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THE CROSSING SWEEPER

A CROSSING sweeper or a man who carts muck may often be observed to be happy in his work. This is a queer phenomenon which modern sociology cannot understand, and indeed refuses to countenance. The work is foul, it is sub-human. Therefore, it is argued with remarkable illogicality for those whose only philosophy is logic, therefore it is not for man to do. And so the sociologists set to to eliminate foul work from the midst of mankind; and one of the first methods employed is to point to the foulness of the work with such horror and disgust as to encourage the muck men to think of muck rather than of men and so to abhor their work.

There was once a preacher who stood in the pulpit of a mining town and cried out against the inhumanity of men working like rats in a sewer. But that was many years ago and the men who heard him were affronted; it was an insult to an honourable occupation. 'My father, and his father before him—we have all worked down the mine—rats in a sewer—who's a rat?' Now such phrases are accepted with acclamation. Higher wages and less work are the answer. The most disgusting occupations should be the most highly salaried; we should not offer large money rewards for the honourable occupations in which a man may find employment in what he does—fancy asking for a salary for the occupation of enjoying oneself!

How is it that a man may be contented doing the inhuman tasks which are necessary in every society? It depends, of course, upon that whereon he sets his heart. Should the work itself be noble, then it may be an end for him and he is working for the sheer love of what he is doing. An artist like Eric Gill naturally hoped that such would be the task of every man in a properly run society—every man is a special kind of artist. It is thrilling for a mathematician or, presumably, even a logician, to work out his immense self-imposed problems, working them out at the cost of great physical and mental exertion (for he is physically weaker after his concentrated study). A man who is making things with figures or with stone, with chemicals or with other human beings can find the goal of his work in the work itself, for such are specifically human labours. But no society can be run entirely on this human level any more than a man can always be doing things by choice and by the exercise of his mind. He is body too, and he is compelled to work the works of nature—he must sleep. So society provides sub-human labours. In Gill's world, perhaps, if we may judge from the *Autobiography*, such labours were chiefly the concern of the women folk of the household, who had to dust and wash up, sweep and cook and make the beds. Yet the farmer too, even with the 'labour saving' gadgets which may be his ruin, has to spend long hours in doing things which do not fully occupy his mind so that he is free with his own human thought while at work.

It still depends on the end in view. In fact the work of the creative 'artist', the skilled craftsman which a man should be, bears in itself this very danger that it may be an end in itself, whereas man's real and complete end is not a human end at all. The delectability of carving stone *can* deflect a man from the even greater joy of carving stone for God. Of course danger does not mean prohibition: it means greater responsibility and greater care, both of which are good things and human things, and which therefore enhance the glory of the work itself. But when the final end of man is dominating the life of an individual he finds that all work, even the most sub-human, is delectable, is humanised and raised above the human level. If we open the pages of the lives of saints we find them almost invariably performing the most unwholesome tasks with the greatest joy—St Catherine in the hospital attending the foul old woman whom no one else could approach because of the stench of the disease; Damian at Molokai with the outcast lepers; Christ himself bathing the sweaty feet of the twelve. If such had lost sight of the Purpose of it all their attention would have been wholly concentrated on the unwholesomeness of what

they were doing or upon themselves doing it, and so their labour would have become a revolting burden.

Of course there is today an increasing habit of thought which will undermine this line of argument by suggesting that religion is the opium for the people. By these arguments, it is suggested, social reform is put on one side and the dispossessed and outcast, the menials and muck-men are persuaded that their inhuman work is 'consoling' and 'meritorious' and so the End becomes the drug—pie in the sky. If we are hoping for joy in the next world and are taught to expect nothing but drudgery in this vale of tears, then all this unpleasant labour can be offered as a sacrifice and no reform or social progress will be called for. Perhaps it is hardly necessary to repeat this common argument, but it is very necessary to clear ourselves of the easy assumption that by stressing the need to change our attitude to 'dirty work' we are condoning society's acceptance of the inevitability of that work. Certainly every man has his dirty work to do, and society as a whole has its own communal dirty work; but the movement to 'humanise' it by linking it up directly with the common end of man necessarily leads to its being diminished and aspects of it abolished. This abolition of a part of man's unwholesome occupations we may call social progress; and it can only be humanly, as opposed to sub-humanly, achieved by insisting not on the unpleasantness of the labour but on the common good of all men, and on the need of helping *other* men to reach God more speedily and more wholly.

We may take an example from the 'worker apostolate' of today. There are three approaches to the problem of bettering the lot of the workers. Firstly we can insist to them on the injustices and disabilities from which they suffer in order that being made aware of what is their due they may rise up and demand it. That is the method of the agitator. Secondly, the working man can be urged to accept these disabilities and injustices as part of his share in the Cross of Christ—to grin and bear it for a supernatural reward. Such is the attitude which some people fear may become that of Catholic worker movements which would thus play directly into the hands of the exploiters of labour. Thirdly, we may urge the working people to notice what *others* suffer, not merely what others of their own class suffer—for then they become too personally identified with the evils and their concern develops into the soul-rotting poison of self-pity—but what the *whole of society* is suffering. And at the same time the positive teaching of the Gospel and of natural law is presented as 'the way of recovery' for all. In this way the poor man becomes more conscious of the need for the

spirit of poverty, or again the young worker can see the desirability of thrusting his roots into the soil of Mother Earth instead of into the earth pots of the industrial hot house. It is by insisting not upon evils but upon goods that society will begin to right itself, and the two principal goods upon which all men must turn their gaze are the Good which is God, and the common good of society. It is only in this way that the vital and absolutely necessary hierarchy of society may be preserved from becoming a means of self betterment and preference.

To return to the crossing sweeper, it is noticeable that when such men preserve their cheerfulness and magnanimity—and how easy it is to speak pleasantly and fraternally with such men!—it is because they have hidden resources within themselves. It is better that they are not themselves aware of these resources; if they have their hearts set unselfishly on the good, above all upon the Good, then they remain men, and more than men, in all that they do. It is such men who will go to almost any lengths to help a stranger in need, such men who, despite their sub-human occupations, are approached as equals by king or coster, by duke or dustman. It is such men that the Christian faith raises up from the gutter and makes into saints, saints who of their nature have the common good of all at heart. The Christian muck-man should be the example to all Christians today whose urgent duty it is to clean up modern society, who must engage in social work but only on the Christian level. Unpleasant tasks surround us and we shall be foolish to insist even upon the need of being integral, the need of being occupied only in human creative work. In fact the creative work of man is only truly creative when its inspiration is drawn directly from the Creator: then all his work is creative. Paradoxically, only the man whose head is among the stars has his feet firmly planted on the earth. Such a man may cart muck or he may direct nations. All that he does he does with good grace, because he does it through God's grace.

THE EDITOR