

THE ENIGMA OF THE CLOISTER

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MID the turmoil and hubbub of the Twentieth Century, when the whole world seems to have been drawn into the swirling vortex of chaos, the foundation of a cloistered community of Sisters will indeed prove an enigma to many. Such an undertaking stands out as a protest against the frivolity and recklessness of material prosperity. To modern and unbelieving eyes the cloister is as a piece of mechanism to the child—an anomaly, lacking sufficient explanation. There is, however, a purpose behind the cloister: a purpose which to profane eyes may or may not be convincing, but none the less a purpose which, to those who pursue this spiritual art of renunciation, means more than the total aggregation of all that the worldling holds dear in a material way. Just as the man of affairs has in his life a terminus towards whose acquisition he directs his every action, so also has the religious man or woman an all-absorbing object after which he or she strives with every faculty of soul and body. Both seek the termination of the road where they hope to find rest and peace. For the religious, this much-desired end is the vision of God. This is the *raison d'être* of every religious institute. This was primarily the reason why on October 4th, 1932, a small band of courageous ladies was duly and ceremoniously enclosed at Maryknoll, N. Y., under the rule covering the enclosure according to the Constitutions of the nuns of the Sacred Order of Preachers.

The Foreign Mission Sisters of Saint Dominic, commonly known as the Maryknoll Sisters, were canonically erected on February 14th, 1920. As the name implies, the community is devoted to the conversion of the heathen; and since its inception has made such rapid strides that it now boasts of over four hundred members, representing the United States, Europe, Hawaii, Canada, Australia, Japan, China and Korea. It is, however, an American institution. God has obviously blessed this foundation of Missionary Sisters and hence what greater return could they have made than by offering Him some of their number as a complete holocaust in the foundation

of a cloistered branch of their community. It is proof positive of the fertile soil upon which the parent vine is planted and an augury of greater accomplishments to be attained in the future.

Maryknoll Cloister is not a separation from the original establishment, but rather its complement. It is a move intended to draw down more abundantly the blessings of God upon the work of the active members of the community laboring in the mission fields, as well as upon all missionary endeavor in general. The enclosed Sisters, who have so generously relinquished all in the service of God, even the satisfaction resulting from the knowledge of having drawn souls to Him through a life of activity, to devote themselves exclusively to contemplation, prayer and penance, are placing spiritual weapons in the hands of those soldiers who go forth to battle for Christ with prayer upon their lips and courage in their hearts.

The feasibility of the cloister is a much-mooted question, due to the fact that its purpose is frequently obscured in a haze of misunderstanding. Many look askance upon the enclosure; many more consider it from a distance, thinking it far in excess of their comprehension. Yet there is no life more authenticated by the joint testimony of Scripture and Tradition, or more favored by the constant practise of the Church. The cloister is nothing more than a house of continual prayer; a thurible, as it were, from which arises by day and night that incense which is pleasing to God. It is a repetition of the "folly" of the Cross through which propitiation is offered for the sins of mankind and blessings asked upon the works of His hand. It is a potent, though silent, example of the spirit of contemplation; men take courage from example, and the acquisition of a spirit of contemplation is the initial step towards the attainment of beatitude. "Actual example," says Saint Bernard, "is a practical and powerful discourse; it is a persuasive argument, a forcible incentive to attempt that which one sees to be feasible." Cultivation of the spiritual sense is the means whereby the soul, blunted by materialism, is brought to a keen realization of its high estate. Even though a life of prayer and mortification be outwardly repudiated by many, they must, nevertheless, inwardly admire the spiritual vigor which prompts others to undertake so great a task.

Inclinations differ and each one sees according to his light. Some are called to contemplation; others to a life of activity; others to an harmonious fusion of both. It is God's way of preserving balance and order in the world. Each one follows the road which leads him to the attainment of that goal which he so ardently seeks.

The Dominican Order has inherited from its founder those ideals which so satisfactorily blend both the contemplative and active lives. Saint Dominic realized the necessity of tempering a life of action with contemplation. He was aware of the utter impossibility of presenting the great truths of faith in a favorable way to the people unless one had first removed from himself the shadowy outlines and made these truths stand out sharply and clearly in his own mind. Contemplation has that in it which makes what was previously as vague and flimsy as summer gossamer, to become clear and substantial. It not only forces the will to adhere to truth for beauty's sake, but also to be guided by the wisdom which it imparts. Because of it, God enriches the soul with graces and crowns it in the end with that beatitude which every man seeks and for which every man was created.

The establishment of contemplative communities is a proof that the Church is still the Mother of Sanctity, for through the medium of contemplation the souls of her children rise to heights unattainable when they are 'busy about many things.' The roads to perfection in the spiritual life are diverse and various, but they ultimately converge at the same end. Some follow the higher levels in which they seek a stronger bond of union with God; others are content to travel along lower levels. The distinction, however, should not be sought nor drawn with mathematical precision, for since Charity is the very essence of Christianity, the travellers on each path share it in a greater or less degree. In reality there may be said to be but one light on the road to perfection—the lamp of Charity. Specifically, however, we may conceive of different lights, according to the greater or less degree of Charity which is present.

Spiritual culture is the means by which dignity and appreciation are infused into human life. It is the flowering of Christianity, and it is grown and nourished in the garden of the cloister. It is the unseen heroes of the cloister, who, by sacrifice of self, propitiate for the many crimes and irreverences perpetrated in the name of modern advancement. Hence the cloister has a very practical purpose both in the life of the Church and in that of the State. Those dwelling therein are not confined by the limits of its walls; theirs is a mission field embracing the very confines of the earth; their prayers are the bond in which all humanity is united. The cross of Christ is their only sermon.

The present world crisis is a striking example of the results of a lack of spirituality. The elementary structure of Christianity has

been neglected and the virtues of charity, purity of heart and humility have been supplanted by the vices of greed, lust and pride. The appalling lack of international trust; the ever-increasing tendency of those in high places to inculcate godless principles into the minds of those who look to them for guidance; so-called Christian sects consecutively discarding the rudiments of Christ's religion; His divinity called into question; the doctrine of reward and punishment cast aside as a remnant of the Dark Ages; the very existence of God denied and openly declared to be a fiction of theological imagining; all take their root in the fact that man has forgotten that the spiritual takes precedence over the material, regarded from any angle.

The cloister is not an enigma. On the contrary, it is one of the most lucid and practical institutions ever conceived. Civilization without it is civilization without a foundation, for the cloister is the fountain-head from which springs the realization of Christian ideals. It is as a brilliant light enabling the world to see the many deceits which hide its real self from itself. It is an experienced guide pointing out the way to social justice, for it removes the dust and cobwebs of greed and avarice from the soul of man. It is not deceived, for its reason is most practical: it separates truth from falsehood. Riches, honors, fame, it does not despise in others; but for itself—clasping the treasures of virtue to its bosom it presses on in the pursuit of spirituality.