

PERENNIAL QUEST

VINCENT NAUGHTON, O.P.



HERE is one thing that all people have in common. The butcher-boy, the banker, the hairdresser, the mayor, the policeman, even the tax clerk—each of these, and everyone else, is looking for just one thing in life—happiness. Yes, everybody wants to be happy, but each person seems to have his own idea of how to be happy. A miser thinks he can be happy with a great pile of glittering coins, but he never can quite satisfy that craving for more and more. There are other people who believe that they will be happy when they achieve a certain social position, but they never seem to get to the place they have in mind. As a matter of fact, nothing in this world comes up to our expectations. There is always something else we want. Why is it that man is like this? Why is he never truly satisfied with the things of this world? The answer is simple. Man does not want merely a moment's happiness; he wants an eternity of it. In truth, he is hungry for the goodness of everlasting happiness, and he cannot be satisfied with less.

There are some people who realize that man cannot be truly happy here on earth, but they have refused, nevertheless, to consider that there is a life after death. For such people life becomes a cynical mockery which breeds a black despair. On the other hand, there are many who realize that, although happiness is beyond reach in this life, it is perfectly obtainable in the life after death. For such people there is one important problem—how can this perfect happiness be obtained?

Since enduring happiness belongs to the next world and not to this one, it is clear that the way to achieve it lies in properly ordering this life to the next. Therefore, the question is one of order. The only sure answer to this problem comes from God, and He gives it in two ways, one of which is ordinary, the other extraordinary. Ordinarily the answer is given by God through the Catholic Church. It consists in the sum and substance of Catholic doctrine, and it is the infallible guide to true lasting happiness. This is another way of saying that the Catholic Church has a monopoly on the only satisfying answer to man's problem of happiness. However, this monopoly is not absolute, because there is another way to obtain the satisfying

answer, the extraordinary way. This unusual way is direct inspiration by God. Of course, it is clear that, since He has set up an ordinary means, He will use this one only on rare occasions. Also, we must remember that the Catholic Church, unlike all other monopolists, does her best to distribute freely this treasure which she holds. Therefore, the only reasons why a person does not receive the guide to happiness from the Church are ignorance of the Church, denial of her authority, and blindness to her Truth.

There is another answer to this problem of happiness. It is the answer of reason itself, the science of ethics. But this answer is incomplete and inadequate. God, in His infinite goodness, ordained man to a sublime supernatural end which far exceeds the understanding of the human mind. Ethics of itself does not, cannot treat of this end of man. It treats abstractly of God as the highest good and places Him, in that aspect, as man's ultimate goal. In other words, ethics brings man to the threshold of the supernatural. God opens the door by revelation. When ethics permits itself to be guided by divine revelation, it truly will be a science of perfect happiness since it will be able to direct man to the true fullness of happiness. Morals then become more than a law; they become a stepping-stone to heaven since the student of ethics can see that man must dispose himself in this life in order to attain the perfect happiness that lies in the life hereafter. This is the type of ethics which is taught in Catholic colleges, and it is the only viewpoint which considers the whole man.

Certainly the man who knows his quest is not in vain ought to travel the road of life with greater courage and steadfastness than the man who sees only a question mark ahead of him. That is why it is so sad a spectacle to behold Catholic college graduates miserably groping their way through life and snatching at the fleeting happiness of a moment as a bewildered sceptic would do. Such people can be compared to a man who, being most wretchedly sick, obtained the perfect remedy for his illness, took it home, put it on a shelf of the medicine cabinet, promptly forgot all about it, and went on dragging himself along his miserable way of life. But is that not the very thing done by the Catholic college graduate who places his happiness in the things of this world? The ethics he studied in college gave him the remedy for his ills. If he puts that remedy away on a shelf of his mind and forgets about it, what else can we say of him?

Ethics, as guided by the knowledge of the supernatural side of man's nature, is a genuine remedy for the discontent that is apparent in the lives of so many people today. But the remedy is only of value when it is used. The science of Ethics can tell man how to be happy,

but it cannot make him happy. He does that by using the knowledge Ethics gives to arrange his life properly. What is the value of knowing how to be happy unless you are happy? None at all if you do not use knowledge. Look at the great American generals of this war—McArthur, Eisenhower, Clark and Marshall. They could never have become what they are to their country today if they had not used their knowledge of military tactics. In other words, they knew what to do in war and they did it, so they are outstanding. It is the same with Ethics, for Ethics is a practical science and every practical science demands that it be put to work.

Father Vincent McNabb, O.P., once wrote, "Speaking accurately, Ethics is not a science, nor yet an art, but a life."¹ He is right, of course, for the fulness of Ethics is in living it. As a science, Ethics gives man the foundation stones upon which he can build his castle of happiness. As an art, it shows him how to build that castle, but it does not build it for him. He must do that himself.

The edifice of our happiness here and hereafter must be built part by part. Since the building is not erected in an instant, we may become impatient and discouraged. When that happens, it is a good idea to remember that each part we build contributes to the whole structure. We must proceed in this way, adding part to part, for otherwise our efforts will be fruitless. Ethical science not only shows us what the completed structure will look like, but it also tells us how to make each part and fit it into its proper place. It keeps us from making parts that won't fit which are nothing else than unethical actions. If we should make a section that is out of harmony with the whole building, the blueprint of Ethics will tell us what is wrong and how to correct the misfit. This slow but necessary construction is the making of our happiness. Just as we would not purchase a house that is not built according to the blueprint, so we would not want a life which is out of all proportion to its blueprint. The blueprint or master sketch of our life according to which we must work if we want happiness is nothing else but Ethics.

¹ McNabb, V., O.P. *From a Friar's Cell*, p. 162.