

THE SOCIETY OF MARIE AUXILIATRICE

A CENTENARY AND THE FOUNDATION OF AN ENGLISH NOVIATE

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It is appropriate that the centenary of the Order and the establishment of an English noviciate should be hailed by such an excellent publication as *The Society of Marie Auxiliatrice*.¹ Many people are now acquainted with the life of Blessed Marie Thérèse de Soubiran who died an exile from the Order she had founded, and many believe that this last sad phase of her life laid the foundations of that deep and tender charity for the poor and displaced which now marks her Order. This admirable book captures that spirit and lays it before us in a concise letterpress and numerous excellent pictures reproduced in France by the new heliograph process. After a preface containing extracts from the Holy Father's own address to the nuns of the Society on the occasion of the beatification of their foundress we are given a brief history of the Order. There follows an account of the work in France, England, Italy and Japan with a footnote on the new foundation in Dublin, accounts of the different types of work, schools, hospitals, hostels and holiday houses, and finally an 'inside' glimpse of the life of a novice and the perpetual adoration.

A noticeable feature of this book is the pictures. Apart from their own intrinsic worth they give a genuine insight into the work of the Order. One notices to begin with the deep unposed happiness in the eyes of children and nuns alike, even in the hospital scenes. One does not have to look far for the explanation. Mother Marie Thérèse had made the Holy Eucharist the centre and inspiration of her Society's work, and it was that together with her complete abandonment to the will of God which prepared them for all possibilities, so that today we may read some passages of her *Directory* with great surprise. She foresaw that this immediate dependence on God would bring them every variety of work and foresaw that this would entail more contact with the outside world than could be contemplated in her own day. And so it is now that the Congregation of Marie Auxiliatrice leads an intensely active life forever centred on perpetual adoration before the Blessed Sacrament. This combination of the active and contemplative life must commend itself to many young people today, and above all there is a peculiarly modern character to an Order which insists on

¹ Obtainable from The Convent of Marie Auxiliatrice, Manor House School, East End Road, Finchley, London, N.3.

taking Christ out of the convent to the waiting world. Not only the nuns' spiritual formation and their life of prayer make this possible but also the shrewd practical intelligence of their foundress. She saw from the first that if their primary work of hostels for business girls was to succeed they would have to offer something more than a lodging-house. That could be found anywhere. So, based on the original idea of the 'beguinages' she insisted that her hostels must have that family spirit which makes a true home. And to avoid this deteriorating into shallow sentiment, as is so easily possible in a religious house withdrawn from the world, she demanded that her nuns should keep abreast of all the latest practical details which make a home. Dressmaking and cookery entered the school curriculum at Marie Auxiliatrice as soon as anywhere because the Mother Foundress possessed the woman's instinct for harnessing the natural to the supernatural. In such a 'practical' fashion the Society undertook their first hospitals. No hostel was complete that could not look after the girls who fell sick, and when once you began to care for your own sick and did the job well other patients arrived. From a hospital to cure people was only a short step to a ward for the incurables where those whose health was despaired of were enabled to face death with hope.

The foundation of an English noviciate for the Society of Marie Auxiliatrice must make one hope for more vocations for a work which seems to answer the needs of this century so fully. We do need religious Orders which can compete on equal terms with modern institutions and, one might almost say, seduce young people from modern seductions. We want hostels and schools and hospitals that are bright and attractive and efficient. Yet in trying to provide these superficial attractions we often kill the spirit. We have all heard of the Catholic Youth Centres which have deteriorated into entertainment centres as a result of competition with the local 'non-denominational' club. But Marie Auxiliatrice claims, and in no small measure succeeds, to serve both these ends. It is largely due to the inspiration of the Foundress and a glance at this booklet or at any school or hostel of the Society will tell us that her spirit still lives. It is preserved in the religious formation of her nuns. Two principles govern this formation: work and prayer according to individual needs. In addition to the time set aside for meditation, Office and adoration before the Blessed Sacrament, time must also be left for whatever private prayer the individual needs. Mother Marie Thérèse also taught that the work of the Society would be carried on most effectively if individuals were given the work adapted to their talents and allowed to pray according to their needs. Besides doing the work of the twentieth century such a religious Order must appeal to modern tastes.

During the last war the Society lost their house in Bow, but while British bombers were retaliating over German-occupied Paris the sisters of Marie Auxiliatrice and their lay helpers knelt day and night in adoration before the Blessed Sacrament in their church beside Montmartre. Now God in his fashion retaliates and the English noviciate can only be the fruit of that prayer. Such fruit cannot fail to grow and ripen.



REVIEWS

POVERTY. Being the English Version of *La Pauvreté in Problèmes de la Religieuse d'aujourd'hui*. Translated by Lancelot C. Sheppard. (Religious Life Series No. IV; Blackfriars; 15s.)

Poverty is one of the trickiest elements in the life of a religious today. For one thing it easily fires the imagination of the idealist, but because it is concerned with material things the ideal can be lost in a series of fanatical decisions about subsisting on the bare necessities of life, without modern conveniences or comforts of any kind. This often leads to unrest and criticism of the existing state of affairs in religious Orders. Another problem arises from the highly complicated life of modern society in which the religious finds himself necessarily implicated—within a welfare state, for example, he has to have ready cash to pay his health insurance as well as his rates and taxes, while the system of stocks and shares upon which the contemplative in particular subsisted has become so modified as to have undermined the basis of the material life of many enclosed religious.

With all this, it was necessary to review the question of poverty in the life of the modern religious without being carried off into the realms of the mystical or romantic. Père Plé, of *La Vie Spirituelle*, therefore gathered his group of clergy, expert in the question of modern religious life, to discuss these problems in so far as they applied to the nuns and religious sisters. A volume, as usual, resulted from these discussions, and it is here translated into English for the benefit of the large number of English-speaking religious. The authors avoid the romantic, but the book opens with an excellent study by Père Bouyer on the paradox of our Lord's preaching 'Blessed are the poor' to a people brought up on the Bible which seemed to them to indicate an ideal life of plentiful possessions and ease in an earthly Jerusalem. Other authors follow this with a history of monastic poverty rising from our Lord's invitation 'If thou wilt be perfect, go sell what thou hast . . .' up to the particular ideals of Poverty of St Dominic, St Francis and S. Ignatius.