

THE TRUE BASIS OF RELIGIOUS LIFE

*(Continued)*¹

BY

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III—*The application of this doctrine to the practice of religious observances and obedience.*

THERE only remains to apply this doctrine to the two great questions of religious life, which seem to constitute the chief problem for modern souls, namely, the question of observances and of religious obedience.

Observances

In the widest sense, we mean by observances the obligations of a religious rule; in a narrower sense they are penitential and restrictive practices. Père Lemonnyer called them, 'The means of the means', and, according to St Thomas, they are subordinate to the vows. It must be admitted, however, that monastic tradition has given them a capital importance and they formed an essential part of all ancient rules. The religious leaves the world to do penance and, in the course of time, three things have come to be considered as essential among the various obligations of religious life, namely, poverty, chastity, and obedience, and to form the direct subject of the vows; perhaps the reason why there is no explicit vow of penance is because its subject matter would be too vague, and, in any case, it is enough to have promised obedience to a penitential rule.

According to St Thomas, corporal penance is ordained for the furtherance of the vow of chastity. It may seem rather narrow to limit the whole system of monastic penance to this one vow; but on looking more deeply into the matter, we can see that the vow of chastity is intended to sacrifice the flesh in its very strongest desires: penance completes this sacrifice. It is this desire of immolating our bodies to God in order to possess him better, which dictates both the vow of chastity and the observances.

Moreover, these observances have a kind of symbolical value by the discipline they impose upon the body; and the restraining and spiritualising influence they have over the gestures and general deportment of the religious make it apparent, even exteriorly that he really is living each instant for God and is truly tending towards perfection. It is because they are such a beneficent and often really beautiful exterior manifestation of the true inward spirit of the religious state, that these observances are so much loved by those who adopt them; hence the danger, mentioned

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above, of making the means an absolute menace to the end, is especially true of this aspect of the religious life.

How can we be surprised that religious should sometimes fast and take the discipline, without relating these practices immediately to their proper end, when so many Christians go to Communion, to all practical intents and purposes, without knowing why they go? St Thomas takes great care to point out that the most perfect Order is neither the poorest nor the most penitential but the one whose penance and poverty are best adapted to the special end of that Order. Indeed, he does not even seem to contemplate the existence of an Order in which penance would be the proper means to arrive at charity. It is the aptness of the means to attain the end which is the measure of its worth. The greatness of Carmel does not lie in the rigour of its penance, but in the contemplation for which that rigour must prepare the soul and this contemplation itself draws its value from the charity which animates it and is, in turn, sustained by it. An individual who is depressed, instead of being uplifted by the observances of an Order, who, instead of finding them helpful in the search for God, is wearied out because of them, is not meant for that Order. And it has been found nowadays that certain rigid enactments, far from leading souls to contemplation, make it much more difficult for them; this being so, such enactments should be mitigated with the certainty that, although they were useful when first formulated, having ceased to be so, they are no longer according to the spirit of the founder.

What I have just written seems to need further explanation. The attachment of religious to their observances does not always spring from pride, or mere love of exterior works; indeed it often takes real heroism to love them and if ever the cultus of them should be called in question, where would the relaxation stop short? If ever we should have the misfortune to let go these observances, nature, only subdued with difficulty, will make its existence very much felt again, upsetting our whole religious life and even hindering us from tending towards charity. They are often specially suited to those natures which are the most difficult to restrain and the taste which such souls find for them is given, according to the general economy of the Divine Plan, to strengthen them at their weakest point.

One of the reasons why God has instituted the Sacraments, is, as St Thomas says, because man in sinning has, through his affections, brought himself under the dominion of corporal things, so a remedy had to be applied, suited to his wounds. It is wise for Superiors to consider the various observances as forming a single whole, of which no detail may be changed at the will of the religious, because the details are the essence of this type of rule.

But if the Church, who is alone qualified to do this, should decide that certain mitigations have become necessary in view of

the present day needs in matters of health and hygiene, or even on account of the physiological change of twentieth century man, this would in no way diminish the fervour of the Order, because done with the pure intention of maintaining it in its proper function, which is to lead souls to divine charity. Superiors are only giving proof of their intelligence and zeal if, seeing the danger of an unsuitable observance, they wisely interpret this in the way most conformable to its end; and it is their duty, in the name of the religious perfection for which they are responsible, to inform the higher authorities of the effect which the old monastic rules have on the young souls passing through their hands. I am sure that the essentials of the traditional observances will be found very well adapted to men and women of the present day, because charity, to develop in the soul, still needs austerity and a rigorous asceticism. But what will be the first to go are those customs which arose from desires, generous indeed, but rather excessive.

There does exist in souls vowed to a regular life a certain fatal tendency to multiply observances. Surely this tendency could find an outlet, over and above the intelligent practice of the observances, in the very wide field opened up by detachment of the heart, docility to the Holy Spirit, and, above all, in the practice of divine love by devotedness in those special works on whose account the Order of which one is a member has been officially recognised by the Church.

Authority and Obedience

This constant dwelling on the true end of religious life will lead to more changes in the field of authority and obedience than in that of observances. . . . It is easy enough to forget the end of obedience. Those who do this make of it the virtue of virtues, almost an end in itself, so long as it destroys neither the prudence nor the initiative due to charity: what is worse, they sometimes allow the creature whom they obey to hide God to whom alone they have vowed obedience. Whether it be attachment or repugnance, the sentiments a religious may feel for his Superior must not be confused with the submission due to him on account of his office, and this office itself is only reasonable when considered in its relation to the true end of religious life; namely, to lead souls to the state of perfect charity.

Happily, a good religious can count on the fact that God is leading him through his Superior, whatever the views and wishes of the latter may be; but the Superior must not trade on this fact and think that because of it he has any less responsibility. Indeed, why not acknowledge it at once that, up to a certain point, souls can suffer harm through incompetence on the part of authority. I am not speaking now of those superiors who, through having a too human end in view, forget that their duty is to lead their subjects to perfection; but rather of those who forget that perfection consists in charity, and charity is perfect freedom.

How does it come about that often religious souls are somewhat suppressed, timid, and fussy over details? St Thomas, in an important article of his treatise on states, calls the religious state the 'state of liberty'. It is according to whether one is a slave or free, that one is or is not in the state of perfection; and this is not a paradox but a fundamental truth. To forget it is to expose the religious state to all the criticisms levelled against it by Protestants. The religious loses his liberty to do evil, but also even to engage in anything that could turn him away from God; in this way he becomes free to give himself wholly to God alone and it is to gain this liberty that he detaches himself from any motive other than the love of God. Moreover, to ensure that this love be not merely a matter of words, he must go to God with a heart perfectly free, not allowing the constraints of religious life to stifle either his personality or the movements of grace in his soul. It is in this spirit that St Thomas interprets the disposition in the rule of the Order of Preachers, which asserts that normally the rule does not bind under pain of sin. Without this, he says, the condition of religious, by reason of the multiplicity of observances, would be the most perilous of all.

It is in connection with this same thing that St Catherine of Sienna said of the religion of St Dominic, that it is a 'garden of delights, wide, joyous, and perfumed'. Few among those charged with forming young religious venture to comment on this truth, for all that it is extremely important and has become customary in religious rules. It can only be discussed without danger of relaxation in the light of the doctrine we are trying to expound, namely, that the religious state is entirely organised in view of the law of love.

The Superior must be animated by this spirit in all his personal dealings with souls. He must only exercise such authority as is necessary to bring a soul to the perfection of charity. Taking into account the nature, disposition, and the amount of grace given by God to the soul, he must encourage it to spontaneity, self-confidence, and to that initiative from which alone comes the interior help of grace working upon the free-will. He must take care not to quench the spirit and uselessly to demand more than God himself demands. This method, however, is quite compatible with strictness, either for the individual good of a soul, or for the higher good of the community, when any relaxation of discipline, even in the interest of an individual, would bring about a deep and lasting injury. It is unquestionable that authority governed by and in view of charity will adapt itself more easily to modern souls who, while still needing to give up their own will, yet claim, even in the supernatural field, a greater freedom of self-expression.

I hope not to have wounded anyone by these outspoken pages. It must be said that the religious life instituted by God to lead souls to the perfection of charity, will not do so unconditionally.

We must not be afraid to face the fact that the monastic life is in profound contradiction not only to the vices of the present world but also to its mentality, its ideals and whole outlook; much more opposition is met with than formerly in those souls who give themselves to it. Modern men and women are thirsting more than ever for a rule of perfection and for a way of approaching God in common, and they understand the precept of love more easily than any other. It is enough to put this essential precept in its right place to bring out all the beauty and strength of such a life. If only religious take care not to lose sight of the 'one thing necessary' for which they have left everything, if only they come back to an ever purer, grander, and more arduous spiritual life, then many of the difficulties which seem so discouraging will disappear of themselves.

NOTE: Readers are encouraged to send in their views of the issues raised in this article, particularly regarding the practical judgments on the need of and capacities for the full religious life in our modern age. The Editor will make use of the views expressed as a discussion based on this important contribution.

THE HARVEST¹

A MEMORY

BY

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Do you not say: There are yet four months and then the harvest cometh? Behold I say to you, lift up your eyes and see the countries, for they are white already to the harvest. (John 4:35).

WE are living in the days of a great harvest. As I travelled here this afternoon, I looked out on the fields of standing corn, and my thoughts turned to our soldiers fighting today in the wheatfields of Normandy, the vineyards of Provence and the olive trees of Tuscany, where the corn, the grapes and the olives are ready to yield their harvest of wheat and wine and oil. *A fructu frumenti, vini et olei sui multiplicati sunt*, as the Psalmist sang so long ago, 'of the fruit of their corn and wine and oil have they been given increase.'

These soldiers of ours in the armoured vehicles of modern battle, as they pass the peasant toiling at his harvest, are themselves reaping today the relentless harvest of war that has at last been made possible by the work of shipyard, foundry and factory, and months of hard training and exercise.

Four years ago we were promised blood and toil, tears and sweat, hard effort and much suffering, before the harvest of war should be

¹A talk given at the Catholic service at the Army Exhibition, Glasgow, on Sunday, 20th August, 1944.