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Lent 67

Dear Friends

The last mimeographed letter is running out and there are still more than four weeks to go before Easter. And in any case I write this on the eve of going into the hospital for a minor operation (bursitis on the elbow) which may make typing difficult for a while. So here goes with another one, to fill the gap.

We have had some cold weather but nothing like the blizzards up north around Chicago recently. In front of my place, crocuses came up on Ash Wednesday and have persisted since, even through snow and low temperatures. They are still there. (From the bulbs Eileen Curns sent last year.) Speaking of Eileen, who was a papal volunteer in Brazil, I got a letter from a Holy Cross Brother in Brazil taking me to task, as many critics have done, for what seems to be a negative attitude on technology in Conjectures. It might be well to try to dot the i's and cross the t's on this point. Am I "against technology"?

Obviously I am not maintaining that we ought to get rid of matches and go back to making fires by rubbing sticks together (thought of this yesterday when burning brush piles, lighting matches in the wind). Nor am I maintaining that modern transportation, medicine, methods of production and so on are "bad". I am glad to have a gas heater this winter, since I can't cut wood. Yet I am not saying I am a better human being this winter, when I have more "leisure", than I was last winter when I did a lot of chopping. Nothing wrong with chopping either. What I question is the universal myth that technology infallibly makes everything in every way better for everybody. It does not.

Modern medicine is certainly a good thing. Thank God for it. Thank God for the fact that penicillin saves thousands of lives. But let's also face the fact that penicillin saves lives for people whom society then allows to starve because it is not set up to feed them. If it used its technological resources well, society certainly could feed them. In fact it doesn't. Technology comes into a "backward country" with an industrial setup that works fine in an advanced country --and depends on financial support from an advanced country, and brings profits back to the advanced country. It may simply dislocate the "backward country" completely. Today twelve percent of the world's population, repeat twelve percent live in the appalling shanty towns and poblaciones that are seen in the outskirts of South American, African, and Asian cities. What is technology doing for these people? It is not creating work for them, but is developing more and more labor saving methods of production because technology in our society is not in the service of people but in the service of profit. What I am criticizing then is the myth that this kind of "labor-saving" technology will turn the world into a paradise. It will not. Look what technology is doing to Viet Nam!!!

On the other hand, I am quite willing to admit that the resources are there and that things could be quite other than they are. Technology could indeed make a much better world for millions of human beings. It not only can do this, but it must do it. We have an absolute obligation to use the means at our disposal to keep people from living in utter misery and dying like flies. Note: there has never been such abject misery on earth as that which our technological society has produced along with the fantastic plenty for very few. What I am "against" then is a complacent and naive progressivism which pays no attention to anything but the fact that wonderful things can be and are done with machinery and with electronics. Even more

wonderful things might be done. But on our present setup, the chances of them getting done are not as good as these people seem to think.

We face an utterly self-defeating and even absurd situation. A critic took me to task for saying in the book that "the realm of politics is the realm of waste." It is and it always has been. When a human question becomes a "political issue"; unfortunately the human problem gets shoved into the background, human hopes are derided and ignored, money passes from hand to hand and a lot of noise is made in the press, and the human problem may or may not even be touched. Witness Johnson's great "war on poverty". It is a sheer insult to the people living in our Eastern Kentucky Mountains. All the attention and money are going not to help them but to exterminate innocent non-combatants in Viet Nam and to enrich the big corporations that are making higher profits now than they ever did before.

In our technological world we have wonderful methods for keeping people alive and wonderful methods for killing them off, and they both go together. We rush in and save lives from tropical diseases, then we come along with napalm and burn up the people we have saved. The net result is more murder, more suffering, more inhumanity. This I know is a caricature, but is it that far from the truth?

What is my answer? I don't have one, except to suggest that technology could be used entirely differently. But the only way it ever will be is to get it free from this inescapable hang-up with profit or power, so that it will be used for people and not for money and politics. The essential message of an encyclical like Mater et Magistra or the Council Constitution Gaudium et spes adds up to this: technology has given us the means to alleviate human misery, but the profit system makes it practically impossible to use the means effectively. The myth of technology (as distinct from the reality) is myth that serves the religion of profit vs people. He who swallows the myth is serving that religion.

Sorry for this long tirade, but I thought it was worth while to make this point clear. Obviously I have no intention whatever of turning the clock back to the Middle Ages, though there are people around who want to do that too.

And so we turn our eyes to the great feast of Christian hope: the Resurrection. Too often the Passion and Resurrection of the Lord have been used in the past to canonize earthly injustice and despair: the old business of saying "Yes, you are getting a dirty deal, but just offer it up and you will be happy in heaven". The real root of Christian hope is the presence of the Risen Lord among us and in us by His Spirit which is the Spirit and power of love. The power of the Resurrection is the power of love that is stronger than death and evil, and its promise is the promise that the power of this love is ours if we freely accept it. To accept it is not just a matter of making a wish, but of entire and total commitment to the Law of Christ which is the Law of Love. Let us realize this, and believe it, and pray for one another. Let us be one in this love, and seek to make all men one in it, even here on earth. And if technology helps to express the creative power of love, then all the better; it will give glory to God and have its own place in the Kingdom of God on earth. But technology by itself will never establish that Kingdom.

My love to all of you, in Christ:

Thomas Merton