

## THE HERESY OF MODERATION

MARK EGAN, O.P.

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HERESY is a displacement of emphasis, an unbalancing of the scales of truth. Heresy lovingly and with apparent reverence embraces a half-truth and, since love is blind in one eye at least, heresy can never clearly focus the object of its affections so as to discover its mistake. Sometimes the heretic is in love, not only with a half-truth, but with himself, and then he is almost helpless.

We are falling into a very dangerous heresy that is sponsored by Humanist philosophers. Moderation has been the key-note of every humanist philosopher from Aristotle to Babbitt. It has found classic expression in the principle, "In medio stat virtus," "Virtue consists in the mean." At first sight these words have a bleak look. They are so smug, so conventional. They do not seem capable of bearing the weight of philosophic systems for over two thousand years. They are as laden with dust as a forgotten tome in an old library.

Yet these few words are the foundation of moral virtue. For true virtue really does consist in the mean. Temperance avoids over-indulgence and insensibility. Fortitude eschews rashness and cowardice. Patriotism never falls into exaggerated nationalism or treason. Perseverance never gives way to weakness or obstinacy.

What then is the meaning of this sentence, "Virtue consists in the mean"? According to Aristotle and St. Thomas the mean is right reason, which is the measure of human acts. In other words, an action to be virtuous must be in conformity with right reason. But does not right reason indicate that all action must be moderate? It forbids all excess or deficiency. Therefore, it commands moderation. Here is where the error starts. The mean of virtue is not to be taken as a quantitative determination. True, justice preserves a relation of quantitative equality between individuals. But what about temperance? Did St. Catherine of Siena sin against temperance when she refrained from eating or drinking for years, and received her nourishment from the Holy Eucharist? Of course not. She was following right reason, inspired by the Holy Ghost.

So it would seem that "nothing too much" is the shibboleth, not

of virtue, but of mediocrity. As Mr. Blue said, "In medio stat mediocritas." The norm that should determine the end of a virtue has been taken and used to measure the act of virtue. We are bent on being not too virtuous lest we should fall outside the limits of moderation. We must not be too generous, too modest, too temperate. There must not be too much mortification inflicted on our poor bodies. This is the half-truth that is fast becoming the only truth in the minds of modern people. It is bringing with it the pall of mediocrity and the inevitable pessimistic outlook on life that is the sanction placed by nature against mediocrity.

Man has an instinct for greatness. The least of us finds that in moments of reflection there is an urge to do something worthwhile. The reason for this lies in our spiritual nature. We possess an intellect and a will that have an infinite capacity for good. Their desires are insatiable. Hence the end of the sinner is always himself, an unconscious recognition of the fact that he is above all other created goods that are ordained to his perfection. The difficulty with the sinner is that he is in love with himself and cannot see that he is embracing a half-truth. For to contemplate one's own greatness without reference to God is to see only half the picture. Man's appetite for greatness can be appeased only by the practice of great virtue, which leads him to God.

However, the signs of mediocrity are stamped on our lives. Let us consider two of them so as to be able to appreciate what is meant by mediocrity. The two signs we shall give our attention to are our preoccupation with economic questions and our persistent selfishness.

It is not easy to suggest that people are too much concerned about money, when millions are unemployed and almost starving. Yet it must be done. Perhaps a distinction will preserve us from undue odium. We believe that poverty as a necessary condition of life is an evil to be eradicated, but poverty as an attitude of mind is an ideal to be striven for. The best attitude towards money is that of the religious who by a solemn vow of poverty has given up his right to acquire wealth. For the majority of men this is an impossible ideal. But as long as man does not possess a soul detached from wealth, he will be bound to mediocrity. In our economic conditions we must have a certain amount of money, but how many will be satisfied with a living wage? Money is a pledge of security, a talisman of power, and it is not good for man to have too much of either.

Wealth engenders a false security and weakens man's confidence in the Providence of God. Why the lust for money? Are we not afraid that tomorrow, next week, next year, we will have nothing to

live on, that old age will find us in the poorhouse. We will be deprived of our accustomed pleasures, if we have no money. Hence, we must bend all our energies to accumulate a store of wealth against a rainy day. But is wealth a safeguard against poverty? Ask the millionaires of yesterday who are the paupers of today.

The greatest evil of money is the loss of confidence in God that is caused by its possession. The Old and New Testament are full of prohibitions against the piling up of wealth. No Catholic can doubt that God will take care of man, no matter how poor he may become. Pause for a moment and call up before your imagination the millions of unemployed walking the streets of our cities, the thousands that line up morning, noon and night to receive their food, the homes that are kept together by state assistance, and then decide which of the following remedies would be most effective: Social legislation—or a perfect act of confidence in God, made publicly by these millions of sufferers, kneeling on the sidewalks that they now pace so despairingly. After all, you have never seen the birds of the air on the bread line, and if you have seen men there, know that it is because they are not great enough to seek help from their Father in heaven, nor simple enough to confide in His care. He can and will not fail them, but they have failed Him.

As a test of our love of money, let us take the following. G. K. Chesterton in his "Outline of Sanity" considers the question of big business versus the small proprietors. He brings out very clearly the necessity of encouraging trade with the small owners. What is more, he points out that the evil of big business could be wiped out with one stroke. If everyone traded with the small owners, the big shops would have to close. Quite obvious. Now suppose that we are convinced of this argument, how many of us would pay \$25.00 for a suit of clothes or a dress in a small store, when we could get the same article for \$16.50 in a large department store on the same street? In buying we think only of our own gain and forget that we are thus abetting an evil.

This brings us to the second sign of the smallness of our lives. It is selfishness, the fear of giving too much of ourselves, of being imposed upon by others. There has been written no better description of this type of mediocrity than that of Isabelle Riviere in her book, "*Le Devoir d'Imprevoyance*."

"All the pains, sharp or dull, all the sorrows, the humiliations, all the disappointments, the hates, the despairs of this world, are a hunger unappeased, a hunger for bread, for assistance, for love. The small boy who cries his eyes out, because his distracted mother has

boxed his ears for no good reason; the old grandfather whom the young folks always forget to kiss now; the homely young girl who sits alone in the corner; the wife whom the husband no longer heeds; the abandoned woman who leaps into the Seine; the friend whose pal has purposely failed to keep an appointment; the twenty-year old boy who lies dying on his hospital bed all alone, while his nurse is having a cup of coffee in the diet-kitchen; the little tot in the state orphanage; the man in the death cell; all have suffered from a lack, a stinginess of love. Each one of them had a right to a mite of the life and the love of another, but it was refused to them. To go on living each one needed something that another was storing up for himself, something that was useless to him and spoiled from lack of use."

What is the remedy against this miasma of mediocrity that is making life a pale, emaciated corpse, instead of the full-blooded, virile thing it should be? There is only one remedy—the regaining of the lost virtue of magnanimity. Aristotle realized the danger of applying the doctrine of the mean to the practice of virtue, so he treated at some length the virtue of magnanimity. What is its function? It impels man to practice great works of virtue. In other words, temperance makes a man temperate, magnanimity makes him heroically temperate; fortitude makes a man brave in the face of dangers, magnanimity makes him nobly defiant of any evil.

What a life is that of the magnanimous man! Intent on the practice of great virtue he has no thought of the mean and paltry things of life. He is almost disdainful of our petty cares. His heart is dilated, his soul expands, his being is attuned to every noble inspiration, ready to fulfil every lofty impulse. He is great, but he is not ambitious. He does not imagine that his great virtue is due to his own efforts, but humility teaches him that he is great by the help of God. This is the key-note of his nobility—humble confidence in God.

This is the answer to the cry of many, "nothing too much." We must measure that "too much" by the power of God, and not by the selfishness of man. If our lives are permeated with this ennobling virtue, we will find that in the expansive generosity of its influence, we will touch the peaks of life and will not be forever money-grubbers, selfish egoists with no thought of the other fellow.