

ELEMENTS OF MONASTIC LIFE

THE SECOND 'ASCETICAL DISCOURSE' ASCRIBED TO ST BASIL THE GREAT AND TRANSLATED FROM THE GREEK BY DOM JOHN HIGGENS, MONK OF QUARR.

II.

1. GENERAL PRINCIPLE. Monastic life has a single aim, the salvation of the soul; and whatever can contribute to this end must be observed with reverence as God's commandment. For even God's commandments have no other purpose than to save him who obeys them.

Detachment. And just as those who enter the bath strip off all their clothes, so those who approach the monastic life should cast off all worldly matters to enter the life of contemplation. Therefore what is of first importance and the Christian's especial care, is to strip himself of those various and manifold evil passions by which the soul is defiled. And secondly, he who aims at the higher life must have effectually renounced his possessions: since anxiety and care for material things are a source of great distraction to the soul.

Unanimity. When therefore, a number of persons embrace a life in Community, with a single purpose of salvation, they must make sure above all of this, that there is one heart in them all, one will, one desire; and as the Apostle teaches, that the entire Community has become one body by the union of diverse members (I Cor. 12, 12).

Poverty. But this is impossible unless the custom prevails that nothing is said to belong to anyone in particular; neither clothes, nor implements, nor anything else that serves for the common life: each of these things must supply a need and not be considered a possession. And as a small garment does not fit a big man, nor a full-size garment a little one, but what is made to the measure of each is serviceable and becoming: so all other things as well, bed, bedding, warm covering, footwear, ought to be for the use of him who really has need of them, and not for anyone's possession. For an injured man uses a remedy, not one who is whole; and it is not the luxurious man, but he who needs relaxation, who is the better for things meant to relieve the body.

2. THE SUPERIOR. Since, however, men's dispositions vary, and not all judge alike what is needful, so, to avoid the disorder that would arise if each lived as he pleased, one must be chosen to rule the others, who in prudence, stability and strictness of life is acknowledged to excel the rest: so that all, by imitating him, may share his virtue. For when a number of portrait-painters are copying the features of one face, all the pictures will resemble one another,

because they are taken from one original; and if many characters are modelled upon one, its virtue shines out in them all. And when one is set over the rest, there will be an end of private inclinations.

Obedience. At once they must all conform to the Superior's will; they must obey the Apostle's command, bidding every soul be subject to the higher powers, for they that resist secure their own condemnation (Rom. 13, 1, 2). But true and perfect obedience of subjects to their Superior is shown in this, that they not only refrain from what is unfitting at the Superior's advice, but they do not even do what is praiseworthy without his approval. For self-control and all bodily discipline have a certain utility; yet if anyone follows his own impulses and does as he pleases without regard to his Superior's counsel, he will have sinned rather than have done well. He who resists authority, resists God's ordinance; and obedience has a greater reward than the most effectual self-discipline.

Mutual Charity. Each must show that same charity to the rest, which a man has by nature for every member of his own body, seeking the health of it all alike, since the pain of any member causes equal distress to the body. But just as in ourselves the pain of any sick member affects the whole body, although some members are more honourable than others (for we are not equally concerned about our eye and toe, even if the pain is the same); so, while each one should have an equal habit of sympathy and charity towards all who live in the Community, yet the more useful members, as is only right, should receive greater honour. And since they are altogether bound to love one another in equal measure, it is wrong there should exist in the Community any private ties of blood or fellowship. For whoever loves one above the rest, convicts himself of having no perfect love towards the rest. So then unseemly contention and private affection alike are to be banished from the Community: for contention gives rise to enmity, while from private affection and friendship spring suspicions and jealousies. For wherever impartiality is lost, there is a beginning and ground of envy and ill-will among those who are deprived of it. That is why we received a command from our Lord to imitate the goodness of him who makes the sun rise on good and bad alike (Matth. 5, 45). As then God gives the light to all men to share in common, so those who imitate God must shed a common and equal radiance of charity on all. For where charity is lacking, hatred will surely take its place. But if, as John tells us, God is charity, hatred must needs be the devil. Therefore he who has charity, has God; and he who has hatred fosters the devil in himself. On this account, all must have charity for all, without difference of degree or kind:

yet such honour as is due must be paid to each. And as regards charity, among those who are thus united, natural relationship will count for nothing. Even if one is by nature brother, or son, or daughter of another, this tie of blood must not be a ground for greater affection between these relatives than towards the rest. For whoever thus follows nature, is self-condemned; he has not wholly abandoned nature, but is still ruled by the flesh.

Right Use of Speech. Speech that is unprofitable and arises unseasonably from intercourse with others, must be forbidden. But whatever is profitable for souls, this only may be spoken of: and indeed, those who have permission for speech should speak of such profitable things, but with moderation and at fitting times. And in the case of an inferior, he should wait for the Superior's permission. But whisperings, and stealthy speeches, and communication by signs, must all be disallowed: since whispering makes one suspect slander, and sign-language is evidence to one's brother of some secret mischief. Such things give rise to hatred and suspicion. But when there is need for conversation with others, one must speak in the tone of voice required: lower when conversing with someone near at hand, more loudly when addressing someone at a distance. There must be no one in the Community so overbearing as to speak in a loud and threatening tone when giving orders or advice. —But let there be no quitting the monastery, apart from such excursions as are commanded and necessary.

Communities of Women. Since not only Communities of men exist, but also of Virgins, all those matters which have been mentioned are to apply to both. Yet one thing must be noted: that life among women demands a fuller and more uncommon measure of decorum: more effectual poverty, silence, obedience, and sisterly love, with strictness as regards leaving the monastery, caution in meeting together, mutual affection and avoidance of private friendships. For in all these things the life of Virgins has need to be regulated with greater care.

Superior and Subject. She who has charge of their discipline should not make the Sisters' pleasure her aim, nor by gratifying them seek for popularity; but she must show herself always grave, and worthy of fear and reverence. For let her know that she herself will have to account to God for whatever offences are committed in the Community. And no one in the ranks of the Community should seek from the Superior what is pleasant, but what is helpful and serviceable; nor must she question what is ordered: for such a habit paves the way for rebellion and follows on it. But as we have received our Lord's commandments without inquiry, since we know

that all Scripture is inspired of God and profitable (2 Tim. 3, 16), so the Sisterhood must receive the Superior's commands without distinction; carrying out with alacrity all that is enjoined, with no sadness or constraint, that their obedience may have its reward. And not only should they accept what they are taught in matters of discipline, but even when their teacher forbids them to fast, or advises them to take nourishing food, or suggests any other relaxation as need requires, they should accomplish all alike, believing that whatever she says is for them the law.

External Relations. When any necessary business has unavoidably to be spoken of, either with some man, or with anyone responsible or who could be of service in the matter, it is for the Superior herself to speak. And one or two of the Sisters should be with her: such that by their manner of life and years they may safely be seen and spoken with. But if one of these has some useful suggestion to make, she should submit it to the Superior; and anything that has to be said, should be said by her.



A CARMELITE LAY INSTITUTE

MOST of those trying to lead a life of Christian perfection in the world model their spiritual life on one or other of the religious Orders, following its spirit and finding in the ideals of the religious family to which they have attached themselves, if only by ties of affection and reverence, an encouragement, an inspiration and a spiritual strength. It is, then, in no way surprising that the new lay institutes, brought into being in their present form by the Apostolic Constitution *Provida Mater* published in March, 1947, should in some cases grow up under the aegis and protection of one of the older monastic Orders.

Some ten kilometres beyond Carpentras in a rather isolated part of Provence stands the house of Our Lady of Life. The valley is cleft in two by a rocky spur about 300 feet high against which the bold, clearly-defined contours of the fortified church of Venasque stand out; to the right lies the valley of the Axle, turning inwards, to the left that of the Nesque which tapers until it terminates in picturesque gorges. The rather abrupt slopes of the mountains are crowned with sharp ridges of rock. The landscape is austere—it would be almost harsh if the dull yellow of the rocks and the green of the pine, olive and evergreen oak did not in the warmth of the light of morning,