

accompanied his vocation, that haunting sense of an ordeal to come which lends such pathos to so much of his preaching. And now the shadow was right over him; he could read his fate now, in the hostile faces closing in.



## THE MODERN VICE

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**C**ORRUPTIO OPTIMI PESSIMA—yes, but few of us can rise to the best, and consequently few of us descend to the depths. *Corruptio melioris pejor* would be a maxim more suited to us, and we could translate it: The corruption of the rather better produces the rather worse. That is the habitual danger which most Christians and especially most Catholics run. It is that ‘rather worse’ which interests me, and another way of putting it would be that Catholics run their own particular danger of being vulgar.

The word ‘vulgar’ is interesting because it carries within itself, as it were, the story of its own corruption. Its true meaning is something to do with the common people, that is, those least in danger of being vulgar in the modern sense, for the common people largely bound in mind and behaviour by God-made conditions of life are in least danger of falling from the rather better to the rather worse. They are what they are—and that is never being vulgar. Only with the rise of an educated class did the word ‘vulgar’ become associated with being uneducated. Thus it got its present pejorative significance. But it is only the educated who are liable to be vulgar in this sense, because it is only the educated who can fall from the rather better to the rather worse by giving themselves the air of truly educated people while in fact being only half-educated. As such they become less than themselves. They pretend to something they have not got, and instead of living true to themselves they live in terms of conventional values of what is respectable, what is the

right thing to do, what is nice (often pronounced naice), what my neighbour will think, how people behave in films, what the papers say, what this or that expert chap with lots of letters after his name says on the radio. All this, I take it, is real vulgarity. Not to be oneself, but to pretend to be better than oneself, and therefore to play the part of being another, while showing all the time that one is not that other. Aiming at the rather better, one only succeeds in being rather worse.

This is, of course, a permeating vice of our times, for we aim to do away with all ideas of class and status and function within human society. This has the effect of everyone pretending to the highest (for if there is only one type it must be the best), while in fact dropping down all the time (for the loss of difference is the same as the loss of distinction). Happily, our failure ever to reach the highest spares us the catastrophe of falling to the lowest—and so we remain just rather worse, just vulgar.

All this, it seems to me, applies rather interestingly to religion. Religion too has become increasingly divorced from status and function, and in this case the divorce means also an increasing divorce from life itself. Ordinary social vulgarity cannot entirely divorce one from life. We have to live, and it is no accident that the contemporary vulgarity of society is least in evidence—indeed it usually disappears altogether—when it is a question of the fundamentals of life. The suburban snob becomes a true mother, as mothers have always been, when her baby is born. In other words, for once she becomes herself in her complete immersion in her maternal status and function. Generally speaking in the privacy of the home, men, women and children are themselves, though if you asked them they would probably say that they were more vulgar at home because there they do not trouble to be refined or to give themselves airs. Peasants living on the land, especially if it is their land, may be coarser than town dwellers, but they are less vulgar. The rhythm of life holds them down to realities.

But religion is more easily divorced from life; indeed its external manifestations and even its internal notions are only too easily and frequently divorced from life. Consequently when religion becomes very individual (or very mass—the

second is only the multiplication of the first), very self-conscious (which is another way of saying very social-conscious, conscious of what others are doing because that so often is modern self-consciousness), religion becomes an adjunct to, a parasite on, life, instead of being the most important dimension of life. And there is worse to come. The fact is that most people are not very religious anyhow, and at least there is something real and genuine in the efforts which the not very religious make to hang on to the religion which they know to be important. Your late-at-Sunday-Mass and bi-annual frequenter of the Sacraments is at any rate an honest person. In religion he does not aim to be rather better and therefore he is not rather worse. In religion he is what he is—and that is not vulgar. The real trouble arises with those who do aim to be rather better, but unfortunately better for the wrong reasons. They want to be better because in the undifferentiated and largely haphazard mass which forms, say, the Catholic population of a country or of a parish, they are provided with no true, solid, prop on which to attach their religion. One may answer that God, the saints, the supernatural, should be the prop. But God is apprehended in his creatures, in his work, and the supernatural in and through the natural. Where our life is no longer organically bound to the natural cycle of production, to status generated through a society's history, to function with some creative aspect to it, inherited or at least trained for, religion itself tends to float in vacuo until it somehow attaches itself to the kind of values that are in general fashion.

Religion, then, like other aspects of life, attaches itself to what *other* people think about one, the edification one will give or rather the respectability that will attach itself to one, the opinion of the priests, not least one's own opinion of oneself as a *devot*. Where there exist rather feeble and superficial spiritual or charitable bodies, sodalities, societies, what not, there is a danger that these will become the active religious focus, the real test of the good Catholic. The rather better are first to join them and to find in them too often fertile fruit for the exercise of petty values (which in real religion are called vanity or lack of charity). And there is a

common note of modern vulgarity which seems at first sight contrary to the exclusion of differentiation and distinction spoken of above. I mean the snobbery of class. A society which pretends to abolish distinctions inevitably generates a host of new and entirely artificial ones. People who cannot afford television are said to erect television aerials so as not to look worse off than their neighbours. The genteel, no longer secure in their status, look down their noses at the lower orders. The difference of a postal address may be cataclysmic. To this sort of snobbery religion attaches itself with remarkable tenacity, perhaps because the whole field of good works and charity can so easily lend itself to the underlining of snobbery and patronage. There is an intellectual snobbery, too, which confuses education in religion with religion itself, and looks down on the simple.

What is true within the parish is true also in its way for the country at large, even for the Church as a whole. Where the spiritual standard tends to be very much what other people think, and particularly what other people think of me, what is 'done', what is 'edifying', in the sense of what is respectable and looking well, then we shall obviously get a sort of stagnation, a sort of going round in circles whose own inertia will tend to drag things down rather than raise them. Going into examples here might be invidious, but I can safely give one in the field of my own daily work. I am amazed at the low standard which has to be maintained by any Catholic newspaper which hopes to survive at all, and the still lower standard needed for real success. The explanation is sometimes given that our Catholic people are actually less educated than others. I do not believe this, if only because Catholics who read daily papers of quite a decent standard of interest and information still require a Catholic paper to be a super-parish magazine edited in vulgar imitation of the worst, not the best, in ordinary journalism (with, of course, a transference of values from the 'right' things in the world to the 'right' things in the religious compartment of their minds and lives). In the same way, Catholics who manifest some sense of aesthetic standards in daily life will cheerfully persecute any priest or group of the faithful who would like to raise the standard of ecclesiastical art. Here

we get clear instances of what everyone would call vulgarity, cheapness, insistence on the third-rate.

Its explanation seems to lie precisely in the consequences of thinking of religion in terms of what will edify, what will please the right person, what others will think of me. When this is universalised we simply get stuck in the mud of the rather worse in our endeavour to be rather better, *ostensibly* for spiritual reasons, *actually* to a large extent because others in that world expect it of us. It works the same way at all levels, from the aesthetic and pseudo-mystic or liturgical to those who imitate their social or clerical betters.

I am conscious that in pursuing my theme I have probably been very uncharitable myself. I have thought in the round and in the mass, and overlooked the many exceptions, indeed the signs of what I hope and believe is a real movement away from the vulgarity of which I have written and towards much purer spiritual ideals.

But if I have done this, it is because I frankly do not think the cure to be easy. Religion cut away, as religion today too largely is, from natural and differentiated life is a hard and lofty aim.

When religion was integrated with vocation and work and life of a people closely bound together in their material aims, and through common values running right through the community, it emerged as a kind of highest dimension of this social life. It might be individually good, poor or indifferent, but it was as real as the life was real. It was honest. Divorced now by circumstances from common life and work, it has become individualised and self-centred, introspective and detached. A few perhaps can bear this, though these are always in danger of making a religion a personal escape from life and the world and consequently are subject to all the illusions of ritualism and pseudo-mysticism. But the majority, it seems, find in their neighbour and in their priests' opinion the standard by which they judge themselves, and consequently their religion tends to become a superficial emotionalism and a quasi-automatic carrying out of external duties and practices. And the rather better they try to do all this, the rather worse (religiously) they must become. Hence we must not be surprised at the

'leakage', especially at the age when young men and young women, filled with the excitement of having to live for themselves, find the religion they know around them unreal. So they fall away until perhaps as they begin themselves to die to real physical life, they find that religion once again becomes acceptable.

One fears that not a little of the visible progress of the Church today may be spiritually weaker than we sometimes imagine. Are not the tests we instinctively apply those of edification, reputation with others, the show we put up, respectable morality, external statistics, degrees of piety, rejection of the unusual, suspicion of the man who does not play the game, of the 'crank', of whomsoever ventures to think for himself? Any tests of religious, Catholic or spiritual worth are, anyway, invidious and dangerous, and their popularity today is a bad sign. God alone judges the heart, that is, the real man. But these popular tests are really tests of adherence to social conventions in a religious setting. In a ruder, but spiritually sounder, age when religion was the highest dimension of life and life integrated with vocation and status, men on whom sound doctrine was sternly imposed were left personally much freer to find their own spiritual level. In other words, they were left to be themselves spiritually. The judgment of God, not the judgment of their fellows, was what mattered. Such men felt the judgment of God to be stern, and also the judgment of the State with which the Church might be linked. But they were relatively free from the judgment of their fellows. Today, we feel the judgment of our fellows to be stern, but the judgment of God negligible, because he is all-merciful. The contrast, one feels, sets off the difference between a religion that inclines to realism and a religion that inclines to the bourgeois conventions whose essence is the vulgar endeavour to become rather better and ending by becoming rather worse.