

great tradition. He is not a private figure but a teacher of theology in the Church, read and congratulated by the Pope, listened to with respect by Bishops at the Council. If, like the French King, we say to him 'Astonish me', he may well do so but that would be by accident not design; his is a restorative not a pyrotechnic or destructive gift. He is a wise man not a prophet. He is not the less valuable for that. He is a man who can tell us the place of a free man in the free Church.

The Vocation of Celibacy among Laywomen

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While the third session of the Vatican Council has many problems of the highest importance to consider, for the benefit of the whole Church and also for particular sections of it, there seems to be extant today a situation of comparatively recent origin which has never been thoroughly examined, discussed, or pronounced upon in any authoritative discourse, and yet it is one of which more people are becoming increasingly conscious: it is the problem of celibate women and the part they play in the mystical body.

It is indeed a problem of which certain authorities, notably in France, are to some extent aware; but apart from an occasional document published there and elsewhere that acknowledges the existence of these people in considerable numbers, no attempt appears to have been made seriously to consider the situation, to appraise it and to suggest lines of approach to be followed when it is dealt with.

The origins of this situation would seem to be twofold. They lie in the emancipation of women consequent upon their work in the first world war, and suffragette campaigning at the same period, and their infiltration as working members of a society which, as a result of two world wars, had lost a considerable proportion of its male population. This state of affairs created conditions in which many women—suited

or unsuited by temperament—to take over a man's responsibilities, found themselves doing so, and entering careers from which they had previously been excluded. All this is merely a material estimate of the position; what never seems to have been done was to examine this position, and the outlook of these women in the light of their existence as Christians, and of the part to be played by them in the mystical body; the part that these apparently incomplete beings were required by God to play in his Church at a given moment in time.

It is easy now, in the light of the tremendously changed attitude of the Church today towards almost every sphere of lay activity, to see what was not done and to deprecate it. It is equally possible to see now why it was not done. The Church had not begun to think in terms of 'celibacy', or of 'vocation' in connection with women having any other than the most conventional and orthodox meaning.

Indeed, the very existence of women outside the religious life or marriage was almost ignored. They were nuns, or they were wives and mothers: this had always been their destiny, as far as the Church was concerned, and was to remain so. The problem of the surplus women was one to which the Church's leaders preferred to close their eyes; the emancipation of women was (and in some cases still is) looked on as unnatural and regrettable. Nursing and teaching were the only two spheres which, it might be conceded, it was not unwomanly to penetrate. Much has transpired, however, in the last few years to convince at any rate some of the Church's leaders that the position has altered.

Although the population trend appears to be returning to normal, after a generation of peace, the problem has not ceased to exist. In spite of this trend, and of a lower marriage age, there still remains a proportion of women for whom, for one reason or another, marriage is not the ultimate destiny. There are those who support aged dependants and who are not therefore free; those who because of physical handicaps cannot marry; those who by reason of physical or mental shortcomings are not sought in marriage; and those who prefer to remain unmarried, not from any lack of occasion for marriage, but who are quite simply convinced that marriage is not for them.

It would seem absurd to declare that in all these cases, such women are deliberately refusing to do God's will for them, particularly if they are women with a real love of God and a strong sense of duty to their neighbour.

It would be equally absurd to assert that they should therefore enter a convent, or its modern equivalent, a secular institute. What, then, is

their position? If they are, in fact, doing the will of God for them as far as they are aware of it, does it not seem more likely that they are in fact living, whether they are fully conscious of it or not, and whether it has ecclesiastical approbation or not, a celibate vocation?

We are concerned here only with the lot of the practising Catholics, and these form, undoubtedly a comparatively small proportion of the whole body of celibate women; but it is these, for the moment, who are the most likely to be reached and the most susceptible of any relatively immediate and successful type of religious formation.

It is true that some of these women live full, contented lives, which they have already dedicated in some way to the service of God through their neighbour. But it is equally true that many of them are lonely, unhappy, and at times come to the brink of despair. They feel the bitterness of being unwanted, but no one has helped them to see the glory of being wanted by God, in the precise place where he has set them. They are, in fact, being wasted, because they do not fit into any fixed category, and so are not recognised for what they are—their potential value as sources of prayer and strength for their brethren in the mystical body goes unnoticed—an untapped source of spiritual energy—and they are regarded with a certain degree of suspicion by the clergy, who may or may not find themselves able to make use of their time, their talents or their intelligence where these may be available, but who are almost certainly unaware that it lies in their power, in return, to help them to be transformed by the deliberate and voluntary dedication of their lives to God as they are, their usefulness and even their apparent uselessness, for his glory and their own progress in the life of the spirit.

If this state of life, then, is intended to be accepted as a vocation, it would seem that like the other major types of vocation—the religious life and marriage—some provision should be made for dealing with it as a specific problem within the framework of the Church. It is not for us to attempt comparisons—whatever its value in God's plan for humanity as a whole, if it is a life to be lived as a means of sanctification and dedication, then it will have its particular problems, which may prove surprisingly similar in a large number of cases; its 'spirituality', or approach to God above and beyond the common approach of all the laity as members of the mystical body; above all, it will need its spiritual direction.

In this connection it is perhaps worth noting that guidance may prove to be not so much *propter hoc* as *post hoc*. Often the vocation may not be clearly visible until it has begun to be lived. In this it is unlike other

vocations, where the intention is evident beforehand, and guidance is based upon the encouragement of such an intention where practicable, and upon subsequent experiences along the chosen path. Careful and sensitive handling of such individuals is essential if much harm is not to result. But this presupposes a state of awareness among the clergy in general which at the present time it seems optimistic to demand, and also a readiness to help, above all, in revealing to those concerned the destiny of which they may be partially or totally unaware, and this is a tremendous responsibility.

The main problems of these celibates would seem to be threefold.

First: the cultivation of a sane and balanced approach to the problems of sex, which may play a greater or lesser part in the difficulties of a lay celibate existence (particularly without any of the safeguards inherent in the other types of vocation), and which are probably never completely absent.

Second: the formation of a reasoned and unembittered attitude to the difficulties of their position. While women now have freedom of entry to almost all professions, the unmarried are still sometimes at a disadvantage in the company of their married sisters, who may tend to regard them either as 'unfortunate' because they have not acquired a husband, or as 'eccentric' because they have refused to do so. It needs a good deal of guidance of public opinion within the Church, in order that celibacy for women shall be recognised as a vocation in its own right, and therefore not abnormal.

Third: progress in the spiritual life which is the most vital element of all, since without progress there must inevitably be stagnation. Stagnation will in turn produce all the ill-effects that often hamper the development of these individuals when left to their own devices: depression: an almost overpowering sense of spiritual isolation, and even despair.

Above all it is the positive aspect of their vocation that needs stressing; the positive ideal to which they are tending. If they are not helped in this, their spiritual life is in danger of withering away into a mere routine—one which may indeed preserve them from the gravest sins, but which will never lead them on to fervour and a generous self-giving to God where he must be sought; in their neighbour—or in their solitude.