

the tiara is to be taken off, and the crown removed; all will be overturned; that which is lowly will be lifted up, and that which is high shall be brought low. I shall make it into a ruin, a ruin; it will no longer exist until there shall come he to whom belongs judgement and to whom I shall return it' (Ezechieel 21, 25-6).

Thus we find in the early section of the history of the Jewish race, firmly embedded, the ideas of moral regeneration, through a *person* and extending all over the world.

(To be concluded)



THE FOOT OF THE LADDER

SOME FACTS ABOUT A MODERN LAY SPIRITUAL MOVEMENT

IT all begins with a conversion; properly speaking with a second or re-conversion.

This applies to cradle Catholics and converts alike, at least to average normal people. The normal born Catholic is usually well content to use up the spiritual capital of baptism, as it were, and make his religion a reflex action rather than a conscious effort. This is not criticism but a statement of observable fact. To become active, to awaken to the possibilities and responsibilities of the religion he practises, a further jolt of some kind is needed, whether from within or from without. It is the same with converts. It does happen that entry into the Church will coincide with or cause the beginning of an intense and active spiritual life; but these cases are rare. (We speak in general terms and not of special cases, such as direct conversion to the religious life, which have nothing to do with the life of the laity—our subject here—and so are outside our scope.)

From our own experiences and from those we have been privileged to hear of, it seems that this second conversion is necessary. All this may be commonplace, but it is a discovery to the individual layman, and therefore exciting. But many do not realise that this is how their spiritual life has begun, and it is well that they should, so that by understanding what has happened to them they can see what can happen, or is happening, to others, and so play their part not only in developing their own lives but in fostering, through that, the individual lay spiritual revival which is undoubtedly taking place at this time.

The form and pattern of this second conversion varies infinitely, as one well knows. One, hovering on the brink of the first conversion into the Church, has recorded at Benediction one day a sort of mental flash bringing a firm intuition of the Reality of the Presence and of the Truth of all it signified. The second conversion in this case, on the other hand, was the result of a slow logical process of thought and action—the developed practice of daily Communion: if it was true that religion and life had become divorced, even in Catholic lives, then their re-integration entailed a strengthening of the spiritual life until it balanced, and indeed outweighed, the secular life and overflowed into it. The rest followed naturally and inevitably. Another, a Catholic born, got it through reading and meditation during a long illness. These cases can be multiplied in their variety and diversity; but many, perhaps the majority, in this country at all events in recent years, were moved as a result of corporate action by receiving deliberately planned external stimuli.

The best known example of this is the Young Christian Workers movement, which sprang from the inspiration of Canon Cardijn, which is, however, restricted to a particular class and age group. Apart from this the greatest and most fruitful source of this kind of second conversion, of convert and cradle Catholic alike, was the Sword of the Spirit Movement in the Royal Air Force which was initiated by the late Mgr Henry Beauchamp.

The essence of the movement was the Leadership Course, to which selected people were sent to have a kind of spiritual cramming in doctrine and the method, the latter being well known as the Gospel Enquiry. These Retreat-courses had an immediate effect on many, and started a strong apostolate within the Services, the method being followed in the Army later. Of course many failed to stay the course—Mgr Beauchamp reckoned on at least fifty per cent failures; but those who 'took' did so very strongly indeed. The long-term results of this movement have been greater than perhaps anyone dared to hope.

After the war, as these young men and women left the Services they were deprived of the spiritual shelter of corporate life and the support of chaplains who understood them, their needs, and their aspirations, and were thrown into the cold waters of postwar civilian life to sink or swim. Many sank. But many more, after the first shock, came up for the second and third time as it were and began to make contact with each other. At first they had big ideas about changing the world, electrifying their parishes, and there was talk of forming a new association based on the original movement, to link service with ex-service spiritual groups. (The

leadership Courses still continue, in the services, and there is a continuous stream of spiritually stimulated young men and women of all classes flowing into civilian life.) A new association was not practicable, and they disappeared again below the surface. But the contacts once made were not lost, and by a natural process little cells were formed of groups of six or so working together in the way they had been taught.

Members of these groups used to meet regularly and unfailingly at somebody's home, usually about once a fortnight. There they carried out the routine of the Gospel Enquiry meetings, usually without a priest, and set to work on action of an apostolic kind. Primarily it took the form of chasing lapsed Catholics or trying to make converts in their several walks of life. But—this must be stressed—their fundamental aim and inspiration were the living of a strong personal spiritual life, a moving—groping is more accurate, for none of us knew fully what we were doing—towards a closer union with God.

For nearly two years these groups remained hidden and isolated; few cells knew of each other's existence. There was no means of communication except through occasional re-unions and contacts with ex-chaplains. One of the latter would tell a group that he had met George at the other end of the country who was also running a group, and then would pass the news back to George and others; and so very gradually the movement began to link up. Few realised, or were so presumptuous as to think, that they were using the exact methods of the earliest Christians in another pagan world, and later—in their own adaptation—of those of Christian monasticism. They were content to do what lay before them, persevering on their own, silently and unseen.

They did not perhaps reach towering heights of spirituality, but they achieved a sort of corporate level, based on prayer, study and real apostolic zeal for action, far above that of ordinary minimum-observance Catholics. This was essentially a lay movement. The original inspiration in most cases came of course from the work of men like Mgr Beauchamp and understanding chaplains and priests, but the peacetime initiative, drive and perseverance were predominantly lay. These groups received little encouragement from priests as a whole; they often worked secretly in parishes in spite of them.

Here one is struck by the significant fact that these people, with no foreign contacts, were acting in the same way as the 'militants' of the continent. They were at one with the apostolic communities of France, with the layfolk of the Company of St

Paul, with the Christophers of the United States. When Father Perrin's *Priest-Workman in Germany* appeared it was obvious that here was the example to which they were all tending; though naturally the English cells have not been tested as those in France and Germany in the war years, or as the Christians in Eastern Europe today. In intensity and sheer virility the English cells are still a long way behind the continental ones; this not from lack of will but from differences in conditions. We should say *apparent* differences, for the spiritual and moral crisis of English Catholicism of the present day is blanketed under a spurious sense of complacency and security. The issues before us are not so clear-cut as they are abroad.

While these Service-sponsored groups were slowly growing in the civilian soil the same inspiration was working more or less spontaneously among other types of people, both in groups and in individuals. Young students began to want to get together for the same purposes. Odd people in professional and business life with an interest in politics and sociology were moved by a phrase of the Italian, Igino Giordani, in a letter written in 1946: 'If *sanctity* goes into politics we shall be saved; it is like generous blood infused in a sick body'.

Brooding on that sentence and on the soulless materialism of modern affairs and the hopeless task of bringing any human influence to bear to change them, they realised that 'sanctity' meant themselves—not other people. If sanctity were to be brought into politics or into any other human activity, it could only be done by those taking part *carrying* it in themselves. 'It wasn't in the Blessed Sacrament', the militants in Germany realised, 'that our brothers were to find him—they never went to church—it was in us.' They had to give up talking about Christian principles and start *acting* them.

This kind of cell was different from the others, for the members only met in the course of their professional lives, and were unable to meet locally as a group. So they had to have an outside rule to bind them together in place of the Gospel Enquiry meeting and joint social action. Theirs was essentially a cell of individual prayer and penance, based on the Mass and, as far as practicable, on the Divine Office. They pledged themselves to follow as near as maybe a rule, which included daily Mass and Communion, weekly physical penance and mortification—and specially during Advent and Lent (these were simple and elementary like giving up smoking, drink, and so on); the regular and frequent receiving of the Sacrament of Penance; and individual spiritual reading. Their unity lay in the

sharing of the Mass and of their mutual corporate and individual intentions. They soon found that their inclination and habit were to tend more and more towards prayer as the first and essential action, and to leave the active intentions to look after themselves—or rather to the Will of God.

There has also been an individual manifestation of this lay revival, quite independent of the cell or group movement. Persons have vowed themselves, under direction, to devote their lives wholly to God, through penance and prayer and poverty *in the world*, living almost literally so far as modern circumstances allow under the *Ancren Riwle*. They generally aim at doing the minimum amount of physical work necessary to keep alive and housed, so that the rest of the time can be spent in prayer. They use all the accepted aids of mortifications, penances, discipline and fasting to detach themselves from the world of material things. Anyone familiar with the lives and practices of Matt Talbot and John McGinnis will know what is meant. As a rule they do *not* feel the call to join a religious order.

They have their special problems and difficulties, and are outside the scope of this account; but they had to be mentioned to complete the pattern of this lay revival, and they are a tremendous hidden force which must have its effect on this movement as a whole. They are in a true sense its *élite*, who have gone beyond the cell or the group to be alone with God. Whether they can ever become true technical contemplatives outside the four walls of a convent or hermitage we leave to others to decide. Certainly they have reached a very high order of spirituality, and are recipients of grace abounding. To take the one instance of fasting: when the ordinary material clod complains of starvation under the present rationing system, it is disturbing to see somebody keeping healthy and lively on one meal of vegetables and fish a day, without meat or fats or sugar, calories, proteins, vitamins, or any of the things that are supposed to be essential to survival. They, too, are a living proof that penance voluntarily done, as well as suffering willingly accepted, has true spiritual joy as its fruit.

To return to the cells: it will be noticed that they are different from those who use the Secular Institutes, or the Community Houses in France. The movement here is peculiarly English, in that the individuals in it seem to succeed in affecting a compromise between the individualism of the hermits and the corporatism of similar movements on the continent. Cell members live in their own homes and meet in them for their cell activities. Many are married with families, and often all take part in the spiritual life. A special mark

of this movement is that both sexes work together and meet together for their Gospel study and so on. They do not take kindly to the segregation of the sexes that is the mark of so much of parish life, and of similar but functional movements like Y.C.W. and L.O.C.K., although they often work in and through these and other local and national organisations. Their action is very much that of a leaven; and they recharge their spiritual life through their own regular meetings, through individual retreats, and through periodical gatherings—informal retreat-conferences—which are becoming a feature of the movement as it grows more organised.

After these two years underground, of which we have spoken, a spontaneous combustion took place a little over a year ago. Letters were written to the papers, contacts suddenly increased, specially between the various so far unconnected streams of the movement. It is significant how people trying to live more intense spiritual lives, whether alone or together, were constantly meeting others of the same mind; a sort of celestial capillary attraction. The different types of cells began to react on one another to their mutual advantage, but more and more the special devotion to the Mass of one type that we have described poured over into the others. A number of cells began to affiliate themselves to the civilian Sword of the Spirit, in order to have a central point of contact and the services of a journal, the *Sword*. Other cells affiliate themselves to local organisations in their own areas; many continue on their own; but whether affiliated or not they all have a unity of existence and purpose peculiar to themselves, kept alive by prayer and by a system of re-unions mentioned above.

The work that these cells do, the Action part of the trinity of Prayer-Study-Action, has expanded considerably in scope. Properly regarded as an overflow of prayer, it has literally flowed into many levels of post-war Catholic life, revivifying many a parish society or sodality moribund since the war, doing a multitude of *little things* at the personal level where it is most effective if least spectacular: forming choirs for Benediction and stimulating attendance by their own example; rounding up slack members of the parish; acting as catechists in country parishes; providing sitters-in for overworked mothers; raising funds for charitable projects, such as hospitality for Austrian children; making the Catholic voice heard in local politics; plunging into the schools and housing questions, often getting ahead of the Communists on the latter; working on efforts like the Sword of the Spirit Human Rights campaign, selling Catholic literature; writing letters to the press. The list is endless. They literally march to the sound of the guns, doing whatever lies

before them; and they do it with a new intensity and a new consciousness of the place of these little activities in the scheme of things and with the growing strength of the Spirit working in them.

We have described the material growth and work of this cell movement in England at some length, because this is, we repeat, so essentially a *lay* movement working in and through the secular world, and it is only through its impact on that world that one can see the effects of the attempts to integrate the life of the Spirit with the life of the world. We make no claim for this movement to be one of contemplatives or mystics; nor on the other hand do we want to become centres of barren piety. Hence our insistence on activity in the material order as well as in the spiritual. We do claim to step off into action where so many Catholic movements leave off. The basis of it all is truly the spiritual life of Rule or Gospel Enquiry meeting, or both.

It is hard to describe the spiritual life of this movement when nearly every member of it is at a different stage. Many do not think of themselves as living a spiritual life at all, but are just trying to be good Catholics and make the best of the opportunities that are given to them, which is of course the same thing. Many, when they began, perhaps, never thought of going so far as to attempt daily Mass; weekly Sunday Communion was enough for them, with regular cell meetings and their Gospel Enquiry and study, and evening services. These things grew on them gradually, taking root in the deep soil provided by their original efforts, a spiritual compost as it were. For instance, the lead given in the *Sword* has led to the general adoption of the plan of having every cell represented at Mass every day by at least one member. Other members were further advanced at the outset—some to the extent of developing vocations and disappearing into convents and seminaries, an immediate loss to the movement but a future gain, for they will become in due time directors and friends of this lay movement. It needs all the friends it can get.

Very few at the beginning contemplated any sort of voluntary penance. They accepted the privations and contingent mortifications of the times in which we all live. It is only recently that they have begun to try the other, to ration themselves of the enjoyments of this world—to find how their interest and pleasure are steadily shifting towards spiritual things. Now a leaflet that members have compiled for themselves recommends 'a simple spiritual Rule'. 'Regular discipline helps to nurture the inner life which is the source of all our action. Nothing rigid can be laid down; each cell should evolve a discipline to suit the capacity of its members,

centring upon daily Mass. . . . In addition, a definite monthly act of personal mortification is suggested. . . .'

People do not as a rule consciously make time-tables of their lives, but many are beginning, insensibly, to work to them, and to find how much more can be done that way. Here again results vary. The material circumstances and responsibilities of family life must affect the externals of spiritual life, but those who are seriously embarked on this adventure realise that every chore can be a prayer and a Communion.

A married man with a family has to get up at 6.30 to perform various household jobs, getting children ready for school and so on; that first hour is offered up as a prayer and spiritual Communion. 'Offer it up!' So easy to say; so easy to make a platitude of it! It is the will that gives the motive its force. Two hours daily travelling provides time for reading and writing in connection with Catholic Action. Three nights a week are spent at cell or other parish meetings. One weekday he gets up at six for Mass. Another, with less family responsibilities, starts his day at 5.50 a.m., with private reading of parts of the Office, and then to Mass at seven. Walking to and from buses, and waiting for them in queues, give time for saying the Rosary. In the bus spiritual or educational reading is done. Benediction is possible once or twice a week at lunch time, with Compline said privately before going home in the evening, and on Fridays the Stations of the Cross. The day ends at eleven after prayers and some spiritual reading. A single worker also manages daily Mass, and ends his day with Compline.

One point clearly emerges from these programmes, contrasting yet the same, and from all others attempted by men and women in the world: the importance of the morning. It is really the only time that a layman can be sure of having to himself. This is a commonplace, even outside the spiritual life; lawyers always use the early hours of the day for all their preparation work and study. One cannot rely on the rest of the day for any deliberate spiritual life without neglecting one's work and one's necessary social contacts, without which it is difficult to bring one's efforts at sanctity to bear on the world around us. All depends on the foundation laid every morning.

So there is, we fear, only one answer to the question how to lead a lay spiritual life in the world—get up earlier. The very act can be a daily mortification and a penance which brings its own reward, provided the motive is right and true. The time gained can be spent either at Mass, if that is practicable, or in spiritual reading, of the Missal for example; and it is time conquered. Once the effort

is made and persevered in, our experience—and everything written here is of experience—is that grace is given abundantly; one learns this from the awful flatness of a day when the effort has not been made for whatever reason.

Moreover one begins insensibly to re-orientate one's life towards this new end. This becomes the important appointment, not the cocktail party or the visit to the cinema in the evening. Human flesh craving sleep is faced with a choice between the pleasure of the world and the pleasure of God; and God begins to win. Once the life of the Spirit is truly begun to be lived we see where our pleasure and joy lie. It is the same with the penances of deprivation, which are the easiest and most obvious for the beginner. It is not a puritanical, kill-joy pleasure that is gained; it is a case of seeing the Universe and not wanting the earth. And we find that we do indeed exchange a very fleeting delight for one that never goes stale. There are few plays, films or books that one can bear to see more than once or at the most twice; the play of the Mass or of Benediction, the concert of High Mass or the Office, bears endless repetition.

Of course, all these acts are mere externals, sacramentals if you like. Without the quickening of the Spirit they are the letter that kills. Daily Mass by itself is not enough; mortification can breed ungovernable pride. We experience these things too. They are surely part of the adventure of the quest for the Holy Grail. That is why the cells insist so much on action, specially action on what appears to be a pedestrian and material level, with the minimum of publicity. But it is action that springs from prayer, action for the glory of God. These lay men and women were brought to action through the initial stimulus of prayer, by the second conversion which all have experienced in some way or other.

Very few, as we have said, have any ideas about the contemplative life—they want to be up and doing; fewer, probably, have read the *Cloud of Unknowing*; nor, if they had, would they presume to think that they had even begun to follow it. Perhaps, however, in the relation described there between the higher phases of action and the lower stages of contemplation is to be found their ultimate practical aim—'So that a man may not be fully active, except he be in part contemplative; nor yet fully contemplative . . . except he be in part active'. And perhaps their way is the one best suited to the present time. But let there be no misunderstanding; we are nowhere near even that limited ideal. Perhaps we are not yet at the foot of the ladder even?