

TEMPTATION BULLDOZER

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SOME time ago, when in San Francisco, I visited the Flood Mansion—a perfect replica of a magnificent Italian *palazzo*, correct down to the least detail, set on a commanding height of the city, with a glorious view across the laguna to the mainland. The interior more than kept the promise of the exterior—from the grandiose entrance hall and its sweep of a balustraded staircase well to the lovely furniture and interior decoration of the numberless rooms, salons, corridors and landings. Yet for all this artistic splendour, the dominating feeling it evoked in me was one of profound sadness. For the *palazzo* was dead, as was its former owner, and the heirs, refusing to live there, were making a gift of it to a Religious Congregation, which had moved in—so far quite inconspicuously.

What makes a mansion in Europe, of which this was such a faithful copy, to be what it is, is the fact that it is the family mansion—the place where gallant ancestors had lived and where the present head of the house was carrying on a family tradition which was being handed on to another generation, now growing up within its walls. A family—which included not only the actual kin, but tenants, servants, clients and all kinds of henchmen and hangers-on, all together forming a true social unit. The Flood Mansion by contrast was just a museum piece, the costly whim of a mulish individual with no pride of ancestry nor hope of progeny. The latter had their own individualistic fancies and felt no desire of perpetuating that of their progenitors. It was the incongruity of an old-world family setting for the restless, ephemeral individualism of American life which was so terribly depressing.

Evidently the construction of a Flood Mansion could not have been undertaken in former times. It would have taken a life-time to do it—generations in fact would keep on altering and adding to it. Heirs of past centuries, the owners would build in view of centuries to come. Not so Mr Flood. He necessarily was already of middle-age when he got together the millions needed for such a project as this fairy-palace. *He* wanted to live there, not his

¹ This was the last article written by Professor Zacharias, who died last year in America.

children. It had got to be done quickly, for him to live there and enjoy it. And modern technics of course is capable of doing it. Immense buildings like the United Nations' headquarters on Manhattan can be got ready within two or three years; even amenities like old trees can nowadays be, and are being, transported from afar and transplanted, to make a fine show of a garden. On a lesser scale than the Flood Mansion, the pattern is repeated all over the country. Suburbs are created within a couple of years; dolls' houses in prim little gardens are being put up while you wait.

Much has been written about the individualistic trend of our times, but it is perhaps never fully realized to what extent this trend is conditioned, if not created, by the technical advance of the last hundred years. Technics has so multiplied man's power as to make him independent of the collectivity by which he belongs to nature—family, neighbourhood. It has given him the feeling of complete mastery over his environment, which he has come to look upon as one to be changed at his pleasure.

The change in mental attitude of course has not been limited to narrowly self-regarding plans of the individual. Nobler aims for social betterment have benefited by the creation of technical methods for carrying them out. It is not an accident that the emergence of utopian socialism coincides with the invention of power-machinery. Faced by slums, poverty, the physical handicaps of a region, modern man thinks at once in terms of bulldozers, real or metaphorical. Dams, irrigation works, rooting out of scrub (and with it of sleeping sickness or malaria or what not) are the obvious means for changing a bad environment and making a new Africa or India.

A New Earth. Never mind about a New Heaven as well. Man anyhow now has got the power with his bulldozers to make a new earth—let him do it—that surely is quite enough. Physical engineering, and with it naturally social engineering. Get a really good plan—and then, hey, presto, in five years you will get your New Earth, where everybody will have an electric washing-machine and a television set and, therefore, everybody will be happy ever after.

The Catholic stands aghast at this end-result of a psychological change of attitude, which seems to have taken him quite unawares. It was so gradual and at first looked so unobjectionable, that even

now few Christians realize that the full-blown Communism of today is but the logical conclusion of that change from belief in God to belief in technics, from a Christian to an anti-Christian mentality.

What is the Christian mentality? It is the recognition that God has placed everyone of us in space and time for the sole purpose of making ourselves, by the help of his grace, acceptable to him. Our life on earth is meant as a time of probation: a school, meant to educate us by setting us one test after another. Every new situation we have to face is an opportunity for us to prove and improve our prudence and fortitude, our justice and temperance, and above all our faith in, hope for, and love of, God. That is the one end and purpose of all our earthly life: a preparatory school for heaven. The situation we may find ourselves in may be a slum: the question we shall be asked is not, what became of the slum, but what justice and charity did you display when faced by that problem? Did sloth or concupiscence prevent you from doing anything about it? The slum or the garden city as such have no absolute value—nothing on earth has, except our souls. That is the Christian attitude, whilst the idea that what only matters is the objective result, the material success, of our activity is anti-Christian.

And so what? Not quietism, but, *Nolite solliciti esse*. Do the tasks God has allotted to you—in the family, the profession, the Commonwealth, the Church—as well as you know how, but don't feverishly look for success, knowing that the whole purpose is not there at all. What was the end of our Lord's long life of drudgery and obscurity in Nazareth, followed by the hectic three years of his public ministry? Humanly speaking—just downright, utter failure and frustration. And what is more, he left us just this Religion of the Cross, and for our sacramental sustenance he left us the Sacrament of his Passion, that is of his 'failure'.

This is the mentality of Christ—what of us Christians? Given the technical power of turning stones into bread and of jumping from the pinnacle of the temple into space, have we, in order to gain all the kingdoms of this world and their evanescent glory, fallen down perchance and worshipped Anti-Christ?