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Despair and the Secular Saint

by KILIAN McDONNELL, O.S.B.

Bravery, integrity, honesty are terms of high praise. For many moderns they are the only absolutes, the virtues which make for a kind of secular sanctity.

Because the secular saint is brave there are many things of which he can boast. The proudest of his boasts is the renunciation of all hope, the rejection of all salvation. This is indeed a dark mystery, full of a twisted sacredness and black impenetrability. It is the very want of light, the holy gloom of life, that makes the philosophy of the secular saint, so he thinks, nearer the truth. For him truth is always naked, grim, tragic, acidic, flat. The refusal to sugar the truth, the determination, almost evangelical, to live without meaning and without expectation, is what gives him the right to secular canonization.

The secular saint often looks to us like a professional cynic. This he would deny because it would imply that his apostolic dedication to despair is a pose. He insists upon his sincerity. He believes in the great weariness of life. Against the general boredom of existence there is only one defense: defiance. The secular saint defies life, defies death, defies morality, defies tradition, defies defiance. It is, he admits, all very confusing and, in the end, all very boring.

To defy life requires bravery and honesty; but before defiance must come acceptance. Man must accept life as it is. The secular saint is inclined to see life as a rather gloomy, often sordid, affair. The only way to be virtuous is to accept the sorry mess. Life is a cheat. Cheat it before it cheats you. As long as life is going to be nasty business, you might as well enjoy it. Don't try to escape. Don't take refuge in any illusions. Be brave. Be sordid.

The secular saint is a lover of reality. And the one reality he is most sure of is his own body. He thinks of the pleasures of the body as the light of the world and they alone momentarily illumine the darkness. Though the joy of the flesh is, for him, the ultimate ecstasy, even here there is no wonder, no awe. His exploitation of the body

is not motivated by creative love; rather it is directed by a wonderless calculation. This, he believes, makes for honesty. Here there is no sham, no illusion; only the ring of clinical authenticity.

He tends to consider his easy morals a truer kind of chastity, more fundamental, more sensitive, richer. He looks upon the virtue of the faithful spouse and the continent as a commonplace vulgarity. They are, he is sure, all honorable men, but basically captives of an illusion. The moral restraint, the security of an ordered life, the sense of direction, the clean-cut, bright-eyed optimism of the Christian is for the secular saint the joy of the ignorant. He looks with pity on the immense innocence with which the Christian lives out his life, this child who gives meaning to life and purpose to death.

What distinguishes the secular saint from the Christian, however, is not the level of elevated animality on which he lives. It is not his proud defiance of accepted norms. It is his mysticism of despair. At this point his sanctity begins, and, having gone full circle, here it ends. The beatific vision of despair is man's final goal. Only the honest, the brave, the heroes of sensitivity are admitted to this dark vision, those who have the courage to live without the comfort of morality, those brave enough to face the terrors of life without meaning and death without hope.

The mysticism of despair is deeply rooted in contemporary philosophy, drama and in the modern novel. Undoubtedly there are many secular saints—philosophers, playwrights, novelists—whose sanctity, judged even by the easy standards of despair, is not real. For all their talk about sincerity they are not sincere. Their honesty is deceit and their bravery is a flight from the rigors of reality. They are little boys who do not know the answer to life. Like forgetful children they no longer remember even the proper question. They have danced and made believe together. They have grown accustomed to the general farce and they like life that way. They no longer ask the meaning of life.

But there are other secular saints whose despair is not the posturing of little boys. They are mature men, truly sincere and honest. Their darkness, they know, is real and they have the intelligence to fear it and to cry out against it. Representative of this group is the Nobel Prize winner, Albert Camus. A character in one of his plays says, "To lose one's life is a little thing and I shall have the courage to do it if necessary; but to see the meaning of this life dissipated, to see our reason for existence disappear, that is what is unbearable. One cannot live without meaning." Camus does not yet know the meaning of life. His despair is, however, a seeking for meaning. He does not possess the right answer, but he has not forgotten the proper question: what is life without meaning? Death without hope?

The secular saint's despair, identification of ruthlessness with truthfulness, contempt for the respectable precautions of other men, are not without value. They throw light on the virtue of hope.

Man left to himself, as the secular saint bears tragic witness, is quite apt to get involved in a defiant pessimism. He does not attain hope, the promise of future beatitude. That is what St. Thomas meant when he said that a purely human hope "falls short of the notion of virtue." Hope is a virtue only when it comes from God, like faith and charity. Hope is a divine virtue because only God can give it.

Hope is not an easy answer to the question of life and death. St. Thomas says, "hope implies a certain imperfection." The imperfection of the Christian's life in the world will cause him anguish. This he must face with honesty and bravery. The imperfection of the present life will also make him look forward to the Perfect Life, which is God Himself. The virtue of hope gives him a divine certainty, as strong as God's strength, as unchangeable as God's word, that life has meaning, that in death there is purpose, that the joy of the Lord will be his.