

Observations on Courtesy

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The statement made by a writer recently that the young people of today are alike in many disrespects applies also to many of the more mature. Whether because of thoughtlessness, or selfishness, or the flippancy of the times, it is difficult to say, but certainly the present generation has little regard for courtesy. Perhaps this disregard may be attributed, as many so-called modern evils are, to the feverish activity and general restlessness which characterizes our age. If people would stop to think they would surely realize that after all it is the simple kindness, a little touch of sentiment and genuine goodness, that makes life enjoyable and at the same time betrays or reveals character.

What is courtesy? One is not courteous simply because he is "Emily-Posted," or shows the polish of a European count. True courtesy is based on a sincere regard for the feelings of others, in short, on Christian charity. It should show itself in gentleness towards those less well placed, sympathy for those in trouble, and deference to one's peers.

Although we know little concerning the personal manners of people who lived before the Christian era, that most solemn and sacred of all teachers, the Bible, tells us that we should guard our manners, for "the attire of the body, and laughter of the teeth, and the gait of the man, show what he is." The first century saw the institution of the "dignity of man," when Christ, the Son of God, assumed our human nature. This dignity has been upheld by the Catholic Church down through the ages, and today she is still fighting to uphold it above the grasping hands of Capitalism, Communism, and other social evils. The apostles themselves gave us the foundation for all true courtesy when they advise us to "be natural as children" and "wise as doves."

However it is not until the middle ages that courtesy demands any special attention, and then it bounds into the limelight under the form of chivalry. This chivalry was supported by religion and practised by knights who took sacred vows. The Crusades were the stimuli for noble ideals of honor and courtesy. Richard Coeur de

Lion and Louis IX of France represented the apogee of this heroic spirit. The *trouveres* and the *troubadours* carried a new note of romance founded on the ideal of knighthood in their literature. With the end of the Crusades, however, chivalry lost much of its religious aspect and was concerned more with an effort to gain the favour of feminine hearts. Then it became merely a form for court service, and its aims and achievements were of a lower order. When love became the source for chivalry, literature also assumed a more amorous character.

Literature which had contributed so greatly to the exaltation of chivalry now railed against its extravagances. A final blow was the immortal work of Cervantes, "*Don Quixote*," which aroused the laughter of all Europe. This decline of the popular standards of courtesy accompanied the degradation of many other virtues, chiefly simplicity and humility. In the progress and prosperity of the nineteenth century, selfishness—which is certainly antithetical to courtesy—advances rapidly. The Great War and the subsequent rush for wealth in many countries were also strong factors in driving courtesy from the public mind.

The last few years have caused some to recognize the truth that there is more to life than the accumulation of money and the pursuit of pleasure. The present distress has taught them their obligation of charity, has made them see that courtesy really exists, and that it is a very desirable virtue. Unfortunately, however, this class is not large. The great majority of our people today are so entrenched in a policy of materialistic utilitarianism that all sane judgments of moral values are excluded. It is very difficult for these self-interested people to bring themselves to the practise of courtesy.

The above spirit is prevalent among the youth of this age and is shown by the attitude of youth to old age, and in the disrespectful manner in which they regard anything old or venerable. Everything must be new and different for them. Advice is solemnly received, but with a knowing wink on the sly. Some of our young people disregard their parents to whom they owe so much; others even go so far as to apologize for them—the height of ingratitude.

Even in sport, courtesy is being forgotten, so sport-manship, especially on this side of the Atlantic, has fallen very low. Competitive sport is entered into with the "win at any cost" spirit, sometimes with absolutely no

consideration for opponents. Some coaches even omit this most important element in training. How can there be courtesy in sport when we see questionable tactics passing as strategy? Athletics would profit the character of a man as well as his body if the element of courtesy were not so sadly neglected.

Conversation today is practically a lost art due chiefly to the disregard for the opinions of others. So many people think and speak solely from their own point of view that the charm of conversing intelligently is lost. The main feature of ordinary talk seems to be the exchange of jests and popular sayings, the result of an aversion for thought. If one finds it necessary to talk in wise-cracks or use the popular sayings of the day, week, or month, he might at least try to use them courteously. Clumsy jesting is certainly no joke. Courteous conversation generally reflects the good breeding of a man, and, as has often been said, fine manners are a letter of credit anywhere.

As in all other things in life, example is a great aid in spreading courtesy. Burke the famous orator once said that example is the only teacher for mankind. We know from experience that most people are mimics and hero-worshippers. Perhaps you have noted how politeness added to a good education enhances a young man's personality. Every college student should try to develop a well-rounded personality, but unfortunately too few are willing to make the constant petty sacrifices which constitute good manners. If students would realize the contagious example which their actions set and the personal benefit to be derived, they would undoubtedly develop a generous consideration for the feelings of others and courtesy would result.

Examples of men who practised courtesy are not wanting. They are found in all walks of life, from the humble laborer on the street to the *truly* great men. From the latter, whose lives are almost invariably characterized by simplicity of manner, we select as an example one who holds perhaps the highest place in the world today. We refer to King George of England who this year celebrates the twenty-fifth anniversary of his coronation. Never a brilliant or colourful man, the King's personality has won a way into the hearts of his people. His simple and earnest manner has strengthened greatly the monarchic form of

government in England and in the Empire. He is a true model of "kingly courtesy."

Perhaps in spite of the adverse spirit of the times we may be able to advance the cause of good manners. Sometimes this will require courage, sometimes moderation, and nearly always thoughtfulness and sacrifice. The chief thing to remember is that we should be exemplars of simple courtesy. In doing this we should not merely affect a gentlemanly exterior, but develop a true inward feeling of kindness towards everyone. We should keep always a high sense of honour. We should try to improve our manner and bearing by the practise of easy courtesy, and our conversation by the development of tact; we should particularly avoid any semblance of snobbery in our manners. In ending we quote from Belloc's poetry a thought which appeals to us as a true estimation of courtesy:

*Of Courtesy, it is much less
Than courage of heart or holiness,
Yet in my walks it seems to me
That the grace of God is in Courtesy.*



'Tis distance lends enchantment to the view,
And robes the mountain in its azure blue

—Campbell.

Prayer is the burden of a sigh,
The falling of a tear,
The upward glancing of an eye
Where none but God is near.

—Montgomery.

