

CORRESPONDENCE

'THE CHALLENGE FROM THE CLOISTER'

TO THE EDITOR, LIFE OF THE SPIRIT

Sir,—The 'challenge from inside the cloister', of the May issue p. 556, certainly demands serious consideration, and the contemplative in the world will not wish to argue *against* your Carmelite correspondent. But is he not misled by the fact that the classics of the contemplative life, especially in his own Order, are admittedly written to or for enclosed Religious? It does not follow that the teaching has no meaning in the world.

'The Carmelite life' is obviously impossible in the world. Enclosure is of its essence, and the evangelical Counsels are inconsistent in their fulness with a secular occupation. But such occupation needs not be pre-occupation. God may give a definite vocation in the world not only to the practice of contemplative prayer (with the whole transformation of character and outlook that is likely to follow); but also to its practice at the cost of deprivation of normal activity or recreation, which is at least the secular equivalent of the 'stripping'. It is hardly for a religious, or for a secular, to speculate on the other's obedience. 'What is that to thee. . . .?'

But I would venture one other consideration. In the present vast enmity of the world towards God, the contemplative intercessor may well be called to bear with special intensity the 'contradiction of sinners'. He is in actual contact—as is his business—and he cannot find the shelter of the cloister, even though he may not know its peculiar conflicts. He lives *in* threatened Europe: he lives *in* the materialism of the Welfare State: he lives *in* the conscious destruction of human personality. The enclosure may know these facts by direct knowledge through the Spirit. The intercessor in the world knows them, however, with another actuality. He may be given, for a time and in the heat of the battle, the respite of a brief shelter within some community. But he is there as a guest—as an oblate at best—and he must return of necessity to the actual warfare. His contemplative vocation seems to be bound up with those very conditions. He is compelled *there* to reverse the evil will, and to make an oblation of its pain. He is called *there* to do what his unknown brother or sister is doing—perhaps in greater perfection (God knoweth) but in another way.—Yours, etc.,

ERIC HAYMAN

Sir,—The act of contemplation is the pure love of God and as such gives him greater glory, and is consequently of more value to the Church, than any other act. It cannot, therefore, be 'a pity that so much is made of the contemplative life in the world today'. The fact that today God often gives a vocation to the contemplative life without the possibility of entering the contemplative state indicates, I would suggest, not that those called are to abandon their vocation, but that God wishes them to follow it in the world. God is not hampered by surroundings, though we may often think so, and he is perfectly able to adapt his means to circumstances. The process of 'stripping' takes a different form in the world, but it is there just the same.

Perhaps the greatest trial of would-be contemplatives who are not enclosed is the intense and crucifying loneliness that comes from a separation from all the aids supplied by the contemplative state. They have often to live completely devoid of any apparent support. Instead of the companionship and mutual support of community life, they may live among people with an entirely different set of values to whom God is no more than a name. Instead of the abiding Presence of the Blessed Sacrament in the house, they may live a long way from a church and be unable to go often to Mass. In country districts they may not even have a church. The enclosed contemplative has ample time for prayer, the greater part of his life is passed in silence and recollection; the contemplative in the world has hardly any free time and an almost total lack of privacy and silence—this can be, at times, an almost unbearable cross. The religious has the opportunity of the best spiritual direction; the layman has often no director, no one to whom he can open his heart, no one to advise or even encourage him. All he has is an intense longing for God which nothing less than God can ever satisfy, and a feeling that God desires the gift of his whole self and will be content with nothing less. . . .

It is for the support and encouragement of these souls that some of the Third Orders have been founded, so that when your correspondent says that it is impossible to live a Carmelite life in the world I think she is wrong, for this is precisely what the Carmelite Tertiary is required to do. The life of any Religious Order is its Spirit, and the Code of Canon Law states that 'Secular Tertiaries are those who in the world, under the direction of any Order, endeavour to attain Christian perfection *according to its spirit* in a manner suited to secular life according to rules approved for them by the Apostolic See'. (*italics mine.*) Furthermore, in the directions to members of the First Order—I am speaking now of Carmelites (Discalced)—we read, 'The object of our Third Order is the same as that of our Order (in general), that is, primarily it is the contemplative life, and secondarily, as

springing from and overflowing from the primary, it is the active life. The aim, therefore, of each director should be to foster in the Third Order by every means at hand that double spirit of the Order, the spirit of Saints Teresa and John of the Cross.'

Surely what is true of Carmelites also holds good for other Orders whose priests, by sermons, retreats and other apostolic labours, strive to instil into the souls of men and women living in the world the spirit of their Order, and to gather under its sheltering wings all in whose hearts that spirit lives. . . .—Yours, etc.,

RHODA MADDOCKS

Sir,—You publish a challenge from within the cloister as to the possibility of living a contemplative life in the world.

Is it not possible to look at it in this way? All are called to perfection. As members of Christ we are committed to living Christ-like lives.

Perfection lies in perfectly fulfilling our function in the divine economy, as religious or roadsweepers, and this we are well aware we cannot do of ourselves. When we pray 'thy will be done', we ask for God's help to achieve our vocation, and he takes us at our word, and 'strips' us according to our circumstances—the lay person quite differently to, but none the less thoroughly than, the religious.

If we aim to fulfil our function perfectly we must grow 'unto the manner of a full-grown man in Christ Jesus our Lord', and be able to say: 'now I live; yet not I. Christ liveth in me'. We have to learn to clutch nothing to ourselves; all is in fact God's and we hold it in trusteeship. We are not more than the housemaids of God! This is hard in any circumstances, yet Christ in a man may accomplish it.

Surely the whole of life is summed up for religious and laity alike in the Mass, which is in a sense the Gospel for today. Here we meet the continuing stream of the Incarnation where it penetrates our lives. We offer our Lady's *fiat* in the bread and the wine . . . His presence must become an all-pervading reality in our lives until we are 'hid with Christ in God', the jumble of our self-possessiveness cleared away, so that he may live in sole possession of our lives. Our need is then to know him and we are promised that 'all shall know me, from the least to the greatest'.

It is a Carmelite, Sister Elisabeth of the Trinity, who teaches so urgently the doctrine of the divine indwelling, and she teaches it to her young married sister living in the world.—Yours, etc.,

ELISABETH PAUL