

## MORAL DILEMMAS

## III. The Vocation of Failure

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CAN there ever be such a thing as having a vocation to choose the wrong vocation? A man adopts a career only to discover too late that it is the wrong career; marries a woman only to find too late that she is the wrong woman; settles down into a fixed, narrow groove only to find that at heart he is a wanderer. Perhaps we should see these errors of judgment as being no more than permitted by God; what is certain is that, the false situation once established, the frustration set up, the sufferer must surely see his vocation as being not at an end but at a beginning: something of value has to be made somehow out of the muddle.

There are of course many other types of frustration, and they are tragically common. There is the outwardly successful marriage which in reality has become empty of meaning: the husband and wife continuing—for the sake of appearances, or from a sense of duty, or because of the children—to act as a happy couple while in reality there is no longer any real communion between them or any hope of any. There are the men and women who long for married life but never achieve it. There are those who have a deep desire to become this or that, to achieve this or that, but have in the end to admit that they lack the necessary gifts. There are those who long for friends, for companionship, but are condemned to loneliness; there are those who never seem to be able to make a real success of anything to which they put their hands. In the moral sphere there are those who long to make something worthy of their lives but who feel hopelessly defeated by some vice which they lack the strength to conquer; there are the cases of undeveloped conscience or deep character defect where a vague desire to 'be good' is at times of emotional exaltation raised to grandiose heights of resolution only to be dashed again into the depths of despair when the next defeat occurs. And finally there is the frustration which weighs down all those whose faith, prayer, service of God, having begun with high ideals and generous self-

giving and a deep sense of reality, seems to have become meaningless: faith no longer giving any assurance, any comfort, any drive; and prayer and God's service becoming a dull, empty routine, lacking any sense either of reality or of progress.

What are the normal human reactions to frustration? Milton gives us four types of reaction in his picture of the 'great consult' of the demons. Moloch stands for the way of blind rage: lashing out at something or other, ranting at this or that, quarrelling with one's friends, perpetually finding something to be indignant about and to attack. Belial on the other hand is for accepting the inevitable and hoping to become inured to it gradually, and to forget: drowning one's sorrows, taking to drugs, trying not to think, sinking into a condition of life which at one time would have been unthinkable. Mammon's idea is to turn hell into a substitute-heaven: if you cannot have the reality of life, or love, you can find or fashion some form of counterfeit; if you cannot have happiness you can concentrate on pleasure instead, or power, or prestige—

'This desert soil  
Wants not her hidden lustre, gems and gold;  
Nor want we skill or art, from whence to raise  
Magnificence . . .'

Finally, Beelzebub, the realist: there is no escaping one's misery, and it is useless and senseless to try; but at least one can make others miserable too; at least that is better than

'to sit in darkness here  
Hatching vain empires'.

These are all very human reactions; sometimes consciously and deliberately pursued, sometimes unconsciously. What ought the Christian reaction to be?

Certainly it ought not to be merely a passive resignation, a stoic endurance—which is more than likely to lead to an unconscious indulgence in one or other of the above reactions. There must be something more positive, more creative, than that. The folly of the Cross, the wisdom of this world being folly to God: the fact is that we just do not know, very often, what in the last resort is success and what is failure. What

we do know is that superficial success can often have disastrous effects: the artist who becomes a fashionable painter and ceases to be an artist; the doctor who achieves fame and fortune at the expense of his integrity, and so on. Success can make us proud, slick, inhuman, cruel, superficial: perhaps then it is only failure that will save us? Everybody has a vocation to some form of life-work; but behind that and deeper than that, everybody has a vocation to be a person, to be fully and deeply a human being; and the second thing is more important than the first. It is more important to be a great person than to be a great butcher or baker or candlestick-maker; and if your only chance of achieving the first is to fail in the second the failure will be worth while, the world will be well lost. As M. Maritain has made so clear to us, the Church thrives not on 'rich means' but on poor; for it is these that chime with the folly of the Cross.

What then is a man to do who finds himself in what might be called an environmental frustration: the wrong career or marriage, failure to achieve the work, the career, the life, desired? He is of course perfectly justified in adopting any good means—interests, friendships, hobbies—which will make life more bearable; but there must be more to it than that. Suppose you have two people deeply in love with each other and unable to marry: it seems heartless to tell them to *use* the situation, creatively: and yet in fact it is the one thing which can bring them any hope. Human relationships, we believe, are not confined to this world, they have an everlasting future; and if sorrow and frustration in this world will make the people concerned finer and deeper and capable in the end of giving each other a much richer and more wonderful love, they must surely be worth while. You do not diminish the pain; but at least you show a purpose in it.

And those whose marriages, whose careers, are a failure? They must accept what is at best a compromise, they must accept the mediocre: but will it not be worth while if it teaches them to be gentle with other failures, to be patient, to be greathearted? Happy, they might have been wrapped up in their own happiness and impatient of the sorrows of others; they might never have come to understand the human heart; they might have come to think of happiness

and success as their due, and then, if their little world collapsed through death or disaster, they would have had no resources.

Always we come back to the idea of sacrifice. We know intellectually that sacrifice is central to Christianity: it is quite another thing to see it as central to our own lives. But our Lord demands that every Christian take up his own cross—not Christ's cross but his own, the one determined by his own vocation in the deepest sense of the word—and follow in his footsteps: why? Because the inescapable pattern is that we reach life only through death, we come to the light only through the darkness: the grain of wheat must die, Jonah must be buried in the whale's belly.

But there is one type of case which demands special attention: the case of the Catholic—and especially the Catholic who neither marries on the one hand nor has a religious vocation on the other—who tries and tries to do something for the faith (through writing, social work, or individual contacts of one sort or another) only to find that his good intentions are frustrated at every turn: is God repulsing him? On the contrary: the lesson there is surely that spiritual means are more powerful than material ones: the work might have helped some, perhaps many, but the loving acceptance of the frustration of these ambitions will help far more. We believe in the communion of saints. When you put a frustration of this sort into the chalice of Christ's sacrifice you put in something of immense worth: the world will be saved by failure.

But what of the cases of what could be called purely personal frustration—the people, for instance, who seem to be totally incapable of keeping the moral law? Perhaps the essential thing to tell them is that being strong-willed or weak-willed is in a sense a misleading conception: that being strong-willed means in fact having an over-ridingly powerful impulse to do or achieve this or that; and that therefore they must concentrate simply on trying to love God. They must never say, 'I shall never sin again'; they must on the contrary expect to sin again and again, but they must not be rendered desperate by their falls: they must try to live with God, always to live with God (he did not despise the publi-

cans and sinners) in the hope that gradually they will come to hate the wrong they do and so, gradually, escape from it.

But also—and perhaps this is the main point—in a sense it is not the escaping that is of most importance. We know so much more nowadays of the extent to which wrongdoing is determined. To exhort and require a defective personality to renounce all forms of frailty forthwith and for ever is necessarily to plunge him deeper and deeper into despair; the essential thing is precisely to help him to free himself from his sense of failure and to give him a sense of achievement: First of all, pray, discover God, love God; your weaknesses need not stop your doing that, on the contrary they can help you, for it is the humble heart that finds God. At the same time of course you must be trying to bring a little more order into your moral life, but gently, little by little, being very patient, not expecting a miracle, and always remembering that this is secondary for you in importance, that the really important thing, the thing you are *achieving* more and more, day by day, is your prayer, your love, your closeness to God.

But how can one free oneself from a sense of failure? Only by accepting the failure with humility and humour, and turning it into greatness of soul. Some people are incapable of thinking of themselves as ever being a failure at anything, and so they never grow up; for in order to grow up you have first to grow down, down into the depths where you can not only see yourself as you really are, but also laugh at yourself in the midst of your tears. If you make morality solemn and pompous—the hushed voice, the worship of rectitude—you inevitably distort it; for it is human morality you are concerned with, and humanity, capable as it is of the sublime, is also still close to the monkey; and if the fall makes us capable of horrible evil, still more it makes us foolish, feckless, feeble, ridiculous. We need what the missal calls the gift of tears, the deep sense of sin; but we also need the gift of laughter. To laugh at your failures as well as cry over them may well be the first step in the process of turning them into success. The cosh-boy has never learnt to laugh; perhaps, poor child, he has never had the chance; and any form of corrective regime, of character-training, of moral

exhortation, which kills the laughter in people, kills also their chances of really emerging from failures and frailties into something which has about it a touch of greatness.

Tears, but never of self-pity; laughter, but never corrosive: these can help a man to take humbly to God the broken shards of failure, knowing that the divine creative and re-creative skill will not be lacking, or denied him. For a failure given to God ungrudgingly can be a form of that re-creative death of which St Paul tells us: 'You know well enough that we who were taken up by Christ into his baptism have been taken up, all of us, into his death. In our baptism we have been buried with him, died like him, that so, just as Christ was raised up by his Father's power from the dead, we too might live and move in a new kind of existence.'

## FREDERICK OZANAM, CHRISTIAN AND DEMOCRAT

JAMES LANGDALE

THE centenary of the death of Frederick Ozanam has passed practically unnoticed. A few articles in the Catholic Press, a couple of small and unpretentious works from Ireland,<sup>1</sup> a meeting of the Brothers of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul in Paris; this seems a meagre tribute to pay to one of the greatest Catholic laymen of our time. The reason is, I think, that Ozanam presents a difficult problem for many of his most fervent admirers. They are attracted by his spirituality, his deep sense of Christian charity, his love of God and of the poor. But there is a whole side of Ozanam which is out of keeping with what English Catholic publicists are pleased to call the 'Catholic

<sup>1</sup> *The Secret of Frederick Ozanam*. By The Rev. Edward O'Connor, S.J. (M. H. Gill and Son, Ltd.; 5s.)

*Humble of Heart*. By Charles K. Murphy. (The Mercier Press; 3s. 6d.)