

LAY THOUGHTS UPON RELIGIOUS ART

THE condition of contemporary religious art is by no means satisfactory. Periodically the question is raised in the local Catholic Press and discussed from various angles and points of view; letters pour in defending or attacking a certain aspect of modern ecclesiastical art; for a time the correspondence waxes hot, then gradually fizzles out; and all remains as it was, to the apathetic indifference of the great majority of Catholics and the intense disgust of an artistically-minded minority.

It is the limit of presumption for one who is neither an artist, nor a writer, nor a thinker, to broach a subject which has been so ably and exhaustively discussed by competent authorities, therefore this paper is offered with apologies for what it is—the thoughts of an average lay-woman interested in art upon this acutely controversial matter.

It would seem that besides the too obvious truism that 'a work of religious art has to be religious,' some principle must form the basis of religious art. We imagine that M. Maritain (*Quelques réflexions sur l'Art Religieux. Art et Scolastique*, p. 216) expresses this essential principle when he says:

' . . . it (religious art) is primarily intended for the instruction of the people, it is a theology in images, and an art which is illegible, obscure'; that is, not understood by the people, 'is as senseless as a house without a staircase or a cathedral without a portal.'

Mediaeval frescoes and statues were the Bible of the illiterate, and their object was not only decorative but instructive. So it was at the dawn of religious art, and thus it continued throughout the Ages of Faith, when

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Europe was 'an immense Church, such as will never be seen again until God returns to earth—a place of prayer as vast as the whole West, and built upon ten centuries of rapture' (Léon Bloy).

But when 'the charity of the many grew cold' the loss of fervour inevitably reacted upon religious art, which steadily and gradually degenerated through various stages, beginning with the splendour of the Renaissance, through the 'baroque,' the formal and cold 'Georgian,' the pitiful decadence of the nineteenth century, until the present time, when we are faced with a practically insoluble dilemma. On one hand the bulk of Catholics, whose taste has been systematically perverted and debased, is pathetically contented with tawdry churches and the gaudy plaster atrocities Continental factories turn out by the thousand, on the other—a more cultured and fastidious minority find no words strong enough to denounce 'Repository Art.' Attempts are made to 'revive' religious art. But such revivals, lacking a common fundamental principle and a spirit capable of inspiring them, are doomed to failure. In sheer despair, and in a spirit of artistic 'defeatism,' some Catholics see their only hope in a slavish reproduction of ancient models, whilst others seek some new ways of expressing their religious feelings. But the latter, though deeply despising the 'fakers,' are as unable to *create*. The seeming 'originality' of their work consists in an adaptation of pagan archaic art to Christian purposes. Their efforts, however perfect from the technical standard, result in mere 'intellectual' art, utterly incapable of promoting any devotion. It has also a great drawback: not only do the 'little ones,' for whom, as we have seen, religious art *exists primarily*, fail to understand it, but, what is graver still, dislike it intensely; therefore it stands condemned as having missed its object.

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Let us imagine that this breach between 'cultured' and 'uncultured' Catholics is allowed to widen, it might lead to so monstrous a position that within the Church there would be *two* arts—one for the unlettered, the other for the cultured. The latter would patronise a few artistically furnished churches where in stately solemnity and exquisite vestments the liturgy would be celebrated to the faultless rendering of plain-song, whilst the 'masses' would continue to worship in ugly churches, decorated in the wedding-cake style, amidst a galaxy of sugary Madonnas, life-size, rosy-cheeked, 'Sacred Hearts,' 'Little Flowers,' etc. Instead of the austere beauty of the liturgy the congregation would have devotions, and lustily sing hymns—that musical and poetical counterpart of 'Repository Art'—of which 'it would be difficult to say what is worse in them, the words or the music,' to quote a priest's words. Were such a nightmare to come true, we would despair of any revival of religious art in the Church, for she knows not 'Jew and Gentile,' and in her worship no division into 'cultured' and 'uncultured.' She is the *one Catholic* Church, and it is the hall-mark of true Catholic art that it appeals to all, irrespective of culture and education. In the Cathedral of Chartres both a Rodin and an old market woman stand in awed silence; instinctively both feel themselves in the presence of a *real* thing, though probably the latter would be unable to give any reasoned explanation of her emotion. Our Lady of Vladimir (Greek, tenth century) casts her spell upon illiterate and over-sophisticated alike.

Catholic art reflects the marks of the Church to which it belongs—it appeals to the senses of the faithful, calling them to *unite* in their worship of God, its inspiration is *holy*, its appeal must be *universal*, and lastly its object is a true *apostolate* to the masses. We hasten to add that *universality* is by no means *unifor-*

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mity. The Church insists upon complete unity of doctrine, but admits a great variety of rites, so in the sphere of art each nation contributes to the common treasury of the Church by expressing its religious feelings in its own way. This must be particularly borne in mind by missions which, instead of importing our Repository Art at its cheapest and worst, would do wisely in helping the natives to Christianise their own tradition, for, naturally, a Japanese's or Negro's idea of Our Lord or Our Lady are not ours, as we fondly imagine in our own narrow racial pride. But this is in itself a vast subject demanding separate treatment.

There seems to be some mysterious quality of the mediaeval sacred art which we feel, though are at a loss to analyse. Possibly this secret, as all great things, is simple, and is only this: that the unknown craftsmen and artists of those remote ages, when faith was a reality dominating man's everyday life, a 'universal kneeling in adoration or terror' (Léon Bloy), worked for the glory and honour of God alone, indifferent to their own fame; their art was impersonal, and money was no object with them. 'Who knows the name of the craftsman who did the wonderful panel of the Annunciation in St. Callixtus' Chapel (Wells) . . . he would be hugely puzzled at the fuss made of it all over Europe' (from a private letter). It is this *charity* which has left such an impress upon the works of the anonymous craftsmen of bygone days, an impress which has survived the changes of time, the vagaries of fashion, and still has the power of stirring us, cold, sceptical children of the mechanical age, and hold us entranced before those sincere, artless paintings and rigid, hieratic carvings. Is there not, perhaps, some mystic 'character' stamped upon those monuments of true religious art, a character as indelible as that of baptism, and due to the spirit which inspired their unknown craftsmen? This sacred 'character,' if such an expression may be

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used, is felt at times not by Christians only. Mahomet II felt it when he converted St. Sophia—the Church of Divine Wisdom—that unique gem of Christendom, into a mosque. Instinctively he realized that such an edifice could only be dedicated to the worship of God. And there it still stands, after fourteen hundred years, in all its incomparable luminous serenity, a perfect symbol of eternity. Desecrated, plundered, it is still the dream of faith dreamt by Justinian in the dawn of our Christian era.

In the East iconography was a vocation, an ecclesiastical art supervised by bishops, for fear of some unorthodox interpretation. There exists at Mount Athos a Greek manual with instructions for the iconographer. He had first to manifest his artistic talent. Then after sufficient preparation he was to pray 'with tears' that God penetrate his soul. A priest recited a special prayer over him: 'O Thou, Who hast so admirably impressed Thy features upon the cloth sent to King Abgar of Edessa, Who hast so admirably inspired Luke the Evangelist . . . enlighten the soul of Thy servant, guide his hand that he should depict perfectly Thy features, those of Our Lady and Thy saints for the peace and glory of Holy Church.' The same principle was emphasized in the sixteenth century in Russia: 'Earning money is not the object of painting. The art of painting the image of God cannot be entrusted to one who dishonours Him . . . Even if a man is skilful in the art of iconography, if he does not lead a pious life, he cannot be allowed to paint, but must be given some other manual work.' This was the primitive tradition, both for East and West, and as long as it obtained, religious art flourished. It is significant that *religious* art was predominantly so in the fullest sense of the word, for its greatest artists were men living under religious vows. Verily they 'painted the things of Christ' because

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'they lived with Christ' (Fra Angelico). They painted and carved their own visions—their art was an inspired art.

We have lost this tradition; an artist nowadays is mostly a layman who takes 'orders' indifferently, whether for an altar-piece or a crucifix, or the portrait of some fashionable beauty in the latest 'undress' or the decoration of Mr. New-Rich's ultra-modern mansion. What really matters is the pay. Can we then wonder that the altar-piece, however finely painted, or the crucifix, whatever its technical merits, are appreciated by us merely as works of art without any religious appeal? There are happy exceptions, of course, but we speak of the general rule.

Also in the days when Faith was a living thing God was to have *the best*; nothing was fine enough for His worship. We are more practical now, and only too often inclined to 'economise' upon God, and whilst nothing is too good for our own houses, no diamonds or pearls too costly for our necks and heads, God has to be satisfied with the 'second best,' and imitation jewels are considered quite effective enough to flash around the Host. Do we *really* understand *WHAT* it is those bits of glass surround?

Is there any hope for the future of religious art? To this anxious question, as to many questions of these troubled times, there is one answer: 'With God all things are possible.' Only on a supernatural plane is such a revival thinkable. Who knows? God may so tire of our ugly churches in which He is worshipped so unworthily, that for His Own glory He may raise some great artists who will also be saints. Their art will not be 'learnt,' they will know little of theories, of various artistic tendencies, will not be concerned with this or that style, theirs will be an art revealed and inspired. With a burning coal the Seraph will enkindle their hearts, and in them the spirit of the medi-

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aeval 'primitives' will live again. They will lift religious art from the dust into which we have let it fall, reject the bad, cleanse and purify all that is good, reshape, breathe a new life into it, and offer it to God as a hymn of praise and adoration. Then, and only then, shall we see in a world rejuvenated and Christianised new churches worthy of the ancient cathedrals that lift their great spires heavenwards. But the primary condition for such a revival is a Christian society, without which even these imaginary artists-saints would be powerless to create.

At present sadly and humbly we must confess that we have the religious art we deserve for our sins.

OLGA BENNIGSEN.

EDITORIAL NOTES.

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It is stated in our first article that very little has been done in this country to deal with the problem of the cinema through criticism. We would, however, draw attention to the weekly contributions of 'Celluloid' to *The Catholic Herald*. Sympathetic, discriminating, incisive and, what is remarkable, exhaustive of the chief current films, his Cinema Notes are almost a model of what such a feature in a popular Catholic paper should be. More spasmodically, able Film Notes have also appeared in *The Universe*. But much, very much, remains to be done.

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The Life of Abbot Marmion by Dom Thibaut, recently translated from the French by Mother Mary St. Thomas and published by Sands, has already been noticed in **BLACKFRIARS**. This English version, it must be added, has the advantage of giving the exact text of the extracts from the early note-books and the fifty or sixty letters which the Abbot wrote in his native tongue.