

The Texts of the Convivium

THE RICH MAN IS CONVERTED

Having reached the age of eighteen and finished high school, to those who asked me what further studies I had opted for, I answered that I intended to sign up for a degree in philosophy.

I immediately noticed that this answer did not offer me much prestige. My more acculturated friends and acquaintances quoted a famous verse from Petrarca: “Poor and naked you go, Philosophy”.

I replied with the verse that immediately flows the afore mentioned: “...Says the mob intent on vile earnings”- A learned and clear insult not received!

And yet “Money is happiness”: is what a writer of that far off epoch had written on the walls of a house in ancient Pompei.

“Doesn’t money bring happiness?” is what a descendant of more than two thousand years ago seemed to have asked himself. “So what does it bring us now I ask you?” (Pierre Benoit).

“A heavy bag lightens a heart”, said Ben Johnson two or three centuries ago.

On the other hand wealth also has its negative aspects. Apart from the fact that ones entrance to the kingdom of heavens is only made possible by an unpleasant diet, there are some huge inconveniences also on this earth.

Seneca wrote: “A great fortune is a great slavery”.

“Afflicted by too much money”: is how my father defined some of his friends and acquaintances.

Fernando de Rojas wrote: “Wealth doesn’t make you rich but busy”.

Therefore, Édouard Bourdet seems to have added, “in life one needs to choose between earning money and spending it: one doesn’t have time to do both”.

This rule has its evident and well known exceptions: there’s no need to name any names! However they are exceptions that confirm it. The man intent on vile earnings shows the tendency to carry it to extremes. In the same way as the human being with a sound constitution takes any action and objective to extremes as he concentrates on them with unyielding commitment and passion.

Many and often far too many individuals are induced, by the desire of money and earnings, to take advantage of their fellow men in a most intolerable and also despicable manner, to the point of walking over their dead bodies. There’s always a pseudo-ethic already ready and waiting to justify every act of cruelty and inhumanity. The captain of industry says to himself: “If I treat my workers more humanely I’d saddle myself with expenses that will no longer allow me to compete. Therefore, in order to save my company and for the benefit of the company I have to impose those sacrifices and put number one first”.

The company becomes the new absolute, the new idol that demands human victims. On the other hand the first to accept sacrifice of himself is the head of the company, who dedicates his entire existence to work. He doesn’t really enjoy the money he earns, also in relation to the possibility it could offer him. His enjoyment is almost all in the work he carries out.

Luckily there’s not only money amongst feasible ends. A great economist of our times, John K. Galbraith, pointed out: “The idea that in order to explain human

behaviour one must never look further than love for money is one of the simplifications that our culture guards most jealously". For Galbraith this idea is without a doubt to be contested.

A captain of industry could also have different motivations. This is demonstrated by the generosity of a certain Andrew Carnegie, John David Rockefeller, Cornelius Vanderbilt, all business men with really very few scruples who have nevertheless donated huge sums of money to charities and public use.

I recently heard of an unusual initiative taken on by a group of American industrialists, some of whom are the richest in the world: they took on the reciprocal official, written and signed commitment to donate half of their wealth to charities, scientific research, the arts, medicine, education and protection of the environment.

What are their names? Bill Gates with his wife Melinda, an active promoter of the entire initiative; then Warren Buffett, Michael Bloomberg, David Rockefeller, George Soros, television and talk show star Oprah Winfrey; others who have agreed to take part in full agreement with their respective wives (convinced yet again by Melinda) Ely Broad, John Doer, Gerry Lenfest, John Morgridge. Their fortunate initiatives range from information technology to insurance and the most varied sectors of technology.

Gates and Buffett have been said to have posed the problem of what they will leave in inheritance to their children, but they solved the problem in the sense that by leaving them a huge estate they didn't earn but which they only passively received, it would only bring harm to them, corrupting them and making them extremely unhappy.

Here a feverish activity aimed at accumulating money has become a commitment to make it the biggest ever use for the sake of the most beneficial purposes. The old Calvinism used to consider the accumulation (needless to say, honest) of so much wealth as a sign of divine predilection. But now new ethics are taking shape, the taste for donating, of helping, benefitting, of contributing to the development of society, is improving and becoming more refined.

I am extremely curious to see what will happen. Nevertheless already the formulation of the pact, the taking on of the "commitment to donate" is an extremely significant act. Here the example comes from above. I just hope that it will be followed by everyone on all levels.