

HOLINESS AND JUSTICE IN TENSION

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IS THERE, in the situation of the believing man, an inherent temptation to stand lightly to the needs of society because of religious preoccupations? Is there a tension, even a conflict, between a care to be just before God (holiness), and attention to justice in the world of men?

Thomas Aquinas has written that man is so situated between God and the world that the closer he draws to the one, the further he is from the other. Many christians who have been listening to the currents of the Spirit these past few decades will be tempted to view the statement as almost blasphemous, and to respond, in teilhardian language, that for one who sees with the eyes of faith, nothing is purely profane. The God-stricken man, they will contend, is passionate for justice among men, not in spite of, but precisely because of, his thirst for the divine.

But one cannot so easily dispose of a way of speaking that could be abundantly documented from scripture, from theological tradition, and from the lives of the saints. There are, for example, the liturgical prayers which petition the grace to despise what is of earth so that we may love what is heavenly. There are the texts of Peter Damian and other medievals recently commented on by Robert Bultot, where the *contemptus mundi* theme predominates precisely among exponents of christian prayer. There is Augustine, avowing that he is interested only in God and the soul, nothing else; there is the author of the *Imitation of Christ*, in his oft-quoted statement that he returns from being among men less a man; and there is John Henry Newman, witnessing to a moment of conversion when the two self-luminous realities of his life were God and himself. To these impressive voices of history one might add some contemporary sociological studies, which seem to point to a negative correlation between social concern and habits of piety. The tendency of post-Vatican II groups to polarize into pentecostals and social activists is a final reason for thinking that we are dealing with a genuine problem, or at least with a question calling for fruitful reflection. The question God and/or

man needs to be pondered today in the context of the struggle for justice and peace. The present reflection is theological, not historical or sociological. It offers no precise solutions, but hopefully it may clarify the question.

Let the reader, first of all, reflect on his own religious experience as it has developed over a period of years. He may very well notice stages of that development during which the reality of God, in attraction or challenge, tended to put every other consideration in the shade. Though verified in many forms, this experience of desert or cave or mountain-top, this being alone with God, appears to belong to the essential dynamic of the call to holiness. There is a sense, perhaps, in which it ought not to be. Why should the search for God or the response to his search for us take us from our brothers even for one moment? It is quite possible that we have here a sequel of the radical sinfulness which divides man against himself, an aspect of that lack of wholeness which is to be overcome in the redemptive process. In any case, God calls us according to our ability to respond at any given moment. There is a letting go, a relativizing of all else except God, which represents a necessary risk in man's adventure into God. And it is not only the pleasure principle, or attractive and tranquil values of art or humanism, which must yield. It can happen that the dialogue of God and the soul does not, for a period, speak explicitly of the world of human affairs, and specifically of justice and peace among men. How many pages of John of the Cross, for example, may one read without coming across a burning passion for anyone but God, or anything but the desire to be with him? Is this un-christian, or not fully christian? Not necessarily, I would say. Jesus has much to say to us in the course of a lifetime, and we cannot bear to hear it all at once. To be faithful to what is given when it is given is implicitly an openness to what remains to be given when we are ready for it. Only in eternity will we be wholly ready. I am sure that when a biographer studies the christian development of someone like Thomas Merton, he will come upon this dimension of a vocation in which the passion for peace and justice only gradually found expression and integration in a life that, from the first conversion, was increasingly given over to God.

A further consideration is that the obvious truth of the variety of gifts and vocations must be brought to bear on the present question. All men are called to share in the struggle for peace and justice, but not all in equal measure or in the same way. The pauline doctrine of the complementarity and convergence of charisms is here relevant.

It would be a superficial view of fraternal charity which would insist that it be exercised monolithically by all. We may not demand that every organ of the body be a hand or a foot. As our knowledge of the human organism has increased, we have seen how crucial are the contributions of certain glands, for example, whose existence and functions were long unknown. Or one may take an analogy from the role of basic research in scientific and technological progress. Activities which, from an immediate pragmatic point of view are, or seem to be, useless, exercise an influence which is nonetheless contributory for being less tangible and specific. Given the mystery of man and of human interaction, it would be arrogant to demand that each person, at each stage of his life, be asked to render an account of his donation to the human cause purely in terms of man-hours devoted to specific fraternal services, or even to intercessory prayer directly concerned with the good of the neighbour. A nation which withdraws support from basic research or from artistic endeavour for the sake of more immediate practical goals may be writing its own death warrant. Similarly, a nagging of contemplatives out of their solitude into the front lines of social and cultural reform or revolution may end up as a monstrous disservice to the cause of peace and justice.

The point can be reinforced, perhaps, by simply reflecting on the influence for good exercised within our communities by different people. Are there not some, especially perhaps among 'senior citizens', whose love is manifested more in simple presence, in the humanizing attraction of their personality, than in their being busy about many particular services for others? And is not the gift of their presence centred in their being totally in God? In virtue of age, health, training and temperament, they may have to be numbered among the unproductive so far as 'service' is concerned. But when they are present, somehow human life contains more hope and buoyancy; and only when they are gone from our midst do we appreciate fully that they have been silent agents of human good in their very being.

Is this, after all, not the case with God himself? Even when we grant, philosophically, that nothing in his creation moves or acts except in total dependence on him, there is a sense in which God does not 'act', but only invites and draws man to act. His own action is unobtrusive. Who of us has ever felt the weight of a divine concursus, or been conscious of the impetus of his victorious grace? In him we live and move and have our being. He does not so much

'inter-vene' (come-between) in our lives as simply appear there. He is wholly for us by the very fact that he is simply himself. Those human persons who are most like him, the saints, seem to share in this kind of power, in which the distance between being and doing, so prominent in the rest of us, is surmounted.

The two foregoing lines of reflection may appear to be on the bland side, a strained effort to justify social insensitivity when it appears in the saints and in many or most devout christians in past and present. A third reflection may therefore be helpful. Holiness is not a gift which contains all other gifts. For any number of reasons, a saint can be without the conceptualization and the other cultural expressions appropriate for his experience of God and man. Thérèse of Lisieux may be a prime example of this. Similarly, today we read some of the imprecatory psalms with embarrassment and distaste, because we find, juxtaposed to a profound sense of God, attitudes towards men which we feel obliged to disavow. It is only gradually, and in a pilgrimage far from complete in our own time, that the Church and her saints have come to appreciate and articulate the full implications of the intertwining of love for God and love for man. One notable example of this is pertinent to our reflection on justice before God and justice towards men.

One of the crucial developments of the last century or so in the Church's understanding of her mission is the realization that it extends not only to the conversion of persons and the enlightenment of their consciences, but to a creative critique of social processes, structures and institutions: an extension of the searing light of the gospel to the total human environment, which man, precisely as sinful man, shapes for himself. Such expressions as 'demonic structures' and 'institutionalized violence', currently employed in pastoral reflections on peace and justice, have their foundation in a theology of sin and liberation from sin which has gained fresh insight into the social dimensions of sin and grace. Recent theology has found a new and less mythological language to express what the New Testament refers to in the language of 'principalities and powers', 'the elements of this world', and 'the world'.

What happens when man sins? Because he is a social and cosmic being, his sin results not only in interior guilt and in the increased power of concupiscence within the individual, but in an objectivization of his sinfulness or concupiscence in the various forms characteristic of his society and culture. This concupiscent milieu – the corrosion of human values, the pollution of the moral atmosphere –

in turn exerts pressure upon already concupiscent man, and forms with his inner concupiscence a coalition of death.

If the sickness from which Christ has liberated man is compounded in this fashion, so is the healing which represents his victory. Grace, too, God's self-gift and self-revelation to man, does not remain a purely inner reality. It is capable of being radiated into the total human environment, where it enters into combat with socialized concupiscence. Wherever genuine christian community has blossomed, it has projected into the surrounding society and culture a spirit which has brought them, however precariously and transiently, into harmony with the gospel and with man's innermost identity.

Two conclusions follow from this understanding of the recent insight of the Church into her mission. The first touches the past, and teaches us that even the saints had their limits, and that we must not harshly judge the spiritualities of the past by the criteria of very recent theological and pastoral insights. The second conclusion is that, today, no adequate spirituality is possible which does not integrate into its viewpoint the insight we have been describing. Whatever the limitations of the past, a contemporary spiritual way which attends not at all to the social and cultural embodiments of sin and grace must be dismissed as inadequate, as not fully christian. It is no longer possible to look upon the personal struggle for holiness and the social struggle for peace and justice as two struggles. They are inseparably two aspects of the one struggle for the victory of grace, inner and social, over concupiscence, inner and social.

James Douglass has given eloquent voice to this insight in his recent book, *Resistance and Contemplation*. The non-violent resistance to injustice and the interior struggle of contemplation, he asserts, are in a Yin-Yang relationship: only that commitment to social action is genuine which proceeds from the well-springs of contemplation; and only that search for God in contemplation is authentic which brings into prayer the anguish of men who are not free to be human, free for God and man.

We are, without exaggeration, at a point of creative break-through in christian spirituality and asceticism. The point is not that we have discovered the neighbour. He has always been present in all genuine spirituality. The point is rather that we now see we cannot be *with* the neighbour as person unless we are *against* the iniquitous structures, processes, institutions, milieux, which condemn him to a sub-human life, and which make it impossible for him to respond freely to the gospel.

In summary, then, this is what we have been saying. We have acknowledged the phenomenon in past and present of a seeming incompatibility between deep religious experience and equally deep commitment to the work of peace and justice. Notable exceptions have only intensified the problem. We have proposed in response three partial and complementary explanations:

First, within the life of an individual, it is quite possible that the dynamics of God's call and man's response bring certain periods in which the plunge into deep union with God carries with it a certain bracketing or obscuring of concern for justice among men.

Secondly, within the body of Christ as a whole, not all are called, even in a whole lifetime, to relate themselves immediately to the mission of the Church in the area of peace and justice.

Thirdly, theological and pastoral insights of recent decades have brought the Church to a new explicit awareness, rich in promise and challenge for christian spirituality. This is the realization that the christian mission is directed not only to individual persons and consciences as such, but to mankind as a whole. This means involvement in the public and institutional dimensions of human life, which, as they share in the enslavement of man, must also share in his liberation. Whatever may have been inevitable in the past, the christian believer of today can no longer seek God in isolation from the task of justice and peace in the world.

This momentous development in christian spirituality in no way negates our first two points. These continue to be, even in a socialized asceticism, rhythms of spiritual growth and a legitimate diversity of relationships to, and contributions towards the Church's mission in society. Nevertheless, the call now is for individuals and communities, in the full light of this profoundly new situation, to discern their own particular call from God. Each one of us may profitably chart his own 'history line' from the viewpoint of the growth in awareness of the call to work for justice and peace. In prayerful *anamnesis*, we need to appropriate the dynamic process of God's providential invitation to us to be our brother's keeper.

If this is to happen with intelligence and prudence, an integral training in asceticism calls for some exposure to the theology of sin and grace in their social and cultural ramifications, and for a congruous acquaintance with the concrete issues, pressures and milieux which affect christian life and ministry today.

Finally, since prayer and spirituality correlate with community, there is need today for a new focus on the part of christian commu-

nities. We must all seek ways to achieve an ongoing 'conscientization', appropriate processes of interpretation, evaluation and strategies aimed at unmasking the dehumanizing forces present in contemporary culture and society, at withstanding their idolatrous and demonic pressures; and, positively, at forging creative alternatives which will enable men and women to find God in holiness of life, and man in the work of justice and peace.