RELIGIOUS POVERTY IN CONTEMPORARY WRITING

THOSE WHO LOOK to Vatican II for ready answers have doubtless found the section on religious poverty in *Perfectae Caritatis* rather meagre fare. Hints about the 'law of work' and the need for a witness that really speaks to men of our time, though significant, amount to little more than an adumbration of the ideal. The Vorgrimler Commentary can conclude, in typically measured language, that 'the opinion could be held that the decree amounts to very little in respect of the problem of poverty'.[1] It is not surprising, then, that current literature on the subject is exploratory and in the main inconclusive. This survey will attempt to trace the main lines of advance and to account for some of the anomalies.

Difficulties

It would be glib to describe all contemporary writing on poverty as problem-ridden. Confident voices still assure us that most of the objections levelled today against traditional religious poverty may safely be discountenanced as temptations. Much of the discussion, however, testifies to a growing awareness that the ground on which accepted notions of poverty are founded is not uniformly firm and that a number of difficulties need to be taken seriously. The difficulties are inter-related and the gist of them might be summed up as follows. Poverty cannot be defined simply as an attitude; it needs to be embodied in a way of life. And a way of life giving concrete expression to poverty of spirit will either be one which a world familiar with organizations like Oxfam and Shelter would not ordinarily classify as poor, or else it will entail real deprivation. In either case religious poverty may prove, on closer scrutiny, to be of a hybrid quality, a mixture of good and pernicious elements.

As conceived in juridical terms, poverty, it is argued, slips easily into illusion, since the religious, as 'poor', is answerable solely to juridical norms and not to the intractable demands of real situations. The range of possible consequences extends from obsessive economy at one pole to effective ownership without responsibility at

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1 Vorgrimler (ed): *Commentary on the documents of Vatican II* (London 1968), vol 2, p 361.

the other. Mgr Huyghe asks whether women religious 'really need to have their attention drawn all day long to tiny details and the practice of their so-called poverty centred on measures of economy which border on avarice'[1] – a criticism which is hardly original but worth hearing from a bishop who is a leading campaigner for religious renewal. In an important article to which frequent reference will be made in this survey, Fr Sikora shows how the ideal of detachment from material things can result in a travesty of true poverty of spirit. 'It is all too possible for one detached . . . to slip into a radically inauthentic mode of being and an idea of life, a dream world in which everything we need is at hand, provided in some marvellous way by the providence of God, a world very much like that of children in a rich family.[2] Another writer observes that 'all their lives religious "charge it" without ever seeing a bill'.[3] Again, it is pointed out that the inability of religious to give things away can have the effect of making a virtue of selfishness.[4]

A poverty which gives pride of place to freedom from material cares is subject, then, to regrettable side-effects. This, of course, will come as a revelation to no one. Fr Sikora, however, carries the problem a step further by asking whether such poverty does not provide security in the very sector of human existence where man's relationship to God is better promoted by the experience of precariousness familiar to those who work for their living.

> The law of work means . . . a sense of insecurity for most men, a radical insecurity that not even great wealth and power could completely remove. And along with this insecurity goes the felt need for concern for the future, for planning with discretion and foresight so as to ensure as well as possible the continual supply of material goods . . . necessary for the sustenance of man in the world. Trust in providence means that such concerns do not *dominate* human life, but they are still demanded of men by the nature of our being. Simple exemption from such concerns seems less than human, more proper to children than adults. And all this – even

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[1] Huyghe, Gerard (Bishop of Arras): 'Renewal of Religious Life: some practical applications', in *Religious Orders in the Modern World* (London, 1965), p 140.

[2] Sikora, Joseph J., S.J.: 'Poverty today', in *Review for Religious* vol 26, no 4 (July 1967), pp 638–661; one of the most comprehensive recent studies to have appeared in English.

[3] Barbieri, William: 'The Young Religious and his Poverty', in *Review for Religious*, vol 25, no 2 (March 1966), pp 288–94.

[4] *Ibid.*

> while it makes it more difficult for him to concern himself with the great matters of the spiritual life with God – nevertheless impresses upon man the fragility of his being in the world.[1]

The difficulties attaching to a strictly juridical view of poverty are all too clear. But exceptional cases apart, the solution cannot lie simply in a return to economic poverty or genuine neediness. For a score of reasons the majority of religious give witness at best to moderate means rather than to poverty. No one proclaims more movingly the value of outright material poverty chosen for the kingdom than René Voillaume, yet even he sounds a warning against too simple a view of the matter. 'We cannot, on account of our personal calling to practise poverty or the humiliation of the cross, implicitly wish for a diminution of our apostolic activities'.[2] That efficiency and indeed the very nature of religious life ordinarily preclude the religious from taking his place among the deprived is generally conceded, and realism points rather to the sort of norm proposed by a carmelite writer, 'the standard of the ordinary working man of the area'.[3]

Of course, even to adopt so modest a standard as this supposes that some degree of self-imposed deprivation is to be seen as a value. Most writers on poverty clearly believe that it is. But along with this, there is a manifest awareness that the value is less luminous than it may have been in the past, for reasons that arise both from the experience of poverty and from its theoretical basis. The more closely the religious of today models his apostolic life on normal professional standards, the more his poverty, seen as a virtue to be systematically 'practised', appears foreign to the air he breathes. Indeed, Moran and Harris dispose of poverty simply by setting forth what they claim to be the foreseeable shape of religious life in the final decades of the twentieth century. In their view, the typical chapter on 'How to practise the virtue of poverty' has no room in the programme.[4] Considerations brought out by other writers suggest that this conclusion may be too simple. But at all events the diffi-

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[1] Sikora: p 646.

[2] Voillaume, René: *Brothers of Men* (London 1966), p 162.

[3] Sister Teresa Margaret, O.C.D.: 'Poverty, Dependence and Destitution', in *Religious Life in the Light of Vatican II* (St Paul editions; Boston, Mass., 1967), p 116. (The article is re-printed from *Sisters Today*, Feb 1966, pp 193–200.)

[4] Moran, Gabriel, and Harris, Maria: *Experiences in Community* (London, 1969), pp 153–68.

culty it purports to resolve is widely experienced.

The theoretical problem stems from a twofold misgiving. Does the traditional practice of poverty still bear effective witness in the western economy of today? And does the notion of poverty take sufficient account of the way in which the modern world understands the relationship between man and his possessions?

The suggestion that religious poverty is no longer the compelling protest that it once was against the abuses of wealth may be illustrated from John Heijke's book on Taizé:

> Especially since the middle ages, the evangelical counsel of poverty has given rise to certain institutionalised forms which, as long as the world was not industrialised, held a genuine appeal. In that world, riches meant primarily luxury, and were of profit solely to the owner of wealth. Since the rise of industry, however, and the establishment of large enterprises, the meaning of riches has undergone a drastic change. Gone is the primary implication of a life filled with excessive pleasures and of profits accruing solely to the owner's capital. Today, ownership and capital are primarily a social productive factor. Capital means prosperity for many, the power to develop entire regions, to foster the growth of human society.[1]

Given all this, does it still catch the mind of the rich man of today simply to renounce wealth? Or would a style of life which gave witness to the use of property in a genuinely communitarian way be better calculated to prod the conscience of the modern capitalist? As one writer remarks, 'If we do not reflect an affluent society's approach to wealth, we lose the chance to lead our fellow men to a deeper spirituality'.[2] The solution of Taizé is to replace poverty by community of goods and to give witness to a social use of property in co-operative schemes which impose real self-renouncement but lay no claim to the title of poverty.[3] Such a solution supposes a large rural community and perhaps also the particular charism so strikingly exemplified by the Taizé brothers. As Heijke himself

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[1] Heijke, J.: *Renewal of Religious Life: Taizé* (Pittsburgh, 1967), p 59.

[2] Padovano, Anthony T: 'Theology of Poverty', in *Catholic World*, vol 204, no 1,222 (January, 1967), pp 219–225.

[3] The reader is referred to Heijke for an account of the rural co-operative experiment (COPEX) and of 'operation hope' (directed to the needs of latin America). For the Taizé approach to poverty, cf also Schutz, Roger: *The Power of the Provisional* (London, 1969), pp 30–40.

remarks, it is not for the imitation of the ordinary religious community.

Coupled with the difficulty illustrated by Heijke in the above quotation is the consideration that our own understanding of the situation of man in the world is not that of the society in which traditional religious poverty first took shape. Fr Sikora remarks that in the past the prevailing view of the human condition made it possible to regard poverty pure and simple as the ideal. 'Anything else could be considered as a concession to the *de facto* existential condition of man'.[1] He suggests that our own attitude towards property as an essential means towards man's self-realization calls for a new approach to poverty as a value.

> The existential need of man for material things is not merely a *de facto* one, but an essential aspect of his being as a spiritual person that is simultaneously spatio-temporal . . . His being is radically spatio-temporal and must by a natural necessity extend itself to the zone around him in the world . . . It would seem, then, that man without material possessions, without dominion over material things, is almost nothing but another lump of matter tossed about by the forces of nature, with the aspirations of his spiritual consciousness destined to frustration. In this light, the ideal of poverty might seem to imply a falsification of man's fundamental being in the world.[2]

Another writer makes the same point:

> In possessions man encounters himself and tangibly experiences his presence to himself, provided that his stance towards his possessions is independent and not grasping. Possessions extend one's existence into the world and thus lead to a fuller possession of self.[3]

Statements like these might appear provocative. No one seems yet to have openly taken issue with them. But current writing reveals various responses to the sort of problems they raise. For instance, an entire theology, which a developed treatment of poverty would have to explore, is implicit in the position adopted by Fr Yarnold: 'We regard prosperity . . . and independence to be necessary for a

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[1] Sikora: p 643.

[2] Sikora: p 645.

[3] Wulf, Friedrich: 'The Spirit of Poverty', in *Theology Digest*, vol xv, no 1 (Spring 1967), pp 47–51.

human being to grow to maturity. The religious gives up these means and by reaching maturity without them shows the power of grace'.[1] In many quarters the force of the difficulties is plainly realized and one proposed – and of course only partial – solution takes the form of a modification of terminology. In an article in *America*, Eugene Ahern argues that the notion of religious poverty contains an insoluble tension, a tension he discovers in the council documents themselves, which affirm both that poverty means actual want and that religious have the right to all they need. He suggests that we would show more regard for the facts by talking about a vow of common possession rather than poverty.[2] Sister Margaret writes:

> Would it not be more honest to change the terms of the vow to meet existing conditions than to make of it a Procrustean bed and try to squeeze the changed milieu into an outmoded concept? Why, instead of vowing actual poverty, do we not understand this as poverty of spirit and total giving of self and individual endowments to the community? This, if practised absolutely, can be a form of poverty both penitential and practical, without offering obstacles to efficiency in work or the apostolate.[3]

Suggestions of this sort are fairly current, and if accepted would modify the features of religious life without perhaps effecting radical change. But the more drastic solution, that poverty as a distinctive characteristic of religious life be simply banished to the museum, appears at the moment to be more talked about than committed to print.[4] It is striking, on the other hand, that those most keenly aware of the stumbling blocks do not draw the conclusion that poverty has had its day. 'Some kind of ideal of poverty, of detachment of spirit, if not of actual deprivation of material things, is a necessary consequence of any wisdom that looks beyond the multiplicity of the

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[1] Yarnold E., S.J.: 'The vow of Poverty', in *Spode House Review*, vol 5, no 55 (June 1969), pp 13–16.

[2] Ahern, Eugene J.: 'Religious Poverty: Fact or Fiction?', in *America*, vol 116, no 20 (May 20, 1967), pp 573–5.

[3] Sister Teresa Margaret, *loc. cit.*

[4] The most noteworthy defence of such a position is offered in *Experiences in Community*. However, the authors concede that 'there is a poverty that pertains to all men', and it seems a fair criticism to say that in their protest against the debasement of a word, they stand a little lightly to a *value* which is central in scripture; one which, if we abstract from particular expressions of it, is by no means lost on the world today, as the Council points out (cf *Perfectae Caritatis*, 13).

world to some final state of unity and union as the true good of man', writes Fr Sikora.[1] Fr Wulf, if he sounds a warning note on the dangers of poverty, refuses to go to the other extreme of making a virtue of possessions, 'which easily become a dividing wall instead of a bridge between (the religious) and his neighbour'.[2] If the dilemma is widely felt, the general response seems to be in favour of the compromise position adopted by sister Jeanne d'Arc: 'As witness on the social level, there is a conflict between real poverty and needful standards . . . which must be accepted if it cannot be resolved'.[3]

Poverty of Spirit

The belief that poverty, in some form or another, is an essential constituent of the religious life still stands firm, then, against real difficulties. A clue to the reason why may be found in a trend in contemporary writing concerned primarily with poverty of spirit. The emphasis here is not on religious poverty against the setting of modern conditions, but on christian poverty in the setting of scripture.[4] The institutional superstructure of poverty may well stand in need of repair and the frontier between religious poverty and that of the layman may be less defined than in the past. But that poverty belongs ineluctably to the christian vocation as such can only be clearer today than it was a decade or so back.

Poverty of spirit, as expounded in current writing, is no fringe virtue. To be poor before God is nothing less than to have the right attitude towards self. 'Assent to God starts in man's sincere assent to himself, just as sinful flight from God starts in man's flight from himself'.[5] To be truly oneself before God is to be aware of one's own emptiness: 'Becoming man involves proclaiming the poverty of the human spirit in the face of the total claims of a transcendent God'.[6] Such poverty is a response to Christ's self-emptying, a 'sharing of the deprivation of Christ and the expression of the acceptance of the death to which the world is doomed through sin, acceptance of the

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1 Sikora: p 640.

2 Wulf, Friedrich: *loc. cit.*

3 Sister Jeanne d'Arc, O.P.: *Witness and Consecration* (London, 1966), p 32.

4 Gelin, Albert: *The Poor of Yahwe* (New York, 1965). A work which has considerably influenced current writing on poverty. For spiritual poverty in the context of the christian life in general, cf also Metz, Johannes B.: *Poverty of Spirit* (London, 1968); and the chapter on poverty of spirit in Evely, Louis: *In the Christian Spirit* (London, 1969).

5 Metz: *op cit.* p 7.

6 *Ibid.*, p 14.

destiny of mankind expelled from the garden to live in tribulation and hunger'.[1]

Seen in this light, poverty is not simply one virtue among others. Rather, declares Metz, 'it is the hidden component of every transcending act, the ground of every theological virtue'.[2] Practical instances are drawn, then, from every sector of christian living. Without poverty there is no genuine repentance: 'awareness of one's sinfulness and of its resultant poverty will bring one to the feet of Christ'.[3] Poverty is inseparable from charity – 'love's other side'.[4] It is freedom from whatever might hinder from a joyous acceptance of the gospel.[5] Rightly understood, it leads, like obedience, to independence of judgment and freedom of spirit.[6] As radical non-possessiveness, the attitude of poverty extends to one's time ('only fifteen minutes for lunch because the next appointment is due'), to one's ideas (dialogue is 'an exchange between poor persons') and to one's qualities (if I am capable of being shocked 'I am rich in the worst way – I do not know I am living on the mercy of God').[7]

Examples could be multiplied to illustrate the extensive range over which poverty as a spiritual attitude is seen to produce its effects. The value of such a view lies of course in showing that poverty goes far deeper than a one-sidedly juridical or ascetical approach might suggest. The danger is that to talk exclusively in such terms would finish by reducing poverty to little more than a metaphor – and a metaphor in constant need of elucidation. Few writers consider themselves dispensed from seeking some connection between the spiritual and more restricted senses of the word.

The connections discussed are various. René Voillaume reminds us that poverty belongs to the Church as such. The means must somehow conform to the message; poor means are an expression of the divine nature of the Church and of our Lord's all-powerful action within his mystical body.[8] Others lay stress on the eschatological meaning of poverty. Actual poverty is related to the 'mystical

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[1] Vorgrimler: *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol 2, p 360.
[2] Metz: *op. cit.*, p 7.
[3] Ninetemann, George B., O.P.: 'Penance, Sacrament of Poverty', in *Review for Religious*, vol 26, no 4 (July, 1967), pp 625–38.
[4] Huyghe, in *Religious Orders in the Modern World*, p 138.
[5] Häring, B.: 'Poverty of Spirit', in *Spiritual Life*, vol 13, no 1 (Spring, 1967).
[6] Sikora: p 648.
[7] Örsy, Ladislas M., S.J.: *Open to the Spirit* (Lodon, 1968), pp 120, 127.
[8] Voillaume, René: *op. cit.*, p 165.

expectancy which is part of our nature'.[1] It gives embodiment to an attitude which looks only to ultimate values.[2]

Another approach consists in asking whether there is an intrinsic connection between poverty of spirit and a way of life characterized by detachment from material things. In an article which draws on Gabriel Marcel and on a study by Oraison and Ledoux, sister Helen Marie suggests that possessing things, or having things, is a way in which we shield ourselves from the awareness, basic to spiritual poverty, that we do not possess ourselves.[3] The distinction here is not between ownership and deprivation, but rather between two approaches to things. One can *have* things, or one can *be related* to things. The second situation results in a fulfilment and an ability to appreciate things for themselves that are beyond the range of the possessive. How this relationship is promoted in present-day religious life remains a difficulty. Certainly, dependence has some meaning within such a view; but how far does spiritual poverty impose the absence of possessions as well as of possessiveness? As more than one writer has pointed out, there is at least a natural correspondence between spiritual and actual poverty. 'Poor people, the actually poor, stretch out their hands and ask when they are in need . . . Consequently, they develop that modesty and humility which is at times difficult for the christian to acquire'.[4] No one suggests that poverty automatically confers the right qualities and that wealth automatically excludes them. But the fact remains that the christian use of wealth supposes an attitude that can only be expressed in the word we use for the tangible want of material things that, in the bible, is the starting point for understanding poverty of spirit. Real comfort, on the other hand, may be compatible with spiritual poverty; but it neither reflects it nor gives us the language in which to talk about it. The line of argument is neatly summarized by Metz when he calls neediness a sacrament of poverty and wealth a temptation to spiritual opulence.[5]

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[1] Sikora: p 650.

[2] Sister Jeanne d'Arc, *op. cit.*, p 22.

[3] Sister Helen Marie, O.S.F.: 'Having Nothing', in *Review for Religious*, vol 25, no 4 (July 1966), pp 703–714. Cf Marcel, Gabriel: *Being and Having* (London, 1965). The translation of the essay by Oraison and Ledoux, 'The psychology of the instinct of possession', appears in *Poverty* (London, 1954). This valuable study furnishes psychological grounds for the ideal of 'detachment', while emphasising the hazards of a vow of poverty for those who lack the maturity that the vow presupposes.

[4] Molinari, Paul S.J.: 'The following of Christ in the teaching of Vatican II', in *The Way*, Supplement no 4 (November, 1967), p 108.

[5] Metz: *op. cit*, p 38.

Poverty in practice

Is it possible to reflect this bond between spiritual and 'real' poverty in a distinct life-style which avoids the hidden reefs surrounding whatever practical form of poverty one chooses to adopt? Proposals are seldom worked out in detail. No blueprints are offered, but there are several signposts.

First, it needs to be emphasized that reservations about equiparating religious poverty with a sharing in actual want in no way reflects an insensitivity to a world situation which, in Fulton Sheen's phrase, virtually imposes on a large part of the human race a 'vow of destitution'. A point that receives wide assent is that religious poverty, however problematic its connection with the real thing, tends by its nature to a concern for the exploited, the under-paid and the neglected. Spiritual poverty is a pre-disposition for such concern. To select two among many reasons why: non-possessiveness means that the religious has no vested interest in the poor remaining poor: he is, 'more than others, sufficiently detached from what he happens to possess as to be free in giving to those in need';[1] and spiritual poverty is alien to paternalism. 'The poor in spirit can never think of themselves as superior or pass judgment on others. They never want "to do good" or "do social work": they only want to serve'.[2]

On the score of personal poverty, one general conviction comes through clearly: the difficulties in the way of religious appearing actually poor are no reason for bearing the appearances of privilege or wealth. That work should replace living off the community is of course an ideal which the Council has placed beyond question. Suggested ways in which religious give witness to moderate living include the use of public transport and of state welfare facilities, and cultivating simple tastes. In general, religious should be seen to breathe a purer air than the asphyxiating climate of the consumer society. As one superior remarks, 'sisters are affected by our present day atmosphere of comfort, our refrigerator and washing-machine civilization. Hence a desire – partly legitimate – for what is most convenient, then what is easiest, and finally what is most attractive'.[3] A remark which gains in depth when set against Vance Packard's portrait of the compulsive purchaser in '*The Hidden Persuaders*'.

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[1] Sikora: p 658.
[2] Huyghe, in *Religious Orders in the Modern World*, p 140.
[3] Huyghe: *Tensions and Change* (London, 1954), p 54.

Writers today are sensitive, too, to the besetting sin of the successful religious Institute, the use of personal poverty as a mask for blatant corporate wealth:

> The members' natural instinct for glory and power are transferred to the congregation. The members themselves are humble, but no one must touch their congregation, its honour and prestige. The members are poor individually, but they do not ask that their congregation should be poor.[1]

The juridical aspect of poverty seems at the moment to be at a discount. The most widely offered suggestion in this sphere is in favour of relaxation: that 'instead of making money in the pocket the greatest hazard to poverty, it should be made its realistic foundation'.[2] The proposal is variously defended as putting an end to excessive concern with small sums of money, as a means of confining the asking of permissions to reasonable limits, and as a chance for religious to help other people at cost to themselves. The extent of the practice will depend on the degree to which actual dependence will be seen to favour not only the spiritual attitude but also solidarity with the really deprived, such as those in institutions 'who are too poor to enjoy the responsibility of managing their own affairs'.[3] But in the main, those who show concern to re-shape the forms of poverty give more attention to the wrong sort of restrictions that once held away than to possible new ones. What Moran and Harris dub 'the asking-permission syndrome' comes in for hard knocks. So does restriction practised for its own sake. 'Regulation of use', says Sikora, 'is not to be sought for the sake of regulation but out of intelligent concern for orderly use that will actually serve for personal growth to christian maturity and for effective apostolic work'.[4] Again, it is pointed out that no amount of regulation or ascetical practice will work without education in personal responsibility. 'Much, even much of decisive importance, because affecting everday life and one's personal style of life, will have in future to be left to individual responsibility'.[5]

True, a certain juridical framework is supposed by most and insisted upon by some. And, as the present survey has attempted to

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1 Cardinal Constantini, quoted in Huyghe, *Religious Orders . . .*, p 142.

2 Barbieri: *loc. cit.*, p 291.

3 Yarnold E., S.J.: 'The Vows: Consecration and Sign', in *The Way*, Supplement no 2 (May, 1966), p 86.

4 Sikora: p 651.

5 Vorgrimler: *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol 2, p 361.

show, new thinking on poverty shows no propensity to erect a new set of over-simplifications. But if there is a concern which dominates the more critical element of this thinking, it is to break loose from a notion of poverty widely seen as a threat to christian liberality rather than as its expression. The starting-point is clear. The indications are that the end of the process is still very much in the future.

Michael Ivens S.J.

CONSECRATED CELIBACY OR VIRGINITY is a form of permanent christian commitment which has its roots in the Bible. Its positive values are established in the New Testament, and maintained and developed in patristic and classical spiritual writing. Though it may be true that the mystique of virginity has been enhanced by popular ignorance of human sexuality, and by a defective theology of marriage, its traditional spiritual and apostolic significance is independent of subsequent canonical legislation and remains unimpaired in the light of modern psychological knowledge.

This is not to say that the many problems raised by celibacy are superficial. It is not enough to stress the eschatological aspect in answer to the charges that consecrated virginity involves frustration in terms of human love and living; it seems impossible to preach it without at the same time depreciating married love; it is a socially isolating factor – and the anti-social will also be anti-apostolic; loneliness normally cultivates selfishness. Is it possible for a celibate to achieve emotional balance without impairing the human capacity for love? Is it not inevitable that the celibate will be either a misanthrope, or will bring his obsessive tensions to every relationship into which he enters?

In our Supplement on CELIBACY (August, 1970), various experts in the fields of Scripture, Patristics, Sacramental and Pastoral Theology, Psychology and Spirituality (cf p 92), will trace the history and practice of this form of commitment in the Church, and will explore the many difficulties which have been high-lighted in current controversy.