

A DVENIAT REGNUM TUUM.

THE BIRMINGHAM ARCHDIOCESAN GUILD OF CATECHISTS.

' We can all be apostles and we can all share in the work of Christ Our Lord in some way. But the way which seems to be most necessary to-day in England is that we should improve our knowledge of the Faith and do our best to explain Catholic teaching and practice to others.'

That was the conclusion of the Pastoral Letter for Lent 1944 of His Grace the Archbishop of Birmingham; and arising out of an earlier passage in the Letter which runs:—" One bright spot in this rather sombre picture (of the present state of religious knowledge among Catholics in this country) is the recent formation of a Diocesan Guild of Catechists," a footnote added: " Particulars of the Archdiocesan Guild of Catechists may be obtained from the Rev. B. Hodgson, St. Peter's, Broad Street, Birmingham 1, or from the Rev. R. H. Nicholson, D.D., Oscott College, Sutton Coldfield, Birmingham." That is, from the Director and Examiner appointed to the Guild by His Grace. It is because His Grace consented to become its President that his chosen device, as it appears on his coat of arms, seemed a suitable title for an account of the origin, aims and methods of the Guild of Catechists to which he has given his blessing as being one of the ways of working for the coming of the Kingdom.

THE ORIGIN.

The Guild had its origin in the work of the Little Sisters of the Assumption, Nursing Sisters of the Sick Poor in their own homes¹. In the course of their great work of charity the Sisters are often called in to attend non-Catholics, some of whom eventually express a wish to join the Catholic Church. The work of instructing such persons, many of them bed-ridden invalids or poor mothers too pre-occupied with the care of a young family to be able to leave their

¹ In a Foreword to Fr. Conrad Pepler's *In the Service of Christ the Worker* concerning these Sisters, His Grace wrote: ' I have been privileged to see a little of the work of the Little Sisters of the Assumption since God gave me the care of a diocese; and I should like to see their foundations established in all our large cities and towns. For by their humble work of love they are bringing back Christ the Worker to the working-man and his family and are breaking down the barriers which selfishness and wealth have built up between the classes.' For a further account of their work cf. *A Tertiary of St. Dominic* by Diana Bury, BLACKFRIARS, July, 1941.

homes to attend instructions elsewhere, was sometimes entrusted to the lay-helpers whom, both men and women, the Little Sisters gather round their convents, thus leaving the Nursing Sisters free to spread their own apostolate still further. Of course the permission of the parish priest concerned was always obtained before such instructions were undertaken, but it came to be recognised that an organised apostolate was needed, prepared for by further doctrinal instruction and formative training, and authorized by definite credentials.

The first idea was to take the correspondence course arranged by Our Lady's Catechists; but their Secretary suggested that it might be better to try to arrange for a course of study locally. This seemed all the wiser in that the field of work of the newer group had so far lain chiefly among the sick poor, of any age, whereas the training given by the Society of Our Lady's Catechists is directed with a view to specialization in the instruction of children and young people. But the younger association of Catechists gratefully records the fact that the first practical step in its career was suggested by the older Society, with which it hopes always to be allowed to work in fruitful co-operation.

So it came about that in the spring of 1941 the first course of lectures was started at St. Peter's, with the full approval of His Grace, who, at the end of the year, appointed an Examiner to be responsible for the standard of the Catechists authorized in his name. The Guild as such owes its existence to the magnanimity of the Catholic Evidence Guild of Birmingham², since it came into existence as a corporate body at a meeting of the newly licenced Catechists called by the Examiner, who is also Archdiocesan Director of the C.E.G., and the Assistant Examiner, who is its present Master. The Guild is also greatly indebted to the members of the C.E.G. and to many of the clergy of the Birmingham area for much help and encouragement, particularly in the drawing up of the few brief rules and spiritual recommendations of the Guild, as well as of a running commentary on these. In this are collected many practical hints, gathered in the light of past experience, for consolidating the field-work of the catechists; and which may help to give the nervous novice a little more confidence than some of his seniors felt when they started out on the job.

Perhaps, too, the courage of some potential catechists may be undetermined by encountering conscientious objectors to the idea that

² In the course of the above mentioned Pastoral the Archbishop paid a high tribute to the Evidence Guild as one of the societies 'whose work is most needed, . . . which aim especially at Christian Doctrine as their object and at a better understanding of the truths of the Faith.'

lay men and women should embark on a work that 'should be left to priests and nuns'³.

In view of the Pastoral Letter which is the charter of the Catechist in the Archdiocese of Birmingham, such doubts can hardly legitimately linger within the diocese. Outside critics might consider the implications of these words of Pope Pius XI.: 'On the one hand society is becoming increasingly paganized and vast numbers live without any knowledge of the Christian heritage, so that without its inspiration the worth of faith and morals is ignored. On the other hand, we observe with concern that the number of priests is inadequate to the day, here for lack of vocations, there from restrictions of intercourse with men' (Letter to Cardinal Segura). It has been authoritatively said of the work of the Guild of Catechists: 'It is difficult to conceive of any more concrete expression of that Catholic Action so often and so repeatedly urged both by our present and our late Holy Father'—the apostolate of the laity to the neighbour at large.

Further, the choice of St. John the Precursor as the secondary patron of the Guild—naturally the first is Our Blessed Lady, invoked under the three-fold titles of Mother of Divine Grace, Morning Star and Seat of Wisdom—was very deliberate. For not only was St. John very much of a two-way teacher, the model catechist, all things to all men, adapting his touch to the bruised reed and the smoking flax, yet to his own disciples in training for the apostolate calling himself 'the friend of the Bridegroom'; but in his relation to his Master, (represented to catechists by His priests, their masters), merely the fore-runner who prepared the way before Him. Besides, the culminating sign of the coming of His kingdom given by Our Lord to His Precursor was: 'The poor have the gospel preached to them.' So the patronage of St. John should also ensure that the Guild will never forget its indebtedness to the Little Sisters of the Assumption and their 'humble work of love'; and it has adopted as its watchword the constant prayer of their founder, Pere Etienne Pernet, 'O Lord, unite all minds in truth and all hearts in charity.'

AIMS AND METHODS.

The primary object of the Guild is to train lay Catholics, men and women, to be of assistance, wherever required, to parish priests in the instruction of converts and children; and to provide further

³ It would be particularly regrettable if this criticism resulted in discouraging younger catechists, who, having learnt to see the problems of youth in the light not of experience but of eternity, should be invaluable apostles to their contemporaries—age-group to age-group in the spirit of the Catholic Action formula.

opportunities for qualified Catechists to improve their knowledge and presentation of the faith and to deepen their spiritual ideals. A secondary object, but one to which the Pastoral Letter quoted above lends great importance, is to provide opportunities for any Catholics who wish to revise or extend their knowledge of the faith. These aims, opportunities and ideals of the Guild should appeal particularly to those who have the honour to be associated with the Order whose motto is *Veritas* and whose mission is summed up as *Contemplata aliis tradere*.

Catechist Licences are awarded to those who in a written and oral examination satisfy the Examiner that they possess sufficient knowledge and are competent to instruct. But the Licence is not intended merely as a certificate of knowledge, and is not awarded, nor is the examination open, except to those who express their readiness to take up catechetical work and to abide by the simple rules of the Guild. The Licence, which must receive the signature of the parish priest of the candidate before it is signed by His Grace the Archbishop, is valid for two years only, but it may be renewed without further examination at the discretion of the Examiner.

Attendance at classes in Christian Doctrine, however desirable where circumstances permit, is not an essential preliminary to the examination but, as an aid to intending catechists, courses of lectures are given periodically at several other centres in Birmingham, and further courses will be arranged in other localities as demand arises. Would-be catechists who are not free to attend courses of lectures regularly, or who are not within reach of any such course, can obtain information as to the requirements of the examiners and the names of useful books for private study from the Hon. Secretary of the Guild⁴. Perhaps it would help to stimulate a wide demand for local courses of lectures were it emphasized that lectures organized in connection with the Guild are, in accordance with its secondary object already mentioned, open to any Catholics, for instance men and women who would like to 'do their best to explain Catholic teaching and practices to others' in the casual encounters of daily life, or parents who wish they could help their children better with their 'religious home-work,' to the very great benefit of all parties concerned. Attendance at these lectures, therefore, is by no means confined to those aspiring to qualify as catechists; but they are not intended as instruction classes for converts.

On receipt of a Licence, Catechists are expected to offer their services to their parish priest, expressing their willingness to undertake

⁴ Miss Enid Dorsett, 4 Seymour Court, Islington Row, Birmingham 15.

any catechizing work he may wish them to do, especially if it be concerned with the instruction of children, the house-bound, deaf, blind or mentally backward. Failing any such need in their own parish they should accept any instruction within reasonable reach offered to them through the Secretary. No catechizing work may ever be done by a Licenced member of the Guild except at the request, or with the explicit approval, of the parish priest of the catechumen. Catechists who find themselves with no instruction on hand at any time, or who are prevented by absence from home or by ill-health from undertaking instructions, are urged to devote such time as they would have been prepared to give to catechizing in part to further study and in part to extra prayer for the grand objective of the Guild⁵, thus redeeming a time of apparent unemployment and continuing to honour their offering of some part of their leisure to its service.

Licensed members are further expected as far as possible to attend quarterly meetings held to promote supplementary lectures, practical discussion and the exchange of experiences, and to be present at any Retreat or Day of Recollection arranged by the Guild Director. In view of the high commendation of its work given in His Grace's Pastoral a rapid extension of the Guild throughout the Archdiocese is anticipated, and arrangements will be made to provide centres for meetings, retreats, etc., outside the Birmingham city area in accordance with the demand. As with the lectures, attendance at such retreats is open to any Catholics who wish to associate themselves in any way, as by prayer or study, with the objects of the Guild.

To its associates the Guild hopes shortly to issue a leaflet of the prayers chiefly taken from the liturgy to cover its own special needs. It is hoped that many Catholics may feel moved to add to this practical kind of collaboration, further assistance, whether in kind or cash, to the lending library and incidental expenses, or by personal service.

THE FUTURE.

'The harvest indeed is great but the labourers are few.'

In the first two years of its history the Guild has sent into action twenty-seven Catechists who are working for souls in and around Birmingham. The competent authorities say that there is ample scope for very many more, and in every part of the diocese. Brilliance is not required, only serious study and a spirit of apostolic zeal, with at times considerable patience in the teeth of procrastination and a stout, or at any rate a resilient, heart in the face of dis-

⁵ The short daily prayers of, and for, the Guild open with the aspiration: 'Jesus, convert England. Jesus, have mercy on this country.'

appointment. In fact, Catechists have need to pray vigorously for something of St. John's own self-effacement and for his gift for seeing, even in the most unlikely places, the thorn-encircled Lamb of God . . .

' Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of every man who speaks to me.'⁶

Also, a sense of humour is definitely an asset, but it must be of the sympathetic variety, that smiles with, rather than at.

And the reward? Exceeding great.

' I've seen a child throw back his head in joyous, half-astonished
glee

At something suddenly made plain, some mystery.

I've seen him laugh, amazed to think he had not thought of
that before,

So simple was it in the end, so true to law'⁷

They will see just that, though the child may be of any age, just coming up to the use of reason or coming to re-birth at the font of baptism perhaps only at the end of a long, bewildering life-time of unintelligible misery, privation and suffering, explained at last in terms of the fall, glorified now in the light of the Cross.

And God only knows how much such catechumens may have taught the catechist who has

' Seen their smiles (O soul, be worthy !)

Seen their tears (O heart, be clean !)⁸

A.B.

⁶ From *St. Patrick's Breastplate*.

⁷ Monk Gibbon, *For Daws to Peck at*.

⁸ G. K. Chesterton, *Music*.