

*weltanschauung*. Perhaps this accounts, in part at least, for his indifference to the bad art and architecture, the bad music of his Sunday worship, and his suspicion of the liturgy in which the senses are ennobled rather than rejected. Yet this inclination towards the neoplatonic has seldom been carried to excess, perhaps owing to the relaxing nature of the climate which eschews all extremes. At least the Englishman has always shown a certain respect for the body, and St Aelred sums this up in his typically English insistence on a daily cold bath.

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And here I must leave you with my task only just begun. Perhaps however what I have said may provide a background for a beginning of the study of the English spirit. I have here attempted only to uncover some of the roots that converge to support and nourish the British Oak.



## OBEDIENCE AND COMMUNITY\*

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I SHOULD like you to look upon this paper as the basis of a symposium. What I want to do is to put forward certain fundamental principles which lie at the very heart of our Dominican vocation, and to draw from them one or two seminal ideas, ideas which like seeds will grow and fructify in the mind, and so produce fruit in the way we live our day-to-day Dominican life. I want to do this moreover with a special eye on your office as superiors. Superiors hold a key place in community life. They are fathers and mothers of the family, and like good fathers and mothers their chief function is to foster and develop the family spirit, which is the chief educative factor in the religious community, as it is in the secular home. And since this is a symposium I think the important part of it will be the *discussion*, which I hope will arise from the seminal thoughts which I propose to scatter among you; not merely the discussion which will take place more or less formally, in this meeting, but afterwards over the dinner table, between groups; and between two also, in walks round the grounds. And that not merely today or this week, but recurrently

\*A paper read to Superiors of the Dominican Third Order nuns.

from time to time, for a long time to come. The object of all this will be a severely practical one; what can we do from now onwards, and in the years that lie ahead, to deepen the reality of our Dominican community life, and raise it, so far as may be, to the level of our ideals for it?

For it is our most precious possession. We need have no doubts on this score. Our community is the very basis of our lives and therefore of our work. It is the source from which all the good we hope to do must have its origin, the soil from which our work as Dominicans must spring, and into which our roots must grow deep, unless we are to wither and perhaps die. The more healthy our community life is on the natural plane, that is in the physical and psychological environment it supplies; and the more vital it is supernaturally, that is in its response to and reliance, not on self apart from God but on human nature penetrated and transformed by grace, the more perfect will be the work which arises from it. I say we need have no doubt that our community life is our most precious possession, because it is a fundamental principle of natural law, the law which governs the functioning of our human nature in all its operations, that human beings are social animals, made to live not as isolated units but in a society. That is why God instituted marriage to form the family, as the fundamental unit of human society. A man and a woman united in one flesh that their union may expand in due time into the wider unity of the family. Under the basic influence of the family children are educated to maturity. No sooner have they grown into maturity, in the family into which they were born, than they begin, normally, to think and plan for the construction of another family, into which they themselves may bring children. In that society they live, in that society they bring up and educate the new generation, and in that society they die. We, who are so much concerned with schools, know only too well that if there is anything wrong with the family, on the natural or the supernatural plane, it will show itself immediately in some psychological maladjustment in the child. The family is a basic necessity for the individual person; without its background in one form or another, against which personal life may be lived, that personal life will be damaged and distorted.

This of course throws light on our vow of chastity in relation to our community life. When we renounce marriage by our vow

we do not renounce the love and human affections that are inseparable from love, for which the family provides an outlet. Our vow transforms these things into something wider in its scope and different in its application, yet essentially the same, human love. Our community therefore provides the background necessary in order that our human love may find its proper object and that we may exercise it in its proper way. Hence it is that our personal lives must be rooted in our community, and derive their strength and effectiveness from that community. Here we are faced with the most fundamental of all sociological problems, the right balance between the individual person and the society in which his life is lived; the right relationship between community and individual. That problem of course is constantly recurrent throughout history. We see it working out in the lives of nations; it is often crudely and partially stated in modern terms as the struggle of democracy against dictatorship. In what sense is the person subordinate to the collectivity in which he lives? The same problem makes its appearance in the upbringing of children in the family and in school, the problem of the due balance between authority and freedom. What is true of the lives of nations and peoples and of the basic unit of human society, the family, is true also of the living of community life by religious under the vow of obedience. It is still the *person*, as an individual, who is all important.

A religious community exists to enable each of its members to fulfil a personal vocation; to become by means of the community environment what God wills them to be as persons; what he wills them to be, that is, in order that they may do the particular work he wills them to do in this world and in doing it to sanctify themselves and so be made fit for eternal life. Every individual human person has a character, temperament, outlook and personality which is *sui generis*. No two persons can be identical or even wholly alike; they may be similar, but they are never absolutely so. This is true of families and nations as well as of persons. Every family has its own particular characteristics, so does every nation. A typical Englishman, we say; a typical German. Each individual member contributes to the spirit and character of the family as a whole, each individual national contributes to the typical character of the nation as a whole. And so it is in the religious family, the Orders and Congregations of the Church. All religious Orders

have the same ingredients, as it were. The vows, a rule and constitutions, a particular and marked spirit and character. This marked spirit and character in any one religious order and the nature of the life and work which flows from it is constituted by the emphasis which is laid on *one* particular characteristic which all possess. With the Benedictines, it is *Pax*, a peaceful serenity connected with their family spirit and their vow of stability; the monastery is their permanent home. With the Franciscans it is *Paupertas*; the poverty of spirit and simplicity connected with their marked absence of solicitude for material things. With the Jesuits it is *ad majorem Dei gloriam*, the single-minded aim with which an army, under Christ's leadership, goes out to do battle against the enemy. With ourselves it is *Veritas*; a constant preoccupation with the ultimate truth in things. No religious order has a monopoly of any of these. We all practise poverty, aim at doing all for God's glory, cultivate 'the peace which passeth understanding.' But each of us concentrates in a special way and with special emphasis upon one of them, so that it becomes our outstanding characteristic as a family. It is this that distinguishes us from others, and constitutes the chief end of our life and work.

Our present aim then is to discuss the spirit of the Dominican Order, to analyse it in such a way as to see more clearly what it is *ideally*, and thence to judge how far our own Province or Congregation, our own Priory or Convent comes up to or falls short of this ideal. From this we may hope to ponder upon what we can do, as superiors, to foster in our community a desire to cause these ideals to be more fully realized and more completely lived. The key word then that denotes the spirit of the Dominican Order is *Veritas*. Its predominant attitude is one of looking for the truth in human life, and particularly, since man is a social animal, in human relationships. This does not mean that every Dominican, still less every Dominican nun, must be deeply versed in technical philosophy and speculative theology. It does not even mean that we Dominicans must necessarily be highly intellectual or even particularly intellectual, if this word is taken to mean a preoccupation with what are known as higher studies. But it does mean that the characteristic note of the Dominicans must be that they are trained, and train themselves, to use every ounce of intelligence God has given them, not in an isolated compartment of the human make-up—God save us from becoming walking

intellects—but within a God-given personality compact of mind, will, and affections, which are all necessary ingredients of love. We must use our intelligence, understood in this way, to apply the truth, which comes from God by natural reason and divine revelation, to human relationships.

For it is in the sphere of human relationships that we have to work out by sympathy and intelligence our share in what each person with whom we come into contact, primarily in the community, our family, and thence in the routine of daily life, is destined by God to be and to become. That is not in order that we may interfere in and arrange other people's lives by a kind of imposition of our personalities upon theirs, but that we may relate ourselves rightly to them in the light of our own right relationship with God. For that is love, and our love of God is perfected in and through our love of our neighbour, of those about us. This special Dominican trait, summed up in the word *Veritas*, the search for truth in human relationships, is closely connected with that other description of the Dominican vocation: *Contemplare et contemplata aliis tradere*. Our primary duty as Dominicans is to think, in its widest sense; to think in relation to God and our fellow human beings, and to consecrate those thoughts in prayer. That means to set our thought by prayer in its right relation to Almighty God, to make every thought a part of our prayer, and so to become what God wills us to be. By being that, or by being in process of becoming that, we hand on to others what we ourselves are and possess.

Thus it comes about that to think prayerfully, as a habit of our whole personality, about our relation to God, and thence to those amongst whom God's providence has set us, results in a profound respect for the *human person* as God's creation destined to become through human agency, what he wills each person to be. Thus we are, and can recognize ourselves to be, God's collaborators in the eternal work of creating and building up human persons made in his image for the happiness of heaven. In this way we gain and increase in a power of entering into the minds, feelings and way of looking at things, of others very different from ourselves, and so by being what we are we can hand on to others the truth that we possess. That is the length and breadth and height of our Dominican vocation. You see what an immense influence this marked note of the Dominican character can have, and actually has, upon our

community, and consequently upon the work which originates from and is done by our community.

Here then at last we are at the very heart of our subject: the relation of our vow of obedience and its practice to the way in which the Dominican character is impressed upon our community, and influences in consequence the way our community shapes and forms us as individual persons by its spirit; so that we give back to the community as our contribution to its life what our personal life has in fact received from our community. We must always be careful, whether as subjects or superiors, of regarding obedience as obedience to the Superior in isolation from the community. A superior is not an arbitrary autocrat; he or she represents the community as its head, and is there to govern in accordance with the spirit of the community, as the Rule and Constitutions create and maintain it. Authority in government is a correlative of obedience in the subject; the two together *make* the community. The right use of authority in itself entails a kind of obedience proper to the superior, a responsibility on the superior's part for giving commands and directions in accordance with the basic principles of the life of the community, the spirit of truth and love in the particular form in which St Dominic has handed it down to us. The absence of this, humanly speaking, undermines the spirit of a community, which should be able to give a willing and loving obedience. It undermines because its result is to obscure the truths the community spirit enshrines. Of course the duty of obedience, even to an arbitrary superior, whose rule is in effect contrary to the spirit of the Order, is absolute, or nearly so. There is only one absolute obedience, obedience to God. But for religious, apart from sin, obedience to our superiors, with this one exception, is absolute too. That does not mean that all commands not involving sin are good in themselves; we may believe them at times to be harmful, at least in a proximate sense, when neither our charity nor prudence can hide from our minds the fact that they certainly are so. Nevertheless we are bound even then, having made our own view clear to authority, to give our loyal and willing obedience to such commands, secure in the belief that ultimately God will bring good out of that obedience in ways we cannot foresee. The ideal, however, for which subject and superior must both work is an obedience given and accepted which is in accordance with the spirit of the community, in so

far as the community mirrors the spirit of the Order as the Rule and Constitutions set it forth. Such obedience is a personal contribution on the part of both to the intensification and deepening of community spirit, and the act of authority which elicits the obedience is itself an obedient act. Experience teaches us that humanly speaking, and we all recognize this, the perfection of willing obedience is in large measure dependent upon the extent to which the exercise of authority is fundamentally consonant with the spirit of the Order. The spirit of authority, then, the spirit in which commands and directions are given, is every bit as important and as necessary as the spirit of obedience, the spirit in which those commands and directions are accepted; and both are dependent on faithfulness to the Dominican spirit, while at the same time they are formative of it.

We have seen that the essential characteristic of our Dominican spirit, which should vitalize every community, arises out of our constant search for *veritas*, the truth in persons and things and situations. It arises too from our practice of the principle that what we are and become by our contemplation overflows, as it were, into those around us and makes us 'preachers', in the widest sense. Contemplation, in this context, includes of course our formal prayer, but it widens out also into the direction and attitude of the whole of our thought in so far as this has its roots in our life of prayer. The result of the search in common for *veritas*, within the community, in relation that is to each other, is to produce a profound respect for the human person, as each is and as each is capable of becoming, both on the natural plane and by the power of God's grace. These of course are not two parallel processes but one, nature and grace fused together into a single process in which the latter can and does transform the former.

Our community life, and the spirit that permeates it, is formative, it impresses a Dominican character upon us. From our novitiate onwards it is continuously making us, please God, more and more Dominican. The basis of this formative power is our observance of the vows which govern the life we live, the centre and heart of which is the liturgy, Mass and Divine Office. These are primary; surrounding them are the rule and its everyday application, governing the regular routine of our lives, silence, permissions, recreation and a hundred other guiding lines which we sum up in the expression *the exact observance of the Rule*. Of this

Chapter is the weekly or regular corrective, as Confession is of our sins against God's law. These things if lived in a truly Dominican spirit will impress upon us a Dominican character, and at the same time will increase, deepen and canalize, in a right direction, all those personal characteristics of temperament and outlook which go to make up our personality, God-given and unique. It is therefore of supreme importance to realize that nothing in our Dominican life, if it is true to itself, can blunt or neutralize characteristics of temperament and outlook, gifts of mind and heart, or other particular talents and capacities. It can and does discipline them, purify them and direct them into new channels, integrating them into the life that has become our vocation.

It does seem sometimes, however, that so much is the worth and necessity of community life emphasized that the unique personality of the individual becomes sunk in it; obedience tends to be turned into a rather slavish following of a stereotyped community way of doing things which blunts initiative and represses the critical faculty. A kind of community thinking that receives no contribution from vigorous, personal, independent thought, and so tends to become a devitalized conformity with custom, which has practically ceased to be real thought at all. We all need to examine ourselves as individuals, and our communities as a whole, to see if there is in us or them any such tendency, even if it is there only in germ, and we need to be constantly on our guard, especially as Superiors, against any application of our spirit and rule that would promote this tendency. It would most certainly be found to be a false application and the sooner it is altered when found the better. Routine custom can become a fossilized thing in a community, not because it is bad in itself, but because the use of vital intelligence in applying our foundation principles to the day-to-day living of our lives is not encouraged, and may even be frowned upon.

A friend of mine, a former university lecturer, who is a regular examiner at advanced and scholarship level for the General Certificate of Education, tells me that she goes to examine many non-Catholic Schools and also numbers of Convent Schools. She holds strong views on the danger of examinations becoming, under the stress of modern conditions, nothing more than an incentive to unintelligent cramming, to the great detriment of genuine education. She is convinced from her personal experience that this dan-



ger can be averted and by-passed by the use of real intelligence in thinking out and adopting teaching methods which have accomplished this, and which to a great extent succeed in minimizing and neutralizing the danger. But in order to accomplish this successfully initiative, hard thinking, hard work and applied intelligence of a high order are a necessary presupposition. It is her considered opinion that on the whole the non-Catholic Schools are in advance, and considerably in advance, of the best of our Convent Schools in producing pupils who are really well taught, whose intelligence and approach to learning is fresh and interested and vital, and who have not been victimized by cramming or unintelligent memory preparation which has examination-passing rather than real education as a primary aim. This is the verdict of a highly trained teacher and examiner, of wide experience, who is herself a devout Catholic.

I wonder sometimes whether this, if it is in fact true, may not be due to an over-emphasis, or rather to an unbalanced emphasis, upon community the result of which is to diminish rather than to foster personality. If it is it is a defect, and a grave defect, in the living of community life, in the day-to-day application of the spirit of the Order within the religious community. Certainly if such an accusation could be brought against us Dominicans with justice it would not be on account of our Rule and Constitutions and the spirit they embody, but on account of defects in the way their principles are applied. There is here I think at least some ground for self-examination and discussion with a view to a more perfect living of our great Dominican tradition. The basis of our life and the source of its strength is the Choral Office. From that springs the soundness of our human relationships both within our Community and in the carrying out of our work. If there are faults and defects in our day-to-day application of our Dominican principles to our lives those defects will be found in the field of our human relationships. To that subject a further paper will be devoted in a future issue of *THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT*.

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In the October number of *THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT* a special supplement of book reviews will be included.