

(This essay written by Robert D Hickson on the Feast of St Maximilian Kolbe, 2013 has been posted on the *Apropos* website at www.apropos.org.uk Subtitles by the Editor, *Apropos*.)

The Disadvantages of Comfort

They're too comfortable

When a friend recently teased me with a trenchant quote from John Henry Newman's sermon, entitled "Religious Cowardice," I deployed my resourcefulness promptly to find, if I could, the entire homily and to read it. Gratefully, I did. It is to be found in the second volume of his eight-volume collection of Anglican Sermons over the years 1834-1843, and it was originally delivered on the Feast of Saint Mark the Evangelist.¹ Newman (1801-1890) was then only in his early or mid-thirties, or perhaps slightly older, and thus about the age of his former student, Hilaire Belloc, when Belloc made his own vigorous Path to Rome, or his other long journeys afoot on the Continent of Europe or in his beloved Sussex.²

The more specific placing of Newman's sermon on Religious Cowardice seemed important to me, inasmuch as the counter-Erastian, and more sacramental Oxford Movement itself began only in 1833 (one year before Newman's own sequence of sermons, and around the time when he joined that Movement); and Newman himself was received into the Roman Catholic Church, on 9 October 1845, only two years after the eight-volume sequence of Parochial and Plain Sermons concludes—namely, in 1843 when he also had made an almost formal retractation of all he had previously written or said against the Roman Catholic Church.

When I first read the entire Sermon on Religious Cowardice, I recalled the incisive, still haunting words of a Jesuit Priest I knew, who quoted another, but later, English convert from Anglicanism who also then became a Catholic Priest. This later convert—whose name I do not know—merely said about his own Anglican forebears and contemporaries: "**They're too comfortable.**" (And he had said those words, he admitted, with pain in his heart.) Moreover, as the Jesuit Priest also assured me, that grateful convert spoke with no hint of flippancy, nor with any condescension.

Counterpointing a sermon and an essay

Rather than now considering the more generally known dangers of complacency or lethargy, to include spiritual sloth and indifferentism, I propose to examine more closely Newman's formidable and still topical sermon on Religious Cowardice, and to counterpoint it with Hilaire Belloc's own

1 John Henry Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons, 1834-1843*, 8 Volumes (London and New York: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1891)—Volume II, Sermon 16 ("Religious Cowardice"), pp. 338-342 (or, in some versions, 175-182). In 1997, the Ignatius Press in San Francisco, California reprinted these 8 Volumes, exactly, but now in one compact Volume, instead of many. Further references will be placed in parentheses in the main body above, and refer only to the 338-342 paginations.

2 Hilaire Belloc often conveys his deep love of his home county of Sussex, not only in his unexpected digressions and vivid analogies, but even in such brief passages as these: "Soon the **beauty** of South England **healed this wound** and I applied **the balm of landscape** to my heart until...my journey was done"; or "The Sea that bounds South England has as many moods as any sea in the world, and one of its moods is that of **calm vision** like **St. Monica by the window at prayer**. When the Sea of South England is in this mood, it is very **hard upon sailing men**; especially **if they have no horrible motor on board**. For in this mood, there is no wind upon the sea; **all lies asleep.**" See H. Belloc, *Short Talks with the Dead and Others* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1926—second edition), pp. 112 and 113-114, respectively—my emphasis added. The first quotation is from his essay, "A Conversation with the Reader"; and the second passage comes from his essay which has an additionally evocative title, "The Coastguard, or the Balm of the Salt."

sprightly and vivid essay, entitled “Talking of Poverty” (1926) and later renamed “On Poverty” (1928).³ We hope thereby to bring out (and apply) some important, challenging, and **freshly expressed insights about the disadvantages of comfort**—though we also know (or should remember) that one of the eight Beatitudes in the Gospel of Matthew promises, *sub Gratia*, a later beatifying consolation and true comfort for those who have fittingly and abidingly mourned from the depths during their allotted time of wayfaring in this world (i.e., as *Viatores* amidst their varied crosses and trials in this *Valle Lacrimarum*).

Belloc’s definition of uninvited Poverty

Before considering Newman’s Sermon, it is of worth to hear Belloc’s own initial and working definition of poverty—not voluntary poverty as a religious vow nor even as a private ascetical vow, but, rather, general poverty and involuntary poverty, or at least unwelcomed and **uninvited** poverty, as it were. Belloc says:

I thus discovered a definition of poverty, which is this: “*Poverty is that state in which a man is perpetually anxious for the future of himself and his dependents, unable to pursue life upon a standard to which he was brought up, tempted both to subservience and to a sour revolt, and tending inexorably towards despair.*” Such was the definition of poverty to which I arrived, and once arrived at, the good effects flowing from such a condition are very plain.⁴

Where will our Belloc—and his subtle Narrator—now want to take his reader, after this surprising definition and implicit challenge? We shall come to see more, but only after first considering Newman’s almost prophetic warnings, as well as his admittedly hesitant, but morally necessary, prayer near the end of his sermon.

A deserter grown strong through grace

John Henry Newman’s sermon, perhaps at first surprisingly, was presented on the Feast of Saint Mark (on 25 April, the traditional date). In the beginning words of the sermon, Newman speaks of “the chief points of St. Mark’s history,” and mentions his uncle, “Barnabas,” and how Mark “was taken with him and St. Paul on their first apostolical journey; next, that after a short time he [Mark] **deserted** them and returned to Jerusalem.” (338—my emphasis added)

Newman’s main purpose is to show how this once fearful Deserter, Mark, gradually grew strong, helped by the example of St. Peter and his close bond with him in Rome; and who then both “composed his Gospel...principally from the accounts he had received from that Apostle [St. Peter]”; and “lastly, ...was sent by him [St. Peter] to Alexandria, in Egypt, where he founded one of the strictest and most powerful churches of the primitive times.” (338)

Newman proceeds to examine how this unusual change could happen, the change from fearful timorousness to courage and a Christian Witness even unto a blood witness. For, says Newman, “first he abandoned the cause of the Gospel as soon as danger appeared.” Moreover, the *instrument* of this change was, as it convincingly appears, the influence of St. Peter himself, “a fit restorer of a timid and backsliding disciple.” (338—italics in the original)

The Anglican Minister’s structure is clear. After having presented “the chief points of St. Mark’s

3 Hilaire Belloc, “Talking of Poverty,” in his Anthology, *Short Talks with the Dead and Others* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1926—Second Edition), pp. 191-196; it was also duplicated (with slight variations) in his later Anthology, but with a new title, “On Poverty,” in *A Conversation with an Angel and Other Essays* (London: Johnathan Cape, 1928), pp. 22-28.

4 Hilaire Belloc, “Talking of Poverty,” p. 192—italics are in the original. Henceforth, unless otherwise specified, all page references to Belloc’s essay on poverty will be to the earlier 1926 text, and placed in the main text above, in parentheses.

history,” “the points of *contrast*,” “the *instrument* of the change,” Newman goes on to consider two other aspects: “the *encouragement*” and “the *warning*.” The former shows that “the feeblest among us may through God’s grace [and our responding co-operation?] become strong”; and the latter should dispose us more fully “to distrust ourselves” and “not to despise weak brethren, or to despair of them, but to bear their burdens and help them forward, if so be we may restore them.” (338—italics in the original)

Overcoming evil dispositions

Introducing two types of characters, or two types temperaments, he says:

*Some men are naturally impetuous and active; others love quiet and readily **yield**. The over-earnest must be sobered and **the indolent must be roused**.... [In contrast with Moses and his “proud and rash spirit,]” St. Mark’s history affords a specimen of the other, and **still rarer change, from timidity to boldness**. Difficult as it is to subdue the more violent passions, yet I believe it to be **still more difficult to overcome a tendency to sloth, cowardice, and despondency**. These evil **dispositions cling** about a man, and **weigh him down**. They are **minute chains, binding** him on every side to the earth, so he cannot even turn himself or make an effort to rise. It would seem as if **right principles had yet to be planted in the indolent mind**. (338-339—my emphasis added)*

Newman shows, then, how “violent and obstinate tempers” with “something of the nature of zeal in them” are often gradually mollified, and even blessed, by “the events of life” thereby having a “powerful influence in sobering the ardent or self-confident temper”: namely, certain “disappointments, pain, anxiety, advancing years.” Not so, with the more timid temper, says Newman:

*On the other hand, these same circumstances [“disappointments, pain, anxiety, advancing years”] do but increase the defects of the timid and irresolute, who are **made more indolent, selfish, and faint-hearted by advancing years**, and find a sort of sanction of **their unworthy caution** in their experiences of the vicissitudes of life. (339—my emphasis added)*

After a few words of contrast with St. Peter, Newman will make a connection between the history of St. Mark and certain of the professed Christians of the second-third of the nineteenth century:

*In St. Mark’s history, however, we have no evidence of [St. Peter’s] self-confidence [and impetuosity!]; rather, we may discern in it **the state of multitudes at the present day**, who proceed through life with a certain sense of religion **on** their minds, who have been brought up well and know the Truth, who acquit themselves respectably **while danger is at a distance**, but **disgrace** their profession [of Faith] when brought into any **unexpected trial**. (339-340 —my emphasis added)*

The danger of spiritual complacency

Now Newman will sharpen his theme and his sober warning, by further and more intimately applying the historical case of St. Mark to actual persons of his own time who are of similar propensities and dispositions—and likely also to such characters in the future. (**We** now also start to squirm!)

*Now, who does not see that such a character [St. Mark] as this, such a trial, and such a fall, belong to other days, **besides those of the Apostles**? Or rather, to put the question to us **more closely**, who will deny that there are multitudes in the Church [sic] at present, who have **no***

evidence to themselves of more than passive faith and virtue, which in St. Mark's case proved so unequal even to a slight trial? Who has not some misgivings of heart, lest, in times such as these [circa 1834-1836], when Christian firmness is so little tried, his own loyalty to his Saviour's cause be perchance no truer or firmer than that of the sister's-son [St. Mark] of a great Apostle [St. Barnabas, Mark's uncle]. **When the Church is at peace** [or apparent peace], as it has been in this country, when public order is preserved in the community, and the rights of person and property secured, **there is extreme danger** lest we judge ourselves **by what is without, not by what is within**. (340—my emphasis added)

Touching upon the spiritual danger of complacency and of our ingratitude for a great gift, Newman elaborates his meaning with further differentiations, in the light of his Anglican faith:

We take for granted we are Christians, because we have been taught aright, and are regular in our attendance upon the Christian ordinances. But, great privilege and duty as it is to use **the means of grace** [?], reading and prayer are not enough; nor by themselves will they ["reading and prayer"] ever make us **real** Christians [in contrast, that is, to merely **notional** Christians]. They will give us **right knowledge and good feelings, but not firm faith and resolute obedience**. Christians, such as Mark, will abound in a prosperous Church; and, should trouble come, they will be unprepared for it. They have been so long accustomed to external peace that **they do not like to be persuaded that danger is at hand**. They settle it **in their imagination** that they are to live and die undisturbed. They look at the world's events, as they express it, cheerfully, and **argue themselves into self-deception**. (340-341—my bold emphasis added; italics are in the original)

The consequences of cowardice

Now Newman will approach the graver matter of cowardice and its potentially fearsome consequences. For, in addition to self-deception, a certain tolerance (even a complicity) soon increases:

They [the self-deceived] make **concessions, to fulfil their own predictions and wishes; and surrender** the Christian cause, [so] that unbelievers may not commit themselves to an **open attack upon it.... To speak plainly**, a state of persecution is not (what is familiarly called) their element; they cannot breathe in it.... **If** then there be times when **we have thus grown torpid from long security, and are tempted to prefer the treasures of Egypt to the reproach of Christ**, what can we do, what ought we do, but to pray God in some way or other to **try the very heart of the Church**, and to afflict us here rather than hereafter? (341—my bold emphasis added; italics in the original)

A sober and fearsome prayer

Within his Anglican framework of doctrine, he will now present a fearsome prayer to shake also our own complacency today, but Newman himself offers this sober prayer very reluctantly, very hesitantly. And, once again, he is trying to find a fitting way to remedy a rather widespread sloth, timidity, tepidity, complacency, irresoluteness, as he then saw it to be the case; and thus to chasten our inordinate sense of comfort, if not self-satisfaction and sinful presumption. In answering his own questions—"What can we do?" and "What ought we do?" in this dangerous situation—he confines himself to rendering a grave prayer to God to purge His Church, to "afflict" and "**to try the very heart of the Church**" as he then understood Her. But his words will likewise reach and deeply touch a Roman Catholic of the twenty-first century, although a well-formed and instructed Catholic could certainly enrich them in light of his own Faith, with the Church's own rich Doctrine, Morals, and Sacraments. But, in Newman's sternly prophetic and chastening

apocalyptic words, we hear the following, also for our own improvement today:

*Dreadful as is the prospect of Satan's **temporary** triumph, fierce as are the horsehoofs of his riders [the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse?], and detestable as is the cause for which they battle, yet **better such anguish** should come upon us, **than that the recesses of our heritage should be the hiding-places of a self-indulgent spirit and the schools of lukewarmness**. May God arise and shake terribly the earth (though it be an awful prayer), rather than the double-minded [the duplicitous in their hypocritical cunning] should lie hid among us, **and souls be lost by present ease!** Let Him arise, **if** there be no alternative, and chasten us with His sweet discipline, **as our hearts may best bear it**; bringing our sins out in this world, that we be not condemned in the day of the Lord; shaming us here, reproving us by the mouth of His servants, then restoring us, and leading us on **by a better way** to a truer and holier hope! Let Him winnow us, till the chaff be clean removed! Though, in thus invoking Him, we know not what we ask, and, feeling the end itself to be good, yet cannot worthily estimate the fearfulness of that chastisement which we so freely speak about. Doubtless we do not, we cannot measure the terrors of the Lord's judgments; **we use words cheaply**. Still, it cannot be wrong to use them, seeing they are the best offering [sic] we can make to God; and, so that we beg him the while to lead us on, and give us strength to bear the trial according as it opens upon us. So may we [like Mark] issue as Evangelists for [in place of, in exchange for] timid deserters of the cause of truth; speaking the words of Christ, and showing forth His Life and Death; rising strong from our sufferings, and building up the Church in the strictness and zeal of those who **despise this life except as it leads to another....** Lastly, let us not...forget **the advantages** which we have [**even in poverty!**]... **Trials come when we** [ungratefully, even presumptuously] **forget mercies**—to remind us of them and to fit us to enjoy and use them [these mercies] suitably. (341-342—with my emphasis added)*

Applying the lessons of St Mark

To recapitulate John Henry Newman's Sermon, we may now better see, first of all, why he entitled his honoring treatment of Saint Mark the Evangelist on his Feast Day, "Religious Cowardice." Mark himself once displayed religious cowardice, but later, perhaps even gradually, overcame it and bore a great witness to the Gospel of Christ. To Mark, moreover, the example and personal guidance of Saint Peter, in addition to the Grace of God, were unmistakably indispensable. Newman furthermore wanted to apply the lessons from Mark's personal history to the challenges faced by Christians still in the early-mid nineteenth century in England, especially in view of their perceptible comforts and torpidities and other passive (even presumptuous and slothful) weaknesses. Mark had first been a deserter—"he deserted them [Paul and Uncle Barnabas] and returned to Jerusalem"—and Newman did not want his congregation to become deserters, if and when the trials were to come, especially in the oppositions and foreseeable persecutions of the Christian Faith, overt and covert. Newman argued that it was a rarer change for a man to move "from timidity to boldness" than to soften the impetuous and self-confidently irascible characters—and "still more difficult to overcome a tendency to sloth, cowardice, and dependency" and the comfortable, lazy absence of "right principles" to be properly "planted" in "the indolent mind." Newman saw an even greater spiritual danger, inasmuch as "the vicissitudes of life" tend to make such comfortable, passive characters of timid temper even "more indolent, selfish, and faint-hearted by [the] advancing years," as they age and become more weary in physical infirmity. They even "argue themselves into self-deception" and "make concessions" and "surrender the Christian cause." Therefore, lest "souls be **lost by present ease**," Newman fearfully prayed to God to awaken the comfortable Christians—complacent, lethargic, tepid—and, if necessary, even bring chastising great trials "to try the very heart of the Church," so that Her fuller virtues and resilient alacrity might be perceptibly restored,

before it was too late and many souls lost. Newman also says: “Yet better such anguish should come upon us [“grown torpid from long security”] than that the recesses of our [Christian] heritage should be the hiding-places of **a self-indulgent spirit** and **the schools of lukewarmness.**” We can well now imagine how the sincere delivery of this trenchant sermon affected the listening hearts—and even the initially inattentive! Not only in his presence, but long afterwards! The lethargic hearts being likely re-awakened, too.

More Manning than Newman

How might this moving Sermon and Warning about Religious Cowardice be now even further enhanced by counterpointing it with Hilaire Belloc's vivid essay on Poverty, for it was written by a different sort of character, a man more like Cardinal Manning than Cardinal Newman? For, Newman was more refined and delicate, and even somewhat reclusive. What he wrote in his own Sermon in a veiled or implicit way might well apply also to himself: namely, “Some of them [i.e., some of those timid “inopportunists” who “readily yield” and are prone to “concessions”] are men of cultivated and refined taste; and these shrink from the rough life of pilgrims to which they are called.” (341)

This counterpointing essay on poverty was composed almost a century later (circa 1926), and unmistakably written in the manly and robust spirit of Hilaire Belloc. For though Belloc had known Newman in Birmingham briefly as a very young student, he much better later knew and very deeply cherished Cardinal Manning himself (Henry Edward Manning) and shared Manning's courageous ethos and the direct manner of his Catholic Witness, and especially his compassion for the poor.

All manner of new aspects

To return to Belloc and to his inquiring (and charming) essay. We may get a good sense of his tone and indirect approach, if we first see how he impishly begins his gradual “talking of poverty,” and we may therefore also fittingly start to look a little askance at Belloc's own somewhat limited Narrator. We should certainly be on the alert! For, the Narrator (i.e., Belloc's assumed Mask, or Persona) says:

*I had occasion the other day to give an address to a number of young men upon the matter of Poverty: which address I had intended to call “Poverty: The Attainment of It: the Retention of It when Attained.” But I found that no title was required, for Poverty was familiar to them all. In giving this short address I **discovered**, as one always does in the course of speaking without notes, **all manner of new aspects of the thing.** (191—my emphasis added)*

Then Belloc (through his Narrator) proceeds, first of all, to give high credit (and implicit praise) to his reader, with, perhaps, a concurrent touch of irony:

*The simple, straightforward view of poverty **we all know**: how it is beneficial to the soul, what a training it is, how acceptable to the Higher Powers, **and so on.** We also know how all those men whom we are taught to admire began with poverty, **and we all have, I hope,** at the back of our minds a conception of poverty as **a sort of foundation** for virtue and right living. **But these ideas are general and vague.** I was **led** by my discourse [formerly called his “short address”] **to consider the thing in detail, and to think out by reminiscence and reason** certain small, solid, particular **advantages of poverty.** (191—my emphasis added)*

The good effects of poverty are very plain

After having given his own working (and somewhat unsettling) definition of poverty (as quoted above, on page two), he again assumes his reader to be a rather reflective and discerning Intuitive

Thinker. For, having “once arrived at” the Narrator's own purportedly wise and essential “definition of poverty,” (192) the reader will (or should) at once see that “**the good effects** of such a condition [of poverty] are **very plain.**” (192—my emphasis added)

The generous poor

But, for the sake of some of us who “don't quite get it,” Belloc will now graciously unfold his plainness (and his further, quite self-assured, “plain” meaning), and he will do it very slowly, but also more expansively and more specifically:

*The **first** great good attendant upon poverty is that it makes men more generous. **You will notice** that while **some few** of the rich are avaricious or mean, and while all of them have to be, **from the very nature of their position**, careful [of what?], the poor and embarrassed man will easily share whatever little he has. It is true that **this generosity** of the poor man **flows from no good motive**, but merely from a conviction that, whatever he does, it will be much the same in the end [a lugubrious prospect and fatalism!]; so that **his kindness** to his fellows is **a mixture of weakness and indifference**. Still, it breeds a habit; and **that is why** men whose characters have been formed under **this kind** of poverty always throw away their money when by any chance they get a lump of it. (192—my emphasis added)*

What is our Belloc doing here with all of these dubious assertions and nuances, by way of his almost “Johnathan-Swiftian Persona-Narrator”? Is the Narrator himself, plain and simple, starting to unravel mentally? And what would Dr. Bernard Mandeville (d. 1733), author of the cynical verse, *The Fable of the Bees, or Private Vices, Public Benefits* (1705, 1714, 1723) say, in the light of Poverty, about this seeming new “interaction of private vices [somehow] producing public benefits”?

The disillusioned poor

Belloc will take us further now, with the second advantage of poverty:

*Then there is this other good attending poverty, that **it cures one of illusions**. The most irritating thing in the company of the rich (and especially of rich women) is the very **morass of illusion in which they live** [like Newman's over-comfortable Christians?]. Indeed, it cannot be all illusion, there must be a good deal of **conscious falsehood** about it. But, at any rate, **it is an abyss of unreality, communion with which at last becomes intolerable**. Now the poor man is **physically** prevented from falling into such **vices of the heart and intelligence**....The poor man is up against it, as the phrase goes. He is up against the bullying and corruption of the police, the **inhuman stupidity** of the captain of industry, the sly, self-advancement of the lawyer, the abominable hypocrisies of the old family servant [i.e., “of the parasitical trades: such as buttlings” (24)]. He comes across all these things **by contact: by direct personal sensible experience**. He can no more think of mankind as a garden than a soldier can think of war as a picture, or a sailor of the sea as a pleasure-place. (192-193—my emphasis added)*

John Henry Newman might elegantly add that such contact most certainly awakens the complacent and the habitually comfortable, thereby to quicken their fuller range of faculties to the perception of reality.

Lady Poverty

But, now Belloc will go on to speak of a third advantage of poverty, and this very thinking of her—i.e., Lady Poverty—will also, but under certain conditions, even prompt our gratitude:

We may also thank poverty (those of us who are enjoying her favors) for cutting quite out of our lives certain extraordinary necessities [sic] which haunt our richer brethren.

*I know a rich man who is **under compulsion** to change his clothes twice a day, to travel at set periods to set places and to see in rotation each of at least sixty people. He has less freedom than a schoolboy, or a corporal in a regiment; indeed, he has **no real leisure** at all, because so many things are thus necessary to him. But your poor man cannot even conceive what these necessities may be. If you were to tell him that he **had** to go and **soak himself in the vulgarity of the Riviera** for **so many** weeks, he would not understand the word “had” at all. He would say that **perhaps** there were some people who liked **that kind of thing**, but that anyone should do it without really liking it [“without a strongly perverted appetite” (25)] he could not understand. (193-194 —my emphasis)*

A discipline imposed by poverty

Now comes a fourth advantage of poverty which turns out to be more deeply spiritual, or moral, but Belloc continues to stun us by how he approaches this topic and blends his tonalities (and diction):

*And here's **another boon granted us** only by grinding, anxious, sordid poverty: action [without “a roaming unrest of spirit”; or an “evagatio mentis”!].*

***There is no greater enemy of the Soul than Sloth**; but in this state of ceaseless dull exasperation [another kind of poverty!], like a grumbling toothache, sloth is impossible. (194—my emphasis added)*

Moving from the Vice (and Sin) of Sloth, to the Vice (and Sin) of Pride—for our greater good—the Narrator now says, before then touching upon the Matter of Luxury (and answering some Objections!), as follows:

*Yet another enemy of the Soul is Pride, and even a sour poor man cannot really nourish pride; he may **wish** to nourish it; but he cannot **immediately** nourish it.*

*Or, again, the Soul is hurt by luxury. Now poverty **in the long run**, forbids or restricts luxury. I know very well that you [Dear Reader!] will tell me with countless instances how the poor gentlemen of your acquaintance drink cocktails, eat caviare, go to the theatre (and that in the stalls), take taxis, order liqueurs with their coffee and blew [blow, waste?] cheques. Very true, but if you will narrowly watch the careers of such, you will find **a progressive decline** of these **habits** of theirs....There is **a real discipline**, incredible as it may seem, **imposed upon luxury by poverty**. (194—my emphasis added)*

An antiseptic against the suppurative reactions of the soul

We sense in such commentary—do we not?—a little exaggeration about the advantages of an imposed discipline; but now the Narrator surprises us further with some of Belloc's deeper, and more heartfelt thoughts, further rendered without a hint of irony:

Poverty has a yet nobler effect by its introduction into our lives of irony: irony I take to be the salt in the feast of the intelligence. I have, indeed, known rich men to possess irony, but only by importation, just as a man may possess a picture which he has bought [and has not produced himself]. Poor men possess irony as native to themselves, so that it is like a picture which a man paints for his own pleasure and puts up on his own walls. All the poor of London, and, indeed, poor men all over the world have irony; even poor gentlemen, after the age of fifty, discover veins of irony and are the better for them, as a man is better for salt in his cooking. Remark that irony kills stupid satire, and that to possess an agent within that kills stupid satire is to possess an antiseptic against the suppurative reactions of the soul.

Poverty, again, makes men appreciate reality [without “self-deception” and “the morass of

illusions,” and without the even deeper morass of “conscious falsehood”]. *You may tell me that this is of no advantage. It is of no direct advantage; but I am sure it is of advantage in the long run. For if you ignore reality you will come sooner or later against it like a ship against a rock in a fog, and you will suffer as the ship will suffer.* (195—my emphasis added)

Preparation for the grave

John Henry Newman conveyed the same truth when he considered the comfortable Christians who would finally have to face, in death and before God, the Final Verdict of Truth. Belloc himself will now draw us to consider these Last Things, while using some indirection and some vividly concrete Ancient Pagan references to the Underworld:

*If you say to a rich man that some public fellow or other has genius, he may admit it **in a lazy but sincere fashion** [i.e., with complacency]. A poor man knows better; he may admit it with his lips, **but he is not so foolish as to accept it in his heart.** In the same way a rich man growing old **will try to forget Death: but a poor man, especially if he has children, keeps Death steadily before him.***

*And indeed **the very best** one can say about poverty is that it **prepares** one **very carefully** for the grave.* (196—my emphasis added)

The burdens of the rich

Belloc notes the old saying that “the rich take nothing with them down to death,” which had seemed to give a Beggar some consolation; but Belloc surprises us again freshly:

*In the **literal** acceptance of the text [the old saying] **he** [the Beggar] **was wrong**, for the rich take down with them to death **flattery, folly, illusion, pride and a good many lesser garments** which have **grown into their skins**, and the tearing off of which **at the great stripping** must hurt a good deal....But I know what this mendicant meant....The rich go down to death stripped of external things [their multiple comforts] **not grown into their skins**; the poor go down to death stripped of everything.* (196—my emphasis added)

One may finally wonder how our morally and intellectually limited Narrator will find this final fact—or belief—a distinctive and worthy advantage of Poverty. Belloc, as so often is the case with such essays, will leave us almost with an anti-climax, but one that also makes us think and thereafter live **in a less complacent way**, especially cumulatively, after having considered again his earlier, discerning comments upon the advantages and good effects of involuntary Poverty. Especially in his indirectly giving us a deeper desire for inner detachment from the inessentials of life, in view of our final purpose and the inescapable risks of the Final Judgment (at least for those of the Faith).

The cumulative benefits of unwelcomed poverty

In summary, and according to Hilaire Belloc's imperfect Narrator, the advantages and good effects of initially uninvited and unwelcomed Poverty are these: it makes men more generous; it cures one of illusions; it cuts out of our lives certain extraordinary (but specious) necessities; it fosters the kind of rooted and dedicated action that bridles spiritually uprooted and dangerous, sinful sloth; it restrains the deleterious nourishing of sinful spiritual pride; it forbids or restricts the luxury that hurts the soul, and thus imposes a wholesome discipline on such inessential yearnings; it introduces into our live a vivid sense of irony, which is the salt in the feast of the intelligence; it makes men appreciate reality; it keeps death steadily before a man, especially if he has children, and prepares him very carefully for the grave—thus, if possible, a provided for death and a good death (a *Bona Mors*, properly understood). Such are the good effects merely of involuntary poverty (as distinct

from destitution). And we then are implicitly invited to consider, and may come to see *a fortiori*, the even greater good effects of a Religious Vow of Voluntary Poverty, which is indeed a special vocation.

First upon the further shore

Implying for sure the Poor in Spirit, Belloc says about the effects of **the final Great Stripping of the Poor** only the following, with a hint that “they who humble themselves will be exalted, finally”:

Therefore in Charon's boat [in the Underworld] they [the Poor] go forward, and are the first upon the further shore. [We are not told of the possible delays or the final dispositions of the others, especially of the Presumptuous, and of the Complacently and Tepidly Comfortable—not only the Selfish or Cruel Rich—but it would seem that they would, in justice, be condignly beset and freighted down with many Disadvantages, even Exclusionary Disadvantages. Do we agree? For, Presumptuousness itself is one of the two forms of Hopelessness: indeed, it one of the two grave sins against Hope, the other being Despair, as we also see in Dante's poetic-theological depictions in his great *Commedia*, from the beginning.]

And this, I suppose, is some sort of advantage [i.e., for the Poor, especially if this priority of arriving Home be both a Final Mercy and also their final entrance into a secure Beatitude]. (196—my emphasis added)

CODA

May these counterpointed insights of wisdom and eloquence from Newman and Belloc help us especially in the formative raising of our children unto Eternal Life (*Vita Aeterna, Beatitudo*). May they not, at least not because of us, ever be “too comfortable,” lest their full range of vital faculties be atrophied and their “souls be **lost by present ease.**”

For, Our Lord said: “Let the Little Ones—allow the Little Ones—to come to Me” (“*Sinite parvulos ad Me venire.*”) And may we, too, in and through our own Christian Combat, grow up and mature into Spiritual Childhood—with its docility, humility, and trust.

By way of obstacles and challenges and the proper consecration of suffering (hence Christian sacrifice), may our children also come to realize “the disadvantages of comfort” in this world. And may they be prepared clearly to detect and firmly to resist the specious lures and traps of comfort, to include the enticements and seductive solicitations of pride and sensuality and secret knowledge. (For a temptation would not be a temptation if it were not attractive.)

May the children, as with Belloc, thus also come to know and apply to their wounded hearts the balm of **moral** beauty, as well as “the balm of landscape” and “the balm of the salt”—the Hills and the Sea—and especially, in its deepest spiritual sense, to know and apply to their hearts “the balm of poverty”—which will better prepare them, under Grace, to bear loyal Witness to the Faith, to the end.

(This essay is dedicated to ASF and my beloved wife Dr Maïke Hickson)

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