespers', and many

dreams were dreamed of a congregation such as now exists.

This congregation took its inspiration from our Lady's visit to Saint Elizabeth immediately she had conceived our Lord and practical sanctity, not stream-lined efficiency nor mystical contemplation, is its ideal. It is, of course, fraught with dangers similar perhaps to the dangers of a wall-less prison. A Sister Doctor could be no more than a doctor, a Sister Secretary no more than a clerk. It is a vocation that puts a great deal of the responsibility for sanctity on the individual religious, very much more than in the more conventional congregations where rules and obedience assure a certain degree of sanctity. *Corruptio optimi pessima* is true of many aspects of the religious life, but in no other congregation could this corruption so easily take place without being observed. An extreme case would obviously be noticed but a religious would be able to 'get away' with many things unnoticed. There is a prophecy, and in certain parts of the world the tendency is already revealing itself, that the secular clergy will gradually cease to exist and their place will be taken by congregations of priests subject to the three vows. Here something of the opposite movement is revealing itself and very soon on the missions, and later perhaps at home, we may grow accustomed to religious women living in twos and threes bound by vows but intimately bound up with society. Their dangers will be the same dangers as have confronted the secular clergy down the ages: for their success everything will depend on their training but, to be effective for the life they have to live, their training must be free from a heavy superstructure of rules and from over-close observation. It will demand eagerness and enthusiasm till the end, and at the beginning an intensity of purpose and a strong sense of personal responsibility.

The community I have mainly described in which this new asceticism is being finely worked out is the *Medical Missionaries of Mary*. There is about them the spirit of the 'familia' of Saint Benedict and the atmosphere of the Blessed Trinity Itself, *semper agens sed semper quietus*, at peace in the midst of work.

NOTE: To prevent any misconceptions perhaps it should be stated that their daily spiritual exercises consist of Prime: $\frac{1}{2}$ hour Mental Prayer. Mass and Thanksgiving. Examen: Rosary: Vespers. $\frac{1}{2}$ hour Spiritual Reading. $\frac{1}{2}$ hour (if possible) Mental Prayer. Compline. Examen!