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## SELF-SUFFICIENCY

THE problem of synthesis between the individual and the group, man and society, the one and the many, may be solved by the application of the thomist social principle of self-sufficiency. We may state it in terms of the relation between the land and the city.

Against the many thomist enthusiasts who are also land enthusiasts it is sometimes pointed out that St. Thomas himself had no love for agriculture and regarded it as tending towards the work of the beast. Troeltsch has written in this respect: 'In contrast to the inclination of modern Catholicism towards the rural population and its specific Ethos, it is solely the city that St. Thomas takes into account. In his view man is naturally a town dweller, and he regards a rural life only as the result of misfortune or of want' (*Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, II, p. 318). The rude tiller of the soil degenerates through continual contact with the lesser creation, animals and the soil; he is to be pitied much in the same way as the modern 'thomist' often pities the factory worker.

There is surely some truth in the assertion that those who cultivate the land lack the human delicacy of mind and soul that is to be found in the town dweller. The rustic may often be soil-sodden and unresponsive. The land and the things that grow and live on the land do not necessarily humanise; they do not inevitably of their nature tend to deepen the understanding and quicken the perception of the labourer. Experience often shows the contrary, the slow yokel more at home with his animals than with his fellows. There are reasons, good and urgent reasons, why we should now return to the soil and forsake the town. But it is surely true to say that these reasons lie rather in the evil of the town than the good of the soil. The soil is good and fundamental to man's life, but of itself it does not contribute to making him more of a man.

The humanising influence that makes us more complete men lies in the society of other men. For man is a social creature; he can possess goods of the spirit which he can and must share with others. And the test is self-sufficiency—not the self-sufficiency of selfishness and individualism, but that of responsibility and co-operation with

one's fellows for the common good. ' In view of the fact that man must live in relation with the many, since if he live alone he will not suffice unto himself for the necessaries of life, it follows that that community will be the more perfect which is more self-sufficing in the necessities of life ' (St. Thomas, *De Regimine Principum*, I). Consequently the small city state is the most perfect form of society. Troeltsch says that this shows the outworn nature of that medieval social theory since it was so bound up with the feudal system and its small groupings that it could not be applied in an age of mass formations of men, big business, and the machine. A country that depends on raw materials brought from the other end of the earth is not self-sufficient, and the huge towns it produces have little in common with the Christian city of the thirteenth century. But then of course the modern standards of judgment are usually based on the assumption that capitalist industrialism is a good way of life because it exists to-day and that anything that attacks it intellectually or physically must be misguided or reactionary; and this way of life of course includes Communism and Fascism, which are different forms of the same industrialism. Judgments based on such assumptions are evidently hopelessly insecure.

Any reasonable criticism of our modern way of life must be based on human nature, with its needs and its destiny, and ultimately on the divine nature from which man proceeds and towards which he must move.

The reason why the land of itself does not provide sufficient support for a *human* life is because of itself it is an isolated existence, in which man mixes predominantly with subhuman elements. The peasant whom St. Thomas knew was probably in a very isolated position, further from civilisation than the peasant farmer in any European country to-day. In that sense life on the land did not need to be encouraged in his day. What may have seemed particularly desirable would have been to gather the peasants together and instruct them, giving them greater facilities for a social life wherein speech would play a more significant part. That would be organising life on a plane more in conformity with social human nature.

But to-day all the emphasis has to be laid on the land, because life has been organised in the opposite extreme of a mass society, and has been guided by individuals or groups who considered, not God and the divine law, but the law of increased dividends and extended markets. We have to draw back from the precipice and we draw back to the land; the emphasis is laid on the soil for this reason. But man does not live by bread alone, and the land will not make

him, the individual, self-sufficient as a *man*. He needs society for for full human life. 'The countryside exists to support and uphold and nourish and maintain the city. It is only in our gross betrayal of our calling to a house not made with hands that the English town has become a shambles and a brothel and a place of filth and disease. Thus the call to the land, to the earth, is the necessary first call. We must be born again, we must be born again on the land . . . ' (*Autobiography* by Eric Gill, p. 233). When we have got people back to their foundation we can begin to rebuild society according to the needs of human nature. The land is the first step, not the last end.

The existence of modern men having been organised on a large scale without a goal worthy of man, the organisation becomes a vast machine guided in the main by blind forces outside human control, but often in the particular by the blind avarice and concupiscence of unprincipled men. If we measure modern society by man's nature and according to the principle of self-sufficiency we must necessarily condemn it on both heads. Since he has developed into an instrument of the machine, the individual man has lost self-respect, the power to mind his own business and the liberty of choosing his own way of life. Human nature is abused and treated as animal nature purely and simply. In this mass organisation, too, the element of self-sufficiency has disappeared, and the men in the mass depend on constantly increasing markets, on competition and the survival of the fittest. As all the recent Popes have shown, the great crime of the industrial form of life is precisely the insecurity in which the masses live.

Our civilisation then is evidently not the *Civitas* that St. Thomas called the 'perfect community.' It errs violently in excess where the isolated, unsocial landsman errs in defect. Between these extremes lies our one hope of salvation. Society should somehow be broken up and joined together again as an organism, a unity in which the integral parts do not lose their identity, the unity which is built up on a hierarchy of societies within Society. The family, according to St. Thomas, is the first unit of society because it is sufficient unto itself—up to a point. It can supply its own basic needs as regards the preservation and propagation of the human species. It can feed itself and generate itself, and the like. But for other purposes and other needs the single family must live with other families, mutually assisting in supplying each other's wants and all combining to defend the community from outside assault. Since the radical group is the family, however, and since the autonomy of the family must be preserved if a further society is to be

built upon it, the nature of the group formed by the combination of families is strictly limited. It cannot expand indefinitely. If it becomes so big and unwieldy as to swamp the family, it in fact destroys its own foundations in the attempt to make a single undifferentiated family of the whole group. There is a natural hierarchy in the grouping; it begins with the smallest and most essential, the family, and climbs gradually through village, town and city. And there comes a point when this hierarchy merges into a world view, which includes all mankind; but this latter society is not a civil and local grouping; it is the spiritual society of the Mystical Body, Christ being the Head of *all* men.

It is only along these lines that the unity amid diversity in men, families and nations can be achieved and preserved. A perfect community is one that is sufficient for its own maintenance. A family is self-sufficing up to a point, but alone it cannot provide itself with clothing as well as food, with a house as well as footwear or tools; and so the family of the farmer joins with that of the weaver, the builder and the miller, and so on, down to the candlestick maker. This community in its turn requires a larger body not only to preserve it from land-lusters and criminals beyond its walls, but also to hand on the heritage of human well-being and perfection in culture, and yet another body to supply its spiritual needs. Only in such an ordered hierarchy can security be found. If we are to rebuild our cities after the war this is the only hopeful ideal upon which they can be re-designed.

'The town properly thought of is the very crown and summit of man's creativeness and should be the vehicle for the highest manifestations of his sensibility, his love of order and seemliness of dignity and loveliness' (*Autobiography*, Eric Gill, p. 230). That is why Troeltsch misunderstands at once the modern Catholic and 'thomist' glorification of the land and the medieval St. Thomas's despising of the land in favour of the city. The same principle is behind both these attitudes. Our job in the ruined world is to rebuild the city; but the city can only be built on the land. Hence the importance of back to the land movements and of attempts at community living. God be praised for that both these enterprises are now frequent and on the increase, and, what is more, they work together, seeking self-sufficiency.

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*Dr. Bell, the Bishop of Chichester, has kindly consented to contribute an article on the late Cardinal Hinsley in the May issue of BLACKFRIARS.*