

BLACKFRIARS

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CHRISTIAN HUMANISM¹

CHRISTIANITY has ever been faced with the challenge of that conception of life which we call humanism, originated and elaborated by the philosophy of the Greeks. It would be possible and interesting to trace the long history of the adventures of Christianity's encounters with humanistic conceptions. It did not begin with the Renaissance, nor have the encounters been concerned solely with problems of aesthetic. Indeed, they call in question an attitude of life which concerns the very foundations of our intellectual life and our moral conduct.

What is to be the distinctively Christian attitude to humanism? Is there a Christian humanism, and if so what principles must govern it? These are questions which the science of theology alone can decide with competence and finality. With its aid, we shall here set out some of the more important principles which must be taken into account in any definition of authentic Christian humanism.

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On its intellectual side, Greek humanism expresses itself in the ideas of science and philosophy as types of knowledge which proceed from demonstrable *evidence* and compel assent. Between this assumption and Christianity there immediately appears a threat of conflict. This is suggested not only by reason of that scorn of learning that certain saints and spiritual writers have professed, nor only because of those invectives against Aristotle and even Plato which we find in certain Christian writers. It would be easy to discover and set out to advantage tendencies in the same

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Church contrary to those. But it must be acknowledged that concerning intellectual as well as moral matters Christianity requires *faith* as the very first step. And by *faith* it understands, not a simple affective trust, but *faith* of an *intellectual* kind, where certain determined truths are professed independently of any evidence. As, for instance, that there are three Persons in God; that Jesus Christ is the Word made Flesh; that all men will rise again on the Last Day, and the other Articles of the Creed. Is not this to substitute one intellectual outlook for another? For if philosophy is held to be an emancipation of human thought from the sphere of all influence or authority foreign to its own laws, then surely this primacy of *faith* in Christianity must mean fundamentally and irreparably a throwing over of philosophy? The apologists of the Christian *faith* are generally too eager to answer that there is no opposition between *faith* and philosophy; what they intend to say is that there is no opposition between the *affirmations* of the one and of the other. That is so. But it is undeniable that *faith* and philosophy themselves are two dissimilar intellectual attitudes. And note this, it matters little that the Christian enjoys some proofs about the credibility of his *faith*, that is to say a justification from which it follows that it is reasonable for him to believe, for the *object* of his *faith* (which is not a miracle but a mystery) remains impossible to prove. We may well ask ourselves if in that there is not a radical refusal on the part of Christianity to accept what the Greek considered to be the very highest point, the zenith of the intelligence.

From the solution we are going to propose there should be evident at once on the Christian side a profound accord and a grave difference towards the intellectualism of the Greeks. The solution ought to be looked for in regard to the *object* of knowledge here concerned. That *object* is God, concerning whom, in the last analysis, the affirmations of *faith* are alone concerned. It is true that there is a philosophical knowledge of God. The glory of the Greeks is to have set up those reasonings by means of which our minds, basing themselves on experience, conclude to the existence

of the First Cause who transcends the world. Christianity neither misunderstands the value of these proofs nor denies them a proper use. Yet faith still remains necessary. For faith gives us certain affirmations and propositions concerning God which completely escape the province of philosophic investigation. When God is known as the First Cause, and when all is known that can be deduced from that, is there nothing more to be known of Him? With all the philosophy that one could wish could we know Him completely? Actually we should then know God only as that which explains the world, as the answer to a need posited by the existence of the world. Philosophy can go no further. But that is not to know God as He is in Himself. It was not necessary for God to have made the world. He has not revealed Himself to an unlimited degree in created nature. He has His own proper Life and Being, and may He not also have His own secret thoughts and designs which He did not disclose when He created the world? If we ourselves, finite beings as we are, cannot be known entirely in our own works and those works which carry our likeness; if we can keep our secret even from those who know us to be the authors of this or that (think of the surprise that is always aroused at the meeting of someone whose book we have read or whose picture we have admired but whom until then we have known in no other way), how then can we pretend to exhaust God in the knowledge of Him that we manage to obtain from that which is not Himself? He remains therefore the God of Mystery—even at the end of the most daring and the most triumphant philosophy. That is enough to secure room for faith, for those are precisely the kinds of truths that faith gives to our mind. By them she carries the perfection of the intelligence higher than it is possible for philosophy to do. Without faith the intelligence would miss the best, that is to say the mystery of God. Although it may appear at first sight otherwise, is not this therefore the most profound fidelity to the intellectualism of the Greeks? It does not depart from that intellectualism as if faith were a bad joke inflicted on our mind, or an obstacle

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to our curiosity. We are powerless before the mystery of God; faith was made to unite us with it.

There is, therefore, no harm to the intelligence in the intervention, thus understood, of faith; unless more importance is attached to the *manner* in which a thing is known than to the thing itself, unless the thought is preferred to the object which it considers. As to the *manner* of knowing, it is certain that faith humbles the intelligence; and that philosophy from the height of its evidence still enjoys the facility of laughing down on it. But this consideration is subordinate, and although many hold it, the Greeks of whom we speak had themselves gone beyond it. Aristotle says that it is better to have an imperfect knowledge of God than a perfect knowledge of finite natures. There you have the object given its right position of first importance. Thus the intellectualism of the Greeks finds itself directed by its masters on the way towards faith. Furthermore, in Greek philosophy there is in general a consciousness of the transcendence of God and of the difficulty of knowing Him well, and there in advance has been marked the place where it will be possible to insert faith. These great minds had more than others admitted the sovereign need of bowing themselves before the mystery.

We do not deny that faith brought a new character into the intellectual life of man which it is legitimate to contrast with the intellectualism of the Greeks. Their intellectualism is, in the most exclusive meaning of the word, humanistic; for it is centred round man, whereas our intellectualism is centred in God. That is to say, they viewed everything from the point of view of man; while the believer learns to view everything from the point of view of God. The philosophers of Greece, if they knew God, knew Him only as the principle that explained the world and man. Which is still to know God only humanly; it is not to have made the leap without which one cannot know Him as He is in Himself. To be concerned about God as He is in Himself is a specifically Christian intellectual approach, and is "theological." It is characteristic of this approach that the believer sees the

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world and man with the eyes of God, as His effects and the objects of His plans. In so far as one is established in this attitude, to that extent is established the decisive difference between philosophy and faith, even when it happens that they express themselves in the same words. So the Greek, even though he thinks of God, is a philosopher, and the Christian, even when he thinks of the world or of his own self, is a believer.

There is a price to be paid by the believer for this attitude. The apprehension which Faith and Theology impart is bound to imperfection. God is hidden from us, and the shadow of His mystery covers likewise everything that we see in Him. In this sense, for that priceless privilege of having eyes to see everything in God and God as He is in Himself, the believer renounces in the exercise of his faith that clarity, satisfaction and repose of the mind which are the recompense of rational systems. Faith will never "know" (*scire*), i.e., apprehend on the strength of evidence and demonstration; it will never tear down the veil. Every scholar knows a similar state of mind, a mental worry which is at the same time the chief stimulant to his study. The believer has it also; but whereas the scholar may at length discover the solution and acquire the evidence patiently sought, the believer, in this life, never does. That cry of triumph at the discovery will never escape from him until at his entry into heaven. Here below it must be, as it is written, *per speculum et in aenigmate*. Would not that be a rather amazing motto on the façade of some school of philosophy? Yet it expresses the fundamental law which governs theological inquiry.

That peculiar kind of knowledge which we are endeavouring to describe here, theology, may be indeed a disappointing kind of knowledge, but only because of its very splendour. It is that science that faith undertakes to elaborate here below, that structure of thought fixed upon the "one thing necessary" from which all other things are derived. It is the most paradoxical thing. According to one aspect, what is more rational than theology? Thought

is used in it with exactitude according to the rules of logic, and at times it seeks the help of certain philosophic notions. In this it shows a great trust in man's natural rational processes. The syllogism has never prospered anywhere as it has among the theologians. Yet from another point of view, all this effort is expended in the service of an incomprehensible Object, whose mystery it can never unravel. It seems unaccountably perplexing, for it is destined never to disclose its own evidence, but much rather indeed to intensify that unquenchable intellectual hunger which faith itself produces. At the same time as he sets out to achieve a methodical science, approached scientifically, the theologian accepts an Object which is impenetrable to his reason. It is impossible at the same time to be more rational and more mystical. Yet such is the strange condition of theology; our distinctively Christian way of being Greek, which may understandably be considered as not being Greek at all.

It will not be surprising to find this same dissimilarity with a likeness, or if it be preferred, this same attachment with independence, at the summit of intellectual life, namely in contemplation. The Greeks had discovered contemplation, and for them it was the perfection of human life. It is impossible to say enough about the beauty and importance of that discovery in which humanism found its highest form. Man is not only a *maker*, despite the marvels of art and technique; nor is he only a *doer*, even though as such he is capable of such imposing acts as the organisation and governing of the State. He *contemplates*. To make and to act are indeed the witness of productiveness, but in making and doing man gives no more than is in him to give; contemplation brings him into contact with that which is other and better than himself. Christianity has been careful not to lose this heritage; in its care contemplation has enjoyed an exceptional prestige. The best theologians have understood the ultimate happiness of man as consisting in the contemplation of God. This agreement of the Christians and pagans on such a point is something beautiful and moving. It shows us how far the Greeks had arrived in their know-

ledge of man, and how Christianity favours and consecrates the noblest of human inclinations. But here again, despite the arguments, how great is the difference! —

The contemplation of God is for the Greeks the very peak of human nature. They saw it as the greatest achievement of man and in it God is treated as the highest object that it is possible to offer the intellect, in which human aspirations reach their climax. For the Christian the contemplation of God is the highest way to live with God, man's supreme good, with Whom he strives to unite himself *because he loves Him*. In the latter case is the love of God, in the other the love of self. That is what makes the difference; that is what gives the two contemplations their peculiar quality. On the one hand man loses himself for the whole good, for it is God that interests him; on the other he seeks his own satisfaction, for even in God he still seeks himself. The incorrigibly anthropocentric humanism of the Greek; the theocentric attitude of the Christian, clothed with what is finest in humanism. Once again it was impossible to imitate the Greeks without at the same time differentiating oneself from them even more.

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The Greeks excelled at moral science. They made for themselves a wonderful idea of it, which can be illustrated by their discovery and analysis of ethical concepts, such as Happiness, Virtue, Reason. These organic notions of Greek ethics are so expressed that though various ethical systems grew up from them, yet they did so without bringing into question the notions themselves.

Happiness is regarded as the fulfilment of nature, the final accomplishment of man, and moral life consists in preparing him for it, having no other reason for existence except to arrive at that. *Virtue* is an acquired and habitual inclination concerning some good of such a kind that henceforth one acts with regard to that good without effort and with joy; a kind of laying up of capital in morality, which is

done so that one can dispense liberally the corresponding good actions. And there are many kinds of virtue, since our activities are many, and in each kind there is a good and a bad usage. *Reason* is the competent guide in man for his activities. It directs him in the course between contrary excesses, it prescribes what is suitable and adapts the action exactly to the object and the circumstances. To be moral is to be reasonable, that is to say to use man's highest and "most divine" faculty in the welfare of his conduct. That is why there is legitimately a moral philosophy, where the reason sets out its directions for all; and in everyone there is *phronesis* in order that each one may apply these general rules to his own personal conduct. *Phronesis* we translate as prudence, and it is described as the practical aptitude acquired by the reason which enables it from then on to exercise surely its natural role as guide.

It might be thought that Christianity would have little sympathy with morality so understood. That to the idea of happiness it would oppose that of trial and suffering; to virtue, duty; to reason, obedience to God. We might imagine that the full and harmonious development of nature in a complete and autonomous independence of man would be opposed with the Christian ideals of effort, renunciations and dependence. While the Greeks made their morals gracious and attractive, Christianity, it might be supposed, would present its own as severe and uncomfortable. How then could humanism continue to exist or be tolerated? Because this antithesis is a false one. We will speak soon of the difference between the two moral standards; but in respect to the fundamental ideas that we are going to recall it must be remembered that in its best moralists Christianity agrees with the Greeks, and that Christian morality is at least no less human than Greek morality. Moral life among Christians is also directed towards *happiness* which it defines as the perfection of man. Trial is not the whole of Christian morals; obligations are not imposed upon us only to harass and to tempt us, but as a need of our nature and for our development, as a real condition for our happiness. The two ethics

agree, too, about the idea of *virtue*, which issues in good actions, since it is better to be established in good than only to practise it occasionally; and that virtue renders action easy and joyful—to be pleased with the good is a sign of a more firm attachment to it. Duty in the sense that it expresses a certain restraint exercised on the will in such a way that the good action proceeds from effort alone, and opposed to the faithful and spontaneous following out of the ordinary interior dispositions—duty so understood is certainly not the Christian ideal of morality. Finally, in the same way, Christianity leaves *reason* with all its activity; though certain commandments are imposed upon Christians and come from God. But precisely because they come from God they are completely in agreement with the highest reason and point out in advance the ways to which reason leads us. For man to obey God, therefore, is not for him to give up his autonomy, but to support it in its very principle; it is not losing his independence but much more the establishing of it. For what else is being independent of God than going astray into servitude? The commandments are nothing else than general rules which it belongs to each man to apply for himself to his own personal life and circumstances. They still leave plenty of scope for his reason and initiative and judgment.

In connection with these remarks, the good understanding between Christian morality and human nature should be stressed. One way to do this would be to mark out for example the legitimate place in Christianity that all those activities and arts should occupy, by means of which, making the best of the necessities which their lives impose upon them, men have turned all that corresponds to them into beauty and agreeableness. Forced to clothe themselves, men have created fashion and all the etiquette of dress; bound to eat, they have invented all the gastronomic arts; compelled to shelter themselves, they have developed architecture. Christianity has not frowned upon these things in which nature has brought forth its finest blossoms. It even recommends in its best exponents all those virtues which the

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Greeks proposed for our relaxation and entertainment with such a just sense of our human condition. It is true that Bossuet was troubled by this, but it is a point on which one can take other advice.

This being said, we are in a position to note the originality of Christian ethics as compared with the Greek. Yet this should be done prudently so as to save, even in the difference, a likeness. For which reason we will treat it on two parallel lines.

First let it be said that Christianity distinguishes itself from purely humanistic ethics by insisting on the grace of God as a necessity for the moral life of man. It requires this for two reasons. First because it professes that God calls man to a life and to an ultimate beatitude which are truly *divine*, and consequently *supernatural*, of which man by himself is absolutely incapable. Secondly because it teaches that since we are born in a state of imperfection and disgrace, that is to say in original sin, man is in such sort that he can no longer use even the resources of his nature as he could when in an unfallen state. Hence the grace of God becomes indispensable, and that involves a completely new condition for man. Instead of his destiny depending primarily on himself, it depends primarily on God. His salvation is bound up with the divine Will and initiative; an initiative we are powerless to set in action, to provoke or to incite. For even if we begin to ask for it, it is before us in our very asking. Grace is a free gift of God's generosity, and to say that grace is indispensable is to take man's destiny out of man's own hands and to put it back into the hands of God. We are aware that we are recalling here a body of doctrines which has been the cause of memorable controversies among Christians themselves, ever since Saint Augustine victoriously established them against Pelagius. There is still a difference of opinion concerning the way in which the dependence of man in regard to grace accords with the affirmation of his freedom. It is permissible to believe that the conflicts proceeded from an inadequate attachment on the part of some theologians to the idea of the absolute

and entire gratuitousness of grace. The most Christian are those who have understood this problem best. But no one has ever ventured to call into question the necessity itself of assistance from God; and if one accepts that and all that it implies, it follows that, in all that concerns us most, we depend on Another.

So we find at the very outset of Christian moral teaching, in its doctrine of grace, a disconcerting statement, objectionable to some, but something which appeals to the religiously-minded. From it, it follows that Christianity holds that the "good life" commences with *conversion*; that is, a turning of the soul, a "change of mind," hitherto attached to sin. Such a doctrine is very different from one which sees the moral life as a regular and normal development of good dispositions which we already have in ourselves. The Greek became virtuous by education; the Christian becomes virtuous—in the sense that virtue ought to suffice for his final salvation—by grace and conversion. On the one hand man realises himself; on the other he begins by denying himself. He is sufficient in himself for the first task; not for the second. A "good life" is his own achievement in one case; it is from the start the gift of God in the other. Here we have passed right over to a totally new outlook. And it follows naturally from this initial and fundamental difference of principle that it is possible to discover certain practical consequences where the difference will be verified in a more concrete manner.

There is a place in Christianity for the use of force and energy in the treatment of human nature, in order the better to cure its corruption and egoism; because grace itself has its sterner exigencies. Hence the evangelical counsels to renunciation, Christian asceticism and the building up by mortification of religious life, (that fully developed type of Christian living). With these may be compared that reverence and sensibility for the body among the Greeks, that cultivation of its health, its beauty. For us, it is true, the body is not the enemy of the soul, but its companion; yet it has commonly lost among Christians that privileged treat-

ment which it enjoyed among the Greeks. Besides this, there is a certain rearrangement of moral values among Christians. For instance, to vengeance—which the Greeks permitted and praised—the Christian prefers gentleness and pardon; in the place of the assertion of his personality, self-effacement and humility (when did the Greeks even name this virtue?); and to the free disposal of oneself Christianity proposes that obedience which enjoys such a great prestige among the masters of Christian perfection. It was not pure humanism that taught us these things.

To speak more generally, Christianity attached a lower price to the human as such. There are found, as Saint Paul says, infirmities in the same man at the same time as great spiritual worth; that is the "exaltation of the humble" in Christianity. There is found even a development of the external moral life relatively restrained for the sake of richness of union with God, as witnesses the contemplative life which from the beginning has flourished as an institution in Christendom. In Christianity one comes to hold that this life is an exile, the true homeland is in Heaven. That is neither very Greek nor very humanistic, as the word is commonly understood. Without going so far as to make this present time a perpetual trial, it is true that we regard it, as in the formula of Saint Thomas, the sketchy outline, the foreshadowing and threshold of eternal life, *inchoatio vitae aeternae*. This present life has not in itself the reason for its existence, and it is into another world that we carry our hope. To the extent that Christianity has stressed this, such an attitude is typically Christian. So much so that it will be necessary to remind some to uphold the worth of this present life and the obligations to accept in it the ordinary conditions.

Upon a particular point, but an important and a significant one, let us call attention to another characteristic attitude of Christian morality, the sense of sin. The Christian is very sensitive to sin because such an act offends God. The Greek attributes less importance to it, since to him it involves no more than a disorder in his nature, like disease

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or an error. Again we see the contrast of the point of view of man on the Greek side, and the point of view of God on the other. Hence we find among Christians the preoccupation to *repair* for sin. This takes us into that vast world of penance, of interior sorrow and painful satisfaction, of which the Greek humanist knew nothing. This becomes among some the desire to make reparation even for the sins of others, in union with the passion of Jesus Christ. So we find a Francis of Assisi and a Catherine of Siena, who indeed correspond little to the *kaloskagathos* ideal of Greek humanism. But what depth and what purity there is in these souls! Associated with the same spirit is the centuries-old history of Christian sorrow and suffering in all its complexity and variety—the realisation in history of *Blessed are they that mourn*

It is not surprising that Christianity has produced in the course of age some types of men and of saints difficult to measure according to ordinary standards of human prudence. All those original Saints, queer, disconcerting. For one Saint Thomas Aquinas, who is balance itself, a marvel of poise, how many leave us perplexed and even shocked! We must each of us choose our own way, but in this diversity we see the effect of that agony, that divine and salutary unrest, which Christianity has thrown into the pure humanism of the morality of antiquity.

Having gone so far in stressing the difference between Greek and Christian, it is well to point out the need of prudence and of care so as not to force the opposition too much, as some have a way of doing. Let us see therefore, how the lessons of the Greeks still influence their Christian disciples, even in those points where they are freed from them. There is, indeed, this *supernatural* vocation of man that we are mentioning all the time. The efforts of the best Christian thinkers have been to adjust this gift of God to certain conditions and capacities of our nature, in such a way that the divine life in utilising them ought precisely to promote our natural impulses and resources. There is also, it is true, that decadence due to original sin to be remembered; but the care

of those selfsame Christian thinkers who stress most wholeheartedly the idea of the fallen state, with all the power that a Saint Augustine has put into it, has been to view the nature of man in that state as untouched in those fundamental elements that constitute it. From these important principles all kinds of consequences follow. We will consider a few of them, and begin with those which concern the fallen condition of our nature.

Take the question of "concupiscence," a human matter of fact that has given the Christian masters much to think about. It is instructive to compare the idea Bossuet had of it with that proposed by Saint Thomas Aquinas. The name alone made Bossuet tremble. Overcome by a too confused doctrine of original sin, he was never in doubt that concupiscence was an evil in itself; he stigmatized it in magnificent but relentless rhetoric; and he seemed to think it almost an extremity of concession if he allowed that marriage had a good use as well as a bad. Saint Thomas also sees in our concupiscence an effect of original sin, but only in so far as it is disordered, not as it is experienced as a delight in the legitimate use of the senses. In this latter sense, he made no difficulty in understanding it as natural to man, and he held that it was experienced, and indeed with greater force, in the state of innocence. But the affection in which it is held, the manner of its use, and the eagerness with which it is pursued, all of these should never overstep the bounds of reason. There is also, admittedly, a certain pessimism in Saint Thomas about the present condition of man, but not a pessimism which refuses to distinguish the essentials, and he recognises the fundamental goodness of nature and its beauty where Bossuet can only see plague and corruption. Two ways of looking at things from which of course will proceed two very different attitudes in practice.

What of the theory which makes the supernatural gifts a perfection of nature itself? The immediate consequence would indeed be to avoid making a pure and simple opposition of nature and grace. The well-known chapter of the *Imitation* (Bk. III, ch. 54) on the relations of nature and

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grace may have some truth, but it is not the last word nor the full truth in the matter. Fundamentally, grace is not concerned with the destruction of nature but with raising it up, nor does it make life less intense, but on the contrary, carries it above itself. Here again are suggested two different lines of conduct. How many Christians have never understood their own efforts except as a wrestling match against themselves, which pushed to its extreme would rather be Manicheanism than Christianity! Certainly there is a struggle and a mortification, we have already said so, but it must be *in the service of life*. That is why the best qualified theologians have chosen to understand the supernatural life on the model of the natural life, and that in the very terms of the Greek philosophers. The virtues which sanctifying grace brings into play, those which are called infused, are called by the names given by the Greeks to the acquired, natural virtues. Prudence, justice, fortitude, temperance and the rest. Their moral development pursues the same line. And as for the theological virtues, faith, hope and charity, which are really proper to the supernatural order, having God Himself for their sole Object, they bring about that privileged meeting with God in which nature does not destroy but exceeds itself. Could one offer greater homage to the Greek ethic than to see in it foreshadowed the features of sanctifying grace? Because of this it follows that the supernatural virtues should find in the natural virtues their best conditions of growth. In cultivating the "man-in-himself," one is preparing the ground for the Christian. Certainly we depend primarily on God; but it is a constant rule of Divine Providence to respect the order of nature. God has written in our own nature that we should conduct ourselves reasonably and that we should acquire the virtues that are fitted to a man. Lacking this moral human culture, it can happen that grace finds itself very much embarrassed in a soul, and so some Christians offer the distressing sight of pretending to a superior perfection which they lack even in the rudiments. They are all too often destitute of certain natural

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and human qualities which others possess who perhaps have not grace, but have more honesty and a more delicate conscience.

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In discussing this problem we have caught a glimpse of a solution which we will call synthetic. This is much more satisfying than an antithetic or dualist solution of which history has many examples to offer. We have put forward different propositions, but we do not believe that they are irreconcilable among themselves. The balance of such a problem still depends on the position taken up by each individual Christian for himself. We know well that it will not be solved uniformly, and that the Christian humanism of which we have laid down the principles ought to admit that the results should be, in the concrete, diverse and manifold. Diverse and manifold as are the individual inclinations of men and the unforeseeable breathings of the Spirit of God.

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Le Saulchoir, Kain-lez-Tournai.