

THE BEST PART

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THE MANIFOLD PROBLEMS which the world faces in our day are too well-known and too disheartening to bear exposition here. Principally, they are conflicts in man, and so among men. Their solution lies obviously in the restoration of peace, in man, and then among men, for, as Bishop Sheen has written, "there cannot be world peace, unless there is soul peace."

Peace is the product of right order—the tranquillity of order, St. Augustine calls it. Music-lovers might appropriately call it "harmony," for just as an orchestra is in harmony when the musicians are in agreement, in order, so the world is at peace when men are in agreement, in order.

The order in man follows the same pattern. It consists in an agreement, a concord amid the complexity of human nature, amid the variety of human interests, desires, capacities. For order (or disorder) always concerns a plurality of ingredients. Order is simply the *union* of a multitude, and there are two types of order. There is the one which exists *within* the multitude, as, for instance, among the musicians in the orchestra who are ordered and in harmony when they are united. Then too, there is the order which relates each member in some way to the one principle which unifies the whole group, as, in the example, all the musicians are ordered to the conductor.

Needless to say, this latter order, the ordination of each element to the principle of unification is of greater importance, because it is the foundation for the other order which exists among the elements. If there is organization in the orchestra, it is because each man is playing the part prescribed for him by the conductor. The musicians are actually in agreement because he is directing them, and, as a matter of experience, harmony results, not when the violinist is watching the drummer and the trumpeter is listening to the piano, but rather when every one of them is personally attentive to the conductor's baton. If each one is intent upon keeping pace with the maestro, he will also be in accord with all the other orchestra members, even though he is hardly conscious of it. But without the conductor who is the unifying principle, there would be no unity and order, and the musicians would be just individuals, with no especial cohesion.

Our world leaders, whether philosophers or politicians, recognize that peace comes with order. Indeed, they are much preoccupied with the task of international organization or with the integration of man. Yet many of them remain incredibly oblivious of the fact that order is not *mere* agreement or compromise, it is agreement on the basis of a single proximate unifying principle. It is not the result of forgetting our differences, but of acknowledging that which can unite us. Order in man is not the product of a varied diet of pursuits and pleasures; it is a matter of establishing the minor aims and activities in subjection to one that governs and regulates them all. Briefly, there must be one ultimate purpose or goal in life which, individually and socially, we are seeking. Whatever that goal might be, it must be ultimately a single goal, a unifying goal for each and everyone of us. Moreover, there ought to be a primacy among the human activities by which we attain this goal, since the goal itself will dictate the means best suited for its accomplishment.

Our modern philosophers, however, inevitably speak in terms of aims, ideals, pursuits. The naturalist, the pragmatist, and above all the Marxist, propound the doctrine that man is relentlessly chasing a plurality of ideals, a multiplicity of human goods; man faces the admittedly hopeless task of satisfying in this life his infinite desires, and particularly his avarice. Such an "ordering" of man as they apply it to society amounts to the organization of a multitude of men on the basis of a multitude of contending ideals—an inconceivable and impractical social order. Nevertheless, man must make the effort to achieve this social order, because peace is high on his list of ideals.

In this theory, man attains his personal and social aims solely by external activity, hyperactivity. It is the exercise of every "go-getting" faculty he has while his intellect lies idle. The objectives so occupy his every moment that he finds no time for useless speculation or contemplation. His thinking, if it be not the handmaid of his doing, is a waste of time.

Our modern philosophers may speak of integration, but they don't really mean what they say. No man alive could integrate the life they have planned for him, a life with many aims, none of them ultimate, of many activities, none of them primary.

There is an alternative to these philosophies of conflict in Catholic theology with its emphasis on the vision of God as our one ultimate end, and the primacy of spiritual activity in attaining this Beatific Vision. As the integration of man is wholly accomplished in contemplating God in heaven, so is it begun on earth in a contemplative, a spiritual life focused on God.

"Order," says St. Thomas, "is the concern of a wise man, since wisdom is the supreme perfection of the intellect which alone can perceive order." The wisest of men is surely the contemplative, for he concentrates upon the more important order, the order between man and his Maker. Our relationship to God is the fundamental order upon which any human integration, any social order must rest. How can there be unity in man unless he first gets straightened out with God? And how can there be a brotherhood among men who do not acknowledge the Fatherhood of God? He alone gives singleness of purpose to our life and it is He Whom we must choose for our director. Just as the orchestra conductor, not the musicians, establishes the harmony, so He gives the peace which the world cannot give.

The contemplative has singled out the order that really counts, the ultimate order which exists between man and his ultimate end, and he acknowledges and strengthens that order in the noblest activity which a human being can perform, in intellectual activity, in contemplation. Here is unity at its best, one ultimate aim, one primary activity. Cut off from the maelstrom of worldly schemes and worldly pursuits, the contemplative is truly at peace.

Our Blessed Lord made mention of this integration in the contemplative life on the occasion of His visit to the house of Martha and Mary at Bethany. On His arrival, Mary seated herself at the Lord's feet and listened to His word, while Martha was busily engaged in the details of preparing dinner. Our Lord said to Martha: "Thou art anxious and troubled about *many things*, and yet *only one thing* is needful. Mary has chosen the best part, and it will not be taken away from her." Mary is the model contemplative, and her one activity is commended as superior to Martha's many concerns. Martha is so busily engaged in trying to manage the various items for the dinner that she has neglected the guest whose presence gives rhyme and reason to her work. Mary, on the other hand, has grasped the important factor, her relationship as hostess to her guest. She recognizes the one thing which is needful, she acknowledges the presence of the Master and listens attentively to His word. In selecting the principal and basic order, Mary has found peace of soul, while Martha is troubled and anxious.

World order, world peace depends upon the extent in which this peace of soul is imparted to others. When enough men realize these truths, peace will be a by-product of their coordinated efforts at reaching their common goal. Bringing men to a recognition of this "peace-plan" is a contemplative work, or rather it is the work of an "active-contemplative."

For there are two types of contemplative. There is the simple contemplative, entirely devoted and attached to God, and also there is the "active-contemplative," one whose contemplation expands into action so that in some way he engages in the active life. This is not the activity advocated by the moderns, but one which proceeds from the fullness of contemplation, and which is indeed more excellent than simple contemplation. For even as it is better to enlighten than merely to shine, so it is better to give to others the fruits of one's contemplation than merely to contemplate. This is the contemplative who has comprehended his order to God and in the light of that order endeavors to set men straight. It is the wise man at work, illuminating his fellow man. It is the director of souls who from the abundance of his contemplation directs men in their relationship to God and to each other.

Mary might justifiably be assigned to this superior class of contemplatives on the basis of another Gospel incident. She was one of the first to whom Our Lord appeared after His Resurrection, and when she sought to embrace her Master, Jesus said to her: "Do not touch Me . . . but go rather to my brethren." Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord and these things He said to me." Even as the sun was yet rising on that first Easter morn, Mary, the contemplative was at work, spreading the good news, the first preacher of the Gospel.

The world today needs many men and women like Mary if our worldly Marthas are to survive. The world needs more contemplatives (in the cloisters and in the world) who espouse God as their life's purpose and His service as their life's work, for theirs are the exemplary lives which prove the possibility of peace and promise its propagation. The world needs more contemplatives who would enlighten us amid the shadows of doubt and the darkness of confusion, for theirs is the most worthy and most necessary humanitarian service. World peace depends upon people like Mary who choose the best part.