

THE MAGNANIMITY OF EAGLES

When the mature King Henry was the young Prince Hal, he learned much in the school of merriment and rioting. With Falstaff as his pedagogue, he probably shared his views on life. He might have answered the question which Falstaff put to himself, 'What is honour?', in much the same way—'A mere scutcheon. Therefore I'll none of it.'¹

But when his father died, Hal became aware of the seriousness of life and the responsibilities of his station as the new king, and he changed his school to one of solemnity and mastership.

For God doth know, so shall the world perceive
That I have turn'd away my former self.²

And on the field of Agincourt, before the battle with the French,



the same question which Falstaff had asked years before must have come up again, for King Henry cries out:

If it be a sin to covet honour,
I am the most offending soul alive.³

The question still stands: What is honor? If it is a mere scutcheon, then one should have none of it, but if one should live his whole life to capture it, then it must be more than a mere scutcheon.

The answer to the question is vital and must be set before men's eyes today, especially when mediocrity has taken the place of greatness and secularist conformity has overshadowed the spirit of personal perfection. If cold Christians like to quote in defence of their abject condition the beautiful words of our Lord, "Learn of me, for I am meek and humble of heart" (Mt. 11:29) and the startling words of Saint Paul, "Do not set your mind on high things, but condescend to the lowly" (Rom. 12:16), let the fire of still other words of Christ and the Apostle melt the ice: "You are to be perfect, even as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt. 5:48), and

I can claim all that others claim. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Christ's servants? These are wild words; I am something more. I have toiled harder, spent longer days in prison, been beaten cruelly, so often looked death in the face (II Cor. 11:21-23).

What is honor that will both drive men to win her and repel men to leave her? What is there in her code that forbids tattle-taling among boys and plagiarism among writers? What is there in her gaze that lures sportsmen to strain with sweat and martyrs to pour out blood? What lies hidden in her heart that stirs arrays of soldiers to the front lines and drives the clusters of cowards to the rear?

The most profitable way of answering the question is to examine what people think honor is. The opinions and examples can be put into two groups. The first includes such things as keys to the cities, ovations, high-sounding speeches, ritual sacrifices, genuflections, medals, scholarships, etc. The second embraces such things as moral code, self-respect, being on the up-and-up, playing the game, dignity, etc.

Considering the first group, we notice:

1) that all these things are external-material manifestations of a better than ordinary accomplishment, given to better than ordinary persons

or beings. Keys, medals, and money are the materials of the earth stamped with a superior value and given to men when they meet the mark; orations, bowings of the head, and applause are all bodily motions solemnized in the presence of exceptional people. In the long course of history, whenever the finger of God was felt in human affairs, people, recognizing His power and majesty, manifested that recognition by sacrifices, hymns of praise, and profound expressions of obeisance.

2) that their very conferral depends upon the person who bestows the recognition and not upon the person who is to receive recognition. For despite all the great things done by men and all the excellence of God, if the onlookers choose not to recognize their greatness and excellence, there will never be any presentation.

3) that their conferral is a matter of justice; for goodness must be done, greatness must be allowed light to be seen and imitated, and weakness must be given example and strength to improve.

Considering the second group entails greater precision, for these things are not tangible except by way of their acts and external signs. Yet we notice:

1) that all these things are internal-immaterial measures of goodness. I say goodness and not merely usefulness or pleasure, for the utilitarian things are always stepping stones to other things, but honor is sought for itself; and although pleasure can accompany honorable actions, it does not necessarily do so. Suffering for justice' sake might be a most painful experience.

2) that they are not conferred, but rather achieved, and their achievement depends upon the man who has done well rather than upon the man who recognizes it.

3) that their achievement is not a matter of justice, but of happiness itself. For is not man's perfection to be sought by a powered dedication to a full and expansive life in accordance with virtue? A notable thinker called happiness "the best and most beautiful and most delightful thing of all."⁴

Now if the two sets of conclusions are examined, honor turns out to be: 1) the external manifestation of worth, and 2) the internal measure of worth. Both of these conceptions point to goodness and virtue: the first considers the tribute to the good accomplished and to the virtue exercised; the second considers the reason for the goodness and the end of the virtue. Further, honor taken as a reward can at times be unjustly held back or

for that matter unjustly presented; honor taken as the measure must of necessity be present.

Now that Falstaff's question has been answered, the further question remains: which way should be undertaken, Prince Hal's or King Henry's? And what about the paradox in Christianity: how can the followers of Christ both carry their crosses and have no fear? How can they be humble and be perfect? How can they keep their eyes off high things, yet boast of their dignity?

And to crown it all, what are we to make of Christ's apparently contrary behavior? At one time, He did an about-face when the crowds rushed upon Him for His coronation, and at another time, He would not silence the jubilant people singing, 'Blessed is he who comes as king, in the name of the Lord.'

The double definition of honor can serve to solve the difficulty. Although honor (in the first sense) is thought to be the greatest of external goods (it is presented to God, it is that which men of dignity aim at, it is the reward for the noblest dealings), still there is a mark of shallowness about it (it belongs to him who accords honor rather than to him who obtains it). Thus, for a man to set his course for hoarding in all the plaudits that the world can offer is to make himself a slave to the nod and favor of a cheering mob rather than to make himself master to the call and service of a noble ideal.

This is not to despise and think evil of honor as a reward (for it is a debt paid in the face of greatness), but it is to put this honor in its proper place. So it is that the valiant warriors of an age are not those who answer the appeal to arms because they will be decorated with gold medals, but rather those who are decorated with gold medals because they have answered the appeal to arms. All this means that honor in the first sense of the term holds second place to honor in the second sense of the term. Because a soldier fights and suffers for his country's honor (his motive), he is given the honor of his country (his reward). The scientist cares that he fulfill the expectations of his vocation; he dedicates his life for the sake of truth and its propagation, but he is unconcerned whether his life goes down in the hagiographies or not.

Yet, if external honor *is* given for great accomplishments, it can be accepted by men as a confirmation of their abilities and perfections, and virtuously so. The honor should be accepted not as a sign for inactivity and inertia, but rather as a stimulation for further activity and energies.

So it is that scholarships are meant to inspire students to do greater things in the future and not merely to confirm their past successes.

A fortiori, let the same be concluded about the Christian: for it is through him that the earth is salted and the world is given light, and if he makes too much of meekness and lowliness so that he does nothing but bury his talent, he is rebuked by the Lord. If Christ on one occasion refused to become king and slipped out of the picture and hid Himself, it was only because His hour had not yet come. When the hour did come, He walked upon the scene and proclaimed Himself and willingly received the crown.

Let Pope Saint Leo clinch the argument: "Recognize, oh Christian, your dignity. . . . Remember of whose body and of whose head you are a member."⁵ Just as in Christ ". . . humility is shouldered by majesty, weakness by strength, and mortality by eternity. . ." ⁶ the Christian must carry his greatness ". . . in vessels of clay" (II Cor. 4:7).

Thus, although men, looking to the great things that must be done and the great codes that must be followed, are struck by a sense of unworthiness and incapability (fostered by humility), still, if the great things are to be done and the great lives lived men must also be struck by a sense of worthiness and capability (fostered by magnanimity).

Magnanimity through its great (*magna*) spirit (*animus*) looks to honor as the worth of human perfection; it seeks to develop the noblest faculties of man; it strives to capture the greatest things of life.

Because the greatest things are difficult to reach, magnanimity is built upon the passion of hope, bridling it in its vehemence, summoning it up in its quiet. Since perfection is a life-long ideal, magnanimity is a way of life whereby man stands up against the fates and establishes his firm stance against the world in its smallness. As a way of life, magnanimity is a force, driving and impelling all the wondrous activity of man to greater heights. This can be understood better by looking at justice and religion.

For the man who sets before himself a life of virtue not only in his own regard and for his own perfection, but towards his neighbor's as well, impels all his personal virtuous actions to a new height; this special end, this motivation by the social good makes 'legal justice' an impetus to all the virtues. Again, the virtuous man can scale greater heights through religion, with its very special emphasis on God's excellence than he could merely practicing virtue for his own perfection. Thus, when magnanimity

is called the crown of the virtues,⁷ it makes the virtues greater. But how?

Magnanimity, as the expansion of every virtue, and as the impulse creating a new order for all the virtues, comes into its own with what might be called the sense of greatness, a compulsion to surpass even the satisfactory and attain the noblest.

This sense of greatness takes the middle position between two extreme attitudes: one, of being worthy of great things but holding back from attaining them; the other, of going out to capture great things but being unworthy of them. That is, magnanimity evaluates both the most noble things in the world and the subjective capacity for attaining them. If there is a correspondence between the two, then magnanimity can begin to operate. But if there is no proportion between a man's abilities and his ambitions so that the man spends his time grasping for things far above him, he is conceited and vain; and if there is a proportion of greatness but the man holds back and does nothing, he is faint-hearted and soft.

Further, if a man upon examining his capacities, realizes that his place is one of day-to-day labor without the possibility of extraordinary accomplishment and he operates accordingly, he is, all other things being equal, undoubtedly virtuous, but not magnanimous. This distinction is not intended to down-grade the ordinary man, but rather to uphold his true position. Graham Greene is judged a good playwright by the critics, but no one would dub him 'great' as he would William Shakespeare. Just as a man who spends great sums of money on great projects is magnificent and the man who spends proportionately less is liberal, so also the name 'magnanimous' should be given only to the very great men.

Just what makes men great? Or for that matter, what do great men seek? I answer quickly, the sublime sense of honor. For it is this which in some degree all men either seek as a reward or live according to as a motive; it is this which is given for noble accomplishments and to noble beings; it is this which has put poetry into prosaic existence.

Coordinating this view of magnanimity with the two-fold view of honor, it seems that:

1) honor as a reward and as a testimony of goodness is the object of magnanimity as a *special* virtue. In this way, man regulates his appetite for honors according to right reason.

2) honor as a motive and a reason for goodness is the consideration of magnanimity as a *general* virtue, governing all the virtues.

Fulfilling the sense of honor, magnanimity is life on a grand scale;

it belongs to great men, virtuous men, who are not only concerned with the proper governing of their appetites, but also with the striving for greatness in everything.

Magnanimity makes a man take great strides in his development. It is best understood as a testimony to man's grandeur, a citation of true humanism. It belongs to the man of science and wisdom, craving for truth, using his mind on the noblest of considerations; it belongs to the man of politics and statesmanship, spending his energies on the social good; it belongs to the apostle seeking especially God's honor in all things, not merely by rendering to Him the things that are His, but by running the course to make Him known to all men.

And if the followers of Christ are usually drawn as meek lambs, Saint Paul carves them as bold lions:

Such is the ground of our confidence, and we speak out boldly enough. It is not for us to use veiled language, as Moses veiled his face. . . . It is given to us, all alike to catch the glory of the Lord as in a mirror, with faces unveiled (II Cor. 3: 12, 13, 18).

It is not the best thing in the world to speculate about moral actions; they must be performed. The virtue in operation captures the attention of those who need an example of virtue. Despite all that may be written about heroism and honor, despite all the examinations of the moralists, it is the people who have the last word.

All men are faced with honor, and great honor in some way comes into the life of every man. There is a natural response to all honor, but only the man who evaluates himself in all sincerity as worthy of making a bold advance for great honor is magnanimous.

If we look at Paul before Agrippa or More before Henry, if we listen to Thomas' proposal, "Let us go too and be killed along with him" (John 11:16) or Lincoln's command, "It is for us the living, rather to be dedicated here to the unfinished work . . . ,"⁸ we should see stirrings of greatness in all the callings in life. Whether it be hunger for truth or thirst for justice or craving for souls, it is magnanimity which is their spur and their crown.

—Joseph Albert Doshner, O.P.

¹ *Henry IV*, Part I, Act V, scene i.

² *Ibid.*, Part II, Act V, scene v.

³ *Henry V*, Act IV, scene iii.

⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1099a24.

⁵ *First Sermon for Christmas*.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Aristotle, *op. cit.*, 1124a1.

⁸ *Gettysburg Address*.