

Life of the Spirit

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FOR RELIGIOUS SISTERS

BY

THE EDITOR



FROM the first number of *LIFE OF THE SPIRIT*, some two and a half years ago, we have had the spiritual needs of the laity primarily in view. It was felt that among the laity only the picked few could attend regular retreats or receive a constant guidance or direction. Religious are necessarily more plentifully supplied with such help, and therefore a review concerned with prayer and the spiritual life should deal first with the needs and problems of the good Christian living a more or less isolated life in the world.

But we had never intended that this should be the exclusive field of the *LIFE OF THE SPIRIT*; we had intended to devote a special section to the vows and the state of perfection, a section which would be of some assistance to those who might try their vocation in a religious Order or who had already found their home therein. This secondary aim has not been so far attainable at least regularly; but a recent visit of the Editor's to a Parisian Conference has revealed some clearer possibilities in this line. The Conference was held by a group of clergy under the auspices of *La Vie Spirituelle* for the assistance of religious sisters in France; and it has suggested a possible service of a similar nature which this review could render in England. We will therefore briefly sketch in the background of this Conference.

The modern problems of religious sisters are not always realised; but at least it is generally recognised that many Orders and Congregations find it difficult to recruit subjects for the future continuance, quite apart from the expansion, of their Communities. This problem has become a veritable 'crise' in France. There are as many young women as ever, and as generous, but few of them find themselves drawn to religious life as it is presented in their experience. This is the central problem of 'recruitment'. But for long in this country as well as in France it has been a habit to take the heroic lives of these women for granted. They are often criticised, but they are always expected to fill every gap in parish life, in education, in

nursing. If they are not ready to undertake further commitments they are regarded as being lacking in devotion. All the time they are carrying on a life which is often truly heroic in its activity and unrequited zeal. So intensely indeed have these sisters been asked to work for the Church that the modern young women sees quite often exhausted sisters, with drawn features and tired eyes, unable to attend with much profit to the life of prayer which still continues inexorably within the convent walls. Little wonder, thought the Editors of *La Vie Spirituelle* and several clear-sighted clergy with them, little wonder that few present themselves as postulants—a vicious circle: the fewer the subjects the more intense the work, and the less attractive to those in the world.

It was first suggested early in 1945 that the chaplains of various religious orders of women should meet to discuss these problems and to seek a way of helping these women whose spiritual needs they were supplying. But it was clear that the chaplains had only a 'sacramental' function in respect of the nuns; it was decided that those who were in some way responsible in a wider sense would be the most able to assist in this crisis. Therefore, a group of religious men—Jesuit, Benedictine, Carmelite, Dominican, as well as many other religious and secular priests—who were in a position to help these religious effectively, gathered by invitation of *La Vie Spirituelle*. The Director General of Religious in Paris was approached and followed the work with interest. The group naturally exercised no authority in these matters; that is the property of the Holy See and Hierarchy. This was rather in the nature of theologians whose experience, discussions and contact with the immediate problems are able to assist this authority. For indeed it is the whole body of the clergy who should now be willing to come forward to offer whatever assistance lies in their power, after so much assistance rendered to them by these good religious.

These clergy met in May 1946 for *Journées d'Etudes* lasting two days, during which they discussed the main problems which faced the religious sisters and some remedies proposed in the nature of the formation of the subjects and the government of the Orders and Congregations. It was generally felt that modern life together with the great development of the realisation of the Mystical Body in the Church demanded a certain re-orientation and new emphasis in training among these religious. The group met again in January 1947 and their discussions were so successful that they were able to publish a large volume, *Directoire Des Supérieures*, with a Preface by Cardinal Suhard, which sold out in the first month or two of its appearance. This fact alone showed that their activities were fully

appreciated by the Sisters themselves. The volume is addressed to Superiors of religious Congregations and deals with such subjects as the state of perfection, the vows, the office of the Superior in relation to the sanctification of her subjects and of the common good, the actual mentality of the modern young woman, how to discern vocations, and the formation of novices, etc. The authors comprise members of the secular clergy and various religious orders, and their work extends over 320 closely packed pages. The Cardinal introduces it with these words to the Editor of the volume:

Moved by the immediate crisis in recruiting through which our Communities are now passing, you and your collaborators, both regular and secular, were compelled to uncover its causes and to suggest remedies for it. Your work, the fruit of long reflection, grounded on prayer, and inspired not by a desire for reform but with the ambition of bringing out the value of the high dignity of these consecrated souls, now comes into the light of day.

Without such encouragement it is not likely that this body of clergy could have achieved anything. But soon an impressive meeting of the superiors of nursing sisters were able to gather the first fruits of this work. In the following pages we have the privilege of publishing a translation of one of the addresses which were given to their assembly. It shows the temper of the work which these French priests have undertaken. The superiors on their part were enthusiastic over the meeting, for the opportunity both of listening to the words of the theologians and also of discussing with each other their difficulties, so fundamentally the same throughout, and this shows the temper of the religious sisters themselves. It has been a great work of charity.

In 1948 two conferences were called. The first met in January and its deliberations have also been published in a '*Supplément de la Vie Spirituelle*' under the title of *Adaptations de la Vie Religieuse* which indicates the nature of the papers and discussions. The second, at which the Editor of LIFE OF THE SPIRIT was privileged to be present, considered the fundamental doctrine of consecrated virginity within the Life of the Church. There is no need to detail this meeting for it is likely that its deliberations will also be published in the near future. And so the work goes on with enthusiasm and general co-operation in France.

The question naturally presents itself as to whether something of the same sort of help could not be offered to the sisters of the English-speaking world. The crisis may not be so acute, but many of the problems may in fact already exist in English Orders and Congregations. An exchange of views on the subject would at least be constructive. The Editor of the LIFE OF THE SPIRIT would there-

fore be happy to know how many religious sisters would be interested in an English version, adapted to the needs of English-speaking religious, of the *Directoire des Supérieures* and *Adaptations*. At present it is proposed to reduce these two books to a single moderate English volume, comprising the main features without the French particularities. But it would be of considerable assistance to the Editor to learn to what extent such a volume would be useful to English Sisters, and he invites them to send their views to him.¹

THE EDITOR.

1 To assist the reader to judge of the possible utility of these two volumes, we here append a list of their contents:

DIRECTOIRE: I *Theologie de la Vie Religieuse*

- 1 La perfection chrétienne dans l'état religieux—
M.-J. Nicholas, O.P.
- 2 Les Voeux: Pauvreté—Stéphane Piat, O.F.M.
- 3 Chasteté—Dom Massabki, O.S.B.
- 4 Obéissance—M.-J. Nicholas, O.P.
- 5 Les Observances, l'oraison, et la vie liturgique—
Dom Basset, O.S.B.

II *Théorie du Supériorat*

- 1 La Supérieure et la sanctification de ses religieuses—
Paul Marie de la Croix, O.C.D.
- 2 La Supérieure servante du bien commun—Abbé Kothén.

III *Ce que la Supérieure doit savoir*

- 1 Foi et théologie—A. Henry, O.P.
- 2 Notions de psychologie—Abbé Géraud.
- 3 Notions de droit canon—P. Delchard, S.J.
- 4 Reflexions sur la mentalité actuelle de la jeune fille chrétienne—
P. Carré, O.P.

IV *La Pratique du Gouvernement*

- 1 Pratique du Gouvernement—P. Bergh, S.J.
- 2 Rapports des supérieures avec les mouvements d'action catholique,
les oeuvres et la paroisse—Canon Dermine.

V *Recrutement et formation des sujets*

- 1 Discernement des Vocations—P. Loret, C.S.S.R.

ADAPTATIONS: Le Principe des Adaptations—R. P. Victor de la Vierge, O.C.D.

- Les adaptations de la Pauvreté—S. E. Mgr. Ancel.
de l'Obéissance—R. Omez, O.P.
de la vie commune—Dom Basset, O.S.B.

Témoignages d'une Congregation ancienne, d'une Congregation nouvelle, de communautés laïques.