

THE RIGHT USE OF CREATURES

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DISCUSSION among Christians about the use of wealth and power rarely ends in easy agreement. Sometimes disagreement arises because some of the participants cannot see that christian faith has anything to do with economic or social life. But even when all accept that faith has implications, and are ready to accept those implications in their own lives, two approaches to possessions usually can be seen.

The first approach is to accept possessions and to celebrate the goodness of the world. Riches enable almsgiving, generosity, hospitality and sharing, as well as effective service of God and of others. The second approach is to renounce possessions. To live frugally and simply, and to avoid opportunities to exercise power through having wealth enable inner freedom, trust of God and the opportunity to meet others simply in their poverty. Both approaches are usually adopted and defended with fervour, but what is axiomatic for one is commonly seen as economic idiocy or as compromise by the other. What agreement there is more often expresses tolerance than the conversion of one or other party.

These two attitudes find expression in the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola. The first, liberal approach to possessions finds some endorsement in the terse sentences which introduce the First Principle and Foundation, although in a qualified form:

Man is created to praise, reverence and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save his soul.

The other things on the face of the earth are created for man to help him in attaining the end for which he is created.

Hence man is to make use of them in as far as they help him in the attainment of his end, and he must rid himself of them in as far as they prove a hindrance to him (Exx 23).

As we move into the Exercises, however, the second attitude makes its claim heard. When Ignatius turns to the following of

Christ, he emphasizes the part played by poverty in the response to him. In his meditation on the Two Standards he invites us to:

Consider the address which Christ our Lord makes to all his servants and friends whom he sends on this enterprise, recommending to them to seek to help all, first by attracting them to the highest spiritual poverty, and, should it please the Divine Majesty and should he deign to choose them for it, even to actual poverty. Secondly, they should lead them to a desire for insults and contempt; for from these springs humility (Exx 146).

From this point on, the ideals of actual poverty and humility which seem to involve the renunciation of possessions and power are presented more insistently to the exercitant chosen to them, so that the right use of creatures is easily identified with the most limited use. But it remains a matter of choice.

God's choice, however, does not ignore our character, temperament and our personal history. When people discuss their attitude to possessions, they often point to apparently trivial incidents in their childhood as significant for their future choices. Take, for example, the story of one man who associated his later ideal of renunciation with an event which happened when he was nine or ten. He saw a pound note lying by the side of the road and without much reflection left it there. In doing so he experienced a deep freedom and peace, which he later found in the meditations of the Exercises.

So God works through personal history. But personal experience is rarely unambivalent. In reflecting on this incident as an adult, the man recalled that some time earlier he had lost a pound note when returning from shopping, and had been deeply ashamed of the loss. So, the later instinctive decision to leave the money untouched was probably motivated at least in part by the desire to atone for the earlier fault. Money was powerful, created trouble and was best avoided. Thus, the incident brought together two elements, both undeniable: a positive sense of freedom involved in the choice against acquisitiveness, and the darker, atavistic and almost manichaeic fear and distaste for money and its power.

If this story has any general significance, it suggests that our attitudes to the use of creatures are deeply personal, and that we shall find it difficult to enter the world of those whose attitudes differ from our own. For our attitudes are deeply influenced by our personal experience, and in an area of life as close to the

centre of our personality as is our relationship to the world of power and possessions, our personal experience is likely to be marked by ambivalence. We experience the world as ambiguous, and the way in which we express our attitude to it will also be ambiguous, as will be the way in which we respond to ideals and hopes, such as those we find in the Exercises. Hence, what any of us say about the use of power and possessions will be flawed and partial, whether it finds expression in the language of the Foundation or that of the Two Standards. It will be marked by our own ambivalence: by the vision of the world as a garden of freedom and by our dread of it as the place of bones.

Because our attitude to the use of possessions is inevitably partial, we cannot be content with leaving happily unresolved the tension between the Foundation and the choice of poverty made later in the Exercises. For what is at stake is not simply the difference between personal spiritualities, but our own personal integrity. In reflecting on the use of creatures, we are invited to look at the ambivalence of our personal experience, and the way in which this affects our hearing of the gospel. The emphasis in the christian spiritual tradition on the need for a rigorous discernment in the use of possessions and power illustrates how deeply this ambivalence is rooted in our personality. Spiritual writers have generally emphasized the need for suspicion in our free use of power or of possessions. Our spontaneity is likely to lean towards unhealthy and unconsidered attachments. But my story of the pound note also illustrates the need for a lively suspicion of our renunciation of power or of possessions, which can also be rooted in fear. There is a real risk of so identifying the christian attitude to power and possessions with their renunciation or grudging use that their enjoyment and confident use is left to those who put no store on the values of the gospel. If the high-minded leave the world of power and wealth, they never leave a vacuum behind.

So it is important, but difficult, to bridge the gap between the world of the Foundation and that of the following of Christ in poverty, whether we begin instinctively from the rhetoric of the Foundation or from that of the Two Standards. The most important and difficult part of the task is to recognize and seek healing for the ambivalence within ourselves. But a theory which brings the two worlds together is also valuable. What follows is not a complete theory, but some remarks aimed at reconciling the tension from the side of the later Exercises. From the nature of the case, they

are incomplete.

In the Contemplation to Obtain the Love of God, which follows the Fourth Week of the Exercises, Ignatius suggests some of the qualities which characterize a healthy attitude to the world. He invites us to:

Reflect how God dwells in creatures: in the elements giving them existence, in the plants giving them life . . . and to consider how God works and labours for me in all creatures upon the face of the earth, that is, he conducts himself as one who labours . . . and to consider all blessings and gifts as descending from above . . . (Exx 235,236,237).

This composite quotation encourages the reader to see the world through the eyes of faith. We are to hold together a view of the world as it presents itself to us in its variety and its unchangeable reality, and the vision of God as present and working within it. This is to have a sense of wonder, the poet's eye. The attitude is opposed to the purely instrumental or pragmatic approach to creatures which the Foundation appears to encourage when it speaks of them as to be used inasmuch as they help us to attain our end. The appearance is deceptive, for to view the world habitually in the context of salvation is a radically non-instrumental vision, since it makes relative all the uses to which we may put the world, even our understandings of what it means to achieve salvation. But the Contemplation articulates much more clearly a non-instrumental attitude to the world, which is not seen in terms of the uses to which it can be put but is seen in its own terms. When we see the world as God's garden, we are taken out of ourselves and are enabled to appreciate the beauty of the world outside its immediate relationship to the human sphere, in which it becomes power and possessions.

The attitude to the world commended by the Contemplation is filled out in the stories of the gospels. Jesus's attitude to the world in these stories is quite realistic. He is presented as understanding the value of possessions and the uses of power. The poor lady of the parable sweeps out the house when she loses her money; people entrusted with money to invest are expected to make money on their investments; to run out of wine at a celebration is an embarrassment; kings facing invasion are expected to make a prudent decision based on their resources. The stories are unsentimental in portraying human attitudes to power and to possession.

They presuppose readers who know the value of money and who appreciate the possibilities and responsibilities given by power.

The gospels, however, are surprising in bringing together that simple acceptance of ordinary human responses to the world of power and possessions, and the poet's vision of the world. The created world is not dangerous because we are likely to care too much for it, but because we are burdened by cares in handling it. This is quite a different thing. Cares and burdened hearts easily come out of the pursuit of possessions and power, and they lead to a narrowly instrumental view of the world. They inhibit the vision of the flowers of the grassland, apparently useless, but whose beauty points to the mystery of God's care for the world. But although this vision of the world as God's garden is imperilled by the care of possessions and the exercise of power, it is not incompatible with it. That it remains hard to hold together the businesslike approach to the world and the poet's vision is evident in our surprise that poets should embody both qualities—that a writer of delicate lyric poetry like Alexander Fet should have been an efficient and wealthy land-owner, or that Wallace Stevens should have been both an innovative poet and president of a powerful company. The worldly poet, like the worldly Christian, seems an odd creature. It is hard for the rich person to enter into the kingdom of heaven. In the gospels, too, the pursuit of possessions and the use of power are in tension with a vision of the world as God's creation.

The reason for this tension is illuminated to some extent by another quality of the christian attitude to the world. When Jesus speaks of the flowers of the fields, he holds together a lively appreciation of their beauty, and the acceptance of the oven to which they are destined. They are both beautiful and transient, and both aspects point to God's care for the human world. The conviction of God's care for the world and of its goodness is based on an unsentimental vision, which can accept the reality of death in the same glance that appreciates its beauty. It is difficult to hold together a sense of beauty and of transience, but much more difficult to see in their conjunction grounds for trust and not for sadness. Most poetry which speaks of transient beauty is profoundly sad, and it is perhaps this sadness in the face of death that underlies possessive and preoccupied attitudes to power and to wealth. Certainly, in the gospels, death is the constant bearing by which our use of creatures is to be orientated. The archetypal fool is the

one who hoards up possessions, ignorant of the fact that he is directly to die. The following of Jesus, which begins when the disciples leave their nets, is soon directed to the cross. The awareness of death guides our use of creatures at different levels. At a superficial level, it makes the pursuit of power and of possessions less urgent and removes our reasons for care. At a deeper level, it makes us aware of how far we are driven to preoccupation with possessions by our fear of death and our desire to separate beauty from the transience which seems to argue to an uncaring world. Positively, a vision of the world which accepts death as the natural concomitant of beauty, allows a free and non-instrumental use of the world. We can face with equanimity the loss of power and of possessions, because we do not see in them a charm that can ward off our own death and diminishment. The awareness of death which forms the context of our use of creatures is not something to be remembered grimly, but a part of the proper vision of the world as mystery—a quality of the imagination rather than of the will.

The gospel stories suggest also a third quality in our use of creatures, but one which is perhaps more closely tied to the cultural world in which the stories were written. They describe a world in which wealth is tangible and power is expressed in direct relationships. The centurion exercises authority by direct command; Pilate takes his decisions in the presence of Jesus and the crowd; taxation is discussed by handling coins, and wealth displayed in the anointing with expensive perfume or by the slaughter of fatted calves. The use of creatures involves handling them; they are disposed of by using the hands as well as by using the mind. This direct relationship between manual labour and the enjoyment of power and possessions is not simply the result of the Fall, but is part of the context within which they are seen correctly. In the monastic tradition, the same emphasis on manual labour is placed in a more self-conscious way: the right attitude or respect for possessions and for people, in using the former and in exercising authority over the latter, depends to some extent on the vision of the world that comes through the hands.

It is difficult, however, to know how we should respond to this emphasis in our very different world. For in our world the enjoyment of possessions and the use of power are both increasingly indirect. Wealth is less tangible, and power is exercised at a greater remove from the people who are affected by its exercise. As a

result, the use of creatures can increasingly be conducted in the mind, without reference to the hands. Such a context does not easily generate wise reflection and a whole vision of the world, unless it is complemented by direct contact with the labour by which wealth is generated and with the people who are affected by the use of power. Friendship with the poor and familiarity with their lives are part of the context within which we can properly use creatures.

Finally, the stories of the gospels consistently depict the proper use of power and possessions as being about hospitality and celebration. When it comes to disposing of wealth, parsimony is criticized more strongly than extravagance. The use of expensive oil for anointing Jesus is seen as a proper use of wealth despite Judas's hypocritical remonstrance; to run out of wine at a wedding is accepted as a stigma, not praised as thrift; the father defends his lavish celebration for his younger son against the criticism of his older son. The proper use of creatures is to enable celebration. It is always turned outwards to the good and happiness of others. The emphasis in catholic social teaching on the central importance of employment in the organization of industry makes the same point, which at first seems paradoxical. But the stories of the gospels suggest a basis for a spirituality of wealth as well as for a spirituality of poverty, a spirituality built around the values of hospitality, celebration and generosity. They do not countenance envy.

My reflections on the use of creatures are open to criticism from two points of view. First, they consider in isolation the person who has possessions and power to use, without considering the merits of the society in which one person enjoys possessions while others are deprived of them. An adequate treatment of the use of creatures must take serious account of the social context. My own reflections only point to the spiritual attitudes with which this account may be sought: the poet's eye which can see the social world as it is and not simply as it impinges on me, and the impulse to celebrate which sees the poor as friends from whom to learn about celebration and not merely as objects of charity.

Secondly, my reflections may be criticized on the grounds that they represent only the attempt to edge the understanding of religious poverty out to a greater liberality and realism. They are of little value in guiding anyone to take practical decisions in the complex world of politics and commerce. In this sphere, exhortation

to encourage qualities like the poet's eye or the ability to celebrate are at best irrelevant, and at worst impose a heavy burden of guilt.

In responding to this criticism, I would not wish to blur the challenge with which the gospel provides us: to combine a realistic attitude to power and possessions with a non-functional vision of the world. But the gospel stories do say more than this. They often provide helpful patterns for reflecting on the use of power. In the story of the Temptations, for example, Jesus sets aside immediately effective ways of acting in the world, that would satisfy his own needs or those of his mission. He declines to turn stones into bread, to accept power on the devil's terms, or to act presumptuously out of his relationship to God. He clearly establishes the principle that power is to be exercised in obedience to God. The point is driven home again and again through the gospels, usually in response to the disciples' failure to understand it.

Although he sets the use of power firmly within obedience to God's will, however, Jesus is depicted as acting powerfully. He preaches powerfully and authoritatively. He embodies the message which he preaches in a range of powerful signs—in cures and exorcisms. He uses wit and rhetoric in his argument with the Pharisees, and is able to point to the witness of his life to support his message. He strikes his hearers as a powerful person, whose power stands in conflict with his humble origins. Similarly, in his attitude to possessions, Jesus acts freely. He defends his disciples' freedom to eat grain on the sabbath, and while he is an itinerant preacher, he is prepared to accept what is offered him. He accepts hospitality from sinners and the local dignitaries alike, and he and his disciples earn a name for a lack of seriousness in contrast to John's disciples. Jesus shows himself free in relationship both to possessions and to power, and his freedom allows him to make pragmatic decisions about their use, based on his obedience to God's will. As the Foundation says, creatures are used in as far as they help to salvation. But the eye which makes the connection between power and possessions and salvation is the eye of faith, the poet's eye.

The Gospel of Mark, however, records a significant change in Jesus's ministry preparatory to his last journey to Jerusalem. He withdraws to Galilee and afterwards works few miracles. His ministry draws attention to his coming death, and this is the focus of salvation. It is difficult to know how far this turning point in

Jesus's ministry is a literary event—Mark's way of drawing attention to the continuity in Jesus's ministry between his preaching of the kingdom and his death—and how far it represents a real crisis in Jesus's ministry, when it became clear to him that the people would not accept his preaching of the kingdom, however powerfully he presented it in his life and his words. Jon Sobrino follows a number of modern scholars in claiming that the gospels recall a real crisis in Jesus's ministry, and that he withdrew to Galilee in discouragement. Reflecting on the growing opposition to his mission and the inevitably fatal consequences for himself should he continue proclaiming the kingdom, Jesus recognized that God's kingdom would not come through his powerful preaching but through his fate.

The interest of Sobrino's position lies in the conclusions which he draws from it about the use of power. In the very difficult situation in El Salvador out of which he writes, he is concerned to encourage Christians to act positively to change their society. As a result, he takes issue with the cult of powerlessness which can be drawn from the cross, while being faithful to the centrality which the cross must have in christian faith. So, he describes the first part of Jesus's mission, where he uses power freely in dependence on God's will, as the ordinary path for the disciple. To act powerfully and pragmatically in fidelity to the gospel is normal and proper. But Sobrino holds that in situations of conflict there will come a time when there is no powerful way that can be followed in fidelity to the gospel. Fidelity will lead to the cross, which as for Jesus can be the focus of God's powerful action. So the two stages in Jesus's ministry will also be characteristic of the disciple's path of service.

In this approach, powerlessness may not be chosen ordinarily as a first step. Christian discipleship demands the use of power and possessions in obedience to the values of the gospel. To speak of powerlessness as *the* christian way is to risk identifying flight from leadership and from responsibility with the gospel. But to serve the values of the gospel will mean that we shall be placed in situations in which there is no way of using power in accordance with the gospel. At that stage powerlessness is thrust on us. That this is not an unusual situation is shown by the help which so many people have found in a spirituality of powerlessness. Sobrino's approach, however, whatever the strength of its biblical grounding, is valuable in showing its limits. His own analysis, in

turn, perhaps downplays too far the ways in which powerlessness may be chosen as a christian option, as it has been by christian pacifists throughout the centuries. It is not chosen for strategic reasons and cannot be defended on purely rational or pragmatic grounds. But the choice of powerlessness, like that of poverty or of celibacy, can point to values of the gospel which should also govern the use of power (or possessions and sexuality). It involves a calling, and cannot be generalized as a 'better way', although its paradoxical character may well make it draw attention more powerfully to the gospel.

At the end of this article, are we any further along the road to reconcile the spirituality of the Foundation with that of the following of Christ in poverty? Not, certainly, in the sense of arriving at a defined attitude to possessions and power, which can alone be regarded as authentically christian. Our attitude to creatures will inevitably and properly be influenced by our experience, temperament and by the ways in which we habitually recognize God's presence and work in our lives. For some, that attitude will find more appropriate expression in the meditations of the Second Week of the Exercises; for most, in the Foundation.

But the reference to the Contemplation has pointed to qualities of our attitude to the world, which should be found both in the use of the world and in detachment from it. Although there remains tension between the detachment from power and possessions based on the following of Christ and the use of them in his service, both detachment and use should ideally encourage the poet's eye, and lead to celebration of the goodness of the world. Both are about christian liberty, and enshrine the tension between the liberation and the liberality which come together when liberty is given.