

Retreat and Action

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If so many modern forms of apostolate require their members to make an annual retreat, or even a monthly day of recollection, I am inclined to think it is far less a case of their organizers including something from the familiar Catholic stock-in-trade than one of needing to satisfy a real want. It really is an impressive feature of the twentieth-century apostolate and goes a long way to prove its authenticity. As long as apostles—actionists—realize they have nothing to give without first finding it in prayer and seclusion we can trust their work to be truly under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The first rousers of conscience among the Catholics of France and Belgium were the Abbé Cardijn and later the Abbé Godin, creating the Young Christian Workers to redeem an entire class; not a remote dusky jungle-dwelling race, but a nation of neighbours, living in the closed world of factories and workshops, who had become alienated from the Church. Doubtless in the English-speaking world if we hear of someone going off to a retreat house we are impressed—he must be making headway in spirituality. The Jocists in France however are not exacting. They are willing to use the half-converted to win the unconverted. 'Gérard', for instance, spent a whole year in the YCW as an apparently indifferent onlooker and only a half-practising Catholic. Yet after his first retreat he wrote this: 'Before, my prayers were mere routine, just out of habit. But not now—now I talk with Christ about my pals. I ask him to bring them into the YCW along with us. When I go to communion, I think about them. I ask our Lord to make me stronger, to overcome my shyness so that I can approach them'. If results like this occur with the lapsed Catholics who attend such retreats (it was not a retreat for lapsed Catholics) there may be something to learn from this broad policy.

Young Christian Workers who grew up and out of the youth movement found that the warm spirituality and apostolate of their teens left an ache. Besides joining forms of adult Catholic Action, they needed movements that would give them spiritual direction and fraternity that would use up a matured enthusiasm. From this evolved numerous family groups, notably the *Foyers Notre-Dame*, today numbering thousands, with a spirituality based on their married state, on the blessings

and trials of living together. Its elements are family prayer, mutual discussion of problems with prayer in the presence of God, a careful study of their faith, especially in relation to marriage, and hospitality towards other members of the group (usually about eight families). In the *Notre-Dame* groups couples are expected to make their retreat together. Perhaps some are hard put to find a retreat house where this is possible, though retreat organizers are waking up to the need. If husband and wife each attempt a deep spiritual life under quite different direction it seems a lost opportunity. Couples especially who find their love through working together in the apostolate should not find it hard to pool the deepest interests of all.

The more intense pastoral zeal becomes, the more it realizes the need to 'come apart' to consider plans and reach decisions. Readers may recall the Abbé Michonneau's book *Revolution in a City Parish*, about the *Sacré Coeur*, Colombes, in the Paris outer suburbs, where the Abbé completely recast the pastoral and liturgical life of a poorer sort of industrial neighbourhood where, in France, practice can fall almost to nothing. Both this church, and the mother church of Colombes, *SS Pierre et Paul*, are in the care of the Sons of Charity. The whole atmosphere is one of deep sincerity, cheerfulness, vitality, hard work. When you enter the presbytery at *SS Pierre et Paul*—the door is open—this notice greets you: 'Come in—you are at home. Share with us the joy and peace of the Lord'. A bright young woman, the permanent parish secretary, is ready to cope with simple enquiries that do not demand a priest. The parish priest has eight curates. On Sundays there are fourteen masses with two confessors in attendance from 6.30 till 12. They claim that the parishioners know 150 to 200 hymns by heart. Recently 12,000 leaflets explaining the coming feast of Christmas were distributed round the parish, mostly by hand.

These are clues to the energetic pastorate that re-vitalizes the sort of parish that used to be forsaken. Is there spiritual force behind the effort? Annually the whole priestly team disappears into the countryside. They relax. Every evening, for a week, prayerfully, they plan the year ahead. At home on the parish they spend three quarters of an hour daily in mental prayer together. An echo of this spirit in the parish is that out of ninety state-school teachers—a notoriously anti-religious body in France—a third make an annual two-day retreat.

The General Mission, that is to say the apostolate of a complete locality, perhaps several towns, by a specially trained team of priests and layfolk in close collaboration with local clergy and all the units of

Catholic Action, may take years. Preparation is prolonged, and profound. When the priestly committees meet, they spend the day conferring between the hours of the Office recited in common. They go into retreat before opening the weeks of full missionary activity. So do the lay helpers. I know a Secular Institute devoted to the rescue of prostitutes; although its members are bound daily to mass and mental prayer they retire to a convent for a whole day of recollection once a month, in addition to their annual retreat. No matter how up-to-date any form of apostolate may be, no matter how intense its action, the feature they all have in common is this insistence on return to prayer and study of the gospels as their well of strength.

A recent Italian TV film has introduced the Little Brothers (and Sisters) of Jesus to their biggest public. They were seen in the desert, contemplating on mountains, yet their life as religious is usually lived in slums and back streets. Their Prior-General, Père Voillaume, wrote 'we have definitely taken wage-earning as the outward form of our religious life'. Cycling home from the factory they are outwardly indistinguishable from anyone else, except for a small badge. Meet them later in the 'fraternity' and you may find them in simple grey habits in the chapel (one I know is a converted coal hole, yet its furnishings are in the finest taste) saying vespers in French slowly and with great reverence, or adoring before the blessed sacrament. They seem to be the most ancient and yet the most modern order, perfectly natural at the worker's bench or down the mine, but with their hearts in the desert of their novitiate. Once a month the brother leaves his 'fraternity' for a monastery or friendly home for a day of seclusion, or you may find him bound for a period of retreat in the desert, or on an island off the Breton coast. They are a demonstration that the tougher your life the less your justification to give up retreats—you need them more. One brother wrote: 'In the midst of all this agitation, noise, and bustle, I look forward to when I am alone in the cabin of my lorry, my little cell where I rediscover the mountain calm, the desert silence'.

This brings us to the idea of a retreat—what is the great appeal? Many of us live busy, highly organised lives, full of rush hours. We expect a retreat house to offer us a similar degree of organization, or we might be put at a loss. So the organized retreat is a necessity. It can lead to mistakes—the notion that retreats consist of a succession of exercises and activities ('do we make the stations of the cross next?'), or that it is all a matter of taking in the retreat master's personality. We need a sense of proportion. We set out to 'come apart awhile' with our Lord,

to go up with him into a high place. It is his chance to transfigure himself and disclose his glory, so that like his apostles we should want to stay there with him. If we stay in a monastery guest house we may get no conferences, but the retreat can be just as valid if we take the opportunity to pray and read and reflect. No one will stop our drawing up a simple timetable or asking for counsel which will hardly be refused. The kind of retreat that best suits us we discover by forethought, advice, or trial.

The least satisfactory result will be a sigh of relief and a sort of doggy shaking down with the thought, 'Now that's over for a year'. If the retreat renews our spirit it should tend to make habits of what we previously tried with an effort. The good work of a retreat can be continued in our normal life by an occasional day of quiet and prayer which even husband and wife can easily share at home. By way of suggestion—assist at a high mass with sermon, in the afternoon make perhaps a short pilgrimage, attend an evening service, conclude with carefully selected night prayers. Above all keep the atmosphere of the home orderly and quiet, even if it means persuading the children to go on an outing. And bear in mind that these retreats into the presence of God are sources of future vitality and action in the cause of spreading his kingdom.

Reviews

THE IDEA OF PUNISHMENT, by Lord Longford; Geoffrey Chapman, 10s. 6d.

Socrates: Is it ever right for a just man to harm anybody?

Polemarchus: Of course: he should harm the wicked and those who are his enemies.

Socrates: When horses are harmed, do they become better or worse?

Polemarchus: Worse.

Socrates: They lose, that is to say, part of what makes a horse a good horse?

Polemarchus: That's right.

Socrates: Must we not say, then, that when men are harmed they lose part of what makes a man a good man?

Polemarchus: Yes.