

## AGRICULTURE, DIVINITY AND WHOLENESS

**I**N an increasingly pagan world, it is a truism to say that Catholics must become more Catholic or they will have to compromise their faith to an extent which will prove fatal. The truly Catholic life must express wholeness of dedication to Jesus Christ and an integration of all activities. One aspect of the chronic lack of wholeness in living seems to me to stand out above the rest at the present time and to be of great importance. I refer to man's dependence on the fruits and hence the well-being of the earth, which have largely ceased to interest the modern educated man except from a scientific and mechanical point of view.

More than enough has already been written on the disintegration of our times, but right action can only emerge from knowledge and understanding, natural and supernatural. First, then, I am going to try and put the problem, as I see it, in its true context. In the book of Genesis we read that man was born in a garden to dress and keep it. Before he fell, man did not have to work by the sweat of his brow, but he did have to keep a garden in as good a condition as he found it. In practice he would have perhaps to keep the divisions between different kinds of plants and to maintain an orderly arrangement in the garden. For, first of all, the garden of Eden was a perfect creation, and not the finest system of husbandry in the world we know can show a garden to rival this paradise of pleasure. Here, then, we have the type of the perfect garden: 'and the earth brought forth the green herb and such as yieldeth seed according to its kind, and the tree that beareth fruit, having seed, each one, according to its kind.' And in Adam we see the first gardener: 'the Lord took Adam and put him into the paradise of pleasure, to dress it and to keep it.'

So man was made the trustee of the fruitful earth. Man is still the trustee today, although, since Adam's fall, he has an immeasurably more difficult task. Wherever we find imperfections in nature, the devil has been at work. The head of the human race carried with him in his downfall the perfection of nature: the health and orderly cycle of growth in man, beast and plant life, the obedience of animals to him (he had dominion over the beasts of the field). If this general despoiling did not take an immediate effect, yet all things were fatally subjected to the diabolic influence of him who is Prince of this world, god of our age. But since man is still God's trustee, then in so far as he betrays his trust, he co-operates with the devil in fighting against his creator. Is this awful responsibility realised? Equally, do we

realise the now glorious nature of this trusteeship? For in its successful fulfilment we are capable of achieving a glory which was not within the power of Adam to attain before he fell. In working as servants of God in the re-perfecting of nature we are working directly for Christ the King in restoring all things in the world to his Lordship. We catch a glimpse of that re-perfection in the perfect obedience of the animals to St Francis, and in the stories of the mutual charities between beasts and saints made available to us by Helen Waddell.<sup>1</sup>

The perfect co-operation between man and inanimate nature has, I think, received rather less attention by writers. In old and stable civilizations and particularly in countries less suited to land cultivation than is our own, perfect co-operation with nature has been the *sine qua non* of life itself. Crop failure in a wholly self-supporting community spells starvation and death. But in England today, our town populations live in a very different world, for they are not dependent on locally-grown crops and have no experience of the results of crop failure. We do well to thank God for a temperate climate and a fertile soil which favour agriculture. There are, however, conditions attaching to this invaluable possession, and, unlike Adam, we have to do more than simply dressing and keeping it. Has man fulfilled his obligations to God as trustee of nature? Do the fruits of the earth prove his good trusteeship or otherwise? The answer in terms of occurrence and variety of disease in man and animal, and hence the fertility in the soil itself, is, I am afraid, definitely 'No'. What is the cause of this? Is Adam's curse striking at the natural world in a new diabolic manifestation, or can it be that the devil has found in modern man a friend in greed who tries to wrest from nature more than God has decreed that she shall give? Can we as Catholics believe that we are witnesses of a degeneration in nature, or that nature is of her own accord unable to provide all the food that the world now needs unless artificially stimulated? These questions imply doubt as to God's justice and wisdom in creating the world as he did, and hence a rejection, conscious or unconscious, of the laws of nature.

Answers to such questions can only be found when we have discovered the physical laws of nature on which depends the true nature of agriculture. Only then can we decide when human actions contradict or obey God's natural law. Without an understanding of the natural order it is difficult for man to live the supernatural life, to which he is called, for the one is the flowering of the other. Pope Leo XIII, in calling for a revival of Thomistic philosophy, pleaded for Christians to investigate diligently 'the secrets of nature and to busy themselves with the study of the physical universe in order to under-

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<sup>1</sup> *Beasts and Saints* by Helen Waddell (Constable).

stand better the world of supernature and convey more effectively supernatural truths to others' (*Encyclical Aeterni Patris*, August 4, 1879). A description of just such practical work is contained in two recent books by an eminent agricultural scientist.<sup>2</sup> In the course of a lifetime devoted to research and practice in many different branches of agriculture, Sir Albert Howard has developed an intense interest in the well-being of humanity through his study of the well-being of the soil. 'The art of agriculture is this,' he says. 'Provided that the actions of the cultivator are well conceived, that they have been proved successful by long experience, that they follow the essential course of nature without real disobedience, that the character of the intervention undertaken is comprehended and that measures are initiated to restore the natural cycle in a proper way, much may be accomplished by man, and this is the art of agriculture'. In another passage he readily admits that agriculture is an interruption or interception of natural processes. 'But these interruptions or intrusions,' he says, 'must not be confined to mere exploitation: they involve definite duties to the land which are best summed up in the law of return: they must also realise the significance of the stupendous reserves on which the natural machine works and which must be faithfully maintained'. (By the law of return is meant that the goodness taken from the soil in farming or gardening produce must in some form or another be returned to it: this is best done through the medium of the compost heap). Sir Albert is convinced that man has a duty to the land, and that he must be obedient to its laws. His life work has been centred on discovering scientifically what these laws are, and how man should set about obeying them. Nature's answer in the form of healthy men, animals and plants has proved the truth of his discoveries. The two books I have mentioned are therefore, I believe, of great value and interest to all who seek the truth, and not just those interested in agriculture. Sir Albert Howard's work will surely have a lasting value to future generations, and already they have had a marked influence against frequently great opposition. It is interesting to note that he has repeatedly challenged his opponents to contest his methods by growing the same crops with artificial fertilisers alongside land treated with compost and to let nature give the verdict over a period of years. The challenge has never been accepted.

One practical implication of his theories is the abandonment of the use of all artificial fertilisers and poison sprays. Those who derive large profits from their manufacture and their supporters, the laboratory scientists of our agricultural research stations and the like who

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<sup>2</sup> *An Agricultural Testament* (Oxford University Press, 1943) and *Farming and Gardening for Health or Disease* (Faber; 1945).

play hide-and-seeK with the balance of nature, are equally strong in opposition to Sir Albert Howard, for disease is their bread-and-butter. On the other hand, the number of those won over to the 'law of return' is rapidly growing, particularly in the Empire and America, where nature has expressed her disapproval of artificial stimulation more strongly perhaps than in this country. In many places where disease was rampant, healthy and larger crops are now being grown since compost has been made and applied, and since the use of artificial fertilisers has been given up. Compost is made in heaps by a simple process of rotting down by combustion and aeration all kinds of animal, vegetable and human wastes. Anyone can make it in the smallest garden. A good deal of labour is required in manufacturing it in large quantities, but the cost of this seldom if ever exceeds the cost of buying artificial fertilisers. But, more important, its use increases fecundity in the soil, whereas the use of 'artificial' produces sterility in a comparatively short time. Much interesting information on this subject may be found in a publication (thrice yearly) called *The Compost News-Letter*.

Here, then, I believe, is a realm of truth which is comparatively little known, and which is vitally important. This essay is not an attempt to persuade anyone 'back to the land.' It is an attempt to see the earth for what it is, in a country where many people never see it at all. Such people are dangerously cut off from God's creation. Their well-being, physical and spiritual, must be nourished by the faith, truly planted and flourishing in the good earth of our countryside. Man must live by the sweat of his brow, but he cannot afford to forget that Adam's origin was not in a city, but in a garden, and 'God saw that it was good.'

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