

RELIGION AND GLOOM

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"In his last moments he befriended all those near him with jests. The ladder leading to the scaffold was rickety, and [the man] who had leaned on a staff at his trial, had now need of the Lieutenant's hand. 'I pray thee see me safe up, and for my coming down let me shift for myself.' . . . Measured thus at full humility, [on the execution block] he made but a second's delay in order to shove the beard out over the block, at the same time remarking that it was not to be cut: 'it had never committed treason'."



WHAT an arresting personality is this Man Who Died Laughing. Surely, we think, he was a man who had lived life to the hilt, who had drained off cup after cup of the red wine of life, and who, after experiencing all the joys and pleasures life could yield, now died on the block with a jest upon his lips, searching for the last great Adventure. Certainly he must have been a man who had lived a life unfettered by any code or custom; one, in fact, who "lived his own life" and did what he pleased when it pleased him,—a sort of fore-runner of that elusive figure, the free-thinker.

Most people will be surprised to learn that the exact opposite of this estimate is closer to the truth. Sir Thomas More was a good Catholic. As it turned out, he was such a good Catholic that it cost him his head, for "good King Hal" had him deprived of that very capable member simply because he refused to recognize that monarch as spiritual as well as temporal sovereign of England. More, during his life, had to deny himself many things the Church forbade; self-restraint ruled his daily life. What has been euphemistically called the red wine of life never so much as touched his lips. He was, to put it succinctly, a man who took his religion very seriously.

Men commonly think that a religious man is necessarily a very gloomy sort of person. At least one historian is so firmly convinced of this that he claims the Man Who Died Laughing went insane before his execution. It never occurs to this writer of history that it was because of his religion that More, outstanding humanist and brilliant wit that he was, could face death with a smile upon his face, a jest upon his lips, and peace in his

¹ Sargent, Daniel, *Thomas More*, p. 298.

heart. It will be the burden of this paper to prove that the happiest people are those who really live according to their religion, as Sir Thomas More emphatically did.

The story of history is in agreement with our contention. History is a mirror in which we see the reflection of life, and life in its essentials is the same today as it was in centuries past and will be in the centuries yet to come. Let us compare, then, two races which came from the same stock, but are as different in their outlook as black from white. It is characteristic of the Irish Catholics to face life with a happy, carefree smile, while the Scotch Calvinists are notably gloomy and pessimistic. Why is this? Before attempting to answer this important question, we make haste to point out that we might take other nations than these as examples. For the Irish we could substitute the Spanish, or Polish, or the French (before the Revolution). We could replace the Scotch by the non-Catholic Swiss and generally Calvinistic people, by the northern Germans and the Puritans. We could go even farther and abstract from nationality altogether, and contrast, class for class, Catholics and non-Catholics. Now, if we are to discover why one people is happier than another, we must delve deeply into the motivating principles of their collective lives. The Scotch and Puritans viewed life as a grimly useless struggle in which every man's fate was decided by an inexorable decree of predestination. Their imaginations abounded with terrifying pictures of hell-fire and brimstone, and life was a very dour thing indeed. As a practical consequence of these ideas, the purpose of this earthly life (since it could not be used to help them one way or the other in saving their souls, which were already predestined either to Hell or to Heaven) tended to become material well-being. What else was there left to do? Money came to be looked upon as a sort of ultimate end in which a man could attain some peace of mind and freedom from worry. So out they set after money,—hungrily, greedily, tenaciously, and found that they could never be satisfied, no matter how much of it they had. A strange way of looking at life, of course, and it gave impetus and strength to the growth of Individualism and Materialism.

It is with a breath of relief such as one experiences when sullen, overhanging clouds are suddenly parted to permit the rays of the friendly sun to enlighten the earth, that we cross the Irish Sea in order to focus our attention upon the Irish.

They are poor, and quite likely they will always be so. The material goods of this world have never outweighed those of religion in the land of Erin. Her people are the staunchest upholders of the Catholic faith the world has seen since the days of the martyrs, and not a few of them have been martyrs themselves. As one enters the picturesque country he is taken over by a guide, usually a man who has kissed the Blarney Stone not once but many times. He regales his charge with stories about the leprechauns and banshees and wishing-wells. Angels, saints, even the devil himself come tripping into his conversation. To many Americans he will appear to be an irresponsible fellow; his lack of business acumen and of apparent common sense may give rise to a feeling of repugnance. However, "it is this detachment from things that go-ahead nations consider vital which explains why to some people the Irish never appear serious. Their mental attitude to life is infuriating to the materialist. He calls it laziness. But the Irish are not lazy; they are casual, indolent and metaphysical."² What lies back of this carefree attitude? We believe it is the firm and deep religious convictions of the Irish. Their lives are ruled by such spiritual considerations as the Fatherhood of God, His all-seeing Providence, His Justice and Mercy, but above all, His Love for men. These truths lie foremost in their minds, while material comfort and well-being are things of secondary importance. They do not set their hearts wholly on money and power and success in this life; what matters is eternity. Material mediocrity does not cause the flame of cheerfulness to burn any less brightly. When, as it often happens, the devout Irish meet material misfortune, there well up from their hearts these beautiful words: It is the Will of God; He is my good Father, and by this trial means to draw me closer to Himself.—To put it more clearly, religious people have something firm to fall back upon when life seems to become an insupportable burden. In the case of those who make money an end in life, it is pathetically different. Take away their god, and there is no hand left to support them when they most need it. For true joy or happiness consists in the pursuit and attainment of *spiritual* things. This is a fundamental Catholic principle, the truth of which stands out with startling clearness on the pages of history and in our own lives.

The practical truth of these thoughts has been abundantly

² Morton, H. V. *In Search of Ireland.* p. 84.

proved during the depression. At regular intervals following the crash in Wall Street we read of a shocking number of suicides committed in all ranks of society, by bankers, students at universities, and humble job-holders. How explain them? The most fundamental reason is that men live and act in the direction of an ultimate end.³ If this ultimate end is anything less than God and is suddenly swept away, men of the irreligious type have nothing to fall back upon for support, no, not even God! The men who consciously stake their all on some material thing are only acting logically in raising a lethal hand against themselves in times of great adversity. Why should anyone bear suffering,—what natural motive is strong enough to keep the desire of life within him,—if there is no God, no immortality, no hereafter wherein man will be rewarded or punished according to his works. Throughout the ages the thought of a just God Who has declared: "Thou shalt not kill," has been the one deterrent unfortunates have recognized and obeyed. The important lesson to draw from these suicides is that material things which are external to man can never satisfy him in his search for happiness. Happiness depends upon something higher, something spiritual; to be happy at all it must spring from within; and it is our claim that interior happiness is the mark of the religious man and the Catholic.

Who was the first to say religion meant gloom? It is a question we cannot answer, but we can consider how unfair the insinuation. Who has not heard that Catholics are a mournful people, ever shaking over the thought of Hell and weeping over their Friday fish! Only a Catholic can appreciate the absurdity of the statement. The truth is that the Catholic religion alone provides man with a workable philosophy of a happy life. It teaches man to see in all things the will of God; it points out as transitory the things the world values highly, such as fame, money, or success; it emphasizes the goodness of all creation; it emphasizes man's dignity and importance in the universe, and so on. Not a single note of pessimism or despair.⁴ No other church can offer the comfort and strength the Catholic Church dispenses to the suffering, the disillusioned and the bereaved. As Dr. Sheen said so forcibly in a recent radio address, where

³ *Summa Theol.* I-II, q. 1, a. 4.

⁴ Johnston, Lucian, *The Legend of Gloom*, *passim*.

would God be, where would Christ be, how could He bless, and console, and absolve,—without the Catholic Church?

It is very interesting and most instructive to examine momentarily a few moderns who have pronounced judgment upon religion as a kill-joy, a hoax, a fake. Heading the list is Clarence Darrow, the “gloomy dean of atheism.” What does he think of life? We hear him at an interview with newspaper reporters in New York saying that life is rather intriguing but very tiresome. It is a very crazy world. He thinks civilization is hardly worth the trouble of saving. Furthermore, and this perhaps will explain the “cheerful” tone of his remarks, he is a great admirer of the prophet of pessimism, Schopenhauer. Well, a single look at Darrow is almost enough to convince one that if religion is a gloomy thing, irreligion is something far worse. However, the list of modern “thinkers” who apparently believe happiness consists in being unhappy is far from being exhausted. The literary works flowing from the pens of talented men like O’Neill, Dreiser, and Mencken are shot through with cynicism, hopelessness, despair and pessimism. Are we really to believe that these men, thinking and writing as they do, enjoy life? It seems more probable they do nothing of the kind; unless, that is, they write one thing and do another,—by no means a new idea.

How unattractive and repulsive atheists appear when contrasted with saints. It is a noteworthy fact that any biography of a saint is also the story of a merry man. Picture Saint Dominic, a delightful conversationalist, pleasant companion, and so habitually joyful that the sight of him sent the spirits of the Friars bounding upwards. By no effort of the mind can we associate sadness and pessimism with Francis of Assisi, the composer of an exultant Canticle to the Sun and the preacher to birds and beasts. We have it on excellent authority that Saint Catherine of Siena often broke out into the merriest of laughter, and that the sight of her was a tonic to her friends. Francis de Sales, Philip Neri and a host of others come down to us as light-hearted, holy men. All of them detested sadness and despair because of their baneful results in the hearts of men, and in this they were but imitating Jesus Christ Himself. He deliberately censured the dismal fasting of the Jews. “But thou when thou fastest, anoint thy head.” He would have all devotional exercises done in gladness of heart, with a pure and joyful acceptance of God and of His fatherly will. Jesus took His

share unaffectedly and without embarrassment in the little joys that day brought after day. He went to dinner (upon invitation) even though His enemies in their malice would call Him therefore a "glutton and a wine-bibber."⁵ He attended banquets,⁶ and the setting of many of His parables is that of the festive board.⁷ He worked His first miracle at a wedding feast, and passed several days at the homes of His friends, Martha, Simon and others.

"Away then with Nietzsche's supposition, that Jesus never laughed. How is it possible that He should not Himself have known a deep and pure joy, who was preaching the glad gospel of the Father, and who in all joy and sorrow recognized God's infinite power and goodness?"⁸

"The Blessed Mother laughed at stories the child Christ brought home to her, because a kindly laugh is one of the best gifts of God, and why should she, who was full of grace, not have that gift?"⁹ It has been thus in the Church from the days of the martyrs who went singing to their death to our own day, wherein our fathers and mothers tread the difficult path of life with a smile oft on their faces, with peace oftener in their hearts. Religion, far from fostering gloom, creates laughter. We must be careful here lest we make too sweeping a claim. We do not mean to imply that any Catholic goes through life insensible to pain and suffering, for these things must be encountered by everyone who seeks to follow Christ. "Into each heart some rain must fall." But "trouble is nothing unless it sets one whining or snarling; and the evil then is not the trouble, but the whining or snarling."¹⁰ Good Catholics are like soldiers who consider themselves honored in proportion as their task is the more difficult. Someday the end of trial will come, and a real reward. Until then they heal their wounds with laughter, which is God's medicine.

With all this in mind, it is still possible for popular authors to stigmatize religion as a kill-joy and wet blanket. Religion, it is true, strictly forbids many things in which men seek happiness, such as sexual excess, drunkenness, dishonesty and the

⁵ Adam, Dr. Karl, *Christ Our Brother*, pp. 10-11.

⁶ *Mark*, xiv, 3; *Luke*, vii, 36.

⁷ *Luke*, xv, 22; xii, 19.

⁸ Adam, Dr. Karl, *Ibid.* p. 12.

⁹ O'Malley, Dr. Austin, *Happiness*. (Article in *Pax* 1924, p. 125)

¹⁰ O'Malley, Dr. Austin, *Ibid.*

like. These things are forbidden primarily because they are sinful, and wise old Mother Church realizes well that all such sins, in spite of their glitter and powerful attraction, bring in the end, not the happiness they promise so extravagantly, but rather sadness, disillusionment, despair. Sins like these, moreover, are unworthy of man, who is the crowning work of God in the world. Now undeniably, each of these sins gives a certain amount of pleasure; but it is the pleasure of an intoxicant,—brief, fleeting, followed by a depressing reaction. Physical pleasure, emphasizing only one side of man's nature, destroys the harmony and perfect order that should exist between his soul and body, and which always accompanies true happiness. Experience has shown repeatedly that a man lives a fuller, more productive, more peaceful and pleasant life when he follows the restraining laws of religion, which are based upon the will of God and right reason, than he does by yielding to the subtle allurements of a fallen nature.

Finally, the most impressive evidence for the fact that the Catholic religion is one that encourages men to smile, is the existence of many things that could only have risen from cheerful Catholic minds. First of all there is the Catholic outlook. An irreligious man is like a small boy who has been given a rubber ball with the understanding that if he loses it or spoils it, he will never get another. Instead of playing with it, he will be afraid to bounce it and consequently will not enjoy it as it might be enjoyed. On the other hand, the Catholic who is cheerful even in poverty may be likened to a child who has been given a rubber ball, with this difference,—he plays with it, enjoys it immensely; then suddenly, tragically, he loses it. But he quickly dries his tears because he knows there are other toys and much better ones awaiting him. In a word, the Catholic regards this world's goods as of secondary importance. Should he lose them all, he has still another and better world, the world of unchangeable spiritual things, awaiting him. Again, Catholics were responsible for an economic system in the Middle Ages that was a model of equity and fairness. The guilds at bottom were thoroughly Christian and as thoroughly sound. Thirdly, the Church herself is never wholly sad, never wholly bereft of serene, confident hope. The Mass itself from one end of the year to the other invariably expresses joy. The psalms which the priest reads every day are unique in literature for their unsurpassed

expression of beautiful truths, profound trust in God, gratitude, hope, love, the unshakeable serenity of the children of God. Catholic liturgy, Catholic literature, Catholic music and Catholic art are breathtaking in their beauty, invigorating in their freshness and purity, captivating because they are inspired by God and draw men back to Him. Always in Catholicism there is something positive,—something to grasp!

Is it remarkable then that Sir Thomas More, having lived a full Catholic life amid a Catholic culture which his brilliant mind could well appreciate, was able to be saintly in his death but never solemn? The words he uttered when sentence of death was passed on him were significant and give us an unforgettable picture of him. “. . . I verily trust and shall therefore right heartily pray that, though your lordships have here in earth been judges to my condemnation, *we may yet hereafter in heaven all merrily meet together* to everlasting salvation.”¹¹

¹¹ Hollis, Christopher, *Thomas More*, p. 237.

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