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THE CHRISTIAN BASIS OF SOCIETY

WE have been told, and rightly told, a great deal about the importance of Christian family life as the bulwark against the onslaught of modern anti-social ideologies. The natural law is being violated on all sides, and particularly the natural law of marriage. The permanent contract is constantly broken, sex is isolated and abused, children are regarded as an unwelcome excrescence of the union of man and wife. It is necessary to state in clear and certain language what sort of a creature man is, how he is made a social being, how this social nature is realised fundamentally in the family. But as Christians we must go a step further than this. Christians know through their belief in original sin that the natural law is not sufficient to carry them through to well-being. The law of nature certainly is today an insufficient standard round which to call the struggling soldier of Christ so as to inspire him with the enthusiasm which will lead him to triumph over this insidious foe. Just as the natural right to property will not of itself solve our modern problem of ownership, nor yet the further natural right of the common good to withdraw the right of the private individual (a principle upon which the modern Socialist bases his creed); just as the natural rights involved in a just war are not sufficient to restrain the unjust atrocities of modern conflict; so also the rights involved in the life of a good family will not of

themselves save that family in its concrete setting of human lust and injustice flowing from original sin.

As Christians we must be in all these things as Christ. Christ came to save and ennoble nature, to strengthen it against its own weakness by a divine power, the power of *super-natural* grace flowing out into the natural faculties of man in the form of infused virtues—charity in the will, faith in the mind. It is this fundamentally Christian attitude which does not seem sufficiently stressed in the Christian defence of justice and society. Catholics have had to be so careful to oppose the Protestant error which denies any goodness in nature and which so despises the natural law that they have laid great stress on this law. Again they have had to meet the Marxist attack on the Marxist ground of reason and nature since this attack was launched equally, though on a different level from that of the Protestant, against nature. But Catholics themselves must return over and over again to the '*Principium*', the principle, the beginning who also speaks unto them.

In this particular matter of the family, Christ has himself given each husband and wife the sanctifying instrument of the sacrament of matrimony. The sacrament enlivens the natural contract of wedlock with the power of the spirit. And added to this sacramental activity there is the Christian virtue of chastity, which rising directly from Christ infuses into the wills of husband and wife and thus into society at large the divine power of cohesion. For chastity is a virtue; Christian chastity is therefore a divine power, the power of Christ, which is ordained to making the single man into a whole, making man and wife into a single unit, and gathering the links of society closer together.

The virtue itself may be considered, as it appears in the minds of most people today, in the form of a negation preventing the evils of what are generally called 'immoralities'. Even in this negative aspect it can help considerably in eliminating the elements of disunity which exist in everything which springs from unchastity. The selfishness of the abuse of sex, the unnaturalness of actions performed solely for sensual pleasure, these things sow the seeds of disruption in the family and indeed tend to prevent any family at all; they also reduce a man to the level of an animal as his lusts dull his mind. Chastity if it becomes a power in a man dispels such evils and makes it possible for other social virtues to exist. But chastity and particularly Christian chastity is far more than this. It introduces harmony into the human framework of body and soul; it controls without annihilating emotions and desires which have been made a part of man. Further it introduces harmony

between man and wife in such a way that they respect each other's person; instead of *using* each other they live as two human beings worthy of mutual respect—'with my body I thee worship'. The power which is given to the soul by this virtue is a power of control, the control of passions and emotions which get easily out of hand. It is sometimes called simply 'self-control'. If a man can thus gather his forces under the direction of his mind and will in such a way that they may be all turned towards the one end of love of God and neighbour, it is evident that such control brings on to the social scene an important unifying bond which will be able to hold man and wife together and so embrace society in its directive power.

From this approach a wider view of chastity appears, a general virtue which gives the mind a control over all the desires and joys of a human life. It is customary to speak of certain types of art and music as 'chaste', not so much because they are immediately concerned with a moral subject but because they disclose a very controlled and deliberate use of the means and materials in question. The drama of the mime, purified of all realism and avoiding all occasions of being 'carried away' by emotion or exhibitionism, is a typical example of 'pure' art in this general sense, as indeed is plain chant in the realms of music. It is of interest to read St Thomas on this general conception of chastity:

In that the human mind delights in the spiritual union with that to which it behoves it to be united, namely God, and refrains from delighting in union with other things against the requirements of the order established by God, this may be called a spiritual chastity. . . . Taking chastity in this sense it is a general virtue because every virtue withdraws the human mind from delighting in a union with unlawful things. Nevertheless the essence of this chastity consists principally in charity and the other theological virtues whereby the human mind is united to God. (II-II, 151, 2.)

And writing of the vice of incontinence the same Doctor says:

Incontinence is considered also as a straying from reason . . . for instance when a man does not observe the mode of reason in his desire for honour, riches, and so forth, which seem to be good in themselves. (II-II, 156, 2.)

In this general sense the self-control which is characteristic of the virtue of chastity sets order and right reason into the affairs of men and turns them to God. Certainly society today stands in need of the special as well as the general virtue.

But even so it is still a virtue common to all men living according to right reason. For those living according to faith there must be something added, something characteristic of the life and the death

of Christ which will make it powerful enough to overcome the sweeping tide of lust which particularly after a war carries all before it. This may be found in Christ himself, in his 'homeliness' as Mother Julian saw it, in a homeliness which leads to the delivery of the body to the death of Calvary. The purity of Christ may be seen in his approach to all men with the reverence due to human persons—even to the woman taken in adultery. He is not carried away by any emotion but he treats each and all with a gentleness and respect which draw them towards him in the embrace of spiritual unity. When anyone takes his human physical attractiveness on its own and is carried away by that—as when the woman cries out in admiration 'Blessed is the womb that bore thee' or perhaps when Mary Magdalen starts towards the risen Christ—he gently sets all in order—'Yea rather, blessed is he that heareth the word of God'. Christ never *uses* human beings, in particular he does not use his friends and those nearest to him. Above all this homeliness of the Lord is seen most powerfully in his relations with his Mother, the Virgin unspotted. To her he gives the respect of an obedient child, as at Nazareth, the love of a son as at Cana, and the love of union as at Calvary.

But Calvary is the final test of chastisement and purification. Only on the Cross are all things set in order. The divine control of self is found paradoxically in this utter abandonment of self. St Thomas teaches that all physical mortification, the whole Christian asceticism of death to self in matters concerning the body, the pains of disease accepted willingly as of fasts undergone through obedience, are designed to perfect Christian chastity. Nailed to the Cross with Christ self-control becomes Christ-control, the control of self becomes the control by Christ. It is there that the homeliness of Christ is finally consummated, when, unable to embrace his Mother weeping at his feet, his arms are extended in agony to embrace the whole world. 'Son behold thy Mother'. And for that reason it is the *immaculate* Mary who appears to modern men so constantly with the invariable message that they should do penance.

This is no mere pious chatter. We must take hold of Christian chastity in this spirit if we are to make anything of the reiterated injunctions to follow the natural law. The good Christian family can be built only with the assistance of Christian sacrifice, of Christian penance. The purification of society with the general virtue of chastity in all walks of life needs the same gracious spirit. Otherwise how can the celibate priest preach continence to the morally tortured husband or wife? Or how can the religious deny himself by vow all that belongs to family life without becoming a bachelor or a

valetudinarian? Without the positive Christian virtue which weds the soul with Christ upon the Cross a man may avoid the sins of the flesh but he will be preoccupied by the health of the flesh or he will tend towards a comfortable selfish existence. Eric Gill used to say that to live as a Christian in the present day often demanded heroic virtue, and that is almost the truth in regard to the Christian teaching about marriage and purity. Natural law will not give a man the heroic virtue of chastity. He may be 'naturally' a self-controlled man, he may have acquired such self-possession as is needed for continence, but if he is to lead the full family life in Christ he will need this Christian infused virtue in a very high degree.

The immoralities and the social disruption of today are not entirely explained by the lack of natural self-control among men and women. If it were so then the natural law enforced with sufficient dexterity would heal the world. But, as Père Bouyer emphasises in his article below, our struggle is with 'principalities and powers'. The Evil One cannot be overcome by a merely human asceticism; he is conquered by Christ alone. In order to overcome these great forces which disrupt society it has always been necessary for the Christian to practise the spirit of the three evangelical counsels. The greater the inroads of these sources of disruption the more acute the struggle of the Gospels, and the greater need there is to emphasise the supernatural character of the power which the Christian gains from that Spirit.

There is no need to soft pedal the Catholic insistence upon property, family life and individual freedom, but the most penetrating *fortissimo* should be reserved constantly for Christian poverty, chastity and obedience.

THE EDITOR

ERRATA

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p. 551, l. 13: for *Icheeben* read *Scheeben*.

p. 555, l. 4: for *Glanion* read *Glaucon*.

l. 8: for *members* read *numbers*.

The Editor apologises for these errors in Dr Versfeld's article last month.