

AN ARISTOCRAT OF POVERTY

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AT a time when an anthology such as 'The Pleasures of Poverty' is published, for one thing perhaps to help stiffen the economic morale of the general public, it may be instructive and even interesting to learn how one of the Church's great women personalities reacted to the problem of material security.

Julie (now Saint Marie Madeleine) Postel might never have become so interested in the question of poverty had she not lived in the second half of the eighteenth century, in a France which was rapidly heading for economic disaster. She herself, belonging to good middle-class country stock, had always known a fair measure of security. But that was an exceptional experience in a country, where, for all but a privileged few, misery haunted the land in the form of famine and squalor. Julie, who had relations with rich and poor alike (begging alms from the former that she might help the latter), could not but see how unfair was the distribution of this world's goods and the resulting sense of insecurity. Everyone seemed consumed with a chronic desire for gain, the nobles because they never had enough, the poor because they had nothing. Eighteenth-century civilisation had, to quote J. A. Spender's words about our own period—'so far broken all records in the race for material wealth'. Never before, perhaps, had individualism been so rampant. Everyone was 'the ox for those below and the frog for those above'. The nobles, 'at ease in Sion' as Péguy would say, had lost all sense of the brotherhood of man. Nor were the lower classes any less enslaved by material things because they did not possess them. The occasional glimpses they had, of boudoirs and banquets, filled them with envy and longing. Insecurity had the same disastrous effect on them as superabundance of goods on the privileged classes. It had excited 'a great travailing about worldly things'.

What struck Julie most, even in her little native town of Barfleur, was the frantic cult of luxury and the rage for

acquisition which filled everybody. But even more important was the fact that the appalling social injustice which she saw all around her could not, in the nature of things, remain a purely economical problem. It went very much deeper than that. It struck at the spiritual roots of the race. For it destroyed all true feeling of fellowship, 'depersonalising' man and making him merely a means to an end, a tool for his fellows. The 'I-Thou' relationship had been long ago replaced by an 'I-It' situation. At Valognes, especially, where she had been educated and in frequent contact with nobles, she had come up against their callous exploitation of the less fortunate. And she had been equally a witness of the hate and discontent of the latter. It had all burnt itself into her memory.

So she determined to do something to help remedy the situation. She was never one to rest content with much speculating about conditions. Moreover, she was quick to grasp reality, and to read 'the signs of the times'. She had an 'incarnational' view of life. History, for her, was a revelation of truth, a manifestation of spiritual life. She saw in the insatiable greed of so many of her fellow-beings not only an entirely wrong attitude to material poverty but a great inner poverty as well. Such exaggerated pre-occupation with more and more things meant a sinking of personality in them. It all arose out of a false scale of values, a conviction that having was more important than being. Men's attitude towards this world's goods had become warped, and they lacked the spiritual vitality to set it right. The only efficacious way to help them, Julie saw, would be to do as Christ had done and *live* the truth she wanted men to see. She would have to incarnate her ideal in personal action before attempting to 'reform society at its base' as she hoped to do.

It would mean the total renunciation of all that material security she had so far known and appreciated. For her plan was to leave home for ever and lead, as a lay person, a life of strictest poverty, giving a free education to the children of the very poor, living on little more than bread and water, and earning, by needlework and spinning, the wherewithal to relieve some of the misery she saw. It was none other

than a free, uncompromising acceptance of destitution. And only a firm belief in the creative power of renunciation could have led her to take such a step. For what she set out to do was supremely difficult, like 'ploughing the rock until it bear'—this attempt to bring about a change of heart in rich and poor alike. It was also a leap in the dark. For times were growing more economically insecure every day. It was something like recklessness to sacrifice deliberately and completely what little security one possessed. But Julie knew that by living this life of total poverty and above all by transcending it through love she would possess the necessary experience and spiritual enrichment to help solve the problem for others. This consisted in getting them to understand the apparent paradox that, just as in the case of love one wins a reward by seeking for none, and one loses one's life in order to save it, so one achieves security by sheer self-abandonment to Providence. Nothing short of purely spiritual endeavour, in the form of unbounded love for souls and detachment from material things, could drive home such a lesson. And that it might be all the more effective there must take place within her a work of intense interiorisation, 'a withdrawal from the process of history into the soul which, by taking the world's evil into the soul, defeats it there. From that victory new creative power flows back into the historical process. And since no ideal can be fully achieved in this world, but always encounters some measure of defeat, there must perpetually be this withdrawal into the soul, in order to defeat the evil that cannot be overcome on the mundane level.' Such a withdrawal would have nothing of despair about it. On the contrary, it would be simply consenting to '*reculer pour mieux sauter*'.

Julie knew that the renunciation she proposed to practise was in itself but a negative thing. But she was also convinced that the pain it entailed was indispensable for acquiring that spiritual power without which she would be helpless. For it was not merely a question of endeavouring to give people a sense of proportion. It was a question of bringing fire upon the earth to consume the selfishness which was responsible for the lack of proportion. And detachment is a sure road to charity.

An isolated existence, however, is not the ideal, sublime though it may be. Man is made for life in a community. So, when after thirty years of apprenticeship to a truly Franciscan standard of poverty she emerged to found her Institute, she determined to incarnate her ideal in that, too. She intended it to atone, by its purely spiritual influence, for the worldliness and individualism of pre-Revolutionary religious Orders as well as of secular society. As a community it was to possess all that wholeness, other-worldliness and love of mankind of which every kind of corporate body she had hitherto known seemed to have so little. For its mission, she plainly affirmed, was to reform and regenerate. And not merely by setting an example of perpetual fast, sleeping on straw pallets, living from day to day and from hand to mouth. It was the spirit, the basic attitude, intensely lived, that mattered. Her ideal was that of the early Christians who 'all had one heart and one soul and not one of them said that anything he possessed was his own but they had all things in common'. It was none other than a Christian community she aimed at, based on selflessness and paving the way for the pure union of charity and the untrammelled life of the spirit. It was a more realistic communism than any devised by man. For matter divides, whereas spirit unites. It would entail uncompromising self-sacrifice, for it meant a complete return to evangelical principles. But the rage for getting would have to be met, at all costs, by unstinted giving. What Berdyaev termed 'the ethics of redemption' were more than ever imperative. Spirit could be regenerated only by spirit.

It almost goes without saying that this dedication to poverty did its work in her own soul as well as in the souls of others. Not that she ever stopped to consider what it would do for herself. She was not given to calculate the profit of any undertaking.

'Lose, that the lost thou mayst receive,

Die for none other way canst live'

—it had relatively little appeal for her. No doubt she was well aware of the law of life that one reaches full stature by giving, not by getting, and that the quality of one's personality is enriched in the measure in which one detaches

oneself from matter. For one of her most oft-repeated words of advice was: 'Quittez tout et vous trouverez la liberté'. She herself had come to experience a wonderful freedom of spirit. Her detachment from material things issued in a reverence for all things. It gave her peace, too, because of the profound sense of security which dependence on God had brought her. Above all, it imparted to her a vision, a deep understanding of the fundamental scheme of things. Though no philosopher in the accepted sense, she possessed the wisdom which told her that the part could not be greater than the whole, that the effect is essentially inferior to the cause and, as such, only a reflection of his goodness. That being so, created things came to have no fascination for her. Why should she be content with images of Reality when Reality itself was within her reach?

[A complete life of St Marie Madeleine Postel is promised by Burns and Oates for the spring of 1953.]

