

came up and the winds blew and they struck upon that house, and it fell down, and a terrific fall it was.

And it so happened when Jesus had finished these words, the crowds were astounded over his teaching; for there he was, teaching them as if he had authority, and not like their scholars.



THE LITTLE BROTHERS OF THE POOR

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WHEN our Lord Jesus Christ sat down to his last supper, he did so, as he had done during all his earthly ministry, not as a host at a table of his very own, but as a guest in the house of another. He who could, had he wished, have turned stones into bread, was content to share the lot of those who have passed beyond being able to help themselves, and who enrich the lives of others by receiving from them. He did this for our instruction. Giving and receiving is a reciprocal action. In that act of humility whereby he, the master, washed his disciples' feet, he set forth in a final and unmistakable fashion what he had previously been teaching: that his disciples were to love one another as he had loved them, stooping to each other's lowliest needs, cherishing each other with a really personal devotion. In this way they would always find him with them. The saints have continuously experienced the truth of his words, discovering him in the sick and wretched, in the casual stranger at the door. Thus Martin saw Christ wearing the cloak he gave to the beggar; 'for the poor you have always with you'. No Christian is ignorant of this doctrine, yet it is given to some to realize it vividly, pre-eminently. It gives them an irresistible vocation. This is the impulse behind the work of the Little Brothers of the Poor. The founder describes it as a veritable 'passion for the poor'.

It was at Easter 1946 that the first 'little brother' distributed parcels to thirty aged people in a poor quarter of Paris. Working by himself, he carried hot meals twice a week to the homes of those whom the immensely increased cost of living had left scarcely able to keep body and soul together. From the beginning

the work, exclusively devoted to the aged, was characterized by a quality it has retained and developed. It was not public charity distributed to a number of digits; it was a personal share in the affection of one who would become a member of the family, and it proceeded from a deep generosity of heart. Contact once established, a permanent loyalty went with it. People were not picked up and then abandoned. They were made to feel that here, beyond any material assistance, was a love upon which they could count. It was presently to follow some of them to a grave at which 'little brothers' were the only mourners.

For the first 'little brother' was soon joined by part-time helpers, and these at present include a number of doctors: very necessary auxiliaries where work with old people is concerned. Other young men, mostly between twenty and thirty, felt called to give up their whole time to the poor. They do an eighteen months' noviciate, and then make a promise of service renewable every two years. Their work includes the distribution of weekly meals and of special parcels for feast days, every sort of personal service and, since 1952, the running of a holiday house, the Château d'Achy, not far from Beauvais.

One must go to Achy, as I was privileged to do this summer, in order to discover the special 'atmosphere' of the Little Brothers. It is in some sort the tangible embodiment of their aims. In the first place it is lavish—the word is used advisedly. It is furnished and run on the principle that nothing is too good for the poor. We arrived a little late for lunch owing to having spent some time in the small offices in Paris where parcels for the Assumption were being got ready; parcels with necessary things, but always with something beyond the necessary, perhaps a special cake or a bottle of cognac. Unbroken fast-days are, after all, as bad in their way as unbroken feasts. At Achy they were expecting us, and we soon found ourselves adopted at one or other of the tables, gay with flowers, in a large dining-room with cool green curtains. There were twenty-six old people there, both men and women, ages ranging from the seventies to ninety and more, enjoying to the full a month's holiday in the country. Everyone wanted to talk at once.

Lunch being ended, we were conducted in a sort of triumphal procession from room to room by an old lady who had originally come from Manchester and had spent fifty years of married life in

France. I had almost said, 'the house might have been hers'. The truth is that it really *was* hers; she obviously felt that. And so did all the others. Each is given a room decorated in its own distinctive fashion, always in the most perfect taste and with that note of largesse and exhilaration which typifies the whole enterprise. In a gracious salon there is music and good talk in the evenings, and any sort of improvised entertainment that suits the mood of the moment. It was a visiting Franciscan who told me a story that would have pleased the saint of Assisi. The previous evening a brother had done a little dance with one old lady. 'I never danced like that before', she said delightedly.

An ancient book of Chinese wisdom says that the really great ruler exercises his influence so unobtrusively that the people, unaware of his presence, suppose that things naturally turn out well of themselves. Achy has this happy air of spontaneity. Yet it must in fact draw heavily on the resources of the young men who spend themselves so generously there. Work which presupposes, even unconsciously, so sustained an effort of human sympathy, is spiritually very exhausting. The tiny oratory being constructed in the offices in Paris, where a few minutes of silence and prayer may be snatched between jobs, is a bare recognition of this. Time and experience will doubtless show what place must be given to that contemplative centre of christian life without which the works of mercy become too dependent upon merely human impulse, and die with the death of enthusiasm. At the same time, grace works in and through nature and it is delightful to see at Achy what grace will do, if all the unaffected goodness of nature is given just and liberal room. The freshness of the Little Brothers of the Poor is due, one must believe, to something more than the youth of its members. It comes from the eternal youth of the evangelical life itself, which may flourish in a hundred different ways as the faithful sons of the Church discover that what is as old as the Apostles is capable of ever new adaptations.

NOTE: The offices of the Little Brothers are at 9, rue Lechevin, Paris, II.