

THE CONTEMPLATIVE HOUSE IN AN APOSTOLIC INSTITUTE

By PAUL MOLINARI

PERHAPS THE MOST important aspect of the recent instruction on formation to religious life is the emphasis it places on the need for the compenetration of prayer and action in the apostolic Institute. Growth in religious maturity, it asserts, is substantially linked to the gradual acquisition of balance between intensive apostolic activity and the time of prayer and solitude, in which conscious union with God, with his will, and the peace attendant upon it is sought and found. In fact, the instruction insists that the novitiate is to be built up on alternating periods of activity and contemplative withdrawal; and after the end of the novitiate until final profession there are to be definite periods of retreat at fixed intervals. The instruction further indicates that these alternating periods of action and contemplation will encourage the novices faithfully to hold fast to what they have learnt throughout their religious lives.

These specific references to the relationship between contemplation and action in the apostolic life are an encouragement to the many religious who feel a great need for a life of deeper contemplation and a more intensified apostolic prayer.

It is hardly surprising that this need should manifest itself at this precise moment. It is the same Spirit of God who guides Councils of the Church and who acts in the individual souls of the faithful. In the Second Vatican Council this Spirit of God has enlightened the Church concerning the primary importance of the renewal of the religious life in the sense of a profoundly spiritual and personal union with Christ. It is under the influence of the same holy Spirit that numerous religious all over the world and in widely differing circumstances are today experiencing a spontaneous and overwhelming attraction to a life of loving donation to our Lord: a longing to be with him and to live in deeper contemplation and more intensive prayer.

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There is among many religious a growing understanding of the true significance and value of the religious life seen as a life of personal union with the Lord. The religious life is increasingly envisaged as the response to a call, a call to total dedication to him who invites them to cling to him with heart and mind. Religious consecration is understood as a deep bond of love which creates the irresistible desire to be with the beloved Person of Christ, to be one with him and to share completely in his mind and attitudes. In this effective and affective union of love what is of overriding importance is to listen with a special sensitivity and docility to what he communicates and teaches, and to accept his every word and wish, to share his desires and preoccupations, to live with him and for him, with no other concern than to love him and to give him joy and consolation.

It is in virtue of this total commitment of their persons to Christ that these religious are becoming increasingly conscious of their commitment to the Church which is his Mystical Body. Their sense of belonging to Christ is identified with a sense of belonging to the Church: their love for him becomes a fraternal love for all his members and for each one individually. They see that their personal union with Christ must extend itself to fit the dimensions of his apostolic love.

This could not be otherwise, because by making more and more their own the sentiments of Jesus Christ, they feel compelled to participate in his concern for his Father's business and sacrifice themselves for the redemption of mankind, following in this exactly the same standards which Christ himself adopted and manifested during his earthly life. Just as in the life of our Lord we see the penetration of apostolic activity and prayer, his sacrificing labours among the crowds and his ascent to the mountain so as to be in silence with his Father, so too these most generous followers of the Lord have a very keen perception of the apostolic needs of our times and feel simultaneously a strong desire for silence and recollection. They feel the need to withdraw for a certain period of time from the ordinary circumstances of their lives and to stay with the Lord in 'houses of prayer', in complete surrender to his loving invitation.

It is worth noticing that these desires and needs are alive today in the hearts of those who are among the most capable members of their Congregations. They are not seeking for escape from a situation which they no longer understand and with which they cannot cope. On the contrary, these religious are the sort of people conspicuous

for their openness and their psychological maturity, aware of their task and their responsibility in the world and the importance of their active apostolate. Further, their idea is to take up their work with fresh vigour after a certain period of withdrawal from it.

Yet we would not do them justice if their desire to withdraw for a while into the solitude of prayer and contemplative union with Christ were to be interpreted simply as a means for a more perfect future apostolate. This may and should indeed be the result of their temporary separation from their work; but it is not their first and primary motive. They simply want to follow the clear invitation of Christ to be with him, to console him, and in union with him to glorify and adore the Father, as he did himself in the midst of his public ministry. It is probable that the temporary absence of these religious will be interpreted as detrimental to the activities of their communities. But we should remember, in a spirit of faith, that the solitary prayer of Christ had an immense apostolic and salutary value. It was precisely in these times of solitude that his sacred humanity was prepared by the Father for the tasks which lay ahead, and was most deeply sanctified and psychologically attuned to the will of the Father. Christ himself, after these periods on the mountain, always descended to the plain and resumed his activities of preaching and healing and comforting mankind; so too these religious who want to withdraw to a 'house of prayer' will sooner or later resume their apostolic activities. There is no question here of founding a contemplative branch within the actually existing apostolic Congregations; nor are we dealing with a 'vocation within a vocation', but simply with a temporary withdrawal from the ordinary circumstances of the religious life to which they return in due time. Not all will necessarily experience this call at the same time. In fact, God has his own times and is at work in the individual souls. But by making this idea a reality we would certainly cooperate with God and help people to be increasingly ready to respond to his invitation.

From the standpoint of a spirit of faith, it is clear that such a temporary stay in a house of prayer will not detract from the apostolate but will rather enliven and enrich it. Speaking of those Institutes which are 'devoted to different kinds of apostolic work', the Council said: 'If religious are to fulfil their vocation which is primarily to follow Christ and to serve Christ himself in the members of his body, their apostolic action must derive from their own intimate union with him. And by this union love itself for God and for neigh-

bour will be fostered.¹ The house of prayer seems an excellent means of promoting this true apostolic fertility and love. The idea also underlines the importance of contemplative prayer in our lives and will promote a greater awareness both amongst religious and in the world at large that our apostolic action must stem from our loving union with Christ. Further, it will make many more people conscious of the fact that our apostolic life must be wedded with contemplation: in virtue of our vocation we are all called to this constant union with God.

First of all it must be clear that a temporary stay in a 'house of prayer' should never be imposed on any religious. Only those who feel inwardly attracted to the experiment should take part in it. Nor should the experiment be open to all indiscriminately, but only to those who are truly balanced and mature, and who have come to their decision after serious thought and with the advice of an experienced and prudent spiritual director.

On principle no fixed rules should be imposed on those who engage in this experiment. In particular, it would be unwise to create new structures or to lay down a-prioristic regulations for the external circumstances of this temporary stay in a house of prayer. It cannot be outlined and planned. If the desire and felt need for this withdrawal is truly from God, he will in due time manifest in those whom he has chosen how he wants them to proceed. He will therefore lead them himself and make his desires known to them. His ways may and most probably will differ with different persons; they will also vary according to the temperament and the state of development of the individual. All, or almost all, will depend on the way in which the holy Spirit works in the souls of those who live in a house of prayer; but since the criterion for admission into the contemplative house will be true spiritual maturity, tried and tested in terms of apostolic fervour, there is no reason why the individual should not have complete freedom to settle the details of his contemplative living according to his felt needs.

For this same reason of respect for the working of the holy Spirit who deals with each religious personally, it will not be possible to determine precisely the duration of the stay in a house of prayer. For some religious a few weeks will suffice, whereas others may need a few months or even a year. Certainly there should be no rigid order of the day imposed on all alike. It may happen that one reli-

¹ *Perfectae Caritatis*, 8.

gious will be drawn to spend several hours in contemplative prayer, whereas others will find the peace they seek in more frequent but shorter periods of prayer. For some the way of complete silence and solitude will be the way traced for them by God; for others it will be more helpful to meet with others from time to time and to draw new inspiration from such occasional contacts and conversations. But by its very nature, this longing to be in the Lord's presence continually in silent admiration, adoration and loving attention, to share with him his activity of atonement and intercession, will create an atmosphere of deep recollection, a sense of religious order and observance which will far outstrip the possibilities normally offered in apostolic communities. Since only the truly balanced and experienced religious is to be admitted to these houses of prayer, the dangers of strain and tension will be reduced from the beginning. It will be the task of the spiritual director carefully to watch developments here and to offer his help in times of difficulty.

Our use of the terms 'house of prayer', 'contemplative house' by no means implies that a special establishment must be set up for this purpose. We are not speaking of the creation of buildings, but of opportunity, atmosphere and circumstances in which this withdrawal may effectively be achieved. Those in whom God inspires this desire to be with him alone need a place which is sufficiently secluded; it need not be completely isolated from a regular religious community. These religious have to be provided with the opportunity to respond to the inner movements of God's grace, but not at the expense of running a special house and perhaps of supporting special external activities to keep such a house going. Ours is no time to be building new houses. In fact, an existing summer house, or a cottage in the grounds of a religious community, will serve the purpose admirably. Or, if no better solution can be found, it might be possible to set aside a wing or floor of an existing house, as long as this could be sufficiently separated off for the specific purpose of this experiment and to secure the privacy and intimacy which it requires. One should also bear in mind the possibility of sharing facilities offered by other Institutes, e.g. retreat houses.

It has been suggested that this experiment might be located in slum areas or the inner city. This would be to confuse two entirely different experiments, and defeat the nature of both. The purpose of establishing a house in particular poor sections of a city would be to bring God to a neighbourhood where he may not be known or to give a special witness to his presence among men. The focus here is

to seek and love God in one's neighbour directly, rather than the seeking of God alone for his own sake, as Christ sought him when he went up to the mountain. While the house of prayer will certainly have a great apostolic value, its primary aim is the reverse of the external apostolate in any form whatsoever. As the Council has emphasized, there is a very precise difference between apostolic love and apostolic activity, though the two have to be integrated.¹

In general, it would be advisable to link the house of prayer with a regular community, which would greatly simplify domestic organization with regard to problems such as catering, medical care and the like.² This would also make it possible for the Superior of the ordinary community to take general charge of the house of prayer. There would be no need to have a special superior for the house of prayer or to create administrative functions within the body of those who seek a special union with our Lord in seclusion. The main advantage of such an arrangement would be to enable the members of the house of prayer to share the liturgical celebrations of the regular community: a point of special importance where otherwise it would be impossible for them to assist daily at the holy Sacrifice of the Mass, for which they will feel a most urgent need during this period of withdrawal.

Where it is possible, they should at least from time to time have their own liturgy in the private chapel of the house of prayer. This would unite the group more intimately and allow them to adapt the liturgy, within legitimate limits naturally, to suit their own particular needs and to express their special devotion to the beloved Lord. It goes without saying that they will need to have the Eucharistic Christ permanently in their midst, to give this life of solitude its true centre. The Lord's presence among them will enkindle their love, and make it possible for them to spend many hours with him, just as Mary, Martha and Lazarus enjoyed his company when he withdrew from the crowds in order to be with his friends and

¹ Cf *Perfectae Caritatis*, 5.

² The question will inevitably be raised: how is such a house to be maintained? It is clear that it cannot finance itself by direct works. It will have to be subsidized by the provincial or central administration of the order or congregation. Here it must be made clear that spiritual vigour of the particular province, or even the Institute as a whole and of the Church at large may well depend on the success of this experiment. It is not a question of the peace of soul of a few religious, much less a private whim or fancy, but of special graces being offered to some for the spiritual well-being of the whole. At the same time, if the project were carried out on the lines suggested above, expenses would be very modest, especially as personal poverty would figure largely in the experiment.

rejoice in their faithful presence and their loyal affection. It is this example from the life of our Lord which brings out very clearly what the religious need during this period: that is, the loving company of our Lord whom they seek as 'the one thing necessary' and to whom they wish to cling with undivided heart.¹

Though we would not wish to exclude from this contemplative situation those who would profit from an atmosphere of quiet and tranquillity for the remote or proximate preparation of retreats, lectures on 'sacred subjects' or other work which might come under the heading of *tradere contemplata*, such activity should never be treated as one of the authentic purposes of the house of prayer, any more than religious should be sent there simply for a 'rest'. This period of withdrawal is neither for study nor for convalescence as such, but for prayer and contemplation. What study is undertaken will be in response to the need to penetrate more deeply into God's revelation by frequent and meditative reading of holy Scripture, and in particular of the Gospels and the other writings of the New Testament. More than at any other time religious will feel the need of having the holy Scriptures at hand, so that by reading them and meditating on them they may acquire the 'high privilege of knowing Christ Jesus'.² This living contact with the word of God under the influence of the holy Spirit and in the presence of the Word incarnate who dwells eucharistically in their midst, will enable them to penetrate to the inner meaning of Christ's communication: to hear his voice interiorly and to respond to his call with warm affection and a love which surrenders itself.

We have indicated that the house of prayer needs the assistance of at least one highly experienced priest with a more than average knowledge of spiritual theology and of known prudence and discretion. It will not be his task to give conferences or lectures, much less to interfere directly with the running of the house. He will be very chary of taking an active lead in the direction of these religious: this must be left to the holy Spirit who moves and guides them by his own inner working in their souls. It will be the task of the spiritual director in these particular conditions to try to follow and to understand the movements of the holy Spirit and to be available when his help is needed. Any other approach would incur the risk of disturbing the work of grace and of interfering unduly with the extremely

¹ Cf *Perfectae Caritatis*, 5.

² Phil 3, 8. *Perfectae Caritatis*, 6.

delicate and highly personal relationship which the holy Spirit intends to establish between the soul and God.

These are no more than a few observations with regard to a spiritual movement which is being seriously discussed today by many religious Congregations and by priests who, through their work, are in close touch with them. Though the house of prayer, as far as practical execution is concerned, is still in the first stages of experimentation, the first judgment is most favourable and sympathetic. Most of us feel certain that this movement comes from God; that it is a most healthy and timely phenomenon in these days when even many good people seem to have lost sight of the transcendent values of solitude, prayer, silence and meditation both in the Church at large and the religious life in particular. In our times of turmoil and exaggerated emphasis on external activity which frequently degenerates into pure activism, it would appear that God himself is intervening, and in his silent but most efficacious way is bringing us to a new understanding and desire of the interior life, and of a new flowering of those qualities which at all times have marked the beginning of an authentic reform and new vitality in the Church. For the Church of Christ will ultimately be renewed only by the prayer and the sacrifice of those who in silence and loving surrender open their minds and hearts to the voice of God and generously respond to his appeal.

The experiment of the house of prayer, whose purpose is simply to foster the loving relationship between Christ and his apostles and to develop the essential unity of action and contemplation, may well turn out to be one of the truly providential means for achieving that interior renewal of religious life so vital for the post-conciliar Church.¹

¹ Cf *Ecclesiae Sanctae*, Introduction: 'If the teachings of the Council are to reach their full achievement, religious institutes especially must inculcate a newness of spirit' (*Supplement to The Way*, 4, p 3).