

# RENOUNCING THE WORLD

By GERARD HUGHES

**I**N the renewal of Baptismal vows at the Vigil Service on Holy Saturday, the Priest addresses the congregation: 'Now that our Lenten exercises are over, let us renew the promises of Holy Baptism by which we formerly renounced Satan and his works, as well as the world which is at enmity with God'.

Every Christian is bound, if he is to be faithful to his Baptism, to renounce the world, because the world is the enemy of God. This renunciation must be complete and continual till the moment of death. By his Baptism he receives and recognises Christ; but the world cannot recognise him.<sup>1</sup> The Paraclete is sent to him, 'who is to dwell continually with you for ever. It is the life-giving Spirit, for whom the world can find no room'.<sup>2</sup> By his Baptism the Christian thus becomes the temple of God and the tabernacle of the Holy Spirit. This transformation takes place in an instant, but we must ratify it throughout our lives. All our growth and all our development must be growth and development into the life of the Trinity. Our Christian life can be thought of as a dialogue with God. He is the first to call us, in Baptism, but every thought, word and action of our life will be summed up at the moment of death into our answer to Him. He is always calling and drawing us to Himself; we are always, in everything we do and say and think, answering His call, accepting or rejecting His gift of Himself. If we are to be true to our Baptism we must renounce completely and continually, everything that is opposed to him. There is nothing in our lives which we can reserve to ourselves. He is a jealous God, and at death he will demand everything so that He can give us everything. Holy Scripture makes it clear that we cannot live God's life unless we renounce the world. St. Paul tells the Corinthians: 'The world with all its wisdom could not find its way to God'.<sup>3</sup> Our Lord in his prayer to the Father at the Last Supper says: 'I have given them Thy message and the world has nothing but hatred for them, because they do not belong to the world'.<sup>4</sup> St. John tells his converts: 'Do not bestow your love in the world and

<sup>1</sup> Jn 1, 10-13.

<sup>2</sup> Jn 14, 16-17.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Cor 1, 20.

<sup>4</sup> Jn 17, 14.

what the world has to offer: the lover of this world has no love of the Father in him'.<sup>1</sup> And St. James writes: 'Wantons, have you never been told that the world's friendship means enmity with God and the man who would have the world for his friend makes himself God's enemy'.<sup>2</sup>

Many Christians, priests as well as layfolk, tend to feel uneasy when they reflect on the truth that they have chosen God, and that 'the world's friendship means enmity with God'. It would seem to them that there is only one certain way of renouncing the world: literally to leave all things, family, friends and possessions, and to enter religious life. They would find it odd if someone were to say: 'Mr. "X" (a well-known politician) has promised to renounce the world, and hopes for high office if his Party is returned at the next election'. It is true, of course, that if 'the world' is to be identified with material creation, or with all activity which is not directly concerned with the worship of God, then renouncing the world must mean retiring from this world's activities as far as possible. The Manichees identified 'the world' with material creation, and therefore sanctity, for them, consisted in the greatest possible independence of material things. Matter is evil; spirit is good. It is an easy distinction to grasp and has a specious clarity and attraction for impatient enthusiasts who like to know exactly where they, and the enemy, stand. But the distinction must also deny the reality of the Incarnation. For if matter is evil, the Son of God could not have become man. His human body must have been a phantom. Manichaeism, in its extreme form, did not last for more than two centuries; but it is only an extreme example of the tendency in religious enthusiasts to make a clear distinction between 'spirit' and 'matter' or between 'the natural' and 'the supernatural', and to be quick to label particular things and activities 'material' or 'natural', and therefore bad, and other activities as 'supernatural' and therefore good. The distinctions between spirit and matter, natural and supernatural, are of course valid and necessary, but it is in their application that errors arise. Even amongst Christians, 'the world' is too readily identified with all activity not directly concerned with the worship of God; so that what is 'natural' is to be rejected or considered of no value. Prayer, receiving the Sacraments and going to Mass are considered supernatural activities which effect our salvation; working, studying, following a

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Jn 2, 15.

<sup>2</sup> Jas 4, 4.

profession, enjoying a holiday, are natural actions which are, of themselves, of no value towards our salvation. If a man wants to dedicate his life to God he must, as far as possible, renounce these natural activities and devote himself to the supernatural ones. The world becomes identified in our minds with these natural activities. That is why we feel it contradictory to say, 'Mr. "X" has promised to renounce the world and hopes to be in the Cabinet'.

Much of the preaching we hear and the teaching we receive seems to confirm this notion. This life is a vale of tears, a testing place for Heaven. Here we have no abiding city.<sup>1</sup> We are pilgrims and must not be diverted from our journey to God by the snares and attractions of this world. The Christian must renounce this world and deny himself its passing gratifications if he is to reach Heaven. Human activity, work, pleasure, friendship are of no value in themselves. It is love of God and conformity to His Will which gives life its value. The conscientious Christian who finds himself instinctively drawn to this world, who becomes absorbed in his work and who delights in human friendship, must become troubled and uneasy. He can only be saved if he renounces the world, yet he enjoys it and is attracted by it. Meanwhile his prayer and 'spiritual life' become more and more difficult because divorced from his real life. As the natural side of his life absorbs all his attention he grows estranged from the supernatural. If he is conscientious he may struggle on in this divided state, perhaps trying to salve his conscience by going in for some form of 'Catholic Action' in his spare time and contributing generously to the Church, but he remains troubled. His friends at work seem to get along quite happily without a supernatural life and he will be strongly tempted to follow their example.

The normal advice given to such a man is that he should do all his work in the spirit of the Morning Offering. 'Offer up all your works, joys and sufferings to God. Renew your intention frequently and do everything for His sake in a spirit of penance and love. In this way you remain in the world but not of it. You renounce the world because you do not value it for its own sake but for His sake. Your actions, valueless in themselves, are transformed, because they are taken up in the one eternal sacrifice of Christ. Of course, God does not need your work, but He does want your love and perseverance in the tasks He gives you. The job you do, the profession you

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<sup>1</sup> Heb 13, 14.

follow, the success you achieve, all these are of no intrinsic value. God will not judge you on these but on the spirit and intention with which you have done them'.

This advice is sound and true in so far as it goes, and can be confirmed from Scripture passages, quotations from the Fathers and the Church's decrees. But it still tends to identify the supernatural with particular acts of renewing and purifying intention, and fosters a detached attitude to the world which must lead to apathy about the world's affairs. If it is intention which gives our acts their value, then does it not follow that the less natural interest we have in human affairs, the purer our intention can be, and therefore the more meritorious our actions? Conversely, so long as a man finds a natural delight and joy in his work then it must be difficult for him to act purely out of the love of God. It is always difficult to give a satisfactory answer to non-Catholics when they ask: 'Why are the traditionally Catholic countries the most backward? Why is there (in Britain at any rate) such a dearth of Catholics, apart from converts, prominent in public life? Why are your Catholic schools, with a few exceptions, second rate in their academic standards?' There are many valid answers to this type of objection. But does not part of the answer lie in the distinction in Catholic minds which limits the supernatural to particular actions directly concerned with the worship of God, while natural actions are considered to have value only in so far as they provide opportunity for supernatural heroics? If 'the world' is identified with non-religious activity, then the Christian dare not become absorbed in his work, for this must draw him away from God. The Pagan, on the other hand, can give his undivided attention to the world. The dedicated Communist can throw all his energies into the Party's plans and his attention is not divided by thoughts of an after-life, nor is he worried by reflections on the intrinsic futility of all he does. His work seem to him to be worth while for its own sake. In many of the underdeveloped countries today where the Communists have got to work, the Christian missionaries see their converts deserting them and renouncing their Baptism, preferring the natural to the supernatural, and this world to God. The process is likely to continue as long as the supernatural is limited to invisible, intangible, spiritual realities divorced from this world.

Is the conscientious Christian who must renounce this world necessarily at a disadvantage in comparison with his pagan neighbour? If we identify this world with human activity which is not

directly concerned with the formal worship of God then he must be at a disadvantage. But the distinction between the natural and the supernatural, though valid and necessary in theology, must be carefully handled; for there is, strictly speaking, nothing in our world to which the concept 'natural' can be applied. The whole of creation has been affected by the Incarnation. All things are centred on Christ and have their ultimate meaning in Him; and every man is called to the vision of God. God need not have created man in this way. He could have left him in a purely natural state; but in fact he did not do so. Even when Adam and Eve sinned, though they lost sanctifying grace, they did not revert to a purely natural state. They lost their supernatural gifts but they were still called to share in God's life. St. Paul writes to the Ephesians: 'It was God's loving design, centred in Christ, to give history its fulfilment by resuming everything in him, all that is in Heaven, all that is on earth, summed up in him',<sup>1</sup> and to the Colossians, 'Yes, in him all created things took their being, heavenly and earthly, visible and invisible. They were all created through him and in him; he takes precedency over all and in him all subsist'.<sup>2</sup> In a sense history has ended because God has become man and has risen again from the dead. The union of Godhead and manhood has already taken place once and for all in the person of Christ. And now we wait for Christ's second coming when his victory, already achieved, will be made manifest in the resurrection of the body and transformation of the whole universe.<sup>3</sup> In the meantime it is the duty of every Christian to manifest to the world the justice, mercy and love of God for man, and to bring under the dominion of Christ that portion of the world in which God has placed him, for 'the Gospel must be preached all over the world, so that all nations may hear the truth: only after that will the end come'.<sup>4</sup>

It is clear, then, that though we are called to renounce the world, there are forms of renunciation which are thoroughly unchristian. We come to God through our humanity and through the world, not in spite of it, and we shall rise again, not as pure spirits but as human beings. God became *man*; it is the whole of our nature which is divinised, not some 'part' of our souls only. Therefore to think of 'natural' activities as of no value in themselves, and merely as obstacles to the supernatural life, though they may provide us with

<sup>1</sup> Eph 1, 9.

<sup>2</sup> Col 1, 16.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Phil 4, 20-21, Rom 8, 19-21.

<sup>4</sup> Mt 24, 14.

opportunities of gaining graces, is to ignore the universal significance of the Incarnation. It is to diminish Christ, not to serve him. How is his Kingdom of justice, mercy and truth to be established in the world if Christians retire from public life as far as possible in the mistaken notion that they cannot serve otherwise, and consider secular pursuits to be of no value in themselves? How can the religious or the priest who is called upon to devote his life to the teaching of mathematics or French literature, serve God with true joy and alacrity, if he believes that his activity, because it is natural, has no value in itself? He may console himself for a time with thoughts of holy obedience or 'it is not what you do but how you do it'; but he will eventually become an indifferent teacher or an indifferent religious. It is of course true that none of our activity, including spiritual activity, is of any value in itself and apart from God, but this must be properly understood. The Fathers of the Church compared the action of God's grace on man to the action of the sun on plants. Without the sun the plants wither and die, but with the sun they grow and develop to their full stature. So too, the effect of God's grace on man is to bring him to his full growth and stature. God's grace does not lessen his individuality and freedom but increases it. His omnipotence does not reduce man to insignificance but raises him up as He raised up Christ. Therefore Christians who are not specially called by God to retire from this world's activities and lead a contemplative life come to him through their dedication to their work and not in spite of it. Their Mass, reception of the Sacraments and their prayer should not divide their attention and make them apathetic about this world's activities, but should, and does in holy people, help them to love and appreciate this world, because they find God in all things and all things draw them to God. The Christian should love and be more attached to this world than the pagan.

What, then, does renouncing the world mean for the Christian? The world which the Christian must renounce is not the material world, not the world of 'natural' activity. Renouncing the world means renouncing that attitude of mind which considers this world to be a closed system from which the Creator is excluded, an attitude which is destructive of the very thing it loves. The maximum of pleasure, or success, or dominion over others becomes the ideal of life; and this is enmity with God. To renounce the world the Christian must renounce idolatry, the worship of a creature, whether it is wealth, or human progress, or sex or the Party programme,

which is beneath the dignity of man called to share in the life of God himself.

It is not easy for the Christian to renounce the world in this way. Indeed it is impossible without that familiarity with God which brings a true sense of dependence on and submission to him. Without this he will easily delude himself that he is serving God when in fact he is serving the world, and he will be deaf to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Or he will be tempted to denounce the world as intrinsically evil and to retire from it as far as possible. And those who worship the world will welcome his retirement; for they prefer darkness and the worship of themselves and their own desires or ideas to the worship of God in whom all things subsist. 'We shall be as God and shall recognise no other gods but ourselves', is the cry of the world. 'Thou shalt worship the Lord Thy God, Him only shalt thou serve' is the cry of the Christian. But his cry will be hollow and ineffective unless he gives it meaning by his own dedication to his work, by his thirst for justice and truth in public and private life, and by his love for his fellow men, beginning with his own family; thus showing that belief in Christ is not an obstacle to this world's progress but the condition of it.

By Baptism we become 'other Christs'; and the Spirit which raised Jesus from the dead lives in us, too,<sup>1</sup> because we are taken up into the life of the Trinity. But we can only grow in the Divine life in proportion as we die to ourselves and give ourselves completely to God, for the life of the Trinity is a life of giving. There is nothing which the Father has which is not wholly the Son's and Holy Spirit's, nothing which the Son has which is not wholly the Father's and Holy Spirit's. If we are to live the life of the Trinity, ratifying our Baptism, then there must be nothing in our lives which we do not give to the Father. At the moment of death he will demand everything from us. Each Mass in which we offer the whole of our lives to the Father in the death of Christ, is a rehearsal for the moment of our own death. But every moment and every action of our life makes up the content of our offering, and the content is different for each one, for each has a different function in the Body of Christ. There is nothing in this world which does not belong to Christ, no human activity which is irrelevant to the Kingdom of Christ. Therefore the work of every Christian in the world has an *intrinsic* value; and every action, every discovery which contributes to the

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<sup>1</sup> Rom 8, 11.

order, beauty and progress of this world is an act which contributes to the Kingdom of Christ and has an eternal value. 'The deeds which they did in life go with them now'.<sup>1</sup> However, the Christian dedicates himself to the world, trusting in God, not in his own ideas of progress. God may seem to destroy our efforts and to break us as Christ was broken on the cross. But it is in our weakness that God manifests his power,<sup>2</sup> and it is only when we have given everything to Him that He will raise us to life again. Therefore, as Christians our standards in all our work must be higher, our dedication to work and to the interests of our fellow men must be greater than that of the pagan, for it is in this way that we give ourselves to God and form our answer to His call to us in Baptism.

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<sup>1</sup> Apoc 14, 13.

<sup>2</sup> Cor 12, 8.