

THE MASS

AND

THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

MUST BE

THE CENTRAL CONCERN

OF

TRADITIONAL ROMAN CATHOLICISM

The aim of the monk is to lead a spiritual life, a life that no longer has anything in common with this world and its works. Therefore, every monk's effort tends to the possession of the Spirit. In conversations with his spiritual father, his superior, the constant question is how can one come into possession of the Spirit and wherein does the life of the Spirit consist, meaning nothing else but the life of Christian perfection. To this end the first condition that the monk considers is the purity of his own heart, the cleansing of his own conscience — the destruction of his ego which opposes the reign of the Holy Spirit. Every good monk takes very seriously the custody of his heart, of his whole inner world as well as his senses; and he humbly confesses to his spiritual father every failure, even the slightest impulse or thought of pride, or uncleanness or uncharitableness. The life of a monk is a constant battle against sin, against flesh and blood, against the demons in his own breast and against the constant temptations from the outside. The monk is always on guard, lest he furnish the devil any opportunity to make him unfaithful.

Essential to this fight is mortification of the body by fasting and penitential exercises. For the monk knows that the body can too easily thwart the spirit, even drag it down; and it is an old experience, laid down moreover in the prayers and practice of the Church, that by fasting and bodily mortification the spirit can be freed and elevated. Therefore, penances take up a considerable part of the monk's life, not as if they are much sought after for their own sake, but because they are considered a means of reaching perfection.

To inner freedom belongs also the renunciation of all earthly goods. Thus the monk willingly gives up all possessions, and is satisfied with the barest necessities. He is garbed in simple clothing. In truth, the monk is a poor man — a man of poverty.

But prayer is most highly valued as the way to possession of the Spirit and union with God. In prayer the Spirit of God Himself speaks. In prayer man is close to God. It is a sure sign that one has the Spirit of the Lord if he has the gift of constant prayer. Thus monasticism is prayer. The monk's life is prayer whether it be formal prayer, reading or manual labor. Everything is prayer for him. Besides the still prayer of his heart, the common recitation of the psalms in choir is most important to the monk and is, therefore, loved and practiced many times daily — from early morning to evening time. The daily prayer hours punctuate the day's labor and place the monk anew before God, for it is to seek and possess God that the man has retired into the solitude of his monastery.

To preserve peace of heart and intimacy with God, silence is of absolute necessity in the monk's life. The atmosphere of silence must surround the monk constantly. Silence and retirement are the only setting in which one can meet the divine Presence. The Voice of God is like the gentle breeze — it speaks softly. So, this is the way in which a monk leads the life of the spirit: in silence, in prayer, in renunciation, penance, humility and in obedience, and in poverty.