

“WITH WHAT VAST RESPECT DOES GOD TREAT US”

—*Book of Wisdom, xii. 18*

“St. Francis honoured all men, that is, he not only loved but respected them all. What gave him his extraordinary power was this: that from the Pope to the beggar, from the Sultan of Syria in his pavilion to the ragged robbers crawling out of the wood, there was never a man who looked into those brown, burning eyes without being certain that Francis Bernadone was really interested in him, in his own inner individual life from the cradle to the grave, that he himself was being valued and taken seriously.”

G. K. Chesterton.

Legionaries are told: “The source of influence is love.” St. Augustine’s intriguing saying is repeated to them: “Love and do what you will.”

Pious stuff? Exaggeration? No—true as Christianity is true, for those phrases express Christianity. But there is need for a little amplifying. Do not suppose that influential love to be the mere emotional discharge which is the theme of tale and talkie. The Christian faith is a matter of facts and fixed truths—not a set of opinions which vary with one’s feelings. The love which is founded on that faith should have the same substance. It must be no creature of our thoughts—a sort of barometer indicating mental climate. It must be an active love, turning into force the things the Faith has taught us.

One of its subjects is to be our neighbour. We must love him for God’s sake; because God has commanded.

We must love him even for our own sake; for if we fail therein, we do grievous hurt to our own soul.

We must also love our neighbour for his own sake. For our Faith tells us that he is a very wonderful person; worth more than the whole material universe indeed an infinite type of being, made to the image and likeness of God; in fact that God is in him, so that what we do to him is done to God.

Love by Action

Every Christian will admit that duty of love. That is a first, substantial step. But to acknowledge it merely in our hearts or in our speech does not suffice. To go thus far and no further will only earn a condemnation, and the hearing of dire words: "... sounding brass. . . a tinkling cymbal. . . profiting nothing. . . depart from me. . ."

So on from faith to charity, from theory to practice, from words to deeds, must all proceed. Wherefore, have we "taken our places in the ranks of the Legion and ventured to promise a faithful service." Various tasks are placed before us and we set ourselves to perform them with thoroughness and out of the motive of love.

But even in its apostolic stage it is possible for one's love to be defective and one's motive flawed. It is more than possible in the non-apostolic members of the Church. It is almost inevitable in the rest of mankind. We may be producing something that looks like loving service of our neighbour, but which may be a hollow sham. It may be only a projection of ourselves. It is possible to be immersed in works of charity and yet to be ministering to ourselves alone. Such self-centred piety is a hideous thing.

It is possible to overflow with gentleness, tenderness,

forgiveness towards others, and yet to have only a subjective attitude towards those people—by which I mean that we ourselves are the centre of the circle, and the whole performance revolves around us and is for our sole benefit. We manifest those qualities because we believe that they are proper to us and should *proceed from* us, not because they should proceed *to others*. The whole thing is an exercise of vanity; self-cultivation and not Christian love.

Thus we make what amounts to an idol of ourselves. Virtually we are saying: "I am kind, therefore I must show kindness. I am generous, so I must show generosity. I am patient; I am sweet; I am thoughtful; I am forgiving; I am just; I am merciful—and accordingly I must cause all that loveliness to shine forth from me over the world around me."

Plainly that thing is not love, but only as gold plating on base metal.

Respect—Hallmark of Love

Then how are we to judge as to the real gold? I give the answer in a single word—Respect. Respect is the first-fruit of Charity. Therefore its presence is the mark of the genuineness of that thing called love. It defines love which otherwise is incapable of definition:

Respect can only proceed from the conviction that our neighbour is in himself a worthy subject of our respect, and hence that he must get it from us.

It must not depend on our just feeling that way; for in ten minutes' time perhaps we may feel differently. Nor on that person's possession of certain qualities or assets. Tomorrow those

qualities may not appeal to us, and those assets may be gone.

In ways innumerable we deceive ourselves. Monsignor Benson somewhere warns us against that glow of benevolence which comes to us at a warm fire on a winter's evening after a good meal and a little wine. Likewise, the expectation of gratitude is a powerful but unspiritual incentive to do good to others.

Neither is awe equivalent to respect. It may be nearer to fear. Christian respect is none of these emotions, but a realisation of the supreme dignity of our neighbour as a soul in whom God is living. If that is really appreciated by us, the automatic response in us will be that delicacy of behaviour which I call Respect.

Respect is the very kernel of our love, the living germ of our service of others. In that light God looks on it, and for that reason insists on it. But even the crudest worldling prizes it uniquely. It is the "healthful binding" in all human relationships. It is the ingredient which gives savour to all the amenities of life.

Among these latter, it is (as a writer says in another connection) "like fire among the elements, or gold among the metals, or the carnation among the flowers, or the diamond among the precious stones."

Perhaps you recoil from this as being too sweeping? Is respect any more precious than freedom and justice? And what of the lesser but still important items like generosity, tenderness, civility, good living conditions? Yes, significant— all of them. But not sufficing the heart of man except, and to the degree, that they bear with them that vital element of respect between parties. Freedom itself, that jewel for which men die so gladly, freedom without the enjoyment of respect is a misnomer; for it is empty of the dignity which is the essence of true liberty. Such

liberty is nearer to slavery; and so may all those other amenities, without respect, be found in slavery and be bestowed on slaves.

Christ in Our Neighbour

You know full well—for all have had the painful experience—how some people can give you courtesy, fair dealing and all the outward seemings of Christian charity, and yet leave it evident that they have no real respect for you. In such cases how do you instinctively react? You bristle like a dog. Those civilities only rile you as if they were insults. Grateful? Attracted by the givers? Not at all! For they are considerate to you only as they would be kind to animals. It is their code, and they meticulously conform to it where it touches you. In much the same spirit they would oil and clean their cars. You are little more to them than those animals or the mechanisms that they own. You are only a device for serving them or through which they love and serve themselves. You are only the stage on which they are playing their effective role. You are the screen on to which they throw their imagined perfections, so that they appear substantial and real. You are the mirror into which they gaze and see what they want to see about themselves. It is not your colour, warmth, beauty, life, that they see in you, but their own.

If people have that detached attitude in regard to you, nothing that they do for you will satisfy you. Their acts of service will only seem like offensive patronage to you. A cynic has said: "One would need a godlike nature to receive a favour and yet love the giver." What! Yes; therein is hid a mighty truth. For most favours imply superiority—which men resent, however great the favour.

So, if I have not been vehement enough up to the present, let me now be stronger and say: You can be unkind, unjust to men; steal from them, oppose them, ill-treat them in diverse ways; you may even make war on them. All that they can allow for and forgive. *But* stop short at that capital sin against your fellow-man—that attitude of impersonal contempt. For it will stir up in him gall of a peculiar kind which will permanently poison his system against you.

Have I been depicting a monster? No, simply digging down a little into human nature and exposing the Old Adam who lurks there stinking with pride and self-sufficiency. He will absorb us if we play his game. So we must do the opposite. The opposite to being proud is to be respectful to all men.

But note two paramount considerations: (a) the acid-test of respect is that it is to be manifested towards people at times when—humanly speaking—they do not deserve it; (b) the *Legion Handbook*, when laying down the law on this subject, does not propose to us the sort of respect which equal offers to equal, but the respect of the inferior for the superior, of the servant for the Lord. Is this prescription rushing to extremes? No. For the ultimate basis of Christian respect is the recognising of Christ in our neighbour.