

received at communion validly consecrated. But is it such a difficult presumption? Not, surely, if you trust God and stop wondering if he may not perhaps be playing a monstrous cat-and-mouse game with you.

The sacraments work by the power of God; but he has chosen to make them work through the instrumentality of men—otherwise indeed they would not be really sacraments. The instrument may go wrong; but if God is prepared to take his chance on that, I do not think it is very worrying for us to have to do so too. We can be quite sure that in nearly all cases the sacraments in the Catholic Church are validly administered by validly ordained ministers, because it is God's Church, watched over by his providence, and he endowed it with the sacraments in order to help us, not to tie us up in knots. Furthermore, God's grace is not confined to the sacraments, so even supposing you do some time or other receive invalid sacraments, your own intention of receiving God's sacraments still ensures you the divine grace and assistance.

The uncertainty you speak of is part and parcel of the human lot, and should not be regarded as incompatible with peace of soul.



## A LETTER FROM INDIA

*(addressed originally to Oblates of Prinknash Abbey)*

Dear Friends:

Fr Raphael asked me some time ago if I would write and tell you something of my experiences in India. There is a good deal that I could say about what has been happening to me in these last six years, but I would like to tell you especially about an experiment I am making with some Benedictine oblates here, as I think that this will interest you very much. When I first came out here, Fr Raphael told me that there was an oblate of Prinknash here and I very soon made contact with him. At that time he was in charge of the first Cheshire Home in India, which he had established at his home at Kodaikanal. Kodaikanal is a place in the hills about a hundred miles from here in Madras State. It is seven

thousand feet up and has always been very popular among British residents here because of its good climate. Unfortunately he was compelled to give up the Cheshire Home, but has now turned his house into a place of convalescence for priests who need some relief after their work in the heat of the plains.

It is not difficult for me to get over to him by bus from here, and this Easter I went to stay with him and to give a retreat to a small group of oblates which we are forming there. One of them is the Indian manager of our oblate's, Mr Stooles', farm, and the other is a young Indian called Stephen, who is working in the Sarvodaya movement in that district, of which I want to tell you something. Sarvodaya means, literally, 'service of all', and is the name given by Mahatma Gandhi to the great movement which he started in India. After Gandhi's death this movement was taken up by Vinoba Bhave, who is generally regarded as the successor of Gandhi in modern India. Vinoba was a disciple of Gandhi, who shared his desire to raise the villages of India from the terrible state of poverty in which they had so long existed. He began his work by walking from village to village, asking landowners to give up part of their land to the landless. He has now walked over the greater part of India, and has collected over five million acres of land. But even more important than the land which he has collected is the spirit which he has awakened in the villages. He has inspired the people with the idea of 'service', of working for the common good so as not only to give land to those who are without it, but also to raise the standard of life of all the villages. Vinoba is, like Gandhi, a deeply religious man and his ideal is, in Gandhi's words, 'the service of God in humanity'. But like Gandhi he is also a Hindu and this makes the co-operation of Christians, especially Catholics, difficult. The Hindu is firmly convinced that all religions are essentially the same. He generally has a great respect and reverence for Christ and is perfectly ready to worship him as God, but this does not imply in his mind any exclusive claim. He believes that God manifests himself in many different ways, and regards Rama, Krishna, Siva, the Buddha, and even Mahomet, as so many 'incarnations' of God, no less than Christ. It can be seen that this attitude of mind is very difficult for a Christian to accept. In Sarvodaya and all Gandhian movements it is customary to have prayers in common, in which there will be readings from the Bible, the Koran and the Bhaga-

vadgita, and prayers will be addressed to Rama, Krishna and Christ. It is obviously impossible for a Catholic to join in such prayers and this makes co-operation in the movement difficult.

For this reason I went up with Br Stephen in May to see Vinoba and to discuss the matter with him. We stayed at his camp in a village not far from Agra and in the early morning accompanied him on his walk, beginning at 4 a.m., to the next village. During the walk I was given an opportunity to talk to him and we had a long and very interesting conversation. I found him rather unwilling to see our point of view at first, but in the end he came to accept it fully. I insisted that there are real and essential differences in the different religious traditions and that we must agree to respect these differences. Neither a Moslem nor a Christian can accept the Hindu position, and they ought not to be required to compromise their faith in any way. Eventually we reached full agreement that a Christian should not be expected to join in common prayers and that we should be able to have our own prayers, in which others, of course, can join, but which are exclusively Christian.

This is a matter of great practical concern, because we have decided to set up a centre for Sarvodaya work in Batlugundu, where Br Stephen is working, which will have a definite Christian and Catholic basis. Our plan is to have a small *ashram* where Br Stephen and a group of oblates which we hope to form can live and from which they will be able to go out to work in all the surrounding villages. We have already acquired ten acres of very good land in a most convenient position and our plan is to settle some landless villagers on this land and cultivate it so as to support the *ashram*. We hope that eventually it will be possible to have spinning and weaving and other village industries there, and also to be able to distribute food and medicines to people when they are in need.

I have obtained the support of the Archbishop of Madura for this scheme and we are trying to get help from the German bishops, who raise a large fund every year in Lent for the relief of poverty in Asia and Africa. But I would like to recommend it especially to your charity. I don't think it is possible to find a better way of helping the poor in the villages of India than this, and I need not tell you how desperately poor the mass of the people are. A mud hut with an earthen floor and a roof of palm

leaves, perhaps 8ft x 6ft, with an opening at the door and no other ventilation, is the ordinary dwelling of a poor family, and the weekly wage of a farm worker is about 15s. It can be seen from this how far even a small contribution can go. This method of giving has the advantage that it is not merely spent in 'charity'. It is devoted to constructive work in the villages, making roads, digging wells, building houses, providing seeds and manures for cultivation, improving stock and introducing village industries. In all this the assistance of the government can be had and Br Stephen has been promised the co-operation of all government workers in the neighbourhood. So it should be a means of doing solid and enduring work, constructive work, in the villages.

We want this also to be a specifically Benedictine work for Benedictine oblates. Apart from Br Stephen and the group of oblates who will work with him, Mr Stooles is deeply interested in the project and has promised his assistance in auditing the accounts. The *ashram* will be in the charge of a committee who will be responsible for the work which is carried out and for passing the accounts, so that I hope that any money which is given will be properly used. We need money first for putting up some buildings in the *ashram* and then for beginning cultivation of the land. There are three wells altogether but all of them need deepening and this will need to be done soon, so that we can have enough water for cultivation (always the most pressing need in India). Altogether we need a sum of about £500 to begin the work. I would like to recommend this to any of you who may feel the desire to help the poor in India, whose standard of living is so far below what we regard as the minimum necessary for a decent human life. Perhaps there is no greater call on our Christian charity today. Some may also like to help to support the *ashram* by regular contributions, however small; these would be a very great help in keeping the work going. Remember that 15s. a week is sufficient to keep a whole family. Contributions can be sent to *Brother Stephen, Benedictine Sarvodaya Ashram, Batlugundu, Madura Dt., S. India.*

I hope you will forgive me for taking this opportunity of begging from you. My excuse is that it comes from a definite result of my experience here in India. When I first came out to India I had no idea in mind except to help to establish a contemplative monastery in India. By the grace of God I can say that this

aim has now been accomplished. We have now, here at Kurisumala, a community of twelve, including myself and Fr Francis Mahieu, a Belgian Cistercian, who was formerly novice master at Caldey, and who is our Superior. Of these, seven are novices who have been with us for some time and may be expected to persevere; the others are postulants, of whom we have many who apply and come and stay with us for a month or so before they actually decide to remain. It is a purely contemplative foundation, with the usual round of prayer, study and manual work, very much as we have it at Prinknash, though rather more in the Cistercian tradition.

But though I am happy that we have been able to accomplish so much, yet my experience of India has made me feel that the contemplative life alone is not enough. The poverty in India is so great, and the need to help the poor so urgent, that I feel that we ought to do something in this direction. Though it is possible for a monastery to assist the poor in some small way, a monk cannot go out and do what is required to give really effective assistance. It occurred to me then that through oblates living in the world outside the monastery and devoting themselves to the service of the poor in the spirit of the rule, it might be possible for us to make a really effective contribution to this need. Such work in the villages, concerned with agriculture and village industries, is that with which Benedictine monks have always been concerned and we know that the villages in so many parts of Europe grew up through the influence of the monasteries. It is my hope therefore that through our oblates we may be able to do something of the same kind for the villages of India.

It is for this reason that I appeal to you as oblates, because we all have a Christian duty to the poor, especially those in Asia and Africa, whose standard of living is so far below our own, and this seems to be the way in which as Benedictines we can do something really effective for the poor, in whom St Benedict teaches us to see especially the person of Christ, who will say to us at the last day: 'I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me to drink, naked and you clothed me'.

Yours very sincerely in Christ,

BEDE GRIFFITHS, O.S.B.

Kurisumala Ashram, Vaghamon P.O.,  
Peermade, Kerala, S. India.