

## CHAPTER IV

### THE SUBJECT OF SOCIAL THOUGHT

#### THE HUMAN PERSON

THE family and society are natural extensions of man. He was not born to live alone but in a company of other human beings, ordained for the preservation of the species and the attainment of the immediate and ultimate ends of the individuals composing it. Man unites with woman to form a family, the family joins other family nuclei to form the clan, the gens, the tribe, the polis, the nation. . . . But if we seek the origin of this process of organization in God and in nature, we find that its factor is man, with his needs, his tendencies, his customs. The social order depends upon a moral idea which informs it, and this is fashioned and develops within the individual conscience.

There have been reformers who understood that in order to change society it is necessary to change the individuals who compose it; and they were right. They made their mistake when they thought that to do this it was sufficient to issue decrees which would change them externally. All human activity comes from within. And Christianity has reformed the heart of man: with respect to God, for his heavenly country and the Church; and with respect to his neighbor, for the common life they share in society. Hence the Christian takes his place in the world and lives out his relations with his neighbors according to certain principles, is bound by definite obligations, and keeps clearly in view his final end. If the social subject, man, is Christian, then society is Christian; that is, it is formed and it develops according to the principles of justice and charity.

The virtues which Jesus teaches to his followers are both natural and supernatural. The natural virtues he found already set forth in the Old Testament, just as to a lesser degree they were to be found scattered through Latin and Greek, Egyptian and Asiatic thought, wrested as it were from the surrounding darkness by the sheer force of human reason alone. But he rescued them from the thicket of other precepts and the parasitical growth of opposing principles that tended sometimes to stifle them. And he has gathered them about an absolute value, ordained them for an eternal end, and cast them into a simple and complete system; so that if the prophets and philosophers sometimes give us in particular instances certain concepts analogous to the ethical teaching of Jesus, their ideas lack that integral coördination that goes to form the saint. The rabbi looked above all to the Law, the sage to the polis, but the Divine Teacher to God. He does not want perfection measured out in doses for the attainment of earthly aims, but a complete perfection with no compromises, the end of which is not in itself, nor in the State, but in God. He has widened the radius of virtue and has freed it utterly from the limits of contingency.

The saint in himself is not necessarily a sociologist, but his sanctity is reflected in the social order, in which he practices with heroic completeness the maxims of the Gospel. Even if he knows nothing about the laws of giving and having, of capital and labor, even though he is totally unaware of statistics and theories, he nevertheless knows that it is not permitted to him to live in luxury while someone beside him is hungry; and if he has a cloak and his neighbor is naked, he gives him half of his cloak — when he does not give him all of it. The saint may not have made a professional study of the problem of slavery, but of himself he knows the duty of charity, and that means putting servant and master on the same moral plane and enjoining on both of them a relationship that tends to make them brothers.

Jesus left untouched the moral precepts of the Mosaic Law. He kept the Decalogue, which is mainly a negative code, but he perfected it by stating the positive beatitudes. The moral end of man remained the same but he integrated it with grace; he accomplished his mission within the tiny confines of Israel, but he had before his eyes the great realm of Christendom.

Christianity, which more than any other religion determines the religious value of man also by the nature of his relationships with his fellows, and binds him in a society at once supernatural and terrestrial, makes the individual the foundation of this social relationship. It does not nullify the person in society, but rather invests him with formidable personal responsibilities, placing upon each individual the obligation of earning eternal salvation. Hence it teaches him always to improve himself, to scrutinize his every act — to watch, as Jesus said — to be on the alert like a faithful guardian, or like the soldier in wartime who sleeps with one eye open; for the Son of Man comes upon us suddenly like a thief in the night. Quite aside from the parable, the performance of one's duties toward God and toward one's neighbor is the work of every moment. It may not be postponed, for at any moment we may be called to give an account of ourselves.

We cannot say, therefore, "I shall be Christian, that is, I shall be just and kind, tomorrow." We must be so at the moment and always. Hence a society of Christians is not just an aggregation of people ridden with lethargy and fatalism, but a conscious body whose members are always on the *qui vive* and weigh their actions and words according to the laws of Christ in the knowledge that they will be obliged to render an account of themselves as individuals. Theirs is a personality constituted and strengthened to fulfill the purposes of its social nature, which finds expression in a community of life both before and after death. Such a constitution and development are favored by the virtues of individuals, free will, and the grace of God.

Christianity favors this development of the individual according to his natural tendencies, evaluating his abilities and attitudes, but also organizing them. That is why it has been able to inspire vigorous and original personalities and enlist them in the service of religious and civil society. It has recast the natural virtues in the warmth of a new spirit and has enriched them with grace in order to fashion the new man — the subject of a renewed society. It demands first of all, therefore, a radical change in the heart, in which, the old man being destroyed, the new man may be fashioned. Jesus demands: "Repent" (μετανοεῖτε, the etymology of which gives us, "Change your mind").

St. Matthew shows us what this change means when it is accomplished in a heroic degree. It means leaving one's nets, the tools of labor whereby one earns his daily bread, and following Christ, while all thought for food or clothing is left to God. This is the supreme, the most heroic application of the precept; but it is not for all, nor even for the majority. Jesus asks it of twelve. He does not ask most of us to abandon our daily toil, but he does ask that we sanctify it by bringing to it the spirit of renunciation. Our ego must subordinate itself to God; that is the way to follow Jesus Christ. For everyone, to follow Christ means to change the whole direction of one's life; for the ego and God, if taken as separate criteria, become two opposite centers of gravitation.

It means the renunciation of the temporal pleasures of life to embrace the cross. It means that one's relations with his neighbor must be inspired by love, and therefore by mutual forgiveness, peace and compassion.

These concepts are forcefully synthesized in the program of the new order: "he that will save his life, shall lose it; and he that shall lose his life for my sake, shall find it."

This is not, therefore, a renunciation of life but of the standards, fears, and aims which have regulated it in a purely egocentric fashion, so that it may become instead Christocentric.

This is the law of sanctity, which is perfect dedication to God. What matters is the soul, the future life, to which the present life must be subordinated. To conquer the whole world with all its good things is not of any consequence; to conquer heaven is.

The new man — the Christian — is he who accepts this reversal of the values that obtain in the world; he who in the conflict between the eternal and the temporal, the spirit and the flesh, heaven and earth, chooses always the first; in so doing he does not, however, eliminate or reject the other as sinful, no, but rather subordinates it in a new hierarchy of values and thereby sanctifies it. The fruits of this change are his works, that is, acts of justice and love toward his neighbor, the introduction of a new, an evangelical and revitalizing criterion into all his social relationships.

Jesus has taught men first of all the essentially relative nature of earthly life. It is not an end in itself, but it is conditioned by the immortal life of the spirit, and it functions as a decisive trial. Since he freed human life from any obsession concerning the brevity of its days and its inherent obligations, he freed man from the morbid promptings of his own egoism, from the tormenting anxiety for the morrow, his security, his very bread, and from the fear of the powerful and the rich. He emancipated him from the exclusive cult of things which, because their value is not absolute but relative, cannot condition his liberty, security, life, or the destiny of his spirit. He freed the human heart from the incubus of the unknown, of violence, war and hunger, before dealing with these evils in themselves; before he cut their claws as it were, and shrank their power to a sphere very limited in time and space, while exacting besides an inexorable expiation from their authors.

When Justin, a Christian philosopher, repeated to the executioner the words of Socrates, the pagan philosopher: — You may kill me, yes, but you cannot harm me — he was

affirming the infinite liberty won for him by Christ as the first fruit of the Redemption. He reduced to ridiculous pettiness the seemingly omnipotent power of armed, mechanical, physical compulsion. He recalled the fact that good and evil are realities that exist quite outside the pigeon-holes of military, judiciary or police archives. And since he was something more than a philosopher, he also meant to affirm the existence of a justice that transcends the rack and the sword.

The man who is idolatrously attached to his daily life and is possessed and dominated by it, convinced that it contains within itself all the possibilities of well-being, fixes his will upon the acts of others, depends entirely upon men and upon his environment, and lives in society like a prisoner in his jail. The Christian, however, is free and at his ease in society even if he is in chains; and he learns from Christ not to depend upon man or to fear him since he must fear only those things which have the power of offending God. He pities even the man who threatens to tear him limb from limb — and does it. For if one kills the body he is not therefore "able to kill the soul"; so the Christian must "rather fear him that can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt. 10:28).

Thus all social relations are extricated from the terror which disfigures souls, alters their end, and enslaves them, because actually the original relationship between soul and soul has been restored; and this results in a radical transformation of the social order inasmuch as all transgressions, which are such if they imply a violation of the moral law, are brought before the tribunal of good and evil over which God presides as Judge.

Once life is viewed as essentially relative in nature, all the circumstances of existence, even the most cruel, are anticipated and overcome, or are at any rate reduced to their proper and very tenuous proportions before the Eternal Absolute; and the human heart is freed from all sense of fear or panic and re-

tempered with serenity. Man has conquered death. "Even though the universe should crash in ruins, I should remain standing; and if everything which we see should perish, I should not die, since the Lord is with me, and I with Him."<sup>1</sup>

There is another reason too for this serenity. Whether he be in fetters or in a hermitage, the Christian is never alone or abandoned. He is with God, and he is therefore always the arbiter of his own spiritual acts — the only ones which have any bearing on salvation.

"Jesus says: Wherever there are two, they are not without God. And where there is one only, I say, I am with him.

Raise the stone, and thou shalt find me;  
Cleave the wood, and there am I."<sup>2</sup>

We shall examine, point by point, the results produced in the ordinary relations of everyday life by this perception of the transitoriness of all things — of the vanity of vanities.

Of course, since earthly life is thus relative by nature, it has no pretensions to absolutism and no harshness or bitterness whatever; thus it becomes easier and economically more care-free, since the Father provides for men as he does for the birds of the air and the flowers of the field. Social problems are simplified and social relations tranquillized, while faith in God eliminates despair. The particular quality of serenity is much more neatly and clearly defined in the Gospel than in Ecclesiastes, where the sense of the universal vanity of things is tinged with sadness if not with actual pessimism.

The individual is freed, therefore, from a double obsession: that of the world with all the difficulties of living due to the opposition of nature and the competition of one's fellows; and that of being forced to consider oneself either the center of the universe, or simply a lost atom.

1. *Odae Salomonis*, V, 10-11.

2. *P. Oxy.*, I, ed. Grenfell & Hunt, London, 1898, p. 3 (Log. V).

His life has an immeasurable value and an eternal consequence. But the very nature of this consequence and the means of attaining it take from man the desire to wrap himself up in selfish pride from behind which he may look down upon the world as a field for exploitation. He is everything and he is nothing; it seems a paradox, but in Christian thought the contradiction disappears.

The consciousness of the relativity of earthly life and the certainty that by virtue of eternal justice it is integrated with the future life contribute a general tone of optimism to the Christian's day. For the pagan, on the other hand, the uncertainty of tomorrow, the pressure of fear, and the consciousness of the fleeting moment, so merciless that it compels him to seek escape from the thought of it, all contribute to his daily life a note of profound sadness that borders on despair, for all his forced gaiety. Hence the last resort for the Stoics was suicide, but for the Christians the unfailing solution is a rebirth in God.

The new man is molded of strength and of spirit, or rather of the strength of the spirit, which takes the place of physical violence. As author of his own destiny, he is endowed with a character unknown to ancient philosophy, which was more or less deterministic, and unknown also to Jewish thought, which was given too much to a mechanical legalism.

John the Baptist "grew, and was strengthened in spirit" according to a curriculum that has become the ideal of Christian education; that is not concerned with muscular development only, but considers the secret of strength to be in the spirit. Even two mighty arms, when there is no stalwart heart to guide them, are not worth very much. Likewise, "Jesus advanced in wisdom and age." And when the two were grown, the Precursor heralded the Messiah as one stronger — *ισχυρότερος* — than himself. "It is the spirit that quickeneth: the flesh profiteth nothing" (Jn. 6:64). This is a principle that



overturns the ideals of might prevailing in a society built with the sword. Only where Christianity fails, does strength become a mere matter of physiology.

And what are two sparrows? A trifle. One may buy both of them for a farthing. And yet "not one of them shall fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered" (Matt. 10:29, 30). The individual Christian has this security, that he moves and acts under the protection of Providence. He will have to defend this security up to the time of Augustine and even of Salvianus against the attacks of ancient thought, particularly Stoicism, which literally shrank from the idea of a divinity that took thought for all the acts of all men at every moment of the day. Because of this certainty, all things came to be explained according to the will of God, endured with patience if adverse and accepted gratefully if propitious. And in the interplay of forces by which mere existence is constantly battered about, the Christian kept before him always the supernatural factor which, since it set above these energies another force that surpassed them all, took from life the grim aspect of a struggling mob in which only the violent advance while the weak fall to be trampled under foot. This certainty of an omnipresent Providence strengthened the Christian's conviction that he was not alone in society, an atom tossed about in the ebb and flow of life, brought to the surface by a tempest of conflicting interests. Hence arose the need of communicating with his Father and the Father of all men by means of prayer, a weapon granted both to the individual and to collective society — and especially to the latter, for whatever it asks, if it asks with faith, will be granted to it. "Ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you. . . . Or what man is there among you, of whom if his son shall ask bread, will he reach him a stone? Or if he shall ask him a fish, will he reach him a serpent? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children: how much more will your

Father who is in heaven, give good things to them that ask him?"<sup>3</sup>

The pagan who is struck by a blind fate feels lost, destroyed on the surface of the earth as on the stage of the Greek theatre. He is alone; he invokes death, commits suicide. The Christian who is also pursued by misfortune may always in the end appeal with prayer to the Father for help.