Sursum Corda

'Insignificant' Man

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

When telescopes were invented, enabling man to see deeper into the skies than he had seen before, and to realize in consequence that the universe is vaster than the primitives and the aborigines imagined it, certain scientists conceived the idea that man is only an infinitesimal speck on a tiny earth which is itself only a grain of sand in the midst of an illimitable universe. Those who thus emphasize man's littleness have been mostly materialists and hence anti-religious. They seem to have detected shrewdly enough that to do away with religion it is not enough to deny God, you must belittle man.

Perhaps the coryphaeus of these anti-God anti-man propagandists was the curious hybrid of scientist and charlatan Ernest Haeckel. He put upon a phrase that sticks in the imagination. "Man," he says, "who exalted himself to the skies and fancied himself the image and likeness of God, is found to be only a placental mammal of no more importance in the scheme of things than the microscopic infusoria that exist in the slime of a stagnant pool." At this moment I shall not stop to controvert Haeckel's opinion, but I cannot deny myself the satisfaction of asking if any other placental mammal except man knows that it is a placental mammal, or if the bugs in the slime would know what Haeckel means when he calls them microscopic infusoria. Man is a mammal and knows that he is a mammal. A bug is a bug but doesn't know he is a bug. As one of the mystics said: "God is present to a stone as he is to me, but the stone doesn't know it." So man is, I should imagine, of some more value in the universe than those things, animate or inanimate that cannot know what they are or what place they occupy in "the scheme of things."

However, let's go back to the argument—if we may so dignify it—of those who think that because the universe is big, man is little and that the bigger we find the universe to be the littler man becomes. I seem to remember a paragraph of Canon Sheehan's in which he pictures a stage equipped with beautiful scenery but otherwise vacant. The curtain rises, the audience is fascinated with the design and the color of the painted canvas and the ingenuity with which the artist has simulated nature. Suddenly there appears on the stage a man. He may be a cripple, a hunchback, an ugly villain, but the eyes and attention of the audience shift instantaneously from the scene to the man. The play's the thing, but the play's the man, not the scenery.

Now, all the world's a stage. In fact all the universe is a stage. The back drop may be the Rockies or the Himalayas, huge, majestic, awe-inspiring. But when a man steps upon the stage of those cloud-piercing ranges he dwarfs them. He has something that they have not. He can transfer the mountains to canvas and with his brush lend them beauty greater than their own. He can write a poem about them. He can ask the mountain "Have you a charm to stay the morning star in his steep course?" But the mountain makes no reply. The mountain doesn't know its own charm. Only man—and God—know the beauty of nature.

Or man can dig into the mountain and extract from it for his own purposes whatever wealth it contains. Or he accepts the challenge of the mountain and scales its most hazardous pinnacles, or he may mock its dangers by flying over them. As of mountains, so of continents, of oceans and of the heavens. They are bigger than man but man is their master. He is awed indeed by the vastness of the universe but not overwhelmed. He computes the distances between the stars, he analyzes the chemical content of the sun, calculates the degree of its heat; he measures its mass and weighs it in his balance. "The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof." Yes, but man, made to the image and likeness of God, enjoying the God-like prerogative of intelligence is, under God, Lord of the universe. "The heavens declare the glory of God." Yes, but man declares the glory of God and of the heavens.

So I have never been able to see the force of the materialists' argument that man is insignificant in the universe. Nor was I, even as a student, impressed by what they used to call in those days "the cosmic difficulty." The universe is great but man, who conquers the universe is greater. The universe is locked up in itself. Man bursts forth from the confines of his body and his brain. His mind is a kingdom to him, as the poet says, but that kingdom has no boundaries. Bishop Prohaszka says "Even the universe is too small for me; it is enough for my grave, but not sufficient for the spreading of my wings; time is a negligible, small quality, a bond twixt two infinities." "The world is mine," said the Count of Monte Cristo. The world? Say rather the worlds. This world and the next were made for man. Insignificant? He alone is significant. As for the materialists who seem to think that man is only so many pounds of flesh and blood and bone, they do not know man.

It is important now when man is in danger of being estimated as so much cannon-fodder and human life maybe thought so cheap as to be worthless, to remember the elementary fact that under God nothing has infinite value but man.

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Library Signpost

'A Soul Naturally Christian'

By Rev. Benedict Ehmann

If for nothing else, the evening at Aquinas last Sunday would have been amply repaid for me by Margaret Anglin's presentation of the great lines of Hecuba at the conclusion of Euripides' The Trojan Women. The aged woman is lamenting over the corpse of her little grandson whom the Greeks have killed at the fall of Troy. Her cup of gall is brimful, and the sorrow of all women in all wars wails starkly in her broken speech, remembering lost things. Finally, her soul drawn tight over the rack of grief, she cries out:

"Lo, I have seen the open hand of God
And in it nothing, nothing save the rod
Of mine affliction and the eternal hate.
Beyond all lands chosen and lifted great
For Troy! Vain, vain were prayer and incense-swell
And bull's blood upon the altars! . . ."

Suddenly a quieting of the tumult of her soul. A light breaks through her grief. Dimly she discerns a divine purpose in her woe and in the tragedy of Troy:

All is well.
Had He not turned us in His hand and thrust
Our high things low and shook our hills as dust,
We had not been this splendor and our wrong
An everlasting music for the song
Of earth and heaven."

There you have it! Four hundred years before Christ taught the world by His crucifixion, a pagan dramatist perceives "as in a glass darkly," the creative function of pain and calamity. In a rapid montage I see the ordeals of this present war testing the mettle of man's spirit. Without them "we had not been this splendor." I remember Colin Kelly. I remember the three men driven for thirty-four days on the open sea in a raft enduring grisesome horrors of body and mind, but coming through with their chins up, still holding on, still with the will to live. I remember all our boys driving through strange lands of the earth against terrible foes. I think of their mothers at home, grieving, like Hecuba, but proud, too, like Hecuba, of that splendor which had not been but for the racking and stress of affliction.

Surely war is hellish. It debauches men. We need not forget that any more than Hecuba. But even in our most ardent conviction of this, it would be ungracious and untruthful to close the eyes against an evident merciful Providence working through the evil necessity thrust upon us. This is true even though it was our own mistakes of the past which have thrust the evil upon us. We do not have to adopt the cynicism of fascist philosophers who maintain that war is noble and desirable because it makes men virile and stiffens their fibre. But we do have to recognize that it is not incompatible with a benevolent Providence to permit calamity as a chastening penance and as a purging of the dross by fire. The ageless wisdom of the common folk realized this truth in a proverb which comes from the Portuguese. "God writes straight with crooked lines."

If there is one barrier to the understanding of this by our folk of today, it is our public education in school, press, radio, and movie. These have made us crass and worldly, without a vision of the great truths. Living in the heritage of nineteen hundred years of Christian influence, there is not a dramatist to measure the spiritual insight and grandeur of the dramas of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. And yet they lived more than four centuries before Christ. Have the spiritual faculties of our dramatists and poets been blinded and benumbed by the coarse materialism around us? Perhaps the war will last as long as it will take us to wake up and cleanse out our idols and return to the only true God. In the meantime, it is good to be reminded of the imperishable lines which were a pagan poet's tribute to Divine Wisdom in a dark and desperate time.

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FOR CATHOLIC STAGERS:

The Heart o' Mary: A One-Act Drama
by George M. Baird.

This is one of the best written plays available to religious groups. The story is well conceived, ably constructed, inspiring in theme. Produced carefully by talented amateurs, it should prove a high light of their stage season.

Plot: In the stable cave where Jesus was born, ELIZABETH, mother of John the Baptist, and MIRIAM, a young girl of Bethlehem, are awaiting the return of Mary and Joseph from the Presentation at the Temple. They are fearful that harm may have befallen the Holy Family at the hands of robbers or wild beasts. The party returns with JOSEPH carrying AN UNCONSCIOUS WOMAN whom they have found by the wayside. She is homeless and about to become an unmarried mother. Townsfolk bring warning of Herod's decree. In their haste to flee all except MARY prepare to leave the strange woman. Our Lady remembers the period of suspicion which assailed her when she announced that she, a virgin, was to bear a child. She urges the others to be merciful and judge not lest they be judged. Her counsel prevails, and they all agree to take the woman with them to a safer hiding place.

Production Notes: Biblical drama . . . 6 characters 1 M, 5F adults . . . One set: the Cave of the Nativity . . . One hour playing time . . . Period costumes . . . Simple direction and equipment . . . Publisher: Samuel French, 25 West 45th St., New York City. Copyright 1927. 30 cents a copy. Royalty $5 . . . This recommendation and digest are credited to the WPA Federal Theatre Project. A director contemplating this play should submit it to a priest to check on any possible theological inaccuracies.

FIVE and TEN Years Ago--

From Nov. 18, 1932, Edition

Citing exceptional progress by the Dutch Catholics, a London correspondent on a visit to Holland reported that the 36 per cent of 7,000,000 Holland inhabitants who were Catholics supported 34 daily newspapers, 32 papers published two or three times a week and 82 weekly publications.

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From Nov. 18, 1927, Edition

His Holiness, Pope Pius XI, in an Apostolic Letter to U. S. Bishops noted the approach of the Catholic University's Golden Jubilee and urged that "plans be concerted and realized in your respective dioceses to give to the claims of this institution priority over all appeals other than those of established tradition and strict necessity."

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Responding to an appeal of His Excellency, Bishop Kearney at the Seventh Annual Diocesan Convention, National Council of Catholic Women, delegates pledged to take

The Chapel on the Hill

(Inspired by Evening Mass at the Fourth Regimental Chapel, Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Replacement Training Center, Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Father Raymond A. Feely, Chaplain)

By Brigadier General Henry C. Evans

In the peace and quiet of the evening,
After the day of drill,
The soldiers come to Evening Mass
In the Chapel on the Hill.

There the shadows of war are lifted,
As the wooden benches fill
With men seeking strength from Faith and Prayer,
In the Chapel on the Hill.

The flickering candles beckon,
Each kneeling figure is still;
Praying for Grace in the midst of strife,
In the Chapel on the Hill.

We bow at the Consecration,
As in our hearts we thrill
To His Presence there on the Altar,
In the Chapel on the Hill.

'Quiz' Corner

Is it a sin to have your fortune told?

The future depends on the will of God or the will of man. This cannot be known through its natural causes and only through God. To attribute power to tell the future to a creature is a sin of blasphemy. If one were to go to a fortune teller believing that they are capable of knowing the future, which can be known only by God, it is a serious thing. Even though one does not believe in it, it may be wrong since we are accessory to something which is wrong. Were it not for patronage the fortune tellers could not exist.

Is it true that the dead know what is happening to those who are left behind?

It is quite evident that the blessed in Heaven know what is happening on earth and is of interest to them. In the Gospel of Saint Luke our Lord says: "There shall be joy in Heaven upon one sinner that doth penance, more than upon ninety-nine just who need not penance." From this text we may rightly infer that the blessed in Heaven know who are the sinners and who are the just. As to the Souls in Purgatory, or those in hell, we have no reason to say positively that they do or do not know what is happening in this world. From the parable of Dives and Lazarus we might gather that there are some cases in which God may permit the lost souls to know events on the earth.

Actress Ruby Keeler was married recently in a north Hollywood Catholic Church. Since she was divorced from Al Jolson, how could she be married in the Catholic church?

Ruby Keeler married Al Jolson before a judge in 1928. Since she is a Catholic this marriage was invalid in the eyes of the Church. In other words she was not married as far as the Church is concerned. This civil ceremony was reviewed by a Diocesan Matrimonial Court and the invalidity of the marriage was officially declared. Since there was no marriage in 1928 Ruby Keeler was free to marry whomsoever she chose. Just bear in mind that the Church court granted no divorce but merely issued a decree of nullity. There is all the difference in the world between a divorce and a decree of nullity.

Is it true that on the last day all our sins will be revealed, even those that have been forgiven?

The Church has not defined whether or not sins forgiven in the Sacrament of Penance will be made known on the Last Day. It is the more common opinion of theologians that all sins will be made known on the Day of Judgment. This will manifest the mercy of God and will be a glory to the one who has repented through His grace and has made ample satisfaction for all sins committed.

EDITORIALS

(Continued from Page 18)

Brooklyn's gain is Rochester's loss. It is hard to say farewell to one who has been so close to clergy and laity in the diocese. The lasting friendships built up over the years will remain even when duty calls Father Mahoney to another field of labor. We wish him Godspeed as he enters on his new work, we pray that God's blessing may accompany him, and we hope that he may be able to return occasionally to gladden the hearts of those who have known and loved him in Rochester.

THE SECOND COMING OF CHRIST

The last Sunday in the Church Year brings to us the Gospel prophecy of the second coming of Christ, to judge the world. It reminds us in vivid language that the world will pass away. The world and all that it offers passes away for the individual when he dies. At the last day, it shall pass away not only for those who die, but it shall fade away into the nothingness out of which it was created. The great fear and tribulation among the people are referred to; many dramatic statues that are only too clear, many filled with mystery, are given; the one source of consolation for the elect is mentioned. The Son of Man shall gather them unto Himself! He shall call them to their never ending reward.

Let us look always for the sign of the Son of Man. That sign is the cross of His crucifixion. On the last day, we shall see it shining brightly in the heavens. On the days that are now with us, we may see it on our churches and schools, on the rosary we carry with us, on the prayerbook we use at Mass. We can see it with the eyes of our soul on the world at large, on the people that know Christ in the world, on our governments that strive to rule men rightly. We should be able to see it reflected in our manner of living, every action, every word, every thought, marked clearly with the cross of Christ.

Keeping the cross before us in life, we shall be