

MAN THE MODERN

Mind you, I don't mean to say that men and women in the world around us are wallowing in mortal sin: they haven't got the constitution for it.—Mr Frank Sheed, addressing the Bosco Conference, Edinburgh, 1947.

MR SHEED (*Man the Forgotten*) and Mr Alexis Carrel (*Man the Unknown*) both chose to write a book about Man. The Catholic wrote didactically, emphasising the known truths about man and his divine origin and destiny. The scientist came very near in many ways to the Catholic position. Both entered a protest against the materialistic trends that would move man from his central and unique place in the universe and regard him simply as another species and subordinate his individuality to the laws that govern masses. These two authors, however, differed, as far as my present subject is concerned, in that the Catholic tended to look backwards while the scientist took cognisance of something that the other decided to ignore, the possibility that man is still undergoing evolutionary change.

Fundamentally, it goes without saying, man does not change. If the concept *man* differs from the man whom the psalmist sang of and Christ provided for and St Thomas considered in his cosmic and eternal setting then not only philosophy but also theology are challenged. Terms, above all the major term in all our syllogisms about man, have changed their meaning and we are wandering in the jungles of incertitude again.

Man does not change. The cry of David for God rings true today. Nothing has been added to or taken away from the mystery that surrounds him and pervades him, down to the smallest cell of his body. *Quis intelligit delicta?* Ovid and St Paul have expressed for all time the mystery of flesh and spirit and their apparent antagonism. For all practical purposes the sacraments, and not an ethical or psychological code, still less an evolutionary speculation, give the answer.

And yet, in smaller matters, in the accidents that qualify his nature, man has suffered a change. Long ago a writer in *The Atlantic Monthly* submitted in a very objective essay the thesis that our minor virtues are changing. The old picture of the deadly sins remains true enough as a diagram but when coloured up is altogether too lurid to depict the life of a Cockney clerk of 1950. Wars and the aftermath of wars bring to the surface of society some of the old turbulence of passions, but the majority of quite irreligious readers of newspapers think of them, if they think at all.

as strange survivals from a barbaric past. The key-note of the lives of most of us is a kind of half-willing decency.

Francis Thompson, in an essay from which the title of this symposium is borrowed, *Health and Holiness*, was one of the first to express this idea in Catholic terms. The skiagraphic and prophetic eye of the poet saw what is now, I must suppose, a commonplace in the experience of every priest who hears confessions.

Put into my worse prose, his thesis is that man of the great ages of the Faith was more robust and vigorous in mind and body, less reflecting and less sensitive to pain in himself and others than are his descendants today. 'Hamlet', he says, 'has increased and multiplied and his seed fills the land.' Our constitutions (as Mr Sheed would put it) have become enfeebled. It is a difficult task for some 'even to front existence'.

From this he goes on very guardedly and with an apology that I have made my own at the end of this article, to suggest that in the sacrament of penance and in asceticism the practice of those times was adapted to more lusty men, that these should be modified, as he says they are by wise confessors, to suit the effete generations of our time. He takes us back to St Paul: 'Unhappy man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death?' (Incidentally, St Paul was no weakling in the physical sense; his wanderings, adventurings and beatings-up show us that, as Kipling said, he could outmarch a camel.) This is a cry from the spirit, but 'Its intimacy was removed and deadened by the circumvallations of theological truisms'. Rather optimistically (as I think) Francis Thompson suggests that compared with a ruder and hardier race we are become more spiritual, but he records with borrowed humour the warning of a bishop not to put off the old man merely in order that we might put on the old woman. Startlingly, he quotes Luther: *pecca fortiter*, but with reservations.

Then follows a constructive passage that is of value to modern physicians whether of body, mind or soul. 'The modern body hinders perfection after the way of the weakling: it scandalises by its feebleness and sloth [one recalls Mr Evelyn Waugh in a recent review taking soberly to himself, as most of us might, the warning of a priest-writer against this insidious deadly sin]; it exceeds by luxury and the softer forms of vice, not by hot insurgence; it abounds in vanity, and frivolity and all the petty sins of the weakling which vitiate the spirit; it pushes to pessimism, which is the wail of the weakling turning back from the press, to agnosticism which is sometimes a form of mental sloth, &c.'

This clinical picture of modern man reminds one by contrast

of what Saintsbury said about medieval man: that he had all the virtues except moderation and all the vices except triviality. Saintsbury, by the way, has an interesting note somewhere on *accidia*. A deadly sin in those days, and still so by definition, it must baffle many a confessor today to draw the line between that and what we doctors are half-content to call 'nervous debility'.

Of course all this is to write as an amateur moral theologian, a superfluous piece of naughtiness even in Francis Thomson, if he had not excused himself so charmingly. Let me stick to the medical side, and aid and abet him a little more.

One must agree with the poet about the superior robustness (and robustiousness) of our ancestors. 'He was a being of another creation. He ate and feared not [our dyspeptic millionaires]; he drank, and in all Shakespeare there is no allusion to *delirium tremens* [the symptoms of the modern toper are mostly due to deprivation, notably of Vitamin B1]; his schoolmaster flogged him large-heartedly and he was almost more tickled by the joke than by the cane [consider here the modern substitution of the solemn lecture for a spanking; probably most healthy boys still prefer the latter]; he wore a rapier by his side and stabbed or was stabbed by his fellow-man in pure good fellowship and sociable high spirits [to us in these Other Islands the horse-play at an Irish fair seems to belong to a lower, a more primitive culture]. For him the whole apparatus of virtue was constructed, a robust system fitted to a robust time.'

'The medieval man fought amidst the torrid lands of the East jerkined and breeched with iron which it makes us ache to look upon; our men in khaki fall out by hundreds during peace manoeuvres on an English down.' This was written before the days of systematic health surveys: a little later the recruiting boards of 1915 found a C3 population. 'They (of the Middle Ages) went about in the most frightful forms of hair-shirt which grew stiffened with their blood [and no word of streptococci] and yet were unrestingly energetic. For us it would mean valetudinarian impotence [good word!] which, without heroic macerations, is but too apt to overtake us. . . . These were the days of *vertu*—when the ideal of men was vital force, to do everything with their whole strength.'

The parentheses are, of course, mine.

On sensitiveness, I have quoted him already. I knew an old man, born in 1850, who as a young farm servant walked from Braemar to Aberdeen, sixty miles, to see one of the last of the public hangings. He snatched a few hours' sleep before joining the crowd. When the felon was led to the scaffold he pulled his cap down

over his eyes, fought his way out of sight and sound, and walked back to Braemar. He was a modern without knowing it. Our criminal code, that barely deters the egregious variants from ordinary decency—white slavers and razor-slathers—is now too strong meat for a modern mixed jury to stomach. A distinguished lawyer tells me the present changes have been forced on our legislature by the increasing difficulty of getting a jury to convict where the death penalty is involved.

In matters *de sexto et nono* let me quote our poet again. 'Realise the riotous animality of primitive man. Witness the amazing pro-genitive catalogue of Jewish king after Jewish king, the lengthening bed-roll of their wives: then reflect that these men still thirsted . . . after illicit waters. . . . Remember, from a hundred evidences, that all the passions of these men were on a like turbulent scale; and estimate the distance to the British paterfamilias, a law-abiding creature in every way who (according to the Shah's epigram) prefers fifty years with one wife to a hundred years with fifty wives.'

As Caryll Houselander says:

They want the Sunday smell—
Beef in a dead street—
Six days to be bored
And one to over-eat.

It may be objected that both poets are writing of Little England and that more virile races abroad can tell a different tale. Primitives, yes, and a few 'backward' peoples like the 'healthy Hunzas' and the Catholic Swiss from the Valley of Loetschental. But civilisation, as we must accept it at present, inevitably means dilution of vigour. I once sat at the same table with one of the present Sovereigns of an Eastern State, then heir-apparent. He was a Moslim and had one wife. 'Is not one enough for most men, doctor?' he asked with a laugh. On the whole we are moving towards a kind of monogamy. That this is likely to take, outside Catholicism, the form of successive polygamy is due to weakness of principle and of the will, not to say pristine turbulence of sex instinct. It is a fair summing-up of our generation that we are not, as some superficial observers would judge, over-sexed but rather under-sexed. The modern dance *à deux* would be impossible for primitive peoples, Africans for instance, without immediate consequences. What we are suffering from, as D. H. Lawrence pointed out, is 'sex in the head'.

I think it was another of Mr Middleton Murry's brilliant contributors to *The Adelphi* of nearly thirty years ago who actually suggested that evolution was producing a new 'mutant' in sex, a

kind of indeterminate creature. Myself, I think the evidence points rather to retrogression and degeneracy. But it is undoubtedly true that voluntary celibacy *of a sort*, the sorts that Mr Graham Greene has something to say about, is very common now. In medical experience matrimonial troubles are caused by failure to fulfil the natural law as often as by refusal to accept the limitations of evil and divine law. Some moderns would have the criminal law altered to compromise with the 'mutant' or, as most of us would call him, the pervert. Short of this, even Catholic psychologists regard many of these cases as suffering rather than sinning. Minor forms of aberration from the normal (incidentally much more common in non-Catholic schools than in ours) are in my experience very mercifully dealt with by the younger confessors though not always by the older. Scrupulousness is, among practising Catholics in this country, perhaps as common as any deliberate excess. I need not say that the former is a more potent wile of the devil than the latter, since it aims to render the sacrament of penance null and void.

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These changes in the physical and mental make-up of men and women should, I submit, be taken as proved on the evidence available. That they are part of any evolutionary or transmorphic change is a hypothesis that lacks scientific backing. Civilisations rise and fall; tides of vitality ebb and flow in accordance with biological cycles we do not yet understand. The history of mankind includes the glacial and interglacial epochs and allows time for many global and local variations. The changes we are considering are comparatively recent and short-term, but remain as a fact.

On more familiar ground it is tempting to look at some of the definite causes which operate in the making of twentieth-century man. This is territory already well-surveyed. Starting at the top, there is the decline of divine worship and with it of the higher moral sanctions. The pseudo-humanism of the Welfare State has been substituted for true religion. As Bergson noted, there has been the expansion by scientific achievement of man's senses (the telescope, the microscope, the telephone, wireless, television, rapid locomotion, the conquest of the air, and a greater range of foods and playthings even for simple people): there has been no corresponding expansion of man's mind to apprehend properly these new sensory data. Intellectual benefits promised by printing, photography, the cine-camera, broadcasting, have not justified themselves. As a character in a modern play defined progress: 'A hundred years ago only a few people could read: now everybody reads the Sunday

papers'. If it be true, as has been stated, that 90 per cent of town children go to the pictures once a week and 50 per cent go more than twice a week, the change in many everyday psychological reactions must be immense. For one thing, to be entertained by sensational matter that does not require any effort of the mind in return, encourages escape into phantasy, and there are signs that this is becoming a common aberration. Another conclusion I draw is that a priest (or layman) who gives a long sermon or instruction to film-addicted young people is as one who beats the air.

I have nothing to add to what is being written about the modern State and its encroachment on forensic, parental and personal responsibility. Of Health Services, one result of these has been the disappearance of all domestic medicine in industrialised areas, and the growth of a valetudinarian attitude to health. This modern curse even threatened to infect the clergy and the religious houses. The old rule was to mortify the flesh: the new rule makes it almost a sacred duty to keep well. Long ago Brother Ass was often maltreated by his rider: now he shows signs of taking charge of him. To the many worries of many a priest and nun under obedience is added the worry of being bound to report to the superior any and all illnesses. A new field for scrupulosity, modern weapon of the devil, is thus presented. It is part of the strong nature to go 'all out': minor variations from normal health, like temporary exhaustions and the pre-holiday feeling, are better taken in our stride. But the cult of the expert (another modern danger) is with us: 'the doctor will know, ask him'. It is all very difficult for a generation for whom the east wind (proverbially unhealthful, as Francis Thompson noted) 'dips the soul in the gloom of earthquake and eclipse'. I speak as a sufferer.

One reason for many of our troubles is that excessive urbanisation has removed man too far from the natural springs of physical and mental well-being. Towns eat up the country. Their populations die out in the Biblical third or fourth generation, to be renewed from rural districts. Many sufferers from vague, intractable and recurrent illnesses discover this for themselves and take to a country life. Health-cure and naturopath homes are nearly always sited in the country.

At the basis of many changes is the deterioration in our national nutrition. There are several reasons for this. Farmers are beginning to answer the Government drives for more production by complaining that their land is exhausted. Mining the soil without ensuring the return of fertility that mixed farming automatically makes, leads to erosion, dust-bowls and soil exhaustion. An exhausted soil

means a devitalised people: imports of food only put off the evil day. Much might be done by making better use of the land we have, and by more rational preparation for food of the crops we produce, notably wheat. It almost seems as if the old curse had come upon us: 'And I shall break the staff of their bread, and they shall eat and not be satisfied'. Malnutrition in its sub-clinical forms is undoubtedly a factor to be reckoned up in assessing the capabilities for good or evil of Man the Modern. There was great wisdom behind the old rule of the Orders that they should raise their own food and be self-supporting and as far as possible independent of outside labour. The health, and to some extent the holiness of many a large presbytery today are dependant on the baker. But some of the monastic orders are among our best cultivators. Many bake their own bread. Some grind their own flour. I know a small Carmel where they do both. However inapplicable these measures are to industrialised populations, the religious derive great benefit for themselves and show a good example by thus side-stepping mass-production of food with its attendant evils. Hawkesyard bread with butter is half-way to a balanced diet, and a Stonyhurst Majestic potato, organically grown, is with milk a meal in itself.

The subject leads naturally to a discussion of asceticism, which I hope I am too wise to attempt. Readers who have not already done so should read Francis Thompson's essay for themselves. But a doctor may say a word on fasting. Two boiled eggs, a heap of lettuce, two good slices of bread and butter, and perhaps a sweet biscuit to follow do not exceed the eight ounces that are allowed at the collation on fast-days, yet this is no more than many people's main meal today, if indeed they can get the eggs. Except that we eat more often, we are all doing a medieval fast most of the time. Further, many of us are living on the verge or special malnutrition, especially in the matter of Vitamin B, the happiness Vitamin as it has been called, on which item, according to Drummoud and Wilbraham, gaol prisoners in the nineteenth century fared better than modern man. Under these circumstances each successive meal, poor though it may be, does nevertheless add its small quota of essential nourishment. Not emptiness but a form of starvation threatens us when we miss a meal. Lassitude, mental fatigue, failure to concentrate, are among the early symptoms of most dietetic deficiencies. To fast, then, is often to feel unfit and to be unfit for the next task, be it prayer or manual work.

Post-war shortages, then, have intensified the process of devitalisation from Francis Thompson's day: 'The pride of life is no more. To live is itself an ascetic exercise. We require spurs to being, not

a snaffle to rein back the ardour of being'. How much more is this true of modern 2,900-calorie man!¹

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If in this patchwork way I have fairly depicted modern men and women, what of the young? What we of the middle ages of man's span see as recent developments, they accept as permanencies. Abnormal and often hateful to us, modern conditions are to them the norm. As Mr Donald Nicholl said to me, the very idea of home has lost meaning for a great many. Stability and security, *pace* all the Beveridges, mean nothing to them. I hope—I am sure—the younger priests understand them: it is almost impossible for the older clergy, except in the most objective way.

Perhaps M. Maritain is right and the world will never again see Christendom like a walled city (I quote from memory): what we must hope for is a sprinkling of saints, here and there. There is plenty of material for saint-making among the young and in the circumstances of their lives. I know of many virile lives being wasted (I speak as one less wise, perhaps) because they cannot get married because they cannot get a house. 'We find our austerities ready made.'

In conclusion, if I may indicate the line I think Catholic Action should take for Man the Modern, and especially for the young people, it would be to emphasise technique. We are a technical generation. We understand processes, and courses, and technical progressions. The technique of sanctity has had many demonstrators: perhaps it is not sufficiently brought before young people. I know of a new devotion, a parish pilgrimage that has become an annual event. Its clerical founder said that the outward secret of its catching-on so well was the walk bare-footed.

'It is dangerous treading here; yet with reverence I adventure; since the mistake of personal speculation is after all merely a mistake, and no one will impute to it authority.'

A. G. BADENOCH.

¹ In this survey of modern man it is fair to credit to him the passing of excessive cigarette smoking and spirit drinking, but this has been partly offset by the fact that these indulgences are shared by the female sex more than they used to be.