

THE GUILDS WERE GREAT UNTIL

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HE THIRTEENTH has been called the greatest of centuries and the Middle Ages considered as the Model Ages. Not to minimize the truth of this opinion, it may be noted that seeing the plight of the world ever since the Protestant Rebellion, almost any century looks good by comparison. There was, however, an element in the period of the Middle Ages which made it distinctive. Christian Charity pervaded the atmosphere and gave fresh draughts of pure air by which saints and scholars could breathe and eventually produce great works. The process to this millennium in the world had been in preparation for centuries. The faith was the main cause, but the social conditions played a vital rôle too.

In feudalism the Villa was the center of social life. Unless the lord was a true Christian, he often ruled his subjects as slaves. In spite of this, gradually these tillers of the soil advanced to serfdom, next to peasantry, and finally to freedom. Europe was growing up. Agriculture was being challenged by commerce, and rural life was to share the population with the city. Out of this expansion there arose, under the aegis of the Catholic Church, a system of relationship which is known as the Guild System. Belloc has summarized its significance and meaning.

"The Guild is the oldest, most necessary, most deeply rooted, of all human institutions. It has appeared in all civilizations which are at all stable, because it is necessary to stability. It has flourished especially at a time when our race was agreed upon a common religion and had a common high civilization." He defines it as "an association of men engaged in the same occupation, and its primary object is mutual support."¹

PRIVATE PROPERTY

In more than one way, the Guild anticipated our modern labor unions and civil service systems. First, it guaranteed the right of private property. Secondly, the Guild was recognized by the State or City, and workers entered it only after passing a test proving their ability in the trade. Thirdly, its members worked for the common

¹ *Social Justice Magazine*, "The Way Out," Belloc, Hilaire; August 1, 1938.

good, and finally, the Guild was self-governing. It must be remembered that the common good for the artisans of the Middle Ages, and they were artists not mere cogs in a machine, was the good of the Mystical Body of Christ. Even the non-Catholic Arthur J. Penty perceived the influence of the Faith, remarking that "it was the communistic spirit of Christianity that gave rise to the Guilds."² This was true Communism, not the socialistic hoax of Marx and Engels. What the Middle Ages practised was the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas on private property.

"Two points are to be considered regarding external things; one is the power of looking after them and managing them, and from this point of view it is lawful for a man to possess private property. . . . The second point that concerns us with regard to external things is their use, and as far as this is concerned a man ought not to have external things as his own private property but as common property, that is, he ought readily to share them with others in their needs."³

Although the Guild System never reached perfection even in the Middle Ages, Pope Leo XIII rated it worthy of considerable praise. "History attests what excellent results were affected by the Artificer's Guilds of a former day. They were the means not only of many advantages to the workmen, but in no small degree of the advancement of art, as numerous monuments remain to prove."⁴

"WHERE WEALTH ACCUMULATES . . ."

The Guild system was nearing perfection when an idea which twisted the minds of men appeared and destroyed the whole social order. "The lust of possession and the lust of pleasure . . . too often make a man . . . miserable in the midst of abundance," wrote Leo XIII.⁵ Tawney's words almost make a commentary on the Holy Father's statement. "Riches," as St. Antonino says, "exist for man, not man for riches. . . . It is right for a man to seek such wealth as is necessary for a livelihood in his station. To seek more is not enterprise, but avarice, and avarice is a deadly sin."⁶ Man had abandoned the idea of the common good and placed his own selfish interest first. The age of rugged individualism based on greed was opening upon the world. That paradox of social injustice, want in the midst of plenty, was being nurtured under the catabolic influences.

² *A Guildman's Interpretation of History*, Arthur J. Penty.

³ *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. lxvi, a. 2.

⁴ *Four Great Encyclicals*, Paulist Press; p. 27.

⁵ *ibid.*, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

⁶ *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, Tawney, R. H.; p. 32.

The effect of this transition away from Christian charity to pagan greed has been given succinctly by Leo XIII. Lamenting the fall of the system, he wrote: "The ancient workmen's Guilds were destroyed. . . . Hence by degrees it has come to pass that Working Men have been given over, isolated and defenceless, to the callousness of employers and the greed of unrestrained competition."⁷

Perhaps one may believe that the Guilds had served their purpose and their end was inevitable. "One answer is that this order came to an end because it would have been impossible to continue it organically; originally designed for local conditions and a smaller population, it would not have afforded room and subsistence for the increased population. . . . It was not the *order* that was so rigid that it was incapable of development and adaptation to changing needs and circumstances. . . . Men were hardened in excessive self-love and refused to extend that order."⁸

SURVIVAL OF ALL

Belloc holds the same thesis and supports it at length. "Had property been well distributed, protected by coöperative guilds, fenced round and supported by custom and by the autonomy of great artisan corporations, those accumulations of wealth, necessary for the launching of each new method of production and for each new perfection of it, would have been discovered in the mass of small owners. *Their* corporations, *their* little parcels of wealth combined would have furnished the capitalization required for the new processes, and men already owners would, as one invention succeeded another, have increased the total wealth of the community without disturbing the balance of distribution. There is no conceivable link in reason or in experience which binds the capitalization of a new process with the idea of a few employing owners and a mass of employed non-workers at a wage."⁹

Great as they were and could have remained, the Guilds are gone. Of course it is impossible to give a date indicating the end of the Guild System and the beginning of Capitalism. There is, however, not too much difficulty in placing the finger on the cause of the decay of the Guilds. It would be a truism to say it ultimately can be traced back to Original Sin. On the other hand, it is historically false to blame the Protestant Reformation, that diabolical cataclysm of so

⁷ *Four Great Encyclicals*, p. 2.

⁸ *Reorganization of Social Economy*, Von Nell-Breuning, Oswald, S.J. p. 260.

⁹ *The Servile State*, Belloc, Hilaire; p. 73.

many other evils, as the cause of the fall of the Guild System. The Reformation merely allowed men to do the wrongs things they were already doing and term them as enterprise. "If capitalism means the direction of industry by the owners of capital for their own pecuniary gain. . . . If by the capitalist spirit is meant . . . sacrifice [of] all moral scruples to the pursuit of profit, it had been only too familiar to the saints and sages of the Middle Ages."¹⁰

THE ROOT OF THE EVIL

The proximate cause of the end of the Guilds seems to have been money. Limiting the reason of so great a change to one is often an error of over-simplification. Yet, when man's outlook had shifted from Heaven to earth; when money ceased to be considered merely a medium of exchange and became an end to be sought for itself, a Pegasus, as it were, on which to ride to fame and security; the old institutions were altered into instruments to consolidate power.¹¹ Indeed, the Middle Ages always had the ingredients of decay within them, but there were great saints to act as antidotes. St. Raymond of Pennafort, for example, wrote a "very practical thirteenth-century manual" denouncing the evils of usury.¹² Nevertheless, once the desire of superfluous wealth had gnawed its way into the hearts of men, the farmer, the craftsman, the tradesman, all flocked to the money-lender. If the latter became their master, it was only because they sold themselves to him in their own quest for more money.¹³

Psychologically, money is fitted to deceive man to want more than he needs.¹⁴ Environmentally, the circumstances of the new commercial Europe gave money an unprecedented importance. Spiritually, men were losing the great Christian virtues of humility and charity. Greed was always knocking at man's heart to gain entrance with the skeleton key of fallen nature. At this point in the Middle Ages, the matter for the vice was present in a most attractive form. Money meant independence, power, in short, all the things men of every age dream of possessing. All forces seemed to unite to push men to the precipice of pecuniary disaster, not in the sense of having too little, but in desiring too much.

Once a man would have gladly chiselled a work of art in a dark corner of a cathedral. Although the artisan knew the world could

¹⁰ Tawney, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

¹¹ Tawney, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

¹² Tawney, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

¹³ Tawney, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

¹⁴ *Summa Theologica*, I-II, q. 2, a. 1, ad 3.

not see it, he knew God did and he offered it to Him. The whole social security plan of the Guild was founded on charity and expressed in the corporal works of mercy. Yet, once man let the things of the world creep into his breast, the reign of Christ was ended and a usurper was seated upon the throne of the heart.

The Guilds were great until man became money-mad, lost his sense of values, and surrendered his little plot of land on a gamble to gain the whole world. The Guilds were powerful until capitalism raised its ugly head and scoffed at the teachings and restrictions of the Church. While the Guilds in a way limited men and hemmed them in, they were not a stumbling block to progress. They kept men from the evils of unrestricted competition, self-seeking profiting, and every form of social injustice. The world still could use the Guilds, if not exactly as found in the Middle Ages, at least with their foundation virtues, justice and charity. Until then, the Guilds will remain historically, things that were great.