

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.

gathered. Our hearts quickened at the call, and our wills grew resolute to fulfil the harsh task in fields that then seemed so barren, while the storm blew hard in our faces. Our resolution and spirit are now bearing their fruit in these days of the harvest. Again the Psalmist's words come to mind: 'They that sow in tears shall reap in joy'; and yet in this harvesting of war blood and toil, pain and death, are still part of the sheaves we must gather in the field of battle.

The soldier, as he fights today close beside the peasant in the cornfield, will see the standing wheat severed from its living roots by the knives of the reaper. The grain from the sheaves must then be threshed from the stalk, separated from the chaff, ground to flour between the rollers of the mill, to give us bread. The tender grapes must be plucked from the vine, trampled in the vat by the feet of men to bring us wine. The olives must be crushed beneath the grinding stones to give us oil.

Face to face with the deep mystery of suffering and death, thousands of our soldiers in the harvest of war gather wounds and death from bomb, shell and bullet, or fall sick in the hot and steaming jungles of the Far East. While the peasant reaps and threshes his corn, living men are torn and crushed by the cutting of the knife and the pounding of the iron engines of war.

Sometimes we ask ourselves: 'What does this mean? Why should men suffer and die in this harvesting?'

Those of us who are Christians can understand a little, even if we cannot probe the mystery to its infinite depths. Do we not confess that the price of our own personal redemption was the blood which the Son of God shed for us on the Cross and the suffering he underwent in his Passion? The mysterious cycle of life was not broken by his death, but was renewed and bore its fruit in the Resurrection, in the life of Christ risen from the dead. Christ himself tells us: 'Amen, amen, I say to you, unless the grain of wheat falling into the ground die, itself remaineth alone. But if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.'

We are a living part of Christ's harvesting, the grains of wheat that must die and yet 'through him, with him and in him' bring forth much fruit. Each one of us, soldiers, fighting men, men, women and children, like the grain of Christ's wheat, must pass through death with him, that we may live with him. Suffering and pain we accept in his Spirit, when we offer it in union with his own Passion and Suffering. My work takes me into hospitals, where our wounded and sick soldiers are lying. Some of them look forward into months of treatment or even a lifetime of bodily disability; and yet these men—part of the harvest of war—rarely complain: on the contrary they carry with them full sheaves of patient courage and cheerfulness. How seldom one meets with real bitterness of spirit among them!

Today too we think of our chaplains, the priests with their men,

right up in the field of battle, in the aid posts and the hospitals, sharing the dangers and hardship of war with the men they serve. The chaplain carries with him, not the weapons of war and death, but the instruments of mercy and healing of spirit for wounded and stricken humanity. Materially he is unarmed; spiritually he is fully armed. What are these instruments of his craft? They are the fruit of the corn, the wine and the oil, the corn and the wine of the Eucharistic Sacrifice, to give to our men the Bread of Life and the fruits of Christ's Sacrifice on Calvary. Each chaplain has his portable altar, his pyx and his oilstock: the altar for the Sacrifice, the pyx to carry the Blessed Sacrament, the stock containing the oil of the olives, which the Bishop has consecrated on Holy Thursday, to anoint the failing bodies of wounded and dying men for the strengthening of their immortal souls. 'Of the fruit of their corn and wine have they been given increase.'

It is their privilege to be the harvesters of Christ, gathering the sheaves and gleaning the grain for Christ's harvest in the fields of battle. This morning many of us heard at Mass the story of the good Samaritan, who had no fear of danger, but stayed with the helpless man, pouring wine and oil into his wounds and carrying him to safety. That is the work of the chaplain in battle: he cannot pass by on the other side as the priest did in the parable. Some of our chaplains have been killed in action, others have died at their duty, many have been wounded side by side with their men in this work of the harvest.

Let me conclude with some words from a poem written by a great French Catholic, Charles Péguy. Péguy died on a day in early September thirty years ago, leading his men forward in battle at the victory of the Marne. He was killed instantly by a bullet and fell in a field of wheat ready for the harvest. Here are the words that he wrote a few months before he gave his life for France:

'Blessed are they who die in a just war.

Blessed is the wheat that is ripe and the wheat that is gathered into sheaves.'