

## NEW EXPRESSIONS OF RELIGIOUS LIFE

ONE of the proofs of the Divine origin of the Church is her adaptability to the needs of successive generations. The Faith once for all delivered to the Saints is always the same, and so also are the Counsels of Our Lord for a life of perfection. But as we have a Christ-given Authority living on earth, the application of these Divine Counsels to the needs of human life have had to be adjusted from time to time to meet the various requirements of a changing world.

The first Religious of the Christian Faith were hermits, who lived austere lives in the caves of the desert. Later these men gathered together in monasteries, where they earned their living by farming, and lived holy lives singing the praises of God. The ideal of these early monastic foundations was always separation from this wicked world, and the construction of a brotherhood according to Christ. But by degrees a far off cry reached the ears of these sequestered Christians, the cry of the pain of the world, the agony of Christian slaves, and a sense of pity and responsibility for suffering humanity crept into their hearts. So heroic men sacrificed the security of the cloister and banded themselves together into Orders for the ransoming of slaves. The next inroad on the peace of the cloistered monk came from the ignorance and the religious needs of the laity, for whom the secular clergy were insufficient.

So God raised up St. Francis of Assisi and St. Dominic, and by the preaching and holy example of these Friars many were brought back to God. Then came the Reformation, an organized attack on the most sacred doctrines of our Church, a denial of the Faith. Heretics sheltered themselves behind the admitted abuses in the Church, and in reforming morals they sacrificed truth. So once again the Spirit of God moved within the Church, and inspired Inigo, the Spanish nobleman and soldier, to leave fame, honour, career, and possessions, and as St. Ignatius of Loyola to raise up a mighty regiment to fight the battles of the Lord. St. Ignatius took

the Church by storm. He shocked the good people of his day. He would have no Office in Choir, no distinguishing habit, he departed from many of the traditions which in those days were inseparately bound up with the Religious State. He was an innovator, and he was terribly modern! Yet the spirit of God so guided the Ruler of His Church that the Jesuits were accorded not only full Papal approval but they were raised to the status and full privileges of a Religious Order.

Amongst women, owing to the conventionalities of the times, the development was far slower. Benedictines and others were there indeed, but, except in rare cases such as St. Hilda, they were for the most part entirely cut off from the world. Even St. Francis of Assisi had to engrill St. Clare! But the needs of the world gradually penetrated into women's convents as it had done into men's. St. Vincent de Paul and St. Francis of Sales both tried to found modern communities for women, but ecclesiastical tradition was too strong for them, so St. Vincent abandoned the strict religious status, allowing only yearly vows to his Sisters, whilst St. Francis of Sales submitted to ecclesiastical pressure and enclosed his nuns behind iron bars.

But there was a heroic Englishwoman who stuck to her ideals, and believed that God would condescend to use even women for missionary work. Throughout the perils of the Reformation, Mary Ward, trained in the hard school of the Poor Clare Outsisters, arrayed herself in an apricot coloured silk evening gown over a hair shirt, and frequented balls in the Strand! There she whispered to dancing partners of the Eternal Verities, and many a man and woman, in spite of the terrors of the times, were through her efforts reconciled to God in His true Church. For this she was imprisoned by the ecclesiastical authorities of her day, and hailed before the Inquisition! Now many of her compatriots are praying most earnestly for her canonization!

Mary Ward lived too soon to see the realization of all her ideals, but in every country new Religious Orders for women sprang up to meet the growing needs of their day, and the eighteenth and nineteenth century saw the foundation of

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great teaching Orders for women, such as the Sacred Heart, the Holy Child, and the Notre Dame Sisters, to whom we all owe an immense debt of gratitude. So we see in this short resumé of the history of Religious Life, how in every age men and women are called to aim at a life of perfection, the only complete example being Our Divine Lord Himself. The methods of becoming Christlike may differ according to the circumstances of the age in which we live, but the living example of Christ is the unchangeable beacon that beckons men and women in all ages to overcome the difficulties of their times, and glorify God by winning souls to the service of Christ. The Great War was bound to make upheavals in social conditions as well as in national, and nowhere do we note the change more clearly than in the final emancipation of women. Girls ran away from the cloister and all its holy teaching, and nuns who were enclosed could not run after them. So the world tended to become godless, and many fell away from any religious influence.

To meet these new needs, the Spirit within the Church stirred once more, and since the War there has sprung up with a vigorous spontaneous growth a very large number of new religious communities for women all over the world. Enclosure is reduced to the canonical minimum; many have abandoned a definite nun's habit in favour of a more practical uniform, whilst others dress like ordinary ladies in the world.

The pioneer of modern communities we find, perhaps rather astonishingly, in Spain. They are known as the Ladies of the Catechism, and they were founded some time before the War, and they were given papal approval by Pius X. They live a full religious life, keeping the Ignatian Rule, and their work is almost entirely amongst men! All over Spain and the South of France they have instituted workmen's clubs, and they teach the Catechism, but they also teach trades! They are most mortified ladies, for they do not wear a habit or ordinary clothes. All their raiment is bought by their Superior, who may not always have much taste, either as to colour or fit, and these miscellaneous garments are dealt round at random to the various Sisters.

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This congregation, being the earliest of the modern communities, is probably rather more bound by Canon Law than some of the more recent foundations. Spain can boast of two other modern communities.

Germany has many foundations amongst this modern group. Dr. Metzger has started a triple community for laymen, women and priests. This community has had to fight some stormy battles, but no one can question their zeal, their love of souls, and their personal mortified lives, lived solely for the love of Christ Our Lord. Germany has now fourteen modern communities, two flourishing in Munich, and an excellent one known as The Sisters of Christ the King in Frankfurt-à-Main, who wear ordinary clothes and teach in the schools. There are many modern foundations in Berlin, almost all engaged in social service work.

Austria has two modern communities, a small one founded by Pater Norbert Schachinger at Kremsmünster, of Benedictine Oblates, who seek to give the opportunity of religious life to servants and simple folk. But the most important in Austria is that founded by the late Monsignor Seipel and Frau Doktor Buryan. It started after the War and has a peculiar constitution, but already they number over 200 Sisters and twelve houses in or near Vienna, and other houses in Berlin and Munich. They are very carefully trained in every kind of social service work. They have done wonders amongst prostitutes at Kloster Neuberg, where all the expense is borne by the state.

Hungary has nine modern communities, and all are flourishing, insofar as they have many Sisters and much work, and the ecclesiastical authorities leave them very free. The best known is the Social Mission Sisters founded by Frau von Farkas. They do parish work of all kinds, but their most remarkable achievement is that they have persuaded their government to give them the care of all the women's prisons in Budapest. The state has built a chapel and convent on the top floor of each prison, where due enclosure is observed, and it pays each Sisters the same salary as was formally paid to incompetent wardresses. The improvement wrought in the characters of the prisoners has

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been much remarked since the Sisters have had the care of them.

Another large community has been founded by Sister Margaret Slachta to help in all charitable movements. They are engaged in various wage-earning occupations in order to support themselves, serving in shops, working in factories and teaching in schools. Three Sisters work for their living and support one who does charitable unpaid work. The best from the religious point of view in Hungary is a community founded by Pater Birro, S.J., at one time Provincial of the Jesuits in Budapest. These Sisters are very good religious and work almost entirely in the villages, teaching in the elementary schools and doing social service work amongst the villagers. They too work for their living in various ways.

In Italy there are three modern congregations. The chief one is a community founded by the late Cardinal Ferrari in Milan, which at one time had houses in many countries, including Palestine. It is a triple community of priests, laymen and Sisters. They wear no habit and do most successful work amongst the poor. They fell on hard times recently, owing to financial collapse, and they had to close all their houses except those in Rome and Milan. They are good religious, and I am sure they will rise again in all their strength. They are known as the Community of St. Paul.

Then there is that remarkable foundation made by Countess Maria Theresa Ledóchowska known as the Sodality of St. Peter Claver, which exists to help the Foreign Missions. Originally it was a lay association, but as it developed the foundress and some kindred spirits banded together as religious, helped by a large lay association. The foundress is dead, and her cause for beatification has already been introduced in Rome.

In Belgium there are two and in Holland four modern communities. The Grail, the largest and latest, is well known in England. These Sisters seek to help young Catholics by providing full occupation for leisure hours. They give their novices a very thorough training, which in Holland entails working in factories, under the same conditions as ordinary workers. After their Novitiate, they come out and mix freely

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with laypeople and they help in all sorts of social work for youth. But underneath all these modern developments they are founded on the essential Religious Counsels, and they are winning their success through many trials.

Another Dutch Order is called the Sisters of Bethany. They have two divisions, one comprised of the inner Contemplative Sisters, and the other of those who work amongst the people doing charitable service. The Superiors are all drawn from the inner Contemplative section.

The U.S.A. have at least eight modern communities. One is a very zealous Missionary Community in Indiana, called the Missionary Catechists, who in spite of poverty are doing a heroic work in conversions. Then America is the home of Dr. Anna Dengel's excellent foundation of Catholic Medical Missionaries, who have hospitals in India and elsewhere, and a house in England at Osterley.

Canada has two flourishing communities: one French, having their headquarters in Montreal, and known known as *Sœurs de N.D. de Bon Conseil*, and the other English, called the Sisters of Social Service. The S.O.S., as they are called for short, have been founded by Father Daly, C.S.S.R., in Toronto. These Sisters are unique in the self-sacrificing work they undertake, many of them going to lonely outposts in the Rockies, where there is no priest and consequently no Mass or religious ministrations. They live thus for months, deprived of all they care for most, whilst they work amongst the farmers and settlers, teaching their children, and gathering people together on Sundays and holidays to say the Rosary and read the Gospel of the Mass. These Sisters also work most successfully amongst the immigrants who flock to Canada from all over the world.

France has six modern communities. The best known is that founded by Mlle. Taphanel at Cambrai, which number several hundred Sisters and do all sorts of good works. Prince Ghika of Rumania has founded a double community, one for priests who work amongst the "apaches" of Paris, and its counterpart for Sisters, who however are more shut up than is usual amongst modern foundations.

Switzerland has three modern communities, the biggest

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being that founded by Mother Dorman, who has a large hospital just outside Lucerne. Czechoslovakia has two, but intercourse is limited by language difficulties.

And then there is Poland—the old Poland with its great national history, reborn only fifteen years ago, and making astonishing progress, blending the old tradition with its modern needs. Poland has five modern congregations in all. Space forbids me to speak of more than two. The young Countess Czacka met with a severe accident whilst hunting which deprived her of her eyesight at the age of twenty-two. Knowing thus from her own personal experience the needs of the blind, her heart went out to them, and she forthwith devoted her life to their succour. Helped by Professor Kornilowicz, she has founded a modern community in the Franciscan spirit in the Forest of Laski about ten miles from Warsaw. She has 115 Sisters, some of them blind, and some of them convert Jews. Mother Czacka has devoted all her fortune to building a whole village in the wood. She has there blind schools for boys and girls, blind orphanages a crèche for blind babies, a home for blind old people, a brush factory entirely staffed by blind people, a convent, a noviciate, a farm and, last but not least, a church and presbytery, and a retreat house for people in the world. She is a holy soul, her work prospers, her community grows, and many souls are helped towards Heaven.

The most astonishing community is that founded by Mother Ursula Ledóchowska, a sister of the Jesuit Father General and of the foundress of the Sodality of St. Peter Claver, of which particulars have already been given. Mother Ledóchowska was a Ursuline nun at Cracow for twenty years, having entered there at the age of twenty-one. Then she was sent to found another house of her Order at Petrograd, when the War broke out, and she was exiled first to Finland and then to Sweden, where she supported herself by teaching languages. By degrees a few others also exiled gathered round her, and her zeal and love for the poor and suffering found outlet in constant works of charity. At the end of the War she returned to her convent at Cracow, but was told to continue her work in the world. The Bolshevik

invasion delayed matters, but in 1923 a friend in Norway gave her the money to buy a farm near Pniewy, not far from Poznan in Poland, and she started what she likes to call an Ursuline Convent, but what is in reality an entirely new foundation on very modern and efficient lines. She is convinced that all modern communities should be established on a wage-earning basis, and for every work of charity undertaken by her Sisters there must be some wage-earning employment undertaken as well, so as to provide the money to pay for the charity. So at Pniewy the Sisters have a large horse breeding establishment, entirely managed by the Sisters themselves, and nowhere have I seen horses so well groomed and cared for. All types of horses are bred, and recently one of their horses won a big race. Officers in the army buy their charges from them, sportsmen their hunters, and farmers their cart-horses. These modern nuns act as grooms, breakers in, and vets, and extraordinarily well they do it. Their activities are not confined to horse breeding, they have twenty-nine cows and twenty-nine Sisters milking them, and hundreds of pigs and chickens, and several hundred acres of farm land. The Sisters plough and sow, reap and hoe, with an efficiency which is the envy of the neighbouring farmers. With the money thus acquired they support their novitiate, an orphanage for boys, a domestic science school for girls, and a guest house. They have also a printing press and a laundry. At Warsaw these Sisters do a marvelous work amongst the poor, where conditions of overcrowding are terrible. This they pay for by running a super excellent restaurant, where thousands of meals are cooked and served by the Sisters themselves every day. At Lodz, the Manchester of Poland, the Sisters teach religion all day in the elementary schools, and are paid for doing so by a grateful country. At Sieradz, a beautiful mediæval fortified Dominican monastery, with Swedish canon balls still embedded in the walls, these Sisters maintain a large poor school and orphanage by weaving. They weave all the material for their own needs, but they also weave the picturesque raiment worn by the Polish peasantry. And so it goes on in every part of Poland. In all Mother Ledóchowska,



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or Matuchna (dear little Mother) as she is called everywhere, has twenty-one houses in Poland, four in Italy and one in France. Counting novices, postulants and candidates, she has close on a thousand Sisters, a truly marvellous achievement! What wonder that a grateful country gives her and her assistant free passages on the State Railways, and her Sisters travel at greatly reduced charges both on trains and trams.

And now for our own country. Miss Gordon Smith has in recent times founded the Sisters of St. Anne, who work amongst the poor, but they have developed more on old-fashioned lines. Miss Burd, foundress of the Sisters of Our Lady of Consolation, has done wonders nursing rich and poor—mostly poor!—but once again she has reverted to stereotyped customs. Sister D'Alton has a new community at Kelvedon, where they have a school, and there is a nursing foundation in Scotland. But none of these are in any sense outstanding modern. They are good Sisters working hard on a well-trodden path.

The most modern British community was started in a stable in 1914, and is therefore one of the oldest of these modern foundations which are found springing up in every country of the world since the War. Its object is the conversion of Great Britain to the Catholic Faith! It was felt that the educated classes seldom got into touch with the Catholic Faith owing to social conditions and educational prejudices. So after some training, generously given by the late Mother General of the Sacred Heart nuns, two women started on their life adventure in a mews near Farm Street Church, determined to convert the world! They had hardly any money, and they lived on beans and lentils, and the hospitality of their friends, invigorated by the joy of many conversions to the Church.

Since then this community has had the happiness of helping nearly 2,000 souls into the Catholic Church. They had many struggles, many disappointments, but from the beginning God's blessing rested on their work. It increased in all directions, and they took up work in poor parishes, lecturing in the park, under the auspices of the C.E.G., visiting both

voluntary and public assistance institutions, doing rescue work, and working for foreign missions. In 1931 they were given three houses, known as the Wayside, in Brook Green to manage as a hostel for ex-Anglican Sisters, ex-Catholic nuns who for some approved reason have had their vows dispensed, and for poor convert ladies who have lost their money by becoming Catholics. These Sisters, known as the Messengers of the Faith, in no way seek to supersede nuns, but rather to supplement them. Nowadays much work is asked of women which Catholic nuns are unable to undertake owing to their Rule, and ladies living in the world, however good and devoted, must have other calls and duties which rightly have prior claim upon them. So the Messengers came into being in order to be able to go into the highways and byways, seeking souls along unfrequented lanes, to which they are able to gain access more easily than others owing to the elasticity of their Rule and Constitution. They offer to those who will join them a glorious opportunity of living an apostolic life, and of going about "doing good" as our Divine Example did before us, trying to teach others to observe the things which He commanded. They begin with pagan England. Those who have had a good Catholic education can have little conception of the crass ignorance of many of our fellow countrymen. Not long ago, within a few months of each other, the Messengers had to deal with two educated and travelled girls who did not know the Lord's Prayer and nothing about Christ except His Name. So there is abundant missionary work to be done at home, and surely there can be no happier way of "following Christ" than to go about telling others about Him? Indeed an incensed Protestant parent of one of the Messengers, after informing her of her disinheritance, on account of her conversion and way of life, added in a crescendo of annoyance, "And the worst of it is, and the worst of it is, you are the happiest of all my children!" Surely this is the best recommendation of a vocation to the Messengers of the Faith!

The Messengers cannot offer new members a large convent, a traditional training, blessed and sanctified by Saints, they can only offer a little band of Sisters longing to "live

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and suffer and labour for the greater glory of God, and the conversion of souls," as they say in their daily consecration. They can offer no sheltered enclosure, no dignified monastic existence, but they can offer hard work for the souls for whom Christ died, tiring days in buses, a great deal of disapproval from many very good people: but with it all a kindness and gratitude from their converts, and their poor, which they feel to be totally unearned.

So the Messengers of the Faith think it worth while. They have a full religious ideal; they take private vows, as the essential foundation must always be those of the Counsels; they recite the Divine Office, indifferently well, but with full hearts, and they have their times for prayer and silence, and have a simple Rule. They have no enclosure, they go about alone, their letters are not opened, they are trusted to inform the Superior if anything is wrong. They have opportunities of mixing with the world, of teaching, lecturing, and sometimes of travelling. Their ideal remains the same. They are not to be shut up but, like their Master, are to go about doing good, living in the world but seeking not to be of it.

The Holy Father told the writer that the Messengers were a high expression of Catholic Action, and as the holy women helped St. Paul, so they were helping him, and he blessed them and their converts. God calls souls to many different kinds of Orders, and the Church needs them all. The Messengers are proud to know that many of their converts are now in old established Orders, Carmelites, Benedictines, and various teaching congregations, and they hope that yet many more may join them. Modern communities love and admire their elder Sisters, and are anxious to help them. Franciscans, Sisters of Charity, Foreign Missionary Orders for women were all modern in their day and derided as being "non-religious." Yet now they are universally recognized as such, and are doing heroic work, and the older Orders have not suffered but rather have prospered in consequence. So in these days, unless the Church has become barren, she must continue to exhibit her immemorial activity and fertility, and she is as anxious now as then to train her children to meet the needs of the age and

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to carry her message to a turbulent and unhappy world.

New communities have to be modern, but never modernist. They would be the latter if they suggested a revision of the ancient ideal of the Perfect Life, but they do no such thing. Its principles are immutable, how could they not be? Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, to-day and for ever. The perfect life simply means committing oneself to be as like Our Lord as we can. This is the only end of religious life, but the methods of realizing it can differ as widely as the methods of the Hermits of old do from those of the Jesuits, or the Anchoresses from the Sisters of Charity. It is true that courage will be demanded from those who want to put new methods into practice, but once the approval of the Holy See and the Bishops is obtained, no one need fear, and without it no one is going to have the audacity to undertake any enterprize of this sort whatsoever.

DOROTHY F. GORDON.