

Diogenes's Invectives

I Go to a Sermon...

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We don't associate enough with our fellow men. Take me, for example; in my barrel, having only myself for company, I shall surely end up with a false image of people. I shall believe them all to be good, sensible, generous, distinguished — in a word, to be just like me. And since the company of such people is infinitely boring, I shall sink into melancholy, and from there into malice, foolishness, pettiness, and vulgarity, which are the inevitable result of a troubled soul.

Where was I? Oh yes, the world, people... we don't associate enough. The other evening, having strolled at length in Athens, I was looking for a sheltered spot where I could warm up, when I spied a door into which a crowd was streaming. I entered. There were benches. I sat down. At the back of the room behind a slightly elevated table sat seven or eight gentlemen in turtleneck sweaters, chatting and waiting for the atmosphere to settle down. Finally there was silence, and one of the gentlemen, the one in the middle, began to speak. He spoke well, with a mixture of eloquence and familiarity which pleased me, especially since he called us “brothers”. I like to be called “brother”. It's edifying. For it is true, is it not, that when we consider the human condition, we can only say to ourselves: “How lonely is the lot of each man. Happy, he who is called “brother”!

After a moment of perplexity, I understood that this unknown brother was speaking of religion. I arrived at this understanding when one of the sweated brothers interrupted suddenly, and rather rudely, affirming that “God had never said that”. Then all the other brothers began to speak at once, challenging each other from opposite ends of the table, and the man seated next to me declared with satisfaction that we were getting right to the heart of the matter. I was pleased with this observation and asked him to explain just what was the subject, for by now the discussion had spread to the audience.

“It is, he said, to know whether order is more important than justice, or if one precedes the other, and if so, which one.

— Order? Would you be speaking of the sacrament which bears this name?”

I intended, by this question, to demonstrate my knowledge of religion and my right to be there on that bench, in a well-heated room. But I must have made a blunder, for my neighbor regarded me with distrust, examining especially my beard and sandals.

“Sacrament? he finally said. Where have you been? The discussion concerns our presence in the world, and the City to be built.”

I put on an understanding look, and, to undo the bad effect of my mistake, I begged him to excuse me, adding that, being a bit out of touch with the world, I had mistakenly assumed they were speaking of religion.

And see how true it is that we don't frequent the world enough: I had made yet another blunder. My neighbor, indignant, leaped to his feet and called me a name which I did not understand very well. Since the bench was short and I was seated at one end, the loss of a counter-weight tumbled me down among the legs of my other brothers; I was confused and longed for the calm of my barrel. But at the same time, my curiosity was aroused. Since everyone was discussing, and very heatedly, I challenged my irritable companion with the same ardour.

“Yes or no, is it a question of religion?”

— Certainly, he said. That is the heart of the matter.

— And yet you speak to me of the City to be built. Or is it perhaps the City of God?

— There is no other City of God than that of this world. We have demystified all that.

— Of course, I replied, it is urgent to build the city of men. My old enemy Plato already talked about that in his *Republic*, and little progress has been made in the matter since. It's high time we put ourselves to it.

— That's exactly what we're doing.

— Very good. Bravo. Rest assured that I shall always be your supporter. But I must add that I have always believed religion to be a personal, an internal, relationship with God.

— Flight from reality, retorted my neighbor with scorn. You should see a psycho-analyst, old man.

— I did that long ago. Several psychoanalysts went crazy over the job. Not one of them ever replied to my questions about my destiny, that of the universe, the meaning of suffering, of evil, of death. You say that the subject here at issue is religion. Is it to reply to these questions?

— If your psychoanalysis had succeeded, you would no longer ask such things.

— It failed, although I had quite a good time at it. And I still ask my questions. I think then, my dear brother, that I have chosen the wrong door. To build the city of men, there are numerous politicians in good working order on the market. If you have no City of God to propose, then what in the devil are you good for?”

And as I had associated with people enough for that day, I left to seek my barrel.

Diogenes.