

**Justice, Peace and Dominicans 1216–1999:
VI–*Pro Foco Non Foro*¹:
The Thomist Inheritance and the
Household Economy of Father Vincent McNabb**

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Where there is no temple there shall be no homes,
Though you have shelters and institutions,
Precarious lodgings while the rent is paid
Subsiding basements where the rat breeds
Or sanitary dwellings with numbered doors
Or a house a little better than your neighbour's.
When the Stranger says: 'What is the meaning of this city?
Do you huddle close together because you love each other?'
What will you answer? 'We all dwell together
To make money from each other'? or 'This is a community?'
And the Stranger will depart and return to the desert.

(T.S. Eliot: Choruses from the Rock)

Social justice, which treats the common good as a purpose of action, and brings all the virtues into our relationships with others, is not the only requirement of living in society, but some understanding of it is fundamental, both to liberal societies and to those of a more ancient stamp. Social justice incorporates the question of distribution of wealth, of how to deal with possessions, property, things. The Church has recently uncovered the role of the laity in her understanding of the Christian life, and this aspect of social justice can perhaps be regarded as especially the province of lay people, who deal with the world of 'ordinary life': the life of production and reproduction, of work and family. It is not unreasonable to regard these aspects as central to modern life and indeed to Christian spirituality and philosophy. 'For instance, my sense of myself as a householder, father of a family, holding down a job, providing for my dependents; all this can be the basis of my sense of dignity.'² These call in different degrees and ways upon the ancient virtues of good sense or doing things well (*prudentia*),
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and art, or the skill of making things well (*recta ratio factibilium*). How then might one conduct these aspects in the manner of a distinctively Christian calling? For the large number of middle class English Catholics, this is the challenge of a vocation in the world, of the salvation of suburbia, of the holiness of married life and work.

The thought of Fr. Vincent McNabb, the Guild of St Joseph and St Dominic, and Distributism should be included in this series because they are, quite simply, the most startling Catholic examples, in Britain this century, of the possibilities of ordinary life being thought about and lived in an extraordinary way.

Fr Vincent McNabb (1868–1943), who spent most of his preaching life urging the crowds of Babylondon to return to the fields and the Catholic religion, was a champion of the household economy. A controversial figure, he lived as though he was still in the age of St Dominic, with a certain degree of exhibitionism, walking everywhere in his hobnail boots and homespun habit, keeping only the Scriptures and St Thomas next to his unslept-in bed in his room, which he swept with his hand. Eccentric he appeared to be, prophetic he may have been, but many people loved him, and at least revered and respected him; he was certainly a first-rate preacher. Although ultimately it was his profession as a Dominican priest for which he should perhaps be remembered, he himself was animated equally by an amateur love of the land. In his collection of essays, *The Church and the Land* (1926), he begins by referring to the crisis in the fortunes of the Church—‘because the economic centre of gravity had become displaced by a subtle avarice which was endeavouring to serve God and Mammon.’ This was the problem of the industrial town and led to what he called ‘race suicide’ by which he meant birth control, but which could equally well be extended in our day to more brutal methods of causing a declining population. In his view this was the consequence of the failure of industrialism and, as such, economics called forth the mystic - put simply, the industrial town was bad for the Catholic faith. He saw an apostolic duty to set forth the facts about this because he followed Pope Leo XIII in *Rerum Novarum* who declared: ‘Every minister of holy religion must bring to the struggle the full energy of his mind and all his powers of endurance.’ And the programme demanding this energy of mind and power of endurance was outlined in these simple words: ‘The law should therefore favour ownership and its policy should be to induce as many as possible to become owners.’ Thereafter, in language echoed by Latin American theologians, he talked of Exodus and exodus from Babylondon on Thames to the fields of England, a religious exodus to repopulate the deserted brown earth with the unemployed

masses, to recreate Nazareth or Bethlehem where Christ learned a craft and lived in a family. 'Leave the garden cities and the flesh pots, not in order to scorn suburbia or to lead a simple life, but to worship God'.³

McNabb regarded the first few years of the community of the Third Order and the Guild of St Joseph and St Dominic at Ditchling Common as the closest thing to the embodiment of this ideal. The Guild was a fraternity of craftsmen and their families, begun in 1913. Starting as a non-religious exodus on a familial level by the Gills, it grew just before the war into the Guild, based on the Tertiary life and self-sufficient principles, or, as Gill saw it, normal life before industrialism, in the Sussex countryside at Ditchling Common. Behind it lay the critique of industrial society of Distributism and the characters of G.K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc. The trio of personalities, Eric Gill, Fr. Vincent McNabb and Hilary Pepler created the spark that gave life to the experiment, a radical vision of land and hand work. Hilary Pepler was a most remarkable man who turned his hand to many different occupations. Businessman, surveyor, one of the first social workers and organiser of meals for children in LCC schools, author, printer, puppeteer, amateur actor and mime artist, Pepler moved to Ditchling in 1915 from the artistic and bohemian setting of Hammersmith where he had met Eric Gill and Edward Johnston the calligrapher, who both moved to Ditchling in 1907. Gill was perhaps looking for the basics in life and art, and found something of them in the country and Catholicism. In 1916 Pepler was taken by Gill to the Dominican priory of Hawkesyard in Staffordshire, a place where he hoped to discuss religion freely. Gill had already met McNabb at the house of André Raffalovitch in Edinburgh, and struck up a fruitful exchange of views. McNabb baptised Pepler that same year and Pepler joined the Third Order soon afterwards, renaming his press St Dominic's Press. The Ditchling thing became a Catholic thing and in 1920 the two men, Gill and Pepler, who had moved to Ditchling Common, formed the Guild of St Joseph and St Dominic: a fraternity of craftsmen holding that 'the principle of individual human responsibility being a fundamental of Catholic doctrine, and this principle involving the principles of ownership, workmen should own their tools, their workshops and the product of their work.'⁴

The influence of these percolated down to E.F. Schumacher and Barbara Ward, who took the practical wisdom to a wider world; and there is a resonance and direct links with the *Catholic Worker* of Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin in the United States. Maurin borrowed much from McNabb with his thoughts on cult, culture and cultivation, his ideal of 'agronomic universities'. The looming ecological fears of

the current generation strike a similar chord and the discussion of communitarian politics and the common good cannot ignore the understanding of virtue and excellence in making and doing that is the legacy of Thomism. Distributism was and is controversial because it attracted some of the greatest Catholic minds of a generation in what many, both then and now, would regard as a futile exercise in 'poetry and preachment'⁴ taking able Catholics away from parliamentary politics and ambition, scuppering more middle-of-the-road attempts to influence the Catholic population such as those of the Catholic Social Guild. It also attracted the contempt of those who turned to the left in the sixties, partly because of its very real authoritarian (in some cases fascist) leanings, and its then unfashionable ultramontanist strain. It is hard now to assess these criticisms. *Slant* is part of the Dominican archives and not a lot else. State communism is of historical interest. It too is a failed experiment. (In 1990 the Supreme Soviet of the USSR as it then was, approved a law authorizing private ownership of the means of production, so abolishing the state's virtual monopoly.) The trades union movement is a muted voice, largely undermined by reasonable material standards of living and the increasingly undifferentiated mass of consumers and producers that the nineteen-eighties produced. The movement called communitarianism is perhaps the closest to anything resembling a challenge to the current orthodoxy of liberal economics and polity, reinstating the notions of common good, subsidiarity and notions of the self embedded in communities and traditions. This is far closer to the views of Chesterton and company than their critics, and perhaps even more rhetorical and less specific in remedies than the Distributists. How are we to understand Distributism then? Since it can be regarded as applied Thomism this article proposes to return *ad fontes*, to the thoughts of St Thomas on property which is where the Distributists claimed to find some of their inspiration, filtered through *Rerum Novarum*, and to place the movement in a broad historical context of thought about property.

When St Thomas analyses property in the *Commentary on the Sentences*, the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, his lectures on Aristotle and the *Summa Theologiae*, he is not talking of the early communal apostolic life of the early church which could still be found in religious life. He is talking of ordinary ownership, and borrows his main line of thought from Aristotle's *Politics*.⁶ The key texts in the *Summa Theologiae* are contained in II-II q.66, where he is discussing theft and robbery. Property is essentially about things (*res*), not, as later for Locke, ourselves, our life and our liberty as well as our possessions. Property involves ownership or control (*dominium*). This can be divided up into

managing or taking care of them and distributing them (*potestas procurandi et dispensandi*) on the one hand, but also the use of things. Thomas does not in fact discuss quite how property is acquired—a lacuna leading to much diversion in later thought. The basic reason why this ownership is appropriate is argued from *Genesis 1*: the dominion given over the creation.

The main problem, though, is that of private property (*proprium possidere*): with what justification can someone come to appropriate for themselves what is common to all, or at least open to be appropriated by all? Thomas argues that private property is both permitted and necessary. The reasons for this are common sense ones, given human nature as it is: that everyone is more concerned to acquire their own things rather than what is common; common tasks will belong to everyone and no one; that it is simply more efficient and better organised to run one's own affairs, and finally that there is less to quarrel about. He claims that it is what is jointly owned that is the basis of the most frequent disputes. Here he was running up against the radical tradition of the Church Fathers, who by and large saw private property as the basis of disputes. To incorporate this tradition, Thomas in his next paragraph seems to take back what he said, in discussing the use of things as opposed to their management.⁷ In this regard things are not held as private property but *ut communes*—as common, for the common good, the whole community. In need each should readily share with others. He quotes *1 Timothy*, that the rich should give easily and communicate their wealth to others. Private property for Thomas is an extension of the natural law, part of human law, made by agreement, a device of human reason. It has been claimed, not without some justification, that the history of natural law (particularly that to do with property) is 'an attempt to rearrange the elements of the puzzle left by Aquinas.'⁸ The reason for this is the difficulty of reconciling the very idea of private property (with its concomitant idea of developing the resources of the earth) with the ability of those in need to have prior claim to it. What in fact does private property amount to?

The limits of property rights clarify the rhetorical flourishes of those who wanted to abolish the distinction of mine and thine. Here Thomas relies on the discussion of almsgiving or charity (*eleemosyna*) to declare what became traditional teaching: some resources are essential for the survival of oneself and one's household; some are necessary to one's state of life and business affairs, or paying debts. These can be called absolute and relative necessity. Finally there are *superflua*, or luxuries. What should be done in justice with each of these elements of one's own belongings?

In times of extreme need, 'for anyone in that condition, all resources become common resources'.⁹ There is no theft morally: people in this condition are simply taking from the common stock. They are entitled to do so. Likewise those who have what is necessary for one's state in life or *superflua* are under a duty in strict justice to help those whose need they are aware of. Where there is dire need all around, the individual must judge what is best under the guidance of good sense. When there is no famine the rich ought by natural right to sustain the poor who do not have enough for a decent life out of their *superflua*: these are also held in common. Quite what is relatively necessary and what is superfluous is left up to individual judgement, a true judgement unswayed by consumerism, as we would say today. Yet, as Finnis says, for the distribution of *superflua* legislation is appropriate.¹⁰

Two very important points arise out of this discussion of property. Distributive justice, what is owed to the poor in strict justice, is a matter for every owner, every householder. It is not primarily a matter for the state, contrary to our modern assumptions. Ownership is a good thing, limiting the power of the state and giving the rich the opportunity to give of their abundance both in justice and in charity. The second point is that Thomas says quite clearly that a man cannot have more than enough without another having less than enough (II-II 118 a.1 ad 2). Finnis emphasises that even though economics is not a zero sum game, Thomas is still right to say this: 'For if we set aside the possible world in which everyone everywhere has enough to meet all their needs, *superflua* truly belong to others; anyone who keeps them is depriving, and indeed stealing from those to whom they should by one means or another have been made available.'¹¹ The thoughts of St Thomas are taken up with clarity by McNabb who wrote 'Study not merely to give God his due by worship but to give man his due by justice. What is superfluous to your poor estate distribute. This is distributive charity; a virtue so sacred that crimes against it are the forerunners of inevitable doom'.¹²

After St Thomas, the subsequent history of these ideas follows a fascinating path. In Cajetan, it seems, justice becomes discussed under a threefold scheme of legal, distributive and commutative justice, where distributive justice becomes equated with the *state's* duty to the individual citizen, surreptitiously taking away the responsibilities of distributive justice from the ordinary household owner.¹³ In Grotius an historical picture of the two 'competences' of Thomas was drawn: common ownership was only a short point in a simple and innocent life; private property came into existence as needs became more complex and property became a full and perfect right after a compact or

agreement. In times of necessity this reverted to the original common ownership.¹⁴ Property, he claimed, in a major redefinition of language, should only be applied to this sort of *exclusive* dominion over things. For Grotius also these property rights were expletive or perfect, capable of being guarded by legal justice, by law. Distributive justice was about compassion, generosity and foresight in matters of government. ‘The distinctive feature of Grotian jurisprudence lay in so reducing the scope of distributive justice that the right of theft in necessity or the right to buy grain at a fair price were theorized as exceptions rather than as rules as they had been in Thomist jurisprudence.’¹⁵ The notion of right lay with the owners. This goes hand in hand with a shift to the language of rights rather than what is due in a relationship between people in regard to some thing: a shift towards the beneficiaries of relationship of justice. Legal justice was simply and rather confusingly general or social justice in Aristotle and Aquinas; by the time of Grotius the law had become equated with legal justice and came to underline property rights or exclusive dominion. All else was imperfect rights, as in Grotius, of the poor, or imperfect obligations of the rich as in Pufendorf. What this later tradition signally failed to endorse was the demands of distributive justice either by the householder (Cajetan’s followers), or by the law of the state (Grotius), or even the obligations in strict justice to care for the poor: in Pufendorf this was an imperfect obligation. By the time of David Hume justice has become associated almost entirely with the defence of property: ‘It is on the three laws of the stability of possession, its transference by consent, and the performance of promises “that the peace and security of human society entirely depend.”’¹⁶ Justice is nothing other than rights to protect these, established by human convention. In Locke’s thought the labour of the industrious and rational could be protected by laws of property.

The stage is thus set for the revolution described by Adam Smith. Smith is the harbinger of the commercial, market society with its division of labour and industrial capitalism. It has been claimed that the desire to reconcile the time honoured paradox of the right to private property and the needs of the poor, occupies centre stage in the *Wealth of Nations*. Smith’s answer to this though is through the market system: if scarcity could be overcome through the division of labour, it would not be necessary to choose between the claims of property and the needs of the poor. For Smith, justice strictly speaking was the enforcement of property rights: and in a market society nothing beyond this. Distribution of wealth, an imperfect obligation, a charitable action, could not be enforced at law.¹⁷ In fact government and law were to protect the property owners who could raise productivity such that no

one, not even the propertyless, would go hungry. This is what liberty was: the unhindered enjoyment of property rights that were productive.

This legitimization of accumulation under the rule of law, of an absolutizing of property rights, of the division of labour, clearly accompanied the growth of market capitalism. In theory the wage labourer would be better off than an African king; the practice produced Marxist socialism and a belated response from the Catholic Church under Leo XIII who saw with horror the factory system that destroyed the propertyless wage labourer and his family. . It was out of this that Distributism was born.

Given this history since Thomas, it could be argued that Distributism and Ditchling were a real attempt to redress imbalances that had occurred in the understanding of distributive justice. First of all distributive justice had come to be seen to refer to the role of the state, not the householder. Then any notion of distributive justice had reverted to private charity or benevolence in the face of a market society which emphasised the right to own productive wealth, and the belief in a market society that all would have enough. There was no need for redistribution in theory. The Socialist answer was to restore the power of distribution to the state. The answer of Distributism was to transfer it back to the household (and, moreover, a productive household). Distributism did not have much place for the market belief that scarcity and consequently the problems of justice could be solved by economic plenitude. This was a fantasy for St Thomas; it is a fantasy, full stop.¹⁸ This perhaps is the major lesson to be learnt from the cries of the ecologists: that the earth itself cannot sustain the inroads of our way of life for much longer: the real world and real wealth is finite. There is not enough for everyone's greed.

The Distributist answer to industrialism as they termed the division of labour in a market society run on factories, had several strands. The most important principle however was termed "The Restoration of Liberty by the Distribution of Property." In this way they attacked monopoly or ownership in the hands of a few, and put forward individual ownership of any appropriate means of existence, including ownership of the means of production, credit and land. The most entertaining introduction, giving something of the style of the movement was that by Chesterton: 'a man felt happier, more dignified, and more like the image of God, when the hat he is wearing is his own hat; and not only his own hat, but his house, the ground he trod on and various other things. There might be people who preferred to have their hats leased out to them every week, or wear their neighbour's hats in rotation to express the idea of comradeship, or possibly to crowd under one very

large hat to represent an even larger cosmic conception; but most of them felt that something was added to the dignity of men when they put on their own hats.¹⁹ At Ditchling each family led its own life, but the workshops, ideas and sense of worship drew them together.

In describing the first days of the Guild of St Joseph and St Dominic on Ditchling Common Fiona MacCarthy writes: 'The seriousness of endeavour mixed with high spirited excitement at the novelty of things, almost a sense of daring, comes over very strongly in the minutes of the early Tertiary meetings. It was a self consciously arduous programme. This saying of the office in public, systematically, by Tertiaries was in fact unusual. It has no equivalent in the history of the Dominicans in England. No one ever before, as far as one can see, lived a lay tertiary life with the commitment of Gill and Pepler's community at Ditchling.'²⁰

It is appropriate to look at the heart of the Ditchling community in this intense public recitation of the office, because from the perspective of suburbia it seems even more remarkable that a group of families should gather at such regular, positively monkish, times for prayer in common. Such recognition of worship as part of justice—justice towards God—betrays a distinctly Thomist inheritance.

Various nuances were added by the different characters who became associated with the ideal. McNabb looked upon Ditchling with the love he never gave a woman. He declared in his unpublished notes that 'we do not wish to go back to what is primitive but to what is primary.'²¹ He was always concerned to put first things first. He felt the *modern world had made an end out of what should only be the means*. In this he shares the Church's mistrust of the pursuit of wealth for its own sake, a mistrust which goes back to St Thomas and beyond: economics is instrumental in the pursuit of the basic goods. For McNabb these basic goods were a full family life lived by the hearth, close to the land in praise of God. His understanding of the necessities of life involved poverty of work and thrift: wants must be measured by one's state in life. Poverty of work is the 'effective will to produce as much as possible of real wealth. By poverty of thrift is meant the effective will to consume as little as possible of real wealth...If our hands provide more than is necessary for ourselves we must give to those who need it. These are not my ideas—they are the ideas of Christ.'²² In the city was the shadow world of tokens, not things, money, not the basic necessities, and 'the token nothings can excite an unsatisfied indefinite desire; which can at least fill the time if not the heart of man'.²³ In the country the *superflua* of life were much less evident; and *superflua* should be disregarded in the self-sufficient voluntary poverty of the household which recycled its envelopes (McNabb) or made its own custard from

eggs (Gill). Bethlehem and Nazareth, not Jerusalem; the hearth and home, not the market with its machines; the land not the city. Again the roots of these thoughts can be found in Thomas: 'If the ultimate end were abundance of wealth, the economist would be king'.²⁴ And this conception of the economics of the household is far from irrational: 'Even if, unlike Aquinas, one envisages economics as an understanding of capital formation, production and consumption on a scale as wide as the political community, if not of regional and world wide markets, Aquinas' household-oriented conception of the basic human purpose of economic activity can reasonably be sustained'.²⁵

It is unclear quite exactly what has been lost when production moved beyond the household; whether it is a case of exile and thoughts of return, whether there is always 'written in the soul of suburban man, a home where he might discover his true self.' Living in the suburbs of Manchester, a place which McNabb did not want to make sanitary but impossible, I understand his sentiment but I rather think, with Dermot Quinn, that the task is not to raze the suburbs but to raise them up.²⁶ Although this too is poetry and preaching ...

McNabb eventually found Ditchling to be inadequately land-based and this, along with his worries about the eroticism of Gill's art, led to his disassociation from the place, in spite of Pepler's best efforts. In the beginning, and in theory, however, things were different. Gill's thought about work emphasised the artful nature of work and the responsibility of the workman to own the means of production, to become responsible as a maker. 'We are responsible persons, responsible for what we do and what we make. To what end is this doing and making? The greatest happiness of the greatest number, says the politician. my own greatest happiness and enjoyment says the individual... 'that he may have something to give to him that suffers need' says the apostle; to share them without hesitation adds the Pope.'²⁷ Echoes of Thomas again—only this time arguing for a certain kind of economic freedom to make effective the Gospel of justice: the distributive charity, sacred virtue of McNabb, the good sense of the householder.

Gill believed that control of one's own work was an essential element of freedom for human dignity, and the recovery of the ancient pre-industrial alliance of beauty and usefulness in making things focused his talents as a stone mason, allowing him to strike the pose of the honest artisan. Indeed, both McNabb and Gill saw themselves as free workmen: In a preface to one of Gill's essays, McNabb showed his agreement with Gill: 'When a man is made a priest his hands are consecrated as the hands of an *ergates*—a workman (Matt ix.38) ... No craft in the world is at heart so free and so opposed to servile conditions

as is the craft of the priest.' And Gill's even more startling clarion call to freedom in *Art Nonsense* declared: 'That State is a State of Slavery in which a man does what he likes to do in his spare time and in his working time that which is required of him. This State can only exist when what a man likes to do is to please Himself That State is a state of Freedom in which a man does what he likes to do in his working time and in his spare time that which is required of him. This State can only exist when what a man likes to do is to please God.' The Thomist inheritance can be discerned in these ideas. For example, St Thomas had an understanding of servitude or serfdom. This involved the notion that it is a matter of human institution, not part of the natural law but a consequence of the Fall; however it is the service which is bought and sold: married life, being part of the natural law, still takes precedence, as do other basic rights.²⁸ In Gill's view the factory worker was little better than the *servus* of Thomas's day; indeed in some ways worse off, because the mind of the worker has been corrupted by the worship of money. 'The irresponsibility of the workman is the first and simplest way in which to see our evil condition. It is the first because the exercise of work is the formal reason of individual appropriation.'²⁹ In saying this Gill borrowed directly from Jacques Maritain's *Art and Scholasticism*, the essential handbook for the Ditchling community, originally translated as *The Philosophy of Art* by Fr John O'Connor. Four hundred copies were published by St Dominic's Press. In this book Maritain develops a Thomist theory of making or art from the elements in St Thomas. There is a property in making, thinks Maritain, because

'The work of art has been pondered before being made, has been kneaded and prepared, formed, brooded over, and matured in a mind before emerging into matter. And there it will always retain the colour and savour of the spirit. Its formal element, what constitutes it of its kind and makes it what it is, is its being controlled and directed by the mind.. Artistic work therefore is specifically human work as opposed to the work of the beast or the machine; and for this reason human production is in its normal state an artisan's production, and therefore necessitates a strict individual appropriation. For the artist as such can share nothing in common; in the line of moral aspirations there must be a communal use of goods, whereas in the line of production the same goods must be objects of particular ownership. Between the two horns of this antinomy St. Thomas places the social problem'.³⁰

This is Maritain's reading of the burden of the 'puzzle left by Aquinas'. In Gill it becomes simply the right to ownership being a necessity, because 'only when there is full control of the means of production can there be proper and suitable manipulation... unless I own

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the stone and my tools I cannot properly exercise my skill and intelligence as a stone carver. It is this necessity of manipulation which gives the right of property in the means of production'.³¹ In other words, things are likely to be better made if they are made by workers who own their own means of production. Gill, in his vigorous way, sums up the difference between the realm of use and ownership by saying that in the realm of doing the sharing of use is primary, and in the realm of making the ownership is primary. He realises, though, as does McNabb, that ultimately the worker must submit to the demands of the common good; it is the giving not the making that is important, the exercise of charity, the practice of poverty: to give up, to go without, to praise God: art must give way to good sense in the realm of morality.

Gill writes, again and again, that the artist should be an honest workman 'making fitting furniture for a civilisation directed heavenwards.'³² Holiness was beautiful, a holiness of imaginative making, forming products of knowledge and love, products of the mind of the artist and made by the hand, products which strike the whole man, body and soul. Thus even ordinary things can have the quality not only of use or serviceableness but of being pleasing to the eye and the mind. For the workman, 'Beauty comes to his work unasked when he works in a spirit of plain justice; when he considers simply the use of what he is making and the service of his fellows'.³³ Beauty is the reward of making well, with understanding and affection—it is difficult, thinks Gill, for factory made goods to exhibit charity, tenderness or sweetness, but they can still be pleasing to a degree in so far as they function well. Do they glorify God? Are they produced by responsible workmen? These questions remain. Ultimately, thinks Gill, the factory system rests on a separation of matter from spirit; industrialism tends towards death, the disintegration of the human personality in the pursuit of pleasure, leisure and an escape from the drudgery of routine in emotional thrills of high art or material comfort: 'no idea more noble or even more human than to have a good time'...³⁴ What is striking about the whole Ditchling thing, whether browsing through the Dominican archives, or Fiona McCarthy's *Eric Gill*, or the writings of Vincent McNabb, is the *quality* of *things* that exert a pull on the imagination and senses. The description of Compline by candlelight in the kitchen at Hopkins Crank; the sharp conversations; the inherent logic at work in practice, from the New College Chapel war memorial, to the Stations at Westminster Cathedral: 'The body characterizes everything it touches. What it makes it traces over with the marks of its pulses and breathings, its excitements, hesitations, flaws and mistakes. On its good work it leaves the marks of skill, care and love persisting through hesitations, flaws and mistakes.

And to those of us who love and honour the life of the body in this world, these marks are precious things, necessities of life.³⁵ In this way the skill of the artist (worker, maker) and the good sense of the defender of the household meet. The claims of good sense or morality upon art, or making, find their focus in the question of the ownership and use of property, a windy crossroads through which the currents of tradition and the currents of the age continue to pass.

Ditchling was a community of a sort, of craftsmen held together to some extent by the force of the personalities but also by the Guild and the Third Order way of life. The life at Ditchling could not be sustained for long in its most fruitful phase. Gill's departure was something neither he nor the others really recovered from. Pepler tried to persevere with the self sufficiency. However, McNabb's Luddite agrarianism, his antipathy to machines, his insistence on the land, was far from moderate: ultimately it was perhaps destructive of what was a focus for a group of talented craftsmen. Moreover, unlike the *Catholic Worker*, which is still going strong, there was no obvious outlet to the poor, no obvious way to practise the generosity McNabb himself practised in London.

In his elegiac way. Conrad Pepler, Dominican priest and son of Hilary Pepler, summed it up by saying that 'such community life necessarily sets itself up against the whole tendencies of the industrial society around it. So the effort to live out the ideal produces a very self-conscious set of men and women, and a highly developed self-consciousness necessarily breeds individualism if not eccentricities which militates against the nature of community life.'³⁶ Yes, it was somehow puritanical; yes, Gill went seriously astray in his private life; yes, it was all amateur husbandry; yes, it was to a large extent poetry and preaching.³⁷ Yet, it might be asked, without Ditchling would Conrad Pepler have been the sort of character he was, running Spode House with a certain charm and manner? Would the contribution of the English Dominicans to Catholic life have made the same impact? Would Chesterton and Belloc have written with such verve about so much without this somewhat eccentric social theory of Distributism? Somehow I doubt it. And it is not wild or destructive. The household as a focus of distributive justice became progressively more obscured after Thomas had put forward his view that there were basically three sections of moral philosophy, relating to the individual (*monos*), the household (*domus*), the state (*perfecta communitas*), and expanded to include a locality or *vicus* in which to practise a trade.³⁸ The Distributists attempted to recover the centrality of the household in a very vivid way. This is still a task, for politicians, economists and anyone else who lives in suburbia. I shall let their memory trouble my thoughts.

- 1 'Pro Foco Non Foro Agri Colendi' was the Latin tag on Fr. McNabb's headstone, arguing even in death that the hearth and not the market place was the reason to cultivate the fields.
- 2 C.Taylor *Sources of the Self*, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p.15
- 3 V. McNabb OP. *The Church and the Land* (London, 1926) Chapter 1–entitled 'A Call to Contemplatives'.
- 4 Brocard Sewell, *Like Black Swans*, p.141
- 5 R.Neuhaus *First Things* 52, April 1995 p.56–68
- 6 Aristotle *Politics* Bk II Ch 5, tr. A. Sinclair, Harmondsworth 1962, p. 62–66
- 7 See J.Finnis, *Aquinas*, Oxford University Press 1998, p.190. I am thoroughly indebted to this fine book.
- 8 See I.Hont and M. Ignatieff, 'Needs and justice in the Wealth of Nations: an introductory essay', in *Wealth and Virtue: The Shaping of the Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment* ed. Hont and Ignatieff, Cambridge University Press, 1983, p.27
- 9 J.Finnis, op.cit., p.191
- 10 ibid. p.195
- 11 ibid. p.196
- 12 McNabb OP., op.cit., p.5
- 13 see Finnis, op.cit. p.217, note a, with references to Finnis, 1980.
- 14 Hont and Ignatieff, op.cit. p.28–29
- 15 ibid. p.29
- 16 A.J.Ayer, *Hume*, Oxford University Press 1980, p.91
- 17 Hont and Ignatieff op. cit.p.24–5
- 18 See e.g. Hugh Walters OP. 'The Monastic Ethic and the Spirit of Greenery' *New Blackfriars* March 1992 p.177–187
- 19 J.P.Corrin, *G.K Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc. The Battle Against Modernity*, Ohio University Press, 1981 p.107
- 20 F. MacCarthy, *Eric Gill*, Faber and Faber 1989, p.
- 21 V. McNabb OP., Unpublished Notes in Dominican Archives, Edinburgh.
- 22 V.McNabb O.P. *Meditations on St John*, Aquin Press 1962, p.40
- 23 V.McNabb OP. *Nazareth or Social Chaos*, London 1933, p.20
- 24 see Finnis op.cit. p.244 for this translation from the *de Regno*.
- 25 ibid.
- 26 D.Quinn, *The Chesterton Review* XXII Nos 1 and 2 February and May 1996 p.34.
- 27 E. Gill, 'Private Property', in *Essays*, London 1947, p.34.
- 28 Finnis op.cit. p.184.
- 29 From *A Holy Tradition of Working*, an anthology of Gill's writings much to be recommended, edited by B. Keeble, Golgonooza Press, Ipswich 1983, p.124.
- 30 J.Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism* London 1930 p.150.
- 31 *A Holy Tradition* p.126.
- 32 ibid. p.137.
- 33 ibid. p.80.
- 34 ibid.p.138.

- 35 W. Berry, *What Are People For*, San Francisco 1990 p.194. See also A. Cunningham in *The Chesterton Review* Feb and May, 1996, Special Issue on 'Fr. Vincent McNabb.'
- 36 Quoted in the stimulating essay on Conrad Pepler by Aidan Nichols O.P. in *Dominican Gallery*, Gracewing, 1997, p.361.
- 37 It continued in some form however until the 1980's. There were other figures who deserve more recognition than it has been possible to describe here, notably David Jones, Philip Hagreen and Valentine Kilbride. It is not prudish to say that Gill's obsession with sex was unfortunate—it is, at the least, unfortunate in any individual, or indeed culture. Art and Prudence: this distinction between making and doing finds its instantiation in the distinction between the work and the morality of the artist. In Gill's case one feels that perhaps he justified too much of his behaviour through this distinction, but it is there in Maritain in abundance, who states that ;'Art in no wise tends to make the artist good in his specifically human conduct;... as the artist is first a man and then an artist, it is easy to see what conflicts will rage in his heart between Art and Prudence, his character as Maker and his character as Man.' (Maritain op.cit. p. 14–15) He quotes Oscar Wilde that 'The fact of a man being a poisoner is nothing against his prose.' (ibid. p.152) Only the saints can perhaps live well fully; but it is possible to see in Gill the difficulties of combining Art and Prudence, of not sacrificing his immortal substance to the devouring idol in his soul; and indeed to see how McNabb the Prudent man and Gill the Artist may have come into conflict (as did Pepler and Gill). Maritain makes it clear that Art aims at Beauty and in that way is independent of and metaphysically superior to Prudence: because it is more speculative and, following Aristotle, speculation is better than the moral life. 'It is difficult therefore for the Prudent Man and the Artist to understand one another. The Contemplative and the Artist on the other hand, both perfected by an intellectual habit binding them to the transcendental order, are in a position to sympathise.' (ibid. p.85) Perhaps Gill could value McNabb the Contemplative and see his grandeur; likewise the Contemplative in McNabb could value Gill the Artist; but when Gill's art began to reflect his disturbed life, McNabb the Prudent Man could no longer find himself in sympathy. Perhaps this is to make the men too much the conveyors of metaphysical ideas; but there is no doubt that they *were* animated by such things, part of a living tradition.
- 38 See Finnis op.cit p.52, notes 1–6.