

ENDOWMENT OF DESTITUTION

RELIEF of distress is one thing, endowment of destitution quite another. Naturally we give the cup of cold water—more probably of hot tea—to the vagrant men and women who ask for it at the door. Naturally the spare coat or shirt goes to the man in want of it. These benevolent acts we all perform, as we supply the match (always supposing we have one) to the casual smoker unprovided with the means of ignition. Which of us would berate the smoker for his carelessness, or require the filling up of a form to explain why he left his matches at home? The natural law enjoins relief of one's neighbour.

Endowment of honourable and voluntary poverty—dowries and other provision for the sons and daughters of our Lady Poverty vowed to religion—this has been the practice of mankind in many lands long before the coming of Christianity. Plainly it is a matter unrelated to the endowment of destitution.

Nor again because we are bound to do our best for the poor who "are always with us," the halt, lame and blind, the mentally and physically defective, the orphan, the aged and infirm, must we confound this entirely just and charitable provision with the endowment of persons unwillingly destitute and fully capable of earning their living.

The acceptance of destitution as the inevitable lot of thousands, a merely regrettable feature in our otherwise admirable civilisation, is the shameful thing to-day. Destitution accepted and tolerated by our elected rulers from every political party; accepted and tolerated by our Catholic legislators in Lords and Commons as unprotestingly as by non-Catholic. Only the question of "how much" the destitute shall be given to save them from starvation is hotly debated.

Sheer destitution of able-bodied men and women, capable, willing and anxious to work, yet prevented from earning a

living, compelled to stand all the day idle because no man will hire them.

And the destitute needing the common necessities—food and clothing, fuel and houseroom—are not allowed to produce them. The complacency of our elected rulers in the face of this entirely discreditable state of things is amazing.

True the destitute are not left to die of starvation—as die they did when I was a boy—the social conscience has revolted against the old liberal doctrine of *laissez faire*. With the result that destitution is now established and endowed, while an army of people is employed and paid to minister to the unemployed. (To say nothing of the army of unpaid social workers who devote themselves to cheering up the destitute, and teaching the unemployed to use wisely their miserable leisure.)

But degradation accompanies this endowment of destitution. Mortal injury to family life. Bitterness fills the heart, hope gives way to despair when day by day, week by week, month by month, year by year the hands stretched out to work are denied their opportunity. Faith—in God and man—languishes, since heroic virtue is required to practice the duties of religion when the weekly “means test” puts the applicant “through the hoop” before he can obtain his share—and so small a share—of alms from the national endowment of destitution.

The scanty alms. There’s the rub! When the insult is big enough and not too nice an inquisition is made we all pocket it cheerfully without shame. The rewards of great soldiers, pensions of ex-cabinet ministers, civil list pensions (of more modest dimensions these) awarded to writers and artists are received without compunction. But this wretched pittance that keeps the destitute alive, and “truly ‘alive’ is all,” and the conditions that pertain to the receipt of endowment, not only test the means but try the spirit to the very breaking point.

Why is this destitution—this endowed destitution—tolerated in a country where wealth is plentiful? Why do we regard destitution as no more than a regrettable feature

of national life, something ineradicable, therefore enduring —“learn, my son, to bear tranquilly the calamities of others,” we easily learn it—a disease to be checked by endowment, lest trouble arise?

We tolerate and accept this destitution with its endowment because for the most part we see no way out. No doubt we denounce capitalism—though less fervently than we denounce communism—but we must have the dividends that capitalism obtains for us. How else should we live? What if our dividends are obtained from cheap labour in Africa or the West Indies, from loans in far-off lands? Dividends we must have, as investors we decline responsibility for the conditions that produce them. Instead of spending at home, we say it does not pay to employ our neighbours, wages are too high, we get no dividends. The notion of an adequate living wage may be urged by the Pope, by more than one pope in our life-time, but what is that to us? Complaints of high wages are common enough, how is it that we do not see the vital thing is to pay the highest possible wage? As it is our dividends are taxed to endow the destitute whom we do not employ.

We see no way out of what is called the problem of destitution because there is no way out while we believe that dividends and big profits must be sought first and the Kingdom of God and His justice second. There is no way out while private gain is placed before the common good. There is no way out while we leave our neighbours in the lurch, by no means loving them as ourselves, and give our minds to—whatever the particular novelty of the hour may be.

First things must come first. Before the expenditure of wealth on luxury must come the expenditure of wealth on the common necessary human needs. The wealth is ample and sufficient, but if wealth is primarily wasted on luxury the necessary things will not be produced. When our neighbours, now numbered with the destitute and endowed accordingly, are employed, desirably self-employed in co-operative labour, in the business of raising food, building

dwelling houses that are more than council houses at the lowest tender, making clothes, securing fuel, and the day's work at any of these occupations can be short if financial gain is not the object, then and not till then will enforced endowed destitution be ended.

It's the temptation to spend wealth on luxury that makes the difficulty. Consider on any morning the front page adverts of *The Times*. Side by side the appeals for charity to the destitute are appeals to spend wealth on every extravagance possible. We can't have it both ways. It simply can't be done: the waste of wealth and the provision of wealth for necessary human needs.

Destitution and its endowment, however shocking to the conscience of men and women of good will, however hurtful to the body politic, however shameful to the Catholic community, remain wherever wealth is diverted to luxury before the simple needs are satisfied. Abundance of wealth is here, abundance of labour exists, neither skill nor readiness to work are lacking. Why then do we choose luxury rather than the common good? Expenditure on the entirely useless things that prompted by fashion we are persuaded to buy, induced by the cry of the huckster, will not be utterly impossible when the destitution at present enforced is no more. The extravagance of generous hearts will always find out a way.

But the endowment of destitution leads nowhere, for there is no way out. It breeds social bitterness, turns the minds of many from the promises of revealed religion to the promises of the unrevealed. Communism and the dictatorships of Europe announce within their dominions that destitution shall be abolished.

Why then should we tolerate it in Great Britain? Is it worth while? To establish and endow destitution may for a while avert social disorder; it can hardly establish justice or bring the peace of Christ in the Kingdom of Christ.

JOSEPH CLAYTON.