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MEN AND MORALS

IT is very gratifying to me to have the opportunity to express the good things I think of Father Gerald Vann's recent book, *Morals Makyth Man*.¹ A work such as this delights the mind with a "rejoicing in the truth" which is indeed characteristically thomist: a joy in fresh Air and Light. In this book we find, combined with constant care for doctrinal accuracy and for fidelity to the established principles received from tradition, that reverence for experience and for the humble truths of ordinary human existence, that quality of compassionate concern for the needs and the sorrows of the time, which we recognise as part of the heritage of the great Dominicans of history. For it has been written that we "must redeem the time"; and if it be that the distinctive mission of St. Thomas and his disciples is the evangelisation of the intelligence, who would feel more acutely than they the pressing urgency of this work of redemption?

It is certain that such work cannot be achieved without toil and hardship. Not without sufferings and opposition was St. Thomas able to assimilate to Christian thought a pagan Aristotle who appeared suddenly in his time surrounded by a cortège of Moslems and Jews. Towards the end of his life he was called to maintain, against the Bishop of Paris and the great majority of contemporary divines, the doctrine of the oneness of the substantial form of the human being, that doctrine which after his death was to be censured by Etienne Tempier and the Doctors of Oxford, but which now has become classical and established. To-day that same controversy is being carried on; but it is onto another plane

¹ Longmans, 7s. 6d.

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that it has been transferred. It has been transferred from the metaphysical to the cultural plane. The question still has to do with oneness of form, but now it has to do with the oneness of the form that should inspire and direct human conduct, of the *moral* form (elevated by the Gospel revelation) that should animate and guide the political, social and economic life of men and the whole course of their civilisation no less than their individual lives. And, thanks be to God, no Archbishop of Paris nor Doctors of Oxford would now take sides for an ethical "pluriformism," and so dichotomise our lives between a social and political paganism suitable for earth and a decorative Christianity good only for heaven.

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Father Gerald Vann's book comprises two distinct parts. The first—*The Theory*—expounds, principally from a philosophical standpoint but without leaving theology out of account ("to try to exclude theology altogether from the view here put forward would have been to parody it"), the essential features of the thomist ethic. The second is called *Essays in Application*.

I consider the first part to be an excellent exposition of Christian philosophy, intended for the "general reader" rather than the specialist, but as useful to the latter as to the former. From the point of view of St. Thomas the author examines in turn the fundamental moral problems which have ever agitated philosophers; he examines them especially in the forms they have taken among the great modern thinkers with whose ideas educated British citizens are more familiar. And he then shows how the powerful synthesising qualities which are inherent in thomist thought do justice—and full justice—to all that each of them has perceived of positive value and truth. He shows how marvellously this synthesis is attained by St. Thomas, and without the smallest trace of eclecticism, solely owing to the elevation of a governing intuition which penetrates into the

very depths of humanity as it exists in the concrete. For while metaphysics is the science—the speculative science—of Being as Being, ethics is the science—the practical science—of the Human as Human.

Father Vann's anxiety to convince the modern reader that thomism is not a static mediæval system leads him to sprinkle his exposition with all kinds of witticisms and anecdotes, while always preserving the utmost precision of philosophical language. It leads him also, and this is more important, to extricate the substance of St. Thomas's moral teaching from the cobwebs of the Schools, and to present it in all its immediate and native significance.

The resulting statement of doctrine seems to me particularly felicitous in those pages which are devoted to the problem of freedom, and to the genuine meaning of an ethic based on the idea of Beatitude. Father Vann shows very exactly how the ethics of Saint Thomas transcends eudemonism while preserving all the truth that it contains, and how, thanks to its essentially teleological character, an ethic based on the idea of Beatitude is an ethic of disinterestedness, foreign to all selfishness as well as to every purely legalistic conception of the function of Law. In reading those fine pages in which he shows that the personality can find itself only in forgetting itself for its transcendent Object, and those other pages in which he sheds light on the dynamic and progressive character (too often misunderstood) of an ethic which begins with the imperfect, (fear of the law and the well-ordered search for happiness) in order to reach the perfect (the life of holiness and the freedom of unalloyed love), we are made vividly aware how true it is that the ethic of Saint Thomas is the product of the same spirit as his metaphysic, a metaphysic whose fundamental intuition is that of the "generosity" of Being. We are thus reminded of that wonderful fifth article of Question 60 in the *Prima Pars* of the *Summa* wherein Saint Thomas asserts that all things, animate and inanimate, "naturally" love God more than they love themselves; from

which it follows that all beings, in the concrete existential order, in virtue of a sort of super-finality, tend towards the End of all being even more than towards the specific end of each, and that they are drawn toward the latter precisely by reason of their being drawn by the former.

Although, "in practice of course we may think, and licitly think in terms of sanctions," how true it is that "strictly speaking there are no sanctions in the thomist ethic"! God—we see in the last analysis—gives to each what he himself has willed. Therein lies all that is most magnificent and most terrible in human freedom.

The reader will do well to meditate upon Father Vann's penetrating remarks about the "legalism" which in the post-Tridentine period has played a large part in the conduct of many Christians. More important than the attaining of conformity to an extrinsic legal code are the quickening and progressively liberating purification of the soul which are achieved by the reason's consonance with the deepest order of nature, and by the grace of the Holy Spirit which is, in St. Thomas's words, "that which is principal in the New Law, and in which all its efficacy is contained." Law has been given us precisely for the attainment of this quickening and this purification. That is why humanism is demanded by Christianity, and why only in Christianity can humanism find its consummation, its final refuge. The barbarism of an epoch like our own in which a materialistic "humanism" brings forth its last fruits, and ends in contempt and destruction of all that is truly human, proves the truth of this all too clearly. True humanism is a humanism centred in God. It re-establishes the creature in the Creator. And let there be no mistake, the Love which is that humanism's fundamental law leads it, in the persons of those who respond to the summons to realise in themselves the sufferings of the Saviour, into the darkest night of sacrifice and crucifixion.

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The second part of *Morals Makyth Man* is devoted to a series of particular problems, problems which directly con-

cern the life and the anxieties of our time. Father Vann is rightly convinced that thomism does not just talk in the clouds. Thomism binds theory and practice very closely together. It guides our slow and wearisome pilgrimage on earth to the heaven of Wisdom. Precisely because of this it requires of Wisdom that she should exert her dominion even to the very borders of action, even to the very boundaries of the *hic et nunc*, where Wisdom and Science (which are concerned with the universal) must give place to Prudence (which is concerned with the application of the universal to the given concrete action in all its circumstances and particularity).

From the outset, and always in its very essence, the whole purpose of moral science is the direction of *action*. Yet one sees many moralists, even Christian moralists, who design marvellous frescoes of universal principles and noble thoughts; but then if you ask these masters in Israel *what is to be done* with regard to this or that concrete problem because of which men suffer and die before their eyes, you will at once see them flee to take refuge in some serene temple of theoretic morals which they have suddenly transformed into a speculative metaphysic. Or else they will give the enquirer no reply at all. Or else (happy, it would seem, to take a rest and to find some counterbalance to their labours as legislators, and an opportunity to lay aside for a while the burden of principles) they will invoke for their reply the wholly empirical and worldly prudence of the experts of the "lesser evil," and of the "realists" of Success and Gain. With a slight adaptation we can apply to them those words of Whichcote concerning politicians quoted by Father Vann: "Among a certain kind of moralist the principles of religion are profitable, their putting into practice is troublesome." Not so Father Gerald Vann. He knows that moral philosophy is a *practical* philosophy and that ethics cannot abdicate in the presence of action.

This is a matter in which is involved the honour not only of moral philosophy. The honour of religion itself is at

stake—and the future of religion in our age and in our civilisation. For it is the peculiar privilege of the things of the spirit that they cannot make any progress among men when they have fallen into dishonour.

The very soul of Father Vann's book is the deep conviction that the modern divorce between religion and life must be brought to an end. And that it must be brought to an end not by some sort of "adaptation" of religion to modern life and to this present world, but contrariwise by an *incarnation* of religion in life—an incarnation more genuinely and lovingly Christian, more genuinely and lovingly evangelical, more genuinely and lovingly responsive to the *ecce venio* of the Son of God. May this conviction be communicated to all the readers of the book, and enable them to understand at the same time the supreme importance of these problems of *reintegration* which confront us to-day! As Dr. Niebuhr has said in remarkable words quoted at the end of the first chapter: "Men whose very existence is imperilled and whose universe of meaning is reduced to chaos by the social maladjustments of a technical society, may be pardoned if they dismiss, as a luxury, which they cannot afford, any *profound* religion which does not concern itself with these problems."

I hesitate to praise the views put forward by Father Vann on subjects of social, political and economic philosophy. For here we find ourselves in such thorough agreement, and he honours me by quoting my own works in so friendly a fashion, that I am fearful lest it be thought that in so doing I have my own personal axe to grind. But I cannot restrain myself from saying with what pleasure I read his seventh chapter entitled *Thomism and the Policy of Integration*. The accuracy and serenity of his statements in this chapter are in themselves a testimony to the lasting vitality of the spirit of Saint Thomas Aquinas. The awareness of all that integration means is here manifest in so high a degree that it may be said that "the policy of integration" is here shown to integrate into its own substance its very adversary, "the

policy of separation." This is the best way, the truly thomist way, to triumph over it pacifically.

For this "separatist" school, "the Christian world is to be a fortress set above the dissolute flux of pagan thought and life, remote, immune,"—a fortress in which the Christian has nothing to learn or to receive from "the others," and in which he sets himself the task "to set up, unsullied, unmixed with error and evil, the City of God and so to offer an example of what may be, to the unhappy infidels who prowl without." On the subject of this separatist school I venture to add one remark. We shall be most sincerely grateful to the partisans of this school for all that they may effectively show to us poor sinners of what can and ought to be done. In virtue of the very logic of their system, ought they not to be the very models of Christian behaviour? May they therefore always show us "fair play"! But this situation deteriorates at once when, in order to defend this stronghold of virtue, means are employed which are incompatible with the Christian spirit, means which make the Name of God to be blasphemed among the Gentiles—when the gates of this city of God are opened to pagan mercenaries who fight in accordance with their pagan methods—when the standards of hatred are hoisted on its walls—when the machine-guns of lies and calumnies charitably bespatter their lead into those Christians who maintain that the supremacy of spiritual values should be respected even in the methods employed for their defence—when apostolic incendiary bombs are aimed at the conversion—into cinders—of infidels and wicked men. . .

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The *Essays in Application* gathered in this volume treat of a great variety of subjects, the selection of which seems to have been made in accordance with the degree of their urgency and actuality.

I would draw particular attention to the chapter on Christian marriage, which, it seems to me, may be closely

paralleled by the recent work of Dr. Herbert Doms² and in which will be found some very penetrating remarks on D. H. Lawrence. Also to the short chapter on *Diversity in Worship* wherein the theories of Pugin are aptly criticised and in which some observations on that "Italianism," of which English Catholic devotion seems sometimes to have been much enamoured, appear to me very suggestive. The question is perhaps more important than might be thought at first sight. Perhaps it may be permitted to a foreign Catholic to express his opinion? Since each nation has its own particular part to play in the concert of Christendom, would it not seriously spoil this concert if the Catholics of one nation play on their flutes or oboes the score perhaps intended for the strings or the drums of other nations? The English temperament has, for instance, its own distinctive way of appreciating the liberty of the individual and its own attitude towards methods of coercion in matters of conscience. Distinctively English Catholic opinion is a matter of concern to the whole of Christendom, and what we foreigners want to hear from our brothers in England is not the Italian note or the Spanish note, but the note which belongs to the Catholic Church in England in her own particular and providential role in the orchestra of the *Una Sancta*. For, as Father Gerald Vann well expresses it, we best show ourselves to be faithful to the universality of the Church—which is supra-racial, supra-national, supra-cultural—when we thoroughly understand that it does not demand the destruction but contrariwise the "sanctification of the human and national idiom."

Finally I would express the hope that the views put forward in the last chapter on *Divine Transcendence and Sorrow*, on the "love-longing of Christ" and on the mystery of evil, will gain the attention of philosophers as well as of less specialist readers. Doubtless, the general indications presented in this chapter only outline a programme of thought and inquiry which still remains to be followed up more

² cf. Blackfriars, September, pp. 693-4 (Ed.).

systematically and more thoroughly. But it is already a satisfaction to the mind to see these problems disengaged from the rut into which rationalistic "philosophies of religion" have driven them. We cannot even *state* the problem of evil correctly until we understand that in order to fashion creatures capable of sharing in the Divine Life it was necessary to make creatures capable of loving God with a love of free friendship; and that in order to make creatures capable of a love of free friendship it was necessary to make them free; and that in order to make them free it was necessary to endow them with a nature which would be capable of sinning. So we are enabled to see that capability to sin—"peccability"—is, as it were, the price which must be paid for the life of blessedness in heaven.

JACQUES MARITAIN.