

The Life of the Spirit

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NEVER TO LACK MONEY—SPEND IT⁽¹⁾

By

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But after all if I spend it, I shall no longer have it, that is clear!

Have you tried? One can never know a worker's capacity, until he has been made to work.—Whoever really wishes to stop trembling with respect before his own money, and begins to put it to his service, discovers how easy it can be to deal with! Let us forget this useless, anxious care of filling one's purse, let us think only of emptying it usefully, and we shall find it always full for the present necessity.

I like to repeat the charming absurdity that a small girl said to her mother: "Hurry up and spend your money while you've got it, because afterwards you won't have it any longer!" We must indeed hurry to make it do service for something while we have it in hand, because otherwise it will slip away without having done anything. We must hurry to use what is lent to us to-day, tomorrow perhaps we shall have it no longer, and we shall have missed the opportunity of acquiring some beautiful or useful thing, or of doing some good action, which would be worth much more than the money we had given for them.

Besides, let us be at peace; If tomorrow a similar opportunity presents itself, the money will be there again to our advantage. There is a principle which we must bear in mind because proof has been made of it. It is what may be called "the principle of

(1) Extract from the sixth chapter of the first part of *Sur le devoir de l'imprévoyance*. With kind permission of the Author and Publisher (Editeurs du Cerf. Paris). Translated by M.S.T.

air-inlet." When you have scarcely any money left, and are going to be without any for tomorrow, give away what remains to you. I assure you, I promise you, I guarantee that when tomorrow comes you will have what is needful! It will not cost you much to try at least once in a while, it will not ruin you at one swoop!

When a child asks for a second slice of bread and butter, his mother tells him: "First finish what you have." If we want to put fresh water in a jug we begin by emptying out the stale residue. Why would we have God less wise than ourselves? Notice that all those who received from him gratuitously were those who had nothing left—the Hebrews who at his command had left behind them the onions and fleshpots of Egypt; the people who, in their eagerness to hear the words of Jesus, had followed him without thinking of taking any provisions; the guests of Cana when they had drunk all the wine; St. Benedict when he had given the last drop of oil. . . . That is but simple justice and wisdom; why should God give to one who still has something? While he has something, he has need of nothing. Our hoard that we have put by "for a rainy day" is what prevents God from coming to our aid. God does nothing uselessly, he ceases or refuses his gifts as soon as they are no longer necessary. Scarcely had the Hebrews entered the land flowing with milk and honey than we read: *the manna ceased after they ate of the corn of the land*; and now why should he trouble to make the water flow out of the rock so long as we have the wherewithal to quench our thirst? So let us empty our purse into the hand of the poor, if we want God to fill it anew.

For he has always promised to do so. He promised it by the mouth of Solomon: *Some distribute their own goods and grow richer; others take away what is not their own, and are always in want.* He promised it by the mouth of St. Paul: *Now this I say: he who soweth sparingly shall also reap sparingly: and he who soweth in blessings shall also reap of blessing.* He promised it magnificently by the mouth of Isaias: *When thou shalt pour out thy soul to the hungry and shalt satisfy the afflicted soul, then shall thy light rise up in darkness and thy darkness shall be as the noonday . . . thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a fountain of water whose waters shall not fail.*

Let us impoverish ourselves then if we wish to enrich ourselves. —The paradox carries you too far. *Charity begins at home.* We must at least have what is necessary. I willingly admit for the moment that God does not like us to have too much. But he does not forbid us to have enough. He asks me to help my neighbour with my superfluity; he does not ask me to take the bread out of my mouth to give it to him.

—I should like you to tell me exactly what is necessary and therefore what is superfluous.

If what is necessary for us is the same as for St. Paul—*having food and wherewith to be covered, with these we are content*—what magnificent superfluity shall we not have to dispose of!

But if we need the *purple and fine linen and sumptuous feasting*, it is evident we shall not even have, for the poor Lazarus lying at our door, the crumbs that fall from our table. It will be our dogs who will eat them, our dogs which we cannot do without, and even they will go to lick the ulcers of the poor man and steal the crusts that others have thrown to him, thus applying in its material and immediate sense the terrible saying: *To every one that hath shall be given, and he shall abound; but from him that hath not, that also which he seemeth to have shall be taken away.*

John the Precursor answers the people who ask him, *What shall we do?* with the challenge *He that hath two coats, let him give to him that hath none; and he that hath meat, let him do in like manner;* he regards that to be needful which covers us at the moment and quietens our present hunger. Is that not enough, in fact, for the precarious creature who neither knows nor possesses the following moment?

I call to mind those poor old men and women, filthy and ragged, who swarm on the Paris pavements in the morning between six and nine o'clock, the hour of the rag-pickers, come from no one knows where, like a horde of rats chased by a flood. In their misery they take the bowl of soup which the white-winged Sister serves out to them, or receive two sous if they come too late—two sous!—then they disappear into unknown holes, swept away by the proud city at the same time as the refuse.

From one of our superfluities we might provide them with a great many necessaries. And we are all guilty. There is not one of us who will not have to answer before God for one, for ten, for a hundred of these miseries.

*Wo to you, cries Isaias, wo to you that join house to house,
and lay field to field,
even to the end of the place,
shall you alone dwell
in the midst of the earth?*

A curse on him who wants more than is needful, who gathers round him for the days to come the goods which should be the portion of his brothers to-day!

If, throughout the world, each one of those who could do so would feed one poor person, there would no longer be a single human being in the whole world who would not eat to his fill.

We must not say: "I have not the means." We always have

the means if we do not wait to be assured of having them to last our whole life long—and to see what people consider necessary to that end, we might think all men expect to live to the age of Mathusala! And to be assured not only of the indispensable, but of opulence, their own and their children's up to the fifth generation.

In a house where some poor people are living, where from top to bottom are workmen's families with many children, dependent on the father's wage—a wage at the mercy of an illness or a stoppage of work—lives a very old woman who possesses nothing. She is alone in the world, she is not related to any of these poor folk, none of them owes her anything, she can only do the smallest of commissions for them as she walks with difficulty. Now, every day, in each family, one after the other, soup is made for her. How ashamed one feels of those silk stockings and rare flowers on the table when we think of that!

Let us remember too the poor widow who, having cast into the *treasury two mites which make a farthing*, had thus given *all that she had, even her whole living*.

Go, sell whatsoever thou hast and give to the poor.

Sell what you possess and give alms.

But no, let us be reassured; perhaps we are not asked for so much. These are counsels of perfection. We shall not be made saints in spite of ourselves! The bread of to-day will not be taken out of our mouths, since it has been given to us to-day by God. Even that of tomorrow will not be demanded of us, if it is too difficult to give it up.

For though God wishes to have all, he does not ask it all at once. He condescends little by little to our weakness, like an indulgent and prudent mother who gives way by degrees without seeming to do so, and contents herself for the time being with a half obedience . . . God knows how hard it is for us to despoil ourselves. The instinct of possession is so tenacious in mankind! *To give, to give! How difficult it is to do so as it should be done*, wrote Jacques Rivière, *that is to say, all at once without having had the time to reflect, to realise what we are doing!* How difficult it is to keep nothing back for oneself, *to make oneself, straight away, poorer than the man to whom we give!*⁽²⁾

No, we must be at peace. No one is bound to make himself a beggar. Let us keep what is necessary. Let us even keep what is necessary for to-morrow if our courage fails us at this point.

But surely we can at least renounce our solicitude for the day after tomorrow?

(2) *A la trace de Dieu*, p. 292.