

# WHY ENCLOSED NUNS?

BY DOM BRUNO WEBB O.S.B.

‘O F what use are enclosed nuns? What’s behind the idea of such a life?’ This is a question which has been repeated times without number, and the person, herself a nun, who asked me to write this pamphlet told me ‘I could not tell you how often I have been asked, “Why did anyone as sensible as you, with all your experience, and able to do such a lot of good in the world, become an *enclosed* nun of all things? You who have lived in so many countries, spoken their languages, and obviously enjoyed it all—how *could* you lock yourself up like this? I could have understood it if you had become one of those nuns who go about doing good, but why shut yourself up where you can do no good to anyone?”’ The same question is asked of monks who undertake no external works, and what we have to say applies equally to them.

## Why do they do it?

For thousands of non-Catholics who think about it at all, and to our shame we must admit for many Catholics who should know better, it is an enigma why sensible women with experience of the world, or gifted girls with all the sparkling charm of their teens, should turn their backs completely on the world and shut themselves within the ‘gloomy walls’ of a convent. Whatever the motive which attracts them, is not this surely to waste precious lives which might so easily have been given to making others happier and better? Is it not a very selfish thing to do? Those who ask these questions are generally perfectly sincere. Some of them look for an explanation in a morbid melancholia which leads its victim to shun the society of her fellow human beings. Or perhaps she has been thwarted in love, and is retiring to brood over it? Others, who have a closer acquaintance with those who have disappeared behind convent walls, realize that in most cases they are either people endowed with an extra dose of balance and common sense, or are particularly high spirited and full of fun; and this will not tally with a morbid state of mind. But one and all realize that, whatever their motive may be, whether morbid or healthy, *some* motive there must be, and it is this that leaves them asking, ‘What’s the underlying idea, the real meaning of such life?’

## What of our Lord's own Life?

Now supposing we were to find the same enigma confronting us when we study our Lord's own life, what should we do then? We should no longer have to ask why do *they* choose such an obscure and apparently useless life, but why did He do so? On the other hand, if we can answer the question why He did it, shall we not be in a position to say why they still do it? And if He did it, can we any longer say it is a mistaken way of life? For He has said, 'Learn of Me . . . I am the way, and the truth, and the life'. If we reflect a little, what is the conclusion which forces itself upon us with regard to our Lord's life? Surely it is that the principal purpose of His life on earth was to restore the obedience and worship *due to God* on man's behalf, and only *as the result of this* to bring salvation to mankind. For as mankind fell through the disobedience of the First Adam, so it is redeemed through the obedience and total worship which Christ, the Second Adam, *offered to God* in the name of all mankind throughout His life, passion and death. He who has so completely transformed the world spent only three out of thirty-three years, perhaps rather less, in external activity. The other thirty years, subsequent to early childhood, were spent as an obscure carpenter in a remote village of such little importance that Nathaniel, on hearing He came from it, exclaimed, 'Can any thing of good come from Nazareth?' And was not His life at Nazareth equally 'useless'? Of what use to the world at large have been the wooden ploughs and tables that He made? Have they transformed the world? If He was to transform the world, should we not have expected a life brim full of activity, teaching, organizing and laying out plans, with every moment 'well filled'? Yet all we know of some nine tenths of His life is that 'He went down to Nazareth and was subject to them'. His life at Nazareth was hidden and obscure because it was directed primarily to the worship of God, and only as resultant upon this to the good of men.

Even during the three years of His public ministry He frequently retired into a lonely mountain to spend the whole night in prayer. And if we consider the one act of His life which, above all others, brought about the Redemption of the world, namely His Passion and Sacrifice on Calvary—what was this but a complete offering of Himself, on behalf of all mankind, *to the Father*? His sacrifice on Calvary was a supreme act of worship offered to God, and it is in answer to this act that God has received man back into His friendship which had been lost by sin.

God is once again our Father and we are His children, because Christ redeemed us on the Cross *by offering Himself to God* on our behalf. And if we are tempted to regard the life of the enclosed nun as useless, let us not forget that even the Cross itself is 'to the Jews a stumbling block, and to the Gentiles foolishness'. At least we must admit that the enigma is the same in both cases. Three short years only did our Lord spend in teaching, preaching and 'going about doing good'. The enigma of the enclosed nun, therefore, has been transplanted into our Lord's own life.

### **Godward first**

What conclusion, then, must we draw? Surely this, that if man turns Godward, God will turn manward. The Church's whole life centres round the holy Sacrifice of the Mass which is the daily continuation of our Lord's Sacrifice on the Cross, itself the supreme acknowledgement of God's claim to obedience and worship, offered in expiation of man's disobedience; and the Church has always known this to be the mainspring of her life. This is the work Christ came to do, *to give back to God*, on man's behalf, the obedience and worship which sin had denied Him. He came to acknowledge God's glory on behalf of all mankind, thereby to regain for man the supernatural life of grace which sin had lost.

The majority of non-Catholics in this country have little if any notion of what is meant by grace or the supernatural order. Yet it is precisely the *supernatural* life of grace which is the key to the enigma both of our God's own life and that of the enclosed nun. It is therefore not surprising that those who do not understand what sanctifying grace is should also fail to understand the hidden life of our Lord at Nazareth or of the nun within her enclosure. We will, therefore, consider briefly what is meant by the supernatural life of grace.

### **The supernatural life of grace**

What is the supernatural? It is nothing less than the raising up of our human nature so as to share quite literally in *God's own* Life through the free gift of sanctifying grace, and grace has as its end the open Vision of God in heaven, which is altogether beyond the reach of our nature left to itself. St Peter, in his second Epistle, writes as follows: 'Grace to you and peace be accomplished in the knowledge of God and of Christ Jesus our

Lord . . . By whom he hath given us most great and precious promises; that by these you may be made *partakers of the divine nature.*' The uncreated Nature of God is infinitely above any possible created nature, whether human or angelic, yet St Peter says we are destined to partake of it. How can this be? A simple analogy may help us.

Consider a cable the moment before and the moment after it makes contact with its power station. Before contact it is a lifeless thing, but as soon as contact is made it is charged with a tremendous power capable of lighting up cities, running trains, and doing any other work that man may apply it to. It has become a 'live' cable; it has received a power which is something altogether new over and above the nature of the cable itself. This may help us to understand, however imperfectly, what the supernatural life of grace is. God is the power station in this case, and the live current which He produces in us is sanctifying grace which is itself the divine Life imparted to us, permeating our nature throughout its whole being and raising it right above its natural level into the supernatural level of God's own uncreated Life. God has destined both man and angels to this supernatural life; sin consists in the refusal of it, and the salvation of a soul consists in its reaching its supernatural end by passing out of this world in possession of it into the blissful Vision of God.

From this short explanation one thing has become clear, that grace is *a completely gratuitous gift over and above anything to which our human nature can lay claim.* This is the meaning of the Latin *gratia*, hence our word *gratis*. It follows that no efforts of ours can produce grace, only God can give it to us. It is His free gift, and without it all our activities are powerless to produce any effect whatsoever towards the salvation either of our own souls or those of others. It is the great error of the world to-day that it is trying to do without God, and this error has infected the minds even of religious people so that they place all their faith in their natural activities, forgetting that these can produce nothing beyond their purely natural effects unless God charges them with His grace as the cable is charged with its current. For our activities to have any *supernatural* value they need this gift of grace which only God can give. 'Every best gift', says St James in his Epistle, 'and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights.' We may preach and teach and perform a thousand other works, but we shall do absolutely nothing towards the supernatural end for which God

has destined us unless these activities are vitalized by God's grace. As St Paul says, 'If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal . . . And if I should distribute all my goods to feed the poor . . . and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.'

### **Please . . . Thank You**

Once we realize that grace is God's completely gratuitous gift and that without it all our activities are powerless to produce even the least supernatural effect, we shall understand why so much of our Lord's life was directed primarily to the worship of God, and only secondarily to doing good to men. If a father offers his little boy something very special, surely he expects 'please' or 'thank you', in fact both. And if he does not get these, surely he may and should say, 'Very well, you can go without it'. So it is with our heavenly Father who has endowed us His children with the gift of free will, and therefore demands of us free co-operation in His dealings with us. We must turn Godward first and foremost, for this is our 'please' and our 'thank you', if God is to turn manward with His priceless gift of divine grace. We must seek God before we seek our fellow men; if we do not we shall seek them in vain. God has promised that, if man will turn Godward, He will turn manward; and it is only when God turns manward with the outpouring of His grace that our works for others will bear any supernatural fruit. Our Lord has solemnly affirmed, 'Without me you can do nothing'; whereas, on the other hand, 'he that abideth in me, and I in him, the same beareth much fruit'. Grace is, as it were, the offspring of the union between a soul and God. The closer that union, the more fruitful it will be. This is the reason why it is the worship of God and our appeal to Him which *obtains* grace from God for the salvation of souls. However fruitful our external activities may be, it does not necessarily follow that it was we who obtained the grace which makes them fruitful. Our external activity may be no more than the channel *through which* grace flows, and that grace may have been won by the prayer of some unknown saint in the slums of one of our great cities or of some contemplative nun within her enclosure. For God can use anything as the channel of His graces, even irrational things like earthquakes and storms which 'put the fear of God into us'. In actual fact He makes use of everything that ever happens to us, because God's action upon us is continuous. But the graces which flow to us through all these diverse channels

have to be won by somebody's 'please' and acknowledged by someone's 'thank you', and it is precisely in this *winning* of grace from God on behalf of mankind that the real work consists. We are creatures endowed with free will, and God treats us according to the free nature which He has given us. Therefore, unless we co-operate with God by our appeal to Him, God will leave us to our own insufficiency and helplessness. The chaos in the world to-day all comes from man's effort to behave as though he were self-sufficient and in no need of God. If the world would go on its knees its troubles would be solved to-morrow.

### **The one thing necessary**

Therefore the Church has always insisted that Mary has chosen, not only the better part, but *the one thing necessary*. The very complaint that is levelled against the enclosed nun to-day was levelled by Martha against her sister. 'But Martha was busy about much serving. Who stood and said: 'Lord, hast thou no care that my sister hath left me alone to serve? Speak to her therefore, that she help me.' And did our Lord approve of this complaint? On the contrary, it drew from Him a rebuke. 'Martha, Martha, thou art careful and art troubled about many things; but one thing is necessary. Mary hath chosen the best part, which shall not be taken away from her.' There you have our Lord's own estimate of the contemplative life. He does not condemn the activity of Martha, far from it; though He does reprove the anxiety with which she performed it. He Himself was the model of all action as well as the model of prayer. But in admonishing Martha for complaining of Mary He admonishes all those who complain that contemplatives are wasting their time.

If we would compare the contemplative and active Orders it will not be in terms of holiness, since holy men and women are found in both. The difference is one of function. In the first place both share this in common, that their members offer themselves to God as a complete sacrifice by the consecration of their religious vows, and this consecration draws its value from the Sacrifice with which our Lord offered Himself on the cross, and so gives to all forms of the Religious Life a special redemptive power on behalf of all mankind. But beyond this they differ specifically. Just as in the human body each organ has its own function, so it is in Christ's Mystical Body, the Church; and so far as their specific functions are concerned, the contemplative and active lives are designed for purposes as different as those of

heart and hand. It is of the contemplative activity of prayer that Christ was speaking when He said "one thing is necessary". This contemplative activity, directed habitually towards God, is a higher and therefore more powerful activity than external activity, whether of mind or body, directed towards our fellow men, even when the latter is spiritualised by religious vows and the agent's intention. Therefore the contemplative life is in this sense more active, not less so, than one in which the various forms of external activity play a preponderant part. It is devoted *wholly* to "the one thing necessary". But so far as the individual vocation is concerned, what matters for each of us is God's will *for me*, that we be in that form of life only to which God calls us. One who has not a vocation to a contemplative Order will not acquire in it the holiness to which God calls her, any more than a plant will grow in uncongenial soil. Her path to sanctity lies elsewhere. But where the vocation of one who is called to the contemplative life is concerned, Christ has explicitly condemned those who complain of Mary's part.<sup>1</sup>

But, you will say, that is all very well. I quite understand that prayer should hold a large place, even the first place in our lives; but why should there be people who do nothing else, who exclude any form of external apostolate from their lives? Christ did not do this. This is a most important question, but if I am to answer it I must ask you to be patient while I explain something further. After that I think you will see the reason why.

### **The Mystical Body of Christ**

Our Lord said to His Apostles, 'I am the Vine, you the branches'. St Paul, while he replaces the analogy of the vine with that of the human body, teaches the same thing. 'For as the body is one and hath many members; and all the members of the body, whereas they are many, yet are one body; so also is Christ. For in one Spirit were we all baptised into one body . . . For the body also is not one member, but many . . . Now you are the body of Christ' (I Cor. xii. 12-14, 27). Both analogies express the same truth that, in the supernatural order, Christ and the Church together are a single living organism. Christ is the fountain head and source of His Mystical Body the Church. We may compare Him to the original cell of the human body which is

<sup>1</sup> This pamphlet does not deal with the character and signs of a true vocation to the contemplative life. For this the reader is recommended *The Convent and the World* by Sister Mary Laurence O.P. (Blackfriars Publications; cloth 9/6).

formed at conception. From that first cell the whole body develops, with its many distinct and highly specialized organs, each performing its own special function and all co-operating towards the good of the body as a single whole. There is the eye for seeing, the ear for hearing, the feet for walking, and so on with the rest. None of these is self-sufficient, but each contributes its own share towards the good of the whole. As St Paul says, 'If the whole body were the eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where would be the smelling? But now God hath set the members, every one of them, in the body as it hath pleased him. And if they all were one member, where would be the body? But now there are many members indeed, yet one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand: I need not thy help. Nor again the head to the feet: I have no need of thy.' (I Cor. xii. 17-21).

Now, all these distinct and highly-developed organs are already present in a certain manner in the original cell from which the body grows forth. But they are not in that cell in an actually formed state as they are later on in the full-grown body. You would look in vain for them as distinct organs in the original cell before it has started to develop. Yet they really are in it though in a different manner. All those future organs are contained in it *virtually*; that is to say the original cell possesses the power to produce them as growth proceeds. The original cell is not specialized and so limited to a particular function such as are the cells of the eye, or ear or heart. Its energy is not given over exclusively to any of these, yet *it contains them all in embryo*. So it is with Christ and His Mystical Body. He is the original 'cell' from which the entire Church, His Mystical Body, has grown forth, and will continue growing till the end of time; so that Christ and the Church together constitute what St Augustine calls 'the whole Christ'. In the Church to-day we find many distinct 'organs' or ways of life, each highly specialized and given over to its particular kind of work, just like the different organs of the full-grown human body. There are Orders for teaching, for nursing, caring for the poor, and so on almost without end. But there are other Orders which give themselves exclusively to the praise of God and to intercession on behalf of all mankind. Our Lord, since He is the original 'cell' of His Mystical Body, did not give Himself exclusively to any of these; His life was not 'specialized'. Yet *virtually* His life contained them all, since teaching, healing the sick, and the rest, all find their place in it; and above all He lived a life of prayer on man's behalf. But as

the Church has grown forth from Him with the passage of the centuries all these elements in His life have become specialized into distinct Orders and ways of life. So, just as we have Orders of men and women which devote their energy to schools, or hospitals, like the specialized organs of eye or hand, so we have others which devote their entire energy to the life of contemplation. This specialization is the law of growth, in the Mystical Body of Christ just as in the human body.

### **Are they Selfish?**

The idea that some people have that the enclosed nun is living a selfish life concerned only with saving her own soul is entirely false. It arises from ignorance of the doctrine of Christ's Mystical Body and of the supernatural solidarity of mankind in Christ its Head. For just as in the human body the health of one organ affects the entire body for good or bad, so it is in the Mystical Body. St Paul says, 'If one member suffer anything, all the members suffer with it : or if one member glory, all the members rejoice with it' (I Cor. xii. 26). Christ's Mystical Body is a perfect organism in which the health of one organ affects that of all the others. We cannot increase in virtue nor can we commit sin without raising or lowering the spiritual vitality of this Body throughout the world, and so affecting souls for good or for evil. It is never merely ourselves who gain by virtue practised, nor merely ourselves who suffer through consent to sin. So the grace which the contemplative draws down from heaven affects, not merely herself, but the whole Body throughout the world, because we are 'members one of another' (Rom. xii, 5). Just as we may compare those who devote their lives to the external works of mercy to the visible members of the human body such as hands and feet, so we may compare the contemplative to the heart which remains hidden throughout life. The heart, by its continuous pulsations, sends the life blood coursing through the entire body, clearing away waste matter and rebuilding tissue ; so by the continuous pulsation of their prayer these contemplatives send a ceaseless stream of grace coursing through the arteries and veins of Christ's Mystical Body throughout the world.

The heart, moreover, is the symbol of love. The enclosed nun has not retired to brood over thwarted love, the truth is the exact reverse of this. She has fallen in love with One who will never disappoint her. This is the real meaning of her life. By the total consecration of her vows she has become the bride of Christ. So far from being selfish, she has *given* herself wholly

to Him with selfless generosity, and by this spiritual marriage contracted with Him she brings forth countless souls to the life of grace and salvation.

### **Prayer is the greatest power on earth**

The power of prayer is not our own, but God's—'Ask, and it shall be *given* unto you.' To ask is the acknowledgement of our weakness; it is giving which presupposes power. So our weakness is answered by God's own infinite power when He gives grace in answer to our humble prayer. It is therefore a literal truth that prayer is the greatest power on earth, since nothing else can draw down God's own power. God, who is infinite goodness, finds the prayer of humble souls as it were irresistible. St Chrysostom says "God governs the world, but prayer governs God Himself". And the Curé d'Ars, "I know something stronger than God—the man who prays. He makes God say yes when He has said no". Furthermore these enclosed religious come before God, not as mere individuals, but as members of Christ's Mystical Body who are specially consecrated to God by their religious vows, and by reason of this are deputed to represent the Church in an official capacity, to speak to God in her name as endowed with her God-given authority. We have already seen that the Church is Christ's Mystical Body, forming with Him 'the whole Christ,' or, as St Thomas Aquinas says, 'one mystical Person'. But when a person speaks it is not merely his lips which speak, but *he* who speaks *through* his lips. So it is with these specially consecrated members of Christ's Mystical Body. Acting in their capacity as consecrated members of Christ, it is not merely they who act, but Christ who acts through them. In various degrees this is true of all who pray, but especially of those consecrated by religious vows. They are the lips of Christ, and Christ continues through them that very same prayer which He performed on earth. Through them He perpetuates, as the centuries unroll, His twofold task of giving glory to God and of regaining grace for man.

Since Christ is God Incarnate His prayer is infallible, it can never be unanswered, though it is not necessarily answered in the particular way we expect and hope for; yet it is this very prayer of His which passes through the lips of His members specially consecrated to this purpose. In answer to this prayer God pours grace upon the human race as the sun floods the earth with light, penetrating every crevice save where the stone-hard malice of a human will casts its dark shadow. And what is true

of themselves as ' the lips of Christ ' is true of the prayer round which their life centres. The Divine Office which they chant is the official prayer of the Church, that is to say of Christ's Mystical Body as such. It is therefore Christ's own prayer passing through the lips of the Church and, once again, Christ's prayer is infallible and all-powerful for the salvation of mankind save where sheer malice blocks the entry of grace into this or that soul. And at the centre of this prayer is the holy Sacrifice of the Mass which, as the Council of Trent tells us, is identical with the redemptive Sacrifice of Calvary save for the manner of its offering. Round the Mass, in which the Sacrifice of Calvary is perpetuated throughout time and space, are centred all the daily occupations of these contemplatives, their reading and the labour of their hands. Each one of these becomes " bread and wine " offered upon the altar; or, to change our metaphor, they are drawn into the Holy Sacrifice like meteorites under influence of the earth's gravity, to share in its infallible appeal on behalf of all mankind. We see what a state the world is in to-day—its conflict, its vice, its tyrannies. It has been trying to do without God, and this is the result of its supposed self-sufficiency. Nothing but grace can rejuvenate the world. Never were contemplatives more needed than they are to-day !

### Old Testament types

There are certain passages in the Old Testament which spiritual writers are fond of using to illustrate the great power of the contemplative. At Abraham's prayer God promised to spare the sinful Cities of the Plain if ten just men could be found in them. Moses won the battle against Amalec by lifting up his hands to God on the hill-top, and at Sinai he prevailed with God not to destroy the people for their idolatry. The Apostle James teaches us the true lesson of these types when, alluding to how the prayer of Elias brought rain after long drought, he says " Elias was a man passible *like unto us*," thus concluding that with us also " the continual prayer of a just man availeth much." So too enclosed contemplatives hold up hands in prayer on behalf of a world which is prey to the age-old illusion of its self-sufficiency, in which lay the original sin of our first parents; a world which is set upon putting itself right unaided, instead of turning to God that He may put it right through us; a world which, in great measure at least, becomes increasingly intent upon using purely material means to gain purely material ends, subjecting

the moral law to sheer expediency, heedless of its utter dependence upon God and blind to spiritual forces, both good and evil, which envelop it on every side. It is a spiritual battle fought on behalf of God's glory and for the victory of grace over the powers of evil, in which prayer is our spiritual armament of overwhelming power; "for our wrestling is not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers . . . against the spirits of wickedness in the high places."

### **World wide like the radio**

There is no limit to the sphere of the contemplative, for there are no boundaries to the influence of prayer. As the voice of the speaker hidden away in the broadcasting station travels everywhere, so the grace generated by prayer penetrates the entire world, save only those who refuse to 'listen-in'. As 'the lips of Christ' contemplatives plead the cause of those countless souls that no apostolate can ever reach. Every day as many souls pass through death's gateway as there are seconds in the day; and to how many of these do you suppose any active ministry of religion ever reaches? Yet none of these is beyond the reach of the contemplative's appeal to God's mercy.

The work of the contemplative, therefore, is world wide, it is all-powerful save against final malice, but it is also a *hidden* work. We cannot see grace any more than we can see God, and only at the Last Judgment shall we know all that it has done. This is why so many people find it difficult to understand the tremendous work the contemplative is doing within her enclosure. Yet even in nature is it not true it is the *hidden* things that do the most vital work? What, for instance, is more invisible than those electro-magnetic waves which radiate the daily news?

### **' I am doing a great work '**

It is because the work of these contemplatives is so supernatural and so hidden that the well meaning but less wise are always trying to induce them to undertake external activity and to 'make themselves useful'. You may remember the words of Nehemias when rebuilding Jerusalem, and his enemies were trying to frustrate his work by decoying him away to make a league with them. His answer was: ' I am doing a great work, and I cannot come down, lest it be neglected whilst I come and go down to you ' (II Esdras vi, 3). Of all works on this earth there is none

which the devil detests more whole-heartedly than that of the contemplative. For he, 'as a roaring lion, goeth about seeking whom he may devour', and he knows that against the life of continuous prayer he is powerless. Therefore he sometimes seeks to deceive the contemplative herself by suggesting all the good external works she could do if only she will give up her life of prayer. How the devil is set at naught by those who are wholly given over to a life of close union with God! That is why he broadcasts so much misunderstanding of the contemplative life. It is because *he* knows its power that he would have us to think it useless. He knows to what extent his efforts to destroy souls are thwarted so long as there are 'ten just men' left in this sinful City of the Plain to hold arms upstretched before the Throne of Infinite Mercy.

### **The dominant note**

One last word. If you are one of those who suppose that enclosed nuns are gloomy and long-faced, have done with it. If you think that, you have never known them. Close union with God does not produce melancholia, but joy. Joy is the hallmark of all holiness; it is the dominant note which rings through the Church's liturgy, for the Church is ever merry with the joy of Christ. God is infinite bliss and joy, and it is impossible to live close to Him without becoming permeated with joy oneself. There may be much suffering whether of body or of mind, for those who share closely in Christ's own life must expect a share in His Passion too; but suffering and joy can go hand in hand as they did on Calvary. If you are looking for melancholic dispeptics you will find them in plenty at night clubs and other palaces of pleasure, where men and women are endeavouring to dope themselves against boredom and despair. But if you look for gloom within the convent enclosure you will be wasting your time; you are more likely to encounter the strength and good cheer of Benedictine peace, or what Mgr Hugh Benson has called the solemn joy of a Carmelite and the irrepressible gaiety of a Poor Clare. No, it is only a neo-pagan world that is forgetting how to laugh.



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