

BLACKFRIARS

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SOCIAL VOCATION

IGNORANCE is one of the greatest evils. It is often the cause of great harm in both the moral and physical spheres. Especially one can note this in the sphere of the social problems. Ignorance is an important factor in helping class hatred.

After the Paris Commune a lay brother of the Vincentians pointed this out to two members of the French aristocracy and in doing so helped to change their lives.

The three were inspecting the ruins of palaces when Brother Maurice turned to the others and said, "It is you who have amused yourselves within these palaces now in ruins: you who pass by without seeing the people, without knowing them or their thoughts or characters, or caring for their needs and their sufferings, it is you who are the real culprits."

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To-day we can look at a class that is slowly becoming a ruin and we can turn to well-meaning Catholics and repeat what Brother Maurice said to Count de Mun and his friend.

In the slums, among the very poorest, is to be found the ruins where communism, atheism, social and moral perversion are the weeds that choke natural goodness. There will be found people with naturally good characters (just think of how they so often rise above their environment), but who have been so oppressed first with the material evils of a capitalism run riot and then scourged by the whips of social heresy and of irreligion, that goodness and beauty are unknown quantities for them.

Religion is something that means nothing to the vast mass of the poorest: something that has no influence on their lives: something that has nothing in common with them.

BLACKFRIARS

They have no interest in apologetics and theology. The Catholic Evidence Guild cannot reach them. For all the trojan work that the C.E.G. has done and still is doing it cannot reach the very poor in such a manner as to make an appreciable difference to them.

Even the Catholic Social Guild cannot do much. They are interested in social questions, but the abstract principles of Catholic sociology are, for them, strange words that have no meaning. They talk in terms of the U.A.B., of rents, wages and the cost of food.

Yet the people, the poorest of the poor, are a special care of the Church. Always has the Church been concerned with those who needed her most. Always has the saint chosen the people who are most ill in body and soul to be his especial friends.

These people need the help that religion can give them, the help that exists in the teachings of Christ and in the life of Grace. They need religion but are unable to come to it and consequently need assistance.

We are all willing to give this assistance: but many of us are like Count de Mun. We know things are wrong and we want to help yet through ignorance we pass by without seeing, without caring (in that vital personal way that makes care so valuable), without knowing and most of all without understanding.

We will agitate for social justice, condemning low wages and bad housing. We will join societies with the more intelligent of the slum-dwellers and sit on committees with them. Especially will we go and talk to them and advise them. And all of this is truly because we care for them and sincerely wish to end the injustices under which they groan.

How we hate slums and shudder at the thought of bugs. We expect men to be shaven and to wear collars (for surely water is cheap and even if a man does not possess many suits he can at least be clean and tidy.) We cannot bear the thought of dirt and grime, even though it is part of the everyday existence of these people. If we ever lived in a slum or near one our desire is to so "better" ourselves that we escape the clutch of grinding poverty. When we do that

SOCIAL VOCATION

we will lean over and give others a helping hand.

But we do not understand, we do not realise the sufferings of the poorest or their real needs.

We can enjoy the cinema and dances and good books and in our spare time study Catholic sociology.

But we do not understand: we cannot understand because we are not of them.

There is a great need for men and women who can know the needs of the poorest, understand their character and appreciate their real position. There is a great need for social apostles who can meet this need.

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This need is being met in a little way. In New York, in various other Canadian and American towns and in one English town are Houses (called either Houses of Hospitality or Friendship Houses). In these Houses men and women are living together endeavouring to practice the precepts of the Gospels in caring for their neighbour's needs.

In these Houses some effort on these lines is being made by men and women who have discovered that there is a real vocation in lay action and that they can serve God even though living the normal everyday life of the people among whom they move. Of their own free will they have selected a poor life (not necessarily the poorest). Of their own free will they have renounced the legitimate pleasures that come with a good job and good pay in an endeavour to show their neighbours that material prosperity is not the goal of man's life.

Where the comfort and aid of religion is most needed men and women are now to be found trying to live a Christian life. In the past only the priest has known of the needs of the poorest and of the great potential good to be found among them. Only priests labouring in poverty stricken industrial slums have discovered the value of those seemingly worthless men and women, covered with dirt, living in daily companionship with bugs and never knowing the certitude of a regular job.

But the priest was handicapped. His collar was an obstacle that prevented him being welcomed everywhere. He had to be saintly before people stopped saying that he had to live

BLACKFRIARS

as he did because that was his job. There was a need for lay apostles and with the growing realisation of the importance of Catholic Action, and the vocation to such a life, came the men and women eager to accept such a vocation and to serve God in such a way and to grow in the love of their Saviour by loving their neighbours for his sake.

They live in slums and attempt to live Christian lives. They accept in some degree the precepts of the Sermon on the Mount. They are poor in spirit and often poor in reality: when generous friends save them from poverty they still try to be independent of material possessions. They have a real Faith and know that Christ meant what He said when He promised that those who first sought after the Kingdom of God would have their material necessities provided.

By such a life these social apostles save their own souls. By such a life they show what God can do. By such a life they teach religion in the only way that it can be understood by these people, the forgotten and neglected ones of this world.

Beginning in a small way these social apostles grow in the love of God hoping that one day they may be worthy of the vocation that God has given them.

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Perhaps only by a great increase in these social vocations can the poorest be captured for Christ.

R. P. WALSH.