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XXIII.29 On poorhouses

- The Spirit of Law - Book XXIII. On laws in their relation to the number of inhabitants -

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A man is not poor because he has nothing, but because he is not working. The man who has no property and works is as comfortable as the man who has a hundred crowns of income without working. He who has nothing and has a trade is no poorer than the man who has ten acres of land of his own and must till them for his livelihood. The worker who has taught his craft to his children as his legacy has left them an asset which has multiplied in proportion to their number. The same is not true of the man who has ten acres of land to live on and divides them up among his children.

In trading countries, where many men have only their craft, the state is often obliged to provide for the needs of the old, the sick, and the orphans. A well-run state draws this subsistence from the crafts themselves ; it gives to some the jobs of which they are capable ; it teaches others to work, which itself constitutes work.

Some alms offered to a naked man in the streets do not fulfill the obligations of the state, which owes all citizens an assured subsistence, food, suitable clothing, and a sort of life that is not harmful to health.

Aurangzeb, who was asked why he did not build poorhouses, replied : "I will make my empire so rich it will not need poorhouses." [1] He ought to have said : First I shall make my empire rich, and then I will build poorhouses.

The wealth of a state supposes much industry. It is not possible, with so many branches of commerce, for there not always to be one of them that suffers, and whose workers consequently are under temporary stress.

It is then that the state needs to provide swift assistance, either to prevent the people from suffering, or to keep them from revolting : it is in this case that poorhouses are needed, or some equivalent statute that can prevent this misery.

But when the nation is poor, individual poverty derives from the general misery, and is, so to speak, the general misery. All the poorhouses in the world would be unable to heal this particular poverty ; on the contrary, the spirit of idleness which they inspire increases the general poverty, and consequently individual poverty.

Henry VIII, in his intention to reform the Church in England, eliminated the monks [2] : an idle nation in themselves, one which maintained the idleness of others, because practicing hospitality, an infinite number of idle men, gentlemen and bourgeois, spent their lives running from one convent to another. He further suppressed the poorhouses where the populace found their subsistence, as the gentlemen found theirs in the monasteries. After these changes, the spirit of commerce and industry established itself in England.

In Rome, thanks to the poorhouses, everyone is well off, except those who work, except those who have some industry, except those who cultivate the arts, except those who have land, and except those who engage in trade.

I have said that wealthy nations needed poorhouses because in them fortune was subject to a thousand vicissitudes ; but it is clear that passing assistance would be much better than permanent establishments. The problem is temporary ; there must therefore be assistance of the same nature, and applicable to the particular happenstance.

[1] See Chardin, *Voyage de Perse*, vol. VIII. [Chardin, VIII, 86 ; the quotation is only approximate.]

[2] See Burnet, *History of the Reformation of the Church of England*.