

On Doing Nothing in Particular¹

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For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

That is how St Paul speaks of the plan of redemption to his converts at Corinth. And now here is Shakespeare showing man as instrumental in 'declaring the glory of the Lord'. It is a passage from *King Lear* where the king, cast out into the storm by his unnatural daughters, sees, for the first time it may be, the close kinship of us all. He says:

Take physic, pomp;
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them
And show the heavens more just.

I have been asked to speak on the universal apostolate. When I enquired what was meant by that I was told: 'You know, doing nothing in particular'. Now about our vocation to do nothing in particular I want to show three things.

First, that it is universal in that it is an apostolate to all men, founded on our sense of being all creatures of God.

Second, that it is an apostolate of charity since it is the making actual here and now of the work among men of Christ, of whom St Thomas says: 'The Son is the Word, the expression of God', not just any how (*non quaecumque*), but as 'breathing forth Love.' Again it is an apostolate of charity because it is addressed to the creatures of God, that is to those capable of love and worthy of it since the love of God dynamically goes out to the souls he has made *creans bonitatem in rebus*, as the cause of goodness, loveliness, in all things.

Third, that because it is indeed an apostolate of charity, it is infinitely adaptable. No limitations in ourselves excuse us from it. No limitations in those about us make them incapable of it. But, since we are all limited, it generally expresses itself in trivial (in apparently trivial) ways.

When a son of Adam becomes a child of God at baptism, it is indeed God's work. But it is another son of Adam (who need not himself be a Christian) who confers the sacrament upon him. And even in the

¹Based on a talk given to a group of people concerned with the idea of Secular Institutes.

imagined pagan world of *Lear*, when the rich man shares his wordly goods with the unfortunate, it is not man's generosity of which he gives example, it is the justice of the heavens.

In the same way, Gloucester accuses the gods when he is suffering as a result of human malevolence. In the most bitter lines in the play he says:

As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods,
They kill us for their sport.

In fact, we are inclined to base the grand judgments of our lives upon our own very limited experience. We decide that life is or is not worth living, that human beings are mostly kind or mostly cruel, not after a panoramic survey of human history but simply from the way we have been treated by our parents, siblings, fellows.

Ask men's opinions; Scoto now shall tell
How trade increases and the world goes well;
Strike off his pension, by the setting sun,
And Britain, if not Europe, is undone.

Arnold Toynbee must have decided that human endeavour is in some way valuable *before* he undertook his titanic task. Had he not, the task itself would have remained undone. If by what we do, what we are, what we assume, we can influence others towards a decision that life is not a tale told by an idiot, we shan't, I trust, find it difficult to explain to St Peter about that 'nothing in particular'.

Throughout human history there has been a hesitant and fluctuating movement towards a wider understanding of the unity of all men. It would now be not only heartless but anachronistic for a general to say to the Queen as one general said to Queen Victoria to explain his rejection of Florence Nightingale's bold plan to treat soldiers as human beings: 'The British soldier, Ma'am, is not a recovering animal'. I think we all have reason to know that Florence Nightingale's spirit has not entirely won, never will win definitively, but we do know that if such an opinion were voiced to our Queen today, it would be allusively, deprecatingly. That is a measure of progress.

Is it fanciful to find a connection between this growth of humanitarianism and the greatly sharpened awareness of Christian unity which found expression in the encyclical on the mystical body of Christ? *New Statesman* readers who campaign against landlords who discriminate unfairly against black people have very likely never heard of the encyclical. I don't suppose the flour has heard of the yeast. And if we look further back and ask what gave rise to that enhanced awareness of unity which is expressed in the encyclical, is it strange if we should find

it in Pius X's teaching on frequent communion? The sacrament of unity, the bond of charity.

I have heard, though I may have got it wrong and I have not read it myself, that St Thomas teaches that if necessary God would arrange a special revelation for each individual human soul, that the supposed baby washed from a wreck and somehow surviving on a desert island with no human contact would not be allowed to die without the chance to make his choice between God and self. It sounds rather a far-fetched and impossible case, however, and *ex hypothesi* one we can never have personal experience of. What we can know and feel in our own lives is that if God wishes Mrs Buggins to hear words of comfort, he has in practice the choice between a miracle and speaking with our mouth. We can say: 'God will arrange things if my words fail. But I must speak for if I don't no one will'. I must speak. I have no right to await a miracle. That would be the terribly-named sin of tempting God.

Let us think for a minute how important it is that Mrs Buggins should be comforted. She is an immortal person created by God. Our Lord died that she might live. But she must find the courage to choose life if she is to have it. And for that she needs strength, she needs to be comforted. She may not recognize her need herself. It is still a need. She may never know where the comfort came from. It is still strength to her. She may not know why she chooses Tide instead of Omo though it is a business which occupies hundreds of brainy people and costs tens of thousands of pounds to endeavour to cause her to choose Tide instead of Omo. What has all this got to do with a universal apostolate? Why, if our apostolate is to be universal, it must reach Mrs Buggins; and if it's going to reach her, it must be something a bit closer to her life than the simplest wayside pulpit message. 'Yes dear, that Miss 'Ansard, she's lovely'. When I heard this, as I think, inadequate though not inaccurate description of my superior, then I in my intellectually snobby way went around all day, chanting to myself: 'Charity, Joy, Peace, Patience. . .'.

We say we have given ourselves to God. We are dedicated people who aspire (which means, of course, making unattractive grunting sounds of effort), who aspire to belong wholly to God. I don't know whether anyone gave you a best dolly when you were small. I had one so splendid that she was mostly wrapped carefully in silver paper and laid away in a drawer whose very handle was forbidden me. It is not like a best dolly that we desire to give ourselves to God. We aren't too good to use. And how are we to be used? By helping others. As St Benedict says, 'by patience we share in the sufferings of Christ,' we

participate in his work of redemption, and thus it comes about what Dame Julian heard: 'We be his crown.'

So we have heard that to love Christ is to keep his commandments, and that his command to us is that we should love one another, and that this is to be the sign by which we may be recognized as his followers. Not recognized by Christ alone, 'Thou knowest all things, thou knowest that I love thee', but recognized by men. And how will they know if we love? Ah! I've heard a sermon that mocked the trivial pretexts for which divorces have been granted. 'Incompatibility, mental cruelty, they call it. And what had he done? Left the cap off the toothpaste!' I leave to those who can afford to mock at that, the great and noble efforts of devotion. I will show mine, I mean to pay the last full measure of devotion by putting the cap firmly on, if that is the appropriate expression of charity.

In the first book of the Bible comes the first passage cited under *brotherhood* in the concordance. It tells of the difficulties, the incompatibilities between Abram and Lot and the strife between the herdsmen of their cattle. Abram says, 'Let there be no strife, I pray thee, between me and thee . . . for we are brethren.' And then to solve the problem of finding pasture for all their beasts Abram makes to Lot the suggestion that they must separate: 'If you take the left hand, then I will go to the right; or if you take the right hand, then I will go to the left.' A curious entry, you may think, to be put under the heading *brotherhood*.

Now I should like to interpret that passage after the manner of the early Fathers. It reads to me like a warning to us. Abram and Lot were anxious to be at peace together but it was not possible while they had conflicting responsibilities. If they would be peaceable together, their herdsmen, anxious to secure the best grazing for themselves, would not. I read this message much in the same way as St Paul's advice on marriage when he says married men and women have to please their partners while the unmarried are free to study to please God. There are so many to tell us that we have evaded our natural responsibilities that perhaps we don't consider the warning in the words. It is a terrible one. There are more ways of doing it than lavishing exaggerated care on cats or poodles.

Here we are, living in the world, earning our living in ordinary jobs, struggling to get on to buses, competing with the others for promotion. If our having no family responsibilities only releases our energies to compete more vigorously, more tenaciously . . . Yes, our energies are released. It must be so that we can master the calm not to compete.

It must be so that we have leisure to listen to others, to notice, to act upon what we know. If our main job is charity, let's apply a spot of time and motion study. Let's try to be effective. The chances are it will be in trivial ways. It will be putting caps on toothpaste tubes or the equivalent. The point is, others are often quite legitimately too pre-occupied with their important tasks to be able to give so much attention to the details. These details are the task assigned to us. What they will be depends on ever-changing circumstance though some, like cleaning the bath after us or writing as legibly as we are able, seem pretty constant. There are ways too to be thought of. Don't ask, 'Would you like a cup of tea?' Unless the person is desperate, you will get the answer, 'Please don't bother.' No. Ask 'Will you have tea or coffee?' In fact it might be that in some circumstances the very flower of charity would consist in saying: 'Phew, I could do with a cuppa, couldn't you?' Not words you'd expect to find extolled in hagiography but I think I have the noblest authority, our Lord beside the well. He had come to give the 'living water'. He started by asking for a drink. It was the only line of communication open at the moment.

These services are none of them very memorable. Even we can't fatten ourselves with pride on such meagre fare especially when we see others who perform intuitively the things that require so much consideration on our part.

Let us remember too that there exist the non-tangible equivalents. It may be very trying to listen to a lengthy discussion on the comparative merits of blue or yellow bathroom curtains, or Cyprus or Israel for a holiday. When we feel the familiar 'I am being tried' pressure rising, let's make it operate the switch to remind us to ask what the decision was in the end. Remember, the poor bores bore themselves too. If only they can feel that they have roused a little interest, they may actually become more interesting. Perhaps they only talked about bathroom curtains because they were preternaturally shy of other subjects.

And here we come to something that is perhaps rather our speciality. It is much easier for us than for anyone else to demonstrate that making a damaging or humiliating admission is not necessarily fatal. 'I have not read *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*' would be a contemptible refusal in some companies: but so would 'I have read it' in others. Many people, probably most, not only learn more from example than from precept but are incapable of learning anything except by example. Especially with the young it is important to help them to an acknowledgement of

their difficulties by quietly admitting our own. The whole of the advertising world is ganged up against them, assuring them with repetitions and reverberations that they will be outcasts unless they have this or use that. Let us prove by what we are that it need not be so. In this affluent society, people, and especially the young, are dreadfully ashamed of being poor. An unhesitating and straightforward 'I can't afford it,' from us can really help.

There is a way of letting people share one's life that can truly assuage the loneliness which is so acute and widespread that even the cigarette advertisers have got on to it. 'Never alone with a Strand.' I know that when what you want is a cigarette, nothing else, not even a tobacco farm will do, but still I don't think we are departing from the truth, and so from humility, if we judge we can be of more service than a cigarette in combating loneliness. And this can be done as well by speaking as by listening, in my opinion. I know this is controversial and I know that in practice speaking and listening must always go together but I remember what Pope says, and see the point:

'Yet Chloe sure was form'd without a spot'—
 Nature in her then err'd not, but forgot.
 'With every pleasing, every prudent part,
 Say, what can Chloe want?' She wants a heart.
 She speaks, behaves and acts just as she ought,
 But never, never reached one generous thought.
 Virtue she finds too painful an endeavour,
 Content to dwell in decencies for ever.
 Safe is your secret still in Chloe's ear;
 But none of Chloe's shall you ever hear.

I know the books are anxious for us to forget ourselves and I've got a facsimile of the page in St Anthony Mary Claret's retreat notebook where he resolves never to talk about himself—except in the third person. I don't fail to find it admirable but it is a bit quaint and not literally imitable in my life. Perhaps it may be with this as with money. The thing is not to be preoccupied with it. Some achieve this by renouncing it altogether, some by having it but being generous with it. Can't we hold our experience in trust for the time when it will come in handy? It is easier to give advice uncondescendingly when we say clearly that this and this happened to us one time. It would be only embarrassing if we prefaced our remarks by, 'I too am a sinner and therefore my heart is tuned to compassion; and it is with justice as well as gladness that I will share your penance.'

But it can be practically useful to say 'When I stole a handbag from Selfridges, this is how I made restitution.'

I picture it to myself as teaching a calf to drink out of a bucket. I must get him to suck on my unsatisfactory, unproductive thumb and then I can lower his mouth gently into the milk without getting it up his nose and making him afraid he will drown.

William Faulkner puts the case for merely listening very trenchantly:

Somebody to talk to, as we all seem to need, want, have to have, not to converse with you or even agree with you, but just keep quiet and listen. Which is all that people really want, really need; I mean, to behave themselves, keep out of one another's hair; the maladjustments which they tell us breed the arsonists and rapists and murderers and thieves and the rest of the anti-social enemies, are not really maladjustments but simply because the embryonic murderers and thieves didn't have anybody to listen to them: which is an idea the Catholic Church discovered two thousand years ago only it just didn't carry it far enough or maybe it was too busy being the Church to have time to bother with man, or maybe it wasn't the Church's fault at all but simply because it had to deal with human beings and maybe if the world was just populated with a kind of creature half of which were dumb, couldn't do anything but listen, couldn't even escape from having to listen to the other half, there wouldn't even be any war.

Well, I wonder. Would you want to unburden yourself to one of these dumb dummies? Almost as bad as the duty visit by appointment to the Tutor to Women Students of college days.

And now the key to our apostolate of being with other people, of going forth well-armed from the ranks of the brethren (of those who share our ideal, who desire to be united with God, who pray) to 'the single-handed combat of the desert.' No longer the desert of Scete but the desert of the ordinary world where what we value is not considered, where there is much striving but no aim, where the idea of humanity, that idea which in the mind of God from all eternity brought us all into being, which calls the whole human race to flower into the perfect image and likeness of God is almost wholly neglected. A desert indeed when the immediate end of the human race is unknown.

Our business is with the truth. We don't give it to others. Their nature cries out for it, though incoherently. We are to be such that those about us may find it easier to know themselves for what they are and to acknowledge it. It used to drive me frantic, to hear confessions and have

no power to absolve. In this too, I have endeavoured to seek peace and pursue it, and now it seems to me a blessing if others can speak to me of their faults as faults. Not with boastfulness: 'I didn't declare them, of course, I had them in my wash bag.' Not with contention like the child in school who says to the teacher, 'My mother said I could', but with at least implicit sorrow and desire to avoid the fault in future.

And so I finish with words from St Paul. First, in Romans:

Having gifts that differ according to the grace given us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; he who teaches, in his teaching; he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who contributes, in liberality; he who gives aid, with zeal; he who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness (Rom. 12. 6-8).

And now I repeat the words from 2 Corinthians with which I began: 'For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving to the glory of God' and I add what follows: 'So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day' (2 Cor. 4. 15-16).

Reviews

THE MASTER CALLS: A HANDBOOK OF CHRISTIAN LIVING, by Fritz Tillmann, translated by Gregory Roettger, O.S.B.; Burns and Oates, 42s.

This book is unusual among works of moral theology. It contains no reference to the Code of canon law, and over a thousand references to the New Testament. It is directed to the layman and makes a genuine endeavour to avoid seminary jargon. It can truly claim to be concerned with Christian living without being preoccupied with ecclesiastical discipline. It is not, however, as its subtitle suggests, a handbook which one could turn up to settle a particular moral perplexity. This is not to its discredit: for there cannot be a handbook to God's law as there can be a handbook to canon law. A moral theologian must be more than a canon lawyer: but he cannot be a divine lawyer.

The structure of this book is firmly scriptural. This is made clear by the first section entitled *Principles*. It takes as its fundamental notion the idea of the following of Christ, and relates this to other key gospel concepts such as the