

The Charity - "to think".

Terry Mahony (S.S. 1955)

In this Summer School, as in previous ones, emphasis has been laid on discovering the true nature of the University Apostolate. This we have seen under various aspects :- as a call from Christ to co-operate with Him in the redemption of the University, as a call to respond in charity to its needs, and as a call to become spiritually and totally transformed ourselves as catholic University students. This talk presupposes all these aspects, and indeed includes them, but its special aim is to show the University apostolate in a wider context, not in a wider theological context, but in a wider social and intellectual context; it is concerned not so much with the apostolate to the university, but with the apostolate of the University itself.

Let us begin by explaining the title of the talk. It seems to suggest that Charity is not what it used to be. But that is not the meaning. The meaning, and this will be the burden of my argument, is that Charity is the same as it used to be it now has new work to do.

In an article in "Lumen Vitae" the French thinker Jean Guittou illustrated the truth of this by contrasting the state of the world today with what it was in Frederick Ozanam's day.

Ozanam was an intellectual of the first rank in 19th. century France. He was a Professor at the Sorbonne. A friend of France's greatest thinkers and writers he was one of the forerunners of the Catholic revival in France. It is not, however, for these attainments that he is remembered. He is remembered as the founder of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, a movement which is primarily concerned with the corporal works of charity. He has himself told the story of how he came to start this great work. With his friends he was accustomed to hold discussion groups with the enemies of the Church on religious matters. After one of these meetings which had profited no one, it struck him how fruitless such discussions were. The only way for men to see the truth of the Church was to see it visibly expressed through Charity. And where was the greatest need of the time - with the poor, those who were hungry and homeless. That is how the movement began.

Guittou's point is that though Ozanam's inspiration was correct for his century the modern world presents a different picture. Not, of course, that Ozanam's work need not be continued. People today are hungry and homeless and the corporal works of mercy will always be a mark of Christian charity. Nevertheless, if we were asked to judge our society here and now I do not think that we would say that its chief needs are food, clothing and dwellings. Guittou says that these things are becoming more and more the concern of Governments. The poor have political power which enforces consideration for their needs.



A little reflection does enable us to see that people's needs are of a different order. They lack not so much material necessities, but rather the opportunity or ability to live so that they achieve the stature of human persons.

If this is true then it follows that the ills of society need more thorough intellectual investigation for it is the ideas or lack of ideas in society which are having this effect on man. Man is always trying to live ideas, to translate them into values which shape his destiny. A particular society or individual is, at any given time, a fact. But each moves forward according to the ideas each has about itself or himself.

In a general way we can set ourselves thinking along the right lines if we look at two factors which must affect our judgement about the needs of society. One is the separation between religion and life, or if you like the denial of religion. The other is the contrast between the world of the nineteenth century and our own.

From the beginning of Christianity up to the Protestant Reformation attacks on religion were usually attacks on one or another aspect of dogma. With the Reformation the Church itself was attacked as being false or an unnecessary institution. Later, Christ was considered as unnecessary, that is Christ as the Church presents Him to us, God become man. One would think that criticism could go no further. Perhaps not, but in its effects on life it can. Though at first the private views of a few thinkers as time went on their false theories seeped through to the people and profoundly influenced society.

To-day, as a result, people as a whole ignore religion, both as a source of ideas and as a guide for living. They argue (or feel) that religion has no meaning or relevance to them, or what is worse assume this without argument. The supernatural means little or nothing in our society, influencing neither individuals nor institutions. And the modern mind, when it is not openly hostile to religion, considers it worth tolerating because it appears to satisfy the subjective needs of some people.

Let us now briefly contrast the 20th century with the 19th. The latter gave birth to many new ideas - ideas which were intensely and enthusiastically held, and which shook and shaped society. Chief amongst there were evolution, economic liberalism, socialism and communism, trade unionism, the emancipation of women, materialism, the belief in progress and science. All of these ideas excited men and gave rise to optimism and also to something more profound namely the belief that the Golden Age was just around the corner, the conviction that the Universe could be understood and changed for the better, and that man at last could achieve happiness themselves.

The dream failed, as we know, and indeed had terrible consequences. It has left the people of the 20th. century in a vacuum; no new vision has been created in place of the old.

Of course we all know in a way the reason for the breakdown of the 19th. century ideals. We know that if the supernatural order is denied or ignored the natural order cannot attain its proper fulfilment and quickly tends to corruption. We can say, too, that the modern world is also doomed to failure if it will not turn to God for the solution of its problems and for the true vision of life.

However, we are not entitled to pass final judgment on our society. True, we must judge it but not so as to condemn it. We judge it in order to know it and thereby know ourselves so that we may respond to its needs and change it in the light of our judgment. This, to-day, is the vital call on our charity.

Let us, then, try to examine the situation of our time in more specific terms. You will be at liberty to disagree with the whole or any part of this analysis. But that in a way is not important. What we have to agree on is that such an analysis can and ought to be made. All we can do here is to give a precis of some aspects of our society which demonstrate how man is placed and which point to some deprivation in him, or to some problem confronting him which we are bound in charity to understand and solve.

First let us examine men's attitude to the intellect itself. The process of doubt, beginning with Hume, has now gone very far. On the surface, perhaps, we may see criticism only of metaphysical thought. But here again we must not lose sight of the concrete effects of this criticism, the most of which is the loss in the intellect. It can provide no certain speculative knowledge nor guide us in the way we are to live. In this connection let me quote a passage from a man, Bertrand Russell, who has sensed the void of thought to a very marked degree. After quoting the blasphemous description of the creation by Mephistophilis in 'Dr. Faustus' he comments "Such, in outline, but even more purposeless, more void of meaning, is the world which Science presents for our belief. Amid such a world, if anywhere, our ideals henceforth must find a home. That Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual beyond the grave; that all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins -- all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built". (pp 51 Mysticism & Logic)

And what is most pathetically significant about this view is that he can advance no reason why despair should remain unyielding.



The most crucial factor in the decline of the respect for the value of the intellect has been the denial of traditional philosophy; and what is important is not that systems of philosophy have been overthrown, but that philosophising in the traditional is rejected. Men cannot communicate in basic ideas, because philosophical currency is not recognised. The consequence is that men no longer look to philosophy for the solution to their deepest individual and social problems. Without trespassing too much on a very difficult field I think that we can properly say that philosophers to-day are primarily interested in method. They concentrate on discovering under what conditions a proposition will have meaning rather than on whether a proposition is true or not.

Reflecting in some way the decline of the intellect, we witness also to-day the loss of social ideals. Summarising the position from the point of view of ideas, we could say that social ideals have been replaced by methodologies. Social Science rather than serving philosophy, has taken its place. It analyses social behaviour by means of statistics, and offers solutions to problems based on standards of social desirability and normality in which there is often complete lack of reference to human values e.g. sterilization for sex crimes. In political thought and institutions we find the same lack of idealism. Capitalist and socialist policies are compromised and the result is the Welfare State where government is at a minimum. The administration largely directs and executes policy, and this creates a sense of indifference and impotence among the governed. We need only glance at contemporary affairs to see how institutions like political parties and Trade Unions have lost their mystique. Yet only half a century ago or less they carried within themselves the vision of a reformed society which they meant to make a reality.

Our civilization is often spoken of as being technological. We have hinted at the prevalence of techniques in other orders of life. We can see their influence more clearly if we look at the material basis of life. It is dominated by the machine and by the type of thinking that the machine brings about. The machine produces commodities, the sale and consumption of which brings wealth to the owners of the machine. This is the central fact of economic life, the fact on which all thought about it is founded. Man is a worker, or owner of property, head of a family, only within this fact. The machine has created the pattern of work and of leisure, family life, and urban civilization. It has turned the person into a functional unit, the community into a mass.

If what we have said about man is generally true i.e. that when he is treated individually he is treated as less than a person, that when he associates with his fellows he is not a member of a community but part of an aggregate, and if his pattern of life is not determined by reliance on his intellect then it becomes difficult to talk of him as having any culture. And yet man is a cultural being. He does not merely submit to or dominate his environment and the circumstances of his life, but penetrates and enters into some sort of

communion with it by means of his intellect and his imagination. The vision that he is able to achieve he re-creates by an outward sign which both expresses his own personality and ennobles his environment by giving it a human stamp.

Where then is the human image in our civilization? It takes only a little thought to see that it is lacking because the organization of our Society, the influences which mould it, directly militate against the growth of the human person. Culture demands the opportunity for realizing human potentialities in every activity - work, family and civic life, knowledge, religion and the arts. It demands also a certain natural hierarchy of values within the individual and within Society. It cannot be imposed by education; strictly speaking one does not know about culture; one is simply cultured to a more or less degree.



If, then, work does not engage his personality fully, if he is rarely able to participate in the life of a community, if the externals of life are standardized, and if the predominant vision of society is economic, then man finds it impossible to become cultured.

It does not follow that there are not people who contribute to the arts. There are. But they do not exist under the patronage as they should, but almost as a class apart from the rest of society. The separation works adversely for both. The artist may easily succumb to the temptation to turn inwards upon himself and become esoteric; the ordinary man quickly loses all contact with works of art e.g. some modern painting.

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To sum up this very sketchy analysis of the modern world, my view is that it is dominated by techniques which are employed either for their own sake or for ends outside man, and concurrently, there is a vacuum of values and ideas which should enable man to have some grasp of the world as a whole and provide him with inspiration for his personal life.

Granting that we may speak in this manner about our modern world, to whom belongs the task of restoration? To say that it is everybody's responsibility is tantamount to saying that it is no-one's responsibility. But if the direction of this talk has been generally true then it is fairly clear that we have a major part to play. And this is by virtue of being members of a University. For we can show, I think, that the University has a most central role in society. Cardinal Newman recognised this when he said that the function of a University was to fit men of the world for the world.

How, then, does the University stand in relation to society? The University is a focus of the culture and ideas prevalent in society. To a certain extent this applies to any institution because people who belong to an institution come to it as society has made them.

So if we object that the University as we know it is lifeless or concerned with unreal issues then it is practically certain that society is following the same pattern.

But what are the grounds for saying that there is a special and exalted relationship between the University and Society?

1. The University provides a community in which one may participate at all levels; and the opportunity to seek truth and to develop culturally. Hence it more nearly approaches to a total way of life.

2. It is concerned with the highest and most noble of men's achievements and endeavours.

3. It teaches so much that affects the life of society, the arts, technology, pure science and the various professions.

The very special position of the University implies that it has very great responsibilities.

What is demanded of it is principally that it establishes a tradition of wisdom in all its various disciplines, because if their integrity is lost in the University then it is lost in the world. If, for example, the University fails to instil into its members the meaning of a particular profession, then the members of that profession become moulded by the prevailing social attitudes to it. The University is reduced to turning out the sort of graduate it thinks it wants.

If the University fulfils its primary function, then it will automatically fulfil its next most important function which is to act as a custodian of cultural values on behalf of society; since it will not be able to perform its principal task without demonstrating the necessity of cultural development to its students, and stimulating its growth amongst them.

The conclusion we should draw from this is that we are distinctly responsible for the salvation of society, and that our apostolate which colours even the most minor of our everyday activities, is all the time geared to the transformation of the whole world.

Our first task as students, scholars, is in and to our University. We must demonstrate in our lives the way of its fulfillment. If we ourselves become the embodiment of what the University should be then we can be sure that the University approaches more and more to its ideal through us. It is likewise true that if the University is changed for the better then society as a whole is influenced for the better. We should expect this to be so because of their mutual influence and interaction. It is even more profoundly true because that is the way God's grace works. If there is a centre of sanctity in an environment, then that environment is disposed towards sanctity.

Finally, our approach to our work at the University must have a sense of universality, and of mission. We have got to make ourselves aware of the vital problems of the world and of the Christian attitude to them. It is not too much to ask of a University student that he should have the ordinary interests of any intelligent person. At the same time IT IS WHAT CHARITY DEMANDS OF US.