

THE LAND OF HOPE

DURING their forty years' exile in the desert the Israelites were supported by the expectation of the Promised Land flowing with milk and honey. The same promise has often been made in our own day to the pale-faced city clerk and all city dwellers in their desert of papers and figures. A factory-ridden people is encouraged to return to the land, for it is said to be the only life fit for man. They are in bondage; they need the freedom of the soil, out in the spacious fields. The children of the Father of heaven are free; so, we are told, are the children of mother earth—in fact, we are almost led to imagine the two sets of offspring to be identical. Satan invented the machine to lash mankind in bondage. God means his sons to be free, following the furrow of the plough.

Freedom is not, however, the only advantage attributed to this form of life, for to freedom they add all the joys of living. The delight of hard muscular toil will be followed by relaxation in a comfortable chair before a glowing hearth with one's children gathering round quiet and content. Is not Nature the kindest of mothers, and is there anything to compare for sheer delight with daily toil in the brown earth among the gentle beasts placed at man's service? These are the fruits taken by the spies from the promised land.

This pleasant picture, however, remains little more than an imaginative one, having little resemblance to reality. It might even be a snare for the young romantic who does not care much for rational explanations. These attractive imaginings presumably arise from those who have occasionally taken part, as a pastime, in the haying or harvesting during pleasant summer weather. 'Back to the Land' under those conditions appears not only economically sound, but also as an altogether desirable mode of existence. So they return to their comfortable suburban homes to spend the winter evenings declaring that their suburban homes are not comfortable, but that the only human life possible

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is worked out on the land. Some even go so far as to state emphatically that machinery with all its consequences is bad in itself. This is perhaps the greatest danger underlying such propaganda. The position as regards returning to the land needs to be made clear before its economic desirability is discussed. The following remarks are an attempt to dispel illusions in order to see the true position, without treating of necessity or desirability.

In the first place the myth of the freedom of the land needs to be dispelled. A small experience will show that the soil demands from its devotees just as much absolute obedience to every whim as does the most greedy capitalist. If the work in a factory be called the work of slavery, then that term applies equally to the labour of agriculture. The soil is in fact a tyrant, allowing no time off, expecting the labourer to fall in with any mood it may derive from the weather, and giving at the best of times a wage scarcely compensating for the energy and work devoted to it. A small farmer is bound to his work almost more stringently than the factory hand. His hours are longer; some of his jobs are as monotonous as the most degraded mass-production can provide. This type of farmer has to work uninterruptedly from before dawn until nightfall. Daily and regularly the cows must be milked, the beasts fed, irrespective of Sundays or Holidays of Obligation. Mangles have to be hoed out—miles of the wretched little plants must be separated from the weeds. Added to such labour is the presence of the most persistent enemies. The weather, weeds and disease always threaten crops or beast. The fact must be faced that the farmer's life is not only an exacting one, it is also a life of suffering, and what in reference to factories has been called slavery.

On the other side of the picture we find the town man with the quiet contentment of a comfortable life aided by labour-saving devices and with a certain amount of leisure time. These machines create more leisure, while providing the possibilities of a wider general culture to fructify that leisure. Only a Manichee could assert that all this modern

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machinery is the work of the devil, bad in itself, and to be entirely forsaken. The Thomist teaching on evil, at least, does not permit such an assertion. On the contrary, the position seems to be that the machine, like most of the enterprises of man, was a very good thing in its inception. Carried away, however, in the first rush of enthusiasm over this novelty men began at once to misuse the gift. Since the Fall man can never be entirely guiltless of abusing the good things of this world, as may be constantly seen in the case of food or sex. So, too, when the machine was invented he never stopped to think whether there was any danger of abuse. Instead of considering the problem of machinery in its whole social and moral context with a view to guarding against excess, he made it a first principle that any labour-saving device was to be adopted without exception. Such inventions were received without being judged ethically or economically. The good thing has therefore been abused with catastrophic results. The fault does not lie with the machine which contains much power for good, but with men who have misused it. Even now the career of the machine is allowed to run on unchecked, so that in times of serious unemployment machines that deprive men of work are invented and manufactured without hindrance. The abuse has continued for a century or so, bringing social conditions all over the world to this present unbalanced state.

The world has been so constituted that we can only atone for the past and restore original equilibrium by some sort of sacrifice. The pre-eminent example of this lies in our redemption from the bondage of sin through the Sacrifice of Calvary. By that sacrifice the whole human race regained the sanctifying grace it had lost through sin, and its sin was atoned. The law of atonement through sacrifice applies, in various manners and degrees, to all human mistakes and errors. This law underlies the whole idea of juridical punishment, while it is often enforced by nature herself. The flaunting of nature's precepts will often be paid for by disease or death.

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Similarly, in abusing the good gift of machinery men have incurred a debt which can only be paid by some kind of sacrifice. Such a penalty does not arise from the mere whim of some creature, but from the fixed laws of the universe which requires compensation for such abuse. Nor is this type of penalty in itself useless, having only a symbolic value; it must really effect a restoration, for one must fast after over-eating. Under these circumstances, it seems very probable that the sacrifice nature demands in atonement for the past abuses is to lay aside these labour-saving machines wholly or in part, to return to the more primitive and harder form of life on the soil. If this very real sacrifice is not taken on willingly, it may be that nature will insist on it by compulsion in some catastrophic upheaval of all modern mechanization.

Whether this is true or not, the point to be emphasized is that such a return to the land definitely pertains to the sacrificial order. To persuade oneself otherwise is harmful or misleading. The sacrificial nature of the enterprise should, if anything, be emphasized, not glossed over, and the Catholic land movement become a distinctively Catholic enterprise, different in all essentials from, for example, purely political efforts in that direction. For the Catholic religion teaches a doctrine of self-sacrifice which is as different from, as it is more powerful than, the merely humanitarian notion of sacrifice in other religions. The Catholic idea of sacrifice, being entirely Christological in its conception, has a far greater motive force and staying power than those philanthropic undertakings. It is also sustained daily by the service of the altar, the whole conception of which, for us, is one of union with a victim and consequent self-sacrifice.

Supposing the return to the land to be necessary, the scheme can have a chance of ultimate success only if undertaken in this spirit of sacrifice. Under those conditions we might look forward to the re-adoption of the machine in accordance with reason, man having become at last master of the machine, instead of the machine the master of man.

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