

WORK AND THE FIRST BEATITUDE

THERE is a haunting quality about the gentle irony of Arnold Lunn's remark, 'My father held the quaint belief that Christ meant what he said on the subject of riches.' There is a trenchant quality about Gilbert Chesterton's remark: 'If there is one thing which Christ and his saints have said with a sort of savage monotony, it is that the rich are in peculiar danger of moral ruin.' The ironic quality of the one remark and the trenchant quality of the other are both just, for there are those who seize like vultures on a carcase upon the words, 'in spirit,' in the First Beatitude, and have tried to eviscerate Christ's teaching: as if forsooth the cumulative effect of so many parables, warnings and threats were not to show that it is intensely difficult to be poor in spirit, if one is rich in body. The ordinarily good rich are they who, in St. John Chrysostom's words, bank their money in God's bank, the bosom of the poor, getting heavenly usury thereby, and not looking upon themselves as benefactors of the poor, but as debtors to the poor. The very good rich are they who keep the trappings of riches, but discard the reality: a St. Louis of France will wear a royal robe, but next the skin will be a hair shirt; he will keep a rich table for his guests, but he will only toy with his own food.

But if there is confusion in some quarters about richness in body and richness in spirit, so there is confusion between poverty and pauperism. Poverty is blessed in itself; pauperism is blessed only accidentally. Poverty was the normal state of Nazareth; the homelessness of Bethlehem and Egypt and of the times when the Son of Man had not where to lay his head, was abnormal. Nazareth blesses normal poverty; Bethlehem blesses abnormal pauperism. The guarded language of Fr. Lewis Watt is the very interesting complement of the 'instancy in season and out of season' of Fr. Vincent McNabb: the former says: 'For those who cannot obtain this minimum of commodities, the living of a decent human life is an impracticable ideal . . .' 'Even then it (*i.e.* poverty-become-penury) is a hindrance which can be overcome, as it is overcome surprisingly often, though only by the exercise of what may not unfairly be termed heroic virtue' (*Capitalism and Morality*, pp. 28, 36). The latter writes: 'The Church's wise teaching and practice rests on the fact that an "occasion of sin" is a set of circumstances wherein the average person would commit sin; or could avoid sin only by an

act of heroic virtue' (*Nazareth or Social Chaos*, p. 19); and again: 'We priests of God must help our people to keep the law of God concerning wedlock and begetting by helping them to end those conditions of servile industrialism which make it almost a matter of heroic virtue to live in the spirit of the Psalmist: "Thy wife as a fruitful vine on the sides of thy house, thy children as olive branches round about thy table"' (*The Church and the Land*, p. 103). Both Fr. Lewis Watt and Fr. Vincent McNabb are vindicated by Pope Pius XII in the address broadcast, significantly enough, on the Feast of Pentecost, 1941. In language too direct to be mistaken, and, in some cases, too withering not to pierce the toughest skin, he inveighs against the 'so-called civil progress' that renders the idea of private property meaningless, that invades the sanctity of the family and the independent human dignity of the individual, that does not permit 'even the formulation of the idea of a homestead of one's own.' He speaks of the Land in a way which may well prove to be 'The Peasants' Charter,' as Leo's great document is 'The Workers' Charter.' He concludes that 'we must not be satisfied with the widespread public mediocrity, in which the majority of men cannot, except by heroic acts of virtue, observe the divine precepts which remain inviolable in all circumstances.'

As there is poverty and pauperism, so there is work and drudgery. Work is blessed in itself; drudgery is blessed accidentally. Man unfallen would have had to work, but there would have been nothing penal about it: 'As regards bodily labour, even had man never fallen from the state of innocence, he would not have remained wholly unoccupied; but that which would then have been his free choice and delight became afterwards compulsory, and the painful expiation of his disobedience. "Cursed be the earth in thy work; in thy labour thou shalt eat it all the days of thy life"' (*Rerum Novarum*, Section 14, C.S.G., 1938).

The curse of work lies in the sweat and fatigue thereof, but the curse has become a blessing since Christ the Worker said, 'Let the sweat of toil bedew me against the day, when a sweat of blood shall trickle, dyeing earth with ruddy spray, thus for humankind's transgressions fullest penalty to pay.' The multiple curse of drudgery lies in the lack of interest and proportionate reward added to the labourer, but this too can become a blessing. Take two representative kinds of interesting human work. A workman skilled in the art of letters enjoys writing in spite of the travail that comes before the flow of inspiration, and in spite of the lassitude that follows the mental exertion. Dickens writing *The Chimes* exulted as a giant to run the course, glorying that he would be striking a doughty blow

for the teeming masses of the labouring poor. Dickens writing *Our Mutual Friend* wandered about like a lost soul, but when the pangs were past he had something of the reward that Our Lord assigns to the bearing of a child: 'A woman when she is in labour . . . ; but afterwards she remembereth no more the pain for joy that a man is born into the world.'

A workman skilled in the craft of husbandry would relish Canon Sheehan's words: 'There were no banks, because there was no money. But there were giants, iron-thewed, clean-skinned, with white perfect teeth and nerves of steel. Why? Because they nestled close to Mother Nature, took *her* food from *her* hands and did *her* work. At five in the morning they were in *her* fields, bending down over the sickle and the scythe . . . They went in at eight o'clock to a thundering breakfast of wholemeal bread, and milk; back again to the harvest fields till noon . . . dinner of innumerable potatoes at twelve o'clock; and back again to work till six . . . 'Twas severe. Nature claimed their labour and their sweat; but she gave back generously. She made her children giants. Now, you have a gossoon sitting above an iron cradle, and doing the work of twenty men in a day. Science and machinery have come between man and his mother, Nature; . . . look at these poor children, with their pale, pasty faces, their rotting teeth, their poor weak brains. But—the banks of the country are bursting with accumulated wealth, human labour is lessened and done away with. Yet which was better—a population of giants and no money, or a decaying population . . . with sixty millions locked up in their Banks?'

Work before the Fall would have had the joy of the skilled craftsman without any of his fatigue, let alone without any of the physical and mental prostration of the 'hand.' How God could have given to man unfallen an equivalent to the joy that comes to fallen man when, for instance, the log he has sweated to fell blazes in his fire, is a mystery to us. But the beneficent God who, through immemorial geological ages, stored the heat of the sun in sunken primeval forests to release it hereafter on the hearths of men finds no difficulty in the matter. He is Supreme Beatitude and has never known woe. Essentially, therefore, the existence of woe is no more necessary to the existence of happiness than temptation is necessary to virtue. Our Lady's universal virtue is brighter than all other virtue, yet it was never tempted in our sense. Who shall say that St. Catherine of Siena's fire-tried virtue of purity was brighter than St. Aloysius' serenity? Suffering both in the universal case of our Lady and in the particular case of St. Aloysius did all that van-

quished temptation could have done. If God can invent an equivalent for temptation, he can invent an equivalent for suffering.

It would seem, then, that as God is He-Who-Is, it cannot be in the nature of things that sorrow should be the correlative of joy. Yet, if God allowed sin with its consequence of suffering, knowing that he would assume a passible nature to remedy sin and to sanctify sorrow, then there is a supreme blessedness in sorrow. But 'sorrow' is a comprehensive word and includes whatever is difficult to flesh and blood: it includes toil: therefore, there is a supreme blessedness in toil. There is an essential blessedness in it, if it concern the sort of work our Lord did, namely interesting work with the joy of making things, and watching them take shape under one's hands. There is an accidental blessedness in it, if it be the soulless drudgery of industrialism. It requires heroic sanctity to neutralise the description of Alexis Carrel and the soul-searing phrase of Pius XI. In *Man, the Unknown* passage after passage may be read indicating different phrases of the one fact: 'The worker . . . is not allowed to use his intelligence. He is the blind horse plodding round and round the whole day long to draw water from the well. Industrialism forbids man the very mental activities which could bring him every day some joy.' 'Bodily labour,' says Pius XI, 'which was decreed by Providence for the good of man's body and soul even after original sin, has everywhere been changed into an instrument of strange perversion: *for dead matter leaves the factory ennobled and transformed, where men are corrupted and degraded.*'

But here surely lies the danger. Because drudgery *can* be sanctified, the tendency is to *expect* it to be. The danger is that we may baptise a system that the permanent mind of the Church and the insistent voice of recent Pontiffs bid us banish. Because the influence of grace can make heroic virtue of necessity, we invent out of our own indolence and selfish well-being a necessity of inhuman conditions of life. But all Catholic moralists are agreed that human conditions for the body are vitally necessary for holy conditions of soul. *Mens sana in corpore sano* has more implications than the Catholic industrialists denounced in Section 50 of *Divini Redemptoris* would care to admit. If our Lord came to turn the curse of work into a blessing, then what work is more blessed than that of emancipating the teeming masses of the labouring poor? The Beatitude 'Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after justice for they shall have their fill' is complementary to 'Blessed are the poor for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.'

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