

Library Signpost

Cues and Clues

By Rev. Benedict Egan

At the Christian Culture lecture last Sunday evening, Mrs. Sheed was asked a question as to what she would consider the greatest English classic. With the admission that such a decision would be extremely difficult in a literature which has produced so many masterpieces, Mrs. Sheed preferred to state what book she would give, first of all, as a gift to a friend who might ask her for the best single book to introduce her to English literature.

The book is The Vision of Piers Plowman. This is a 14th century allegory by William Langland. There is some doubt as to its authorship; but solid traditions ascribe it to Langland.

What is there about Piers Plowman which makes it such a representative work that a person of Mrs. Sheed's intelligence would choose it as the gateway to English literature? Well, there is its monumental size: it is a poem in the grand style. There is its grand expression of that Christianity which was the very fiber of the High Middle Ages and of what was then called Merrie England. There is also its authentic poetry and imagination, of the blood royal with such immortals as Homer, The Song of Roland, and Beowulf. And (perhaps best of all, for without this there can be no undying fame in literature) there is its profound humanity: for here is the very stuff of that English people, such as they were six hundred years ago, living, breathing, moving to high aspirations, sinning (as men have always sinned) and repenting, too, and withal radiating the truest democracy, which is that of the spirit, alight with the knowledge of God, and aglow with His love.

An American professor, Henry W. Wells, has given us a version in modern English, published by Sheed and Ward. It is a fascinating job, giving us moderns a key to an otherwise locked treasure-trove. It is quite likely at the Rochester Public Library, and will be, one of these days, at the Catholic Evidence Library, when funds permit.

Yesterday, Feb. 10, was the 50th anniversary of the first Apparition of Our Blessed Lady to Bernadette. How much more that will have meant to people this year, through the marvellous interpretation of Franz Werfel! Many people will doubtless make this the occasion to begin their second reading of it. Yes, it is that kind of book: the kind Mr. Sheed described last Sunday as impelling us to a second, and third, reading, not because of the plot, but because of the alliveness of the period therein, whom we desire to visit again and again, even more than many of the friends we know.

I take this occasion to present to you a striking item from the review of the Werfel novel by the Jesuit Father Brodrick in the London Tablet:

"It is just fifty years since the Jew, Emile Zola, went to Lourdes to collect material for the first novel of a trilogy of cities—Lourdes, Rome, Paris—by which he proposed to show that the virtues of faith, hope, and charity, as Catholics understand and practise them, are productive of nothing but illusion, despotism, and social misery. Zola's Lourdes was a brilliant piece of special pleading. Its author, an apostle of science and progress like Mr. H. G. Wells, prided himself on his realism and maintained that the book was no mere romance, but a careful study of solid if sordid facts. On Aug. 20th, 1892, Zola witnessed the sudden cure of Marie Lebranchu, the La Grivotte of his novel. This . . . was too much for one who aspired to be the Claude Bernard of modern letters, so he staged a prompt relapse for Marie in his pages and packed her off to a hospital to die, though he knew she was as hale and hearty as himself. Indeed, she outlived him by several years. When asked by Dr. Boissarie to explain this very unscientific proceeding, he replied crossly: 'My personages are my business; I have the right to dispose of them as I want to, to make them live, or have them die as it pleases me.' Against such an attitude Catholic protestations were utterly ineffective. The novel threw on them and went the rounds of the world. Zola's literary art was to that. The only telling answer would have been another and greater novel, and Mary, the Mother of God, who so often smiled and sometimes even laughed in her dealings with Bernadette, had that answer up her white sleeve. She had another Jew in reserve, a little boy of two in Prague at the time when Zola was making his researches in Lourdes. Fifty years is less than the tick of a clock in the chronology of Heaven." (The boy, of course, was Franz Werfel.)

"If someone were to say that The Song of Bernadette is the best saint's life ever written, he would not be so very wide of the mark. As a piece of literature it is truly magnificent . . . There is abundant beauty and tragedy, laughter and tears, indeed the whole round of life, in this incomparable Song, and it carries many an echo out of Eternity. It is the Lady's triumph over Zola, and her smile is going to irradiate the darkness of a war-stricken world. . . . A Catholic will assuredly feel at home in this book of a great and noble-hearted Jew." (With the kind permission of The London Tablet.)

Recall this holy thought of St. Francis de Sales before sleep:

"If we love God, we fall asleep not merely in His sight, but at His Will; and our Creator and Divine Sculptor lays us down upon our beds as a statue in its niche or a bird in its nest, and, waking, we shall find that God was present, and that we have been neither removed nor separated from Him. We were present to His holy Will and Pleasure, though without our consciousness."

The Song of Bernadette, and St. Francis de Sales' Introduction to the Devout Life are in the Catholic Evidence Library, open 4 to 8, 7 to 9, except Saturdays and Sundays: Columbus Civic Centre.

"Religious work among the Indians is most successful in places where there are relatively few white people."—The Shield.

Three Weeks On A Raft

By Rev. James M. O'Connell, C.S.P.

Many times in the pulpit, and perhaps some times even in this column I have tried to make the point that every man is religious by nature—and that only when certain philosophical, professional or amateur, get snarling with him does he become atheistic. Leave a man as God made him and he will turn to God with the inflexible instinct of a babe cradling its mother's breast. The clearest test on the subject is that of King David: "Only the fool hath said in his heart there is no God." Another almost equally familiar, though non-scriptural, datum is that of Tertullian: "The human soul is naturally Christian." A multitude of objections may be alleged against atheism, but the first objection is that atheism is unnatural.

It happens, however, that modern civilization is to a great degree artificial, that is to say, unnatural. One significant comparison is that of the vitamins. By a curious poverty man takes what he needs which the Creator has placed certain life-giving elements, and in the process of preparing the wheat for the table, modern man—being very scientific—removes the life-giving elements. Only of late have we become sufficiently aware of the artificiality of that procedure. So after taking the vitamins out, the baker puts them in again and charges the consumer extra! "Monkeys is (not) the swiftest people."

Likewise an artificial civilization takes out the life giving element which God placed in the heart of man, and too rarely are those "vitamins" (so to speak) replaced. Why don't we leave the wheat and the man as God made them?

So in the pulpit and elsewhere we preachers say: "Leave a man alone; don't clutter up his brain with artificial and unnatural philosophies; leave him as God made him, and he will be religious." I don't know how many times in public and in private I have quoted the celebrated psychologist of the last generation, William James of Harvard, who said he had heard many reasons why men should pray, and many reasons why they should not pray, but that few who philosophize upon the subject seem to remember that the real reason why we pray is because we are "made that way."

Well now here comes an excellent proof of that fact: Eight men on rafts in the South Pacific for over three weeks, with no food but a few oranges, no drinking water except a few drops caught in a makeshift container when an occasional rain fell; burning up with heat by day and chilled to the bone at night; the salt spray cutting their skin like knives; sharks all around their frail rubber rafts; following them as wolves follow a wounded beast in the woods, waiting an opportune moment for the kill; eight men huddled together, cramped into impossible positions day and night for these interminable weeks; hope of rescue alternately reviving and dying, until it seemed folly ever to hope again; their sense like their hopes tricked so often that when land finally appeared they suspected it to be a mirage; surely if ever men were up against stark reality and far removed from artificiality it was on that occasion. No philosophers and no professors to "sell them up" with unnatural explanations of man, of life of the universe, of the meaning of things; alone out there face to face with Absolute Reality.

Those men turned to God, religion, prayer. They even went so far as to ask God for a miracle, indeed for a succession of miracles, and all of those men, including the "agnostic," came not only to believe in God and in prayer but to testify that miracles happened in their behalf.

Two of them, the leader and the one time agnostic-atheist have written the story for the newspapers and magazines. What they have to say, especially about their prayer-meetings, with the three rafts brought close together for the purpose (what a church!) will be no doubt discussed, approved, disapproved, explained or explained away by thousands of commentators who have not had and never will have any such excruciating but in the end triumphant experience. But it seems to me that of all the comments that can be made, the truest and the most important is this: when, by accident or by deliberate intent, men get away from the artificialities, the trivialities, the mental and moral abnormalities, the un-human and anti-human systems of thought that are called "philosophies"; away from that phantasmagorical mass of impressions and opinions, false and true, good and bad, wise and foolish, sane and insane that is called "civilization"; there is reviewed in their souls religion which came to them with their creation. Those eight men learned it the hard way. Perhaps eight million men, or eighty million men, reading of their experience will now, as we say, "come to themselves." When men come to themselves they also come to God. (Copyright, 1943, N. C. W. C.)

FIVE and TEN Years Ago

From Feb. 9, 1932, Edition  
Speakers at the Catholic Conference on Industrial Problems in the New York City made a frank appraisal of the economic situation as no mere "cyclical" depression but a period of transition for the application of sane remedies "if our national life is to be preserved."

From Feb. 10, 1938, Edition  
Attendance at Mass was held up as a possible "one good deed a day for God" by His Excellency, Bishop Kearney addressing more than 625 Catholic Boy Scouts in Sacred Heart Cathedral.

The projected Equal Rights amendment to the United States Constitution was opposed in statements presented to the Senate Judiciary Committee by the Rt. Rev. Msgr. John A. Ryan, Director of the N. C. W. C. Department of Social Action and by Miss Agnes G. Regan, Executive Secretary of the National Council of Catholic Women.

"Heaven is heaven because God is so beautiful in the light, and earth is the factory of Saints because God is so beautiful in the darkness."—Father Faber.

'Quiz' Corner

Will you see me right on the subject of venial sin? Does venial sin destroy sanctifying grace in the soul? If not, does it decrease this grace?

Venial sin does not destroy sanctifying grace in the soul; grace is lost only by the commission of mortal sin. Nor does venial sin diminish sanctifying grace. A gradual decrease of grace would only be possible on the supposition that either a definite number of venial sins amounted to mortal sin, or that the supply of grace might be diminished, grade by grade, down to ultimate extinction.

The first hypothesis is contrary to the nature of venial sin; by adding venial sin to venial sin we get only more venial sin, never a mortal sin. The second hypothesis leads to the heretical view that grace may be lost without the commission of mortal sin. Nevertheless, venial sins have an indirect influence on the state of grace, for they make a relapse into mortal sin easy. They should, therefore, be avoided.

What is the reason for the announcement of marriage between two Catholics?

The Church demands the publication of a marriage between two Catholics in order that any one who may know that there is a legitimate impediment between the two persons concerned may reveal it to the priest. All Catholics have the obligation to reveal such things in order that the priest may know whether or not the contracting parties are free to marry one another. He also is bound to investigate any facts which are brought to his attention which would lead him to doubt that the persons were free to marry.

What is the meaning of Madonna?

The word Madonna is an Italian expression for the Blessed Virgin and means "My Lady." The most intense devotion has at all times been manifested by the Catholics of Italy towards the Blessed Mother and they have many customs of deep love for Mary. The term "Madonna" is also used for a painting or a statue of the Blessed Virgin.

Among others making great sacrifices to further the war effort we'd like to mention those Italian heroes who worked not for Italy about the war to customer until victory is won. (N. C. W. C. "Courier Post.")

Books Reviewed

FOR HEAVEN'S SAKE Father Gerald T. Brennan

With childlike simplicity and directness, Father Brennan has again given us a group of stories and incidents that will make thoughtful ears pick up and eyes sparkle with humor and sympathy.

Two notes give the nod to those stories and their modern dress and the other the spiritual application that tumbles out of the tales at times most unexpectedly (witness St. Christopher leaving the plank and the daring aviator in the middle of a loop-the-loop).

Catholic mothers don't have to look very far for good bedtime stories for their youngsters as long as Father Brennan keeps writing. The language too is admirable in its choice of words for eight to twelve-year-olds—or even younger if need to them.

We can only desire two things—a cheaper price to make it more readily available and we should like to see Father Brennan try his hand (since he is so well in tune with the junior "wore-length") at interpreting and modernizing as far as that can be done, some of the stories and incidents for this same age group.—Rev. George C. Vogt.

EDITORIALS

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action to happenings in the world outside the Church; Catholic response to false doctrines in social, economic, moral, matters; Catholic defense of the rights of the Church; all call for expression through the Catholic Press; the secular press has a field of its own; the Catholic Press does not trespass on this field; the Catholic Press has a field all its own; the secular press has no desire to trespass on this field.

The COURIER in all its years has been the Catholic Press for thousands of readers in all the cities and parishes of the diocese. It has brought national and world-wide religious news through the National Catholic Welfare Conference news-service, playing up those items that have the greater news-interest for its readers. It has carried the regular weekly record of events happening in the diocese, in the parish. It has carried inspirational and instructive articles of the great national Catholic columnists, and the instructive and informing writings of local Catholic thinkers and educators. It has been, in a word, the Voice of the Church in the Diocese of Rochester.

Improvement in the COURIER, looking to greater reader interest, better presentation of the news, augmented instructional matter, brighter format, larger subscription list, is the purpose of the group of clerical and lay Friends of the COURIER who have accepted appointment on the Editorial Advisory Board. Their work will result in a better paper, in better service to all our readers.

LIKE MUSTARD SEED, LIKE LEAVEN

Frequent and compelling are the messages Christ gave the people concerning the Kingdom of Heaven, which is His Church on earth. The frequency of the references tell us of the importance Christ attached to a proper understanding of His Church. The compelling power of the parables in which He illustrated His words left a clear impression of the work His Church would do. In the Gospel of this Sunday Christ uses two parables concerning the Kingdom of Heaven: it is like to mustard seed, it is like to leaven.

How forceful a picture of the quick growth of the Church is given in its comparison with the mustard seed. The smallest of seeds, that grows into a tree. Christ and the twelve were a small group, but they and their successors have spread over all the earth. The growth and development of the Church through 2000 years is because of the power of Christ: just as the growth of the mustard seed into a tree, is because of the natural power God placed in that seed. This parable reflects the external growth of the Church.

But the power of the Church is not merely external, it is also internal: every member shares in this power, every member partakes of the influence of the Church. It is a divine influence, it depends on the grace of the Sacraments, on the potency of God's word, on the merit of Christ and the power of the Father and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. It is, indeed, like to the leaven that the woman put in the meal till all was leavened. The Church in the world has turned pagans into Christians, sinners into saints: this is the work of the Church, to be continued till time is no more, till all is leavened.

Is your soul being leavened? Is your life being raised by the Church? Are you helping the growth of the Church? By prayer, good example, by saying a word of encouragement to your neighbor working the light? Rejoice that you belong to the Kingdom of Heaven, labor strongly for its growth, its penetrating influence.