

Sermon Cards

'Born To Philosophize'

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

I have not yet desisted from the hunt for someone who can write scholastic philosophy, from beginning to end, in one volume—a volume not too fat and not too heavy in a way that a high school sophomore will understand and enjoy. Is that demanding too much? Well then let's make a concession. Suppose we say that the new and popular rendition of scholasticism shall be granted to the comprehension not of a high school sophomore but of the ordinary run-of-the-mill college graduate.

Once in a while I think I have got my man. Gerold Vann the English Dominican could do it. I think Walter Farrell, the American Dominican, could do it. Etienne Gilson perhaps could do it if he wouldn't occasionally soar aloft, and as he soars, leave the ordinary reader behind. Maritain cannot do it. Too high. Too deep. He demands too much previous knowledge. Mortimer Adler could do it if he would remain on the level of his lecture at Marquette on "St. Thomas and the Gentiles." But not if he were to write as he did in "How to Read a Book." He probably thinks that volume easy. It isn't. It requires close attention and close attention is a pain in the brain to the multitude.

Hearing me express my desires for a popular and yet accurate philosophical treatise, a certain professor of psychology in a university said, "I can do it." I asked the parish priest, whom the professor used to teach, "Heavens no," he said. "The people can't follow him. They admire but they don't understand."

So it goes. The ideal man doesn't appear. Or he is too busy. Or something.

When the proper man does appear, I wish he would commence with the sentence that opens that old familiar classic by Tillman Pesch, S.J., "The Christian Philosophy of Life": "Man is by nature a philosopher and has been aptly characterized as being in ceaseless quest of the causes of things." The casual reader will not know it, but both parts of that sentence are directly from Aristotle. But from that point, Father Pesch goes on to philosophize for 626 pages! Too much! And besides, it isn't the kind of book I have in mind.

The writer of my perhaps impossible volume might next snatch a definition out of a book that appeared 37 years after Tillman Pesch's—Eugene Bagger's "For the Heathen Are Wrong." Bagger says, "The novice of philosophy wonders about everything that other people take for granted."

That's better than a definition. The philosopher is one who realizes that he has been somehow projected into a world of wonder. He is not stupid enough or lazy enough to accept it and do no prying about it. His brain may or may not be a starter, but once the spark enters his mental carburetor he is off on a line of thought. He doesn't stop until he gets somewhere. G. K. Chesterton says that the human mind is an instrument made for coming to conclusions, and that if it doesn't reach conclusions there is something wrong with the instrument.

The reason most men don't do any philosophical thinking is the same reason that most men don't do any theological thinking. They are afraid of it. They think it too hard and so they leave it alone. "Besides," they say, "What good is it? What does it get you?" Nothing but a headache in the beginning and a feeling of aspiration at the end. So they take the world and life as they find it and ask no questions. If you were to drug them or slug them into unconsciousness and deposit them on some far tropical isle, they would, upon awaking, say, "How came I here?" But they have been deposited on this earth and launched into life and they are too inert mentally to ask Whence or How or Why. They speak with contempt of people who, in their phrase "Don't know what it is all about," but they themselves don't know what life is about and they don't even try to find out. They were born with a capacity for philosophical thinking, but the capacity has been wrapped in a napkin and buried, like the talent in the Gospel.

Perhaps they are also what the philosophers call "hedonists." They crave pleasure and make a god of it. Eat drink and have a good time, is their motto. Take the world as you find it. Ask no questions. Thought is painful. Chuck it.

That's pretty low down in the scale of human life. Even so, the hedonists, the "tired businessmen" and the others are wiser than philosophers of a certain stripe the agnostics. These are a prize specimen of what the Scripture means when it says "Professing themselves to be wise they are fools." They philosophize and philosophize no end, but they start and continue and conclude with the idea that truth is forever elusive. "Whence do we come? Whither do we go? What is the meaning of life? We don't know," says the agnostic; "nobody knows; nobody can know. You may think and think for a lifetime but as far as finding the truth is concerned, you are licked before you start. You are like the medievals who went in search of the Fortunata Isles or the lost Atlantic. There isn't any."

But the pathos and the tragedy of it is, and also the glory and the beauty of it, that we cannot refuse to think. We are made to think. If we are human we have to think. Sometimes the world seems like a prison, or a purgatory. We cannot help asking "Why?" "The universe is crazy," says Anatole France. But the philosopher asks whether the universe is crazy or the man is crazy who calls it crazy. At other times the world seems beautiful and wonderful. The least we can ask is "How come?" Whence the beauty and the majesty and the wonder? Is there a Source of Beauty? What is Beauty anyway? The man who asks these questions is ripe for philosophy. He needs the right philosophy.

Eugene Bagger, a convert to Catholicism at the age of 13, neglected it, but 25 years later says, "The philosophy that I had constructed for myself in the attempt to make human history intelligible was a kind of revised version of Thomism." He came back to the Church. But the odd thing is that many who are in the Church know nothing about Thomism which alone makes "human history intelligible." Why doesn't some competent person come out of his shell and tell us about Thomism in terms that we can understand?

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Think of This Tonight

Think of this as you go to bed tonight. Think of this as you lean the back and lift the window, and smell the night air and look out at the stars. Think of this . . . There are thousands of ships chocks on Midways that are empty tonight. There are thousands of little cottages . . . like yours? . . . in Jaguaria, Greece, China, Russia . . . empty tonight. Where have all the people gone? Why, didn't you know? They're dead . . . You are still alive. YOUR blood is warm. A face you love is there on the pillow in the dark of the room . . . and everything is so quiet and still . . . and beautiful. That's worth saving, isn't it? Others are dying in order to save it for you. Then . . . in your country asking how much when it asks you to lend at least one-fourth of your pay, far war bonds? Will you be doing too much if you tell your employer tomorrow that you want to lend at least one-fourth of your pay . . . a dime from every dollar . . . and for him to set it aside every pay day? Ask yourself that question as you stand at your window and smell the night air and look out at the stars tonight!

—SELECTED

'Quiz' Corner

Is it the duty of the Church to guide its flock concerning the cause of war?

The Church does so. She says that no war can arise without injustice on some one's part; and it is never lawful to declare war except as a result of a succeeding grave and unjust provocation. But apart from the causes of war, when it comes to a question of morality, the Church says that violent repression of violent injustice is not wrong, and the soldiers engaged in such lawful repression of injustice are not guilty of murder if the aggressive nation exposes its own soldiers to danger of death.

Why does the Catholic Church have Sunday schools for the young people in the other churches?

Since Catholics receive a course of training in religion during their school days they are pretty well equipped in the knowledge of their religion. They are constantly reminded of their duty in the sermons on Sunday, during Lent, and on the various fasts. Instructions are given in many Catholic societies, all of which eliminate the necessity of a Catholic Sunday school. Also, study clubs to a great extent, serve the same purpose.

Is it not true that the stars have some influence upon us?

The variations of the sun and moon undoubtedly affect indirectly by bringing about seasonal and weather changes by the position of the stars can have no influence upon our destinies, as astrology pretends. Human actions depend upon free-will, and the circumstances in which we find ourselves are according to the divine will. To seek information from the position of the stars at the time of a child's birth is not only the height of folly, but a sinful superstition which encourages fatalism and may easily lead to a denial of God's Providence.

Why is it that Baptism is absolutely necessary for salvation?

Because Christ made Baptism a condition for spiritual birth necessary to enter the kingdom of heaven. He could have commanded any other course that His wisdom dictated.

"Unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Ghost, he can not enter the kingdom of heaven." Here is the plain statement of command; a law established; a condition is placed for entrance in heaven. This then is God's will that Baptism be necessary for salvation. We can readily see why God selected Baptism with water. For water is a sign of washing or cleansing.

Eighty per cent of the world is at war and the remaining 20 per cent is looking for a good place to have a nervous breakdown.

EDITORIALS

(Continued from Page 15)

has yet to be refuted. Even following the declaration of war conditions were not substantially changed, and it is estimated that by the middle of next year some 20,000 industrial enterprises will be compelled to close their doors.

The decline of the middle class must be viewed as a dangerous symptom of social sickness. For it is upon this class all Christian sociologists base their theories of social reform. Remove it, drive its members into the ranks of lower classes, and a disordered social body composed of proletarians and the wealthy will result, with an unbridgeable chasm between the groups.

The problem has occasioned grave concern on the part of many social authorities. The distinguished Jesuit sociologist, Fr. Valere Fallon, for example, insists in his "Principles of Social Economy" upon the duty "to preserve as much as possible the middle classes . . . The concentration movement which characterizes our era threatens particularly the petty tradesmen and the small business men."

Similarly, the non-Catholic Lewis Corey points out in "The Crisis of the Middle Class" that "not only is there a quantitative change in the greater ruin wrought, but a qualitative change in its impact on groups formerly only slightly affected by depression." Large numbers of small producers, storekeepers and independent professionals are always killed off by depression, the author adds. "But mere assassination now becomes massacre. In only three years of depression, from 1930 to 1932, 578,000 independent enterprisers in industry, trade and the professions, were driven out of business: one out of six. The massacre is still on; the survivors tremble." And the present threat to the middle class, growing out of the war, should make those who did survive tremble even more.

But can such conditions long endure without disastrous consequences? Can the middle class, the backbone of social organization, be destroyed with impunity? Hardly. Moreover, there are moral considerations to the problem. As three French social writers, Riviere, Agnard and Colrat, maintain, "shielded from want and protected from luxury, living at home, the middle class is, from the moral viewpoint, in a most favorable situation. It is an intermediate category between the capitalists and the wage-earners, and can obstruct the economic and the political excesses of both." Take away the backbone and the human body collapses, take away the middle class—the real backbone of society—and the social body will likewise collapse. Assuredly, here is a matter of grave import especially for the future of the American people.

—CY Service.

Library Digest Is Yours A Catholic Mind?

By Rev. Benedict Sheed

The always enterprising Mr. Frank Sheed has just completed the first year of a very ambitious enterprise. Realizing that the liberal arts students are undergoing an enormous transformation and demanding the very best of Christian thought and action if that transformation is to be directed toward Christ, Mr. Sheed has been serving from the house since those many months that one of our greatest needs is an intelligent, fully well indoctrinated Catholic mind and its possession of a thorough Catholic mind.

A year ago he called attention to the need and began publication of what he called a Tutorial Series of Catholic Masterpieces. It is aimed to help Catholics love themselves in the great principles and consequences of Catholic faith.

Despite our Catholic schools and the staggering expenditure of energy and material to keep them going, we are not producing an adequate supply. This is not said with any chip on the shoulder, or implying that there is much goodness among our youth; in every atom and corner of which we should thank God on our knees. But there is not enough intelligence—real Catholic intelligence, and to be perfectly frank, it should be added, the spirit is kind of some of our clergy.

To have a Catholic mind is more than to know the facts of theology and a few of the facts of history. It is to be dominated by the revelation of God, dominated in mind and heart and will and action, seeing all things in perspective, really seeing things as, and not merely occasionally saying so. It is to have one's life mastered by the Being of God by the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, by our sacramental incorporation into the life of the Blessed Trinity; by the potency of the Church in the Incarnation into every fibre of human life and history; by the primacy of the spiritual over the material. Such an overwhelming reality creates a conviction in the Christian soul. Our world today is in pathetic need of this revelation. It cannot be achieved on a mass scale. It is a personal conversion. It means "selling" all you have, your time, your frivolities, your normal interests, your preconceptions (harder of all); and allowing the Holy Spirit to direct your life.

Once that "selling out" is accomplished, the forming of the Catholic mind can begin. Catholic action without the Catholic mind is not acceptable to God. If we are to be agents, it is to be with all we have, mind as well as will and heart and strength. Our doing is to be an expression of our knowing, just as our knowing is a fulfillment of our being. Our Catholic work will be an extension of the Incarnation far more intensely, if we realize our place in the Incarnation.

Mr. Sheed's Tutorial Series is aimed to offer the primer material for this forming of the Catholic mind. It presents eight basic masterpieces of Catholic writing, arranged in a logical sequence so that the student may find himself moving step by step to eye-widening vistas of Catholic thought.

Taking the Incarnation of our Savior as its starting-point, Mr. Sheed chose Dr. Aristides' fine book "Whom Do You Say?" A Catholic who reads this book will really begin to see if he does not already do so; the place that Jesus occupies in history and in life.

Mr. Sheed's next choice is Cardinal Newman's novel "Callista." Jesus established a Church, His Mystical Body, Vine and Branches, with the mission to penetrate life and history with the grace of the Incarnation. Callista shows the early Church in action, its life, its spirit, its energy. The Catholic who reads it will appreciate far better the great perspective of his Church.

The third selection is Hilary of Poitiers' "Treatise on the Trinity." The Church has had to meet two thousand years of the unremitting prodigious force of the human intellect. In our own day, the light is perhaps more deadly than ever. The Catholic who studies this book will be equipped to stand against the titanic forces ranged today against the Church, and will be confirmed in his view of the Church as the timeless bulwark of truth and life.

The fourth selection is Monsignor Benigni's "Christ in the Church," which helps to link the ancient with the modern by giving a panoramic view of the Church's action as the working of Christ from end to end of history, strongly yet gently disposing all things for the fulfillment of the Kingdom of Heaven. The Catholic who studies this book will learn how to evaluate history in the light of God.

Next comes Helen Waddell's "The Desert Fathers," which returns to another important phase of the history of the early Church, presenting that remarkable and fascinating movement of the third and fourth centuries which had such far-reaching results in European history. The Catholic who studies this book will begin to perceive the limitless resources of the Church to renovate and enrich human life.

Next selection is "The Confessions of St. Augustine," monumental classic of Christian literature, in a new, eminently simple translation by Mr. Sheed. This grand testament by one of the greatest minds of Christendom is a thrilling spiritual experience, revealing to the depths the power of the Christian faith and its loveableness.

G. K. Chesterton's "What's Wrong With the World?" is fifth in the series, presenting the case for the family as the unit of society, and for women as queen of the family. This is the natural corollary of the Incarnation, and when it enters the work of the Incarnation suffers with it. It is vitally endangered today; the informed Catholic mind must be equipped with the Christian social doctrine.

Last of all is an Anthology of English Catholic Poetry, which Mr. Sheed calls "Poetry and Life." It is the poets and the mystics who are real poets of any truth. A reading of sacred poetry deepens our perception of the beauty of Truth, and demands the allegiance of the affections, leading thus to expand our rational assent to real assent, and making us fighting crusaders of the truths we hold.