

Surgeon Corda

Robust Optimism

By Rev. James M. Gilks, C.S.P.

There are dozens of definitions, epigrams and "wisecracks," serious and jocund, about optimism and pessimism. Any one can read them off. The poorest of them, in point of phrasing, and not by any means one of the best as far as substance is concerned, is that "an optimist is one who would rather believe that everything is all right than know the truth." It does often happen that an optimist retains his optimism by the simple expedient of closing his eyes. If he opened them wide, if he saw what is going on in the world perhaps he would abandon his optimism, or at least it would be shaken.

So it is a great satisfaction to come across a man who sees and knows and yet is hopeful for the rest of man and for the future of civilization. I think I have not read in a dozen years one so small book that is more realistic than the one entitled "Modern Culture Deceived" by Andrew J. Krzesniak, Ph. D. S.T.D. Don't ask me to pronounce the name. We shall call him simply "Father Andrew."

Father Andrew wears no blinders. He has seen and read enough to make almost any man a misanthrope and even a dyed-in-the-wool cynic. Let me give you a few samples of his realistic apprehension of what's going on, of what the "leaders of thought" are saying, of the trend of art, literature, science and social life. But as you read, remember that Father Andrew's conclusion is going to be very different from what you might imagine.

On the cult of money and the adulation of the rich:

"Having so nonchalantly sloughed off his belief in God, modern man turned to money as his chief object of worship. For him it is the means by which wealth, pleasures and comforts can be acquired. The thought of money animates and thrills him; it impels him to do everything in his power to get as much of it as he can . . .

"This mad quest after riches does not always take the form of open lawlessness. Often it is disguised as a technically legalised procedure. Thus camouflage, it evades reproach; for the springs of its motive, kept always in tension under the stipulation of avarice, act secretly from within. The results, nevertheless, are quite the same. The victims of this masked avarice feel it just as painfully as do those who experience injustice under bare-faced forms . . .

"The worth of men is estimated, not in terms of virtue, but in terms of money. If one has much money, he has both friends and followers. Everybody greets him cordially, flatters him, favours upon him. Should he lose his riches, however, he is deserted, shunned, given no further thought."

Many a man has soared because of that despicable phase of human nature. I could cite a dozen instances myself in which a man who had money and friends, lost his friends when he lost his money.

On the cult of the body (Father Andrew says "he" when I fear, he means "she." He is gallant!)

"He is concerned about his body alone, which he fondles, admires, and develops with infinite care. As he surveys the world and life, he keeps his own

body prominently in the foreground; he never loses sight of it even for a moment. He knows it about everywhere like an idol. He respects it frequently in a nervous hope and small, not only in his own home but even in the streets and public places of entertainment. All his senses are reserved, all his delicacies concealed with great solicitude. Lips are rouged, cheeks powdered, nails manicured, hair dyed, eyebrows plucked, eyelashes curled. All this is done because nothing beyond the body is given the least thought or recognition."

On suicide of thought:
"According to the vitalistic pan-romanticists . . . reason itself is a harmful factor. They hold that reason depraves the very life of human beings, turning this to decay. Reason, they say, treats life destructively and, like a veritable demon, is leading the entire human race to ruin."

On Hedonism:
"Modern materialists, exultantly on the hunt for pleasure, pursue this will of the wisp through all the tortuous course of their tempestuous lives . . . Hardly have they drained one draught of delight when a new craving arises . . . The result of such an attempt is always the same. After they have exhausted all sources of delight and are closed and gorged to the full, the spell breaks and they are disillusioned . . . At such moments the thought 'And it all' bores into their brains."

On dancing:
"Many erotic features are also found in the majority of modern dances, the same being reproductions of the dances of the jungle and of other primitive nations . . . The modern dances have spread to the most obscure towns in rural districts, gaining there the same popularity they enjoy in metropolitan cities."

We could go on, but we need not. I fear that this process of lifting a few sentences here and there may give the reader of this piece, unless he also reads the book, an impression that Father Andrew is morbid. But those sentences are really conclusions of paragraphs in which he speaks with moderation and justice about what he sees. I quote them not only to show that this open-eyed and honest-minded observer is no optimistic fool.

So, let's come to his conclusion — the surprising conclusion. He says:

"Whenever any influence detrimental to the development of a nation begins to diffuse itself, a reaction sets in, either immediately or a short time after, and certain tendencies tend to remedy the injurious effects and to restore equilibrium come to the fore. Political and social upheavals are soon succeeded by a return to normal conditions. A period of corrupt morals is followed by a period of greater regard for morality; a decline in religion, by a revival of religious zeal. The operation of this law is confirmed by the history of every nation, ancient or modern. In the course of their existence, nations have undergone many acute and distressing crises which they have somehow managed to survive."

If I cared at this time and in this place to go into the affairs upon which an optimistic view of men and affairs must be based, I should launch into a little sermon on the text of St. Paul, "They are without hope because they are without God in the world," and its correlative text, "We are not as those who have no hope."

The only basis for optimism; the only reason to believe that the world will be set right again when it goes too far wrong is—God!

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Library Signpost

The Song of Bernadette

By Rev. Benedict Egan

The Song of Bernadette. By Frans Werfel. (Viking)
Frans Werfel, like certain other great writers of our times, is a fugitive from the Nazis. His first book since his escape is not a philippic nor a jeremiad against his enemies, but a testimony of love for God and man. It is the history of St. Bernadette, told in the form of a novel.

When the Nazi war machine crashed through France in that fateful June of 1940, Werfel and his wife were driven ahead of it in the melaleuca of refugees. He knew he was a marked man, for he had written against the Nazis in the earlier years; one night, in fact, he heard in hiding a British broadcast announcing his execution by the Nazis. There seemed no place in all the south of France where he could find lodging and secure refuge except Lourdes; and to Lourdes he came with his wife, with only a superficial knowledge of the destiny and importance of the little town.

Under cover, until he could get passports to America, he learnt about Bernadette and the meaning of Lourdes, and during one particularly dark hour of anguish and mortal fear of the Nazi dragon, he made a vow to sing the song of Bernadette if ever he should find safe harbor on the shores of America.

That was in 1940, in the late spring. And now, in the spring of 1942, appears this book, The Song of Bernadette, as the fulfillment of that vow. It is a generous, whole-hearted, amazing fulfillment; for it must surely be reckoned as one of the noblest novels ever written. Greater even than the miracle of his escape from the Nazis is the miracle of this book. Uprooted, driven forth, exasperated by terror, Werfel, who is a Hungarian Jew, has been so blessed through Bernadette with healing of mind and heart that: no trace of bitterness or hatred saws the utter graciousness of his story. It stands, apart and sublime, an overwhelming evocation of Bernadette and her lovely lady and the healing love that flows out of Lourdes.

Werfel begins his story with that marvellous February day in 1858 when Bernadette Soubirous, fourteen years old, suffering from chronic asthma, child of Lourdes poorest family, was given by Heaven to see the beautiful Lady in a vision of such ecstasy as to possess the girl until her death. In fifty chapters, arranged in tens like the decades of the Rosary, the author tells the chain of events which led from the first Ave Maria of that February apparition until the last unearthly cry "I love, before her death at 35.

Werfel follows the facts of the past with scrupulous fidelity, yet so great is his dramatic power that they are alchemized into a drama of remarkable

realism. The living Bernadette walks through these pages, every nuance and tone of her unique character faithfully reproduced. Even more remarkable is the mastery of Werfel's description of the apparitions. Such a delicacy of perception and such a penetrating intuition into the rarest of spiritual experiences would have been impossible without the aid of grace. No reviewer's description could reflect the utter spiritual joyfulness which radiates like the very essence of Mary's love in the pages which describe the eighteen apparitions. They are the perfect mirror of that heaven of delight and communion into which the little girl was rapt as she beheld the Lady.

Nor does Werfel relax his reverent attention to the verity of Bernadette's nature in those final years, hidden in the convent so far from her beloved grotto. He finds the true key to her great sufferings and raptures in the Lady's call to penance; and the final agony of the tumor on her leg is the culmination of that vexation of long before when the Lady bade her eat of the grass and drink of the muddy ooze in the grotto. "I cannot promise to make you happy in this world, only in the next . . ." the Lady had said to Bernadette during the second apparition. Werfel, more powerfully than any writer I know, conveys the full pathos of this sword of separation throughout Bernadette's life.

The Song of Bernadette is richly and warmly human. Each one of its host of characters comes forth, true to life: Bernadette's hard-hit father and mother, something like Dickens' Micawbers; her teacher, rigidly set on holiness and impatient of visions to a backward child; the dean of Lourdes, Peyramale, furious lion tamed at last into a docile lamb by his singular little parishioner; the government officials from the police commissioner Jacomet up to the Emperor Louis Napoleon; the cete crumles sagely voicing the stale left-overs of the age of reason and science. All these have their innings, but among them shines Bernadette, a sign to be accepted or contradicted. Werfel draws the full measure of the world's "comedy of errors" out of the dramatic personae around Bernadette; but never with venom or acid, for Werfel loves all these people and views their errors with humor and pity.

Not only is The Song of Bernadette the fulfillment of a noble vow, but also a testament of faith and love. Werfel believes and loves what his book so eloquently describes. He has the conviction that Lourdes is Heaven's gift to the world of our times—its peace, for the world's strife; its healing, for the world's inhumanity; its faith, for the world's negation and despair. For it was at Lourdes that he himself found peace and healing and faith during his flight from persecution.

(Three copies of The Song of Bernadette are being placed in the Catholic Evidence Library for what is hoped will be a long line of readers.)

The American home is a little democracy. Maybe so, but Mother wishes someone else occasionally would be elected to do the dishes.—Waterloo (La.) "Courier."

STRANGE BUT TRUE

Little-Known Facts for Catholics

By M. J. MURRAY

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EDITORIALS

(Continued from Page 10)

He was a member of the Ordination Class of 1928, had served in Africa, Mt. Morris, the Immaculate Conception Church at Rochester, and as Chaplain of St. Mary's Boys' Home. His death occurred at the Home early on Monday morning.

Father Smith was a priest whose outlook on life was always a happy one. People instinctively accepted him as their friend, their spiritual guide. Old and young rejoiced to share in the fruits of his ministry. Joy in the faith of Christ marked his every action. Fourteen years of priesthood were all too short to express the consuming zeal that dwelt within him, when we speak from a human standpoint, fourteen years of priesthood were ample, indeed, for such expression, when we see things as God sees them.

His many friends in the priesthood will miss him, his fraternal spirit, his helpful optimism. Thousands of the faithful to whom he ministered will see in his death the loss of one who meant much to them. The Bishop and the diocese will mourn his passing as a useful servant of the Church, a worthy priest of God.

To his brother and sister the COUNCIL extends its sympathy, extending the hope that solace shall be theirs in hallowed memory of a life dedicated to God and to the salvation of souls. May his soul rest in peace!

BAPTIZING THEM

Entrance into Christ's Church was to be by Baptism. Not by Baptism in the name of any creature however holy, however great, but by Baptism in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. We were to belong body and soul to the entire Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. In the three Persons, we were to find our supernatural life as in its source. In them we were to have the daily help needed for its continuance.

The power of the Trinity was first exercised within us supernaturally in our Baptism. That power suffused our being with sanctifying grace, which came to us not as a robe or covering, but as a penetrating force entering into every fiber of the soul. That power brought about wonderful changes in our souls: it blotted out all stain of original sin, took away the curse of the primal sin, raised the soul from a creature of God to the adopted son of God, made it an heir of God's Kingdom above. In us from the moment when the waters of Baptism flowed over our heads, the Father began to dwell as the Author of our being; the Son began to dwell as our Redeemer; the Holy Ghost began to dwell as our Sanctifier.

The Trinity remains within us throughout our life on earth and for all eternity in Heaven. It is a presence always effective in results. The divine love that brought about our creation, reveals in each new moment to renew in us our created gifts of body and mind, to add each-day new increments of soul-life and body-life, nourishing our souls constantly with its own divine life, blessing our bodies with sturdy health, active senses, the joy of living. Added to these natural gifts, are the riches of all the spiritual gifts and graces proper to one baptized in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

'Quiz' Corner

Why does not the Catholic Church have Sunday schools for the grown people like the other churches do?

Since Catholics receive a thorough training in their religion dur-

ing their school days they are pretty well equipped in the knowledge of their religion. They are constantly reminded of their duty by sermons on Sundays during Lent and on the various feasts. Instructions are given in the many Catholic societies all over the world, which eliminates the necessity of a Catholic Sunday school.