NUNS AND MONKS: A THOUSAND YEARS OF CHANGE

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Otium sanctum quaerit caritas Veritatis:
negotium iustum suscipit necessitas caritatis
(*Love of the Truth seeks the leisure of holiness:*
The force of Love drives us to the labour of justice).

Augustine — *The City of God.*

A THOUSAND years ago, in Anglo-Saxon England, there was little difference of status or observance between nuns and monks. We read of a meeting most characteristic of the England of that day, 'at which massed choirs of monks and nuns sang vespers in the king's presence in the cathedral', and of 'the king's coronation at Bath on Whit Sunday, 973, at which again abbots and abbesses, monks and nuns, assisted and were together entertained to a banquet by the queen'.[1] This all suggests the freedom and equality of Scholastica and Benedict, of Lioba and Boniface, or of the Canterbury pilgrims in the fourteenth century; it suggests that in those days 'nun' was the feminine term corresponding to 'monk', so that the same definition would apply to both with a difference only of gender.

Clearly, this is not the case today; so that it is necessary to enquire what the differences are and how they arose within the monastic body. When Vatican II spoke of the 'venerable institutions of the monastic life' (*Perfectae Caritatis*, 9), it obviously included nuns (*moniales*) as well as monks; and its qualities are clearly defined: conversion from 'the world', eremitical or community life, the divine office in choir, work, and the search for God. This is a reasonably apt description of the life of the monk. His main task is the praise of God — the *opus Dei* — within the monastery; but he may also undertake some work of the apostolate or christian charity. It is not, however, the same for nuns within the monastic order. Church legislation, some of it obsolete, some still in draft, has imposed a host of further specifications. Along with the Code of Canon Law, promulgated in 1917, we have the Apostolic Constitu-

tion of Pius XII, *Sponsa Christi* (1951), the Council's decree *Perfectae Caritatis*, the Instruction on the Contemplative Life and the Enclosure of Nuns (*moniales*) *Venite Seorsum* (Sacred Congregation of Religious, 15 August 1969), and finally, the draft of the new law for Institutes of the Consecrated Life (DC) circulated to Bishops in February 1977.[2]

For the sake of simplicity let us consider for the moment the successors of those nuns who dined with the queen at Bath on Whit Sunday in the year 973: that is to say, the main body of Benedictine nuns, contemplative nuns with papal enclosure; and let us see how legislation has affected them:

1. These nuns are not only 'monastic', but are also totally dedicated to contemplation, and thus are bound to 'papal cloister' (*Perfectae Caritatis*, 9, 7, 16; DC 107).
2. They are in *solemn vows*, for 'it is not right to deprive nuns of the honour, merit and joy of pronouncing the solemn vows which are their proper heritage' (*Sponsa Christi*). In order to qualify for solemn vows, a monastery must fulfil exacting conditions of enclosure; some have ruined themselves in the attempt to build that high enclosure wall. If they fail to qualify for solemn vows, they are not nuns (*moniales*), but sisters (*sorores*), like the members of modern active congregations (Canon 488, 7).
3. *Physical virginity* may be required for admission; since in many monastic congregations, the rite of solemn profession has been confused with the 'Consecration of Virgins'.
4. They follow 'the purely contemplative life' (*Sponsa Christi*), a concept that will be discussed below.
5. They are included in one category as *moniales* together with Carmelites, Poor Clares and others: so that all three groups share a common amalgam of *monastic* community and choir, carmelite enclosure and franciscan poverty. Each group has no doubt profited in some way from the traditions of the others, but each has also been distorted in the interests of uniformity and control; and perhaps the monastic nuns have been especially impoverished in this way.
6. The 'return to the sources' (cf *Perfectae Caritatis*, 2) might have relaxed this assimilation; but on the contrary, the Draft Law of 1977 has emphasized the polarization between contemplative and active nuns as never before, establishing the life integrally ordered to contemplation at one end of the spectrum, and integrally devoted to the apostolate at the other (cf DC 100, 116: *loc cit.*, pp 94-101).
7. The result has been that Benedictine and other Nuns (*moniales*) devoted to active works have made intensive efforts to 'demonasticize' themselves. The traditional practices of silence, poverty, obedience, common prayer and the religious habit have been

> surrendered, and theories of 'mysticism in action' pursued with indifferent success. These aspects of change have made the strongest impression on the Church at large.
> 8. All of this has been a construction of exclusively male origin. The nuns were never consulted before the draft-law was distributed — in spite of its Preliminary General Canon that 'what is laid down concerning members of Institutes of consecrated life applies equally to both sexes' (*loc. cit.*, p 31), and the consultation of many male superiors with the female branches of their respective Orders.

The words of Pius XII provide us with a very complete summary of the way in which successive church legislation has affected the Benedictine Nun:

> The Church turned her maternal solicitude chiefly upon those virgins who, choosing the better part, abandoned the world entirely and embraced a life of complete christian perfection in monasteries, professing strict poverty and full obedience as well as virginity. The Church provided an external safeguard for their profession of the common life by increasingly rigorous laws of cloister. At the same time she so regulated the internal order of their life that in her laws and religious discipline there gradually emerged as a clearly defined type the figure of the monastic sister or nun entirely devoted to the contemplative life under a strict and regular régime (*Sponsa Christi*).

The canonical figure of the contemplative nun is thus completely different from that of the monk. The latter, it is true, shares many of the characteristics listed above, but in his case their significance is totally other. He, too, lives in canonical enclosure (*Code*, canons 597ff), but with none of the extravagant strictures imposed on the nuns (canons 600ff), who cannot leave enclosure without the permission of the Holy See, except in cases of imminent death or other grave peril: such cases to be certified in writing, if time permits, by the Ordinary of the place (canon 601). The monk also takes solemn vows, but they are not for him a status symbol; nor does he have to rebuild his monastery in order to be admitted to them. The monk too may be celibate and chaste, but he would not usually describe himself as a virgin, nor is that status ever required for his admission. He may perhaps pray for hours daily, but he thinks of himself rather as a 'monk' than as a 'contemplative', and would not feel that he had altered his fundamental option if he gave a retreat or undertook a week's parochial supply. Meanwhile he remains entirely distinct from the Orders of friars; he elects his own superiors and is consulted about the revision of Canon Law and his Constitutions. Men of active Orders and Congregations, on the

other hand, have been under no special pressure to de-monasticize their way of life; they have gone on very much as before, but with the additional impetus of Vatican II behind them.

Thus the Orders of men have been spared some of the uncertainties, perplexities, divisions and even miseries inflicted on women, some of which Pius XII described in drastic terms more than thirty years ago:

> Actually there are not a few monasteries which, alas, are on the verge of extinction from hunger, misery, and want; there are many which, because of domestic difficulties, are leading a hard and almost intolerable life. Besides, there are some monasteries which, though not indigent, are so cut off and separated from any other monasteries that they lack vitality. Frequently also the strict law of cloister easily gives rise to serious difficulties. Finally, with the ever growing necessities of the Church and of souls, and of the urgent need for a variety of helping hands from all classes of persons to meet them, the time seems to have come for combining the monastic life, generally even in the case of nuns who are given to contemplation, with some moderate apostolic work (*Sponsa Christi*).

As these miseries seem due in significant measure to the eight factors listed above, it will be helpful to consider the origin and effect of each of them.

1. *Enclosure.* Its extraordinary story has been well told by Peter Anson, and the effects analysed by Sister Marie Julienne.[3] There is a development from the Constitution *Pericoloso* of Boniface VIII (A.D. 1298), through *Lubricum vitae genus* of Pius V (A.D. 1568) to the recent Instruction (1969) *Venite Seorsum.*[4] Though enclosure is no longer taken as a mere repression of unruly subjects or a physical protection in an age of barbarism, but rather as a 'withdrawal into the desert' as a means of living and expressing the paschal mystery, Sr Marie-Julienne's analysis remains valid:

> The contemplative institution is in contact with society. This contact is made by means of social signs. Now there are two kinds of social signs. They may be negative, signs of *rupture* which serve to protect from outside influences; or positive, signs of *communion* which serve to open up the community to a sort of symbiosis. The signs of rupture or separation are usually material: the habit, the grille, customs and usages. By their very originality, these make the life of contemplatives different from that of others; and for this reason they tend to draw attention to it and often make it the object of curiosity. Canon Law surrounds these signs of rupture with a multitude of detailed prescriptions. These externals all too easily become

> the object of the sort of attachment which smacks of triumphalism. The signs of communion or openness are more likely to reveal themselves in personal actions, in relationships of service, of hospitality, of work: relationships akin to any ordinary social relationships. Even when these are subject to rules, they are always based on the natural solidarity between human beings. This is to say, they are subject to the demands of justice even before being privileged signs of charity. The signs of separation are conventional and bear the stamp of the past. They are negative and gulf-forming. They are lifeless signs, supported simply by an effort of patience. They are reassuring to some, aggravating to others. The signs of communion, on the other hand, are natural. They are incarnate in human actions common to men of every epoch. They are positive engagements, carrying an element of risk. They require flexibility in human relationships. They keep the conscience on the alert because they are reactions of personal freedom. The signs of separation are often deceivers; but the signs of communion always represent true values. The signs of separation need periodically to be 'brought up to date'. But the signs of communion find their source of renewal almost, as it were, in the very fact of their existence.

It was the Daedalus of greek legend that built a high bronze wall around the king's garden to keep in the swallows, so that it would always be summer. The legislators who have built and maintained the walls of canonical enclosure are not likely to be more successful.

2. *Solemn vows*. These are necessary for the status of nuns: *moniales* are *defined* as those religious women who take solemn vows (*Code*, canon 488). These in turn depend on papal enclosure; so that they are an important tie-beam in the whole structure. Yet they are, in fact, an arbitrary canonical construct. Efforts since the end of the sixteenth century to discover any theological distinction between solemn and simple vows have had no success.

The distinction was devised in the twelfth century to solve a practical problem. Monks and nuns who had attempted matrimony were told sometimes that their marriage was invalid, sometimes that it was valid but illicit. To clear up this difficulty, Gratian made a distinction between those who had never expressed their vows or had expressed them without any special form, and those whose vows had been corroborated by some external act, such as the 'Blessing of consecration' or the explicit promise of entry into the Order (*propositum religionis*). In this way, Gratian invented the term *votum simplex*; and, soon after, the term *votum solemne* is found in Orlando Bandinelli (later Alexander III) and Peter Lombard: the 'solemnity'

being seen in the external rites which made the vows capable of proof. After a century and a half of controversy concerning the application of this distinction, it was finally clarified in its present form by Boniface VIII and enshrined in the body of Canon Law.[5] Apparently, the distinction is now to be abandoned after 800 years, for it does not appear in the Draft Law of 1977. But the link between a special form of enclosure and the contemplative life of nuns is maintained (107); not, however, in the case of monks. For them the solemnity of their vows, shared with friars, canons regular, etc., has been of no great significance. It means only a further degree in their incapacity to own any property, in the difficulty of obtaining a dispensation, in the obligation of saying the Office. But for nuns, solemn vows have been essential to their nunhood, a barrier against confusion with modern congregations constantly urged on them by the Holy See, especially in the Constitution *Sponsa Christi.*

3. *Virginity.* This has been the foundation stone, both historically and mystically, of monastic life for nuns. The ancient and beautiful *Consecratio Virginis*, with its *velatio* and the splendid Leonine Preface of consecration, expressed the different elements of the ideal: for St Paul it is an ecclesial sign of the Church as virgin and spouse of Christ; in the Gospels too it is an eschatological sign of the future life, in which we shall neither marry nor give in marriage; for the Fathers it is ordered especially to contemplation, for the pure in heart shall see God; the theme of *Sponsa Christi* is developed from the Song of Songs and the prophets by Tertullian, Cyprian and all later mystical writers; finally its ascetical significance, association with fasting and humility, is worked out by St Augustine. All this is amply expressed in the rite of the pre-Vatican II Pontifical, and in the encyclical of Pius XII *Sacra Virginitas* (1954), where it is made perfectly clear that this is based on *integritas carnis* in the literal sense. All this is implicit in passages on the Church as our mother and as the virgin bride of Christ (*Lumen Gentium*, 6, 42).

Yet this seems a different approach from that of St Benedict's monk, who comes to the monastery 'to return by the labour of obedience to him from whom he has strayed by the sloth of disobedience'. Conversion is his primary motive, while the eschatological cry of the consecrated virgin strikes a different note: *Ecce, quod concupivi iam video, quod speravi iam teneo: illi sum iuncta in coelis, quem in terris posita tota devotione dilexi* ('See, I now gaze upon my heart's desire, I now possess the object of my hopes; I am now at one with him in heaven, whom on earth I loved with an undivided heart'). So a monastic profession is very unlike such a consecration, though both have reference to the Paschal Mystery. In the one, the pall speaks of death to sin and of conversion. In the other, the crown

and bridal ring speak of consecration and resurrection. In the one, the starting point is sin. In the other, it is the absence of at least one sin, the exclusion of one experience. The rite of consecration can therefore be an impediment to some candidates, especially in our day; and in order to meet this difficulty, some Congregations offer a choice of either consecration or monastic profession, and the latter is often preferred even when there is no obstacle to the former.

Already in the thirteenth century, St Thomas (*Summa Theol.* 2-2ae, 152, 1) had emphasized the formal element, the purpose of preserving chastity, rather than on the material and accidental elements of physical integrity. He had also pointed out that this formal element could be restored by repentance (2-2ae, 152, 3 *ad* 3), so that it might reasonably be held that virginal integrity was not necessary for the *Consecratio* (though it would require a heroic cast of mind to take part in that rite with a dubious qualification).

The new 'Order for the Consecration of Virgins', promulgated in 1970, accepts the thomistic solution. It requires only that the candidate should never have been married or have lived openly in a state contrary to chastity. The bridal theme is preserved, but the antiphon quoted above is no longer printed and the preface is amended to avoid any devaluation of matrimony.

Thus two significant factors have disappeared, the insistence on 'virginal integrity' and the assertion that those to be consecrated are entering upon a more sublime spiritual state of life. Yet perhaps these were the factors that gave the institution much of its power and that distinguished the nuns from the monks. If they are no longer there, it seems likely that the institution will die out, and that this distinction between nuns and monks will disappear. It will then be left to the vow of chastity in its more usual form, or to the vow of 'conversion of manners', to 'typify' the virgin motherhood of the Church.

4. *The Contemplative Life. Perfectae Caritatis* (7) speaks of 'Institutes entirely given over to contemplation'; whilst *Sponsa Christi* expatiated on 'the canonical contemplative life', common to all nuns (*moniales*), whether they constitute the female branch of orders of monks, friars, canons regular or mendicants. Yet in fact the ancient 'contemplative life' had passed out of sight at the Reformation. The late middle ages had tended to produce two distinct strains of spirituality, the ascetical and the mystical. The latter, emphasized by the Rhenish mystics such as Eckhart, Tauler and Suso, and the English Mystical Tradition of the fourteenth century, was seized upon not only by the various leaders of Quietism, but also in a measure by the Reformers.[6] The ascetical strain, which began with the *Devotio Moderna* and the author of *The Imitation of Christ*, led on to Ignatius of

Loyola and the later Jesuits, to the Council of Trent and the creation of the seminaries. Thus, post-Tridentine Catholic Spirituality tended to lean towards the ascetical as opposed to the 'mystical'. As Evennett puts it:

> Its genius took individual rather than corporate or liturgical expressions. It was highly sacramental rather than biblical, in the Protestant sense of a personal formation based primarily on direct reading of Scripture, its great masters were all impregnated with the Bible, and its meditative practices were largely focused on the life and passion of Christ; while the humanity of Christ, which fifteenth-century devotions such as the rosary and the cult of St Anne had emphasized, was the object of increased veneration. It was exacting, in that it demanded continuous heroic effort at prayer and self-control, self-improvement and good works; practical in that it closely linked active good works and self-improvement.[7]

The great personalities and the saints transcend these limitations. St Ignatius Loyola was himself a great contemplative, as were not a few of his followers. But the main line of official teaching and development is indicated with reasonable accuracy in Evennett's essay. Thus whenever the desire for contemplative prayer recurred — as it continually did — the emphasis was on the supposition that it was for the chosen few, on the need for ascetical preparation, and particularly on the distinction between 'acquired' and 'infused' contemplation. Thus contemplation was effectively professionalized and turned into an optional extra for ascetic monks and nuns, but not for secular clergy, active religious or lay people; and the term 'contemplative', originally a description of simple prayer, now signified the fences which had been built round it: ascetic rule, virginity, enclosure. One could be 'a contemplative' without being contemplative, as is still the case today.

At the same time, the theology of grace suffered a similar dilution in the decline of genuine scholasticism. Trinitarian relationships, the mystery of the divine indwelling, became just theories about a supernatural — or even magical — object called 'grace'. The crucial image-realities of vine and branches, mystical body, fellowship of the saints, became passing references in scholastic theses. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries this confusion became doubly confounded by a jejune scholastic monopoly in all branches of theology. Mystical theology has concentrated on psychological states in the souls of individuals, with no interest in the History of Salvation in the life of the Church. For the Fathers, contemplative prayer is part of a process of conversion in response to the Word of God. For St Gregory, Martha stood for the present life of faith, and

Mary for the future life of vision. In his view, the contemplative life draws special support from its combination with the active life, which is the love of the brethren, and the test of our love of God. But for the Neo-scholastics, Martha was the ordinary Christian, called to obey the commandments and to stick to 'meditation'; while Mary was the contemplative of the élite, called to live by the Counsels and to limit her *koinonia* to the circle of enclosure. The Fathers found their answers in the *sensus plenus* of Scripture. But Tanquerey, after 750 pages on the pursuit of perfection, has only eight pages in small print on 'the spirituality of the New Testament'.[8] For the Fathers, mystical experience is part of the ecclesial communion in which every believer is involved by Baptism:

> The complete fusion of love for God and love for the brethren is part and parcel of the life of faith, but as long as we are living only by *faith* there is a special tension in that faith as it opens itself gradually to the *vision*. That is why every charism in the Church comes to maturity through the vital union of contemplation and action. That is why for these Fathers the contemplative and active lives merge in perfect love; a love that is the complete and single response to God and man, for this is in fact the New Covenant made with man by the risen Lord.[9]

Let us now return to the fate of the canonical contemplative nun, as she was in 1950, when Pius XII coined that expression. Cut off from the common life of the Church by enclosure, by the Latin of the liturgy, by the caste system dividing choir sisters from lay sisters, by the individualism and spiritual careerism of the contemplative life as then commonly explained, she seemed the victim of an aristocratic flight of the alone to the alone, rather than called to hear the word of God by a longing for the *koinonia* and mutual service of the kingdom.

The monk too, was educated on the same theories; but for him, a wider access to the rest of the Church, to monastic theology, to the pastoral needs of teaching and the sacraments, brought enrichment of an altogether different kind. Not many communities of monks could complain of the miseries described by Pius XII. And anyone who has seen new life flow into a community of nuns through the vernacular liturgy and the integration of lay sisters, the reading of scripture and the study of theology, the respect of persons, the meetings with other monks and nuns and all the other vital reforms now at last beginning under the impulse of Vatican II, can only rejoice at what has been achieved, and hope that much more is to follow.

5. *Moniales*. 'Nuns' experience further difficulties which have not lessened with the last decade and a half of change. According to

Perfectae Caritatis (16), *moniales* as a group include a variety of traditions; they are simply lumped together as those 'who live the strictly contemplative life' or who 'by their Institute may be dedicated to external works'. All these have to some degree been assimilated to the figure of the 'canonical contemplative nun', and their various Orders subjected to a uniformity which perforce obscures the positive charism of each one. So the Benedictine nuns cannot exercise the full hospitality of the Rule (cf chs 53, 56, 61); the Carmelites lack something of their desert; and the Poor Clares sacrificed something of their mendicancy when Cardinal Ugolino imposed on them the Rule of St Bendict.[10] In each case, original documents enshrining the essentials of charism, such as the *Rule* of Benedict, the *Dialogues* of Gregory, the *Fioretti* of Francis, the *Foundations* of Teresa, have ceased to have any importance: and not for 'accommodation to the needs of the times', but for the sake of uniformity of 'typology'. Many still look in vain for the restoration of 'the founder's spirit and special aims' (*Perfectae Caritatis*, 2b).

Yet uniformity would be the death of religious life. A meeting of Superiors General in Rome recently recognized a prophetic and critical duty of religious that could not be evaded in face of the destruction of human dignity, consumer society, injustice and oppression. Each Order was founded in prophetic and critical tension with the Church of its own day; but over and over again each has been tamed by clericalization and harnessed to respectable tasks. If they are to survive, they have to die to the customs of the past and recover charismatic life; for this is the hour of a radical following of Christ.[11]

Perhaps monastic nuns have suffered more than most from assimilation to other traditions. Already in the seventeenth century, as Brémond writes: 'behind our young abbesses we find François de Sales, Pierre Coton, Canfield, Berulle, Asseline, Condren, and others. The reform, undertaken when all Catholic France felt the need of interior renewal, had been directed by new men, strangers as a rule to the old Benedictine family. It was unavoidable that such men should fashion the Reform to their own image, more or less adapting the Benedictine Rule to their own experiences, pious habits, and temper of mind'.[12] And in fact, until Vatican II, the constitutions of many Benedictine congregations, with their half hour of mental prayer, their half hour of spiritual reading and their note that this legislation does not bind under pain of sin, reflected a Counter-Reformation spirit infused from elsewhere.

6. *Polarization of the 'active' and the 'contemplative'.* This matter was much debated at the Council, where one of the important texts,

specifically referring to the distinction, reads:

> This is why 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 which empowers them to share his redemptive love and spread God's Kingdom (*Perfectae Caritatis*, 5).

There was also strong pressure by some of the Council Fathers to release active women religious from what was called 'the ruthless trap of prayer and activity'. The Bishop of Arras, Mgr Huyghe, had written:

> Let us take the day of a nursing or teaching nun, caught in the jaws of a pitiless vice. One jaw consists of a scheme of spiritual exercises punctuating the day from beginning to end. Mental prayer, or more often meditation in common, Mass, various and numerous prayers (and how many of them!) recited and sometimes even sung, spiritual reading in common at a fixed hour, different examinations of conscience. . . . All that would be nothing if it were not for the demands of the apostolate; for it too has its timetable, and it constitutes the second jaw of the vice.[13]

The Bishop attributes this unhappy state of affairs to the imposition of 'a type of contemplative monastic life' which he traces to St Benedict of Aniane; hence the noviciate and training of such nuns has been excessively 'contemplative', and a distinction has been made between a primary end, the glory of God, and a secondary end, apostolic activity. Moreover, the contemplative ideal was influenced too much by the Greeks, the Eastern Fathers and the monks, who had no understanding of the world or of a mature laity.

However, the sufferings of these nuns are the result, not of the contemplative life, but of the fences that have been built round the contemplative life during the past four centuries. Genuine contemplatives, like Augustine and Gregory, Bernard and Francis, Catherine and Teresa, never found any difficulty in combining deep contemplation with an impossible programme of work. But the intense psychological self-awareness of modern spirituality, combined with the work ethic of modern man, would put anyone on the rack. There is no doubt about the sufferings of these nuns in a life which, they will tell you, denies them both prayer and community: a desperate race of work, constantly accelerated by falling numbers and rising costs. We therefore have, at one end of the spectrum, Institutes whose members 'can devote their whole

lives to the apostolate' (DC 116), and at the other those which 'are wholly given over to contemplation' (DC 100). Each of these appears to be a theological nonsense. In the one case, the aim seems to be to prevent active nuns from being corrupted by bad theology; in the other, to keep the contemplatives behind bars, and away from the allurements attaching to 'adaptation to modern life'. The directives of *Perfectae Caritatis* (6 and 7) have been pushed to impossible extremes, and only the description of 'the venerable Institution' has been left to convey a peaceful and healthy generality (9).

7. *Demonasticization.* The 'sisters' of the active Congregations are not our immediate concern; but their problems shed some light on ours. Most of their difficulties allegedly stemmed from an excessively monastic way of life; so that they have been encouraged to shed the externals associated with the 'canonically contemplative': silence, 'the habit', enclosure, a fixed order of the day — and sometimes with all this, the substance of poverty and obedience! New Constitutions have been composed at great labour and expense; and some of these have said little more (at least in their experimental stages) than that 'Our sisters shall pursue the highest ideals by the most modern psychological methods'. It could be argued that this is one of the reasons for the diminishment of vocations to such Congregations. Certainly, some of their members have tried to seek what they have lost by transferring to the 'contemplative' Congregations, or in a lay-life of christian service. Certainly there is some grain of truth in the contention that persons are being sacrificed to institutions which have lost their sense of direction.

Attempts have been made to work out anew a spirituality of 'contemplation in action', and these have found a wide response. However, the modern recommendations for achieving it are not always clearly understood or expressed. The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius Loyola, with their roots in medieval tradition, have been one of the great means of meeting with the risen Lord and of living ever more deeply in accord with the will of God over the past four centuries of christian history. They have been the guide and inspiration of the great majority of the active congregations. But one must feel concern when they are presented as one more 'problem-solver' in the technological age. This would seem to reduce them to a mere cleverness, and no longer as the search for evangelical wisdom, which in fact they are (cf 1 Cor 1 and 2). Nor is it exactly helpful to be told that the technique, say, of the 'particular examen' has been misapplied since its discovery: that it never ought to have been 'taken in an ethical sense, as though we ought constantly to accuse ourselves of sins and defects of all kinds'.[14]

There is still a good deal of confusion on the relation of

contemplation and action. Directives to contemplative nuns to concentrate wholly on their *otium sanctum* to the neglect of any *negotium iustum*, whilst their active sisters are urged to give all their powers to the *negotium iustum* and shun the *otium sanctum*, seem to go against common sense, let alone sound theology. Perhaps we have something to learn from the Orthodox, who have never accepted this polarity of the active and contemplative; or perhaps from the Anglican nuns, who have not been caught up in post-Tridentine canonical dichotomies.

8. *Lack of consultation.* We should, of course learn from the nuns themselves, who have hardly ever been consulted on any of these problems. The original Commission for the revision of Canon Law on Religious numbered a hundred and twenty-six, all male and all ecclesiastics. It is not until 1978 that we find an unnamed *consultatrice* figuring in the discussions, and later on, two sisters and one layman.[15] Perhaps there are still too few women properly qualified for the work involved; but it still remains that the draft canons firmly state the principle of 'non-discrimination' between men and women, monks and nuns (DC 6, 105). There is the ever-present danger of clerical *machismo*, neatly summarized for us in a quote from Tanquerey on the spiritual direction of women:

> They must not be made even to suspect that one is personally interested in them. Their mentality is so constituted that if they be led to think themselves the object of a particular regard or affection, almost without fail they descend to a natural plane, be it through vanity or sentimentality.[16]

The names of major religious superiors of women's Orders and Congregations are still not printed in any official directories — from the Vatican's *Annuario Pontificio* to the local Diocesan Directory.

Hopes for the future. At the same time, there have been successful initiatives, like the first General Chapter of Cistercian Abbesses of the Strict Observance, held in Rome in 1970, and followed by many similar gatherings at national and regional level, as well as semi-official meetings of various kinds over the last ten years. There is, in addition, the questionnaire published in May 1979, by the Sacred Congregation of Religious, and distributed to all religious houses on 'the contemplative dimension of religious life, with particular reference to the role of Institutes of Contemplative Life'. This document is especially noteworthy for its insistence on the need to eliminate every antithesis or dichotomy between action and contemplation. It asks the right questions about the practice of

prayer, formative instruction in prayer, and its significance in relations with the local Church. The *ex professo* contemplative houses are asked to specify concerning means to end: *lectio divina*, cloister, external silence, eremitical periods; what are their views on present customs with regard to enclosure, the possibility or need for competence to be given to local superiors for exits and entrances, structuring federations of houses and so on. This vigorous attempt to discover what contemplatives think that they are doing, and how they can best do it, is a great sign of hope: one which has recently received confirmation from the Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes. His recent book sets forth a splendid programme for religious life, both active and contemplative, based on the various emphases or blending of *otium sanctum* and *negotium iustum*:

> The Church today must be more than ever the Church of prophecy and service; and that needs a permanent attitude of contemplation. Only persons capable of fruitful silence and serenity beneath the cross can truly be prophets and witnesses. . . . The contemplative life shares with others the serene and profound fruit of its contemplation. Without losing interior depth, the necessary experience of God in the desert and separation from the world, the contemplative communicates to others the spiritual fruits of his experience and makes them share in his prayer.[17]

Tradition repeats again and again that Martha and Mary are sisters. As Thomas Merton says somewhere, 'neither can approach the throne of God without the other'.

Conclusion. So we may return in spirit, after a thousand years, to the happy state of affairs that prevailed at Bath on Whit Sunday in the year nine hundred and seventy-three. Not that royal banquets are necessary to monastic observance, but that nuns should be as free as monks to face and solve the interesting problem of accepting or refusing a royal invitation or command. They would, no doubt rightly, interpret the rule of enclosure and other observances very differently from the monks; but if they were allowed to live the life of the Rule of St Benedict and to order their own affairs as freely as the monks, then many young women who are in search of the monastic life, but could not endure the restrictions and reassurances described above, would find their true home. Then the monasteries would once more play the part attributed to them by Pope Paul at Monte Cassino in 1964: the Church and the world, he said, need monastic life today for different but converging reasons.

It is this thirst for truly personal life that ensures the relevance of

the monastic ideal today. . . . Long ago men hastened to the silence of the cloister, as St Benedict did from Nursia, to find themselves again, to recover their lost identity. But then the motive of this flight from the world was the degeneration of society, the moral and cultural collapse of a world that could no longer provide the spirit with self-awareness, development or communication with others. There was a need for a retreat where man could find once more security and peace, study and prayer, work, friendship, and confidence. Nowadays it is not the lack of social contact that drives us to the same retreat, but the excess of it. Excitement, noise and crowds, a feverish life without, these are the things that threaten the life within: the loss of silence, which speaks of reality in the heart, the loss of order, of prayer and of self. To find once more the spiritual mastery and enjoyment of his true self, he feels the need to knock again at the door of the Benedictine Monastery.

NOTES

[1] David Knowles, *The Monastic Order in England* (Cambridge University Press, 1963), p 52.
[2] *Supplement to the Way* 33 (Spring 1978), 'Canon Law and Religious Life', a translation of and commentary on the Draft-Canons (DC); the relevant canons are 98-107.
[3] *Cistercian Studies* (1968), pp 109-23, 189-206; and (1966), pp 145-58.
[4] English translation in Austin Flannery O.P., ed, *Vatican Council II* (Dublin, 1975), pp 656-75.
[5] Suso Mayer, *Benediktinisches Ordensrecht, III*, pp 175ff.
[6] Louis Bouyer, *The Spirit and Forms of Protestantism* (London, 1956), p 64.
[7] M. Outram Evennett, *The Spirit of the Counter-Reformation* (Cambridge University Press, 1968), pp 41-42.
[8] A. Tanquerey, *The Spiritual Life: a treatise on Ascetical and Mystical Theology* (Tournai, 1932), Appendix I.
[9] B. Calotti, 'Western Mysticism', in *The Downside Review*, 98 (July, 1980), pp 201-13.
[10] Cf *Cistercian Studies* (1966), p 151.
[11] Cf 'Les Religieux et La Promotion Humaine', in *Vie Consacrée* 51 (January, 1979), pp 12-22.
[12] H. Brémond, *Histoire du sentiment religieux en France* (Paris, 1915-32) *II*, pp 419-41.
[13] Cited in J-M. Tillard and Y. Congar, *L'adaptation de la vie religieuse* (Paris, 1967), pp 129, 169ff.
[14] William Johnston, *The Inner Eye of Love* (London, 1978), p 162.
[15] Cf the official *Communicationes* I, 1 (1970), pp 15ff; X, 2 (1978), p 160.
[16] *The Spiritual Life, ed. cit.*, 546, p 265.
[17] Cardinal Eduardo Pironio, *Joyful in hope* (Slough, 1979), pp 12, 147-48.