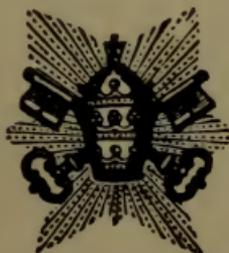


The Mission
of the
Contemplative Orders



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CONTEMPLATIVE ORDERS

WHAT is the cause of the dearth of vocations to the contemplative orders? Is it not largely that this life is not understood and not being understood cannot be appreciated and loved? How can a youthful, enthusiastic soul who feels within her the inspiration to give all to God, who is glowing with ardor to devote all to His service,—how can such a soul be content to give herself to a life of apparent inactivity, when there is so much work to be done for God's cause? How,—unless she grasps the deep truths under-

lying the contemplative orders, unless she is able to see the highest activity in repose.

We are sometimes told that members of contemplative orders are leading useless, idle, and selfish lives; but it is a mistake to suppose that the highest usefulness results from much occupation of hand or much curiosity of mind, without regard to the motive which prompts the labor, or to the object which engages the attention. The highest usefulness is rather spiritual than physical, rather intellectual than corporal. But then, it is the outcome of a mental activity meditative, sacred, perfective, prayerful, not of a mental activity merely informative, or subtle, or sceptical, or secular.

Of the thirty-three years of His mortal life, our divine Saviour devoted but three to the apostolate of teaching. During thirty years He lived a hidden life of prayer, penance, and manual labor; and yet He came on earth to accomplish a stupendous task,—nothing less than the conversion of the world. And in the Blessed Sacrament—the continuation until the end of time of His life among us—how hidden, how silent is He! He does not preach from the tabernacle in words of fire, He does not hurl forth anathemas against the of-

fending sinner, He is hidden, silent, submissive; and yet what believer doubts that the little white Host is the greatest force in the world? There He offers Himself to His Father to avert His just anger from a sinful world, there He makes reparation for our sins, there He pleads for us and obtains mercy and grace. This life—His hidden life at Nazareth and His life in the Blessed Sacrament—is at once the model and the explanation of the contemplative life.

The Blessed Virgin Mary also reveals to us the sublimity of this life and the power it has with God; for He, who was bounded only by His omnipotence, chose for His blessed and most beloved Mother a life hidden, retired, devoted to prayer. The Gospel for the Office on the feast of our blessed Lady's Assumption is the beautiful narrative of our Saviour defending Mary who sat at His feet while Martha served. Why should this Gospel be chosen for our blessed Mother's last and crowning feast, unless to teach us that she, in a far higher sense than that other Mary, had "chosen the better part."

Many persons consider contemplation an extremely dangerous and slippery subject,

a sort of spiritual acrobatic feat to be accomplished with safety by a few chosen souls only. Quite the contrary is the truth; if we were not a fallen race, contemplation would be our proper element. We are created to the image and likeness of God, and our perfection consists in the closeness of this resemblance. God's essential act is the knowing and loving Himself, therefore this same act—the knowing and loving God—should be that most proper to us. As the catechism teaches, we are “created to know, love and serve God,” but this knowing and loving Him is contemplation, according to the definition of Dionysius the Carthusian, contemplation is an “immediate, certain, and affectionate knowledge of God.” This same master has a beautiful passage on the “perfection, end and beatitude of the human soul.” He tells us that he speaks of a brave man as a lion, of a deceitful man as a fox, and of a simple, innocent person as a lamb, because the characteristic actions of these several persons resemble those of the animals to which they are likened. “Since, then, God's essential action is the knowing and loving Himself, that man I may dare to call divine whose sole occupation is the knowing and loving God as perfectly as possible.”

For another reason, also, is contemplation the “perfection, end and beatitude of the human soul.” It is the habitual state of the blessed who see God face to face; and, as God wills all to be saved, it is the final destiny of every human soul. What wonder, then, that there are some who wish to begin here in the darkness of faith what is to be their occupation for eternity before the unveiled Vision.

That the contemplative orders have their place in society, that they have their part (and an important part) in the business of the world, that they are of value to the commonwealth, is lucidly set forth in a work by Pere Coppin, C. SS. R., *La Vocation*. The author tells us that the sphere of action of a young woman who remains in the world is necessarily limited, no matter what her position; while if she enter religion she becomes an instrument in God’s hands by means of which valuable services are rendered to the whole human family. He continues: “The first service she renders the human race is that of expiation. All who believe in God know that such a thing as sin exists; sin, which offends His supreme majesty. They also know and acknowledge that sin requires

expiation: that this expiation might be adequate—equal to the offence—God has demanded it of the Incarnate Word, and He has paid it by all the works of His mortal life,—more particularly by His Passion and death. The Redemption is the great and divine work of expiation.

“This expiation of Christ is, indeed, adequate,—even superabundant; but, still, God demands something further: the family, which forms a moral unity, must itself expiate the sins, the disorders of its members; society, especially when crimes are multiplying in its bosom, must submit to this law of expiation.

“For the true Christian expiation is not difficult, but where are they who are truly penitent and accept all the trials of life in reparation for their sins?” Yet, God’s mercy finds a way to save sinners: He chooses certain souls to whom He commits the work of expiation for the members of their own families it may be, for their city, their nation, and even for the whole world. “Their vows, their austerities, their labors, their tears, their supplications,—all this performed in union with our Lord’s expiation satisfies the justice of God and obtains mercy for a multitude of offenders, saving

the family, saving society at large from numberless chastisements.

“You, parents, brothers, who would restrain a daughter or a sister when she wishes to consecrate herself to God in a religious order, little do you comprehend that it is perhaps principally for your sake that she is called. In the counsels of divine mercy she is to be the expiator of your sins. You should, then, rather press her to go: your sins and those of the other members of your family have caused the clouds of divine vengeance to gather over your home; but God has had pity on you; He wishes that the purity, the prayers, the immolation of your daughter be as a lightning-rod to protect you from the bolts of His anger.

“O you who swallow sin like water, you banish religious from their country or submit them to the burden of unjust legislation, but, take care! you are destroying your spiritual ramparts, you dismiss an army of heroes at a time that the God of justice is about to send against you His legions of avenging angels!

“‘Woe to the world if there were no religious,’ said our Lord to St. Theresa. ‘It cannot be doubted,’ says Ruffin, ‘but that it is through the merits of religious that the world still exists.’

“To the question, of what use are the austerities practised in some religious orders, the Count de Maistre makes reply: ‘One might as well ask, of what use is Christianity, for they rest upon the same principle: Innocence paying the penalty of crime.’

“And you, young people, who feel within you an attraction towards this life of prayer and sacrifice, lift up your hearts, deify your thoughts, that you may be able to appreciate at its true value the holy vocation for the cloister. If you are called, you must enter religion—to fulfil God’s will, to glorify Him, to make sure your salvation and to attain perfection; but you must enter, also, for the sake of your parents and brothers whom you leave in the world, for the multitudes which surge, press and defile themselves in those low earthly valleys, whilst you pitch your tents on the luminous heights of the Gospel. You owe it to those sinners to become a victim of penance and expiation; it is to you that those words are addressed which our Lord spoke to a certain saint: ‘My life was but a martyrdom, a cross, and this same life thou shalt lead. Thou art united to Me, to live and die as I did. Thou must consent to be

oppressed by creatures, crucified by their sins, but with the hope of washing them away in My blood. My child, I am constrained to expiate sin, to appease my Father, through thee and in union with thee.’

“The second means by which the nun renders her life useful to society is prayer. ‘What do those nuns, for what are they good?’ it is asked with contempt. ‘Those immovable figures in the sanctuary!’ There is perhaps no work more sublime than that which these souls perform. ‘They do well who pray for those who do not pray.’—Victor Hugo: *Les Miserables*.

“This young woman who has entered the cloister is praying for those who do not pray at all or who do not pray enough. In God’s sight she represents the faithful whose hearts are often cold, unpraying hearts, lacking the spirit of praise, of adoration; she stands before Him as their representative, and the intensity of her intercession makes up for their spiritual poverty.

“The heart of the consecrated virgin is a living censer from which at every instant escapes the incense of prayer; she prays, she adores, she loves—for herself, doubtless, but also for her parents, brothers, sisters, for her friends and for the whole

world. She prays, she intercedes and she obtains the grace of conversion for sinners, the peace of God for the dying, resignation for the poor, patience for the sick, a thousand spiritual and temporal blessings for her family. It would seem as though, when Jesus unites Himself to a member of a family by the strong, true, mysterious bonds of religious profession, He enters into that family, and its interests become His. We shall meet in heaven many fathers and mothers who owe their salvation to the prayers, tears, works and immolations of one of their children consecrated to God in the religious state.

“Cities, nations, society at large, receive many choice gifts and graces from the divine mercy, which they owe to the prayers of religious.

“But it is peculiarly the Church which is so wonderfully assisted by the prayers and sacrifices of consecrated souls. On the great day of divine revelation, when Truth will stand unveiled before us in all her purity, how different will the pages of history then appear! How many events, favorable for the Church and her action, now attributed to this or that great Christian statesman or to a legislative assembly, to a

writer, to an eminent bishop, or perhaps to a pope, will be found to have had their source in the prayers of a humble nun or of several chosen souls whom God, without their knowing it, has united by a bond of prayer and sacrifice into a powerful and glorious alliance! 'Those who pray do more than those who fight,' said a great statesman, Donoso Cortes, 'If we could penetrate into the secrets of God and of history we should be struck with admiration at the wonderful efficacy of prayer, even in temporal affairs.' Many a humble and frail young girl, who has given herself entirely to God in religion, will appear to us on the last day as a Deborah, an Ester, a Judith, saving the new Israel; like another Jeanne d'Arc, she fights against the enemies of Christendom; not, indeed, with the sword of battle but with that of prayer and sacrifice; and without being conscious of it, gains glorious victories which the angels record on the pages of the eternal annals."

We have at hand a splendid article by Rev. Charles D. Plater, S. J., *The Social Value of the Contemplative Life*, which presents a somewhat different aspect of the same point of view; viz., that of the usefulness of contemplatives to their fellow-men. The author

tells us that it is a principle beyond cavil that "Life should be social and not merely individual. 'Service' must be the watchword of humanity: for in the due service of others we shall find our truest selves." And he sets before himself in this article the task of refuting the false conclusion too often drawn from this principle: that the contemplative life cannot be justified, because it is not of service to the community. He continues: "But is the contemplative life unsocial? At first sight it might well appear to be so. It would seem to be a life lost to society, a selfish withdrawal of much-needed forces from the battlefield. 'How,' one is tempted to ask, 'can men and women shut themselves up in convents when the world is so full of misery and sin, of wretchedness and despair?' The question may come as a difficulty to the most zealous and devoted souls; indeed, their very zeal may add strength to the suggestion. They are bent on the service of others. In this they are Christlike and apostolic. But their too ready acceptance of certain inadequate views about human society leads them to suppose that the contemplative life is unsocial. We believe them to be mistaken; but the mistake is not an unnatural one for

a zealous man to make in these busy days. And as it lies at the bottom not only of difficulties felt by Catholics, but of objections brought by those outside the Church it will repay a few moments' consideration. But before we investigate the causes of the error let us glance for a moment at its consequences. Were it to become generally accepted amongst us that the contemplative life is an unsocial and therefore an unjustifiable life, the first result would be the emptying of our monasteries, beginning with those entirely devoted to contemplation. These *horti inclusi*—enclosed gardens of God—oases in a dusty world, would disappear. What thinking man can contemplate the prospect with equanimity? Indeed, the loss would be a great one. In the first place there would be the cessation of the homage offered to God in these places: the stream of adoring prayer which rises to Him unceasingly. This point we shall not dwell on, for we are thinking rather of the social benefits of such institutions....”

“....If the contemplative orders were to die out amongst us, a still greater calamity would follow. For there must be in the lives of each of us, if we are to live Christian lives at all, some element of contempla-

tion, of prayer and self-restraint. Now it is clear that even a modicum of this necessary element in our lives cannot well persist unless there are in our midst men and women who are, so to say, specialists in contemplation, to be our guides and our models. Analogies might be multiplied. Here the Platonic idea of the state proves illuminating. The state is the individual 'writ large,' and any element of the single human life must have its concrete embodiment in a class to be found within the community. And what would there be to save us from our own egoism unless we had before our eyes the spectacle of men and women whose devotion to prayer and mortification is complete. One of the most rousing exhortations in à Kempis is the passage where he tells the fainting Christian to 'observe the Carthusians, the Cistercians, and the monks and solitaries of various orders, how they do every night rise and sing psalms to the Lord.' Nor can we neglect the lesson: for, as the Abbé Guibert well says, 'a Christianity without prayers and without sacrifices would cease to be the Christianity of the Gospel. Even if the exterior cult were to remain, it would be but a form of paganism, for it would be

without action upon life.' To despise the contemplative life is to cripple the Church of God.

“Whence, then, comes this under-valuing of the contemplative life which is liable to seize even upon zealous Catholics? It comes, as we have said, from an inadequate analysis of what is meant by social service. For the contemplative life is emphatically not an unsocial life. Quite apart from the higher motives to which we have alluded, our reason should tell us that in nature herself we may find a defence of the contemplative orders.

“Let us come back to Plato's idea of the State. The essential solidarity which subsists between the members of any community, indeed between all members of the human race, makes it clear to us that nothing is of so great social value as the development of character in individuals. The truly unsocial man is the man who, so to say, lets his character evaporate in noisy activity, in empty bustle, in self-seeking of any kind: the man, for instance, whose religion is, to use Faber's expression, in his hands or his eyes rather than in his heart. Such a one may have the appearance of zeal, but he has not the reality. He may

seem to be socially useful, but he is a mere drone in the human hive. But the man who in silence and solitude stores up in his heart a great reservoir of character, or driving power—call it what you will—is bound to effect the world precisely on account of this solidarity of which we speak. The waters thus stored will irrigate the world, while the man of pretences is but paddling in his tiny puddle. The one is a semblance, the other a reality.

“ ‘Semblance and reality!—*Ex umbris et imaginibus in veritatem.*’ This was ever Plato’s theme, and his mind (like Newman’s, in later times, keenly sensitive to truth) would have welcomed the extension which the Catholic Church has given to his words in the writings of her saints and ascetics. She tells us the need of releasing a few of our number from the serving of tables, so that they may live always in the sight of the spiritual realities, which our own activity so often eclipses; that their hearts may acquire an exquisite delicacy of spiritual balance, and their minds range freely amid the crags of contemplation of which the rest of us get but an occasional glimpse. Let no one say that such a life must needs be narrowing and cramping. It

produces, of course, an unworldliness and child-like simplicity which we may mistake for narrowness; but we are blind indeed if we cannot see what has become of the energies which have been drawn off from family cares and business responsibilities.

“If we are to do good to society we must provide, not a crowd of superficial busy-bodies, but a few men steeped and saturated in the eternal truths. . . . The vitality of the few will raise the tone of the whole languishing community. It is the elite that tell. And why? Because they live an intense life which increases the vitality of those around them; because they represent an idea,—and a man who represents an idea is of the utmost social importance. After all, it is a question of the division of labor; if the social organism is to be complete it must include a certain number of men set apart to live the life of contemplation.

“We may add that, just as the justification of contemplative orders on the familiar principle of division of labor should commend itself to all students of social development, so the notion of a seeming inactivity which is fraught with most momentous practical consequences should be familiar to all who have had some experience of life.

They should not, therefore, find the notion a stumbling-block when they encounter it in the Catholic system."

The reverend author illustrates his point with a passage from Monsignor Benson's book, "The Light Invisible." He is describing the thoughts of one who, on seeing a nun praying in a convent chapel, was tempted to regret the seeming uselessness and barrenness of the contemplative life. We quote the passage.

"After all it is essentially selfish,—it is a sin against society. Possibly it was necessary when the wickedness of the world was more fierce, to protest against it by this retirement; but not now, not now! How can the lump be leavened if the leaven be withdrawn? How can a soul serve God by forsaking the world which He made and loves?"

Then came a flash of insight:

"First I became aware suddenly that there ran a vital connection from the Tabernacle to the woman. You may think of it as one of those bands you see in machinery connecting two wheels, so that when one moves the other moves too. Or you may think of it as an electric wire, joining the instrument the telegraph opera-

tor uses with the pointer at the other end. At any rate there was this vital band or wire of life.

“Now in the Tabernacle I became aware that there was a mighty stirring and movement. Something within it beat like a vast heart, and the vibrations of each pulse seemed to quiver through all the ground. Or you may picture it as the movement of a clear, deep pool, when the basin that contains it is jarred—it seemed like the movement of circular ripples crossing and re-crossing in swift thrills.

“I was aware that the atmosphere was charged with energy; great powers seemed to be astir, and I to be close to the whirling center of it all. Or think of it like this. Have you ever had to wait in a city office? If you have done that you will know how intense quiet can co-exist with intense activity. There are quiet figures here and there around the room. Or it may be there is only one such figure—a great financier—and he sitting there almost motionless. Yet you know that every movement tingles, as it were, out from that still room all over the world. You can picture to yourself how people leap to obey or to resist—how lives rise and fall, and fortunes are made

and lost, at the gentle movements of this lonely, quiet man in his office. Well, so it was here. I perceived that this black figure knelt at the center of reality and force, and with the movements of her will and lips controlled spiritual destinies for eternity. There ran out from this peaceful chapel lines of spiritual power that lost themselves in the distance, bewildering in their profusion and terrible in the intensity of their hidden fire. Souls leaped up and renewed the conflict as this tense will strove for them. Souls even at that moment leaving the body struggled from death into spiritual life, and fell panting and at the feet of the Redeemer on the other side of death. Others, acquiescent and swooning in sin, woke and snarled at the merciful stab of this poor nun's prayer. . . . Yes, and I in my stupid arrogance had thought that my life was more active in God's world than that of this nun, just as a shop-keeper, bustling to and fro behind the counter, might think, if only he were mad enough, that his life was more active and alive than the life of a director who sit at his table in the city. Yes, that is a vulgar simile; but the only one that I can think of which in the least expresses what I knew to be true.

There lay my little, foolish, narrow life behind me, made up of spiritless prayers and efforts and feeble dealings with souls; and how complacent I had been with it all, how self-centered, how out of the real tide of spiritual movement! And meanwhile, for years probably, this nun had toiled behind these walls in the silence of grace, with the hum of the world coming faintly to her ears, and the cries of peoples and nations, and the persons whom the world accounts important, sounding like the voices of children at play in the muddy street outside, and indeed that is all that they are, compared to her—children making mud-pies or playing at shop outside the financier's office."

Father Plater continues: "This striking attempt to visualize a great reality will appeal in a special way to those who strive after some picture, however inadequate, of what Aristotle calls the 'activity of immobility'.... The thought is one which serves as a good corrective to the perplexing whirl amid which so many active men are condemned to live. But we cannot develop it here, for we are concerned rather with a vindication of the contemplative life which will appeal even to the utilitarian.

"We should be prepared to admit that

the contemplative orders, if not useful, were better abolished; but we should not accept the narrow interpretation too often given to the word 'useful'. The fact is that the most severely enclosed orders have their influence upon the life of the Church. This has ever been recognized by their founders, who take care to impress upon their subjects that a monk who is not helping the Church by his solitude had better return to the world.

“But how can a life seemingly shut off from the world benefit mankind? Our faith and our experience both tell us that it in fact does so; and if we seek a reason in philosophy, we shall find it in that dim... 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... With faith and experience and philosophy to warn us, it were surely the height of rashness to disparage a member of the social body, the functions of which may be shown to be so necessary to the harmonious working of the whole.

“It is, then, no merely speculative ques-

tion that we have raised, but one of immense practical importance. The future success of Christianity may depend largely upon the maintenance of the contemplative orders. The forces of irreligion are gathered thick and fast, and we shall need all our strength to meet them. Can we, in the struggle before us, afford to throw away a most potent means of preserving the Catholic spirit among our people and extending its influence to those who are wandering in darkness? Our reason as well as our faith tells us that in the cloistered orders lies an integral part of the Catholic organism; that on them, 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."

The pious and learned Pere Berthie in his reflections on the twenty-fourth psalm has the following passage: "I believe that in all ages of the Church it is prayer alone that has converted the impious and heretics. In so unbelieving a century as ours, it would be a wise course on the part of pastors to recommend to their faithful sheep the conversion of the impious. If solitaries,

virgins separated from the world, fervent ecclesiastics, the just in every state of life, would offer their good works for this intention, I cannot doubt but that it would result in turning very many to the path of salvation.”

Father Faber writes in “All for Jesus”:
“In many a convent, among porters and lay-brothers, there may turn out, when Jesus makes all things straight at the last, to have been many a Francis Xavier, many a Father Claver, many a St. Charles for reforming the clergy, a St. Thomas for writing books, and a St. Vincent of Paul for working the interests of Jesus in the towns and amid the country poor.”

In the Life of St. Alphonsus Liguori we read that having been made Bishop of the diocese of St. Agatha, he found his flock in a deplorable condition; vice was rampant and scandals multiplied. The saint had tried every means in his power, but in vain. He then determined to establish his order of Redemptorist nuns. “If we succeed in the foundation of a convent of the Most Holy Redeemer,” he said, “the edification which these holy nuns will give will make their house the precious gem not only of the city and diocese but of the whole province.”—

“If this convent,” he said on another occasion, “does not give another aspect to our city, then, in my opinion, we may give up all hope of converting it.” Thus did this great saint and active apostle value lives separated from the world and devoted to prayer and penance.

Bishop Hedley, in a meditation on the Hidden Life of our Saviour, writes as follows: “We know very well that the virtues of our Blessed Lord’s life are the virtues that will best of all sanctify our own souls. But what we have to be persuaded of—thoroughly and warmly persuaded of—is, that they are also the generating forces of His kingdom.”

It is character that counts and the perfection of our character consists in union with God. Bishop Hedley continues: “The imitator of Jesus sees that, except through that loving union with God which draws down grace, nothing can be effected either in one’s own soul or in the world. Thus the apparent success of one’s own eloquence, persuasiveness or skill, is often only apparent, not real—quite short-lived and unimportant; whereas the success which flows from the action of the hidden spiritual heart of a true servant of God is as certain

and solid as the promises of God—though we, perhaps, may never see it come to pass. And as for results, when one knows that an immediate success is often a disguised failure, and that, on the other hand, the prayer, or the suffering, or the prayerful activity of the truly hidden heart is as infallibly certain of result, somewhere in God's wide kingdom, as the circles on the water after the fall of the stone, one heeds but little what short-sighted persons christen failure or success."

Pere Coppin, in the work quoted above, gives it as his opinion that in those apostolic laborers who were also contemplatives; as St. Bernard, St. Alphonsus Liguori, it was "their intercession, their penance, their union with God, that was their greatest apostolic force in leading souls to God." "This is the greatest apostolic power in the Church." Even under the Old Law we find numerous examples to prove how powerful is the prayer of the just man. Moses, interceding for his people who had fallen into idolatry, overcame the anger of God which sought to destroy them. The Lord promised Abraham that if but ten just men were found in Sodom, He would not destroy the wicked city. And so might instances be

multiplied. To return to our own times: it has been said of St. Theresa that she won as many souls for God as did St. Francis Xavier. In the Life of St. Gertrude we read that having seen by revelation the sad state of a certain soul in purgatory, she begged mercy for that soul. "O Lord," she said, "wilt Thou not yield to my supplication, and pardon this soul?" Our Lord replied in accents of great tenderness, "For love of thee I will have compassion, not on this soul only, but also on a thousand others." There are numerous examples in the lives of the saints and of holy souls of their imploring, insisting on, and obtaining pardon for hardened sinners, release for the souls in purgatory, etc. Our Lord once said to Venerable Anne of St. Bartholomew, Carmelite, "My daughter, by your humility and your prayer you have been one of the pillars of My Church."

In itself the contemplative life is more perfect than the active life; it is the part of Mary,—the "better part," as our Lord Himself said; but it is also, speaking generally, the life in which the soul most easily and most speedily reaches perfection and reaches a higher degree of perfection—union with God. The hidden, interior life consists in

“that which is the only end, the only act, the only state, for which the soul was created; that is to say the loving worship of its God. This is essential perfection—the more or less continuous and intense exercise of the act of charity. This it is which sanctifies, and which also leads to success.”—Bishop Hedley. This is the most powerful force in the world’s conversion. Our Lord says: “. . . .he that abideth in me, and I in him, the same beareth much fruit: for without me you can do nothing. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, you shall ask whatever you will, and it shall be done unto you.” (St. John, Chap. XV.)

The strict enclosure which is the rule in contemplative orders shields the religious from the dangers and allurements of the world; while the life of prayer and recollection brings the soul into constant intercourse with God. As a recent spiritual writer has well said: “Among all the means placed at our disposal to facilitate the flight of the soul towards God and to accomplish more perfectly her union with the Sovereign Good, none is better or more excellent than prayer. It is in this sense that our Lord gives the preference to the contemplative life, from which spring those acts

which bring the soul into immediate intercourse with her God and of which Mary is considered the model and type.”

But above all, it is conformity of our will with the will of God in which union with God essentially consists; and it is particularly by a life of seclusion and recollection that the soul learns to conform her will entirely to the divine Will, learns to listen to, and to follow all the interior inspirations of the Holy Ghost. And will our Lord be outdone in generosity? When He finds a soul entirely given up to Him—a soul that seeks only to please Him and makes all His interests her own—is it possible that He will not in return show Himself favorable to all her prayers or even her mere desires? It is told of one of the saints, that many persons came to beg her prayers, for it was well known that they were always granted. But she, being always immersed in contemplation, forgot all about her clients, and was very much astonished when they came back to thank her for the favors they had received through her prayers. She spoke of this to her heavenly Bridegroom and received the answer: “Daughter, your will is always and only to do My will, and I will never let you

vanquish Me in love; and, therefore, My will is to do your will, even when you have forgotten that you ever willed it." Is not this power over the Sacred Heart, this power which may be used for the good of others, one of the strongest motives for inducing a soul to seek to sanctify herself,—to give herself up without reserve to the Divine Will?

One sometimes meets the objection, that, while it is true that the contemplative life is more perfect than the active, the combination of both is the most perfect. Granted,—but where will we find the soul able to combine them? In the *Mystical City*, Mary of Agreda, raised as she was to rare heights of ecstatic contemplation, writes: "In the union of these two modes of life (the active and contemplative) is the apex of Christian perfection. But it is very difficult for one and the same person to unite them simultaneously and in a perfect degree. Many saints have indeed made great efforts to reach this end; the teaching of masters in the spiritual life has the same aim, as have also the exhortations of learned, apostolic men and the example of the Apostles and of the founders of religious orders. They have all tried, as far as God's grace

enabled them to do so, to unite the contemplative with the active life; but they have ever acknowledged that, as our Lord said to Martha, the active life with its manifold occupations of body and mind, disturbs and disquiets the heart. The Blessed Virgin Mary alone united these lives in the highest degree of perfection. With her the most exalted contemplation was not in the least disturbed by exterior works. In her was found Martha's care, but without her disquietude; and also the repose of Mary, but without her inactivity."

But there is another aspect of the subject which should be dwelt upon: it is, if we may so speak, God's side of the question. Even among good people, how small a part of their service of God is devoted to thanksgiving, praise, adoration! They pray for themselves and they pray for others, they petition for blessings of soul and body, they beg for the things of time and for those of eternity, but how fervent are their thanksgivings and how much time do they occupy? God is our Creator and our Father, to whom are due our constant and most fervent praise and adoration, but how many think of that at all? Creation exists to give glory to its Creator, but how does it fulfil this duty?

From numberless haunts of vice the foul stench of corruption daily, hourly, rises; and should there be no houses set apart from which the pure incense of praise is constantly going up to the throne of the Most High? no lives dedicated solely to the worship of their Creator? On how many altars is Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament neglected and forgotten; in how many country chapels and small churches are the doors locked after Mass, and that loving Heart is left to spend the long hours of the day and night alone! And even in the crowded city, of the throngs that surge past His door, how many turn aside to exchange a few words with this most faithful Friend? But worse than this neglect are the blasphemies, sacrileges, and outrages committed against Him in this His Sacrament of Love. For all this souls consecrated to a life of prayer must console Him by their devotedness. In many communities of contemplatives is perpetual adoration of the Blessed Sacrament kept up, their members ever hovering about the tabernacle offering their hearts in reparation for the coldness and indifference too often received. If the contemplative orders had no other purpose than that of praise and adoration, if their members spent their whole

time in giving to the Creator the worship and thanksgiving of which the world at large robs Him, their existence would be justified. In a sermon delivered in defense of contemplative orders, Cardinal Mermillod said: "Every human need has a consoling angel to minister to it. For sickness there is the Sister of Charity; for old age, the Little Sister of the Poor; for helpless infancy and for ignorance there are the members of the many active communities which we see multiplying every day. And would you not allow your Jesus to keep near Him a few poor little Sisters to compassionate the sorrows of His Heart wounded by our sins?" On another occasion the same Cardinal said: "May the Bishops protect the Marys of the cloister; those under the mantle of St. Theresa or St. Clare as also those adorers of every name who night and day tarry at the feet of Christ pouring out their fragrant ointments, their tears, the affections of their hearts; giving Him with never-failing tenderness the love of a virgin and spouse. O harmony between heaven and earth, union of souls, communion of saints! . . . Who will tell the history of the prayers, the holocausts of penance, the never-ceasing canticles, which now, more than

ever, are necessary to disarm divine Justice and to raise humanity from the decadence into which it is falling.”

Moreover: “This is the will of God; your sanctification.” All created things strive consciously or unconsciously toward the perfection of their being. We see this in the material world about us, in nature; in the world of intellect; and is the spirit alone to be neglected? Reverend H. E. O’Keeffe, C. S. P., in an article on the contemplative life recently published in the *Missionary*, says: “But the spiritual perfection of the individual is of much more import than the perpetuity of the whole race. The perfection of one finely heroic spirit is of infinitely more worth than the propagation of innumerable ordinary types of the race.” “. . . how superficial is the view which considers that the life of the spirit is a narrow, selfish and barren life.”

In regard to the rewards of a spiritual, interior life, even here below, the saints tell us that they are beyond all power of description, beyond anything the carnal man can imagine or dream of. St. John of the Cross tells us, that, when the soul has caught but a glimpse (in contemplation) of the beauty and sublimity of God, she

would not only gladly die to be able to enjoy Him eternally, she would even joyfully undergo a thousand times the bitterest form of death to catch but another momentary glimpse of Him. (*Spiritual Cantic*, strophe XI.) St. Theresa writes to the same effect. These are the experiences of saints, but even in a much lower stage of the spiritual life the peace and happiness of those who make God their all is far beyond anything the world can bestow.

It is a common mistake to suppose that members of contemplative orders have nothing to do but to remain on their knees all day in prayer. Although the greater part of the time is ordinarily devoted to mental prayer and the chanting of the Divine Office, nevertheless, in imitation of our Saviour's hidden life at Nazareth, many hours are spent in work; often, particularly in orders like the Poor Clares and Trappists who have no lay-sisters, in the most laborious and menial house and garden work. And it is frequently found to be just those who were of the highest rank in the world who are most eager to undertake the lowliest and most fatiguing tasks. We read of St. Mary Magdalen de Pazzi that she performed as much work as four lay-sisters. Blessed Magdalene Martinengo, daughter of the ancient family of the counts

of Martinengo, and possessed of great wealth, having become a member of the Order of Poor Clares, did the cooking for her monastery and worked at the most laborious tasks, so that often in the evening she could scarcely reach her cell so great was her fatigue. Mother Mary Theresa, foundress of the Congregation of the Adoration of Reparation, writes as follows concerning her Institute: "Labor is a divine precept, the first reparation demanded by God of the sinner. Labor regenerates man; it strengthens his faculties without satisfying his evil tendencies; it extinguishes concupiscence without ruining the body; it mortifies corrupt instincts without exalting self-love. A life of labor, to accomplish the precept of penance, appears to me to be far preferable to the austerities invented by fervour. O, how much better I love to see my sisters washing the linen,....than if they had lay-sisters to serve them, so that they might occupy themselves in doing penance!....How I love to say to those who ask me, 'How do you live?', 'We live exactly like poor work-women.' This life agrees with all healths, all characters, and all educations. Jesus made Himself all to all; His daily life should be imitated by great numbers, and yet that life is contemned by even the good;....and I have loved it, as I consider it the most effica-

cious means of bringing men back to the belief that evangelical simplicity is not a mere fable.”

Work is a penance; it was imposed upon our first parents after the fall, and it is in this spirit that souls vowed to the interests of Jesus undertake these common and lowly tasks. As Bishop Hedley says: “It is one of the conditions of sanctification and of success.” This work would be of small importance if it were not for the spirit which animates it. It is not the exterior action that makes one great in God’s sight, it is the love with which it is performed. St. Thomas of Villanova says: “The Lord does not look at the greatness of the act, but at the intention; He does not consider the work, but the love put into it; He does not regard the greatness of your effort, but the intensity of your love. In the judgment of Christ, the widow who cast two mites into the treasury of the temple gave more than all the rest because her love was greater. Mary without Martha can please God, but Martha without Mary can never please Him. The contemplative life, even if external good works be wanting to it, is very pleasing to God; but external activity without the contemplative or interior life is never pleasing to Him, for these are works without spirit, force and value.” The interior soul knows how to sanctify the mean-

est employment. By the perfect fulfilment of her vow of obedience she is sure of doing at each moment the will of God; by purity of intention and by uniting her work with the humble toil of our divine Saviour at Nazareth she can make each action of great value in the eyes of God, who regards the heart rather than the deed; and by the practice of the presence of God and by frequent elevations of the heart toward Him she can make her work a continuous prayer.

There are those who think that the contemplative life is not suited to our times and particularly to our country. Hear what Pius IX said on that subject: "The want of the American Church is religious orders of prayer. America is a young country; she has passed her infancy and is now in her youth, but before she arrives at maturity one thing is necessary,—the extension of contemplative orders, without which she will never reach perfection." Father Hecker, founder of the Paulist Fathers, whose special vocation lies in the region of zealous activity for the conversion of souls, is quoted as saying: "It (the contemplative life) is the only counterweight that can keep this head-long activity of our generation from ending in irreligion and its own destruction."

Reverend Father O'Keeffe, C. S. P., in the article quoted above, writes: "It is a

portent of moral decadence when the meditative spirit reigns not in the heart of a nation." "It is the culture of the spiritual sense which will lend beauty and dignity to our national life. It is the interior life which will give birth to heroes, saints and poets in our young republic. We need the contemplative life as a protest to our intense and thoughtless activity. We need it as a counter-irritant to the vulgarity and frivolity which is consequent upon our marvelous material prosperity. The moral effectiveness of a spiritual system is measured by its authority to uphold the highest religious ideals. When the vision dies the people perish."

The strict enclosure and particularly the grille are to many a serious stumbling-block. But as Gautrelet says, while nothing is harder for the mother than the grille, "nothing so pleases her who has heard the voice of her heavenly Bridegroom as this same grille, which, indeed, separates her from what she loves most upon earth, but only to unite her to Him Whom she loves above all,—Jesus Christ. She has the happiness of giving all, giving without reserve and without measure." He further says in effect, that the intention of the Church in making the law of enclosure was, and is, to unite the soul more intimately with God, which is the end of the religious profes-

sion. This union cannot be effected until the natural inclinations are subdued; and, "In order to subdue nature, recollection of spirit and dominion over oneself are necessary." Enclosure is the means the Church has chosen as being eminently adapted to form and preserve this spirit of recollection; "...this law of enclosure which is placed before the soul as a wall of defence against the outer world and against a worldly life."—Gautrelet, S. J., *Traite de l'etat religieux*.

Mary of Agreda, who was taught by the Blessed Virgin herself, received from her the following instruction concerning the vow of enclosure. "The vow of enclosure is the rampart of chastity and of all virtues. . . . By this vow virgins live in a safe port while other souls, tossed about by dangerous storms, are at every instant in danger of perishing. When one considers advantages so great, the enclosure does not seem to be in truth a narrow place, for within it the religious finds spread out before him the vast field of virtue, of the knowledge of God, of His infinite perfections, of the mysteries and wonders which He has wrought and ever will work in favor of mankind. Over these extended fields, through these wide meadows, the soul may, and *must*, roam and recreate herself; and only to those who refuse to do this does

the most perfect freedom seem a narrow prison.”

In regard to a vocation to a contemplative order, we quote the following extracts from Pere Coppin, C. SS. R., *La Vocation*.

“When one perceives signs of a vocation for the contemplative life, one must not immediately reject this desire on the pretext that now-a-days there is more need of workers, and that as the young person in question is possessed of certain talents she should not bury them in the tomb of the cloister. From tombs of this sort, as from those of the martyrs, come forth life, that life, that divine vitality from which Christians are born. Unable to cast out the demon from the lunatic child, the Apostles asked our Lord the reason of their inability to do so. Because of your unbelief, replies the Saviour. For, Amen I say to you, if you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you shall say to this mountain, Remove from hence hither, and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible to you. But this kind is not cast out but by prayer and fasting. (Mark, Chap. IX.) Human society is today more than ever haunted (we are tempted to say, possessed) by these evil spirits. . . . and they must be driven out by powerful intercession, austere penance and by that lively faith which moves mountains; and in contemplative orders especially do

we find this triple and all-powerful mode of exorcism.”

Moreover, in the choice between a contemplative and an active order, one must above all endeavor to learn the will of God in one's regard. To ascertain the divine will in this matter one must carefully study one's interior attractions and one's aptitudes.

“But a certain natural inclination toward a calm, retired and peaceful life should not be taken for a supernatural attraction. This is more exalted; it is, as it were, a need of the soul, which feels that she must belong entirely to Jesus, must please Him alone, must occupy herself with Him alone, by living entirely for Him, by praying and immolating herself with Him.

“When entering a contemplative order, it is above all necessary that one should be determined to give oneself entirely to God, to the work of one's sanctification and to the salvation of souls. ‘That which results in bad or mediocre priests,’ says Lacodaire, ‘is the entering the sacerdotal state with any other thought than that of sacrificing oneself. . . . all else can be repaired or corrected except this “original sin.”’

“The same may be said of religious and above all of contemplative religious. Those become bad or mediocre who, at their entrance into religion, do not realize that the

soul must belong entirely to God....that the Christian called to be a chosen soldier of Christ must glory and rejoice in dying with Christ for souls.

“True, these thoughts need not have completely mastered the soul, still less, have passed into her feelings,...but it is at least necessary that they should have begun to dawn upon the spiritual horizon of the soul and that she should experience the incipient desire of corresponding with them. The grace of vocation and all the spiritual helps of the life of the cloister will do the rest.”

In regard to aptitude, a well-balanced mind, not much dominated by the imagination; a cheerful, amiable disposition; an attraction to mortification, exterior and interior; and a propensity for prayer, joined with fairly good health—these are in general the requisites, although in individual cases one or the other may be wanting and the vocation be, nevertheless, a true and solid one.

Self-centered characters, who view all things by the light of self-interest, whose minds seem to be incapable of moving outside the narrow circle of their bodily ailments or mental troubles, such characters are quite unfit for the contemplative life; they need a life of exterior activity which will take their thoughts away from self.

Also persons much given to seeking outward consolation, who must tell everyone they meet all that befalls them and ask a word of comfort or advice, such souls can do incalculable harm in a contemplative order by destroying the peace and recollection of the whole house.

But when assured of one's vocation to a contemplative order, one must be firm, and must courageously overcome all obstacles from what side soever. Ponder well these words of our Lord:

If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethern and sisters, yea and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.

And whosoever doth not carry his cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple. (Luke XIV.)

I came not to send peace, but the sword. (Matt. X.)

No man putting his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God. (Luke IX.)

Many communities of contemplatives do not accept endowments or require large dowries, but live on alms, the more perfectly to practice evangelical poverty. While this is a great advantage to many a young woman who would find it impossible to follow the call of God if a large dowry were demanded of her, it is, on the other

hand, sometimes found to be a serious obstacle in the minds of certain very good persons who would like to see a community of contemplative nuns established in their midst, if—it did not require anything for its support! If these persons believe in the work of contemplative orders why are they not as willing to support them as they are any other charity? And how can the members of these orders give themselves to the performance of their proper duty of prayer if they must employ all their time and efforts in gaining a livelihood? St. Theresa, who met with this difficulty when founding the first convent of her reform, says in her *Life* that she was astonished to see what mischief the devil was able to do against a few poor women, and how all the people could imagine that twelve women leading an austere life could be so injurious to the city. She was warned by St. Peter of Alcantara not to accept an endowment, and she states that she found afterwards that those monasteries which she erected without endowments enjoyed greater protection from God and suffered less want than did the others.

It requires so little for the support of a few austere nuns, that no one need imagine that other works of zeal or charity suffer from it. On the contrary, aside from the spiritual blessings which flow

from the presence of such a monastery in a city or diocese, many good Christians are sincerely pleased when extern-sisters from these communities knock at their doors. The presence of these Sisters and the purpose for which they make their appeal raise the thoughts of their benefactors above the material and temporal affairs that make up their daily lives, and renew their faith and confidence in the power of prayer; while they are glad to be able by their offerings to share in the prayers and sacrifices of the community, the efficacy of which they have many times experienced. Nor is this all,—to many a sorrowing heart has the sympathy of the humble extern-Sisters into whose ears they pour their troubles, brought peace and consolation. Many a sinner have they been able to reclaim, more than once a death-bed to smooth, as they make their rounds asking for aid for the monastery they serve.

The Catholic directory shows a number of contemplative communities in this country. The Carmelites and Poor Clares each have a number of houses; there are also the Dominicans, Precious Blood Nuns and others. May this little article serve to increase their number!
