

THE CONSTITUTION ON
SECULAR INSTITUTES AND THE
CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE

BY

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THE new Apostolic Constitution, *Provida Mater Ecclesia*, which recognises what are called Secular Institutes (that is to say, Associations which, without public vows and without community life, dedicate themselves to the perfection of the spiritual life by means of the three evangelical counsels practised in the world) appears to envisage these Institutes as directed always to an apostolic purpose and the works of the active life. We would here take the opportunity to consider how this same Constitution, with very little adaptation, might be extended to include similar associations whose aim would be a purely contemplative life lived in the world, and in fact a revival in modern conditions of the hermits and anchoresses of a former age. While hermits have always existed in the Church (though they are perhaps fewer today than ever in her history), their mode of life in solitude has never been recognised as a form of the canonical state of perfection nor has it had her approval and guarantee as a safe way of life, unless it became to a large extent conventual. In the West such Orders as the Camaldolese Hermits and the Carthusians have formed a happy combination of the eremitical and the conventual life; while in the Eastern Church there are similar forms, and also more strictly eremitical types, which the less legalised and organised condition of monasticism in the East facilitates. But in both East and West it has been found difficult to extend ecclesiastical approval and guarantee to the purely solitary life, owing to its many difficulties and dangers.

These difficulties and dangers spring from the very nature of the solitary life. It is either superhuman or inhuman. As Aristotle said: 'he that is incapable of society, or so complete in himself as not to want it, makes no part of a city, like a beast or a god'. The solitary must either be completely perfect, and live in the society of God and share in the divine life as far as is possible on earth, or he will inevitably become inhuman—the self-centred bachelor or spinster living only for himself, impervious to a generous love either of God or man; or even worse, fall into eccentricity and possibly madness. For life among others is the only normal way of acquiring perfection. Long years must be spent in receiving instruction and example from others

in the daily give and take of social life and in exercising the moral virtues in a variety of ways and with ever-increasing perfection and generosity. Normally it is only by loving our neighbours whom we can see that we shall acquire the freedom from selfishness necessary to love God whom we cannot see. For the contemplation and love of God are impeded by any weakness in the moral virtues: the passions will be uncontrolled and constantly disturb the soul when it wishes to seek God, or lead it away from God and into sin, clouding its perception of divine things; external difficulties and unavoidable conflicts, the perpetual noise around us of persons and things, will perturb the peace of the mind; and charity will not develop unless first exercised on other persons and the familiar things of this world, and will be unable to rise to the generosity needed for the love of the invisible. Hence Cardinal Cajetan wisely remarks:¹ 'Let this be well explained to those tempted to the solitary life. Let them examine themselves, whether they are seeking solitude out of feeling; or whether it is because they have already the perfection of life, so that they are already patient, kind, humble, meek, content with bread and water, etc.: *Solid food, says the Apostle, is for the full grown; for those whose faculties are so trained that they can distinguish, practically and effectively, between good and evil. Who is he, and we will praise him?* (Ecc. 31, 9).'

The solitary life is thus only for the perfect, and is most dangerous for others, unless a special divine grace intervenes, as in the case of St John the Baptist, St Anthony, St Benedict and others. Yet, given perfection it is the most natural state for those possessing it to adopt, and in itself a more perfect condition than community or social life. Perfect charity seeks only to adhere to God perfectly, it seeks only God. Circumstances, authority, the manifest divine will, may cause it to extend itself and become even more perfect, by passing over what it receives from God in contemplation to its neighbour; adding thus the fruit of good deeds without losing total adherence to God, and by that very addition growing in perfection in itself. But, as St Augustine says: 'the love of truth requires a holy retiredness, and the necessity of charity a just employment, which if it be not imposed upon us we ought not to seek, . . . but betake ourselves wholly to the search after truth' (*City of God*, 19, 19). In itself the solitary life is the natural resort for those who have attained perfection; and, while many are called to the active life, many others to the contemplative life in circumstances in which it will overflow in action, there are also many vocations to the purely contemplative life. And yet that life is today only open in a form guaranteed by the Church, in a strictly conventual form, while the active life has already taken on a vast

¹ Commentary on *II-II*, 188, 8.

variety of forms adapting themselves to new conditions. For many the contemplative orders are inaccessible owing to the circumstances of their life or of their upbringing, in spite of their fitness for a contemplative life and unfitness for an active one. The new Constitution recognises the large number of vocations that present themselves now-a-days for the active life of perfection outside the cloister and sees in the development of Secular Institutes a way of renewing the life of society by the presence of organised cells of intense action. Cannot the contemplative life also follow the active in the secular world and form cells of contemplation—persons living outwardly in the way of the secular world but leading a fully anchoritic life? There is scope for such a life, as ever, in the deserted spaces of the world; there is scope for it in a form similar to the medieval anchorites and anchoresses, living in a house near the church; there is room for a development similar to the Idiorhythmic monks of the Byzantine Rite living in twos and threes in their own houses; there is place for it in the solitudes of our great cities, where the huge blocks of flats and lodgings make it possible to live for years without knowing anyone.

There is room for such contemplatives; they exist, too. But it is impossible to make an organisation expressly for the perfect, even if they could be found and organised, whereas their life is mostly hidden with Christ in God. Any organisation must be primarily intended for those seeking after perfection. Is such a Secular Institute possible, aimed exclusively at training and guiding contemplative souls without the safeguards and advantages of community life? We suggest that the new Constitution makes it something that can be considered and perhaps tried out, and which if successful might hope for ecclesiastical approval.

The Constitution provides for one or more common houses for training; these would have an obvious use in the initial preparation of candidates for a contemplative life in the world, and would form a refuge for retirement from time to time to the support of common life. But the real training would have to be in the world, where the life is to be lived; and it is here that the organisation of a Secular Institute would come into play to remove the difficulties and dangers inherent in the solitary life; and to make it a suitable way of acquiring perfection for the imperfect of contemplative vocation. The private vows and organisation would provide many of the safeguards of common life. Obedience would, by frequent control from superiors, direct the contemplative life along the right lines. Poverty would be subject to control, and the way of life preserved from eccentricity, excess or relaxation. While the solitary life would be the ultimate aim, it need not be embraced at once, but a gradually decreasing social life in the milieu of the aspirant and some active works would

be prescribed as a needful means of acquiring the perfection of the moral virtues. Or members could live together, somewhat on the Eastern Idiorhythmic pattern, in twos or threes, until fit for solitude. In the end there would be produced pure contemplatives, in such surroundings and such degrees as were suited for each one, with allowance for much variety both within one institute and between various institutes.

Such a stabilising of the contemplative life in the world on a basis approved and recommended by the Church would result in a great impetus to the contemplative life. We cannot doubt the utility and need of such a growth in the number and distribution of contemplatives in the present world. Though inactive, such lives are the most useful of all by prayer and example. We constantly assert that our goodness and our success in making goodness progress in the world depend more on God than on ourselves. The setting aside of some who are called and suited to this work so that they can dedicate themselves exclusively to it is but the logical conclusion of this doctrine. And there is no question but that the effect of pure contemplative lives on their milieu, even where their whole strife is to remain unknown and apart, is gigantic; for they put in a clear and unmistakable manner before men the absoluteness of God's claims and the true nature of perfection, which lies in union with God. This can be seen wherever there is a contemplative convent. Other forms of religious life do not place before men the same clear question of the purpose of life; love of God is obscured in fact, or at least in the minds of those who do not see truly, by love of the neighbour.

Such a new form of the contemplative life as is here envisaged would render it possible to many who cannot now embrace it. It would also provide a form less open to the vicissitudes of war, anti-clericalism, irreligion and indifference, which often break up contemplative convents or render their life extremely difficult. Such institutes would have little dependence on material places or outward organisation; less indeed than active institutes. They would be indestructible and not dispersable. Even conscription of their members as labour would merely put a strain on their members but not destroy them. They could survive and function in the modern bureaucratic state.

Such Institutes could also bring about a return of the ancient forms of the eremitic life in the deserted and lonely places of the world, where men can still live freely. As in the decline of Rome the hermits of the desert became a signal and an inspiration to the whole world by their flight from it, so in the decline of our days the spectacular dedication of some to God might have a similar effect. The inclination of our time, even in the Church, leans too much to action;

it needs a powerful and extreme contemplative counterpoise; compromise forms will not be so effective. The revival of hermits would be spectacular, as it was long ago—but only of course on condition of being as deliberately unspectacular as possible. For it is the hermit's strife to be alone with God that is spectacular; and any advertisement on his part would destroy it. To be effective, such an institute of hermits would have to make every effort and take every precaution to be unknown and to remain unknown; it would not have to seek vocations, but to wait for them to come, and flee with them ever farther from the world. There are, no doubt, many parts of the world where this could still be done. Africa was the original home of the hermits, and that continent has something in its make-up that can drive men and help men to solitude; we may see hermits once again (indeed there are followers of Charles de Foucauld) in the desert, or perhaps, since that has now fallen to the Mohammedan yoke, in the better climate of the solitudes of Southern Africa. But these are not things that can be planned or organised; they must just happen.

A PRAYER OF ST THOMAS OF AQUIN
BEFORE STUDY
ORATIO S. THOMÆ AQUINATIS



CREATOR INEFFABILIS, qui de thesauris sapientiæ tuæ tres Angelorum hierarchias designasti, et eas super cælum empyreum miro ordine collocasti, atque universi partes elegantissime distribuisti: Tu, inquam, qui verus Fons Luminis et Sapientiæ diceris, ac supereminens Principium, infundere digneris super intellectus mei tenebras, tuæ radium claritatis, duplices, in quibus natus sum, a me removens tenebras, peccatum scilicet, et ignorantiam.

Tu qui linguas infantium facis disertas, linguam meam erudias atque in labiis meis gratiam tuæ benedictionis infundas. Da mihi intelligendi acumen, retinendi capacitatem, addiscendi modum et facilitatem, interpretandi subtilitatem loquendi gratiam copiosam.

Ingressum instruas, progressum dirigas, egressum compleas: Tu qui es verus Deus et homo, qui vivis et regnas in sæcula sæculorum. Amen.¹

TRANSLATION FROM THE ENGLISH PRIMER

O Unspeakable Creator, which forth of the treasur of thy wisdom hast pointed out three hierarchies of Angels and placed them by a

¹ This text is taken from the A.A.S. 1933.