

CHRISTIAN LIBERTY AND
OBLIGATIONS

II

*The Christian's Social Obligations*¹

WE have seen that the liberty of the Christian is, by definition, something super-human, absolute, inviolable. But if all this be so, how are we to set any limits to it? What room does it leave for rules and law? Are we not being so carried away with our idea of Christian freedom that we are being led to an anti-social anarchy, an anarchy all the more dangerous for being an anarchy of the Spirit? And in point of historic fact, do we not find throughout the history of the Church an abiding suspicion of such an exaltation of the liberty of the Spirit? How can we reconcile such claims with the demands of social law and order, with the well-being of the human community?

All liberty has both a personal and a social aspect, because liberty and the common good are bound up with one another. But does not this present a serious difficulty so soon as liberty be considered, not on the natural but on the *theological* plane? And is not this only to be expected when one passes from the order of the natural philosophy to that of faith? Is not the Christian, who measures his standards by God alone, free from the clutches—in his most intimate liberties at least—of every social obligation? Are we not to expect here a sort of supernatural logic in direct opposition to the logic of nature?

No; for it is our own logic, the authentic logic of the Christian economy, that is to ordain a social obligation *within* this spiritual liberty itself. We shall see that the Spirit Himself imparts the true balance, the true rule of

¹ The concluding section of an address to the Rouen Semaine Sociale, continued from BLACKFRIARS, April, 1939.

this liberty. After Christian liberty, follows Christian obligation—it is the other vital element in the ‘atmosphere’ so necessary to the ordered exercise of our liberties in social life.

Liberty, obligation. We should not set them in opposition. To do so would prove as unsatisfactory as for the philosopher to oppose personality with its absolute rights to society and its inexorable demands. The dynamic force in both these would soon put any such dualism out of joint. It were equally vain to try and limit them both from without, to achieve a compromise by using the one to limit the other. For it is at the very heart of the Christian economy that we find them indissolubly united, in a structural interdependence—personal perfection and the community life.

We have said that the gift of the Spirit was the source and guarantee of liberty—but how are we to receive the plenitude of this gift? Only in and through Christ made flesh, leader and Head of all mankind. We need but recall here the priestly prayer of Christ in the Gospel of St. John, and the metaphor of the Vine and its branches. This is the very law of the Incarnation—the mystery not only of the coming of the Word made Flesh, but also of a God who is head of all mankind. In this sense Christianity is not primarily a ‘mysticism’; it is an historical fact. More exactly the ‘mysticism’ of the Spirit is based on the Incarnation; the Christian is the son of God in Christ, his leader and Head. *In Christo, in Spiritu*; these two formulæ are interchangeable in our sacred writings, and it is St. Paul, the theologian of liberty, who is the expounder of the doctrine of the Mystical Body.²

Thus we find a ‘natural law’ operating on the supernatural plane in the divine economy of salvation (and what a joy it is for the theologian to see this inner solidarity of

² See especially the two volumes of the ‘Unam Sanctam’ series (Paris: Editions du Cerf), *L’Unité dans l’Eglise* by J. A. Möhler, and *Catholicisme* by P. de Lubac, S.J.

nature and of grace!). The philosopher declares that man is by nature 'a social animal,' born to live and attain his perfection in society, and we recognise there a fundamental need. The will to live in society is as natural and compelling as the very will to live itself, and the social life thus insinuates itself into the very heart of the individual man, and the human personality finds the occasion of its perfection in the community. No opposition there, nor compromise, but a result achieved *from within*. The theologian makes his own this unity discerned by the philosopher, and shows that it holds good also on the supernatural plane.

Just as the human personality achieves and can only achieve its perfection in and through the life of the community, so the Christian can only reach perfection and find liberty on the supernatural plane by incorporation into Christ, the Head of the community, the brotherhood of the sons of God. Indeed, the unity of personal liberty and social obligation is even closer on the supernatural than on the natural plane. For whereas on the natural plane it is only with difficulty that they can be prevented from coming into conflict, on the supernatural plane it is the selfsame grace, the selfsame communication of divine life, that endows us with the liberty of the Spirit and incorporates us into the Christ-Society. We have seen in the first part of this discourse that the Christian exaltation of the rights of the individual and his claim to liberty are based on the knowledge of his vocation; it now remains to show that this vocation and its concrete realisation consist in predestination in Christ.

The 'natural law,' then, acts here as a law of grace. Christians, as Christian *persons*, are conscious of a social need that is satisfied in the Mystical Body. The Christian is not to sanctify himself by escaping his social obligations in a personal mysticism. Nor will he consent to the idea that the sanctification of society is brought about only, as it were, in an indirect fashion, in the sense that a collection

of sanctified individuals would make a holy community. This would be a false spirituality, a parallel heresy in the religious sphere to that of Liberalism in the political. For just as liberty does not consist in a compromise between the rival claims of individuals, but in the exaltation of the individual in and through society, so too the spiritual liberty of the Christian does not consist merely in the mutual respect one for another of the sons of God, nor is it the result of a facile dependence upon brotherly sentiment—a form of escapism—but rather is it an ever deepening participation in the Christian communion.

True brotherly love is specifically the same as the love of God. We are sometimes surprised that the two precepts of charity for God and for our neighbour should be on an equal footing, but that is really the very core of the Christian mystery.

We can accept therefore no sort of disjunction of the personality and the social—the individual being regarded as the spirit to be sanctified, society mere matter, incapable of sanctification. Whether or not that be inherently possible, it is not the order of things planned by God, for this is fulfilled only by an *Incarnation*. And for having more or less accepted such disjunction a certain section of the Christian world well merited the violent criticisms of Marx. A real disregard for society, a failure to understand its grandeur and importance, characterised a whole era of Christian theory and practice (that is to say, in many circles; for in spite of and alongside of these failures and this blindness we can see the eternal plan of God being worked out). At any rate many Christians lacked enthusiasm in this regard, and that spur of interest and ardour without which doctrine is liable to become a dead letter. To-day the revivification of the doctrine of the Mystical Body and the magnificent enthusiasm which it arouses even in the simplest people make us more acutely aware of the age-long negligence which allowed it to lie fruitless like unused capital.

Dialectical materialism, indeed, had an easy time of it with that refined 'ideology' which would know nothing of material realities and the social obligations which have their economic roots in them. 'It is easy to be a saint if you leave off being a human being,' said Marx. It is indeed a false and vain sanctity which will take no notice of the fundamental material conditions of human existence. But the Christian recognises them ungrudgingly, for he knows that his God, Christ made man, did so, accepted and consecrated them when he took them upon Himself, and that not only by the Incarnation itself but by the economy of salvation then instituted, the Mystical Body which is the prolongation of it. This communion, this supernatural 'collectivism,' is what constitutes the necessary 'atmosphere' for the ordered exercise of our liberties and determines the temporal mission of the Christian.

But are we not now faced with a more subtle temptation if we are still to prize liberty of the spirit as our greatest treasure? For it would seem that the reconciliation of the interior life and the collective life cannot take place without compromise or injury to one or the other.

We may admit that there is no true Christian alive who has not yielded at one time or another to the attractions of solitude. And the Church has always recognised it as a high vocation. Even the philosopher may wonder whether truth and integrity do not really demand a kind of intellectual detachment, which will enable us to escape the danger of becoming soiled by our social environment, hemmed in by social prejudices and conventions in the mockery of a solitude in which we can no longer be ourselves. What then of the Christian faced with a sin-ridden world!

But, except in the case of an extraordinary, a magnificent—a magnificently 'inhuman'—vocation, the Christian's place is in the world, there to bear witness to his God, and that just because his God came incarnate among men. For

once again we come up against the Incarnation; our God is not a distant God infinitely removed from us. 'Far from being a retreat or an escape'—said a Christian philosopher who in our day has known the cost of proclaiming Christian liberty—'far from being a defection in face of the drama of existence and of life, a taking refuge in the passive curiosity of the spectator, our participation in the drama will be all the more real and thorough if we preserve our interior liberty intact. It is, indeed, a result of the "law" of the Incarnation—this almost terrifying activity into which every Christian is in some degree plunged if he is not to betray his calling.'³

It is indeed a difficult problem—this question of participation in the society in which we live, in social service. But we cannot accept, in any case, the solution of M. Benda's *Trahison des Clercs*—for the 'clerk' is not a traitor only when he is swayed by the emotions of the mass, but also when he refuses love and service, withdrawing himself into 'splendid isolation.' For the Christian is always obsessed by the thought of his neighbour, of the community of mankind; he may not wrap himself up in his own private salvation, tacitly consenting to the spiritual and temporal wretchedness of his fellows. Christianity is a brotherhood.

The Christian then will be able to resolve the antimony between social obligations and spiritual liberty, because he understands in his inmost soul that liberty of spirit is achieved in a community of union with Christ. He is ready to see that liberty can exist only within the framework of society, that its true fulfilment lies in its very obligations. Liberty exists *within* the common good: this is demanded by the very nature of man as it is of the very nature of the Christian.

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³ J. Maritain, *Lettre sur l'Indépendance*.

If we are to understand better the importance of the Christian 'atmosphere' for the difficult task of the organisation of our liberties in the social life of to-day, we must examine from a truly Christian standpoint the exact basis of this social obligation of the Christian, decide how the true child of God must view it.

The Christian will be prepared to see how man's social nature contributes to his liberty, and how the common good is the fundamental principle which gives order to his liberties. This is because the common good, already pre-eminent in the scale of human values, has become for him the receptacle which is to be infused with divine life. Let us see how this comes about.

To help us in our analysis we shall take a look at what is going on under our very eyes among men of to-day, among the flower of present-day Christendom—gazing not with passive wonder, but with that clear-eyed and ardent interest which will lead us to a real understanding of the aspirations, the actions, the achievements of contemporary Christians.

The briefest of glances at our present-day world will reveal one characteristic with which its every element is everywhere deeply engraved—the least human actions, the most trivial objects, are involved in an immense social organisation which conditions them through and through. I cannot make a small purchase in a shop, claim the tiniest wage, sign the briefest of contracts without realising how I am surrounded and supported by the multitude of economic, social, legal and political conditions, which form the very groundwork of my work, my business, my contract. The 'wires' thus flung across the world cross and re-cross one another, are inextricably interwoven and entangle everything in their toils. A movement on the New York stock exchange will increase my income without my even being aware of it, and the next day my little undertakings may succumb because of an industrial merger in Japan. And so forth and so on, on every plane of human existence.

The life of society encircles me inescapably. Just where we think our activities are most personal, or the use to which we put our property the most purely private affair, it is really regulated by, and at the mercy of, this network of social and economic entanglements. The 'common good' penetrates to the core of our most secret actions, seeps into the common body through a thousand pores. Lawyers see very clearly how every day the public right encroaches upon and gnaws away the rights of the individual, and how the social element enters into the most personal of transactions. It is from this truth that the State-exalting ideologies of both Right and Left obtain the element of truth which renders them so attractive and so dangerous.

Thus the most humble individuals no less than the most powerful magnates are finding themselves more and more involved in the complex entanglements of modern society. Work, commerce, industry, education, banking, and even leisure-activities, no longer take place, no longer can take place, save in collective groups, soon themselves bound together in an ever-growing organism. If this 'socialisation' has been most evident and weighed most heavily in the economic sphere—and that from the point of view of the capitalist as well as of the worker—it is none the less actually taking place in every sphere of human activity. It is true that this has not, and could not, come about without grave disadvantages, but they cannot of themselves outweigh the immense benefits which this 'socialisation' of human activity and human resources has procured. It necessarily involves a terrible constraint on the individual, but after all the danger of that is only the reverse of the medal. We must weigh it against the increasing prosperity it should bring to mankind. It would not only be futile to try to protest against this 'social progress,' it would also be a folly and a sin against the 'natural' law of human perfection—if it is true that it is by social activity that human perfection is attained—the individual

finding in a fuller 'socialisation' of spiritual and material wealth a greater and steadier capacity for progress.

But now that man's social life is of ever increasing importance we will see that the Incarnation must take place here too; and the more men become involved in society, the more urgent is this need. Seeing that a human good—and one of the greatest importance and the widest application—is bound up in it, divine life *must* inform it. The Incarnation of Christ must be continued in it.

For this is the very law of the Incarnation which the presence of the Holy Ghost in mankind inaugurated and fulfils: if God is to take flesh to render man divine, He must take *all* in man, the highest and the lowest in his nature, the social factors as well as the individual. Anything which remained outside would not be redeemed and freed. Such is the authentic character of divine life upon earth. The docetism which would limit the scope of Christ's assumption of our nature, in order to safeguard God's transcendence, is but a false reverence. And the Word Was Made Flesh—so St. John phrased it in words so final, so decisive for humanity.

If this is the law of incarnation in Christ it is also that of the incarnation of divine life in the Church of Christ throughout the centuries. It is the whole man and all his works that are 'assumed' by grace. Divine life is not infused into our lives only after their human content is eliminated or their native structure destroyed, but by a raising of the latter whole and entire to a supernatural plane. Anything which remained outside the influence of this grace would be lost. No, we shall not yield to this false reverence which will not dare to see the Church, Christ's Body, incorporated in humanity.

Those fundamental elements in man which condition his very being and progress are evidently the first to be deeply involved in this incorporation—such is man's 'social' structure outside which he cannot attain perfection. The law of nature operates as a law of grace.

For a century now this 'law of nature' has played an increasingly large part in man's life in the social, economic and political spheres, and it is a magnificent, if a tragic sight to see how the very perversion of this social life shows man's fundamental need of it. If the Incarnation does not include it, a multitude of souls will be cast away. It is vain to try and sanctify the individual without sanctifying the social man—vain and clumsy tactics that will give no results. For it implies a certain lack of coherence in the economy of salvation, and a tacit consent to the limiting of the sphere of application of the law of the Incarnation. After all, what does it profit me to make holy my intellectual faculties, sensibility, emotions, work, if my relations within society are necessarily incapable of salvation? For it is precisely these that most threaten the happiness of our contemporaries.

Far from regarding the perpetual presence of society and the common good as a check to his spiritual liberty, to his every kind of liberty, the Christian rejoices in it, for it enables him to see how, at the heart of things, liberty and the common good are bound up with one another, both humanly and divinely speaking.

Thus the more the common good is interwoven with the web of community life, the more does it become matter for grace, and, if I so may put it, the 'ground' of the Mystical Body—not a mere collection of individuals, but a community of men in the strictest sense of the word. We should be eager to appreciate the grandeur of these social and communal ideals—these ideals which fill men of our century with such enthusiasm. We should strive to see in them a great harvest field for Christianity. The plough is already breaking the soil. Can we not see this when we see the keen realisation of the necessity for a vocational apostolate which is being embodied in different movements in the different classes of society? It is the mystical incorporation of Christ in the community life of men.

We must fearlessly recognise the accession of the

masses to an historical significance and the fact that they now play a predominant rôle even under totalitarian régimes. We must refuse to abandon these mighty human forces to the depersonalising influence of the herd instinct and the slavery of the mob.

The social obligation of the Christian with the duties it involves (and the responsibility can sometimes be a crushing one, and a fierce independence of spirit is necessary to shoulder it) is not therefore something extra, added on as a necessary but *external* and accidental condition of his life as a Christian. This obligation is indeed the very law of his perfection in Christ. As Pius the Eleventh said, 'Catholic Action is not external to the Christian, it belongs to the very essence of his life.'

In such an 'atmosphere' the Christian will understand and practice this constant dependence upon his human environment happily and harmoniously. His interior liberty is the surest guide to his social liberties. And if these social liberties are an essential condition of interior liberty, this inner liberty of the children of God is still more necessary for the preservation of social liberties themselves. It constitutes the 'atmosphere' without which the ordered exercise of social liberties is inconceivable but with which even the slave has found freedom in Christ.

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