

QUID RETRIBUAM DOMINO?

BY

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IN an old number of 'Punch', in those days a very anti-Catholic paper, there was a picture of a small child about five: 'Gran'ma', she says, 'please I want to be a nun'. 'Good gracious, child, whatever has put such a dreadful idea into your head?' 'Well, you see, Gran'ma, I've found the world is very hollow; even my doll is stuffed with sawdust—so please, I should like to be a nun.'

This early Victorian idea of a nun has unfortunately not yet died out. To many, even now, she appears as a disappointed, not too happy creature, who has somehow lost her way in the world. Many, even good Catholics who are ready to admire the active Orders who teach and nurse (God bless them!) regard the life of an enclosed contemplative religious as 'pure waste of life', and do not hesitate to say so. This attitude, we hope, is the result of ignorance rather than of malice. They do not know anything about it, still less do they understand. They do not understand the distinction between a career and a vocation. A young girl starting life may freely choose a career to occupy her till she gets married or even after. She may choose to be a lady doctor, or a missionary, or a writer. It is her own choice and if she does not like it, she is free to change.

Now, with one who enters religion, it is quite different—her life is not *her* choice, but a response to the choice of God; calling her into it by what we call a vocation. 'You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you', is as true of every religious today as when our Lord said it to the Apostles. 'I have loved thee with an everlasting love; therefore have I drawn thee.' And the soul so called is free to refuse, there is no force. But by the aid of divine grace she accepts. 'Thou shalt call and I will answer thee.' 'Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth.' She accepts joyfully; Why is she called rather than another? That is God's secret. Every vocation has been in the mind of God from all eternity, revealed in due time to the chosen one—*Quid retribuam Domino*, for so great a gift? Henceforth she lives in ever increasing gratitude for it.

When a girl is about to enter a convent her relations begin talking about 'escapism', an ugly modern word which implies that she

does so in order to avoid the duties and responsibilities, the difficulties and sorrows which a woman in the world has to meet, and to live a selfish and idle life in comparative comfort. Does she really escape all disagreeable things? By no means. She leaves her loved home and all the family dear to her. She gives up everything to possess nothing, not even the habit she wears. She renounces the possibility of a happy home of her own. She gives her health, her strength, all the faculties of body and all the talents bestowed upon her—she gives herself to the Divine Master. True, all is his already, but in his love he deigns to receive them as her gifts and he blesses them a hundredfold, even in this life. The religious has to face many things hard to human nature; for example, fasting and the other penitential exercises of the Order—the midnight rising, even in the depth of winter, long Offices sung in the cold early morning, the deprivation of many comforts and conveniences and many desirable and perfectly innocent pleasures, to embrace a life of obedience, which is not always pleasant. She gives up her freedom and her will into the hands of another. Yet all these things she receives with joy, because she regards them as so many splinters from the Cross of her divine Lord, and offering them in union with the sufferings of his Passion, she feels they become an infinitesimal share in the salvation of mankind.

Does she lead an idle life? All religious Orders insist on *work* of some sort as a point of their Rule. The Dominican Constitutions are very clear on this subject. The nun does not live for herself, every moment of her time is usefully employed. She has her appointed time for rest and recreation, but never for idleness. She must pass on to others the 'fruit of her contemplation'. Her union with God, whatever its degree, she must share with others. Her influence goes out to all around her, even beyond the convent walls. For though enclosed, a fervent community exercises a distinct influence on its neighbourhood—'No man liveth for himself', says St Paul.

'But what *can* you find to do in a convent?' is sometimes asked. Well, first and foremost there is the 'Work of God', the *Opus Dei*, which with the other spiritual exercises of the community occupies a considerable part of the day. That is what she is here for: 'To sing the praises of God by day and by night'.

Secondly, study of Holy Scripture, of the Liturgy, of the spiritual life, of the writings of the Fathers, the plain chant, also literary work, translating, etc.

Thirdly, manual work. All the cookery and washing to be done—and the housework as well as much gardening. And for those who

are too old or too weak for heavy tasks, there is no end of needle-work—all the clothing of the community to be made, then vestments for poor missions or those abroad.

Montalembert in the volume of *Monks of the West* on the Anglo-Saxon nuns tells us that their beautiful embroidery was famous even on the Continent. This tradition still lingers in English religious houses and there are some highly-skilled workers in this particular art, as well as in painting and illuminating. No talent is wasted.

And if the nun has the happiness of a Dominican vocation, what a field of work opens before her. Of course, the chief apostolic work is the preaching of the Friars—but the Preacheresses have a sort of second-hand share even in this work for do they not, by day and by night, invoke the aid of the Holy Spirit on the preaching and teaching of the Brethren? A Dominican Father, now gone to his reward, used to relate how an old laybrother, past work and nearly blind, used to make it his special business to pray for *him* and *his* Retreats and Missions, and he always attributed any success from them, under God, to the prayers of his humble co-adjutor. And the same may be said for other religious Orders which combine active religious with contemplative.

'But such a monotonous life', some say, 'How can you live it?' Monotony is unknown in religious houses. The cycle of the Liturgical Year supplies an endless variety of spiritual thoughts, no two days are exactly alike and no one would realise how many incidents occur unexpectedly to enliven the recreation time.

It is not an easy life, no use to disguise the fact, especially when the first elasticity of youth is past. It has to be lived with an enthusiasm born of *love*. Such a vocation is an inexhaustible treasure. The longest life is too short to give thanks—'Misericordias Domini in aeternum cantabo'.

CHRISTMAS CARDS

Every year we have occasion to notice and recommend the Christmas cards of A. P. Westbrook, and every year he has a wider selection to offer his customers. There are styles for every taste, there are even cards for Scouts and Guides; and all are concerned with the Event which the sending of cards and greetings celebrates. Among the new designs we find those of Doris Pailthorpe, Austin Molloy, J. Upton, W. J. Kesterton and Brenda Rutherford. The prices range from 1½d. to 2s. each; envelopes are supplied with some of the cards; and over-printing is also undertaken. These cards will be very welcome at this season, and readers may write to A. P. Westbrook, 11 Dorset Road South, Bexhill. C.O.P.