

THE VALUE OF THE CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE

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MAN is naturally a social being. His interests in life, self-development, education, protection against enemies, safeguarding of health and the promotion of friendship, all demand that he live in society, and as a member of that society he has the obligations of promoting the common good, of furthering the interests of his fellowman. He is a cog in a machine, a part of an organism. Saint Paul pertinently applies this metaphor to the Church; we are members of Christ, drawing life from Him, deriving worth from Him, possessing unity of aim and diversity of function, exhibiting that combination of unity and variety which is the mark of an organism. The question arises; does one who withdraws from the world to become a member of a contemplative religious community fulfill his obligation to society? It must be admitted that even among some Catholics there exists a prejudice against the contemplative state. Many contend that its members are of little or no benefit to society, in fact, that their life is unsocial. And at first sight it might well appear to be so. It seems to be a selfish withdrawal of much-needed forces from the battlefield. It is a difficulty that occurs even to the most zealous and devout souls; for the very zeal of their own lives adds strength to the suggestion. They are bent on the service of others, and in this they are Christlike and apostolic. But a too ready acceptance of certain inadequate views about human society leads them to conclude that the contemplative life is an unsocial one.

Upon a deeper study of the subject, however, the incompleteness of this view becomes apparent. "The religious congregations," writes Leo XIII, "co-operate on a large scale in the mission of the Church, which consists essentially in the sanctification of souls and in doing good to men. . . . But it is not to the Church alone that the religious orders have from their first appearance rendered immense services: they have benefited also civil society itself. They have had the merit of preaching virtue to the multitude by the apostolate of good example, as well as by that of word of mouth, of form-

ing and adorning men's minds by the teaching of sacred and profane knowledge, and of enlarging the heritage of the fine arts by splendid works that will live."¹ It may be remarked here that we are not concerned with those religious congregations or orders which engage in active work; their educational institutions, not only grammar and high schools but also colleges, their hospitals, homes for the aged, orphan asylums and other charitable foundations, stand as living testimonies of their philanthropic and christian practice. The social value of these is evident. It should be remembered, moreover, that usually these establishments are maintained at no cost to the state, and that if they did not exist, the state would be forced to increase its budget annually by many thousands of dollars. But our efforts here are confined rather to a defense of those religious bodies whose principal occupation is the contemplation of truth, not of any truth, but of Him Who is "the Way, the Truth, and the Life," of God Himself.

Paradoxical as it may seem, the contemplatives share the burdens of society and contribute to the common good. They have a strong love for others which is manifested by prayer and penance. Their prayers draw down upon struggling and suffering humanity manifold graces, light, strength, courage, and comfort, blessings for time and eternity. By penance they strive to atone for the offences of sinful humanity, to appease God's wrath, and ward off its direful effects. These prayers and penances when united to the sufferings of Christ are, according to spiritual writers, most efficacious. While Moses was on the top of the hill he seemed to be profitless to Josue, who was fighting Amalec in the valley below, yet so long as he kept his arms extended the Israelites were victorious, but as soon as he ceased his prayers his people were overcome. "Hence the indispensable necessity of such experts in prayer, such laboratories and experimental stations for the study and application of spiritual forces as Trappist and Carmelite foundations. They are to religion what the Rockefeller and Carnegie foundations, and departments in universities devoted to pure research, are to science—to medicine, physics, biology, law, music, and art. Without them not only the further development and evolution of Catholicity would be in danger of ceasing, but there would be the more disastrous menace of a degeneration of the Church."² History reveals that here or there, in this land or that, when the interior life of the Church declined, when exterior

¹ Pope Leo XIII, "The Religious Congregations in France," *The Great Encyclical Letters of Pope Leo XIII*. (New York, 1903), p. 496.

² Michael Williams, *Catholicism and The Modern Mind*, (New York, 1928) p. 153.

activities and interests—political ambition, the accumulation of wealth, desire for prestige—became ascendant, disasters followed, and sometimes these were not visited in particular places, but brought universal lethargy and sickness to the whole Church as in the case of the Reformation.

Reference is frequently made to the immense wealth of the medieval monasteries. But there is an explanation. The members of the nobility, often in thanksgiving for favors received through the intercession of these religious or for services performed by them, enriched the monastery with material benefits. These endowments continued through the centuries until finally some of the monastic institutions possessed more land than even the temporal rulers of the time. Many of these grants which today strike us as enormous were tracts of waste land which would probably never have been reclaimed except for the diligence of the monks. Most monasteries, in fact, had their beginning in a primeval forest, an arid moor or a noisome fen; it was only the self-sacrifice, the religious and humanitarian purposes, the highly organized efforts of these consecrated toilers that converted such places into healthful and productive farm lands which were utilized by the neighboring inhabitants who were dependent chiefly upon the beneficence of the monks for their sustenance. Because these demands are no longer made upon them most monasteries, at the present time, maintain farms merely to supply their own table. In some places, however, these farms are experimental stations. The greatest agricultural school in the province of Quebec, Canada, is conducted by the Cistercians, and their experiments with seeds and plants have considerably increased our knowledge in the field of botany. A remarkable example of the services rendered by the contemplative especially in the field of genetics and heredity is the discovery of the law of recession and predominance known as the Mendelian law, the name of which commemorates its discoverer, Gregor Mendel, Abbot of Brunn in Austria.

More important than their services to the world of agriculture has been the work of the contemplatives in furthering education. Monastic schools were the only ones that existed from the time of the Barbarian Invasion until the Middle Ages. The Benedictine monasteries especially, were homes of study and depositories of the ancient learning. Not only sympathetic writers, like Montalembert, but those also who are more critical, acknowledge the services which these religious contributed to education. "In those restless ages of rude culture, of constant warfare, of perpetual lawlessness and the rule of might, . . . the monasteries were the sole schools for

teaching; they offered the only professional training; they were the only universities of research; they alone served as publishing houses for the multiplication of books; they were the only libraries for the preservation of learning; they possessed the sole scholars, they were the sole educational institutions of this period."³ Although it is only where local needs require it that monasteries today have schools connected with them, nevertheless the monks themselves do not fail to continue their research, delving into the profundities of the sciences, sacred and profane, and their contributions to them have been numerous. Their ancient libraries are ever open to the student wishing to search the rare volumes in the cause of education. Monasteries have always been places of work, both manual and intellectual.

In spite of these facts, it is not uncommon for the contemplative life to be considered a haven of rest for unfortunate and disappointed souls. This is true in isolated cases but not in all. The autobiographies of the saints need only be consulted to find abundant proof that the sole motive which prompted their embracing such an austere life was the love of God, and for His sake the love of their neighbor. Then again, it is urged that the contemplative, by his vow of chastity fails to discharge the social obligation of conserving the race, thus depriving society of many desirable members. It may be answered, however, that this obligation falls, not upon every member of the community, but upon society at large and is amply discharged though there be individual exceptions. Indeed, it is safe to say the non-fulfillment of this duty will never be threatened by a too general observance of sexual abstinence. It is only the unlawful gratification of carnal passion that can menace the true growth of population. On the other hand, often the very conditions of society, such as poverty and the care of needy parents, impose on man the obligation of remaining celibate. Chastity frees the religious from family cares and permits him more time for the services of God and neighbor.

That the contemplative is selfish and makes no contribution to society is untrue. The individual benefits merely a small group, for example the family. What is the objection to the contemplative confining his efforts, if he so desires, to the community of which he is a member. And let no one say that such a life must needs be narrowing and cramping. It produces, of course, an unworldliness and childlike simplicity which many mistake for narrowness; but they

³ Monroe, *A Textbook in the History of Education*, (New York, 1907) p. 255.

are blind indeed who cannot see that the energies which have been drawn off from the family cares and business responsibilities have been converted into other channels. As there are public figures in secular life so there are contemplatives whose scope of work is national or universal. The very presence in society of such spiritually dedicated characters "is a source of psychic inspiration for the whole community, and a constant and courageous protest against the smug Philistinism of the men of the world."⁴ There could be no greater aid to the creation and development of the spiritual conscience in the human race, a sense of one's duty of resisting the lower self, than the spectacle of men who can pursue spiritual things with a more powerful passion than that which men of the world follow after gold, fame and sensual pleasure. This demonstration of a complete overcoming of the world is in no sense an attack upon life rather it is a contribution towards it.

Out of this question arises another one. Is society bound to support the contemplative? Most contemplative orders are self-supporting; they exact a dowry on entrance; they have their own farms which supply their table. The sale of their products helps to support them, whether these be vestments made by the nuns, or books, paintings, etc. Frequently they receive donations of large sums from friends who have obtained favors through their prayers. The contemplative requires very little from the outside world. It would seem though that society should grant them whatever is lacking after their own efforts at self-support have fallen short, if not out of justice, then out of gratitude for the various benefits they have bestowed upon society in every age. Moreover, if individual men are bound to serve God so too are nations obliged to serve and honor Him. For all men are subject to the laws of nature and as their union in civil society does not exempt them from the obligation of observing these laws—since by that union they do not cease to be men—the entire nation becomes subject to the laws of nature and is bound to respect them in all her proceedings. Now society as such does not always satisfy these obligations fully and sometimes neglects them entirely. The contemplative vows his life to God, prays not for himself alone but also for his fellowman, for the spiritual and material betterment of his country, for the health and well-being of its rulers. In this manner he tries to make amends for the negligence of society and should receive some recompense for his work.

⁴ F. W. Foerster, "The Indispensability of the Ascetic Ideal" in *Marriage and the Sex Problem*.

Our faith and our experience both tell us that this life seemingly shut off from the world benefits mankind "and if we seek a reason in philosophy, we shall find it in that dim and half explored but most suggestive region of study which deals with the interconnection of souls, and with the influence of character and personality upon bodies of men—with the essential oneness of the human family, and the still more amazing oneness of the Communion of Saints."⁵ With faith, experience, and philosophy to warn us, it certainly would seem rash to disparage a member of the social body, the functions of which are so necessary to the harmonious working of the whole.

The question is one of great practical importance. The future success of Christianity may depend largely upon the maintenance of the contemplative orders. The forces of irreligion are gathering thick and fast, and we shall need all our strength to meet them. Can we, in the struggle before us, dispense with such a potent means of preserving the Catholic spirit among our people and extending its influence to those who are wandering in darkness? On the contemplative orders, perhaps no less than on the activity of our preachers and teachers and lecturers, we depend, under God for success in the ceaseless battle which the Church is everywhere waging against infidelity and error.⁶

⁵ Charles D. Plater, S.J., "The Social Value of the Contemplative Life," *The New York Review*, February-March, 1906. p. 578.

⁶ Ibid.