

## RELIGIOUS LIFE IN THE WORLD

FOR many centuries past Religious Life, in the official or technical sense, has implied the cloister and the religious habit; and the obvious advantages of these external helps need no showing. Yet it has always been the way of Holy Mother Church, is indeed one of her essential qualities, to accommodate herself in her modes of life to the needs of her children in every age. In recent years many of the faithful have discovered in themselves a desire and a need to seek the perfection of religious life and yet, for one valid reason or another, cannot enter a religious Order or Congregation. For these, too, there is a special corner in the understanding heart of the Church; so that now there exists a number of organizations whereby these souls may pursue the special vocation which has been given to them. Amongst them is one that is under the aegis of the Dominican Order, and it is about this we propose to write a brief account.

*Le Petit Groupe Dominicain de Jésus Crucifié*, as it is called, is a special fraternity or group within the secular Third Order of St. Dominic. This *Little Company of Jesus Crucified*, as we may call it, was founded by Fr. Boulanger, O.P., Provincial of France, in 1893, with the approbation of Mgr. Coullié, Archbishop of Lyons. In 1909, following a petition drawn up by Fr. Desqueyroux, O.P., Procurator General of the Order of Preachers, and presented by Archbishop Touchet to His Holiness Pope Pius X, the Holy Father granted to the Sisters of the Little Company the privilege of a semi-public oratory and graciously lent his name to the first account of the new-born undertaking. In 1920, Fr. Lemonnyer, O.P., then Regent of Studies at the Priory of Le Saulchoir, gave to the Little Company its Constitutions, which determined the fundamental organization of its work and its double rôle of religious formation and the apostolate. Finally, in 1923, Cardinal Touchet added his approbation.

To say one word upon the title of this organization, it is

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called *Dominican* because, as all its members belong to the Third Order of St. Dominic, it forms an integral part of the great Dominican family, benefits by a long tradition of saints and apostles, and shares actively in the good works of the Order; it is indeed a new and sturdy branch grafted on to the old trunk. The words *Of Jesus Crucified* are added because the Little Company was placed under His special protection and renders Him a special worship of Reparation.

The Little Company is intended to form souls consecrated to the divine service, as Religious are, while yet living in the world, after the example of Christ Our Lord Himself, of His Mother, and of the holy virgins of the first centuries of the Church. It offers to its members not just an attenuated form of the religious life but all the traditional reality of that life, the exterior signs alone being wanting. It is undoubtedly a special vocation, but the promise and the strength of this vocation is contained in the prayer of Our Lord after the Last Supper: "*I pray not that Thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that Thou shouldst keep them from evil. . . As Thou hast sent me into the world, I also have sent them into the world.*" The Little Company aims to realize this special form of religious life in order to meet particular needs and to launch an apostolate called for by the times in which we live, by bringing religious life into the very midst of the world, into the family, the school, the workshop, the office, into every grade and condition of society, preaching by deeds and example to the mass of unbelievers and indifferent, showing religion to be in very truth one with life in all its circumstances. The Sisters realize the essential object of religious life: to promote the glory of God, the sanctification of their own souls, and the attraction of others to the love and service of God. Like living cells, they are destined to fulfil the rôle of a Christlike leaven, working unobtrusively but effectively amongst those with whom they come into contact. By their personal integrity in all matters, the God-given capabilities which they cultivate in His service, their inflexible purpose, their external conduct, in every way they help to spread the good tidings of Divine Love and to restore moral health to the society in which they live and move.

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As we have said, the Little Company is intended to give the benefit and essentials of religious life to those who feel themselves called to it by God and yet are kept in the world by circumstances not perhaps of their own making, or could not find in the cloister just that outlet for their zeal and activities for which they feel the need. Some of the members do actually live a common life, in organized centres or engaged in some special work attached to such centres, and have all their money in a common fund. Others continue to live in their ordinary surroundings and are affiliated to one of the common centres. There is no essential difference between the two sorts of members, for both categories realize in themselves the particular form of life intended by the Little Company. The centres must be for all of them not only a home but the source of their fervour and religious perfection. Those living outside can and ought to come to stay in these centres as often and for as long as they can, in order to take part in the common life and spiritual exercises. A fortnightly letter helps to supply the lack when it is impossible for one of the members to attend. There is a monthly retreat, as well as an annual one which all members are expected to attend.

The special characteristic of the Little Company is a life of outstanding charity fashioned after that of the early Church. It engages in all works of charity and mercy according as the needs of time and place demand. The Sisters spend their lives for the glory of God and the good of their fellow men, without counting the personal cost, in an ardent and generous spirit of zeal. They willingly give their help to their Parish Priests in all parochial activities, as far as their circumstances allow. Those who are obliged to work for their living, or are engaged in occupations that absorb all their time, far from being dissociated from the apostolic pre-occupations of their Sisters, join in them by their prayers and offer their work, their sufferings, and their sacrifices, for the conversion and benefit of souls.

Such a life and apostolate represents a very high ideal under the circumstances and can spring only from an intense and utterly sincere spiritual life. All the training is directed

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to the producing of this and there is a training centre where this is inculcated. The six months of postulancy and two years of noviceship may be spent here; but this is not of obligation, and those Sisters who live with their families or are engaged in material occupations receive their training by means of regular fortnightly letters from the Novice Mistress who resides at the training centre, as well as by visits whenever possible to that same centre. It may be necessary to add that the Novice Mistress in no way intrudes into that sphere which belongs by right to the Spiritual Director; she is concerned only to inculcate the spirit and practices of the Little Company.

The training itself is based upon reason and common-sense solidly supported by the truths of the Faith. There is nothing flamboyant about it; it aims at giving the Sisters a sane, expansive piety, not founded on sentiment or imagination but on the solid rock of Catholic teaching, making good use of the treasure which St. Thomas has bequeathed to his Order and to the whole Church. Seeing that all the Sisters, of both categories, lack the external helps of religious life, such as the habit and the cloistered life, whilst those who cannot live in one of the centres feel the pull and distraction of ordinary life and occupations as well, the Little Company demands of its members a profoundly religious spirit, great generosity, and a well-balanced judgment, especially where conscience is concerned. The Sisters have to lead what spiritual writers often call the "mixed life" in which activity and contemplation run side by side. They have to act without injudicious zeal, always aware of their immediate surroundings. Now, as St. Thomas says, *actio sequitur esse*—action is consequent upon being, and as a man is in himself so will the nature and quality of his action be. The members of the Little Company must obey the command of Our Lord: *Let your light shine before men*. But such a light presupposes the existence of a burning fire of Charity. So long as the soul has not been penetrated and indeed liberated by a knowledge of things divine more experimental than speculative, fired with love and desire for God, there can be no light to shine before men and no action that is effective in the cause of

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God. Thus the aim of the Sisters is the aim of their Order: *Contemplata aliis tradere*, to give to others what they already themselves possess as the result of the contemplative element in their lives. Their contemplation is helped by the recitation of the Little Office of Our Lady according to the Dominican rite. In this way they take their share in the official prayer of the Church, that most excellent of all praise of God of which the Mass is the centre and completion. Mental prayer morning and evening renews in the Sisters their life of union with God, while frequent lifting of the soul to God in the midst of daily labours helps towards the spirit of contemplation and establishes a mood of tranquillity in the soul which resists the vicissitudes of daily life and its anxieties.

Religious life, whatever form it may take, is but the flowering of the Christian life whose essence is the love of God; the aim of religious life is the ever increasing perfection of that love. The Sisters of the Little Company, therefore, set before themselves as an ideal the perfect observance of the twofold precept of Charity and use everything else as a means to this end. Amongst these means the Vows of religion hold the first place, though as far as these Sisters are concerned they are for the present merely private and individual vows. Rightly regarding the vows not as a restriction of liberty but rather as a necessary means to true freedom of the spirit, the Sisters bind themselves by Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience. They make their vows annually first of all, over a period of three years, after which they make them for life. They are made in the hands of the Prioress, who governs the whole Company, in the presence of an appointed representative of the Order. Their profession is regarded not only as a promise to observe the letter and spirit of the vows and of their rule, but also as a promise to God to make fruitful use of all the gifts and capabilities of nature and grace with which He has endowed them. It is, in effect, the holocaust to God of all that they have and are, with the obligation to follow always the more perfect way. It is not only the effort after purely spiritual advance that is demanded of them; even in the intellectual and practical spheres they must develop the powers that they have. Theirs is an ideal yet

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practical programme of a truly great and complete human life fulfilling the purpose for which it was created, modelled upon that of the God-man and deriving from a vivid appreciation of the facts of the Incarnation and of their significance.

From its beginning the Little Company has maintained a special devotion to the Passion and to the work of Reparation. The latter carries with it the intention of making some amends for the failings of those who are consecrated to God in the religious life or in the priesthood; this they do less by external practices or particular exercises of prayer and penance than by their religious life as a whole, a life which imposes so much abnegation under a seemingly easy exterior. To the devotion towards Jesus Crucified they add a particular devotion to Our Lady in her Compassion, and also to Bl. Antony Neyrot, O.P., the great example of the divine mercy towards a soul who, having been consecrated to His service, has unhappily fallen away. They endeavour to make the Divine Will the rule of their daily life, recognizing it not only in their Rule and Constitutions and in the commands of their superiors, but in all happenings great and small, in all the circumstances and difficulties of a religious life lived in the world. They are taught to develop the true virtue of Prudence, especially as expounded in the writings of the Angelic Doctor and of St. Catherine of Siena, and to bring it to bear upon their every action.

This is, in sum, the constitution and object of the Little Company of Jesus Crucified. Even from this inadequate account it will readily be seen that it represents a lofty ideal and demands a high courage. Its membership does not extend, as far as we know, outside the country of its origin. Whether it would find fruitful soil in England we do not presume to say. But at the least it stands as an example of the exalted way of service and self-sacrifice to which many may well be called by God for the preservation and recrudescence of Catholic life in our own country.

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