

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

A Little Luxury

There's nothing wrong with a little luxury, as I am sure you, dear Reader, as a 21st-century Westerner, will agree. Say, we work hard; British working hours are the longest in Europe. Also, we accept all kinds of privation in our work. Few of us can say that we've freely chosen our work, that we rejoice in it. It is only right that when we leave it to go home, we should be allowed to let our hair down. Well, it has to be said that, if you were a puritan, you would certainly disagree. *Luxus* in Latin means *excess*, and you don't have to be a puritan to know that you can have too much of a good thing. So do we deserve a bit of excess after a hard day's work? Or are we guilty, if we overstep some line - some measure of what is appropriate? How do we know where to draw the line?

Consumerism

Consumerism is a rough-and-ready system of thought which says that if you'd like something and can afford it, you should have it, since the purpose of life is to gratify our desires as fully as we can. It goes a long way towards giving its adherents a whole way of life. Because desire is an endless capacity - and a very good capacity; it's the way we realize that we are destined for God alone. We come into the world crying for food and warmth and comfort, and our education is a long business of refining those desires, until we can understand them in true colours. We long for things with an eternal, everlasting thirst. Time and time again we devote ourselves to this or that project, telling ourselves: when we have *this*, we shall be satisfied. But it isn't true; it doesn't work. We lose interest in the things we've achieved, our eyes once more scan the horizon, looking for the next Golden Fleece. Without God's gift of grace, some of us go on slaving in the treadmill, looking for that elusive feeling of reward and wealth - the third car, the second conservatory or, dafter than all the rest, the latest fashion - and the elusive surge of happiness that comes from new acquisition. That's not real freedom. It's addiction, it's a compulsion. Living to acquire new things is excessive, undignified, expensive, wasteful, and in the end, paradoxically, it is *poor* in the worst sense of the word. With a little grace, for some of us, a penny drops, and we realize that there is something ultimate to long for, a blessing that will not leave us looking

homelessly for something greater. The childish urge to possess can be refined into something really human: the longing to find meaning, purpose, and promise, which can make all our struggles worthwhile.

Rich Beyond The Dreams Of Avarice

The rich man in Jesus' story thinks his earthly life is a marvellous one. He has had no cause to question what has happened to him, and he has never lost interest in his beautiful walled garden, and he values the safety he feels from all earthly threats, and enjoys his marvellous taste for splendid food and clothes and music and furniture. And it is important that we should not despise him in these things: after all, is he very different from us, in our rich and privileged corner of the world? That we allow ourselves to pretend to be poor, on the grounds that we haven't won the lottery and we aren't professional footballers, shouldn't blind us to the fact that we are living lives which are incomprehensibly wealthy in the eyes of most other people on the face of the earth. Nor should we forget that the guards we have mounted on the Channel Tunnel and other ports of entry perfectly reproduce the rich man's garden wall; we all know that, without belonging to the British National Party, we're all allowed to believe that we have a natural right to be rich, and a natural right to exclude the poor, however hungry, homeless, hapless or helpless they may be. And it largely works. Most of them don't get in, and we feast on, and they slump against our defensive battlements. Oh dear.

Has It Spread, Doctor?

What if the disease Jesus diagnoses has become ingrained so fast in us, that it's inoperable: if we have it cut out, the patient will die? We're so used to pointing to our possessions or our life-style, and saying *This is me!* that if we lose these prizes there might be nothing left of us. Remember the faces of the children trapped in the Russian school, or the eyes of the starving in Darfur; it isn't so hard to rethink. If we'd been, by some horrific miracle, delivered to their side in their hour of need, we might have changed the story of the rich man - that is, *our* story. Do not fear. The wall held, and continues to hold. We are still inside. They are still outside; but are we safe?
Fr Philip