

ADAPTATION IN FRANCE: I<sup>1</sup>

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FATHER Plé has honoured me with the formidable responsibility of replacing him during this course of study. It is certainly not because of my ordinary work, for I am a professor of philosophy, and, which might seem even worse, professor of scholastic philosophy! That seems sufficiently remote from directing souls, or from canon law! The only qualification I have for speaking here is my collaboration in the organization and the work of the *ancelles*—that is to say, that part of the active branch of the Congregation of Our Lady of Sion concerned with an up-to-date apostolate.

As to the problems of adaptation, the subject we intend to study during this session, I think the experience of the *ancelles* particularly instructive for us. This does not mean that the *ancelles* are a unique case. In France at the present moment a whole host of similar efforts are being made, stimulated by the concern of attaining souls directly, the desire of reaching the very lives of the masses outside the Church, of bringing Christ into the midst of those who do not know him.

That has, of course, been the inspiration of a great many new foundations, in particular of the Little Sisters of Jesus, or of Père de Foucauld. A great many secular institutes have sprung from this. These little groups don't make much stir, nor arouse publicity, but as soon as you begin to be interested in the apostolic task of the Church, you find them everywhere: teachers, workers with delinquent children, social assistants, auxiliaries of the apostolate, auxiliaries of the clergy, militants of the workers' mission. And many traditional religious congregations, too, have come like Sion into the movement: the 'Berengères' of the Dominicans, already an established foundation; more recently the Little Sisters of the Assumption, the apostolic Carmelites, the Dominicans of the rural areas and a great many others.

It is moving to be confronted with this secret vitality of the Church—secret but effectual. If people had known better all these manifestations of the work of the Holy Spirit in the Church per-

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haps they would have been less scandalized, last winter, in the press and elsewhere, by the affair of the priest workers. Indeed their withdrawal caused some painful problems, but apart from this absorbing question a closer scrutiny would have revealed the patient continuity of apostolic work in the different communities we have mentioned. As with St Antony, St Gregory, the monks and the virgins of the second century, as with St Francis, St Dominic and the apostles of the middle ages, as with St Ignatius and St Francis Xavier and with the missionaries of all time, the Spirit bloweth, he is at work in the Church. The great variety of these experiments, at once religious and apostolic, is a proof.

It is marvellous to discover, behind an apparent incoherence, the fundamental unity of their inspiration. Whatever the nature of the object of these different religious communities, each of them is characterized by a profound desire of apostolic witness, based on a return to a life more primitively christian, in particular to poverty, simplicity, and community life. Each has as ideal the presence in the world of little living Christian communities.

Here it is a group of lay folk, embarking on a common task with a view to a more fervent life, a more truly christian example, and who discover little by little, through an inner necessity, the need for a Rule whose elements lie in the evangelical counsels and the great religious traditions of the Church. There we find religious communities, already established, discovering that faithfulness to their original ideal demands of them a renewal of their form of apostolate and of their way of life. For the one as for the other the inspiration is the same. But if the secular institutions and groups of lay people must rediscover traditional methods, on the other hand the old orders and congregations must adapt certain elements of their tradition.

It is in this atmosphere that the adaptations should be realized, and it is this spirit of effort and realization that leads me to speak of the *ancelles*.

In saying that the experience of the *ancelles* is particularly instructive, I mean that they offer a rather unusual case of adaptation. They are indeed an active apostolic branch, with completely new activities and way of life. They are not the only ones—as we have seen—but the originality of the *ancelles* lies in the fact that they grew and developed as a branch of a congregation whose traditional religious spirit is well known.

The foundation and the development of the *ancelles*, although effected in faithfulness to their fundamental inspiration and in continuity with the original ideal, and indeed necessitated by the ideal itself, posed a great many problems which have not all yet been definitely solved. The attempt at an answer which is their life, even if only provisional, nevertheless offers an interesting lesson.

In this conference I would like to give a simple account of the experience of the *ancelles* so as to point out, with illustrations from their particular case, the general conditions in which any adaptation of a religious life should be made.

#### THE ORIGIN AND AIMS OF THE ANCELLES

Since we are taking the *ancelles* as an example, let us say a few words first about the origin and ideals of the *ancelles* of Our Lady of Sion.

You know, or at least you should know, that the Congregation of Our Lady of Sion was founded by the two brothers Ratisbonne, themselves converted Jews, for the conversion of Israel. For reasons which it would take too long to enumerate and analyse here, the congregation could not straightway give all the fullness and all the specialization that its founders would have wished, to this apostolic character in the Church. In the nineteenth century they could not open the schools and centres that they would have desired for the instruction of catechumens and the christian upbringing of young converts.

The congregation nevertheless continued the mystery of Israel within the Church, officially consecrated to prayer and reparation. And in the same direction Sion organized a powerful archconfraternity of prayer for Israel. In addition, providentially enough, a great many boarding schools sprang up in the large towns all over the world where there were important Jewish communities. Thus Sion realized a part of her apostolic ideal in the numerous Jewish pupils in her schools. Evangelization and example instituted by her founders thus continued in spite of the obstacles of the times. But that was not the full apostolic offensive in Israel that they had dreamed of. The fortuitous meeting, which led to the foundation of the *ancelles*, so to speak renewed the grace of Sion's vocation.

About 1930 an Italian priest had gathered together about a

dozen young girls desirous of devoting themselves to an apostolate in Israel. Nurses, social workers, catechists, they came into contact with Jews, taking care of the poor, everywhere giving an example of the charity of Christ, trying to lessen the distance and the prejudices which separate Israel from the Church. To give a religious basis and formation to this little group of apostles, the Patriarch of Jerusalem proposed to amalgamate them with the Congregation of Zion. The Mother General of the time recognized immediately in these workers the true heritage of the original inspiration of Zion. The *ancelles* were adopted and became a branch of the Congregation.

After twenty years of existence the union is indeed truer and deeper. They are but one congregation. To enter the *ancelles* is to enter Zion.

From the point of view of the ideal this addition, or rather this development, created no problem. The task of the *ancelles* was fully in accord with the Zion vocation—the conversion, or rather the return of Israel (I draw your attention to the importance of that distinction). It was the same work in the Church, and therefore the same spirituality acquired by resort to a like tradition, to the same sources. It was a simple matter to apply to all of them, teachers, contemplatives and *ancelles*, the same constitutions. And up till now the novitiate too remains in common. Nevertheless, in spite of this deep unity of ideal and of formation, the method of apostolate, the daily task, in a word the way of life of the one and the other remained so different that adaptation was indispensable.

Doubtless you know the rhythm of life of a teaching nun, particularly rigorous at Zion, as to solitude and contact with outside people. You will admit without hesitation that it is impossible to make teachers and *ancelles* live according to the same Directory. This was not immediately evident, but it became so in proportion as the *ancelles* understood their apostolic vocation. It is just this discovery which interests us here.

By the very name of their apostolic aim, like so many of the new communities born of our times, the *ancelles* are called to tasks very different and extremely involved with the world. Their concern is to meet the people they have to save on their own ground, and since their vocation calls them to the help of Israel, they try to meet and to reach the Jews wherever they happen to be. They wear civilian clothing, living by preference in Jewish quarters,

always in little groups of three or four sisters. It is around these little residences, future cells of the Church, that normally their apostolate should centre. But before arriving at the creation of a christian community the apostolic activity of each sister can take on all sorts of forms, according to her personal talents, or the needs of the moment, from the simple presence in silence of a living example, to a recognized apostolate, and works of mercy. Their various types of work are above all for them a means of coming into contact with Jewish circles.

Even a very brief summary of the kind of work in which the sisters are in fact engaged, or may easily be so engaged, is enough to give you an idea of the problems of adaptation which appear one after another.

Some of them have jobs which allow a discreet and prayerful presence in the very heart of Jewish circles, in the depths of misery, of obscurity, at the heart of luxury or sin. They are mother-helps, maids or charwomen, penetrating thus anonymously into Jewish families. Some of them have even humbler ways of contact and of being amongst Jewish folk—as factory-hands in Jewish concerns. Notice that doubtless this will be the most effective, and probably the only possible method of witness for the communities of *ancelles* who go out to Israel—working among others, just being there, living, praying, adoring, waiting, like Mary during Advent. The dream of a postulant who had hesitated between the Carmelites and the *ancelles* was to be a maid-of-all work in a big Jewish hotel! The ideal of a simple presence which triumphs—a continuation of the mystery of the Visitation. At this stage the life of an *ancelle* is in fact very close to that of a contemplative, with just this difference that she remains in the midst of human life, in the very centre of those for whom she is praying. But this simple difference demands many adaptations!

Others, on the contrary, seek a part where charity is more directly efficacious, or aim at a witness more openly expressed. They are nurses, or social assistants, as for example in Rome, or in Paris. Sometimes they have administrative posts. Sometimes they have been able to form a complete community in the district residence, and so to be occupied in work directly orientated towards charity, acting as hosts or evangelizing. In Paris three *ancelles* run a hostel for young girls; they are hoping to open a

house for Jewish students. In Tunis they have taken over a dispensary in a Jewish quarter. Again in Paris another little group of sisters are hoping to run together a 'loge de concierge', or a library, in order to get a footing in a big concern and to give an example there of christian charity.

I do not want to insist on the diversity of all these activities, on their possibilities and their hopes. All this, as I have already said, is not peculiar to the *ancelles*. You may know well other similar developments. I have only briefly mentioned all this so as to help you realize how far the demands of apostolic work may sometimes go, what new things faithfulness to an ideal can impose. Though perhaps not unique, the case of Sion is at least particularly revealing, on account of the co-existence of ways of life so different in one and the same congregation.

Of whatever type the apostolate of the *ancelles* may be—whether silent presence, direct witness, taking in charge of charitable works, evangelization, contacts of all kinds—whatever be the job which serves as an alibi to these diverse apostolic works, it is certain that the work of the *ancelles* is a part of the original vocation of Sion, the return of Israel to God. It is definite that it is the same function and the same ideal.

But it is none the less certain that the existence of a branch dedicated to such work, so wrapped up in the world, and so new, in a congregation with a way of life so rigorously traditional as that of Sion, arouses and will continue to arouse considerable problems of adaptation.

These problems were not raised in theory; they were occasioned by the life itself—just because of the urgency of the apostolate to be achieved. The superiors were obliged to find some solution—with the help of theologians and specialists in canon law. Above all they tried to maintain the essentials, to be sufficiently objective to safeguard the true values, in spite of the urgency of the situation.

You know by experience, or you can guess, that such an effort cost a good deal, and could not be made without much groping and anxiety. It would be enough to give an account of the evolution of such-and-such a detail of the rule, to show precisely from what extremes the adaptation sometimes has to be made. This would reveal the real necessity and pressure which serve to tone down the form of certain requirements while the essentials remain. Take as an example the case of the habit. The *ancelles* go out in the

world and work in modern dress. I remember the time when they had to change many times a day in order to join the community with the teaching nuns. It was a real pantomime, a perpetual disguise! At present they have separate communities where they always wear ordinary clothes. They even make their novitiate in modern dress among the other novices wearing the habit. It is obvious that the chapter in the Directory on dress has had to be modified (which does not mean that all the problems have been solved!). I could easily quote other examples, which would provide us with some delightful anecdotes. But we must adopt a more systematic method in order without going too far afield to indicate the various points where adaptation has been effected.

*(To be continued)*



## POINTS OF VIEW

*To The Editor, THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT*

DEAR SIR.—Fr Bruno James's letter in your September issue has voiced at least one other priest's convictions. I am equally uneasy about the wisdom of encouraging people to make the resolution: 'I mean to become a saint'. A Thérèse Martin could so resolve, but she was possessed of great qualities of soul and balance of mind, not to mention the safeguards of her religious training. I have just been re-reading Sister Anne Hardman's *Life of Mother Margaret Mostyn, the Carmelite*, and in it there is this letter written by the holy nun—at least this extract I take from it: 'Desires of perfection are not enough, but "rather puff up to pride" than please our Lord, whereas a truly humble soul, who refers everything to God, seeing him in all "makes his omnipotency a prisoner", so that he is, as it were, forced to make his will hers, and allow her to dispose of his treasures.' More souls are likely to be much discouraged rather than lifted up by pride if they envisage holiness as a progression in perfection. That is so because the closer to God we become the more we realize our wretchedness and become aware of frailties we had not hitherto suspected. Our Lord did indeed exhort us 'to be perfect', but he at once added: 'As your heavenly