

driven out of their minds by diabolic devices of modern science they have to die like the Holy Innocents of whom the Church says: '*Non loquendo sed moriendo confessi sunt*'.

Yet this very fact may give us new hope. The blood of the martyrs has ever been the seed of the Church, and it was after the age of the martyrs had passed that Europe became Christian and the degenerate art of paganism was transformed into the beauties of plainchant, icons and mosaics. Thus, instead of ruefully looking back into a past that could produce these wonders should we not rather be filled with hope for a better future, a Christian future obtained for us by the blood of the martyrs? This future will surely produce its own characteristic art—perhaps even from the ruins of the degenerate art of neo-paganism. But in the meantime we may well feed on the wholesome art of the past and assimilate it—not by 'back-to' movements but by living lives of prayer and virtue, imitating our martyrs as far as in us lies in our own small way. Then, perhaps, future generations may once more produce an art worthy of our faith, an art that will equal, in its own characteristic manner, those glorious expressions of the faith of a past age: plain chant, icons and mosaics.



## CONTEMPLATION AND CONTEMPLATIVES

BY

JOHN CORSON

**S**OME confusion seems to exist on the subject of contemplation and the contemplative life—if we may judge from the correspondence in *THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT*. The point is one of great importance and the confusion extends to a great number of people to judge by the quotation made in the December issue from *Cross and Crown*. It may therefore be of some use to offer one or two distinctions which may at least form a basis for further discussion and elucidation.

From the first we should distinguish clearly between the act of contemplation, the contemplative life, and a contemplative state or Order. These are three different things which are always being used as almost synonymous. Contemplation as an act of an individual human soul has been described as a *simplex intuitus veritatis* or we might almost say a *simplex intuitus deitatis*. It lies in the realms of unseeing faith, the most perfect form of which can

never reach to vision. Yet it is a direct and simple intuition of God, not by an argued process of reasoning, nor by an analysis of the idea of God, but by a contact with God which derives from a close union of love which influences the mind and the heart together. A knowledge which reaches the mind directly from the touch of love may be called an intuition because it is concerned with the concrete object in itself and not merely with the abstracted nature of the object. When a man knows God in this way, when he contemplates God, he does so because he loves God and loving God has removed the obstacles to perfect love, the venial sins of self-reliance and pride, and has thus made it possible for the Holy Ghost to work in the soul through the Gifts of Wisdom, Understanding and the other five which together make it possible for a man to contemplate. In other words the act of contemplation is essentially bound up with the action of the Gifts of the Holy Spirit, as becomes evident by merely reflecting on Wisdom or Understanding which introduce man's mind to a divine mode of knowing. Without entering into the disputed question of acquired and infused contemplation, it is clear that in general man can only dispose himself for contemplation by overcoming venial sins and by quietening his spirit by means of special methods and with the help of the active virtues; but God infuses the true and essential contemplation—it is his gift which he gives when he likes, as the Spirit breathes where he listeth. This contemplation lies beyond discursive prayer and meditation, beyond acts, beyond anything that is acquired. It comes sometimes briefly, sometimes at length; it lies sometimes beneath great aridity and torment—the quiet presence of God in the perfection of charity. It comes even amid distractions and activities, but it comes not at will nor when a contemplative might wish for it.

Contemplative life, on the other hand, is something continuous, a movement towards an end, as we would speak of any life. A man is said to live a life of sin not when he falls occasionally into evil but when it is a characteristic of his mode of behaviour, when he does evil things by habit and more or less continuously. In this sense the contemplative life is distinguished from the active life by the predominance and continuity of the contemplative virtues, that is the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity, while the moral virtues such as justice, temperance, mercy, patience, religion take the leading part in the active life. A man who rests the foundations of his daily existence on the great truth of the faith, accepting everything directly from Providence, content to remain in the darkness of mystery and not always demanding reasons for what he has to do; the man who rests in the all-embracing peace of the

divine hope which God gives him from the depths of his mercy and from the breadth of his omnipotence, not disquieted by the evil trend of world events, not disturbed by the financial difficulties in which he may find himself, not relying heavily on his own human powers of endurance or on the powers and constancy of his friends, but finding himself always supported in the hands of God; above all the man whose supernatural love is the main feature of every virtuous action he performs, loving with the love of God when he is just or merciful, loving with God's love when he pays his bills or forgives his debtors, loving God when he is in pain or misunderstood and attacked by his neighbours, living in the union of charity when he sets himself to sleep and when he rises in the morning, consumed with the fire of love when he approaches the holy Table and receives his Lord—such a man must be living the contemplative life. Charity is the characteristic of his existence even when he is immersed in activities. Evidently he is not always receiving the gift of infused contemplation. When he is going about his business, be it in a monastery or in a broker's office, he has to keep his mind on his work. He performs his daily tasks in the presence of God, aware at the back of his mind that he is still the tabernacle of the blessed Trinity, but his active mind must be preoccupied with the land he is digging or the figures he is adding or his work will not be done. His contemplative life does not cease when he is thus engaged, any more than that of the apostle when he is preaching the Word of God to the infidel or the back-sliding Christian. His contemplative habit of mind remains, because his life is characterised by faith, hope and charity. In this way he lives a life which is in tune with the act of contemplation. There are no great barriers in his manner of behaviour which will make it impossible for God to give him this special gift. The Holy Spirit can breathe on him at any time because he is not self-reliant, proud, or given over to the natural joys of being busied about many things. Love rather than asceticism is the key to his life.

Finally there is a *state* of life which depends on rules and organisation, the scaffolding surrounding the life of an individual rather as the young saplings in a park are surrounded by netting or a circular fence. The sapling is alive but its life is not strong enough to stand up to the buffeting of the wind or the gnawing of the rat, rabbit or squirrel; so it needs to be held up and protected. In this way the contemplative religious Orders provide by their rules a *way* of life rather than the life itself; they supply the organisation, rather than impart a share in the organism of souls in heavenly converse. This is called in general the 'State of Perfection' which may be subdivided into the contemplative state and the active

state of perfection in that certain rules are principally organised for the performance of the active moral virtues, such as nursing the sick or visiting the poor, while other statutes and constitutions aim at handing the soul over in contemplation to the working of God's grace. In this way the contemplative Orders provide a way in which the members may eventually enter in reality into the *life* of contemplation; they supply the organisation which makes it possible for the members most easily and most directly to reach a continuity in the reign of charity, hope and faith in their lives. Perfection in this sense is synonymous with charity, but it is not difficult to understand that there are many within the framework of the 'state' who are in fact deficient in charity and therefore not actually living the contemplative life, whereas there may be many outside the framework of the 'state', living in lay surroundings and with only their own personal rule of life to support them exteriorly, who have yet advanced far in the way of perfection and are living the contemplative life. St Thomas makes this point when writing of the state of perfection. Nonetheless in that state, which we call a contemplative Order, everything down to the smallest detail is so arranged as to make the ascent to God as direct and unhindered as possible. There is a great deal to do within the Order; the active social virtues have to be exercised so that the novice finds that he has no time to himself and has to be performing a great number of exercises, albeit religious exercises, all the day long. But the social life which he leads is restricted so that the danger of its being dissipated among too many friends or employed in too extended a series of social good works is eliminated and his active, ascetic life is shot through with silence and the performance of liturgical prayer so that it will the more quickly bear fruit in contemplation and the supreme reign of charity. His obedience is austere and poverty and chastity restrain his natural tendency to immersion in worldly affairs. This does not mean that it is easy for him to attain to the contemplative life, for that is never easy to reach but always demands great generosity and a certain salt of heroism; but it means that he reaches it by a direct though hard route.

If this threefold distinction is valid—and its elements may be found in St Thomas even though he does not set it out exactly in this form—it is clear that a man may be called a contemplative in three ways. He may be a contemplative because God frequently bestows on him the gift of contemplation, when he has this special *simplex intuitus deitatis*. Or he may be a contemplative because his life is generally more or less permanently characterised by faith, hope and charity. Or finally he is a contemplative because he has

adopted a state of life which is organised for contemplation, because he has entered a contemplative religious Order. As we come down the scale in this way we notice that the first is not according to his choice at all, but comes as the Holy Spirit 'listeth', the second depends considerably on the cooperation of the human will as a man can exercise his will in love and constantly practise the virtues of faith and hope. He can keep from serious sins and deal always severely with any deliberate, venial sin and thus live the contemplative life partly by choice though of course virtues are infused. Finally the life he leads in a religious order may be almost entirely his own choice. Indeed it is possible for a man without a contemplative vocation to be living in a contemplative order through his own choice—even against the manifested will of God.

In this way there may be lay contemplatives in the world according to the first and second types but not according to the third, and perhaps this fact will help to disentangle some of the confusions which have arisen on the subject.



## CORRESPONDENCE

Sir,—Your correspondent in your November issue seems to overlook that there are people who are irresistibly drawn to contemplation, yet have no vocation to live an enclosed religious life, and it is for such people that lay institutes are designed.

The Christian contemplative, religious or lay, offers his life in total self-giving to the purposes of God, and if we look at the life of our Lord, it seems likely that lives wholly orientated to God in the world will be extremely exacting, but if they are to be fruitful must be trained and disciplined.

A time of complete withdrawal from the world, if it is practicable, must be of the greatest value. It will be the dispositions learned during that time of withdrawal that will later stand in good stead in the world. During this time the standard will be set, the ability to work out the same ideal in a different context developed. Of course the change from one way of life to another will be difficult, but that does not seem to be a good reason for foregoing so valuable an opportunity of training. Neither does the desire for peace and retirement necessarily make it right that the desire should be satisfied.

It seems to me that it would be of inestimable value for any isolated person trying to practise a life of prayer in the world to be 'attached' in some measure (perhaps as a tertiary in a lay institute),