TIME TO STAND AND STARE

By JOHN F. KAVANAUGH

It is well that there are palaces of peace
And discipline and dreaming and desire.
Lest we forget our heritage and cease
The Spirit's work — to hunger and aspire:

Lest we forget that we were born divine.

From C. S. Lewis, *Spirits in bondage.*

AS AQUINAS maintained, following Aristotle, 'action flows from being'. Who and what we are — our very nature as persons — is expressed, embodied and realized in our activities. Self-discovery, as well as discovering another person, rests upon action as the principle of self-revelation and self-understanding. It is possible, however, seriously to misunderstand our nature and personhood if our actions are artificially constricted or defined by cultural, economic or political imperatives.

Human activity ranges from hand and head work to contemplation, appreciation and even leisure itself. In every action, our humanity is revealed and our spirit is confirmed. But if our activities are confined to those which are exclusively productive, economic, marketable or consumerist, we inevitably feel ourselves to be confined. Spirit is in bondage. The spirit of work shackles the work of the Spirit.

One of the great dangers of advanced industrial society, both in its collective and its consumer forms, is that productivity alone, in different ways, becomes the dominant or even exclusive expression of our personhood. We are artificially constrained to reveal and find ourselves in merely object-related actions: producing and possessing. The complaint of Friedrich Schiller in his sixth letter from *On the aesthetic education of man* has become troublingly prescient:

> Everlastingly chained to a single little fragment of the Whole, man himself develops into nothing but a fragment; everlastingly in his ear the monotonous sound of the wheel that he turns, he never develops the harmony of his being, and instead of putting the stamp

> of humanity upon his own nature, he becomes nothing more than the imprint of his occupation or of his specialized knowledge.

Human self-expression, through ever-expanding methods employed in highly industrialized, militarized and nationalized countries, is being channelled into the producing, marketing and consuming mode. Schiller's 'full harmony of our being' is collapsed into a monotone. Whether we are young or old, employed or on relief, retired or actively involved in a career, our sense of our identity and value as persons is some variation of the production theme. Our humanity becomes little more than what we produce or possess.

As Christians, our beliefs include the inherent dignity of the human person, not only fashioned in the image and likeness of God, but also marvellously elevated by the Word's taking of flesh in Jesus Christ. It is this belief which grounds the 'personalism' of Pope John Paul II. The only reason that human labour has dignity is that it is *human* labour: it is the expression of the human person. The primacy of labour over capital, consequently, is rooted in the recognition of the primacy of persons in the world. This alone is the reason why the exploitation of labour is evil. This alone is the reason why questions both of faith and justice are relevant to the political and economic orders. And it is for this reason that all human labour must be properly humanized rather than alienated.

Not only issues of justice emerge, however. Equally persistent issues occur concerning the relationship between labourers and the products of labour. Work, we have said, is the expression of our personhood: this is its worth. If, in any way, the labourer becomes a mere expression of labour or if the products of labour become the source of human value, then the proper ordering of the world is inverted and distorted. When work becomes the whole of our lives, we lose touch with our humanity *of* which work is only a reflection and part.

In this light, we can see how humans need so desperately those 'palaces of peace' which C. S. Lewis cherished. Dreaming and desire, hunger and aspiration, are activities of the whole, albeit, incomplete human person. To be sure, they are related to our capacity for productivity; but they are most appropriately characteristics of our entire identity as creatures: dependent, radically unfinished in ourselves, and yet filled with stunning grace. Our personhood is directed towards completions which are received and accepted rather than achieved. And it is in this context that

leisure is crucial to our self-understanding. If our personhood is primarily received, so also are its fulfilments.

'Lest we forget that we were born divine', it is well that we have our palaces of peace. Peace is a human activity; but it is the action of repose. It is a standing in the presence of what is, not the acquiring or producing of it. It is a witnessing and reception of the truth of who we are. Peace is a freedom, consequently, from harsh task and managerial struggle. It is a freedom even from duty. It may be called leisure.

The leisure which allows us to stand in the truth of our personhood can be found in many forms. There are four special 'palaces of peace', however, which are especially required for the work of the Spirit in contemporary experience. They are solitude, relationship, simplicity, and compassionate presence to others. Each has leisure as its prerequisite. In each we experience our personhood as received, as gift and as mystery. In each of them we are put into contact with our creaturehood in a manner that can never be experienced through mere production. In each area, moreover, we are engaged as believing, hoping and loving — pre-eminently human activities all, but not those of achievement, production or appropriation. Faith, hope and love are dynamics of mutuality, acceptance, appreciation and reverence. They are the action of God in us. Unfortunately, in contemporary technological societies productivity dominates the life and experience of most people. The very requirements of personhood — solitude, relationship, simplicity and compassion — have become commodities in themselves. Production, accumulation and consumption of objects has so taken control over our consciousness, that our very experience of interiority, the texture of our relationships, our capacity for simple appreciation and our sense of compassion are forced through the grid of productivity and consumerism.

There is a crisis in the humanization of labour, and it is the same as the crisis in personhood. We are losing touch with the leisure experiences which call us back to our worth, our dignity, and our irreplaceability as humans. Our palaces of peace have become mere extensions of the cultural factory.

Time for solitude

What is left of us when we are no longer relating to objects, by producing or possessing them? What is the foundation of our value? What is the core of our identity? The answers to these questions are recklessly distorted by our relation to work and the products of our

work. If economic definitions of value govern our categories of self-worth, our identities become totally determined by the objects we produce and consume. In the United States, for example, Saks Fifth Avenue has an advertising slogan which touts, 'We are all things you are'. In England an advertisement which reduces the modern woman to the products she possesses ends with the claim, '*The Sunday Times* is Her'. Behind these media themes lurks a philosophical and spiritual premise of all consumer societies. Self-definition is found in externals, in things which can be bought and sold, in status which can be earned, in objects which can be measured and replaced. Self-fulfilment is achieved, supposedly, by the clothes we wear, by the video products we relate to, by the media we use, by the appliances we possess, by the buying-power we wield. Children have importance because they are primary marketing targets of the media. Retired people have no value because they have less to spend. Unemployed or old persons sense that their personal significance is diminished because they are no longer producing, earning, or buying. This is also a cause of the poor's self-hatred: not an imposition of poverty itself, but of the consumer culture. We arrive at the full definition of *homo consumens* (a phrase of the Jesuit General, Fr Pedro Arrupe), the 'consuming human', whose actual identity and desire is consumed by economic and productive life.

In this context, we can see that the experience of christian prayer and the recognition of oneself as a saved sinner by the sheer gift of grace is inhibited by our way of life with its economic myths and imperatives. 'Self-made' men and women who are defined by what they produce and possess cannot begin to comprehend the meaning of grace which is not earned, concocted, managed, won or insured. The prodigal son, the lost sheep, the lavish payment for labourers at the eleventh hour are all confounding images for an economic mentality formed by consuming, producing and acquiring. And yet, in solitude before God, such images are the means for entering into the relationship of the Trinity. We may encounter problems in our own prayer when we find it difficult to even feel 'real' unless we are performing, planning or doing something. We may find barriers in our spiritual direction experiences when we are confronted with deep-seated 'economic' resistances to the message of the gospels. Such problems and barriers are actually hindrances, made legitimate by our culture, to the experience of leisure in prayer: at rest, receptive, appreciative.

Even our culturally defined manner of 'spending time' inhibits solitude. True, it is quite possible that we imagine ourselves resting and relaxing, but if we investigate the 'expenditure' of our time we may find, with countless others, that our rest itself is consumed by activities. If there is passivity in our leisure, it is the passivity of relating to possessions or receiving data through objects. Television and radio continue to claim greater amounts of our leisure time. Communities are formed around media requirements. The last hours of our evenings are often given to the passive reception of propaganda and data from media whose function is largely to justify social and economic structures. Even in the sheer expenditure of time, solitude is displaced by a numbing assault of fabricated images. The average person living in the United States spends 26-30 hours a week watching television. This amounts to over ten uninterrupted years of a person's life — relating to a flickering object. The Information Technology Advisory Panel of the british Cabinet Office proposes to introduce thirty television channels into half of the households of the United Kingdom by 1986. What activities, we might ask, will such 'watching' displace?

All of this may be called leisure, but it is merely non-action. It is closer to the passivity of death, as it fails to express living personhood. The activity of leisure in solitude, however, brings us back to the reality of our life as gift. We encounter ourselves as irreplaceable because of our capacity to affirm life in faith, hope and love. These activities, even in leisure, are indeed fraught with risk and vulnerability. But they disengage us from the death-like trance induced by the world of objects where we find ourselves created, not in the image of God but in the likeness of commodities we produce and own.

Time for relationship

The second palace of peace is human relationship and solidarity. This is the realm of intimacy, of covenant, of community and friendship. In personal relationships, we find ourselves faced with the truth of our own sinfulness and poverty and affirmed in our grace and uniqueness. When we enter into the realm of the personal, we enter into the incomparable. In our love and commitments we discover a radical uniqueness about ourselves as persons — our capacity freely to give ourselves in faith, hope and love to other persons. What we make, build or possess are only secondary activities which find their meaning in our committed relationships.

The actions of friendship and intimacy cannot be bought or sold and are not subject to managerial control. Only we can do them for ourselves: if we do not place these acts, they will never be placed. They are freely given, freely received. They are part of the universe of grace rather than the universe of earnings — although certainly we must make efforts to dispose ourselves to encountering the living God in another person. Relationship is a disposition, consequently, which the wisdom of our industrial ideologies might call 'wasting time'.

Solidarity with another human being drives us back to the truth of our creaturehood. A lay woman states that one of the most painful experiences of marriage and children is being known so fully in one's own weakness and need for healing. One cannot live by externals in intimacy. One cannot be comforted by the cultural pretences of achievement and performance. A married man confesses that the most difficult thing about coming together in a community of believers who share their lives and struggles is the pain of being known and the fear of self-revelation. At the same time he acknowledges that the only experiences he has of being loved are those of his being known in his interior life — by wife, by children, by friends. Men and women religious often find themselves avoiding the most self-revelatory of community experiences (direction, mutual encouragement and correction, personal struggles and fears) and yet realize that the only time they have found themselves fully confirmed in their basic life choices has been when they have allowed themselves to be revealed.

The building of relationship demands freedom from other kinds of building. One must find time; give it. One must stand in the presence of the other. One must permit a mutual giving and receiving which can never be contrived or controlled as objects might be. As C. S. Lewis points out in *The four loves*, one must be vulnerable when one enters the wholly unmanageable realm of personhood. Trinkets and objects will never wound us; but if we restrict our cares to them, we will never live. Our hearts will never be broken, indeed; but they will become unbreakable, impenetrable, like dead things.

Productive and economic myths, to make matters worse, inhibit commitment and intimacy in countless ways. One might say the mere fact that authentic relationship cannot be marketed and consumed is enough to render it valueless in terms of economic criteria. The ways in which our culture preaches comparison,

competition and isolation drives a wedge between persons, whether in communities or families. External validation and pretence reinforce the fear of self-revelation. And the deployment of our time in producing, consuming, watching or tinkering is offered as a palliative for the pains of loneliness. *Cosmopolitan* magazine, which has editions in Europe, North America and South America, published an article last year that clearly and sadly articulates the displacement of personal relationship by possessions.

> What I really cherish about possessions is their extremely unhuman quality of immutability. Keats said it for all time: 'A thing of beauty is a joy forever'. Lovers grow cold. Spouses wrinkle. Children mature and move away. . . . Hobbies, to paraphrase Dorothy Parker, pass the time, but they do not feed the heart. Nothing short of passion does that, but even strong emotions rarely last. Possessions do.
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> I used to deride others' concern with 'mere things'. The way some people talked and thought about them, devoted their lives to acquiring them, seemed materialistic and crass. As the years passed and I suffered the normal amount of disappointment and betrayal at the hands of my fellow humans, however, I began to look with new eyes at those 'things' and to realize that perhaps they weren't so trivial after all. . . .
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> There may be no joy more intense than that occasioned by seeing an object you love and possessing it immediately — except, perhaps, the anticipation of wanting, and the eventual satisfaction of getting, something you have to plan and save and scheme for. All that you can truly possess is, in fact, things. As we've all heard a boring number of times, a child is only lent. If you clutch a loved one too closely, that person might disappear. . . . But there's no need to hold back when you're dealing with possessions. Clasp a sensuously soft cashmere throw as tightly as you like (assuming your fingernails are well cared for). It will never walk out on you.

It is revealing to note that the advertising slogan for the 'Cosmopolitan Woman' is: 'One of her most satisfying relationships is with a magazine'.

Our lives are so tied up with producing or accumulating things, that we find ourselves unable to rest in the presence of another. Or we are fearful of it. Restless and bereft of an interior life, we fill ourselves with projects and possessions. The apostolate or the job or acquisitions or the economic task claim more of our time — not only as a means of achieving value but also as an escape from the mystery

of the Other. It is similar to our problem with solitude. Like prayer, relationship is a palace of peace wherein we encounter the depths of being a person. Like prayer, it is also cultural resistance.

Time for simplicity

It is a paradox of consumer and production-oriented societies that intensified demands for immediate gratification are accompanied by a loss of appreciation. Savouring, appreciating, thanksgiving and celebration take time. They require a disengagement from the imperatives of 'bigger and better'. In societies driven by the command to acquire and consume more, hedonism strangely enough would be a step up the ladder of becoming more human. The critique of the consuming-producing model is not, consequently, rooted in a distrust and rejection of objects. There is no Manicheism lurking behind the demand for simplicity. Rather the critique is made precisely because there is not enough appreciation of the material world. There is just a ravaging of it. There is just a craving consumption of it.

Objects have value in the world because of persons. Material things attain their dignity precisely in relation to human fulfilments, enhancements and completions. Things are for people; this is not only the foundation for demanding the equitable distribution of wealth in the world; it is also the main reason for simplicity of life. We fail to see that our preoccupation with ever more complex means of acquiring things inhibits our very appreciation of the objects desired and acquired. When we relate properly to objects, we find that our personhood is engaged and called forth. Objects become self-expressive rather than self-protective. They bring communities, families and nations together rather than sunder them. But when our intrinsic worth is inextricably bound up with quantity of production and possession, we become little more than the extensions of the objects which we believe give significance to our being. It is for this reason that sharing is so difficult: it is a matter of losing our identity. Things are no longer for us, for people, for life. We are for them. The more we have, the more we are.

Travelling light through the world, living with simplicity, is based on the principle and foundation of spirituality. This insight demands an indifference to objects not because they lack worth, but because of the need to find their real value in the universe of persons. Objects serve as precious means for appreciation and gratitude, for reverence and respect and for compassionate presence to others. The

perversion of this ordering, however, has led us to use things as an escape from human sensibilities about suffering, as a flight from the vulnerability of solitude or relationship, and as artificial pretence of self-sufficiency.

The discipline of simplicity is a discipline of personhood. It is a re-engagement of our identity. Objects, commodities and possessions are restored to their proper value in a personal world. They are consciously repossessed as the means of human self-expression, self-revelation and committed relationships between persons whose interior lives give things their meaning.

Such is the reintegration of labour and the products of labour into the life of persons. Appreciation and gratitude and sharing are rediscovered in this 'palace of peace' called simplicity. Once the primary needs of food, education, clothing and shelter are met for all women and men (a goal to be reached only if those who have superfluities are willing to divest) simplicity of life liberates the well-off from the inordinate fear of losing their possessions; it also frees the less affluent from the avarice and jealousy associated with 'not having more'.

Time for the 'non-productive'

One must have leisure for compassion, for being with others in their diminishment. When our whole purpose is locked into patterns of achievement and productivity, we live in fear of the non-achievers, the 'unproductive', the marginal and unsuccessful — at least as those terms are determined by dominant cultural mythology. Such persons represent non-being to anyone whose identity is confined to producing and consuming. In many ways, we are frightened by the prospect of engaging someone who is marginal and pretenceless — unless we can 'do' something for or about them. We do not want to be reminded of the hidden handicap beneath our own pretences, of the great wound of our humanity; and so we brace ourselves against them. But in doing so, we hide far more than our wounds; we hide our very selves.

Unproductive and non-achieving people in some way remind us of our fate. We are not the masters or managers of life. To visit the terminally ill, to spend time with handicapped people, to walk through poor streets or desperate prisons, to be present to the very old or critically distressed: this we have no time for. It is not because of priorities. It is because of terror. For the great ruse of our civilization will come unmasked. All the accumulation, productivity,

possession and consuming in the world cannot save us, cannot ease the ache of our hungers and desires. The fragility of all the marginal people in the world testifies to the fact.

It is for this reason that one of those 'palaces of peace' so dearly missed by the contemporary person is leisure for the disenfranchised. We must take the time to stand in the presence of their truth — just as we must stand in the presence of God, of ourselves, of our relations. We will find ourselves revealed, not only in our fragility, but in our grace.

This is beautifully seen in the life of a retired widow, for whom cultural fantasies of achievement could no longer be sustaining. Against her fears of the unknown and dreadful, she decided to give three nights of her week to a woman who was totally paralyzed except for the voluntary movement of her toe. The widow walked into an abyss of utter dependency, feeding the woman through a syringe in her stomach, preparing her for each day with her family, quietly communicating with her through the use of the alphabet and responsive toe-movement. In it all, human splendour was revealed. The healthy woman was told, by painstaking toe-spelling, 'I love you'. She grew to see how lovely this object of her initial fear actually was. She emerged more alive each day of her widowhood, tapping new resources of life and hope. A day before she died, the paralyzed woman spelled out with her toe: 'It has been a great privilege to know you'. But the question is who was privileged? Who ministered to whom? Who was called forth to new life? Who was released from the prison of fear? Who was paralyzed and made able to walk free?

When we allow ourselves leisure with those for whom leisure is the only reality, for whom there are little or no plans and strategies, for whom there is little to give other than our presence, we encounter ourselves on a level of our reality as persons. We understand that the greatest gift we can bestow is the power of our personal presence. We also come to understand the profound mystery that, no matter what our fragility and confinement, if the only action we can perform in the world is move our toe, we can still take part in the labour of the Spirit, we can still heal the earth, we can still act in faith and love.

In the sixth chapter of the Fourth Gospel, the disciples asked Jesus: 'What must we do to perform the work of God?' To which he replied: 'This is the work of God: have faith in the one whom God sent'. Our fundamental labour as humans is the embodiment of

trinitarian reality. Our work, as persons, is to have faith, to believe in the creative love of God, to have hope in God's saving action in us. Our essential labour, paradoxically, is performed in our palaces of peace. By being present to the Trinity in solitude, in relationship, in simplicity and in compassion, we rediscover the purpose of all other human works which are, in their fulness, the *fruit* of faith.

Encounter with our deepest personhood is the only way of overcoming alienated labour, the only way of restoring productivity to its true value as the servant of human life. In leisure, in our palaces of peace, we are able to see 'non-producers' — even if we ourselves are one of them — in their dignity. We understand how our value is retained even if we are unemployed or retired. We are enabled to resist, in the midst of our manifold works and labours, being enslaved by our achievements and products. And we definitively discover the truth that, no matter what form our labouring life takes — whether we are deliverers of mail, whether we are truck drivers, whether we are teachers, whether we are refuse collectors, whether we are physicians, whether we are bricklayers, our humblest tasks are mirrors and parts of God's creative work. Our labour embodies the splendour of personal reality; and our labour becomes the enhancement of it.

An old man told the story. They were three bricklayers. Someone asked them what they were doing. The first said, 'I'm making five dollars an hour'. The second said, 'I'm laying bricks'. The third said, 'I'm building a city'. The third person, no doubt, had palaces of peace.