

## CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE IN THE WORLD?

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**I**N the May issue of *LIFE OF THE SPIRIT*, 'A Challenge from inside the Cloister' by a Carmelite nun denied with considerable force that there could be any real contemplative life in the world—mainly 'because the essential "stripping" could never be accomplished outside Enclosure or the Rule nor could it be born'. (p. 556.) It is true that the writer says that it is 'A Carmelite life in the world' that does not seem possible, but she goes on to say: 'May I suggest that it is a great pity so much is made of "contemplative life" in the world now'; so that evidently it is not *only* the Carmelite form of that life which is considered impossible outside the cloister.

This 'challenge' has given rise to a series of replies—some of which have appeared in the following numbers of *LIFE OF THE SPIRIT*—all of which have protested quite decidedly against the theory expressed in the 'challenge'. The general feeling is—against the writer's view 'that it is a great pity so much is made of "Contemplative life" in the world'—that it would be, on the contrary, a very great pity to *discourage* in any way those (and there are many more than is generally known) who are genuinely called by God to close union with him, but who for one reason or another are unable to join any contemplative order. Such people are sometimes found, too, among religious, in an active order from which they may be unable or unwilling to change to a contemplative one.

No doubt there are cases of souls such as those of whom the writer of the 'challenge' speaks, who think they can attain that which only the 'stripping' of enclosed life—or even *any* form of 'stripping'—could accomplish; people, in fact, who shirk the call to the religious life. But the fact that some may misuse what is in itself good, in itself a real call to 'go up higher', is surely not a reason for general discouragement.

The Carmelite, it is true, declares that: 'There is no intention to belittle or to discourage contemplative life in the world: far from it', but simply 'fear of the danger of those, not bound by any ties or any special indications against an enclosed life, being lulled in

the security of the thought that they could lead a contemplative life *equally well* in the world' (her italics). Such a temptation in some cases is possible; but, again, can that be considered sufficient reason for the general discouragement? It may be remarked, too, that experience would seem to show that such persons usually find out fairly soon that the difficulties, trials and sufferings which any form of contemplative life necessarily involves, are more than they can support; in other words, they discover the *real* nature of that life, and that it does not consist entirely in a state of peace and gentle content. The writer ends her letter with another declaration that 'one does *not* want to discourage the contemplative life in the world for those whom God bids to stay there'; but the bulk of her letter gives the impression that she tends to take back with the left hand what she gives with the right.

Difficulties with regard to the question of the contemplative life in general seem to be the result of two things:

(i) Failure to distinguish clearly between two aspects of the term 'contemplative life';

(ii) Failure to realise—perhaps, even, refusal to admit—the truth that contemplative life, in one of the above aspects, is not an extraordinary grace granted by God only to a select few, but that it is the normal perfection of the Christian life which consists in the constant endeavour to follow Christ; the constant endeavour to 'become another Christ'.

(iii) In an article which appeared in the July number of *LIFE OF THE SPIRIT* on 'The Carthusians', the present writer spoke of the need of always keeping in mind this clear distinction between the two senses in which the term 'contemplative life' can be used. If this is not done, there is likely to be confusion.

First of all, the words 'contemplative life' mean a particular form of the religious life which is arranged in such a manner as to provide the means for those who enter that life, to arrive at contemplation, i.e., at a form of interior prayer and spiritual life which leads to direct union with God—as far as that is possible in this life on earth. This is what may be called the 'technical sense' of the words.<sup>1</sup>

Secondly, the words 'contemplative life' can be used in a more

1. In the context of 'Perfection' this particular form of life is called a 'state'; that is, the State of Perfection made static by public vows, as distinguished from the life of perfection or perfect living which is to be found among all estates of man.

general sense, meaning the actual 'grace' of contemplation existing in individual souls, irrespective of their outward mode of life—that is, whether they are members of a contemplative order, of any other form of religious order, or of life in the world in any of its many forms.

Contemplative life in the technical or official sense, while it provides the means for arriving at the 'grace of contemplation', does not ensure it; from the fact that one is a member of a contemplative order, it does not necessarily follow that one is a 'contemplative' in the personal, individual sense. The reason for this is that contemplation is always a gift of God, and he gives his gifts as he chooses.

We should, then, agree with the Carmelite when she says that Carmelite life or contemplative life, in this official, technical sense, is not possible in the world. But we should agree only up to a point, for, as more than one of the answers to her 'challenge' have shown, even the Carmelite life itself *can* be lived in the world—not, of course, exactly as in a Carmelite convent with its separation from active life and its enclosure, but to the extent which is actually demanded by Carmelite tertiary life. The words of the Rule for Tertiaries deserve quoting: 'The object of our [Carmelite] Third Order is the same as that of our Order (in general), that is, primarily it is the contemplative life, and secondarily, as springing from and overflowing from the primary, it is the active life'. (See LIFE OF THE SPIRIT, July, 1951, pp. 31 and 32.) In other words, the Carmelite form of contemplative life can be adapted to the varying circumstances of life in the world—as, indeed, can that of any other contemplative or partly contemplative religious order. But in the second sense, the 'contemplative life' or 'grace' does not involve a special external form of life as in the first sense; it means the interior state of individual souls, whatever the external form of life may be. That this is possible is due to the truth which is becoming more and more generally accepted by authorities on the spiritual life, that the grace of contemplation—the 'mystical state', as it is sometimes called—is in itself, as we have said further back, the normal perfection of the 'Christ-life' in this world. This statement, however, does not imply that even those Christians who strive to correspond faithfully with divine grace will receive the gift of contemplation here and now. But Father R. Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., maintains that: 'infused contemplation [i.e., con-

templation in the strict sense] belongs, if not to the essence of Christian perfection, at least to its integrity'. (*Christian Perfection and Contemplation*, p. 178. English translation.) In this book, too, Fr Garrigou-Lagrange speaks of the 'General and Remote Call to Mystical Contemplation' (p. 345, Article II), together with the 'individual and proximate call', and shows that the former means that infused contemplation is open to all who desire to follow our Lord to perfection and that the latter implies a special, direct call from God to certain souls. There are, of course, 'many mansions' in the mystical life, and many degrees, but the essential character is the same in all, even in the lowest—that is, 'a simple and loving knowledge of God, which cannot be obtained by our personal activity alone—although it is aided by grace, but rather demands a manifest, special illumination and inspiration of the Holy Ghost'. This knowledge of God, however, remains in 'the obscurity of faith'. (Garrigou-Lagrange, p. 260; our italics.) In an essay on the spiritual doctrine of St Gregory of Nyssa (brother of St Basil and, like him, a monk), Père J. Daniélou, S.J., shows that St Gregory teaches that the mystic state consists essentially in an interior experience granted by God of his presence in the soul and that this experience may be offered to all who try to follow out the 'Christ-life'—not by extraordinary devotions or mortifications, not necessarily by long periods of private mental prayer, but by following as perfectly as possible the ordinary Christian life; using its Sacraments, its liturgical worship—the Sacrifice of Christ our Lord himself and the Divine Office (when this be possible) in which the Church continues his own prayer on earth, the 'Prayer of God'. (Luke VI, 12.) In short, the full Christian life.<sup>1</sup>

Not only is the contemplative grace or gift possible in the world and in all its forms, but even the solitary life can be lived—in spirit at least—as we are told in that excellent little book by F. M. Pohl, *The House of the Spirit*. 'Those called to live in the House of the Spirit', she says, 'are of two kinds: those who are able to live the solitary life [in the world] without mixing to any great extent with other people, and those who live in the midst of the wear and tear of business life, social life, family life and so on.' (p. 5.) Solitary life in the world lacks, naturally, the helps

1. *Platonisme et Théologie Mystique: Essai sur la Doctrine Spirituelle de Saint Grégoire de Nyse*. Jean Daniélou. (Aubier Editions Montaigne.) See especially pp. 260, 261, 264, 266, 271, 273, 288.

provided in religious life; it is almost entirely interior. But obedience, separation from the *spirit* of the world, and various kinds of 'stripping' are there, adapted to the circumstances.

All this is in no way intended to 'belittle' contemplative life in the official sense, nor to make any sort of comparisons between it and contemplation in the life of the world outside the cloister. In itself, of course, official contemplative life is the best and safest means of attaining to Christian perfection, and it possesses the inestimable safeguard of religious obedience. But, as the Carmelite writer truly says: 'Surely the highest vocation for each is the vocation to which God calls him individually. That way alone surely will the closest union with God be reached and God's greatest glory manifested.'

### THE BREAD

[A fragment written between two treatises in Ms. All Souls XXIV, fol. 29v.—C.K.]

Ye wot well that wheat being in the sheaf is not able to be served afore a lord at his table, unto time it be also beaten with the flail, also thrown with the fan, also broken with the mill & shaken with the bowltel,<sup>1</sup> also wet with water, also kneaded & moulded with hands & then to be set in an hot oven till it be baken. Right so man's soul that is bound in the sheaf of fleshly lusts & earthly affections is not able to be served afore our Lord in heaven, till it be also beaten with the flail of tribulation, also thrown with the fan of persecution, also broken with the mill of temptation, also shaken with the bowltel of sickness, also wet with the water of sorrow & contrition, also kneaded & moulded with the hands of slanders, reproofs, cursings, scornings and despising. And then to be set in the oven of the love of our Lord and of heavenly things & so to be baken with the heat of charity, till adversity be to him as joyful as prosperity, poverty as riches, sickness as health, despising as praising. And then as the wheat, well dight & baken as it is aforesaid, shall be presented & served afore the Lord in his royalty, right so the soul, dight & baken as it is aforesaid, at the hour of death shall be presented with angels afore our Lord in heaven, with him to dwell there without end. Amen.

1. meal sieve.