

## DILECTA CIVITAS

Omnis illa Deo sacra	Et dilecta civitas
Plena modulis in laude	Et canoro jubilo
Trinum Deum unicumque	Cum fervore praedicat. <sup>1</sup>

WHEN I love my friend, I also love his clumsy chin—because it is his. I love my friend none the less because he sings out of tune. And because I love my friend, I am in a way drawn to love all his compatriots. It is so with a city. It is powerfully so with Rome. For centuries men have been drawn to Rome. They have tossed their coin into the Fontana di Trevi and they have returned over and over again *ad limina Apostolorum*. Thousands of strangers have come to feel themselves no longer strangers in the streets of Rome; they have grown to know and understand her, and so to love her—something like a friend—they love her not because of her riches of works of art, her grand architecture, her noble antiquities. No: it is something deeper than this: they understand her whole meaning, her purpose on this earth. And her many bourgeois buildings? Her many, many tumble-down churches with dusty cornices that once attempted to be grand? Her sometimes appalling music, frowsy-looking clerics, strait-laced prelates, disordered congregations? And her many dirty little streets? These things they love too—because they are hers. A pretentious decoration becomes somehow their own, those multitudes become their compatriots. They have had the vision of the real Rome. It is not that Rome is loved in spite of these things; Rome is loved, and these little failings with her.

René Schwob has had the vision, and he was written a book about it.<sup>2</sup> “C’est le climat spirituel de Rome qui m’enchanté—l’*ébriété* dans laquelle ses envolées baroques me mettent depuis que j’ai débarqué dans cette Via Nazionale, si laide cependant . . .” A convert Jew, he has written books of pilgrimage to Jerusalem and to Lourdes, and now his Roman pilgrimage is as a fulfilment. He has called his book *Rome ou la mort*, taking the cry of Garibaldi

<sup>1</sup> From the Dominican Office for the Dedication of a Church (Lauds).

<sup>2</sup> *Rome ou la mort*, by René Schwob. (Desclée-de-Brouwer, 25 fr.)

as he assailed the city, and putting it on the lips of the Christian pilgrim. In Rome indeed one can feel the living pulse of the Church, or better, one can put one's hand over her beating heart. This is Rome; who was raised up by God and schooled for eight centuries to receive Christ, and not, as Jerusalem, to receive His first members and to be baptized in their blood. *Limen Apostolorum*. For three centuries Rome fought against this baptism and drove Christ underground. But she had needs surrender, and Rome is the eternal monument of Christ's triumph. And it was not Rome that accepted Christ, but it was Christ that absorbed Rome. Roman and Christian became one idea. And in this fusion was fused into Christ the whole of humanity that was contained in Rome. And Roman and Catholic became one idea.

For Rome is universal: not merely materially in her multitudes, her diversity of creatures, her diversity of documents; but spiritually, reflecting not only human history, but human desire, human attempt, human failure and triumph, all enacted under the eyes of God. *Omnis illa Deo sacra*. In Rome the Church refuses nothing that is human. René Schwob ponders for many pages on the difference between the art of ancient Greece and ancient Rome, and feels that whereas Greek art is pure, is of the gods, Roman art is essentially human—about men, events, religion. And it is in this sense that Baroque is truly Roman—"le baroque, c'est du romain qui s'envole." Yes, perhaps Michelangelo's naked Christ in the Minerva is too human, yet it stands against the altar. For Michelangelo, that great Christian, was the originator of the new Christian art, the legitimate child of the art of ancient Rome: the richness of the human form was to be enjoyed again, men were to delight in sheer decoration, exult in a line, sometimes a hesitant, broken line, sometimes a luscious line, but enjoyed with human enjoyment, and put there for the praise of God through this enjoyment. René Schwob notes this genius for decoration not only in Rome, but in all the Italian people who partake so closely of the spirit of Rome, and it is indeed consoling to find that in Italy there are still craftsmen who can draw a good curve.

Baroque is a confession of love, a confession of human

frailty perhaps, but also of human achievement. It is an art alive with the life of man, with a warm heart within him and warm blood in his veins. It sometimes may be foolish but foolish like the acts of love. It is Rome's reflection of human contradiction, the helplessness of man and yet his great vocation—like the pomp that surrounds the Vicar of Christ, that for a moment seems absurd until one realises how it is the expression of man's homage and love. René Schwob was also in St. Peter's last Easter, when the Holy Father returned to public life and we all shouted and cheered. This is ridiculous but it is human, and indeed St. Peter's itself, the crowning of Baroque achievement, is the expression in stone of the same idea. Baroque has been described as "wild desire to achieve the impossible," like the helpless flourish and gesture of Bernini's statues which represent man's ardent desire, and his total capacity to fulfil it himself. René Schwob calls this contradiction the Church's tragedy, but being also the Church's humility it is her prayer. And in that way Rome with her architecture, often grand, often unsuccessful, becomes a great prayer, a prayer of praise in stone (and stucco). *Plena modulis in laude.*

This idea of the prayer of the City is at the root of the idea of pilgrimage. We go not on a pilgrimage to contribute our own prayer—we can do that at home—but we go to contribute our presence to the holy place: to be there. And in Rome we are there, assisting at the prayer of the Roman and Catholic Church. The function may be poor and the church dingy, but it is the prayer of Rome. And the pilgrim is never alone in offering his presence: all around are the witnesses of man's effort through the ages. The gropings of the pagan: sometimes reduced to ruins like the remains of the palaces of the Emperors, sometimes incorporated into Christian buildings like the temple-façade in the Forum still bearing its pagan inscription, or sometimes become completely Christian like the pagan statue in Sant'Agostino that became a Madonna, or like the Pantheon which from the sanctuary of all the gods became that of all the Saints. The sufferings of these Saints are there in Rome, their triumphs. Throughout the ages the Saints have come to Rome: in Rome they have found the strength and support for their

work. They came to breathe the Christian atmosphere. *Trinum Deum unicumque cum fervore praedicat.* One thinks at once of the great founders, of Dominic, of Francis, of Ignatius—these are Roman Saints, they are vividly present in Rome. Theresa of Lisieux came but once to Rome, but she came to venerate the presence of the Martyrs and to talk with the Vicar of Christ. Here is the presence of Christians, Saints and sinners, from all ages, from every part of the world: and not only wandering Christians, but the organised presence of Christians as well—the ecclesiastical mechanism of Rome that René Schwob calls “le corps apparent qui est le support du corps mystique.”

Yes, thousands have had the vision of Rome, and they have had it in the weedy mediæval township, in the growing City of St. Philip Neri, in the degrading late papal Rome, in the spacious metropolis that is becoming the pride of the new Italy. René Schwob has had the vision, and being a poet, has written of it so beautifully and lovingly. Another French book has helped many to understand Rome—*Romé*, the modern pilgrim, and René Schwob says he had this book in his pocket all the time. These are witnesses to the glory that is Rome from la fille ainée de l’Eglise.

A last thought. The care of the Popes for the Alma Urbs. Everywhere one finds plaques commemorating the building of a sanctuary by a Pope, or the restoration of a monument, pagan or Christian, and the shield of Pius XI in as good baroque a style as any. There is a continuity, and yet, every building of Pius XI is in the most excellent modern taste. Rome is indeed full of contradictions: but a huge harmony. On the Capitol, where the electrically illuminated Cross shines out on the top of Michelangelo’s tower, with an electric Fascio lower down, and facing the ancient bronze statue of the Emperor, Mark Aurelius on his little horse, is a pagan statue of Rome personified, sitting like a goddess above the fountain, and re-enthroned there under the auspices of a Pope of 1600 with this inscription: S.P.Q.R. VRBIS ROMAE SIMULACRVM . . . LOCO ILLVSTRIORI COLLOCAVIT—CLEMENS VIII P.M.

SEBASTIAN BULLOUGH, O.P.