HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES AND IDEAL DEMANDS

By JAMES WALSH

PERHAPS ONE of the most popular misconceptions confronting the historian of western spirituality is that which takes it for granted that religious life, especially for women, allowing for certain accidental differences, has presented the same face and the same ideals from the time of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians until the present day: 'nuns' are they who, in their contacts with 'the world, must deal with it as though they had no dealings with it'.[1] It is of course accepted that there have been deviations from this ideal, even as there have been 'bad popes'. European literature, particularly of the satirical kind like Boccaccio's *Decameron*, or in more gentle vein like the Prioress in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, or even the Protestant Gothic tales of the nineteenth century, have always harped on the worldly indiscretions of those whose profession is the external trappings of holiness. But, then, equally, every century has seen its reforms: a return to a more spartan austerity, to a more literal practice of poverty, to holier 'indiscretions', to a purgation of worldliness.

Here is one of the great puzzles afflicting the popular mind at present. The reform called for and initiated by Vatican Council II has seen a decimation amongst the numbers of religious. One very numerous order of men, for example, declined from thirty-six thousand in 1963 to twenty-eight thousand in 1978. The diminution in congregations of religious women has been of much the same proportions. Many informed lay-folk draw attention to the fact that the members of the larger congregations of religious women, until the 'reform', were admired and respected from afar, leading lives of prayer and asceticism behind the decent privacy of their convent walls. Now most of these have abandoned their religious garb, and appear to be mixing freely and familiarly (and not always in an edifying manner) with a world which they were supposed to have left behind in response to a divine vocation. In short, the argument runs, the reform of

[1] Cf 1 Cor, 7, 32ff.

Vatican II seems to have led to a weakening, a desacralization of religious life, or at least to an increase in worldliness.

At the basis of such perplexity, of a certain misapprehension and often over-hasty judgment, is that all religious, in virtue of their consecration, must be remote from a world that inevitably defiles: that it is only because of the austerities of the cloistered life that they can remain unscathed when they leave the cloister to perform their apostolic tasks. The theory, and gradually in our times, the practice, shows that the reverse is true. The predominant forms of religious life in the Church, for the last four hundred years and more, have in fact been apostolic rather than monastic: that is, their purpose is to seek the perfect charity of Christ, as much by their desire to transform and redeem the world, according to the Council's teaching throughout *Gaudium et Spes* and *Apostolicam Actuostatem*, in union with Christ who came to invite us to share his task of saving the world, as 'by keeping themselves unspotted from the world'.[2] The answer Christ gave to the lawyer who asked the question, 'And who is my neighbour?', the story demonstrating the fulfilment of the great commandment, reminds us that it was the equivalent of the priest and the religious who 'passed by on the other side'.[3]

The unity of action and contemplation

It has already been pointed out elsewhere that the kind of apostolic community initiated in the Church by Ignatius Loyola was centred on the dynamic action of the Spirit vivifying the members individually and corporately by permeating their charitable works with a consistent inner view of the Christ who continues to have 'compassion on the multitude'.[4] *Perfectae Caritatis* had already stressed that for Institutes devoted to the apostolic life, 'the entire religious life must be imbued with the apostolic spirit and all their apostolic activity animated by the religious spirit' (8). In fact, in speaking of religious commitment in general, the same decree had observed that:

> the members of every religious Institute will seek God above all things, and him alone; and in them, contemplation, by means of which they cling to him in mind and heart, will be wedded to the apostolic love

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[2] Jas 1, 27.
[3] Cf Lk 10, 25-37.
[4] Mk 6, 34ff, and parallels; cf *Supplement to The Way*, 36 (Summer 1979), p 10.

> which empowers them to share his redemptive work and to spread God's Kingdom (5).

It was, however, left to the Instruction on religious formation, *Renovationis Causam*, to draw out the implications of this dynamic unity. Those in formation, the Instruction observed:

> . . . need to be taught step by step how they may achieve the integration in their own lives of contemplation and action: a unity which is one of the essential and primary values of those (apostolic) Institutes. Its acquisition demands a proper understanding of the specific nature of the spiritual life, and of the ways in which a closer union with the Lord may be achieved. For it is the same love for God and for men which animates a person, whether this is shown in solitary and intimate communion with God, or in the generous zeal of total dedication to apostolic labour. At the same time the young religious should be advised that this unity so ardently desired, the goal of all living creatures as they strive after perfect self-expression, is not achieved simply by activity; nor is it ordinarily comprehended on a purely psychological level, since it is deeply rooted in God's own love, which is the bond of perfection transcending all human understanding.[5]

There is more than a touch here of the scotist approach to pauline passages such as 'in him all things were created . . . in him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell'; and the travail of all creation as it awaits the perfection of the children of God revealed in him.[6] The crucial point, however, which needs to be made is this:

> No one attains to this unity without a consistent denial of self over a long period, or without continually striving to purify his intention in the midst of action. This unity also entails the faithful observance in these Institutes of the central law of the spiritual life: it implies a harmony between the periods given over to that solitude in which a person is entirely devoted to God, and those dedicated to various works and the human needs which attend them.[7]

A harmony, says the Instruction: not a juxtaposition or that carving up of the day into times for work and times for various sorts of prayer. Harmony implies interpenetration of levels, blending, or, to use the old monastic word, *concordia*: that ever fuller awareness of

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[5] Cf *Supplement to The Way*, 7 (June 1969), pp 25-26.
[6] Cf Col 1, 15-20; Rom 8, 21ff. [7] *Renovationis Causam, ibid.*

oneself living in and with Christ the life of God in the most diverse of human circumstances. There is the strong implication too that the blending will be unique to each person, but also that there will be 'parameters' of prayer and action which will differ from Institute to Institute; and that this divine, dynamic harmony will be at the heart of each Institute's charism, which must needs find its appropriate expression in revised Constitutions. It may also be stated with a certain confidence that there has been no religious Institute approved by the Church that has been given over to 'pure contemplation' for any protracted period of time.

But before we review in brief the history of apostolic commitment in the Western Church—which every Institute must do before it can consider the ideal and practice of its own life and spirit, it would seem essential to attempt to define 'apostolic life', 'apostolic prayer', 'apostolic spirituality'; otherwise we will find ourselves using words in constitutional settings which convey no real meaning. Apostolic spirituality we understand to be the science, art or manner of 'thinking' and 'experiencing' the Incarnate Christ who identifies himself as the One sent by the Father for the world's salvation. Apostolic life is thus the way proper to those who dedicate themselves, totally and as long as their lives shall last, to sharing directly and propagating untiringly the knowledge and love of God revealed in Christ Jesus, in his words and ministry: and this in the consciousness of their human weakness and fragility, yet sustained, as they believe, by the constant prompting of the Holy Spirit. Apostolic spirituality is concerned to specify, through study of the Gospels and reflection on the Church's experience of Christ's mission, the purpose of commitment to the apostolic life: to participate directly in the work bequeathed by Jesus to his apostles, and to those who respond to his call — which is to be consecrated in the truth by the Father in order to participate in this same mission of Jesus, the Eternal Son made man.

Apostolic commitment in the West

The above description of apostolic spirituality is as dense and as complex as it is incomplete. May be it partially explains why many religious today are said to be having identity-crises: another reason for revised Constitutions. It certainly leaves no room for starry-eyed idealism, and brings home the extreme demands, the unremitting hardship of the ideal apostolic life. It may also explain the sometimes frantic search for outward signs of inward grace: 'What shall we eat, what shall we drink, what shall we wear, what shall we give up . . . ?'

What perhaps it does clarify is why the rigours practised by those founders of monasticism, the 'Fathers of the Desert', daunting if not horrifying—even allowing for legendary exaggeration, are still closely associated by many Catholics with every form of religious life in the Church today. And by the Church in this context we mean not so much as *Lumen Gentium* has it, 'the Kingdom of Christ now present in mystery', but that organization in the visible society whose task it is to recognize and to support religious communities. Religious life, it is popularly believed, should be penitential in the literal sense.

The hermits and their disciples: the monastic apostolate

This popular view, that religious are the professional 'pray-ers' and ascetics in the Church, is one whose roots go down into the dim and distant past; and it has little to do with the reality of modern apostolic life and commitment. The first literal 'flight from the world' was precisely ascetical, penitential: it took no account of the command of Christ to his apostles to transform the world which stood in such need of the good news. Those who first took refuge in the egyptian desert did so not to prepare themselves to evangelize the world, but simply to flee from its temptations and distractions. And even this is an over-simplification. For though the first desert fathers were hermits, shunning the companionship of all their fellows — 'unless', said one of them, 'a man can say in his heart, "only myself and God are in this world", he will never find peace'— it was otherwise with the thousands who fled after them. So many of them were, in fact, escaping from the cataclysm of the world that they had known. The Roman Empire under which they had lived in comparative comfort was crumbling as the barbarians swept through it, slaughtering and pillaging as they went (Rome itself was sacked in A.D. 410.) The invading hordes from the north presaged the end of civilization and of Christendom, as this had begun to establish itself after the conversion of the pagan Emperor Constantine. So we are told that in the middle of the fourth century, Pachomius, Abbot of Tabenna on the Nile, had seven thousand men and women grouped in communities, following his sparse and primitive rule; whilst at Arsinöe, during the same period, over ten thousand acknowledged Serapion as their abbot. It is difficult, at this distance in time, to find any true single answer to the question, 'What went ye out into the desert to see?'

The hermits and the communities of the north-east african desert never felt called upon to evangelize the unbeliever. Their apostolate was quite simply 'to have love one for another'. *The Lives of the Fathers*

and other near-contemporary documents are full of examples of their exquisite mutual affection. Their field of gospel-endeavour was their own heart and spirit, as they sought to follow the pauline injunction: 'You cannot belong to Christ Jesus unless you crucify all your self-indulgent passions and desires'.[8] The great founders of monasticism in the West, Benedict, Cassian and Gregory, turned to these masters of the ascetical life, not for their words on contemplation—these are sparse enough, and their own are usually better inspired—but for their penitential determination, and above all for the beauty of their fraternal love: exemplified, first in the visits of the hermits to one another, and later, within the confines of the cenobitic community.

Since we do not find anything of what we mean currently by the epithet 'apostolic' in the anchorites and the first monks of the Thebaid, how then did the gospel-task, at once so forcefully and yet against such opposition, find its way into western monasticism? First, and almost by accident, the Benedictines were the architects divinely chosen to rebuild the famed *Pax Romana* on a truly spiritual basis, but also with an intellectual power and enlightenment, and even an agricultural technology, fathered by that peace: qualities which their forebears could scarcely have suspected.

Secondly, the search for a new kind of asceticism, first by the celtic monks and later by their saxon successors, led to the evangelization of a large part of Europe. From the time that Patrick and his companions sought to damp down the fires of aggression in the warring hearts of their pagan brethren by converting Ireland into one great monastery, we find *peregrinatio*, the lifelong wandering of those who made a profession of pilgrimage, featuring most largely among the more widely ascetical as well as the fiercely personal penitential practices of the irish monks. It seemed to open up a whole new aspect of the spiritual combat: the wanderlust of the seafaring men to whom the Isles of the Blest would for ever beckon, pitted against the aching longing for the emerald green and the soft light of the *patria*. The greek poet Homer had, centuries before, found a word for it: the *nostalgia*, that longing for home which expressed much the same conflict in the breast of his hero Odysseus.

So it was that the irish monks left a trail of monastic establishments over half of Europe as well as in the lowlands of Scotland and the north-east of England; and in so doing implanted a deep respect for and a love of the gospel-life. Meantime, Gregory the Great, a monk

[8] Gal 5, 24.

reluctantly turned pope, sent out his benedictine companions to evangelize the saxon invaders who had all but destroyed the monastic culture of the Columbas and the Cuthberts: they who, at the last, would seek the contemplative solitude that only wandering away from the monastic habitation could give. So the Venerable Bede tells us that Cuthbert had merited the right, through years of unremitting monastic labour, which Bede certainly considered apostolic, to seek on the deserted Farne Island the stillness of contemplation in total solitude.

At first sight, it would seem that the reverse of the monastic coin of *peregrinatio* is stamped firmly on the rule of Benedict by the unconditional requirement of *stabilitas*, in order to create the physical environment for the life of contemplation in community. However, both stability and wandering continued to permeate every form of religious life through the high middle ages and into the era of the renaissance. All the masters of the western contemplative tradition, as Cuthbert Butler attests, accepted though with reluctance the need, more or less infrequent, to descend from the mount of contemplation (whose biblical image was the Thabor of the Transfiguration) for apostolic purposes. The same alternation was true of every form of monastic life, even of those who took up again the monastic exile in the wake of the *conquistadores* of the new-found lands of the sixteenth century, or the Ursuline Marie Guyart, among the Indians of New France; or, nearer to our own times, those who accompanied the colonial empire-builders to the Far East and the length and breadth of the African Continent. Early enough, St Boniface had confessed that it was the love of apostolic journeying (*amor peregrinationis*), as well as the love of Christ, which motivated his wanderings. His manner of evangelization was that of the irish pilgrims before him: to found monasteries, and to send back for help to the monks and nuns at home, to come and people them. The finger has been pointed recently at the so-called 'imperial' missionaries of the last century, who consciously or unconsciously strove to make the 'corner of the foreign field for ever England', Holland, Ireland or wherever. We find a resemblance in the unbroken line of beautiful 'wool-churches', beginning from the ports of Norfolk as the Lowlanders crossed the North Sea, right across England to Worcester and beyond. Such had been the missionary practice of the Church, whether its monks came from Rome or Lerins. 'This was how the faith was planted', as one of the most famous returned exiles and missionary martyrs, St Edmund Campion, eventually phrased it in the England of Elizabeth I.

The 'mixed' life: Friars and Canons Regular

Some church historians, in reviewing religious life (or Western Spirituality, which has become a synonymous phrase) from the Acts of the Apostles to the present-day change and crisis, tend to see the whole in terms of varying kinds of tension between apostolic endeavour and contemplative leisure: it is a question of achieving the right blend of the two ingredients to suit very diverse times, places and circumstances. So, in the high middle ages, which preceded the dawn of scholasticism and the foundation by the new religious Orders of those theological schools destined to become the great universities of Europe, such as Paris, Padua and Oxford, the great monastic writers, like Rupert of Deutz, considered that the all-important goal of the apostolic life was the establishment, in mirror-image, of the *Curia coelestis*. Its theological foundation was the augustinian distinction of the earthly and heavenly cities. But the heavenly *curia*, where the 'holy, holy' holy' was the angels' unending song, pressed into service all that was best in the regal courts of earthly princes for the central activity of the monastic establishment. This was truly God's work performed by his chosen ones, the *opus Dei*, the liturgical ceremonial of Mass and Divine Office which for a brief moment brought down into this fragment of eternity the heavenly bride, the new Jerusalem. As the macaronic Christmas carol still has it:

Ubi sunt gaudia
If that they be not there?
There are angels singing
Nova cantica;
And heavenly bells are ringing
In Regis curia.
Oh, that we were there!

Here was the worship of all those redeemed, washed clean in the blood of the lamb: the liturgical 'work' painted in such glowing colours in the final pages of the New Testament, the Apocalypse.[9]

Yet these were also the years when the feudal order, the established structure of European Society, into which religious monastic life was fully integrated, was beginning to fall apart; though many of its civic customs and religious ideals were to persist for at least three centuries more (longer in some regions of Europe), and which not a few still remember with nostalgia.

[9] E.g. Apoc 7, 9-12.

During these years of violent change there emerged two new and distinct forms of religious life, which could conceivably lend support to the view that consecration through the profession of the evangelical counsels is by and large perennially concerned with the resolution of the tension between action and contemplation. The Canons Regular, substantially identified with the first founding father, St Norbert of Premontré, were clergy engaged in sacerdotal ministry who formed monastic communities in order to enhance the quality of their priestly lives and, in particular, to bring the splendours of the monastic liturgy into the parish churches, in the hope that the spiritual lives of those whom they served would thus be nurtured and fostered. Dominic Guzman was originally a Premonstratensian; but he founded an Order whose aim was 'preaching and the salvation of souls'. One of his brethren and near-contemporaries, St Thomas Aquinas, would sum up the spirit, not only of his own but of the other Orders of mendicant friars, the Franciscans and Augustinians. Thomas's pregnant phrase was *tradere contemplata*, which, like many another latin aphorism, can only be paraphrased: 'to hand on to others the fruits of one's own contemplation', that is, of the divine truth revealed in the person of the Incarnate Word, stored up and treasured in the mind and heart of the believer.

The tension undoubtedly lay in the acquisition of these fruits of contemplation, and in the physical and psychological environment considered necessary for it. This was none other than the life and climate of the monastic community: 'God has inspired you to embrace a life of poverty and discipline', said Pope Honorius III in A.D. 1216. Its elements were the asceticism of silence, prayer and fasting, with the *opus Dei* providing the rhythm of the friar's daily existence during the long months which he was expected to spend in the cloistered friary. An apostolic message that was not shaped in sanctuary, choir and cloister, it was thought, would inevitably be distorted; and it was expected that there would always be considerably more friars at home in the community than there would be out on mission.

The ideal of the 'mixed life', as it came to be called—'the perfection', said St Thomas, 'proper to prelates and preachers'—suffered many vicissitudes in the centuries that followed. Professed monks of various kinds and conditions continued to consider it so difficult of achievement as to demand a sanctity comparable to that of the apostle Paul. For the majority, the aim of the religious life and the contemplative life remained synonymous; and this demanded the monastic institution. Mary continued to be the cloistered religious,

Martha the active lay-christian, in some way the inferior of the religious.[10] A few hardy theologians, such as the Englishman Walter Hilton in the late fourteenth century, were found to be proposing variants of the mixed life even for devout laymen of worldly wealth and position. But undoubtedly the primary answer of the Church to the new 'pagan-infected' humanism of the renaissance, as well as to the nominalistic rationalism which was contaminating the theological schools of the time, was the traditional 'flight from the world' signalized in the *Devotio Moderna*. The prototype of this movement was the new religious community called 'The Brethren of the Common Life', whose handbook, *The Imitation of Christ*, still remains a spiritual classic with few rivals, and preaches a form of anti-intellectualism in opposition both to renaissance humanism and declining scholastic theology.

The monastic Order which seems to have flourished with unparalleled vigour during the three centuries contemporaneous with the heyday of the Friars and the period which preceded the Protestant Reformation in northern Europe, was the Carthusian, with its unique blend of the eremitical and monastic styles. We know that they were inveterate copiers and authors of spiritual commentaries on the Scriptures and other spiritual works; but they were certainly not apostolic in any direct sense, at least as a rule. One fact, however, is established. It was from the monks of the London Charterhouse, and not from any community of the mixed life, that St Thomas More received the formation of heart and spirit which would enable him to renounce the royal favour for the headsman's block.

The Counter-reformation: the integration of contemplation and action

In Tudor England at least, if not elsewhere in a northern Europe torn by wars fought in the name of religion and by persecutions conducted in the name of God, it was the dissolution of monasteries and priories, for the sake of their wealth, and for the furtherance of regal and national ambition, which destroyed religious life in its every recognizable form within two decades, and thus cut off the main agency for the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. Yet, in the providence of God, these violent changes in society made possible within four decades an apostolic form of religious life which, at least in its conception, was revolutionary. The Society of Jesus was founded by Ignatius Loyola quite simply to walk the way of Christ:

[10] Cf Lk 10, 38-42.

to preach and to minister as he did, as he walked through the towns and villages of Galilee and Judaea. Understandably enough, the Order Ignatius founded experienced itself hemmed in by the minutiae of regulations whose purpose was to promote and to regulate the monastic institution, since this was, by and large, the only form of religious life which had developed, with its many variations, up to the sixteenth century. However, the mission of Francis Xavier and those who followed him to the Far East, and perhaps, even more acutely, the ministry of the Jesuits in Elizabethan England in the later decades of the same century, under threat of persecution and death, justified in practice this new idea of religious life propagated in the *Spiritual Exercises* and the jesuit Constitutions, both as experienced and framed by Ignatius.

There were very few of these new religious serving on the Mission in Britain from 1570 who did not spend a considerable time in the fetid and overcrowded prisons of the period. Some, like St Henry Morse, made their novitiate in gaol, whilst others joined the new Congregation in those apparently untoward and unpropitious circumstances. Ignatius had made it a cardinal point that the Jesuit would be essentially mobile rather than stable. It was no part of Xavier's mission to found religious houses to act as bases or places of contemplative repose or liturgical activity, out of which the missioners would operate. Ignatius, however, expected that in the course of a two-year probation, the major part of which would be spent outside the novitiate house, and when they would be exercised in apostolic experiences of the most diversified kind, novices would achieve a relationship with each other which could only be described as that of companions or friends in the Lord. And we have ample evidence that such was the case with the Jesuits who worked in England for over a hundred years between 1570 and 1679, under the constant threat of imprisonment and death.

As was to be expected, Ignatius laid great stress on the quality of these apostolic religious, and he made no secret of the fact that the apostolic life would make far more exacting demands than would the living of the monastic life:

> If someone enters a well-ordered and organized monastery, he will be more separated from occasions of sin because of the cloister, tranquillity and good order there than in our Society. It does not have that cloister, quiet and repose, but travels from one place to another. Moreover, if one has bad habits and lacks some perfection, it suffices for him to perfect himself in a monastery so ordered and organized. But in our

> Society it is necessary that we be well-experienced and extensively tested before being admitted. For as he travels about later on, he must associate with men and women both good and bad. Such associations require greater strength and experiences, as well as greater gifts and graces from our Creator and Lord.[11]

As with the mendicant Orders, the spirituality conveyed by Ignatius to his first companions was a disposition of mind and heart founded on a particular attitude towards and a practical experience of contemplative assimilation to the person of Christ and a rooted conviction of a direct sharing in his apostolic mission. Bl Peter Favre, who, Ignatius felt, understood the rationale of the new Order better than any of the others amongst the first companions,[12] made it clear that it was not a question of resolving the tension between action and contemplation, or even of seeking a blending of them in the apostolic life. It was rather a dynamic interpenetration which made of the crucified and glorified Jesus a familiar and constant companion. 'You are my friends . . . '.Those first Jesuits aimed at contemplating the Lord from the beginning to the end of the apostolic ministry of word and sacrament. As Favre wrote in his memoirs: 'One could say that to possess Christ in the practice of good works, and to possess him in prayer, can be compared to possessing him in *effectu*, and possessing him in *affectu*'.[13] The tension, if such there be, is rather in the heart and mind of the religious as he strives to reach, in his loving service of the brethren, that pitch of awareness of Christ's presence for him for which the irish monks of old prayed with such fervour in their periapts, their 'breastplates': ' . . . Christ in all who think on me, Christ in every face I see . . . '. How to deal with one's own aggressiveness, sexual drive and desire for personal independence, even self-aggrandisement, if such would smother one's deep-rooted fears and feelings of inadequacy: here indeed is the tension. Ignatius called it ridding oneself, under grace, of inordinate affections.

Growth or excrescence

As we have said, Ignatius had no illusions about the hardships involved in his vision of apostolic religious life, or of the quality of leadership which it would demand. Originally, he wished to limit the

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[11] In a declaration written by Ignatius in 1541, entitled *De Collegiis et domibus fundandis*, cf Ganss, G., *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus* (St Louis, 1970), p 96.

[12] Cf *Supplement to The Way*, 35 (Spring 1979), *The Discernment of Spirits in the Memoriale of Bl Peter Favre*, p 5. [13] *Ibid.*, p 62.

numbers to no more than sixty. In theory, he was content that it should expand, as long as each member could achieve the quality of life he envisaged for his followers: men who were, to adopt the phrases of *Perfectae Caritatis*, truly 'mortified'— living for God alone, dead to sin,[14] renouncing the world, having truly handed over the whole of their lives to God's service, sharing in Christ's self-despoilment,[15] and wedded to the apostolic love empowering them to share his redemptive work.[16]

Almost as soon as they were founded, the Jesuits became involved in the Church's plans, initiated at the Council of Trent, for a better and much more carefully structured theological education for young men destined for the ministerial priesthood. For these purposes they began to found Colleges, at first in Rome and then in various parts of Europe where there was a Catholic dominance or presence; for these were the times of *cuius regio, illius religio*: the people were forced by laws of extreme severity to conform to the religion of their emperor, king or local baron. Since these colleges housed not only jesuit professors of theology — concentrating on countering the destructive criticism of the protestant theologians in sacramental theology, the nature of the Church, the role of tradition in the recognition and interpretation of the Scriptures, the question of Apostolic Succession — but also the young members of the Society in training for the priesthood, they also became religious houses; and inevitably in a sixteenth-century context, quasi-monastic institutions. Perforce, they adopted the outward style and many of the monastically-rooted customs of both the canons regular and the mendicant friars. There was a single important difference, for which Ignatius had had to fight almost the entire College of Cardinals: the lengthy and solemn monastic liturgy never became a feature of the jesuit institution.

Ignatius had taught that the same devotion, born of the contemplation of the apostolic Christ, must animate all his sons. He called it a 'certain facility for finding God in all things'. It was a piety which could exist independently of set times and psycho-physical conditions for protracted prayer. Its roots, however, had to be deeply implanted through an affective and imaginative contemplation of Christ, which was almost entirely synonymous with the *lectio divina*, the contemplative process which was the *raison d'être* of monastic theology.

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[14] Cf Rom 6, 11. [15] Cf Phil 2, 7-11.

[16] Cf *Perfectae Caritatis*, 5; and James Walsh, 'Continual Mortification', in *Supplement to The Way*, 19 (Spring 1973), pp 136-37.

It had little or nothing to do with the theology of the schools which was concentrating at the time on the reasoned argumentation, the *disputatio*, which owed so much to Aristotelian Logic.

One result was that nature and grace, during these early decades of the Society's existence, became uneasy bed-fellows. The individual was expected to grow in perfection by the acquisition of virtues which belonged to the perfect man. They could be distilled from the Gospel, because Christ was perfect in all that he said and did. Piety thus became highly individualistic: an asceticism that was often stoic in its savour. And grace was involved largely through the medium of the confessional. The formative tools in this religious workshop were first the rule, which gradually extended itself to every aspect of religious life, to the extent that absolute fidelity to the rule became synonymous with religious perfection; secondly, spiritual direction, which was so often associated with the eradication of external faults, whether against the commandments or the rule; and thirdly, the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist, from the practice of which every communal element was lacking, except physical presence at Mass for the non-priests.

So numerous did these Colleges become, along with the rapid expansion of the Society both in numbers and in the demands for this particular work, that the stability of the Institution, with its traditional monastic observances, all but ousted the principle of apostolic mobility, except in the newer mission fields. In Europe, at any rate, it was no longer a question of the compenetration of action and contemplation, or even often of their tension or blending. The actual preparation for apostolic life came to consist in the asceticism of a literal obedience (which, in Ignatius's spiritual understanding, had always moved in the direction of the mystical[17]), — 'theirs not to reason why . . . '; in the substitution of the Superior's permission in and for all things for the demands of a truly evangelical poverty; and in place of consecrated chastity, a clerical celibacy whose permanence was guaranteed by the Church, since the very notion of it had to be defended against every group of the Reformers, who had wholly abolished it.

Such was the shape of the apostolic life inherited by a multiplicity of new Congregations especially in France, all founded for similar purposes: to restore the love and knowledge of God which the French Revolution, coinciding more or less with the suppression of the

[17] Walsh, 'Continual Mortification', *op. cit.*, pp 135-37.

Society of Jesus, was intent on obliterating from the minds and hearts of the people. Raymond Hostie, in his *Vie et Mort des Ordres Religieux*,[18] lists one hundred and twenty-five new congregations of priests and brothers founded between 1800 and 1949, all but fifteen originating on the Continent of Europe, mainly in France, for a specific and direct apostolic purpose. The congregations of apostolic women founded during this period easily outnumber those of men: a great many enshrining apostolic ideals which owed something to the inspiration of the spanish nobleman who became a poor pilgrim for Christ.

It was, however, stability rather than apostolic mobility which these congregations either willingly, or willy-nilly, sought. But the institution appeared right for the time. Wherever the ordinary people suffered material and spiritual deprivation through the warring ambitions or the greed of emperors and princes of Europe, new religious groups like the Redemptorists and Passionists in Italy were formed on the model of the mendicant friars, to bring Christ's consolation, pondered and contemplated in a monastic environment, to myriads of destitute and exploited people, through the corporal works of mercy and the ministry of word and sacrament. Likewise, in a France totally dismembered by the terror of the Revolution, multiple communities of women began to form, often in total ignorance of each other's existence, the majority of which took on roughly the same shape. Their purpose was to restore some semblance of the traditionally cloistered institution, as this had existed before the Terror. They had, to be sure, a necessarily limited knowledge of the gospel values which energized the predominantly contemplative communities of the past. But their primary purpose was to devote themselves to the enormous and urgent task of rescuing the people, and particularly the children, from an existence less than human.

Why these apostolic groups, in search of a stable religious community, took on not only the semblance but the external realities of traditional monastic life, are numerous and highly complex. They adopted quasi-cloister, quasi-habit, strict silence and the 'custody of the exterior senses'. They took up various limited substitutes for the Divine Office (whilst retaining its recitation in common), in order that they might have time and energy for pressing apostolic tasks. It is not surprising that they became trapped in an uneasy compromise between the arduous professional training which soon became necessary for the educational and 'social' apostolates, and formation

[18] Louvain, 1972.

for religious life. Coincidentally, this early nineteenth century was one in which the Church had no leisure to find itself. Whilst the persecution of reformation times was burning itself out, the central administration of the Church in Rome was under pressures that were beyond its actual control. It was suffering from the tensions which hereditary possession by the Papacy of temporal as well as spiritual power were buffeting it from all sides: there was the *risorgimento*, giving vent to italian desires for a national identity, whose chief enemy was the Papacy; and the Church was the target for the atheistic liberalism in France which ironically still sheltered under the title of 'Enlightenment'. Yet, by the middle of the same century, there were scores of new religious Institutes of apostolic women, which brought together the untaught and the educated alike, the daughters of discontented peasants and of the 'bourgeoisie'. Most of these Institutes retained the existing class-distinctions by the division into 'lay-sister' and 'choir-sister'. And all were cloistered in the literal sense. Each of them claimed to have characteristics radically differentiating them from other Institutes, but which they were unable to express in any appropriate ecclesiastical language. Yet their members were willing and eager to go anywhere at a moment's notice, to fulfil the apostolic purposes for which they were founded. But, incredibly to modern-day thinking, they took their minor papal cloister with them: such were the demands of the Church authorities, and, indeed, of society in general.

For most of these, any satisfactory integration of action and contemplation was impossible, except on an individual basis. And ecclesiastical administration, at every level, was consistently searching for uniform ways in which these new Congregations could be guided, controlled and, in the context of the time, protected. The reason for this was not simply their proliferation and rapid growth. There was the apostolic help urgently required by recently-restored or newly-formed dioceses, whose bishops, in the main, expected and demanded total apostolic disposition over religious Institutes, particularly of women, working in their territories; and these latter had no code of Law, no canonists to guide them. In the majority of cases, even where they were not restricted to a single diocese, and thus not subject to the control of a single bishop, the dividing line between the internal régime of the Institute and its apostolic works was consistently blurred in favour of the diocesan authority.

In spite of all these difficulties, the hundred years or so which followed the Catholic Emancipation in Ireland (1829), the restoration

of the English Hierarchy in 1850 (the four great archdioceses in the eastern United States were erected in 1808), was a period of unparalleled expansion for the Church, especially where English was the official language. Imperialism, and particularly the trading that went with it, constituted an emphatic english-speaking presence in every continent of the globe. The french Institutes established in the wake of the Revolution had sought refuge in England throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. At the same time, Ireland became once again the fountainhead of missionary exiles, in the shape of newly-formed apostolic congregations: Catherine McAuley's Sisters of Mercy, Nano Nagle's Sisters of the Presentation, Margaret Mary Hallahan's dominican tertiaries now converted into apostolic religious. Others followed in their wake, like the various franciscan foundations, and the new medical congregations. The purpose of all these Institutes was solidly and directly apostolic; but their internal régime, as well as their external religious organization was, wherever possible, traditionally orientated: that is, cloistered and monastic.

In the United States and in english-speaking Canada, many of the same substantial influences were at work. Here, the various groups of immigrants from catholic Europe were accompanied and followed by priests and religious as they established themselves on the eastern seaboard, pushed across the face of the entire continent, or came in under french influence via the deep south. And always, as soon as a measure of stability was achieved, religious houses and convents were established, on the pattern of the european Institutions the exiles had left behind, often with jealously-guarded customs whose original purpose had been lost or long-forgotten, but which were treasured as identification marks.

The pioneering spirit and achievements in the fields of education and other services of charity, particularly for the sick and the dying, were extraordinary by any standards, professional or otherwise. One need think only of women of the calibre of Philippine Duchesne, Elizabeth Seton, Catherine Drexel, Cornelia Connelly and Frances Xavier Cabrini, with the companions they inspired.

If we have referred, almost entirely, in these last few pages, to apostolic women, it is largely because their numerical decline and the radical changes in their manner of life in the last dozen years or so have been more dramatic, far-reaching and widely felt, especially in the United States, and in the various territories dependent for apostolic resources on American Institutes, especially during the years immediately following the Second World War. Earlier we have

referred to Fr Hostie's analysis of the life-span of religious Institutes of men.[19] The situation is equally grave in the case of women.

Ideal demands: the promise of the Council

If one asks the reasons for the rapid decline in numbers and the far-reaching changes both in structure and apostolic direction in so many Institutes, they are at once historically trite and fairly easy to account for hindsight. Yet the rapidity of it all remains totally bewildering. There is, of course, a fairly strong body of opinion which links the two: which has tended to see the rush for change as indicative of inner deterioration and the sort of flirting with the world redolent of the rapid monastic decline of the fifteenth century. Nor is this simply in the realm of material living standards or of the loosening of sexual *mores*; it is equally aligned with the ideas, feelings and tendencies of a world which is becoming increasingly irreligious. This point of view ought not to be passed over lightly; there is much truth in it. However, there is more than one historical example of earnest and deeply devout men and women who devoted their spiritual strength and energy in attempts to reverse trends. History also shows repeatedly that heroic dedication to the well-being of others must begin in the present.

Equally there are many who claim that significant numbers left religious Institutes in the years immediately following Vatican II because of uncertain leadership manifested in the failure to implement, with a real and positive determination, the call to radical change spelt out in *Perfectae Caritatis*, itself based on the Council's whole pastoral purpose expressed in *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes*. 'If the trumpet gives out an uncertain call, who will arm himself for battle?'[20] There were numbers who felt that the 'loss of nerve' manifested by government at various levels in religious congregations when the first steps towards change seemed to result in catastrophe, and the consequent agonized questioning over religious identity, were too difficult to sustain, psychologically and spiritually. Yet others sincerely believed that they could work better in various apostolic situations outside their own communities, as these grappled to maintain institutions which they had no longer the personnel or the financial resources to meet. Others again found their personal sense of security eroding, as they wondered how they themselves would fare in old age, seeing their Institutes moving into a situation of

[19] *Vie et mort des ordres religieux*, esp. pp 303ff. [20] 1 Cor 14, 18.

steadily diminishing numbers and consequent over-commitment, with scarcely a sign of any upward swing. All these difficulties are still with us in varying proportions. The question whether and how revised Constitutions can and should face them is by no means resolved.

Time has shown that the document *Perfectae Caritatis* seemed to be, in some respects, extremely idealistic; and the religious who set themselves to interpret it appeared to do so with degrees of enthusiastic naïvety or extreme pessimism. It promised so much; but the hidden difficulties of implementation disappointed so many. One example is the simple recommendation that 'in Institutes of women the aim should be to have one class of sisters'.[21] It was surely a directive in keeping with the late 'sixties which apostolic Congregations set themselves to serve: that class-distinctions in the form of privilege, precedence, type of work and so on, should be abolished wherever possible. But the attempts to implement the directive wreaked havoc in many instances; they failed to judge how much serious preparation was necessary before so apparently obvious a step could be taken.

The effect of the abolition for apostolic women of the minor cloister,[22] which had been so carefully enunciated in the Code of Canon Law only fifty years previously, appears to have been uncalculated. And some would say that its results have proved incalculable in that many seemed unready for it and unprepared to cope with it. Larger Congregations, operating from a Roman centre, did not always understand the importance of unspoken but widely-differing traditions of various regions and provinces which were never articulated in the special Chapters. There was always the uncertain reactions of clergy and bishops; and the directive 'there is a need for suitable co-ordination and co-operation with episcopal conferences'[23] was, in many cases, left too long in abeyance, and took little cognizance of imponderables. All in all, the history of congregations of apostolic women since the time of St Francis de Sales' attempt to found an Institute which would be free of cloister did not seem to have been taken sufficiently into account.

More fundamental, perhaps, was the general lack of understanding of the very principles of renewal enunciated in the decree.[24] The return to the following of Christ enunciated in the Gospel as the first and supreme rule of all religious Institutes: what did this mean to the many thousands of religious who had never enjoyed the benefit of even

[21] *Perfectae Caritatis*, 15. [22] *Ibid.*, 16. [23] *Ibid.*, 23. [24] *Ibid.*, 2 (a).

an elementary course in scripture studies? This was the very time when the new freedoms granted to catholic scholars by the Encyclical *Divino Afflante* of twenty years previously had really taken hold; and when different interpretations of basic texts such as 'if you would be perfect, sell all . . . ',[25] and the equally key text on marriage and celibacy in Matthew 19 were being taught publicly in the very institutions of higher religious education administered by religious.

The second principle demanded an historical knowledge and reasoned judgment about the origins, directions and possible deviations over the years concerning the 'founder's spirit and special aims'. Phrases in this connection such as the Institute's special charism, its sound traditions, its spiritual patrimony, its particular character and function, were being heard for the first time, and were never in the majority of instances given a clear and simple explanation.

Some of the Congregations to which the Decree was addressed, though reasonably vigorous and able to cope with apostolic work which was carefully specified and restricted, were very small in number. Where were they to find the resources to share the Church's initiatives 'in matters biblical and liturgical, dogmatic and pastoral, ecumenical, missionary and social'? They were also being directed to 'acquire an adequate knowledge of human conditions in their various circumstances', as well as 'an ability to discern wisely, in the light of faith, trends and situations in the world of today'. All this demanded a discriminating use of modern news-media for which few religious had been adequately trained; whilst the secular literature which reflected modern trends and situations were still regarded as militating against the asceticism current in many communities, if not positively dangerous to faith and morals. The decree, in fact, postulated a whole programme of education in the formative years of apostolic religious which ran counter to their experience. The quasi-monastic structures of novitiate and subsequent years of apostolic formation (where these latter existed) had to be dismantled if these principles were to be implemented. For the most part, by the time Institutes were being assisted to inculcate them through the directives of *Renovationis Causam*, and novitiate-personnel were being prepared to train new candidates, the latter were so few in number that the more thoroughly they were formed according to new content and method, the more difficult it became for them to be assimilated into existing local communities.

[25] Mk 10, 21.

The Church in Council, under the inspiration of the Spirit, saw itself and its own task, present and future, with an extraordinary clarity. The recent Encylical of Pope John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, has offered us a dynamic restatement of that task. This is what he says of those called to religious life:

> Mature humanity means full use of the gift of freedom received from the Creator when he called into existence man made in his image, after his likeness. This gift finds its full realization in the unreserved giving of the whole of one's human person, in a spirit of the love of a spouse, to Christ and, with Christ, to all those to whom he sends men and women totally consecrated to him in accordance with the evangelical counsels. This is the ideal of the religious life (*Redemptor hominis*, p 93).

Such a statement affects in particular apostolic religious. It takes for granted that the Institute has one purpose, that the vocation of each is univocal. It is clear then, that revised Constitutions must make the broadest possible provision for the integration of a progressive assimilation into the *Corpus Mysticum* to be expressed in that consecrated love which is at once highly personal — the individual's conscious awareness of uniquely loving and of being uniquely loved — and yet capable of an indefinite universality under the prompting of the Spirit, the dynamic gift of faith informed by that love with which the Father loved us by sending his Son. In this, apostolic priorities must become translucent; the courage of the Holy Spirit must be sought in order to free ourselves, both from the selfishness of our own preoccupations and from external pressures and influences, to surrender traditional works in which we are no longer serving the Lord with a real efficaciousness and a true purity of intention.

It will remain true that the lessons offered us by the Council are being learnt in the midst of great difficulty, and can be implemented only at great personal cost. To believe deeply that the values of Christ are hidden in the experience and suffering, zeal and weariness, enthusiasm and disappointment of so many apostolic religious over many centuries means a confidence that rides free of numbers and resources: a hope that the apostolic vocation in the Church is moving through death to new life.[26]

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[26] The substance of this paper was given to the International Union of Superiors General (IUSG) at Rome in November 1979.