

THE CHURCH AND CULTURE (II)

WHAT we call the Christian Middle Ages emerge from a time of confusion that separates them from the ordered civilization of the Roman Empire. During that time of confusion there was a progressive disintegration of the old Roman order. The Empire itself broke up, and Europe was subjected to successive waves of barbarian invaders, who, if they brought nothing else, did at least invigorate the West with fresh blood. The barbarian brought with him an energy both physical and moral that provided sufficient human enthusiasm to embrace Christianity, and under Christian inspiration produce something as near a purely Christian culture as mankind has yet reached.

The connecting link between the ancient and medieval world is the Catholic Church, carrying with her down the centuries the cultural heritage which she had already adopted and baptised: this was largely preserved in the living tradition of her worship, which gathered and conveyed in an unbroken stream a thin residuum of human achievement. Much disappeared in the wanton destruction of the great libraries of the ancient world, or through the neglect that comes of despair, when the past glows with a melancholy radiance and the future is veiled by darkness and fear. At such times there comes a point when nothing seems worth saving but the bare fact of existence. In a world of shifting sands the Church remained the one rock of civilization.

There are two dominant elements in the early Middle Ages. On the one side the fierce, acquisitive fighting element springing from barbarism with its reliance on the sword and a fundamental belief in might over right; the religion of Wotan and Thor with its heaven in Valhalla, where the warriors drink and carouse and discuss their old slaughters, the ancient Nordic religion of blood and soil.

On the other side is the Catholic Church, highly organized under a single head, with her universal insistence upon peace, the rule of law, and the supremacy of right over might. On the one side naked might, on the other right backed with the invincible weapon of martyrdom. It is true that she had to use other spiritual weapons in the struggle to establish her principles; but to blame her authorities for a free use of excommunication in those days is to show misunderstanding of the type of 'rough-neck' she had to control.

The triumph of medieval civilization is the triumph of the Church over the barbarians. This was made possible by the fact that her method was not one of suppression, but one of civilization. No other power in the West could have civilized the barbarians, because no other power existed with a perfectly coherent meaning and purpose. No other power preached a Gospel or held out to these men a promise of any kind for the future here or hereafter. The Church taught these men, Goths, Huns, Lombards, Franks, Saxons and Northmen everything; taught them the arts of farming, building, reading and writing, in fact all the arts of peace which she had carried with her unforgetfully from the ancient world. That she had apt and ready pupils no one can deny, for there was a whole-hearted and spontaneous response to her teaching. Proof of this may be seen in the speed with which the monastic life took root and flourished, particularly in the outer fringes of Europe, in Ireland and a little later in England. Throughout the centuries to come one must always set beside the castle with its moat, drawbridge and highly organized defences a group of buildings that had no physical defences whatever, namely the monastery.

The network of monasteries provided the stable and pacific element in an age filled with darkness and violence, setting before men's eyes the Christian ideal in actual practice. They provided more than an escape from barbarism, negative and colourless places of refuge, like the deep dug-

outs of the twentieth century. Morally and culturally they were the pivotal points of civilization. They did more than preserve the past; they gave inspiration for the present and a living hope for the future. Inside these monasteries men, as part of their life of prayer, read, wrote, sang, painted, spun, wove, farmed, gardened, carved, built, and did the hundred and one things that civilized man enjoys doing. There was nothing exclusive about these activities, since the monks were ready to teach these things to the world as part of their apostolic mission. The African missionaries of our own day have identically the same task. Under a single set of buildings the monastery included the work of primary and secondary school, school of art, technical school, agricultural college, hospital and workhouse for the use of all who cared to profit by them. Here was a number of corporations putting into practice in a perfectly tangible fashion the Christian Law of love.

This may sound an ideal and rather sentimental account of monastic life. That there were faults no one will deny, but the fact remains that such monasteries did exist both in the England of St. Bede and in the Ireland and Scotland of St. Columba, where they formed the principal centres of missionary activity and human civilization.

If one asks for further proof of human achievement that still remains with us from the Middle Ages it is only necessary to look at the living miracle of a great Norman or Gothic Cathedral, such as Ely, Peterborough, Durham, Lincoln or Westminster Abbey. Man has produced nothing like them before or since. They owe little to past models, and were built under a single inspiration and for a single purpose, the greater glory of God. They are peculiarly our own, for they are to be found at their best north of the Alps, in France, Germany and the British Isles. Even as far away as Cyprus, where the Crusaders found permanent lodgement, two Mosques are established in great Gothic buildings which look as though they had taken flight from Northern France.

As part of these great memorials to medieval culture one must include the carving, the painting and the stained glass that was an organic part of them, so much of which has since disappeared, not only at the hands of the Puritan, but through the misplaced zeal of restorers and renovators. Much of the medieval glass in Salisbury Cathedral was removed during restoration in the eighteenth century and was thrown into the town ditch. Some of you may recall Thomas Hardy's sardonic lines upon Church restoration:

' From restorations of thy fane
From smoothings of thy sward
From zealous Churchman's pick and plane
Deliver us O Lord!' Amen.

In so many cases nothing is left of these great Gothic Cathedrals but the bare building deprived of its sculpture and its glowing colour.

Building, painting on walls and glass, and sculpture are only part of the medieval heritage. It found further expression in a spontaneous outpouring of religious poetry in the form of Sequences and hymns for the Liturgy, and after the thirteenth century in the birth of a lyric poetry in the tongues of the people. It is hard to name examples among such a galaxy; one may mention at random the *Dies Irae*, our great Sequence for the dead, the *Veni Creator*, the *Veni Sancte Spiritus*, the *Corpus Christi* hymns of St. Thomas Aquinas, and in the Italian St. Francis's *Canticle of the Sun*. In England, too, there is a freshness and tenderness about the late medieval poems and carols that can still captivate the heart:

I sing of a maiden
That is makeless,
King of all kinges
To her son she chose.

He came all so stille,
To his mother's bower,
As dew in Aprille
That falleth on the flower.

He came all so stille,
There his mother was,
As dew in Aprille
That falleth on grass.

He came all so stille,
There his mother lay,
As dew in Aprille
That falleth on the spray.

Mother and maiden
Was never none but she ;
Well may such a lady
Godes mother be.

Closely linked with poetry, music and liturgy were the Mystery and Morality Plays, some of which like *Everyman* and the York Nativity Play can still appeal to the jaded palates of the twentieth century. These were composed and played by the people themselves.

There is no need to prolong the catalogue of achievement left us by our medieval ancestors. Practically without exception we discover this about their work. Apart from its own inherent beauty and genius it was a means to an end, the means of teaching man to know and love God better. Their buildings were indeed 'sermons in stones,' for which motive and inspiration alike were exclusively Christian. In fact, it seems possible to extend to medieval culture the words of Our Lord: 'Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and all these things shall be added unto you.' These men sought first and foremost the glory of God, and so almost everything they touched seems still to have a sacramental value, to be in a sense a vehicle of Grace, as well as a shrine of loveliness. The work in hand being but a means to an end, it was upon the work itself that they concentrated their attention and their skill. The last thing they considered was their own honour and glory, or the praise of men. For them that would have been the sin of vainglory. There is, therefore, about their work an almost complete absence of self-consciousness and a direct sincerity which seems to say: 'This is the best that we can do. It is first and foremost for God, not for you; and we really do not care very much what you think about us.'

Such work was in its finest sense communal and popular. It sprang from the people; from the hands of Tom, Dick and Harry who learnt their craft upon the scaffolding at the hands of their masters. For the most part their very names

have long ago disappeared, but their work remains: and for those of us who can still read it their work is filled with meaning. Often it depicts figures in the Old Testament fulfilled in the New; the Virtues are personified; the Saints are set before us to be identified by the emblems or symbols they carry, St. Catherine with the Wheel, St. Nicolas with the three children in the tub, St. Peter with his keys, St. Andrew with his cross. In a Cathedral like Chartres in France every part and detail has a meaning which was plain and open to our ancestors. To find it ourselves we need an armful of guidebooks, and even then our aesthetic satisfaction is arrested by the symbol, and the lesson of its meaning fails to strike home. Our minds do not work in the same way as the medieval mind did. We use our eyes so much to read the printed page as the source of our information. The medieval man used his eyes to see things, and for him the things he saw were sacramental; in them his mind perceived a deep meaning and purpose, for they were the symbols of Christian truth.

The Church was a picture-book of Christian truths and mysteries presented in a fashion full of humour and vitality. One thinks of the dooms set over the West Door or the chancel arch; naturally placed there if the Church or Sanctuary stands for heaven. In going to heaven there is no escape from the Judgement; and so often what a grand Judgement! God the Father, St. Michael with the scales, hosts of wicked little devils pulling down the scales on the wrong side to damn some poor shivering soul by false weight. The gracious figure of Our Lady with her finger presses down the scale on the right side, rescues the soul and frustrates the demons. To the right are the sheep, the redeemed singing and playing with all their might: to the left the goats, the damned, and among them a good sprinkling of mitred and tonsured heads, being hustled off with pitchforks to the cauldrons.

The medieval Cathedral has been rightly called 'The Bible of the Poor.' Here is the wonderful prayer to Our

Lady which Francois Villon puts into the mouth of his old mother:

I am a woman poor and old,
 I know nothing and no letters have read;
 In my parish church I see
 Paradise painted, where are harps and lutes,
 And a hell where the damned are cooked.
 The one makes me afraid, the other glad and blithe.
 Give me happiness, noble saint,
 To whom all sinners should have recourse,
 Filled with faith true and untiring;
 In this faith I will live and die.

Every man, woman and child could read the meaning of the sculpture and the painting, and draw from them something far more important than aesthetic satisfaction, for their Faith was conveyed to them through living forms of a craftsmanship which touches the apex of Christian culture. The craftsmen themselves were hardly conscious of their art: they regarded themselves as stone-masons and painters who carried on with their job from morning till night. 'Such men were great, more because they made themselves, like the epic poets, the unconscious interpreters of the living beliefs and powerful inspirations of the people among whom they lived, than by their professional skill.'

The ordinary people did more than merely enjoy the finished products of the craftsmen: they actually in many cases took part in the work of construction. 'A spectacle wonderful to behold,' we read in the chronicles of the Abbots of St. Trond in north-east France, 'these multitudes, who so zealously and joyfully brought the stones, lime, sand and wood necessary for the work, night and day in carts at their own expense! As large stones were not found in the district they brought them from distant parts, dragging them from village to village by men's arms without the help of oxen or mules.'² Let us leave these good

¹ 'The Middle Ages,' by F. Funck-Brentano, page 232.

² Quoted by F. Funck-Brentano, page 218.

people dragging their great stones so joyfully for the building of their Church, and the simple masons producing their masterpieces, as the great building rose skyward with its tall fluted pillars, its tracery and vaulting, and its flying buttresses.

I think we can at least reach this conclusion, that in the Middle Ages a purely Christian culture reached its full flower. The Church was its inspiration, and the fresh blood that the barbarian introduced provided the physical and moral energy that made this achievement possible. Furthermore, this Christian culture was not the exclusive property of an aristocracy or an *élite*: it was the property of all men: it was communal in the sense that it was the creation and possession of the people, of the poor almost more than the rich. These people sought first the Kingdom of God and all these things were added unto them.

A number of causes that there is no time to deal with here in detail broke up medieval civilization. The growth of Nationalism, the Black Death, the effect of prolonged warfare, the reluctance of the clergy to renounce their monopoly of political and economic power in favour of an educated laity, which was gradually replacing them as the ministers of Kings, all helped to undermine medieval civilization. Religious communities had in many cases lost sight of their primary Christian purpose, and tended to develop into vested interests out of touch with the people whom they were founded to serve: and when a community degenerates to the level of a vested interest, the motive of self-interest begins to dominate its activities and blunt its spiritual temper. Sacramental life among the laity was at a very low ebb, most people being content with a minimum of observance in this respect, since they received little active encouragement from a clergy which took such a state of affairs for granted.

With the Renaissance came a new phase of culture based upon the humanism of pagan Greece and Rome; and almost at the same time there broke out in Northern

Europe the religious revolt we call the Reformation. Working in with the establishment of despotisms like that of the Tudors in England, or those of the smaller princes of Germany who were quick to use it as a weapon against the Emperor as well as the Pope, the Reformation produced a religious, political and cultural system in Europe based upon Nationalism. It finds its most complete expression to-day in National Socialism, though in a less accentuated form it was to be found all over Europe since the sixteenth century. The Church, apart from the opening phase of the Renaissance in Italy, when Catholicism and the New Learning were working together, has been for the most part fighting to preserve the Faith, and has pursued the policy of a city in a state of siege. Strict centralization with the increase of control and discipline which this entails has been essential, if she is to protect the faithful, whose lives are spent in an atmosphere of heresy and increasing infidelity.

The culture of the Renaissance with its reversion to the ideals of ancient Greece became the possession and pursuit of a limited and leisured class, which alone possessed the means to patronize the new literature and the fine arts; and its tendency to an increasing secularization found expression in the building of palaces and magnificent country mansions for an enlightened aristocracy. In Protestant England the word 'Abbey' took on a new meaning which now drives home to us what the people of England have lost. From the humble class of stonemason and painter have sprung the sculptor and the artist, whose work came to be called fine art, and found its way more and more into the homes of the wealthy. The subjects portrayed were no longer religious but secular. Music and dancing alone afforded the people a cultural outlet of their own in the form of Folksong and Folkdance. Drama began to take on secular dress, and, apart from isolated survivals in the form of Passion Plays, was now performed by professional companies of actors.

Coming to our own time, we find that the unchecked growth of industrialism and the removal of the tools from the hands of the craftsmen through the use of power driven machinery has struck a deathblow at the old craftsmen. It is too early yet to make any exact estimate of the influence of mechanization in our own day. Its onset and development have been so sudden that human society has been unable yet to adapt it to cultural and civilized purposes, let alone discover whether this is even possible in a free and reasonably conducted human society. Apart from the moral and economic problems introduced by machinery, there are cultural problems involved in its use that it seems impossible to solve without sacrificing in some measure human dignity and human creativeness, if the machine is to supplant the hand and tool of the craftsman. At the moment humanity seems bent on using the machine to destroy itself, whether by an indiscriminate process of sub-humanization—in this connection one thinks of the factories with their monotonous piecework and moving belts—or by forging the most inhuman weapons of warfare the world has ever known, aeroplanes, gas, guns and high explosive.

On the credit side it may be said: we can all read and write to-day. We are being educated. But in whose interests and for what purpose? Are these interests those of the Church, of Christianity, or those of the world as such, which has no thought, as the medieval man had, of the world to come? Such culture as education achieves is of this world, and is contaminated by the materialism which ministers so effectively to our bodily comfort. If we turn to the culture of an earlier age, we do so as a refuge and a means of escape from conditions of life that become more and more intolerable to the spirit, in the same way that T. E. Lawrence turned for relief to Homer during his Arabian adventure.

What then is the rôle of the Church in relation to culture to-day? She is still the guardian of practically everything

that is of permanent value in human achievement. In her Liturgy, which still offers to us such a wealth of music, literature and drama welded together in a living unity of prayer, many of us find something more than a refuge and an escape. We find in it something that can still inspire and fulfil our human longings and aspirations, something that helps us to preserve a proportioned sense of spiritual and human values. That it remains unchanged through the centuries in language, setting and gesture is not simply due to an obstinate conservatism or fear of change as such. It is due to this: in these days of spiritual and cultural bankruptcy, the Church can substitute nothing better. The Faith is unchangeable and eternal; so too in its degree are the means whereby we express that Faith in living, corporate prayer. The Liturgy still conveys to us the best that man could achieve for that purpose, great literature wedded to music, used not for its own sake, but as a means for fulfilling this one essential purpose, the raising of the heart and mind to God.

Outside the Church men's eyes are blinded and their ears are deafened by the glare of neon lighting and the voice of loud-speakers, which cover the darkness and silence of a spiritual desolation. The solutions of an optimistic Victorianism are blown on. No one can find solace in a theory of human progress or a Wellsian scientific paradise to-day, when the skies are filled with bombing and fighting aeroplanes, and Europe is a network of fortifications and military highways. The old economic systems are discredited, and the economic problems they have failed to solve still remain with us. The Totalitarian systems do not afford suitable soil for cultivating the spirit of man, for culture demands for its growth conditions of living in complete harmony with man's nature. If man is to create, he must have a deeper and more spiritual incentive than the materialist ideologies can provide. Order and discipline without regard for freedom of spirit can be quite as harmful to the spirit of man as freedom without order. If the

soil is to be productive, man must have that due measure of both that a Catholic civilization can alone provide.

Only when mankind returns to the unity of the Catholic Church and the Faith once more provides the inspiration of the Spirit of God will man attain his true measure of creativeness. It is the considered opinion of many to-day that we are well on the way back to barbarism, and are well over the threshold of the Dark Ages. If the imminent threat of war is fulfilled, it will bring the fabric of such civilization as is left us crashing down in ruins. Our sole ground for hope rests upon Christianity. Even now, when it seems almost too late, many who are not bound to her beliefs see in the Church the sole preserver of civilization and culture.

When the Christian Renaissance comes to pass, it will be founded not on the ideals of a pre-Christian culture, which carries within its exclusive worship of man the seeds of its own dissolution; it will be found rather in a return to the medieval concept of a civilization of which Christianity and the worship of God was the mainspring and inspiration. From the ruins of our own epoch may spring up a culture wherein man may once again learn to devote to the greater glory of God the products of his genius, his science and his handicrafts, in the ordered freedom of the City of God.

I will not cease from mental fight,
Nor shall the sword sleep in my hand.
Till we have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant land.

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