

The present session of the Council is considering the revised schema on Religious Life. This is the fourth version, which goes to show that The Fathers of the Council have regard for the importance of religious men and women in the life of the Church. Cardinal Döpfner pointed out that if the orders are to be true to their nature they should be the spearhead of the renewal in the Church which is the special aim of the Council. The Fathers, then, are concerned that the orders should implement the plans and edicts of Vatican II. With this in view they extracted the treatise on religious life from the general constitution on the Church, considered and re-considered in the Commission the hundreds of suggestions, and are now debating the fourth draft preparatory to their final decision on the schema.

All this inspires hope for the orders in the work of the Church today. And yet it seems that the decisions of Vatican II in this regard may not be very effective. In the nature of the case the admonitions can only be general in character. It is not possible to reform the 1,300 different orders and congregations in one sweeping document. Each one of these would need to be considered in its own right with its own particular place in the Church taken into account, its structure and peculiar characteristics reviewed in relation to the ideals of its founder and its original recognition by the Holy See. There is no doubt that through the proliferation of orders and congregations considerable overlapping has occurred and one of the aims of the Council seems to be to reduce the number where feasible and to amalgamate those that are dwindling or threatened by extinction. Apart from this the schema reiterates the fundamentals of the state of perfection, with special emphasis on obedience which is the keystone of the whole building.

There is little doubt that a crisis has arisen in the majority of these thirteen hundred orders and congregations throughout the world. It would seem that this crisis has been developing for a number of years. The years immediately after the last war saw an inevitable increase in vocations to the religious life, but this was a by-product of the war years which was not characteristic of the general trend which showed a gradual decline in the number of vocations. The generally fruitful spirit of enquiry and challenge to accepted traditions which has been such a magnificent result of the Council's deliberations has apparently struck the orders forcibly.

Vocations have declined suddenly, and numbers already in their first years of religious life have left. A most important volume on Vocation has recently appeared in the 'Problèmes de Vie Religieuse' from *Editions du Cerf*¹, in which Père M. Leclercq, O.M.I. writes a special article on *Departures before Final Vows*. This contribution is both frank and statistically valuable, as the author had been allowed to draw on the archives of his own institute. Over a period of seven years something under twenty-five per cent left the institute either at the expiry of their first vows (86%) or during this first period of temporary vows, and eleven per cent asked for dispensation from their perpetual vows. This is probably a fair pattern throughout many orders at this time, that is a quarter of those who pass through their novitiate successfully and propose by their profession to take up religious life fully as their vocation. The author gives the two principle reasons for their departure – in general terms they leave either because they find themselves psychologically unsuited to community life or because of difficulties in the matter of chastity. It would have been interesting to know whether the proportion of those who left through 'community' difficulties increased towards the end of the period analyzed. For it seems likely that the present mood of questioning traditionally accepted forms coincides with a general lack of the sense of community in society at large. Children who grew up in family and school traditions on the whole accepted the community in which they found themselves without much question. With the collapse of family and its traditions a rapid decline in the recognition of the demands of community has undermined much of the social structure of life today. To give a single instance, the 'Service of Youth' in this country lays far more emphasis on serving youth and providing them with all their immediate needs than on encouraging youth to serve the community. People grow up with the main preoccupation of self-fulfilment; they choose their careers when possible on the principle that their occupation must be one in which their own personalities may be developed to the full.

From this general atmosphere in society young men and women enter religious orders and are confronted with a tightly formed community which makes demands that often seem in complete contradiction to the principle of self-realization. Perhaps from the beginning they should be encouraged to throw off this principle as one of the shackles of 'the world' but this is unlikely to achieve any success; for the novice has indeed come to find self-fulfilment, though in a manner very different from that he has so far accepted – the self-realization of the resurrection which comes through the obedience to the death of the cross. But the tragedy is that only too often the community in which they find themselves suffers from the same pre-occupation – self-fulfilment of the community or the order. If the

¹*La Vocation, Eveile et Formation:* eighteen of the foremost French authorities on religious life contribute to the volume. (Edition du Cerf pp. 385. n.p.)

individual religious is too concerned with the development of his own personality, the order is similarly mainly concerned with finding and keeping its position in the Church. If the subject must lose himself in order to realize his full personality in the community, so the community must lose itself in the Church, as the Church at the present time is losing itself to regain its salvific position in the world. In other words what is needed to reform religious life is a renewed, outward looking movement. Father Lombardi puts it well in words quoted in a recent issue of *Herder Correspondence*: 'When we consider the magnitude of the tasks which these critical times have imposed upon the orders, we have to confess that a great number of the orders do not come up to expectations. Officially no doubt they are all very worthy, historically they may have a very glorious past, but in point in fact many of them are ill-equipped to meet the grave responsibilities of today . . . We cannot help feeling that many of them show little of the ardent readiness of troops on the eve of a death-or-glory advance . . . There are too many of these institutes that proceed at the same old sedate trot . . . They work to rule and . . . routine.'

Little wonder, then, that the Conciliar Fathers are primarily concerned about obedience and poverty as regards religious orders. For on these two elements of religious life much of the two outward-looking apostolic effort of the orders will depend. Obedience is the instrument by which the religious loses himself; but in the light of this atmosphere of self-realization it needs to be administered by authority in such a manner that its subject attains a greater responsibility. He can no longer be expected to toe the line blindly for the rest of his life. He must learn to submit his will in order to be able to fulfil the urgent apostolic calls now confronting his order. After his training he will be expected to take far more initiative in the 'mission field' than heretofore. The task of authority has therefore increased in complexity, having to balance the requirements of submission with those of initiative. And poverty, too, in the material side of religious life poses the same problem of balance. It is no longer possible simply to do without the goods of this world. If the apostle walks everywhere today he will miss most of the opportunities of his missionary work; he must often make use of a car. He must also on occasion have the use of cameras, film projectors, gramophones and TV's – a vast array of expensive equipment is now open to apostolic uses. But the acquisitive instinct is as powerful as ever in fallen nature. The balance made possible by detachment becomes increasingly difficult as this side of apostolic activity expands.

Finally in all this buzz of activity in the apostolate the need for the purely contemplative religious life is more imperative than ever. Poverty here should be more straightforward, but the demands of obedience will be more difficult because initiative has less obvious outlets. Even so the contemplative community has to lose itself in order to discover the renewal of the Church in the world today.