

## THE LITTLE BROTHERS OF JESUS

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**N**OBODY who passes by that shabby little house in a back street in the poorest quarter of the fishing port of Concarneau would suspect that two rooms on its first floor make up the 'monastery' of a small contemplative religious community. None of the many summer visitors to what is also a popular Breton holiday resort would ever guess that the four young men, garbed as labourers or fishermen, who might be noticed entering or leaving this house are professed religious, following a rule of life which, in its own way, is as strict as and perhaps harder than that of Carthusian or Cistercian monks.

One of these Little Brothers of Jesus was waiting for me at the barrier of Concarneau station when I arrived there on a July evening this summer. I managed to spot him in the crowd because of a small badge, composed of a red cross and heart, pinned on to the much washed open-necked khaki shirt he was wearing. He strapped my suit-case on to his bicycle, and we left the station, making our way through the less frequented part of the town until we reached a three-storied house. 'I have got a room for you in with one of our neighbours', he explained, 'but if you prefer to share our life and live with us, we shall be very glad to make you at home.' As I was anxious to see as much as possible of this Brotherhood of which I had heard so much, I had no hesitation in accepting the invitation.

We went upstairs and entered a medium-sized room. 'This is where we live', the Brother remarked as I looked around. Never in all my more than forty years' experience of religious communities, active and contemplative, Catholic and Anglican, had I ever been in a 'monastery' which was so expressive of the spirit of Holy Poverty. This one room appeared to serve as scullery, kitchen, refectory, library, calefactory and dormitory. In one corner was a camp-bed; in another corner three wooden bunks on top of the other. It might have been the living-room of any poor French working-class family. It was rather overcrowded with furniture, but everything was scrupulously clean. The Brother (who stays at home and looks after the domestic affairs of the community)

told me that I could sleep on the camp-bed, and while I unpacked a few things, he put on some clean sheets. Then he started to prepare supper. Adjoining this living and sleeping-room was the tiny chapel. I was amazed at the beauty of its furnishings, but the Brother explained that they had been designed specially by an architect who is responsible for the fittings of all the chapels of the Little Brothers of Jesus. The altar took the form of an old Breton oak chest. On it was a tabernacle in the shape of a carved oak fish resting in a chalice, with a rope round the base. Draped over this unconventional tabernacle was a transparent white silk veil. Behind the altar hung a fishing-net. The only other decorations were a small carved oak statue of the Sacred Heart, and a curious set of Stations of the Cross. The sanctuary lamp was one of those glass balls attached to trawl-nets, into which a small electric bulb has been inserted.

After supper, when we had washed-up the dishes, the Brother and myself recited Compline together in French, because he explained that he did not know much Latin. Then we said good-night. I got into the camp-bed, and he retired to one of the bunks. As I lay awake I could hear the voices of the family on the floor above, and of those down below.

The following morning, after we had recited Lauds, we walked to the parish church for an early Mass. During the course of the next two days the three other Brothers returned to their 'monastery'. Each of them had been at sea, working as deck-hands in local trawlers, fishing off the coasts of Ireland. With no apparent effort the four young men resumed the normal observances of community life; keeping silence for the greater part of the day (except for matters of business), reciting the Day Hours of the Roman Breviary in the chapel; making an hour's daily adoration of the Blessed Sacrament; reading, writing, and taking their share in domestic duties. We talked at meals, and I asked many questions about the spirit and history of their Community.

The '*Petits Frères de Jésus*' were founded at El-Abiodh-Sidi-Cheik, in the heart of the Sahara beyond the Atlas Mountains in 1933, seventeen years after Père de Foucauld had laid down his life as a martyr, when shot by some natives. Again and again he had tried to form a community of men in the North African deserts who would live a contemplative life of prayer and manual labour in the midst of native people, and in intimate contact with

them, but the rules he composed were so severe, surpassing even the Trappist Constitutions in the way of bodily austerities, that he never managed to get any men to remain with him for long. After his death his disciples did not forget the ideals he had set before them. Thus it was that the first Fraternity of the Little Brothers of Jesus was formed on somewhat less penitential lines. Within less than twenty years their members have grown to close on a hundred. There are today over a dozen Fraternities in different parts of the world: three in North Africa, the rest in France, Syria, the Cameroons, South America and in other countries. They are seldom composed of more than six religious, and are grouped according to regions; the Institute itself is ruled by a Prior-General. A revised version of the Rule was approved by the Holy See in 1950. Postulants are tested in a country house at Montbard, between Paris and Dijon, and in one or other of the working fraternities. The general novitiate is at El Abiodh-Sidi-Cheik (Sud Oranais). It is worth mentioning that permission has been received from Rome for the Sahara itself to be regarded as the 'novitiate enclosure'. This vast extension of territory enables the novices to leave El Abiodh and make the long journey across the desert to visit the tomb of Père de Foucauld at Beni-Abbès, and to acquire the habits and customs of the nomad desert tribes. After the year's novitiate each Brother is sent to one or other of the smaller Fraternities to earn his living by manual or other type of labour. Perpetual vows are not taken until after three years, in some cases not until after six years, of temporary profession. Those Brothers who are going on to the priesthood study under the Dominican Fathers at Saint-Maximin in Provence.

No distinction is made between priests and lay-Brothers. All are equal and observe the same Rule. To safeguard the spirit of poverty, only the fraternities of formation are allowed to accept gifts of money or to beg. Elsewhere the Brothers have to support themselves on what they earn.

It was always the wish of Père de Foucauld that the community of Brothers he dreamed of and prayed for should be '*Frères universels*'; that they should spread all over the world and 'go native', not only with the tribes of North Africa, but with the poorer classes of any other country. So today we find his disciples living like the Arabs and natives of the Sahara; indistinguishable from the workmen in factories in France; labouring as masons,

house-painters, joiners, electricians, navvies, etc., or employed in chemical, textile and iron-works, and in petrol refineries. Some of them have shared in the toil of dock labourers in seaports. Three years ago the Bishop of Quimper asked the Brothers to establish a maritime fraternity in Concarneau so that they might become fishermen. This far-sighted Bishop has such faith in this silent and hidden apostolate that he has since formed another Fraternity in his diocese where three Brothers work as farm-servants.

The ideal of the Little Brothers of Jesus is to imitate the hidden life of our Lord in the carpenter's shop at Nazareth: to live according to the Gospel precepts; poor among the poor, consecrated to God by their religious vows, so that they can spread the message of divine love where there is hatred and divisions, to break down class and racial distinctions. They live like the poorest of the poor. Their religious habit is merely the ordinary clothes of the working classes wherever they may find themselves. They neither preach nor teach, nor do they engage in active works of charity as are undertaken by other religious communities. What they aim at is the infiltration of divine charity into the mass of humanity by the example of their own lives.

The chapel is always the heart of each fraternity, even in places where it is not possible for the Brothers to have Mass frequently. Since they are under no canonical obligation to recite the Divine Office either in choir or individually, except those who are in major orders, they regard the Breviary as the most obvious form of vocal prayer rather than a burden imposed on them by the Church. Thus the Divine Office is recited either in whole or in part, in Latin or in the language of the country.<sup>1</sup> A French translation of the Day Hours has been prepared and mimeographed copies bound up for use by those Brothers who are not familiar with Latin. The Office is recited slowly and reverently, but with none of the ceremonial trimmings which are commonly supposed to go with St Benedict's injunction that 'nothing is to be preferred to the work of God'. Just a few men, dressed in lay clothes, gathered together in a small room—no choir-stalls, no plainchant, no organ.

1. The Brothers 'go native' not only in dress and in habits of life, but also in liturgy. Those living in the Near East have adopted one or other of the Oriental Rites. In some African fraternities the Office is recited in Arabic.

The daily hour of adoration before the Blessed Sacrament, with Exposition in the larger Fraternities, is the other source of the spiritual life of the Little Brothers. On one night each week, generally on Thursday or Friday, they make an extra hour of adoration in their chapels. What strikes one about the Rule and observances is their extreme simplicity and common-sense. Père de Foucauld—unlike the founders and foundresses of so many French religious communities—hated formalism and rigidity. His disciples have acquired a rare spirit of adaptability and broad-mindedness: a firm hold on the essentials of the religious life, but an indifference to its non-essentials.

I have tried to explain already that the Little Brothers are contemplative rather than active religious, even if they live and work in such close contact with the world. Each of those three Brothers who go to sea as deck-hands in trawlers manages to fit in time to recite his Office and to make the daily hour of adoration. How they do so is beyond the comprehension of anybody who knows from personal experience what are the conditions of a small deep-sea fishing vessel. But each of them told me that unless it were possible they could not continue this hard and brutal existence amid shipmates who, in most cases, are semi-pagans or non-practising Catholics whose religion consists in little more than a profound belief in superstitions. Several priests in France had assured me that the Little Brothers at Concarneau had 'found the true formula of the Sea Apostolate', and I incline to agree with them, although I doubt if many Catholics in English-speaking countries would take the same line. But the Little Brothers are merely following the same formula for the re-conversion of the world to Christ, although in a more whole-hearted manner, since they are professed religious, as are the priest-workmen and the seaman-priests of modern France.

During the week that I was the guest of the maritime Fraternity I often had the feeling that I was living with our Lord and his apostles beside the Sea of Galilee; the whole thing was the nearest approach to the religion of the New Testament that I have ever come across. Such happy Little Brothers: so natural, so unaffected, so simple and so deeply spiritual. There was absolutely nothing of that meticulous insistence on petty regulations and trivial details. One just slipped into the life and thought nothing about it.

When one has long since grown accustomed to associating the

purely contemplative life for men with picturesque medieval accessories and accepting without question pre-Reformation or post-Tridentine accretions to the original Rules of the Orders, the red-tape of Constitutions which have been elaborated in the course of succeeding centuries, it was a shock to find oneself in a new form of the contemplative life which has thrown overboard most if not all those external features which are now regarded as essential, leaving little more than the bare bones and the spirit. I wondered if these Little Brothers (not forgetting the Little Sisters who observe much the same rule and who are multiplying as rapidly) have planted a tiny seed which may yet revolutionise the contemplative life in the Catholic Church, growing into a tree of a species which is quite different to those around us.

For as Mr L. C. Sheppard pointed out in an article which appeared in *LIFE OF THE SPIRIT* (August, 1947, p. 71): 'in place of the absence of exterior activity, the separation from the world, we find a contemplative life lived in the hurly-burly of the daily tasks of ordinary folk. Their spirituality, their rule teaches the *Petits Frères* to treat as the means of union with God those very things that have in the past been so often regarded as obstacles. The fraternities are contemplative, not because they establish their members in an exterior state conducive to contemplation but because they have at their disposition the required means for the end in view: a eucharistic life, fraternal charity, immolation of self, work. So may be formed the contemplative life in the soul; it is a real and continuing education. Such is this school of sanctity.'

They try so hard to be hidden and unknown that I am not quite sure if I am doing right to advertise them in this article. Publicity of any sort is the last thing they desire. Those young men I met might easily have been mistaken for farm-servants or fishermen, except that there was something different beneath the surface difficult to define. Maybe this 'something' was the presence in them of the spirit of the Beatitudes? Or was it what our Lord meant when he said: 'It is fire that I have come to spread over the earth, and what better wish can I have that it should be kindled?'<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> For further details concerning the history, life and spirit of the *Petits Frères de Jésus*, see Fr René Voillaume's *Les Fraternités du Père de Foucauld*, and *Au Cœur des Messes*, both published by Les Editions du Cerf (Blackfriars Publications, 34 Bloomsbury St, W.C.1.). Periodical reports of the growth of the Little Brothers are given in the *Bulletin Fraternité Charles de Foucauld* (Secretariat: 'La Source', Dampierre, Seine-et-Oise).