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CHRISTIAN POVERTY

THE teaching of the Church is always theological, it is always based on the supernatural life of God. The teaching of 'the world' is always at best philosophical, relying on human reason for its inspiration and direction. But the theology of the Church embraces the true philosophy of reason too. Viewed from the supernatural heights of the divine life there is no opposition between the two; indeed grace perfects and guides reason, as it does all man's natural powers. It is only when man approaches truth from the angle of 'pure' philosophy that he finds an apparent opposition between the teaching of the Church and the dictates of reason—that is why 'the world' discards the teaching of the Church.

But often when the Christian has descended from the heights to consider truths of reason 'the world' imagines that he has entered its domain and it challenges him to a duel for trespassing. Sometimes the Christian himself will forget that he should never quite cross the border; for at least he should never entirely leave the supernatural order in which he moves of right.

In fact a great deal of the social philosophy of the Church is put forward by its protagonists as pure philosophy and is attacked as such by other sociologists, by Fabians and Communists and all the rest. The Catholic will produce as his weapon the social encyclicals of the recent Popes; and he will be met by social theories which

are founded on atheism or are exclusively humanitarian. The Catholic is here at a disadvantage—he is, as it were, limiting himself to his left hand in the duel. For his social teaching is not merely sociological; it is theological. It springs directly from the teaching of Christ in the Gospels.

Of course, the Church in her teaching uses 'pure' philosophy—natural ethics, natural morality; but in so using it she at once raises it to a higher level by subordinating it to and informing it with the principles of faith. The Social Encyclicals may seem to be pure sociology; but they are addressed not to the modern atheists, but to believers who are presumed to be living according to the principles of the Gospels. They are not just attacks on Communism; their principles undermine quite as effectively the industrial capitalist society about which we are too complacent.¹ These encyclicals showed that the pure philosophy of the two extremes of left and right was in fact impure and erroneous. But they were appealing to followers of Christ who accept the gospel principles which are incomprehensible to the atheist or materialist.

Indeed Christian social teaching on this level has no rival. It has no real opponent because it is based on the GOSPEL OF POVERTY, and this is theological rather than philosophical. Other social teaching preaches social security; it aims at wealth and leisure for all. The follower of Christ preaches poverty; and, if he remains true to Christ, his economics and politics and social ethics will all be based on this fundamental Christian doctrine.

Christ himself, during his preaching life, had nowhere to lay his head, no roof to call his own. When he was weary with work he had to ask an 'evil-living' Samaritan woman for refreshment. Before that he had lived in the poverty of Nazareth, and his birth had been that of a 'vagabond'. And his life ended with nowhere on which to rest his feet—nothing on which he could stand and call his own. Raised up from the earth he was stripped of every stitch of clothing, thus touching the climax of what he had so constantly taught—'Blessed are the poor'.

Unfortunately many Catholics today in their championing of certain aspects of social teaching forget all about its supernatural guarantee in the words and life of Christ. In particular they insist on the natural right of every man to property as though they were meeting the Communist on his own ground. For this reason the teaching of the Church has come to be identified in the eyes of the outsider with a clinging on to property for its own sake.

¹ Cf. The two outstanding articles by Victor White, O.P., on the Encyclical *Divini Redemptoris*, 'Thoughts on an Encyclical', BLACKFRIARS 1937 pp. 325 and 405 (May and June).

When challenged with this the Catholic says that of course a man must not have too many possessions, that he must be a Distributist, that property must be more widely owned, that every one as far as possible must be an owner. He has not, in fact, moved out of the enemy country, and the enemy may well regard this as a surrender; his ideals are the same as theirs, social security, wealth and leisure for all. And so they set to and argue the best policy for approaching the one common ideal.

Yet the Catholic ideal is altogether different, it does not really share any of these material aims; for it grows out of the doctrine of the Incarnation, according to the preaching of poverty by the Word incarnate. The paradox of the Catholic position today is that while the Church has to defend the natural right to ownership she may not preach property but poverty. A natural right has been attacked and must be preserved that man may have the true material on which to work; but the supernatural message of the Church is still 'Blessed are the poor', and she must still hold out to the would-be perfect the necessity of selling all their possessions.

The defence of property must be guaranteed by the preaching of poverty. If a man is shown that the goods of this world are in fact encumbrances on his journey towards the Perfect Good, he will more easily realise that he has no absolute power over anything, that these things are means which he must use to attain the Good who is reached outwardly through the common good. An analysis of the use of property shows something far more akin to the better elements in Communist doctrine than the enemies of the Church can see. The individual has a right only to what is in a large sense necessary for his livelihood; these necessities must themselves be used not merely for the individual, but for God and for the common good of men; and of whatever is over and above the necessary the individual has the right only to dispose in the way he considers most likely to profit the common good. But the goods of this world have such an attraction to fallen man that he will never be able to preserve this balanced view of his natural attitude towards them without the lenses of the Gospel to correct his astigmatism; and the gospels proclaim that wealth makes an almost insuperable barrier to the Kingdom of God and that the Son of Man had nowhere to lay his head.

A few words of St Thomas's on this subject will not be out of place. Speaking of the relation of wealth to happiness he writes:—

Riches in man's possession of themselves tend to impede the perfection of charity, chiefly by enticing and distracting the spirit, so that we read in St Matthew, 'the care of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choketh up the word' (13, 22) . . . And

therefore it is difficult to preserve charity in the midst of wealth. So the Lord saith, 'A rich man shall with difficulty enter into the kingdom of heaven' (Mat. 19, 23); which is to be understood of a man who actually possesses riches; for of the man who places his will (*affectum*) in riches, he says that it is impossible. . . . (II-II. 186. 3 ad 4.)

The evident message of the gospels could of course be misrepresented into an aspect of manicheism; but St Thomas used the balance of his judgment in a characteristic way when he said that poverty in itself was not a virtue. In its material aspect it is a lack, an absence, a cutting away. That is not good as such because it is negation. The negative clearance is necessary that the virtues themselves may flourish, in particular the virtue of liberality.

The Christian principle does not imply that it is of itself a good thing to be without possessions. The Church does not encourage the lack of wealth; the principles of the Church of themselves tend to relieve destitution. If we may quote again, Mr Walter Shewring has written in a book shortly to come from Burns and Oates:

The poverty meant is not destitution—it is the absence of superfluities, not the lack of necessities. A way of life where frugality is the norm . . . a life where dependence on God is palpable, and where it is manifest that the things which are seen are temporal and the things not seen eternal—that, in essentials, is what the Church means by poverty. . . . Destitution is, absolutely speaking, an evil, and an evil opposed to poverty, since it forces on men that care and concern for getting richer which by nature besets the state of riches and which poverty is meant to avoid. . . .

Christian poverty, therefore, cannot be gauged simply by the bank balance or by the number of halfpence in the purse. There is no virtue in being 'down and out' nor even in having the minimum of sufficiency in possessions. No Government will make any difference to the poverty of the masses simply by seeing to it that they all have a living wage. Wages are not property and the absence of them is not poverty. The spirit of riches has corrupted almost the entire European society of today, and it reigns equally in destitute Germany, in grasping Russia, in complacent and contented Sweden, in anxious England as well as in rich America. That is why Christians should soft-pedal as much as justice will allow the right to property and the need to supply every individual with free ownership of the goods of this world. It is more urgent perhaps than ever before to insist on the Gospel teaching on the blessedness of the poor, which implies the freedom of detachment as well as a care for the common good. It is by now well known that the Church defends the rights of ownership; but it is less evident that she has espoused Lady Poverty. We must not allow the devil to

ambush us by making us into uncritical defenders of property.

Those members of the Church who take upon themselves the additional obligation of *vowed* poverty not only play an integral part in the life of the Church, but now they bear a greater responsibility for upholding what threatens to be a lost ideal, for if the ideal of Christian poverty disappears then Christian civilisation is lost. The religious vowed to poverty rises above the natural attachments of property in order to guarantee the Christian use of the goods of this world—to warn people of their abuse. He becomes unattached to places or things. Spender visited Cologne soon after the almost total destruction of that city at the end of the war:

The people who live there seem quite dissociated from Cologne. They resemble rather a tribe of wanderers who have discovered a ruined city in a desert and who are camping there. . . . (*Horizon*, December 1945, p. 396.)

This shows clearly how property and in particular private property holds down the individual citizen and family to a particular spot on the earth's surface. A man's house and his land give him his stability. That is why ownership is so necessary for a stable society, for rearing a family and living an independent life. But it shows also the opposite truth: if a man wishes to be utterly handed over to God's will in order to live a dedicated life, he must vow poverty. By poverty he is thus cut off from the very things that give him stable independence. The vow of poverty works like those bombs, it destroys all his property and leaves him an outcast from the 'world', nowhere to exercise his free will and independence. Property of some sort is essential for family life, but it is the first thing to be destroyed, discarded in a life of dedicated obedience and chastity. No goods of his own, this means that a man has nothing external to exercise his will upon independently, and therefore he can be fully obedient to his superiors. He is thus made free of the world; free, too, from the world. He can be in the whole world but not of the smallest part of the world. He is a native of nowhere, yet he is the inheritor of all creation. As having nothing he possesses all things. He is ready to be sent to the ends of the earth; and wherever it is he will be being sent *home*, for the world now is his home. Having wed Lady Poverty he conducts her to the dwelling place where they are to live in holy union; that dwelling place is not here or there, not in this county or that town. It is everywhere. Bitter, unnatural for the men of Cologne, who have a right to property, to settle and rear their families securely supported by a rampart of material goods; they wander disconsolate amid the ruins. The man who has wed Lady Poverty may find his freedom and his world-wide possession in those same ruins. . . .

The religious points the way. He shows how these present ruins can be made the foundations of a new city of God. Not all are called to live that life without any property or ownership; but all are called to live according to that self-same spirit. And on this condition alone will a new social order arise. 'The poor you have always with you'—and they may be the leaven for a rising Christian social order.

THE EDITOR

BLESSED ARE THE POOR

After these things, Jesus went over the sea of Galilee, which is that of Tiberius . . . (St John 6, 1).

LET us think of these five barley loaves and two fishes. As you know our blessed Lord and Apostles had nothing. You will remember when our blessed Lord began to preach the redemption of the world he took care to begin at the beginning, the first thing necessary—'Blessed are the poor in spirit'. Religious life begins too with that poverty. Until that is right we have not begun right. We are in a sense not bound to pay more than other people (ten Commandments)—but we are more bound. For instance I might be bound to pay £50 to someone from whom I had stolen it. I might say, 'Well I am such a wicked person that I will take a vow to pay it back'. I should not be bound to pay £60 because I'd taken a vow to pay, but I am more bound to pay the £50. Because I am bound in justice and also by vow. A great number of people can't see that.

All the world is bound in justice to poverty, chastity and obedience. Not by vow, of course. Now if we, being bound more, commit a sin against poverty, chastity or obedience, we also commit a sacrilege, so that we are obliged because we have taken a vow. The primary thing is the poverty of our state. Now this is a very important thing, very simple. Everybody is obliged to poverty (of spirit). The world does not think so. Poverty is so necessary that though a king or a queen led a very good life and there was a chance of their being canonised and their cause was up in Rome, there would be the duty of showing whether that king or queen were poor. If it could be proved that they had *not* the virtue of poverty they would not be canonised. When you read the lives of the saints you will always find a chapter on their spirit of poverty. Riches, as such, cannot go to heaven. Our Lord said 'Woe to the rich' (Luke vi, 24). 'Woe' therefore means you are going to hell. It is not pleasant to read this part of the gospel. But I have no commission from God to leave out parts because they are unpalatable. That is our Lord's teaching. Imagine Father Vincent saying