

THE APOSTOLIC VALUE OF THE CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE¹

BY

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THE contemplative life is of its nature a hidden life. It is often a reproach levelled at contemplatives that they separate themselves, not only materially, but also spiritually from the life of those living in the world. That the world of sin which the contemplative has quitted and that of grace where he intends to live, are opposed one to the other, is a fact. But that this includes an opposition between those who abide in the love of God either in the world or in the enclosure is not true.

The soul of the contemplative becomes the rendezvous of humanity and God, for she belongs to both. As he prays silently or chants the Divine Office his prayer and praise are the voice of the world. When he suffers and offers himself in sacrifice he is a token for the expiation of the world's sins and shares in the sufferings of his brethren. He is ever in the presence of God, and within his soul Life itself is buried—hidden like the seed—in order to bring forth fruit and be communicated to others. It is the role of the contemplative to be an instrument enabling Christ once more to touch the crowds and bring healing and comfort as in his days on earth. The fulness of Christ should overflow from the soul of the contemplative to free the souls of sinners from the captivity of their passions and ignorance. The contemplative may not turn his back on the needs of others and fails in his essential duty if he does not fight courageously for this liberty from death.

Faith and love are the weapons used by the contemplative. 'Thy faith hath saved thee', said our Lord to St Mary Magdalen. Faith is not an imaginative, nor even an intellectual representation of the invisible world. It is truth inundating the soul and opening the intellect and heart to supernatural light. 'Eternal life is to know God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent.' The faith of the contemplative in responding to humanity's need becomes an instrument

¹ Abridged and adapted from *Valeur apostolique de la vie contemplative*—L. M. Gautheron (La Vie Spirituelle, Oct. 1948).

of salvation. His soul swept by the *ascesis* of divine grace becomes as a naked rock which is struck that water may gush forth to quench the thirst of the multitude. But intellect and will are both faculties of the one soul and therefore inseparable. Faith to be living and life giving must be united to love. There is much talk and writing about love these days, and less about intellect and faith, which is alarming to those who think about it. Very often what passes for love is the natural desire to devote oneself, or else only sentimental passion. True love is a *spiritual act* rarely felt in the emotions and always deliberately willed, *voluntary* in the Thomistic sense of the word. At its highest it is so splendid a reality that it parallels with eternal beatitude; equal—in the life of the faith—with the life of heaven. 'Abide in my love.' It is not tied to the activity of our hands or brain, but freed by its very concentration from all that might dissipate its energy. A perfect act because divine. In a world where love is disfigured and befouled this *spiritual* and divine love is expiatory and life giving, for love is the principle of life. The more spiritual it is, the more intense is the life it communicates to others, for the source of this love is ever active and ever diffusive.

This is the pearl of great price which the contemplative shuts himself up in the cloister to seek. He understands that the greater and the purer his love, so much the greater is his power in the apostolate. But love is as strong as death and 'the lamps thereof are fire and flames'. In those flames the contemplative must be purified; and because he is willing to pass through this fire of purification the contemplative is enabled to give love to the world. A contemplative is a realist. He faces facts. Our Lord called his apostles his friends *after* they had left all things to follow him. He strips those who aspire to union with him and whom he wishes to use for the salvation of souls. What is the use or point of all this separation from normal life? asks the world. The answer is here, and the contemplative must face the prospect of giving up *all* from the very beginning. Stripped for the fight which is not so much *against* someone, though that is always present for the Adversary is ever on the watch, but rather a fight *for* Someone, it is essentially positive. 'I will keep my strength for thee.' Complete confidence in God is a necessity, for often the fight is hoping against hope. There is nothing to show for it: 'The only Doer is he'; and he keeps his secrets to himself and relies on the contemplative's trust as a proof of love; for God takes as well as gives, which is a proof of friendship. He longs to communicate himself and a contemplative soul must be ever ready, ever at his disposal. Our Lady's *Ecce—Fiat mihi*

is her fundamental attitude. No passive state this—but one ever ready to suffer and love, a love which can never be satisfied in this world, and so often a love in the dark. Because of this darkness and the unflinching trust it calls forth, humility is an absolute necessity. Humility—the great instrument that God uses for the saving of souls for whom his Son died.

When a soul sees itself so far from the desired perfection, it is tempted to ask what can be the value of its life made up of small duties, insignificant sacrifices and petty fights against humiliating temptations? It is true that cloisters are not peopled with souls who have already reached the heights of perfection, but it is also true that there are many who tend towards this perfection with generosity and often heroic effort, and these are powerful over the heart of God in the very measure of their impotence. A soul that cannot pretend to the favours of a bride can yet ask for the favours of a child. If the contemplative does not slacken nor become discouraged he gives God what he holds most dear—a soul to fill—a thirst to quench. God loves the poor and he meets them in the souls empty of all but that which his grace has placed therein. In prayer—so often dry and empty—the contemplative sees his destitution before God's riches, his foulness before his purity, his emptiness before his fulness. Recognising and accepting this state, confiding in God alone, he is thrown into God's arms for him to use as he wills. And one of the principal means by which God uses such a soul for others is found in the sense of identification with sinners, as our Lord allowed his innocence to be identified with iniquity; and thus the contemplative is able in his solitude and depths of weakness and imperfection, to fill up that which is wanting in the Passion of Christ for his Body which is the Church.

To suffer divine things—*pati divina*—to be associated with Christ in his sufferings, is indeed a divine thing; a drama lived out in adoration. Men have said that the cloister sterilises the heart. On the contrary, purified and supernaturally strengthened, the heart of the contemplative becomes more tender and gains in delicacy and depth. The drama in which he is an actor is as limitless as humanity and the love of God for man. To this Love the contemplative soul carries all the sorrows and loves of earth that they may be healed and purified.

It is significant to read in the Encyclical *Umbratilem* of the Pope of the missions and Catholic Action these words: 'It is easy to understand that those whose earnest zeal and fervour vow them to prayer and penance contribute more to the progress of the Church than the active workers in the Lord's field for if the former did not

obtain from heaven an abundance of divine grace to water the fields the evangelical workers would reap but a scanty harvest.

Contemplatives are witnesses to the pre-eminence of the supernatural in a world that has lost the sense of God. Thanks to their testimony the sovereignty of God is re-affirmed together with his mercy which makes friends of his servants. They are the children of light who show the way to heaven to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death. The world today considers it an unnecessary luxury to praise and love God though all inanimate creation sings his glory. The contemplative re-establishes the equilibrium and prevents man, who considers himself sufficient unto himself, from being swallowed up in chaos.

There is one who is the supreme example of the fruitfulness of the contemplative life—Mary the Mother of God, the Queen of Apostles and Refuge of sinners. For every contemplative she is the perfect model. She ever bears the weight of men's sorrows and loves all mankind with an Immaculate Heart. In the silence of her soul, the abnegation of her hidden life and the sweet daring of her *Fiat*, the contemplative learns his power over the Heart of God. Through Mary, with Mary, he works and prays and suffers for the souls who are ever crying in this vale of tears for happiness that can only be found in the Fruit of Mary's womb—Jesus.

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