

must always bear within themselves that consciousness of their poverty which finds expression in the contemplative prayer of the ever imperfect finite being before the Infinite Creator. But the spirit of poverty was missing in the Puritan and contemplation found no place in his life.

By a stress on a half-truth, Puritanism condemned its adherents to a half-life: the concept of the Economic Man was the logical outcome of such a doctrine. In the real fullness of life, work must be balanced by leisure, economic activity by the cultivation of beauty in its several forms; action must have as its correlative contemplation; extraversion must find complement in intraversion; the God of works must not be forgotten in the works of God; and the human must find a continual reintegration into the divine in the manner that the Incarnation made possible.

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## THE MYSTERY OF GOSPEL POVERTY

THE morning of April 16th, 1209, witnessed in the square of St George in Assisi (now called the Piazza Santa Chiara) an incident most rare and strange in the history of men. Warned and expectant of good things, a great crowd of beggars and outcasts had assembled, and to them presently came two men bearing between them a deep, heavily-weighted sack filled to the top with money. With that large indiscriminateness that often accompanies Catholic charity they began to hand out right and left the contents of the sack. The method of distribution would have horrified a modern humanitarian. There was no personal interviewing or questioning, no assessment of alms-qualification, no means test. A careless and bountiful profusion characterised this very medieval gesture; and when the last coin had been given away and the last beggar satisfied, it was probably the literal truth that the only completely destitute persons in that crowded square were the two prodigal benefactors.

The sack had contained in money the total worldly possessions of Bernard a Quintavalle, a very rich merchant of Assisi. Some little time before, he had gone one day with Francis to a small nearby church to pray and to seek God's will in his regard and, opening the book of the Gospels which lay upon the altar, they had immediately come upon the words: 'If thou wilt be perfect, sell all thou hast and give to the poor and thou shalt have treasure in heaven, and come follow me.' And Bernard, with the help of Francis, already a beggar, forthwith obeyed this direction with literal exactness.

To many thousands of men and for many subsequent years Francis and Bernard preached the Gospel. But it is important to notice that they never preached a Gospel command of poverty. They preached everywhere and always the imperious Gospel requirement to keep the commandments. Nothing was clearer to them than that in the Gospel exterior poverty is a counsel that men may or may not follow, but that the commandments of God are of iron necessity. For them there existed a whole group of commands and prohibitions whose observance was literally vital to the spiritual life of man and whose denial or infringement was no less than a denial of the order in the divine nature itself. The moral law was not a set of arbitrary commands but the very order within the Godhead, to be freely and lovingly reproduced in the life of men, and seen to be vitally necessary to man's well-being.

The sharp distinction between precept and counsel is largely lost upon those who have no sense of an eternal moral law; and, in an impulse to be generous before they have been just, men have sometimes rushed in to seize upon nobly generous gospel counsels before they realised the difference between what Christ sternly commanded and what he occasionally advised. Confusion of these two things has had the effect of loosening men's grasp upon the commandments themselves. When counsels of perfection are mixed pell mell with precepts and the whole presented as something called 'the teaching of Christ', it is but a short step to the discovery that the commandments themselves are unbearably heavy.

In the Gospel the distinction between precept and counsel is as clear as words can make it. The story of the rich young man, from which Francis and Bernard took their rule of life, runs in S. Matthew as follows:—'And behold one came and said to him: Good Master, what good shall I do that I may have life everlasting? Who said to him; Why askest thou me concerning good? One is good, God. But if thou wilt enter into life, *keep the commandments*. He said to him: Which? And Jesus said: Thou shalt do no murder. Thou shalt not commit adultery. Thou shalt not steal. Thou shalt not bear false witness. Honour thy father and thy mother. And: Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. The young man said to him: All these things I have kept from my youth. What is yet wanting to me? Jesus said to him: *If thou wilt be perfect*, go sell what thou hast and give to the poor and thou shalt have treasure in heaven, And come follow me.' The distinction between precept and counsel could not be clearer.

The young man is described by St Matthew as enjoying 'great possessions'. Nevertheless there is here no fulmination against his

riches, no 'Woe to you, rich' such as occurs in a well-known passage in St Luke: which would suggest that that commination should be read in the light of the above distinction, and that the rich against whom it is directed are particular rich men whose abuse of their wealth brings them under this severe condemnation. All his teaching, as well as his attitude to wealthy individuals, leaves no doubt that our Saviour never condemned riches as such. Riches are a trusteeship; the rich man is a steward, and his riches might even become a means to eternal life.

It is not implied, however, that the way of wealth is an easier way. Indeed it is, given fallen human nature, a much more difficult way. 'Amen I say to you, that a rich man shall hardly (i.e. with difficulty) enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. And again I say to you; it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.' The impulse of most of us here would surely be the impulse of the Apostles; if possessious that seem so natural and necessary have such awful power of impediment, what hope is there for anybody? 'And when they had heard this, the disciples wondered very much saying: Who then can be saved? And Jesus seeing it said to them: With men this is impossible: but with God all things are possible.'

It is at this point that the whole Gospel attitude to possessions is seen to be spiritual and not economic. Its real root is to be found in a man's relation to God. There is no pronouncement of Christ upon wealth apart from his pronouncement upon everything, and no understanding of him here except in the context of his whole teaching. If it is true that the human spirit is created for an eternal intimacy with the divine nature itself, then anything that has a power of rivalry with the divine nature or any power to deflect the soul from that noblest of all destinies is immediately and gravely suspect. Now riches have an awful power to fetter a man to himself and to enslave him to his numerous and capricious personal desires. No question but that they invite him to pamper his body and to indulge in various forms of bodily comfort that riches make so easily procurable. Worse still, they powerfully promote the imperious demands of his spiritual self-love, in vanity and ostentation, in pride and arrogance, in the arbitrary exercise of power over others. It is this vast harvest of sins, the innumerable forms of self-worship ready to the hand of the rich, that make St Paul describe the love of money as the root of all evil.

Given this immense power that riches can exert over the human heart, it is not surprising that actual poverty, which can offer the soul a great disentanglement from possession-preoccupations should

be warmly commended by our Lord; but the emphasis is always upon the state of the heart and the interior.

'Lay not up to yourselves treasure on earth, where rust and moth consume and where thieves break through and steal. But lay up to yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither the rust nor the moth doth consume and where thieves do not break through nor steal. *For where thy treasure is there is thy heart also*'; which last might be paraphrased: 'By "treasure" I mean all that you deem valuable'.

This characteristic doctrine of Christ finds perhaps its best expression in the first of the beatitudes: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit'. It is a sentiment as far removed from 'Economic Man' as it is possible to be; for it asserts the spiritual nature of man and what should be *in consequence* his detachment from the passing and the perishing. But this detachment is but the negative side of a divine attachment. 'Detachment' alone sometimes has for the Christian a thoroughly false ring. It sometimes means no more than the disdain of the self-centred man for his fellow-creatures. St Jerome points out that Peter did not ask what reward the Apostles should have for having left all things, but for having left all things to follow Christ. Our Lord did not say to the rich young man: 'If thou wilt be perfect, sell what thou hast and give to the poor', as though this were perfection. Crates the philosopher and many others, says St Jerome, did this much. But, says our Lord, 'sell and give to the poor and come follow me'. It is not the stripping, but the Christ-motive in stripping that is important. In a word it is possible to extract a pure economic doctrine from the teaching of Christ only by ignoring his complete preoccupation with spiritual truth alone. Many truths of the temporal order arise from his teaching; but their source and explanation are found only in the soul's adjustment to God. 'Be not solicitous—seek *first* the Kingdom of God and his justice, and all these things shall be added unto you.'

St Bonaventure, for whom the beatitudes of the fifth chapter of St Matthew make the perfection of the gifts of the Holy Ghost as listed by Isaiah (c. 11), thus relates the gift of fear of the Lord to the beatitude of poverty of spirit, to which fear predisposes and in which it finds its consummation: 'Fear makes the soul shun evil and occasions of sin; and since cupidity is the root of all evil, fear disposes to a poverty of spirit in which humility is also joined with poverty, so that the perfect man is set far apart from the fount of all sin, namely pride and cupidity. Hence, poverty of

spirit is the foundation of all evangelical perfection. He who would reach the summit of perfection must first lay the foundation, according to that of St Matthew: "If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell what thou hast"—the poverty that keeps nothing for itself, "and come follow me"—the humility that makes a man deny himself and take up his cross daily to follow Christ who is the basis and first foundation of all perfection. Fear therefore disposes the soul to poverty of spirit.' (*Breviloquium*, Pars. V. Cap. 6.)

The relation here of Christian poverty of spirit to fear is very significant. It sets this poverty apart from the poverty of philosophers who strip themselves of possessions to show their moral fibre, or to advertise their indifference to 'respectability' or to comforts. This poverty on the contrary is full of that stark truth that is called humility. For the fear is not the servile fear of cravens but a filial awe and reverence for the supreme majesty it adores. The stripping is essentially a *religious* act, an act of adoration of Infinite Reality in and with his divine Son 'Who, being rich, became poor for our sakes, that through his poverty we might be rich'. In a word, the poverty of the Gospels is that type of moral mystery that is called in French *une mystique*: its motive is a generous love of the infinitely generous God. 'Thou must learn to give all for All', says à Kempis. Every soul that is to be his must learn this sooner or later; and God works this divine weaning and commutation in his own manner and at his own pace in each man of good will.

And the end is *peace*. St Bonaventure, who is the sedulous interpreter of Francis to the Schools, sees in the peace that Francis endlessly preached the final aim of all human effort anywhere. All men actively and habitually seek peace, even if they often look for it in the wrong place. Even wars are waged only for the sake of peace. This peace is the silence that comes upon the heart when all the strident cry of unsatisfied desire has died down. 'The sixth and ultimate stage (of the love of God) is a true and full tranquillity in which is such peace and repose that the soul is in some fashion in silence and in sleep, and as though gathered into the ark of Noe where it is nowise disturbed. For what can disturb the soul whom *no goad of cupidity disquiets* and *no sting of fear agitates*? In such a soul dwell peace and the last degree of repose, and there rests the true Solomon whose place is in peace and his abode in Sion.' (*De Triplica Via*, cap. II. para. 4.)

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