

demonstration of a pattern of nationhood''. It offers membership to one and all by relinquishing their present nationality and becoming 'naturalised citizens of the Service-Nation'. The movement apparently sets out to form another Holy Nation, another tribe of Israel scattered over the face of the earth as a leaven working in the mass. Though it invokes the will of God it remains uncontentplative, active in the wrong sense, man-centred and therefore inevitably competitive. It is designed to serve the nations of the world, but it does so by introducing another type of nation which at the same time tends to be exclusive of other nationalities. The movement in fact sets out to play the part of the Church universal, the Catholic Church, but without the supernatural, superhuman character of the Church. Refusing the contemplative centre of the true Church, it carries the seed of disruption; it is dedicated to the service of humanity instead of being dedicated to the service of God a service which leads to friendship with God, friendship which is charity, which is the source of social well-being and the spring of contemplation. A service-nation will be no substitute for the Catholic Church, and no humane or philanthropic activity can remedy the ills of modern society without Christian Contemplation.

We need today a great resurgence of monasticism, a reappearance of many great abbeys of monks, of convents of enclosed nuns sprinkled over the country, here at home and over the American and European continents in particular. The contemplative lives of those men and women, engaged altogether in the primary things, can alone provide the flavour of supernatural truth which will make the people of today acceptable to the Lord. We need that salt to savour the earth and to give our modern feverish activity that wisdom which alone can make it effective. It is with this view that this issue of BLACKFRIARS is dedicated to the re-establishment of the *Contemplative Ideal*.

THE EDITOR.

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## CONTEMPLATION AND THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

WE are used to hearing the present age in the Church's history described as the age of catholic action: there is a possibility that we may not sufficiently realize that catholic action essentially demands and implies catholic contemplation. By catholic action we mean the sharing, by the laity, in Christ's redeeming work in and for the world: trying to make known the truth entrusted to the Church, trying to create a Christian order of society, trying to reclaim for men and women those fundamental rights and duties which our Lord came to teach the world and which the world has

so largely lost. But all this work, and every part of it, implies the need of contemplation; and if the contemplation is lacking, the action will not achieve much lasting good. Misguided benevolence can do almost as much harm in the long run as sheer wickedness; and action without contemplation is blind.

Action of any sort is blind without contemplation of some sort. The symphony played on the concert platform is significant only if it expresses an artist's vision; the military campaign would be military chaos without the precedent thought of the strategist. And the need of contemplative vision becomes greater as the aim of given action is more important for humanity: the artist whose material is stone or paint must be a contemplative, but it is still more important that the maker whose material is human flesh and blood should be a contemplative; and when you come to those whose material is the souls of men and women you come to the greatest need of contemplation of all. The men who write unreflective music are a menace to society; the men who thoughtlessly use economic or political power to do damage to human flesh and blood are a worse menace to society; the men who mould minds and souls away from contemplation and into hatred of the truth destroy society.

And nowadays there is indeed in the world a hatred of contemplation, even in the broadest natural sense; and anyone who supposed that the defeat of Germany would free the world from it must be finding himself rapidly and sadly undeceived. One might have supposed indeed that the revelation in the past years of the depths to which modern man can sink would have forced humanity down into a deeper contemplation of itself and so to a deeper recognition of the demands of life; but it is not so, and the same superficial use of the mind for smash-and-grab purposes goes on. One might have supposed that the revelation of the hell to which the selfish pursuit of short-term policies inevitably leads must have forced humanity to take a longer view and achieve a broader sympathy, a real and living sense of the brotherhood of man; but it is not so. Nor has the unequivocal manifestation of evil led the world as a whole to look upwards, to search for the Good for its own sake while realizing its own impotence to reach it without help from the heights. Human nature goes on as before: it was to be expected; but it is only minimal commonsense that catholic action should recognize that it is *this* that it has to fight first of all, and that you cannot drive out this satan by activism.

But if contemplation means first of all this ordinary human sense of depth and breadth and height, it demands for the Christian much

more than this. To fight against stupidity and superficiality you have to be wise; but Catholic action is not opposed merely by natural stupidity. The mystery of iniquity is active in the world, perhaps as never before; and the work of Christ is opposed by the conscious and powerful malice which loves evil, and by the hatred which is deadly sin. These devils are not to be driven out save by prayer and fasting: the hatred which has its roots in other worlds can only be opposed by the love which is of God and the wisdom which is taught of God. Catholic action is blind without the contemplation which is the life of grace, the life and power of God moulding the soul.

Contemplation in this strict sense is not a question of strange psycho-physical phenomena: it has nothing to do, essentially, with trances and levitations and the rest. Nor is it a specialized vocation for a few chosen souls, with special psychic gifts and a special manner of life. Every soul in whom the life of God is active is, in the old phrase, *capax Dei*, capable of sensing God's presence within it, of knowing God and not merely knowing about him, of living with him and sharing his life as one can live with, and share the life of, a friend. The root of this power is the life of God within us; what makes it an actuality is the day to day search for God in the deep places of the spirit—the daily period set apart for prayer, learning to realize his presence, to speak simply to him, to *be* with him; and then the repeated efforts throughout the day to turn momentarily to him, so as gradually to acquire a more constant sense of his abiding presence. And what is the effect of this daily search as we find it gradually unfolded for us in the lives of holy people? It is that they become moulded into the likeness of him with whom they thus live: they become different—they become perfectly full and rich—personalities, because they learn to look at all things with the eyes of God, to love all things with the love of God, and because they themselves are filled with the power and the energy of God. So it is that, being contemplatives, their action is the type of catholic action: for being taught by God they become truly *wise*, and know how they should act for the ultimate good of the world; being taught by God, their wisdom is the wisdom of *love*, which is the only wisdom that can combat hatred and malice, and the only wisdom that can conquer the hearts as well as the minds of men and so change the face of the earth; and being filled with God, they are filled with *power*, and their action is never wasted, dissipated, ultimately frustrated, for it is part of the action of him who said, Fear not, I have conquered the world.

To be a contemplative is the vocation of everyman; it is a

specially urgent need for those who are called to take part in catholic action in the world to today. But that is not all. To say that everyone should be a contemplative is not to say that everyone can be equally a contemplative. And it is part of the traditional economy of the Church's life that there should be some who give themselves wholly and exclusively to the contemplative life; precisely in order that the activity of others may be guided, and empowered, and fruitful. St. Dominic, when founding his Order, knew that the men who followed him would, if they were faithful to the vocation, have an immense amount of work to do; they were to try to be contemplatives themselves, yes, but even if they were truly zealous they would find, all but the greatest and holiest of them, that the very time-factor was against them: they would not gain from their own prayer alone the power that their work would need. And so before the work was started at all he had founded his first convent of purely contemplative nuns: it was they who were to empower their brethren; it was they who were to bring down upon the work of the Order the blessing, the wisdom and love and energy, of God.

This is an aspect of the contemplative life which is not always appreciated. People think of contemplative monks and nuns as leaving the world to fend for itself and retiring to a safe retreat to look after their own souls. But every Christian comes to God *per Christum*, through and in Christ; and to share the life of Christ is to share the love and the labours of Christ. And as the Church is indivisible, so the work of the Church is indivisible: we have different gifts to bring to the common task, different functions to fulfil; but we act as members of the single indivisible Body of Christ; and those whose life is prayer find their prayer expressed and fulfilled in the labours of others, and those who labour draw on the power generated by others' hidden life of prayer. The story of the nun in Benson's *Light Invisible* puts this very clearly: "I perceived that this black figure knelt at the centre of reality and force, and with the movements of her will and lips controlled spiritual destinies for eternity. There ran out from this peaceful chapel lines of spiritual power that lost themselves in the distance, bewildering in their profusion and terrible in the intensity of their hidden fire. Souls leaped up and renewed the conflict as this tense will strove for them. Souls, even at that moment leaving the body, struggled from death into spiritual life, and fell panting and saved at the feet of the Redeemer on the other side of death . . . Yes, and I in my arrogance had thought that my life was more active in God's world than hers . . ."

What conclusion are we to draw? Surely that these contemplatives are needed today as never before. If St. Dominic needed this store of energy, these power-houses of the life of the spirit, for the world of his day, how much more the apostles of today, whose world is so much farther removed from the ideals of Christ. The whole machinery of life today is geared against contemplation in any form: education, instead of leading to it, is becoming on the contrary more and more simply a question of gaining practical acquaintance with applied science; industrialism continues to degrade work by robbing it of its contemplative and creative qualities; power-politics are simply the unreflective travesty of statecraft; even within the religious sphere, the disunity of Christendom is still largely the legacy, not simply of doctrinal disagreements, but of that surrender to prejudice and emotional antipathy which is itself a sin against the truth and continues to make true contemplation—true *love-knowledge*—of the issues at stake so difficult.

Perhaps we should go further, and deeper. These things are all the effects of evil in the world: whence precisely does the evil come? There are those who hold—and they base their views on words spoken by our Lady in her apparitions during the past hundred years—that we are living in an age in which, in a new and more terrible way, “Satan is unleashed” in the world; and certainly the signs are not wanting that this is so. They go on, moreover, to warn us that time is growing short; and that unless those who call themselves the followers of Christ make more effort to oppose the powers of evil, the vengeance of God will fall more terribly than before upon humanity. The healing and restoring power of God is there in its infinite abundance; but how is it to be used and made effective? Our Lady gives us the answer plainly: we must repent, and we must *pray*. She mentions specifically the rosary, that royal road to contemplation for the simple soul, for it is the characteristic of the rosary among prayers that it can lead from the humblest form of vocal prayer, through what is nowadays called meditation, to ever simpler and simpler forms of union of spirit with Spirit, and so to perfect holiness. And why this emphasis on prayer? Because, once again, it is only supernatural life that can combat the powers of eternal death: and to be fully active in the world today as a Christian you have to learn to lean completely on God, to become capable of being caught up wholly into the life and power of God, to be filled with God; for only then will it be possible to say of you in your contacts with others, as once it was said of the Christ in whom you now live, that “power has gone forth from you”; only then will there be within you the power that can

exorcize Satan.

It is not for nothing that iniquity is spoken of as a mystery. Sometimes evil is open and obvious; and then, with sufficient goodness and strength, it can be met. But sometimes on the other hand it is cloaked in the trappings of piety; sometimes it puts to its own uses the goodness of heart that is not yet holy enough to avoid stupidity; and then you find the terrible and sad phenomenon of good people using evil means to achieve good ends, or working ultimate harm for the sake of an immediate good, and serving Satan when they think they are serving the Church. There is a natural wisdom, a natural contemplation, which can show a man much of the depth and length of life, yes; but in the fallen world that will not do. You have to learn the length and breadth and height and depth of which St. Paul speaks, and you can learn them only in the power of Christ, and on the Cross and in the heart of Christ.

Catholic action implies contemplation. The individual active member of Christ's Body must himself be trying to lead the life of prayer; and behind him, and behind the Church's activity as a whole, there must be the intense life and energy of the contemplative souls; without these, action could never be what it ought to be. But of course we must not think of the contemplative life as though it were merely a means to action. The artist's vision is not just a means to the art-work: the work is simply the outward expression and completion of the vision. And when the artist creates a work of art which is also a work of love, then the work itself and the precedent vision which it expresses are both simply aspects of a single activity: the praising of love. It is the same within the Church's life: and the generating of vision and power in prayer, and the expression of the vision and power in action, are both simply aspects of the single activity which is the supreme purpose of the universe, the singing of praise to God.

None the less, we are right to think much, in these days especially, of the urgency of the *work* that is to be done in the world, and to remind ourselves of the fact that the contemplative life is an essential part of that work. In so doing we need not fear that we may relegate contemplation to the status of a subordinate means, provided we remember two things. First, that whatever the work, the aspect of it that is of ultimate importance is that it is a way of praising and serving God; for if we remember that, we shall avoid the danger of becoming immersed in the work as an end in itself, as satisfying in itself and to ourselves, and shall, on the contrary, preserve its contemplative character as an act of love and praise. Secondly, that the ultimate purpose of Catholic action as

regards the world of men is precisely to make that world contemplative: to lead it to know and love God. All the social, economic, political, work that is being done, and all the precedent study that makes it possible—all this is only a varied (and of course necessarily varied) way of achieving the same end. Catholic action fights for these social ends in order that the fullness of the spiritual stature of man may be restored, and that therefore man's praise of God may be made whole, and his vows may be fully paid. That is why, if prayer is at the beginning, it is also at the end: Catholic action is complete when the wheel has turned full circle, and prayer has generated prayer.

To see the world of today as it is, so largely a prey to the gigantic forces which drag it further and further away from the contemplation of truth and of love, is to be filled with the realization of the urgency of the Church's need for contemplatives. Those of us whose vocation lies in the world of action need terribly this empowering influence to uphold us, not only lest we ourselves founder, but lest in our failures the work itself should fail. We need the power that will be expressed, in our activity, not only in terms of wisdom and understanding and counsel, but in terms of zeal and courage and quenchless energy. The mystery of iniquity works secretly, and its very secrecy is part of its strength: the weakness of human nature will always find excuses for its failures unless their evil origins are made starkly obvious. Where great opportunities are frittered away, where great beginnings and sanguine hopes are allowed to crumble, and outstanding gifts decline into mediocrity and sloth, where vision and wisdom are lost for the sake of immediate aims however beneficent, where the fires of charity itself are gradually smothered and grow cold: in all these cases it is the mystery of iniquity that is at work on the weakness of human nature, and through that weakness it is the work of God's love that suffers. The contemplative life is not a luxury for the Church, a luxury for the world. "I perceived that this black figure knelt at the *centre* of reality and force, and with the movements of her will and lips controlled spiritual destinies for eternity . . . There lay my little foolish narrow life behind me, made up of spiritless prayers and efforts and feeble dealings with souls; and how complacent I had been with it all, how self-centred, how out of the real tide of spiritual movement! And meanwhile, for years probably, this nun had toiled behind these walls in the silence of grace, with the hum of the world coming faintly to her ears, and the cries of peoples and nations, and of persons whom the world accounts important, sounding like the voices of children at play in the muddy street outside . . ." It is this will, these lips, that call down the hope-bringing words to a desperate world, Behold, I make all things new; it is from this will and these lips that those who are called to work, in their sinfulness, for the world, can derive the power to share in that renewal. GERALD VANN, O.P.