

# Aggiornamento II.—Towards Fraternity

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*by Ian Hislop O.P.*

Within the last few years Catholic thought has reconciled itself to the fact of the French Revolution. We see it now not as a merely diabolical upheaval but as growing out of a longing for justice, for dignity and equality – every man a citizen. Of course there was another side to the Revolution but in spite of this and in spite of its ultimate capture by the military consul and middle class calculation, something of its spirit remains, romantic but disturbing. The sense of youth so strongly felt by the young Wordsworth, the conviction of renewal of which Shelley sang has remained and from time to time upsets even the hard faced manipulators of more scientific Revolutions.

One word, perhaps, sums it up, Fraternity. The brotherhood of the free and the equal, man, the common man escaped from the sacred monarchy, from dutiful subservience to his superiors. It was a secure world he left, everyone in his proper place ordained by – Providence: and it is a world that many of us hanker for under various guises. But the Bourbon are dead never to return and longing for the ancient securities only prepares the way for secular tyrants who in the name of order extinguish man's spirit.

This we can now see because the Catholic has grown up and wants to put away the things of a child. He sees, as do all who are sensitive to the moral problems of our age, that he can no longer leave the great issues to the expert or to the administrator: it is not safe to do so. In our age we no longer have Fathers writ large in the old sense. The elders have no claim to exclusive wisdom or to absolute authority. In an age of constantly accelerating change they are more likely to be anxious old men clinging to outmoded status symbols and dead institutions, slim and shrewd no doubt, but without insight. Whatever be the role of the elder in our society, and I am convinced that he has a role, it cannot be that of domination. Privilege, even respect, based on mere eldership looks strangely out of place in our age, it may deceive the persons making the claim, but it rests on a view of society long abandoned.

Apart from the technical field – where after all the young inherit the world fairly quickly – the achievement of the past creaks and groans under the new pressures. The traditionalist, a very different person from the man who puts a true value on tradition, finds himself attacked; how can you, a moral man, possibly defend institutions and laws which may have sprung from a primitive prudence, but

are in a different context immoral in their consequences? The Gods of the recent past are in the new world that is being born idols fit only for an ethnological museum.

But stop: is it not better to put up with many wrongs in the interests of order and security? It is a crime but are not greater crimes committed in the name of Liberty? True enough; undirected, uncontrolled Fraternity can lay us open to the kind of shock that turns the mildest group into a mob or a pack. Yet because we have left the burrow, the womb, the tribe, call it what you will, we are necessarily naked and exposed. So we have to look a little more closely at this word Fraternity. The Christian surely can accept what it implies in terms of political experience and see that this affects every form of public activity. It means open discussion with the discipline imposed by this, and the freedom it demands if man is to discover truth as a personal value. It means checks on unlimited personal power, with the recognition at the purely human level of the dangers of autocracy both for superior and subject; terms that themselves betray an unfraternal attitude. It involves close attention to techniques of debate, of committee procedure and of communication lest the new leader is just a new name for the old monarch. This is all involved, but the Christian must then ask himself is renewal simply the reform of institutions in terms of new secular insights and techniques? Or does something also have to be rediscovered about the Gospel which has become obscured in practice?

There is the demand that each man makes to be recognised as brother. He may do this out of weakness, or because he is immature; cynicism or his inhibiting pride may prevent him from admitting the demand he is making, but the inescapable teaching is that he is brother. So difficult is the sibling world revealed by the psychologist that one cannot argue from experiences of brotherhood; such experiences can be no more than clues interpreted and filled out by revelation. 'You have one teacher, and you are brethren' (Mt. 23.8). This is not a chance remark of Our Lord, but a fundamental statement of Christian existence before Christ. We who cry to Our Father are necessarily brothers, and at the fundamental level of grace can have only one Father. Underneath all the titles that have been accumulated in the Church through two thousand years this fundamental one stands. All others are either properly used of a function validly exercised only in relation to Christ, or are merely trivial, echoes of some vanished court. 'Call no man your Father on earth, for you have one Father who is in heaven. Neither be called master, for you have one master, the Christ' (Mt. 23.9.).

One of the difficulties is that our language is so sodden with sentimental hypocrisy that the word Brother evokes Mr Chadband, and we shrink from both the falsity and the vulgarity. Its meaning can only be rediscovered in communion with Christ. Man, since he

has been delivered from the dominion of the prince of this world by the saving work of the second Adam, rediscovers himself as human in Christ. Beyond the divisions that sin creates out of differences, such as class, or colour, men find themselves as truly human since they are able to recognise each other as brothers. Their brotherhood rest on the one Father whom they share with Christ: 'my Father and your Father' (John 20.17). It is a brotherhood of rebirth which involves leaving the past, father and mother according to the flesh, yet one into which even the old can enter. Though it is a brotherhood it is not enclosed within itself, but by its very nature is outward looking and outward acting. It is impossible to be a brother or to be a neighbour or not to be a stranger without becoming involved with or committed to the poor, the oppressed, the prisoner and the lonely. There is no way the Christian can protect himself against the most small save by apostacy from Christ. If he does not exist where men are crushed because of race, or class, he does not exist at all as a Christian. This the old Fathers recognised when they spoke of the whole human race as the bride of Christ, each one being made in the image of God everyone being needed for the integrity of that community in which alone we can discover what we are.

As we emerge from our feudal childhood, from the nursery of the human spirit, we become conscious of ourselves and of each other as brothers, as adults free in Christ. Then Christ alone is master, for in the spirit men only have authority, only are fathers, in so far as they act in the Holy Spirit, and authority belongs to the Spirit. In the new world, which looks at first as if it were just chaos, we need direction and guidance: it is not the prudence of the past that will help us to withstand the new pressures, but the living Spirit. Hence the urgent necessity at all levels for distinguishing between Holy Tradition and traditions, between Holy Doctrine and theological theory, between the norms of Christian behaviour and the secular compromises of Christians. Far from leading to a rejection of authority this should lead to the rediscovery of the prophetic voice of the Church. When young people complain about institutions and manners they are not attacking the Church, they are demanding that the Church be seen, that the temporal clutter (so dear to those of us who are older because it evokes so much of our memoried experience) be left behind, not in the name of the newness of the world, but in the name of Christ. If the Church is to be renewed we must let the dead bury the dead.