

WHAT IS A DISPLACED PERSON? ¹

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FOR three years when I asked myself the question, I thought I knew the answer. A D.P. was a human being who had lost his country, and all that was needed to stop his being one was to give him another. But during those three years I decided myself, and ten years of subsequent experience have confirmed the lesson of my initial error: you cannot give a man a new country. All you can do is just make it possible for him to dream free from care of the old.

The D.P., this man uprooted from his native soil, torn from his social setting, and cowed by want and the kind of regulation ill-luck that attends all state-aid, has been thrust into an unreal world. He has been taken out of his own time and projected into this super-neolithic present which we may call 'The Age of Hutments', and he begins to acquire a special sort of mentality. His personality disintegrates to a larger or smaller degree, according to his level of intelligence and strength of will, and becomes merged in the mentality common to all D.P.s.

A dull new world takes shape, a realm of shadows. For three years I deceived myself; I mistook the refugee for a pauper. But 'poverty' is not the word to describe his misfortune, the refugee is primarily someone who has been uprooted and who drifts between the East from which he has fled and the West which very often will not admit him unless he has retained his muscular strength. Living for long years in a camp or an old barracks, he grows bitter. I have often given the definition of a D.P. as: 'A stateless person, spiritless and hopeless'.

A stateless person. Notice the negative words one uses in talking him: stateless, *heimatlos*, *auslander*, residue, hard core, Europe's surplus.

Spiritless and hopeless: uprooting a human being involves for him the worst of all misfortunes, the total loss of belief in human comradeship. That is why so many refugees are embittered, take to drink to drown their sorrow, and are so often lacking in concern for personal appearance, ability to manage their affairs, and willing-

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ness to work. It is not laziness but a canker of the soul. They will not face up to reality, dreaming either of their lost country or of a future impossible to attain. At Frankfort one day a highly intelligent Orthodox priest said to me: 'They are sitting on their luggage in the station, and have waited a dozen or more years for a train that will never arrive'. And he added: 'The worst of it is not that they have their luggage—their memories of their beloved native lands—but that they are sitting on it—living in the past rather than using the present to build up a new life'.

The refugee has lost his self-confidence, and it is up to us to give it back to him. When we laid the foundation-stone of our fifth European Village (Village Albert Schweitzer), in a wonderful atmosphere of friendly co-operation, the Chief Minister of the Saar said:

'It is not enough to give a stateless person a new house and a weekly wage. He will only be able to take up a new and normal life if he feels around him true human devotion, if he knows that others approach him with complete confidence, if self-respect, a sense of independence and the assurance of having equal rights with others, revive within him. The refugee needs the friendship of all those among whom he will be living.'

The Minister was very right, but this ideal is difficult to attain, not merely because of unco-operativeness on the part of the refugees, but because of the prejudices we all have against them.

You can take it from me that there is much more hatred of foreigners in the world than anyone would imagine! For the D.P. is a man without hope, suspicious of everything, even of the good people try to do for him.

Not that they are all like that. I have met with gratitude and integrity. I have watched many lovely flowers come into bloom, but how many other plants have withered! I could overwhelm you with my 'white' dossiers, putting before you a D.P. universe right-thinking, dazed with happiness, praying ceaselessly for their benefactors. I could also spread open my 'black' dossiers, showing you failures and frauds, breaches of trust, the disillusion of people with feeling hearts, the completely cold forgetfulness shown by those who had been helped. But that would give no true picture of the D.P., poised as he is between injustice and ingenuousness. When a kind heart does a good action and is mocked for it, what happens? The truly good and kind *persists*. Yes, goes on doing good, even without hope or result achieved.

Perseverance is the watchword of my life, though I am myself far from sublime. What I undertake I persevere in, purely for the

sake of Good, of Goodness for itself alone. People do not always understand me, sometimes even opposing this conception from ancient and deep conviction, such as their belief in a utilitarian apostolate and of a charity which tends to regard conversion as the proper exchange for a kind act.

One very old man, a worthy man in every way, said to me once:

'How many old people have you in your homes?'

'Two hundred.'

'What do you do for them?'

'Feed them.'

'How many have you "brought in" so far?'

He was using an old missionary expression: 'to bring in to God, to Holy Church'.

'None.'

'Then, what is the *use* of it?', he flung at me.

'To feed them. . . . When one gathers in a human being who is wretched, the act of feeding him is its own justification. One does not feed in order to convert.'

But do not make any mistake! There is no need to see me as bereft of my Catholic faith, my role as a priest. If you say to me: 'Is it a matter of indifference to you whether a soul possesses or does not possess integral Truth?', I answer: 'No'.

I do not set myself apart from the traditional attitude of believers in the matter of the end to be attained, but their methods are not mine. Mine stems from the principle: 'The more you seek, the less you find'. I believe simply in the force of example and the power of prayer and secret sacrifice. I believe in the virtue of suffering offered to God without anyone's knowledge.

Do you know the little Sisters of Charles de Foucauld? They live among the natives in Africa, in just the same way and amid the same poverty, making their homes in the same sort of shacks and eating the same food. They look after the children and the sick, they cultivate their own little patch of assava. There they stay, lost in the great spaces, isolated in a desert of humanity. And what are they doing? They are in readiness as examples, they are *example incarnate*, and this is what I am trying to do in my own small way, achieve catalysis, not conversion. In actual fact, no one ever makes a convert, only God can do that! We are only God's crystals. His light shines through us to fall on others. All we can do is polish the glass, so that the ray shall shine through brightly.

The D.P.s have taken us a long way. But it is always the same when talking of them. The story of their distress awakes one's conscience, and soon one no longer looks at them but into oneself.

In the camps I have seen Orthodox priests made hard, cruel and merciless by their too-intense patriotism, and I have seen a Polish Catholic priest unwilling to give a Christmas parcel to a mother because she had sent her child to a German kindergarten. He was not acting as a priest but as a Pole. And are the camps really the ideal place for starting discussions on Faith?

When I listen to that sort of thing, I am reminded of prisoners discussing liberty inside a gaol. I believe that religious problems should not be put to the down-trodden. Pasteur said: 'One doesn't ask a person in distress: What is your country? What is your religion? One says: You are suffering; that is enough for me, and I will help you.' I could not put it better than that myself, and I have never done better.

I know: the road I have chosen is narrow and difficult. Since I have always opposed classification of any kind, I have evidently myself been 'classified'. Some Catholics in my own country have labelled me 'neutral', and in the eyes of some that is a severe criticism. Neutral, because I have no love for narrowness of soul! On the religious plane this is the narrowest of all narrowmindedness. Religion is a matter of love, not caste.

Non-believers, or those of other faiths, have often declared that I was 'committed', simply because I was a Dominican and a priest. Just judging by the colour of my habit! Since I am neither neutral nor committed, I have been walking these last ten years along the ridge-tiles of the roof, as it were.

I place myself humbly at the disposal of God, that through me he may bring to pass good.