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THE PRIMACY OF PERSON

M. JACQUES MARITAIN, more than anyone else, is responsible for the wide recognition to-day of the all-important distinction between individual and person. He has insisted on the principle that while the individual is for the State, the State is for the person. Those unused to distinguishing two aspects of the same thing have shown some hesitation in accepting the plain fact that in one sense you are working for the good of the State and in another the State is working for your good. They do not readily see that man simply as a unit, separate from all other units and yet with them making up a single complex whole (Society or the State) plays a subordinate role, that of a part to its whole, and that at the same time man has a human soul, an intellect and will, which can be subordinated to nothing less than God. He lives in society for the benefit of his own mind and will, and yet he contributes to the perfection of the mind and will of the other members of that society, working with them for the perfection of each person in God.

The main difficulty in grasping this truth lies in the terminology used. There seems to be no particular reason why one aspect should be called 'individual' and the other 'person.' This, however, becomes clearer when it is realised that 'individual' means what is *undivided* in itself and *divided* off from other similar things. It does not say anything about the thing itself, but simply states its position as a unit amid a host of similar units. 'Person,' on the other hand, originally referred to the character in a play, and we still read at the beginning of the written play the list of characters called the *Dramatis Personae*. Such a person in a play is a unique human being, and the art of the dramatist is to produce a consistent picture of temperament, passions, outlook on life which flow out from what is peculiar to the character and its own particular history. That is what is significant in the character of a play; and the person is the single human being in its entirety with all these modifications, unlike all the other units of society, utterly himself and no other. If we still have to contend with the difficulty of the word 'individualism,' which appears to mean the over-emphasis of just these personal traits at the expense of the community, we should remember

that in fact the individualist is concerned with that aspect of his life which divides him from others. The 'personalist' is not isolated or self-centred; he can only find the full development of his person in God. Thus human unity is a unity of persons rather than of individuals.

A few Christians have already grasped the distinction in its application to the State. From time to time we read denunciations of totalitarian ethics as suppressing the human person so as to make the State supreme, the men who compose it being subordinate, individual cogs in a machine. We insist now and again that the true Christian State must recognise the supremacy of the human person, for the good of which it should be organised. In a democracy at war this truth needs to be stressed frequently, for the military forces necessarily treat their men as individuals and not as persons. All are subordinated—even their very lives—to the one goal of the State, the defeat of the enemy. The whole country has to be organised on totalitarian lines and human freedom is to some extent suspended at least for the duration. We have then a duty to keep the true Christian balance between the one and the many before our eyes during the present emergency.

But until now we have not insisted sufficiently on the personal duties involved. It is easy enough to call out to the State: 'Remember to treat us as persons.' It is more difficult to direct one's attention to one's own responsibilities and to promise the society in which we live to behave here and now in the immediate surroundings of this present life as a true human person redeemed by Christ and in turn assisting the redemption of mankind. The chances that the governments of the world will take notice of our still small voice are very slender indeed; there is no chance of its being heard if we insist on their duties to the Person before we have begun to consider our own duties as persons. This lack of balance appears most clearly in the predominance of the 'Social Question' in the thought of modern Christians—it is THE question for nearly every conscientious follower of Christ. Hence we spend our time 'planning' for the society of the future, the fever for which is surely a symptom of disease, a failure to consider personal responsibilities. The editorial of the current *Theology* (August, 1942) accepts 'planned society' as a necessary conclusion from the advance in technique and the machine age; and the editor sees two alternatives: either the dictator at the head of the planned totalitarian state, or a democratic planning for human freedom, 'to plan with a view to providing, wherever possible, the conditions for the exercise of personal responsibility and decision.' But, in fact, planning is always for the future, personal

responsibility is of the present; planning is abstract, personal responsibility is concrete. So that to plan in this way is like offering one's guests a sumptuous meal of cardboard menus.

When we make a blue print for society, using perhaps the social encyclicals and the best manuals of ethics, we may be in fact refusing to face up to our own position in the here-and-now of life in the present. Our plan involves a host of other people. The world will never be at peace until men begin to live as Christians, we say glibly; and we begin to show how *other* men can live in this way. When the fundamental Christian principles begin to be practised the importance of the human person will be understood by all members of society, the family wage will be paid by Christian employers, property will be more widely distributed, and we shall be able to settle down to peaceful Christian living. In the meantime, sweeping arrangements of other people, Catholics or Christians, or at least Britons, have to be formulated. If these others do not play their part the plan becomes useless, we shrug our shoulders despondently, and suggest that we were ready to take our share in the scheme if the others had not refused. It always depends on the others and we feel that it is up to us to tell them how to behave. Here is the scheme: here the goal is set before you; form fours; right turn; quick march, all of you others, towards that goal.

Although the human person plays a large part in these schemes, we are in practice allowing the individual to supersede the person, because we are legislating for the many, laying down a pretty pattern in which thousands of units take their place, irrespective of whether they are Mrs. Jones with the split personality, Tom Brown with abnormally strong sexual inclinations, or Harriet Smith on the verge of becoming a saint. The individual tends to take pride of place in social thinking. Moreover, the craze for planning is often a form of escapism, fleeing from present reality into the timeless abstract. The arrangement of individuals in a social plan is at best the outlining of a goal: that is comparatively easy to visualise in the abstract, but abominably difficult to reach in the concrete. So we build these castles in the air rather than begin ourselves to live as vital Christians. In the days when Christianity was a rising force in the world, pagan society was unwholesome and in need of basic reorganisation, and yet the Christians did not busy themselves with publishing a hundred and one plans for a Christian society. They had the Gospels which told them what Christ wished them personally to do.

The Social Question certainly demands close and persevering attention. But the fact that it is such a pressing question does not

mean that it is also the primary one for the follower of Christ. If it were primary then those would be justified who say that, modern society and Christianity being incompatible, it is impossible to live a Christian life so long as things remain as they are. Some mistaken Catholics have even asserted that you could not now live in society as a Christian person because mechanised society does not recognise the rights of the person but treats men only as individuals. In this sense it becomes impossible to avoid the practice of birth prevention where the family is not respected; the freedom of Christ cannot be enjoyed in the slavery of industrialism. This does not seem to have occurred to St. Paul, who recommended a Christian master to take back into his service a repentant slave, saying nothing about his right to liberty. It was possible then for slaves to be good Christians, and for masters of slaves also to reach sanctity. Did St. Paul give his converts to understand that they would find it impossible to follow Christ fully until Caesar had righted society at least according to the natural law? Rather was his attitude that, if they followed the spirit of the Gospels, society would in part at least be leavened and civilisation become alive. That point of view is expressed in many of Christ's words—'Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his Justice and all the rest shall be added unto you.'

Although one of the principal duties of 'social thinking' is to distinguish person from individual, the social question naturally concerns itself more with individuals than with persons. It seeks to bring order into the conflicting units of society, to arrange that the individual is divided off from other individuals in such a way that he does not trespass on their rights or property. Social science is concerned with the immediate aims and ideals of human society. But these aims and ideals are also means to something further. The aims that are set before us in terms of the just wage, the distribution of wealth, the independence of the family are at the same time means to the final end of man—his society with God in heaven. The just wage is, however, given to individuals, society with God to persons.

The understanding of person in relation to self is, therefore, of primary importance. Christ died for each distinct human person with all his peculiar characteristics. The first question, then, for each person is not: How are we going to arrange society so that I can begin to follow Christ? but rather: What does Christ have me to do here and now; Is he not asking me to sell all that I have and give to the poor, deliberately to take up my cross every day, to pray without ceasing? If the cases of really Christian heroism are today remarkable chiefly by their absence, surely it is because men have begun first of all to make arrangements for society with their

plans and programmes for individuals without looking first into the responsibility of the distinct Christian person. We have been too concerned with patterns instead of with Christian living. Mr. Middleton Murry at the Malvern Conference seemed to lament the fact that we no longer have 'a pattern of holiness.' But we should say rather that holiness does not lend itself to a pattern, that it is not desirable as an external artificial mould for individuals. No two saints are alike in their holiness; the sanctity of a man of God is not achieved by copying the pattern of another saint. In this sense patterns and plans are *impersonal* things like suits of armour. Even the model of Christ himself means rather that it is Christ who is to live in me, Christ himself present to-day in my circumstances. Patterns are necessary in the initial stages of Christian life in the sense that the goal must first be outlined as something external distant and impersonal, eventually to be reached and identified with oneself. As holiness increases, the Spirit begins to take charge, and the Spirit breathes where he chooses. The Spirit can be held to no set plan. The spiritual life is characterised by an abandonment to the will of God, so that the soul is prepared for a movement in any and every direction. Models of sanctity are helpful in the main as showing how God has worked with other redeemed human persons. For holiness is a matter of personal perfection, a unique perfection, an analogical perfection like the being which is included in the notion of person.

Christ himself seemed to deprecate planning and to insist on a personal approach to every human necessity when he spoke of the sparrows and the lilies being provided for by their Creator. 'Which of you by taking thought can add to his stature one cubit?' Who by taking thought can solve the hopeless muddle into which we have thrown ourselves? The real hope for the future may perhaps lie in forgetting the future in favour of beginning to serve God to-day. At least the saint who is in the hand of God and approaches more closely to the eternal moment of heaven, begins to live only in the present with all its immense significance and profusion of graces which are held out to the soul. The saint is a more perfect human person. Saint and unrepentant sinner are both individuals within the State, establishing it and contributing in some way to its completeness, but the State itself must ultimately help to turn the sinner also into a saint, to perfect his personality according to his own special capacities.