

# Rev. Dr. Owen B. McGuire

## What Our Civilization Owes to the Catholic Reverence For and Devotion to the Virgin Mother of God

This month of May is the month of Mary. It is, then, an appropriate time to inquire what we owe to her in the world in which we live.

Day and night we are now reading, or listening in to writers and orators discoursing about "our civilization." That means, and can only mean, the civilization of Christian Europe to which we are all heirs, though we have not all been faithful to the heritage. Now, suppose that during this month of May you meet a non-Catholic friend, or a score of such friends and say to each: "Veneration for the Virgin Mother has been the origin of the purest elements of our civilization. All that was best in Europe clustered around it"; and suppose you say further: "For over a thousand years in the development of our civilization every brightest and loftiest achievement of the art and strength of manhood and womanhood was due to the Catholic conception of and veneration for the Virgin Mother." How many of your friends will agree?

### NOTE RATIONALISTS

Yet the words I have put in inverted commas are not mine nor of any Catholic writer. They are the words of two great writers who were neither Catholic nor Protestant. Both were Rationalists. I am not sure that either believed in a personal God, as Christians believe in Him. But both had made a specialty of the history of Europe; and they knew that history better than any other two writers of the nineteenth century, certainly better than any authors writing in English. They were not merely historians in the sense of being chroniclers of events. They wrote of the origins, the causes, and the development of our civilization. They were contemporaries, and both lived to a ripe old age, one dying in 1800 and the other in 1803.

One was John Ruskin. No one needs to be told who was the author of *The Stones of Venice*. The particular work of his from which I am going to quote is *Fors Clavigera*. This was not a book (in its origin) but was a sort of periodical, published at regular intervals and addressed, in the form of letters, to the workmen of Great Britain. He rightly believed that they needed instruction on the much maligned Middle Ages.

The other writer was Prof. W. Harpole Lecky, author of *History of European Morals*, and *History of Rationalism in Europe*. In the latter work he writes:

### Publisher Addresses School Press Meeting

ST. BONAVENTURE—Frank E. Gannett, publisher of a chain of some twenty daily newspapers and operator of a number of affiliated radio stations, has definitely accepted an invitation by the St. Bonaventure College Department of Publications to be guest speaker before the seventh annual high school press conference to be held at the college on Saturday, May 9.

News of Mr. Gannett's acceptance was received yesterday by Leo A. Brownard, student general manager of the meet. According to Mr. Gannett's communication, he will discuss "The Newspaper and the War," at the luncheon to be held in Alexander Hickey Memorial Dining Hall as a feature of the day's program. He will fly to Olean from his Rochester headquarters on the morning of the conference.

### Army Chaplain Commends Courier For "Swell Job"

An Army Chaplain, the Rev. Leonard W. Scannell, O.M.I., of the 36th Engineers, Fort Bragg, N. C., expresses satisfaction with the CATHOLIC COURIER as a means of interesting boys at this post.

Writing to a friend here, Father Scannell, an Oblate priest, says: "We get the COURIER, five copies each week. If you know the editors just tell them they do a swell job and the fellows out this way appreciate their kindness in sending it."

Ideals, and seldom or never has there been one which has exercised a more salutary influence than the medieval conception of the Virgin. For the first time woman was elevated to her rightful position, and the sanctity of womanhood was recognized, as well as the sanctity of sorrow. No longer the slave or the toy of man, no longer associated only with ideas of degradation and sensuality, woman rises in the person of the Virgin Mother into a new sphere and becomes the object of a reverential homage, of which antiquity had no conception. . . . A new type of character was called into being; a new kind of admiration was fostered. Into a harsh and ignorant and benighted age this ideal type infused a conception of gentleness and purity, unknown to the proudest civilization of the past. In those pages of living tenderness, which many a romantic writer has left in honor of his celestial patron; in the millions, who in many lands and in many ages, have sought to mould their character into her image; in those holy maidens who, for the love of Mary, have separated themselves from all the glories and pleasures of the world, to seek, in fastings and vigils and humble charity, to render themselves worthy of her benediction; in the new sense of honor, in the chivalrous respect, in the softening of manners, in the refinement of tastes displayed in all the walks of society, in these and in many other ways we detect its influence. All that was best in Europe clustered around it, and it is the origin of our civilization.

The same Lecky in his *History of European Morals* returns to this subject, an understanding of which he clearly believes to be necessary for an understanding of the development of the civilization of Europe. This veneration of the Virgin Mother he says, "furnished the world with its supreme ideal," and he adds, "It is also a striking illustration of the qualities that prove most attractive in woman that one, of whom we know nothing but her gentleness and her sorrow, should have exercised a magnetic power upon the world, incomparably greater than was exercised by the most majestic female portraits of Paganism."

In the background of that "magnetic power" and working as its efficient inspiration, there was, of course, the fundamental cause which the Rationalist Lecky could not be expected to emphasize. "The most majestic female portraits of Paganism," whether in marble, or on canvas or in literature, represented no living, present and helpful power. They were dead symbols of dead personalities, or of fictional characters that had never lived, creations of poets, artists and superstition.

But to the people of the Middle Ages, as to Catholics today, the Virgin Mother was not such. To them she was, and to us she is, a living presence, person, and power. The Catholic child at its prayers understands this as well as did St. Thomas Aquinas. When in reciting the *Hail Mary* the Catholic child comes to the name of Jesus and bows its head in reverence, it does so to a Person; a living Person who, it knows, is present, hears its prayers and has power to help it. It knows, too, that the Mother is with the Son and that in His Godhead she hears its prayers, and in Him has power to answer them.

### RUSKIN QUOTED

Let us now see what Ruskin had to say on this subject:

"After a careful examination, neither as an adversary nor as friend of the influences of Catholicism, I am persuaded that the reverence for the Madonna has been one of its noblest and most vital graces and has never been otherwise than productive of holiness of life and purity of character. There has probably not been an innocent home throughout Europe during the period of Christianity in which the imagined presence of the Madonna has not given sanctity to the duties and comfort to the trials of men and women. Every brightest and loftiest achievement of the art and strength of manhood and womanhood has been the fulfillment of the prophecy made to the humble Lily of Israel: 'He that is mighty hath magnified me.'"

"The workers and laborers of Great Britain," to whom those words were addressed 80 years ago, must have opened their eyes in astonishment when they read them. For 300 years they had been hearing a very different story.

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