

OVERHEARD

THOMAS GILBY, O.P.

Two young persons are discovered in a London cafeteria. Each carries a tray and is dressed in black. Their sex does not matter. They may look like apprentice undertakers or trainee deaconesses. In fact they are novices in religious orders, ancient and modern.

Hullo, fancy meeting you.

—Me too you.

Look, here's a table free.

—Goodo. Aren't you immured in a cloister?

I am. Thought you'd taken the plunge too. Isn't yours called a *convictum*?

—It sure is. What brings you up to town?

Lawyers. Just for the day, though. All set to sign away my birthright. Benefit of a nephew actually. Hope it'll be nephews and nieces too—that is, if my sisters do their stuff. And you?

—Dentist.

We have to go to the local man.

—Ours is the superior's brother. Wimpole Street. Came up by car.

Alone? I've got an escort. Gone to the Zoo. Permission of course.

—Mine's off buying some records. Plainsong you know.

We get enough of that as it is. Anyhow we're not allowed gramophones. Not even the wireless, except for the weather, of course, and the Queen on Christmas afternoon.

—Oh, we're encouraged rather. Especially the Third Programme what used-to-be. Television too, but only for science. We're supposed to keep abreast. Orders from Rome.

We sort of jog along in our own way.

—That's different; you people have been at it for I don't know how many centuries. Sometimes I rather envy you primitives. We're wired throughout, and they're talking about giving the points for morning and evening meditation over the loud-speaker.

Lor.

—The mid-day examen too.

We don't go in for that. Why, we haven't even got running h. & c., not to speak of mod. con.

—All the same, I must say you look pretty well on compost and contemplation. How are you getting on really? Life of the spirit, I mean.

Not too bad. Took me some time to get used to the Office. The just man flourishing like the palm-tree, that sort of thing, and laetabunting in his cubicle. Wasn't my natural idiom exactly.

—Do you think you'll stick it?

Hope so. I've passed my council, anyhow. Hence this jaunt. And you?

—They reckon I'll stay the course. Mean to anyhow. It wasn't quite what I'd expected.

Same here. Thought there'd be more privacy for one thing.

—And for another—well, it's difficult to put.

Try, all the same.

—Not that it matters much. Just scratching the surface.

Scratching's the word.

—Well, I never thought for a moment that I was doing the noble or making the grand renunciation, yet I wasn't prepared for being back again where I was before and this time rather more humdrum.

Sort of finicky too. Little things loaded with terrific importance. Suppose they have to be when you're being trained.

—By the way, are you taught to seek perfection according to the way of spiritual infancy?

Heavens no. However, the rule sees to it that we don't take an inordinate conceit in ourselves.

—That's putting it mildly. I feel sometimes one ought to fight against being ground down to the nursery level.

The other day in refectory while we were munching our beans and being read to out of an improving book I heard the phrase, Take care of the pennies and the pounds will look after themselves. I caught the eye of an old stager up at the top. There was almost a wink. There was certainly a nod.

—See what comes of not keeping proper custody of the eyes. Seriously though, I do see the point of routine and attention to detail. Especially in a community. Spit and polish. You're not disciplined unless you can be trusted to go through the proper

motions, whatever you're feeling like. But surely you don't have to be obsessional about pettiness.

The big issues seem to recede, and all sorts of trivialities are thrust forward in their place.

—Such a lot of them too.

And day in day out.

—In themselves they don't upset me. It's when they're charged with significance.

For instance, we never drink tea in the afternoon; it wasn't invented when we were founded. Personally I quite like small beer before Vespers, but not its becoming a crucial test. Thank heavens, though, an exception's made for breakfast. Then we're given coffee.

—Probably orders from Rome. Like making the Carthusians go for a walk from time to time, and talk.

Actually it's not. It started ages ago to celebrate a victory over the Turk. In those days we were ruled by a Habsburg or somebody, who went on for years and years like Queen Victoria. It became established. What they call a laudable custom. I see you're drinking coca-cola.

—It makes a nice change. I get tired of hot drinks made from powder. As you know, our holy founder was a Swiss.

Soon to be canonized, I hear.

—Yes, they say the cause is advancing very favourably. However, I can't think it matters much what a particular liquid habit was. You can't make it into a sort of sacramental.

Perhaps it helps *esprit de corps*. Like handlebar-moustaches for fighter pilots. Anyhow, you can always fall back on water. Or can you?

—Of course. I don't mind if it's put like that. But take smoking. We're told it's a theological imperfection, except on the foreign missions to keep the flies away.

We're told we can't afford it. Probably amounts to the same in the end.

—Maybe. Anyhow, I quite agree that irksome things as such, well, they're merely difficulties. It's when they recommended or imposed as being more than they're worth that they can become problems. Obedience isn't a cover-up for little-mindedness.

Hennish, said St Teresa.

—Men are less defenceless than women, according to report. Burlier, I suppose.

—Have you also noticed?

What?

—They say you need a sense of humour, but I must say I've been rather shaken to catch myself becoming rather a giggler.

So've I. And one prattles at recreation.

—Ugh, like a pack of psychological innocents. Suppose it's better than being sophisticated.

We've got some pretty gnarled types. Expect you have too.

—Yes. But they're not the official pattern. Perhaps they're really better than the lines they're given to read.

Feel sure God likes humanity to be racy. I think there's a danger of equating the ordinary and the mediocre. If Christian charity is made into a kind of specialized technique, you're left with a gap between your religious occupations and things of common or garden interest.

—Like books, if you see what I mean. Some of our seniors never seem to read anything between spiritual works and bloods. Except for Malise Browne's novels, but then he doesn't count, being a specialist in the problem of evil. Still, we musn't forget the *Catholic Clarion*.

Not to speak of the *Diptych*.

—All the same, most of our people turn first to the *Cosmos* when the Catholic papers arrive on Friday.

Oh I don't know. Even pundits scan the *Rocket* at breakfast before working their way through the *Jupiter*. No, I think our trouble is not the packaging of religious truth and practices, but rather the fact that some special packages are given the monopoly.

—All from tins or cellophane-wrapped.

And you don't have to prepare anything for yourself.

—All laid on. While in the world one had choices, important ones too. Confession seemed to matter. Anyhow it seemed more important. Common decency. Fairness. Aren't they better than acts of interior abnegation about nothing more substantial than one's private whims and fancies? Though I must say I seem to be biting on things at present.

Certainly both of us seem to be sucking our teeth rather.

—Do you think we're indulging in spiritual pride?

I wouldn't be surprised.

—Neither of us are the best judges of how we should be trained for responsibility.
That's really the point.

—The Jesuit who gave our retreat said that austerity was just another name for efficiency.

Did he now? The Dominican who gave ours said that the signs of a religious vocation were a good digestion and a sense of proportion together with easy manners and the team-spirit. Some of the novices thought he was taking rather a low view.

—Our Jesuit warned us that scruples were an occupational disease.

Our Dominican promised that we'd have a better chance of growing out of them after we'd studied St Thomas's treatise on Grace.

Enter two elderly persons. They are canonically religious to judge from their countenances and clothes. They meet at the counter.

How are you?

—Good to see you. Here of all places.

Catholic ownership. A prominent Catumbian.

—That's why I come too. (*To the manageress.*) Thank you, my dear child, it's uncommonly kind of you. Good, good, that table there over by the window. You'll take the parcel too. Thank you. And you'll have the trays brought across. Thank you. Well, well, well, it's a long time since we met.

Nine months. At the Religious Vocations Exhibition.

—So it was. I've brought up one of ours. On business.

That's a coincidence, I'm doing the same. There's mine over there. He hasn't noticed me.

—The two of them together. Don't let's disturb them. Wonder what they're talking about.

'm.

—What's yours like?

Devout but reticent.

—Ours too is deeds not words.

Hope they're typical. Do you remember the paper on Modern Youth and Observance?

—All the more impressive coming from a bishop.

He told us not to mistake clichés for principles.

—And that reverence was relative.

I imagine our elders thought we were disrespectful when we were young.

—They say the younger generation doesn't produce such characters as in the old days. All the same, I think we were tamer. We used to read the minor spiritual classics.

Now they prefer the Bible.

—Perhaps that's it.



THE PRINCIPAL MEANS OF PERFECTION

PÈRE LALLEMANT

Translated by Hugh Farmer, O.S.B.

I. THE SACRAMENTS

THE principal practices which lead to perfection are the sacraments when we approach them with the necessary preparation; yet, curiously enough, this is the very truth which is most neglected. The sacraments give graces which result in the production within us of the effects proper to them: confession brings great purity of heart, Holy Communion close union with God and spiritual fervour in all our actions. . . . The more you approach the sacraments, the more graces you will receive to share in their effects. But the effects of these sacraments, namely purity of heart and spiritual fervour, are themselves the best preparation we can make to receive them.

A soul which before Holy Communion was in darkness, weak and languishing, but after it becomes enlightened, fervent and strong cannot doubt of the fruit of its communion, because the sacraments' effect is to give their proper sacramental grace. Hence after a good confession the soul receives much light on its interior dispositions, humble and loving contrition, and peace of a quiet conscience. After a good communion the soul experiences a taste for God and receives new strength to spend itself in God's service.

II. THE USE OF PENANCES

The right measure to observe in the use of penances is to do less than will alter one's health, but more than what permits rebellious nature to make its presence felt too keenly. When great perfection