Literary Cavalcade — By John O'Connor

'Lest I Become a Castaway'—Helpful

Lent is three weeks away. The war promises to bring trials of mind and will unlike those of the war years. Then, there was the drive for victory and the ultimate hope of peace. Today, there is uncertainty for the future and confusion worse confounded."

"I therefore so run," wrote St. Paul, "not as at an uncertainty; so fight, not as one beating the air; but I chastise my body and bring it into subjection; lest perhaps, when I have preached to others, I myself should become a castaway. . . ."

"Lest I Become a Castaway" are words echoed through our English literature. They are words that, as long as they are not separated from the totality of Christian revelation, are helpful to us. But unless we consider also the corresponding graces and mercies of God, we may yield as the poet William Cowper did, to extravagant fear.

John Donne, 17th century mystical poet, thought much on the subject of death. His viewpoint, however, was that of an intelligent person — calm and even triumphant:

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so:
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow
Die not, poor death; nor yet canst thou kill me.

Donne's sonnet cited above also contains the famous and cryptic line:

One short sleep past, we wake eternally,
And death shall be no more.

Catholic writers who have a reliance on the Holy Sacraments are not subject to such fears as are some of the great non-Catholic writers. Thus Jessica Powers, now a cloistered Carmelite and always an outstanding artist, once wrote:

There is no place on earth where I can hide
From the depth of the thought of death.
Therefore I have prepared my house to receive him.
I have set slim gold candles in the windows,
And I have spread a blue velvet carpet
For his white feet.

Yet a number of literary geniuses have suffered almost from an obsession of fear. Particularly is this true of that 18th century critic and dictator of letters, Dr. Samuel Johnson. Cowper, whom I mentioned above, expressed that fear the most poignantly. A frail nervous man, he suffered from periodical attacks of insanity. His extreme fear is found at its height in his poem The Castaway, ironically enough, the last poem he ever wrote. In it he describes the drowning of a sailor who has lost sight of his ship and shipmates. The story, however, is strongly reminiscent of our day:

Not long beneath the whelming brine,
Expert to swim, he lay;
Nor soon he felt his strength decline,
Or courage die away;
But waged with death a lasting strife,
Supported by despair of life.

Cowper then identifies his experience with that of the sailor:

No light propitious shone,
When, snatched from all effectual aid,
We perished each alone:
But I beneath a rougher sea,
And whelmed in deeper gulfs than he.

The fear of being a castaway is not a universal experience. Quite as unaffected and more encouraging is the cavalier attitude of the young soldier in Alan Seeger's poem:

I have a rendezvous with death
At some disputed barricade,
When Spring comes back with rustling shade
And apple blossoms fill the air. . . .

However, for a Christian conception of death, it is a happy privilege to quote some lines by the former co-author of this column, recently discharged from the United States Navy:

Now comes red thought of death:
Death, like to the rose
Whose tragic satin lips once drawn back,
Fold on fold of revelation longs forth
To yield life's darkness light.
Death the dawn; death the communion
Where time sleeps in love, the unravelling of God.
In life the soul has been a hillside
Lying 'gainst the evening star of God
But Christ-like death comes as the sun at mid-day.

And again:

No leaden thread of plaintive sadness then
Shall bind the soul's vast urge;
No shadow pall, [illegible] vacant blackness lashing
Nor moon-washed [illegible]
Edged by [illegible] and by [illegible] silver knit
But diamond blazing to the heart of God.
Held by His breath of majesty and ease
Coursing with motionless wings, like pilot seagulls,
Graceful and strong, Love's universal width.

Properly understood, these latter lines are answer to the fear about us, the fear of becoming a castaway.

Catholic Information

The Angel Bell

Three times a day you can hear it, chiming over the city clangor of horns and traffic whistles, or sounding over fields and quiet country lanes. It breathes peace; it tells of Jesus and His surpassing love for us. Its sound speaks of that eternal rest which is to crown the day of our work here below.

We're speaking of the Angelus, which is rung three times daily, at six, twelve and six, in every Catholic parish with a church bell. The sexton first tolls three groups of three, and then dingdongs eight or nine times.

Catholics who hear it, leave their work for a minute or so and recite the Angelus prayers, which they learned as children, at home or in school. These recall how the "Angel of the Lord" (hence the name Angelus) descended on Nazareth and asked Mary to become the Mother of God; how she agreed with God's plans and how, without the cooperation of any man, she begot her Jesus, our Saviour. While the ding-donging goes on, we pray that through the sufferings and death of Our Lord, we may be led to a glorious resurrection.

The custom is rather recent, as such things go with us Catholics. We've had it for only 600 years. It's still practically an innovation, but we like it, just the same.

At first, people used to pray for a definite intention at each time of the day. The morning bell was called the "peace-bell"; people were in the habit of praying for peace at that time. The noonday Angelus was said in honor of Jesus, dying on the Cross; and the prayers with the evening bell were said in honor of Our Lady.

We read of a court-trial lately in which the neighbors of a church were suing the pastor for ringing the Angelus at six in the morning. The judge in the case (and we don't know whether he was Protestant or Catholic) wrote an eloquent decision, concluding that, far from being a nuisance, the Angelus was a memorial to the Incarnation which had been standing for centuries, — and which would continue to stand, as far as he was concerned.

Don't you think it's a beautiful custom, to raise one's mind and heart at least once in six hours above the moil and toil of this workaday world? — to recall the divine poetry of Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter? — (Catholic Information Society of New York.)

English Translation Of Psalms Published

First new translation of a Latin text approved for the universal church in several centuries, an English translation of the Psalms, has been published by Benziger Brothers, Inc., of New York.

Approved by Pope Pius XII, in March, 1945, the new translation is arranged in prayerbook form. Copies may be obtained at any Catholic Bookstore or directly from the publisher.

Notre Dame Priest Honored

Notre Dame, Ind. — (NC) — The Rev. Mark J. Fitzgerald, C.S.C., of the University of Notre Dame, has received a citation from the U. S. Government for [illegible] service in furtherance of the National War Labor Board during World War II.

Library Signpost

A Christian Revolution

By Rev. [illegible]

A Rochester lady has written a striking letter to Dorothy Day, which is printed in the February issue of The Catholic Worker. Writing in a spirit of deep faith in what a Christian is meant to be, she calls for a "sense of zeal, our peace-time vocation." She protests against the despair which may be found even among good Catholics concerning the cause of peace. It is true, though it shouldn't be, that even we Catholics, intended though we are by Christ to be His witnesses as "peacemakers," are letting ourselves be infected with the current Russo-phobia and the atomic bomb jitters to the point where we seem to have no more spirit than the non-Christian world around us to get to work as "peacemakers."

We seem to be like all the rest in placing our hopes on military control and on the procedures of the UNO Council. Necessary as such things may be and deserving of our interest and prayers, there isn't one of us who can delegate his personal responsibility as a "peacemaker" to President Truman or to the UNO Council. Our responsibility doesn't even stop with letters to the President.

The first and most indispensable "Resolved that . . ." must come from our individual selves and must hit home to our own souls. And what must it entail? The Rochester lady has a good answer: "Proclaiming the Sermon on the Mount, [illegible] Christianity, personal social responsibility, in a mission such as Christ Himself established when He first sent forth His disciples two by two to proclaim 'The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.' And such disciples ought, as far as is necessary, to follow Christ's own instructions — not to bear [illegible] or two pairs of sandals — but to go to the house of one of the faithful and there seek shelter and food while the mission is in progress."

It's funny, but not so tragic, [illegible] and anger by people of our own household, nourished at the same table of Communion and professing the same faith as ourselves. [illegible] more Christ-like? And how can we be Christ-like without growing in that "mind which was in Christ Jesus," so that more and more we figure things out His way and act accordingly, even when and where it hurts? If we can't recognize Christlike conduct when we see it, there must be something wrong with our Communions and our way of living.

Do we know that every Mormon has to give up one year of his life entirely to work for his religion, going about at his own expense as an "evangelist"? I met one of them a few years ago in Alaska "sweating out" his year. Even though he knew that I and my host were Catholic priests, he gave us his evangelical talk with seriousness and fervor. I'm sure he thought he might convert us. I respected his zeal. And that is what all Mormons take for granted they must do for a year of their lives, giving up all other work and interests for the cause. They do not have the true faith of Christ. But their zeal is more Christlike than the inaction and lethargy of many Catholics. Peter Maurin once said, "So many others have the pep, but not the stuff. We have the stuff, but not the pep."

There is the true apostolic spirit, and blessed are all our people who have it. They are the true hope of today and tomorrow. May their tribe increase! Even if circumstances prevent them from all taking front line positions in the field of action, there is still a part for their zeal. The Rochester correspondent says, "I am scarcely young enough or unencumbered enough to undertake the [illegible] necessary to such a project myself. However, I believe that we older ones could and ought to form the background of prayer and penance (mortification) which the work would require."

We Christians, every one of us, have a work to do. If you have any doubt about it, read the Epistle and Gospel which the Church [illegible] (Septuagesima) at the very threshold of the Easter cycle of Redemption. And read further what Father Wm. O'Connor of the New York Archdiocesan Seminary at Dunwoodie has to say about it in his book called [illegible]. There seem to be many people interested enough in this subject to keep that book busy in circulation at the Catholic Evidence Library.

[illegible] Calvary's Cross; it is for Christ's men and women to carry it on with their lives and sweat.

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