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THE NOVEL OF CATHOLICISM

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IVEN in the pages of the most obscure Catholic magazine as well as between the covers of *The American Mercury* has arisen the question of the Catholic novel. Though much has been written about the Catholic novel being on the way, there seems to be nothing written in the way of a Catholic novel. A Catholic novel, if not the Catholic novel, emerges every month, if the Catholic press is to be believed, yet this same monthly product vanishes within a cloud of criticism pro and con. Unless some definite standard be recognized regarding what should or might constitute a Catholic novel, the Catholic novel will be as fatuous a dream as is Irish freedom, a very real ideal but yet a very ideal reality. But too recently did a reverend editor disagree with an equally reverend literateur concerning a new novel. The clerical literateur had hailed the novel as the Catholic novel whereas the clerical editor denied it to be either Catholic or even a novel. Such disagreement was due to two trends of thought which can encourage or discourage creative Catholic literary work. The reverend editor may have known all the principles of literature but he proved himself wholly ignorant of the facts of life. The other literary clergyman showed himself to be cognizant of the forces of life as well as the canons of literature. The fact that the novel in question bore in part a stark similarity with the newspaper's latest scandal did not disturb him, for he realized that life is the essence of literature. His contentious adversary, however, felt that cer-

tain features of life should be ignored in literary creation. These two viewpoints regarding Catholic literature, particularly Catholic novels, should they continue to be recognized as equally authoritative, will beset every opportunity of creating a Catholic literature. The former view, that literature is a "verbal portrait of life," is considered correct as well as the attitude, that literature is a revelation of ideal living. But should they be accorded equal commendation? If a realization of what is the purpose of a novel and a parallel insight into the significance of Catholicism as it reigns within human life be had, there should be no dispute as to which view is correct.

A novel in a general sense may be considered a literary narrative of fictional characters, interpretative of life. Most well-meaning Catholic literary dilettantes, particularly clergymen, would expect such a definition to mean an interpretation of fictional life rather than a fictional interpretation of life. A novel must be primarily an interpretation of life. The so-called Catholic novels concern themselves almost exclusively with conversion, reconversion or sacred vocations. The consequence of such an interpretation of life is that its audience (and why not non-Catholics?) must wonder whether Catholic life, particularly its intimate features, is very boring or too scandalously stark to be publicized. There is no reason in the world why the buoyancy and bravery of struggling to live as a Catholic should not be the theme of a Catholic novel. Is there any real reason why most Catholic novels be pivoted about the conversion of an aged British aristocrat or an esthetically inclined dowager? Should it not be admitted and realized that any feature of Catholic life—and Catholic life is human—is the prime concern of the Catholic novelist and the prime product of the Catholic novel?

The Catholic novel must, of course, be interpretative of Catholicism. Not the Catholicism so succinctly defined in Catechisms and apologetical treatises but that religion which dominates and recedes and again recovers in the heart and mind of the Catholic. The Catholicism, for instance, which surged thru the erratic but mystic Jacopone di Todi so beautifully interpreted in Helen C. White's *A Watch in the Night*. That Catholicism, to take another example, which profoundly illustrated the gallant chastity of sincere priests as intimately etched in Willa Cather's *Death Comes For The Archbishop*. Not the Catholicism which bore the merited ridicule of the literati in Owen Francis Dudley's *The Masterful Monk*. Nor that Catholicism which would

militantly irritate any sensible reader as evidenced in Eric von Kuhnelt-Leddihn's *The Gates of Hell*. The novel can not be an apology for Catholicism just as an apology for Catholicism can not constitute a novel. The Catholic novel must be an interpretation of life Catholicized; a picture, if you will, tho never pornographic. The Catholic novel should never be a photostat of the Creeds but a photograph of believing Catholics. The Catholic novel is to be an interpretation of Catholics striving to live for the principles of Catholic life.

This discussion, then, resolves itself into the conclusion that the Catholic novel must be as revealing as a gossip columnist, as sublime as an act of worship, as cautious as a conscientious chaperon, as magnificent as the window of an unaged European cathedral. It must be revealing; it must uncover the most elemental influences in human life. Only a literary artist can satisfy this demand, for he must express the value of Catholicism in human life by impressing upon human life the value of Catholicism. It must be sublime; it must be able to recreate for its readers the invisible bond of the Mystical Body of Christ. An appreciation of such is required in Catholic life, for such is the essence of Catholic living; consequently, Catholic life can not be interpreted unless the novelist is imaginative enough to convert the abstract into the concrete and the concrete into the abstract. It must be cautious; it must never for the sake of literary craftsmanship juggle or obscure a dogma or a principle of Catholicism. Yet it must be ever aware of the variableness of human conduct regarding such principles and dogmas without admitting them to be variable. Consequently the Catholic novelist must be a man of thought; he must be able to sense and describe the interplay between principles and practice in human conduct. Finally it must be magnificent; it must reflect all the beauty and grandeur of human souls as they grope and crawl, yet ultimately run, to the goal of everlasting glory.

This is a suggestion of the criterion of a Catholic novel; perhaps as a suggestion it is inadequate, maybe as a criterion it is more so. But as a suggestion it demands that the Catholic novelist leave the drawing room or the Deauville villa and go down into the earth, if not come down to earth. It spurs him to quest among the men and women who snatch an hour or so from their only merciful repose, sleep, to attend the Mass or visit the Blessed Sacrament. It seeks his attention beside the factory girl's machine as she prayerfully preserves her virtue

against the leering advances and insults of a foreman. It challenges him to walk as bravely along the docks with a conscientious longshoreman whose unsullied loyalty to the Holy Name Society forces him almost tearfully to combat the blasphemy and profanity of his fellow-workers. It asks nothing but that the Catholic novel be an authentic revelation of Catholic life, for such is the only requisite that can be demanded.