

BLESSED ARE THE MERCIFUL

THE articles in this number on the works of mercy take the necessity of these works as axiomatic, as something so self-evident that it would be tedious to labour it. In this, surely, they are true to the spirit of St Vincent de Paul, who is the subject of the next article, by a Vincentian father, in honour of his tercentenary. The gospels leave us in no doubt at all about the Christian obligation of almsgiving—of ‘giving mercy’; all that the practical Christian is concerned to discuss is the matter of ways and means.

Yet a little ‘theory’, perhaps, may be useful in order to put this very practical, down-to-earth obligation in its full context of the Christian life. Why is almsgiving such a strict and universal duty? Because it is the acid test of charity. ‘If anyone says “I love God”, and hates his brother, he is a liar’ (I John iv, 20). ‘Whoever has worldly wealth and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how can the love of God be in him?’ (ib. iii, 17). God must be loved in men; loving our Lord means serving him and coming to his aid in the least of his brethren. Presumably the least of Christ’s brethren are the most undeserving of his brethren. The gospel knows nothing about restricting almsgiving to the deserving poor; what mercy considers is need, not deserts, though it is likely to be true that the genuine needs of the sturdy rogue will be different from those of the deserving poor man.

The essence of almsgiving, of course, is not giving *money*, but simply *giving*; giving what the needy need, whether it is money or food or shelter, or time or advice or comfort or help or instruction, but always, whatever is given materially, giving friendly sympathy. St Albert, quoted by St Thomas (*Summa Theol.* II-II, q. 32, a.i), defines almsgiving as ‘a work of giving the needy something out of compassion because of God’. Because of God; in the awareness that the needy and the afflicted, typified in scripture by the orphans and widows, are his special wards. Because of God; this element in the definition widens the field for almsgiving to all men, to all our neighbours, because from God’s point of view we are all needy, all to be pitied, all in need of friendship and sympathy. Giving the needy something; no rules of thumb can be laid down for almsgiving, it cannot be

organized conveniently in advance, because it is determined by the particular needs of particular people whom we encounter in particular circumstances. This is where so many of us fail more or less often. We are put out by unexpected demands on our somewhat unsteady charity; we are unprepared. One of the contributors to this number remarks what a help a certain amount of routine and organization is for the harnessing of our charitable energies. This is true, and it is also true that organizing ability can be of immense use in making almsgiving effective. After all, there are whole professions which are devoted to the works of mercy, medicine, nursing, teaching, professional social work. Nonetheless it is important to remember that the demands and the occasions of almsgiving can never be contained within rules and regulations or reduced to professional techniques; the man who would be generous and solicitous for the less fortunate of his neighbours cannot escape from the necessity of improvising. This is why almsgiving commonly tends to come more easily to the naturally improvident than to the naturally careful man.

It is also necessary to remind ourselves that organization and efficiency, unless we watch ourselves carefully, will always be liable to drain the works of mercy of what is their vital essence—humanity. The ‘beneficiaries’ of our good works become cases, objects of benevolence, occasions of merit, they are classified as ‘the poor’, ‘the underprivileged’, and most deadly of all, as ‘they’. They cease to be seen by the doer of good works as human beings, as individual people with characters and personalities and histories and problems of their own. But treating a person humanely implies being aware of him as a human being; and unless you are so aware of him, you cannot really give him anything, you cannot communicate with him or share things with him as one man with another, one brother with another.

For the heart of St Albert’s definition of almsgiving is that it is something done ‘out of compassion’. It is an act of the virtue of *misericordia*, which is so inadequately translated by the English word ‘mercy’. We have been talking about ‘works of mercy’ and ‘almsgiving’, both hallowed phrases familiar to us from the catechism, and both faded, formalized and unevocative in modern English; ‘almsgiving’, with its limitation in our imaginations to a Lenten alms-box, and to beggars at church doors; and ‘mercy’, which has come to mean little more to us than a palliative of strict

and rigorous justice. But we do have quite a wealth of English expressions that correspond both accurately and vividly to the meaning of *misericordia*; we talk about 'having a heart', being 'tender-hearted', 'feeling sorry for people', our 'hearts aching for them'. The gospel talks about our Lord 'being moved with compassion'. Such is the sort of attitude or sensibility from which a genuine act of almsgiving must procede.

This would seem to suggest, then, that some people are more suited by temperament to the works of mercy than others, and that while these activities are indeed laudable, and provide a proper outlet for persons of lively emotions and quick sensibilities, it seems unfair to treat them as obligations on *all* Christians, even those of the coldest and most phlegmatic temperaments. There is a lot of truth in this. Temperament does have an important part to play in deciding a person's course and choices in life, including the particular Christian activities in which he is going to make his own contribution to the Church's life. To take an obvious example: women, as a rule, are much better at comforting the sorrowful than men are, because they naturally have quicker and more generous emotions. With the best will in the world the average insensitive and embarrassed male will usually be singularly ineffective at this particular work of mercy. St Paul recognized this, and includes what our versions call 'helps', which seems to mean a 'flair for relief work', among the charismatic gifts of the Holy Ghost, some of which are given to some people, others to others, for the building up of the body of Christ. Work in the Cheshire homes or in the S.V.P. is not for all, but only for those to whom it has been given.

But something has to be said very definitely on the other side. The works of mercy, almsgiving in one form or another, according to the particular demands of the unpredictable moment, are an obligation on every Christian, and the virtue of *misericordia*, of tender-heartedness, is a virtue for all men and women, not just for the more excitable. After all, even the most fishlike and insensitive of men is still a human being with human feelings to be deployed and expressed on the right occasions. As such he is capable of response to the human feelings and condition of other people; and quite apart from feelings, he is obliged to make the response of intelligence and deliberate choice to other people which is involved in recognizing and treating them as persons, in giving

them the basic esteem due to them as human beings; he is obliged, in other words, to love them as himself. Fulfilling this fundamental obligation of humanity is not primarily a matter of the feelings, but of intelligence and determination, both stimulating and controlling the feelings, and making up for their deficiencies.

The way St Thomas puts it is to classify tender-heartedness, *misericordia*, as an effect of charity. If you love a person, you are naturally affected by his misfortunes, your heart aches, you suffer with him (com-passion), and so you are moved to do what you can to alleviate the distress which sympathetically you share. When it comes to loving God, of course, he has no misfortunes to affect our tender-heartedness; that is why as the first and direct and unconditional effect of charity St Thomas puts, not *misericordia*, but *gaudium*, joy. Joy, peace, tender-heartedness, in that order, these are the three interior or psychological effects of charity. But if you love God, you love his friends, your neighbours, you want to rejoice with them in the joy of your Lord. Your love of them is designed to be one of the channels by which God's love reaches them, and to be a share in God's love of them. But God's love for all of us has to be merciful and compassionate and tender-hearted, because our entry into the joy of our Lord is so hindered by evils and troubles of all kinds. The supreme instance and illustration of God's compassionate love for men is the passion of Christ, his entry into our sorrows and the consequences of our sins in order to open up to us an entry into his joy.

So it is that the Christian's act of compassion in which he shows his love of his neighbour is a sharing in the sacrifice of Christ. That is why St Augustine, in the sermon translated in this issue, calls almsgiving the sacrifice of the Christian. So to regard it brings out the inseparable connection between genuine mercy and joy. In *The City Of God* St Augustine defines true sacrifice (as distinct from symbolic or ritual sacrifice, which is meant to signify true sacrifice) as 'every work which is done in order to cleave to God in a holy association, every work, that is to say, which is referred to that ultimate good by which alone we can be truly happy' (Bk X, vi). Every activity which is directed towards true joy is a sacrifice. Chief among such works is mercy or almsgiving, if it is 'referred to God'; for the whole point of doing works of mercy is to deliver a man from misery and make

him happy—to bring him a step nearer to the only true source of happiness or joy, which is to be found in cleaving to God. Mercy and joy, then, go together, the doer of works of mercy must be happy and cheerful, not a kill-joy, but someone who has a true and living appreciation of ‘the joy of his Lord’.



MONSIEUR VINCENT: THREE HUNDRED YEARS AFTER

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MPIERRE FRESNAY, excellently made-up as a priest of the seventeenth century, walked quickly across the church. He threw open the door of a confessional, beckoned to the confessor who was ministering to the souls of a few *dévotés*; then, together, they turned their backs on such pious trivialities and set out for the field of practical philanthropy.

The concept of the projected image is quite familiar in contemporary publicity and propaganda. It involves the selection and exaggeration of some one aspect of a product, a political party, a public figure, and the stamping of the result on the imagination of readers, viewers, or listeners. The French film, *Monsieur Vincent*, in which occurred the scene mentioned above, is a typical example of image projection: it is not unfair to say that the impression left on its audiences was one of almost complete activism. The vivid episodes presented the saint in a way calculated to appeal to the mood of the mid-twentieth century. Here, they seemed to suggest, is a man who had broken free from the shackles of *bourgeois* ecclesiasticism; one who sat loosely to the routines and prejudices of institutional religion; who interpreted Christianity in the tempo of today as a remedy for social injustices and for the re-ordering of economic and administrative chaos. This image of St Vincent de Paul, focussed so compellingly by the genius of M. Fresnay, is not, of course, the creation of the cinema. St Vincent the social reformer, with no mystical nonsense about him, the man of action *par excellence*, fits admirably into the conventional categories of our times. In this guise he has appeared