

hundred years, always ready to step into the breach when some new initiative was called for. They have concentrated on middle-class and special schools because here the need was greatest, and today they direct eleven grammar schools, two secondary modern schools, and ten Home Office Approved Schools, as well as one of the country's two Catholic Training Colleges for men. As the crowning glory of their contribution to the civic life of the country they can count among their alumni a Lord Mayor of London, Sir William Dunn, a Mayor of Westminster, Sir John Gatti, and a Chairman of the London County Council, Sir John Gilbert. But the Brothers are surely no less proud of a tribute paid in the name of the Home Secretary to one of their members who had devoted his life to the work in Approved Schools: 'It is impossible to overestimate the value of that form of service to society which lies in reclaiming boys from a course of conduct that leads to crime'.<sup>6</sup>

The domestic centre of the centenary celebrations will be St Joseph's College, Beulah Hill, the lineal successor of Netherton House. But the high-light will be the Solemn High Mass in Westminster Cathedral, sung by Bishop Siedle with the Cardinal presiding, and in the presence of the Apostolic Delegate, a number of bishops, and Her Majesty's Minister of Education, on May 24th. In such a gathering for such an act, may we not see the symbol and source of past achievement and a confident pledge of future success? *Non nobis, Domine, non nobis, sed nomini tuo da gloriam. Ad multos annos!*



## THE PARISH VISITORS OF MARY IMMACULATE

A. J. REILLY

ONE of the marks of the living Church is its ability to inspire leaders in every age especially fitted to meet the needs of the age. Never has there been a time when the spiritual soil was so infertile that it was unable to produce valiant

<sup>6</sup> *The De La Salle Brothers in Great Britain*, p. 59.

men and women to answer the challenge of the world. In the past there was a St Dominic, a St Francis, a St Teresa. In later centuries there were names like Pernet and Hecker and Rice. And these are but a few of the thousands from the time of St Paul to our own day raised by God as leaders in their own particular day and hour.

Against this background of inspired leadership we are inclined to think that our own age, especially the years since the end of the first world war, are barren indeed. We see only spiritual aridity, the noxious weed of materialism run riot. Yet in this, our own age, was born the idea embodied in the Legion of Mary, now a worldwide institution, the Medical Missionaries of Mary, the Parish Visitors of Mary Immaculate, these last amid the unrestrained pleasure-seeking of the hectic nineteen-twenties in the United States where, the superficial observer would say, no spiritual seed could take root.

Changing conditions of life, war's aftermath, rapidly growing cities with their shifting populations were all tending to weaken the ties that bind souls to God. In the vast rural areas served with so great difficulty before the advent of the motor car many families had all but forgotten their Catholic beginnings. There were also countless immigrants whose language difficulties cut them off from the Church. All these strayed sheep must be sought and returned to the fold. This was the challenge of the age of pleasure. It was answered by the Parish Visitors of Mary Immaculate, the fruit of one young woman's preoccupation with Christ's command, 'Feed my sheep'.

Mother Mary Teresa Tallon, foundress of the Parish Visitors, conceived the idea of reaching these scattered sheep through a parish census. It may be objected that this was nothing new, that priests have been taking census of their parishioners since there have been parishes. But there is a difference. Mother Tallon did not propose to take a census of the *parishioners*, but of the *parish*: that is, to visit every house and family within the parish area regardless of their known religious status.

To convince the proper authorities of the reasonableness of her idea and to obtain the co-operation of parish priests were the first steps, which, as in all foundations, were not easy. Nevertheless, when the work is of God the obstacles give way. Mother Tallon's plan was simple and practical. On the invitation of the

parish priest the Parish Visitors would go into a parish and make a house-to-house visitation collecting the usual data necessary for the administration of the parish and at the same time seeking the straying.

I distinctly recall my first contact with the Parish Visitors. I was sharing an apartment with two friends in one of New York's big apartment houses—each a little village in itself. One day I answered the bell to find two nuns at the door. I regarded them a bit suspiciously at first. Their habit was entirely unfamiliar, and—well, it was New York where anything could happen.

'We are Parish Visitors', said one with a friendly smile. 'The Reverend Pastor has invited us to take a census of the parish. Are there any Catholics here?'

'We're all Catholics', I answered, which seemed to please the sisters. Then followed the usual census questions and the sisters took their leave. When my friends returned we discussed briefly the novelty of having nuns take a parish census and then forgot the incident.

Much later I learned how small a part of the picture I had seen. The Parish Visitors are religious, trained in the contemplative life. They are also professional social workers, family counsellors and trained catechists. Their formal preparation requires three years, but to the end of their lives they continue learning, learning to sense the burdens, sorrows and problems of souls bereft of grace, learning to depend on their patroness, Mary Immaculate, in their search for souls, learning every day to trust God more and themselves less.

When invited into a parish they literally knock at every door in the parish area. If a door fails to open they go again and even again until, at last, the blessed Mother manages to open the door for them to enter as messengers of her divine Son. Frequently their greatest work is done where doors open reluctantly for their introductory question means much more than I had imagined when I first heard it. It means really, 'Are there any troubled souls here, souls seeking grace, souls bereft of peace?' It means this and more.

Their training as family counsellors plus the inspiration of the Holy Ghost helps them to detect the momentary hesitancy, the slight uncertainty of tone, the quick shadow passing across a face. The harsh, blunt 'No', need not be accepted always as the

final word. Met with a smile and a warm 'Thank you', it often weakens to 'Well—er—that is', whereupon the Sisters go into action, as it were. They would say, however, that our Lady goes into action. They only follow her commands like well-trained soldiers.

Sometimes it is a Catholic away from the sacraments so long that he has almost forgotten he is a Catholic. Sometimes it is a soul darkened by prejudice or hatred or one struggling blindly to the light. Sometimes it is a marriage that has to be made right, a matter of personal pique or merely carelessness. For many non-Catholics it is their first contact with Catholic nuns or religious, and they are touched by the warmth, the human kindness, the understanding and genuine sympathy of these hitherto strange creatures. Often the Parish Visitors receive greatly appreciated help from the non-Catholic homes they visit. 'No, we're not Catholics here, but my brother's wife' (or 'my daughter's husband' or 'the lodger' or 'the family next door') 'belong to your Church.' This information all too frequently is followed by the qualification, 'They don't go to church much.'

The work of the Parish Visitors is for no particular class. Often the rich are in as great need of spiritual alms as the poor. Their sympathy and advice, as well as their prayers, are given as freely to the non-Catholic as to their co-religionist. Their work lies wherever the spiritual soil needs tending. Often it requires much tact and patience, many wearisome visits and incessant prayers. The joy, when the task is accomplished, is three-fold. It fills the hearts of the Sisters, it radiates from the returned soul and echoes in heaven.

Working now in nine dioceses in the United States they have proven their worth as seekers of lost sheep, whether in the large city parishes with their heterogeneous populations and veritable babel of tongues, or in rural areas with their vastly different problems. They are diviners and their rod is grace.

Daily appeals for the help of the Parish Visitors come to Mother Tallon's desk from all over the country and even from outside. An army of millions, instead of hundreds, would seem unable to cope with the needs, and Mother Tallon envisages even greater need when the Iron Curtain is raised. She is not worried, however. She knows that God will send the workers. Meantime, as she looks out from the lovely hilltop in Monroe, New York,

where the Mother House is situated, over the vast field of the world, she begs her friends to join the Sisters in their prayers for vocations and still more vocations, that none of the straying sheep may be lost.



## CONSCIENCE<sup>1</sup>

BEDE JARRETT, O.P.

**I**N guiding ourselves in the way of our Blessed Lord, we have to a certain extent to be left to our own conscience and we can't put on to the shoulders of any one else the decision. Obedience settles much in religion, but there must always be a margin over 'when?'. A number of things in the spiritual life are left to our own judgment, decision and prudence, details outside obedience, where authority may not or cannot enter. A vast region lies under our own rule. To guide this we have a faculty that goes by the name of conscience. It is not the voice of God, not like God whispering; it is a moral faculty. We have born in us the musical faculty. Now that is part of us, it can be trained well or ill, made to choose that which is best in music or less good; also the faculty of speech, we can speak well or ill, pronounce our words well or not. Just such a faculty is our conscience, the power of selecting what is good or what is ill. Though born with us, much depends on our education: you can teach a child almost anything you will. The human mind can be educated. Conscience is our moral faculty for telling moral right from wrong and it is infallible when properly trained. We cannot tell ourselves that we are right because our conscience allows us, we know from experience that our conscience can lose the power of judging truly. Our fingertips are sensitive, but if we burn them the skin hardens and they lose their sensitiveness. Sin has the same effect on our conscience. At one time our conscience would have been very clamorous over certain of our acts, now it is deadened, or the other way round. Some people

<sup>1</sup> From notes taken during a retreat to religious.