

THINGS AND TOKENS

AND Jesus took the loaves: and when he had given thanks, he distributed to them that were sat down. In like manner also of the fishes, *as much as they would* (John vi, 11).

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Even if a man sees, as I see, that the Bible, and especially the Gospels, are the world's best handbook of Economics, he will have surprises almost every time he opens the book.

It is now only a few days since the reading of this phrase in St. John's Gospel seemed to throw more light on the present state of the world than could be thrown by a library of books on Economics.

As such an instantaneous illumination seems, like a lightning flash, to make a jagged way across the darkness it dispels, I would ask my readers to be patient with me if I cannot make what I have to say as round and lucent as the sun.

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Exegetes will notice that whereas this miracle of providing food in the desert is told by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, this mystic phrase *as much as they would* (ὅσον ἠθέλον) is given only by John. Matthew, Mark and Luke agree in the word *they were filled* (ἐχορτάσθησαν); but they lack all mention of man's willing.

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We have here an instance of God allowing the human will to condition, as it were, the divine will. This is, of course, a deep mystical fact of the soul's relationship to God. Sometimes God's power seems hindered by men's evil will, as when Jesus ' could not

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do miracles there because of their unbelief.' Here, on the contrary, the miracle of multiplication is brought to the very frontiers of man's will. This phrase of St. John is all the more striking because he more than the other three gossellers is insistent upon the Will of God. Who would expect this phrase *as much as they willed* to be found in a gospel which opened with the phrase . . . 'who are born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God'?

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A sounding-line to the depths of our Blessed Lord's deference to the human will may be found in the simple ethical principle; *We cannot expect from the average person more than the average goodness.*

This principle does not mean that the average person will never rise at need to that extraordinary height of human endeavour called 'heroic virtue.' But while the average person will sometimes rise to heroic virtue under extraordinary circumstances, it will be found that under ordinary or average circumstances the average person will have the average goodness or badness.

This simple, yet necessary, principle underlies the Church's ascetical tradition towards what she calls 'occasions of sin.' The Church's wise teaching and practice rest 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, i.e. by more than average virtue.

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Let us now follow up this undeniable general principle with an equally undeniable general fact: *All that is in the world is either THINGS or TOKENS OF THINGS.*

A mind or will behaves in one way when in an environment of tokens; and behaves in another way in an environment of things.

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So fundamental has this fact appeared to be that scholarship is now judged by loyalty to the principle, 'Verify all references.' No token or sign, or evidence of a thing can be accepted as scholarship when it is possible to have the self-evidence of the thing. Hence the false showy scholarship begotten of Encyclopaedias and Bibliographies. Hence, too, the token-knowledge of books to be found in experienced librarians and book-sellers. In contrast with this showy knowledge of tokens there stands the solidly-based knowledge of things. The modern growth in the physical sciences is largely a result of observing things rather than tokens of things. All laboratory thoroughness rests on the principle that direct knowledge of things is primary and knowledge of tokens is secondary.

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Inside the great world of things created by the Will of God are many worlds of tokens created by the will of man. One of these is the great financial world of currency and credit, which we may call the money-world. It is, of course, not a real-world or thing-world, but a shadow-world. Yet it is so dangerous a world that an expert in these shadows, if men will play this shadow-game, will, in the end, possess his opponents' realities.

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Aristotle and Aquinas, that is the pre-Christian and Christian world, are agreed that avarice or the undue desire of these tokens tends to a certain infinity. How could it be otherwise? Even ten thousand shafts of sunlight are not the sun. The token-nothings can excite an unsatisfied indefinite desire; which can at least fill the time if not the heart of man.

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Far otherwise is it in the greater world of realities. The very fulness of their reality limits man's desire.

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No man, unless at enmity with his reason, desires infinite things. If food is needed, no man desires an infinite meal; if clothing, no man desires an infinite garment; if shelter, no man desires an infinite house; if possessions, no man desires an infinite field to till. Man's being and powers of doing have a bound which sets a limit to the things he needs.

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We may now venture to formulate the principle acted upon by the Eternal Wisdom when He gave the hungry His miracle-bread; and conditioned His Will to give by their will to receive. The principle may be formulated thus; *In a system mainly of things the average person may be trusted to limit his wants by his needs. But in a system mainly of tokens, the average person cannot be trusted to limit his wants by his needs.*

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If the Eternal Wisdom, instead of miraculously providing bread and fishes, had provided money, St. John would have been unable to say that as much as each one wanted Jesus gave. Indeed, the one recorded complaint about mal-distribution came from the thief-Apostle, who had care of the money-tokens. The poor thief who was preparing to sell God for silver and to betray love with a kiss could hardly value this precious spikenard as a token of love. He could value it only by his tokens; and counted as worth only three hundred pence an offering which has made Magdalene the undischarged creditor of Mankind.

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The present world-wide 'economic blizzard' (to use the phrase of two Chancellors of the Exchequer, the late Worthington Evans and Lord Snowden)

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points ominously to a breach of our formulated principle. If our present economic system throughout the civilised world is mainly a token-system, an inevitable result will follow. The average person, in other words the majority of persons, will not be content to measure their wants by their needs. Everywhere there will be the very definite desire to have more and more token-wealth. The very uncertainty of the future value of this token will heighten and foster the desire.

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Yet St. Thomas has formulated another principle, which can be ignored only by inviting the curse of war. *Pax tollitur ex hoc quod cives singuli quae sua sunt quaerunt* (Peace ceases when the citizens seek each man his own).¹ This principle becomes dramatically practical in a token-system where the majority of the citizens may be expected to seek even more than their own in their almost irresistible desire not to measure their wants by their needs.

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Thus it will be found that Bethlehem and Nazareth poverty is not a defect to be remedied, but a fundamental condition of all ultimate remedy and redemption.

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¹ *Summa Theologica*. IIa-IIae; Qu. 183, Art. 2, ad 3. Eng. tr.