

*Sigrud Undset*  
*(Sister Catherine, T.O.P.)*  
1882-1949



## A NOVEL THEOLOGIAN

Jude Maher, O.P.

Many are placed in their childhood to work in the vineyard; some enter later in life. . . . *Dialogue: St. Catherine of Siena*

JUNE 10, 1959 will mark the tenth anniversary of the death of Madame Sigrid Undset; it was of her novels, *Kristin Lavransdatter* and *The Master of Hestviken*, that the renowned Catholic author and critic, Theodore Maynard, wrote: "It is the greatest Catholic fiction that has ever been produced." That Mr. Maynard's judgment was not unique among critics can be seen from the fact that the first of these two medieval novels, *Kristin Lavransdatter*, received the Nobel Prize in Literature for 1928. Those who have agreed with earlier praise lavished on the works of Sigrid Undset now have new cause for rejoicing in the number of studies on her work that have appeared in Europe during recent years. The hope may well be justified that in a few decades no course in literature, no list of great books, no educated person will be able to ignore the magnificent artistic achievement of this Dominican tertiary from Norway.

Sigrid Undset's connection with the Order of Preachers was a fruitful one and she was not slow to express her respect and affection for the children of St. Dominic, both in her novels and in the activities of her busy life. From A. W. Winsnes' excellent biography, *Sigrid Undset: A Study in Christian Realism*, we learn that the French Dominicans who had come to Norway after the First World War served as her point of contact with the vital intellectual and social life of the Church, perhaps best displayed at that time in the writings of Jacques Maritain. To quote Professor Winsnes:

From these Dominicans, she writes, one received confirmation of the fact that the Catholic Church was no antique relic, tied for ever to anachronistic social forms to which no one could ever return, but an active movement which pressed on with the times, possessing social awareness and a highly developed intellectual life, always preaching the same unchanging message, but with the power to present it according to the needs of the age.

Her gratitude to the Order of which she later became a member is evidenced in the aid she gave the French Province to establish itself in Norway, and perhaps more important, from the point of

view of this article, in the fact that many Dominicans, and in a larger sense, the theological spirit of the Order, may be found in much of her work. Father Thoralf Norheim, O.P., the Norwegian concert pianist who has just finished a tour of the United States and Canada, mentioned in conversation while visiting in Washington that the portrait of the priest who converts Paul Selmer, the main character in the novel-cycle *The Wild Orchid* and *The Burning Bush*, was in many respects a vivid picture of a Dominican friar at the Oslo convent. And in her major works we find that Kristin's brother-in-law and spiritual father is a Dominican, while many of the crucial incidents in *The Master of Hestviken* find their setting in the 14th century Dominican Priory at Hamar, Norway, and in London's famous Blackfriars' Church. Even the story of how the mother of Sir Thomas Aquinas gave tacit approval of an attempt to destroy her son's purity comes naturally to Kristin's mind, when she ponders the duty of parents to protect the virtue of their children. Thus, *Dominicana* readers should be inclined to hasten the day of recognition for Sigrid Undset in the United States, and if they consider not only the outstanding literary merits of *Kristin Lavransdatter* and *The Master of Hestviken*, but also the depth of Catholicity displayed in these novels, they can understand that such recognition is more than deserved and long overdue.

When we speak of the Catholicity of Sigrid Undset, however, we do not have reference primarily to the external aspects of the Faith which these epics constantly reveal—the mumbled prayer at the sight of death, frequent church-going, grace at meals, the presence of priests and religious, the ingrained devotion to the Virgin Mary, the keeping of fasts and public penances for sin. We do not have in mind the insistent concern for the sanctity of marriage nor the fact that nearly all the major problems of the two main characters, Kristin and Olav, in each of these novels are religious problems. We refer rather to the theological view which, as this article will attempt to show, can be discovered in every chapter of the works. The possible objection that *Kristin Lavransdatter* was written before her conversion to the Church was answered by Sigrid Undset herself, when she wrote, "I was essentially Catholic in all my works, long before God gave me the final grace to embrace it wholeheartedly."

That such essential Catholicism is apparent in these works may be gathered from a comparison between some fundamental notions found in St. Thomas and the expression of these notions

in the novels of one who was, indeed, an heir to the Thomistic tradition.

We may well begin with Madame Undset's presentation of the activity of grace. Though it be true that a meritorious act cannot be performed without the help of grace, nonetheless grace does nothing without nature. It always presupposes nature. Further, grace does not make over the nature into something it was not before, but rather, in the phrase of St. Thomas, "grace perfects nature." That Sigrid Undset had a keen penetration into this doctrine is revealed in practically all of the more than 2,000 pages of the great medieval novels. It is in fact spelled out for us unmistakably in one incident from *The Master of Hestviken*. Arnvid, Olav's friend who later becomes a Dominican, once told the saintly Bishop Torfinn that he would like to have the calm and good humor of a certain priest he knew. The Bishop replied: "One may carve Christ's image as fairly in fir as in lime, but never have I heard that He turned fir into lime, like enough because it would be a useless miracle. With God's grace you may become as good a man as Asbjörn, but I trow He will not give you (his) temper, for all that."

Kristin's whole life exemplifies this principle. She is quickly revealed to be of very strong will and fierce passions, neither timid nor hesitant in facing the unknown, suddenly agitated when her will is denied, but basically of an affectionate though serious nature. Through adolescence these tendencies find increasingly unfortunate expression, until they culminate in grave sin with Erlend. Years later, when Kristin is again reconciled with God, the process of harnessing these dispositions begins, but it is truly a harnessing, not a process of obliteration. She loves her seven sons with utmost devotion and is ready to do battle with anyone or any thing she sees as obstacles to their happiness—even her husband, Erlend. But by *happiness* she understands ultimately the possession of God in heaven. Thus, the serious aspect of her character, though the reason for some brooding, also helps her to be a capable and foresighted mistress of the family manor-home, Husaby, as well as the vigilant guardian of her sons' spiritual welfare.

Sigrid Undset's deep understanding of the operation of grace parallels her grasp of the nature of moral evil, of sin. Her very accurate theological knowledge comprehends that although all grievous sin is a turning away from God, no one sins in order to turn away. Man seeks always for something which he conceives

as being good. We all seek happiness, but as to what will make us happy, we often place more confidence in the judgment of our lower nature than in the judgment of God. A preacher may speak of the evils of fornication, and there are few Catholics who will not recognize the evils. But in the concrete temptation, it is not the evils but apparent goods which attract men, goods which sometime seem of nobler stuff than simple sexual desire. In this respect, when Kristin willingly submits to Erlend, Sigrid Undset presents the reader with a careful appraisal of all the circumstances, the apparent goods, which led the girl into sin. We see all the circumstances of boredom with daily routine, of seeking for the romantic and unknown, for experience of tender emotion, of yearning to give the right man strong affection and support. Yet in treating of Kristin's moral failure, Madame Undset reveals her artistic genius. As readers, we are sufficiently removed from the act so as to be able to advert continually to its sinfulness, yet we can still realize the power of the apparent goods—all the glow and sweetness—that attract Kristin in her commission of sin. The whole treatment serves to remind us that turning from illicit goods, from sin, always seems a stern, heartless, narrow thing, and only when passion cools does one glimpse the baseness of the act.

The aftermath of this sin forms one of the many examples in the works of Sigrid Undset, which reveal St. Thomas' doctrine on the connection of the virtues. Kristin must practice deceit and disobedience in order to arrange further meetings with Erlend. The loss of purity brings in its wake all manner of evil. She cares little for the scandal she causes among her fellow pupils at the convent-school; she finally marries Erlend, but only after she has woven a tissue of lies to cover the eyes of her parents. But once she is reconciled to God, to seeing His Providence in her life and thereby attaining humility, she learns to bear without anger her sister's accusations, and yet more heroic, accepts with resignation the shame of having caused much of Erlend's waywardness. Towards the end of her life she reaches true heights of sanctity, when she keeps a superstitious mob from pagan sacrifice, and performs a work of mercy that ultimately brings her the terrible suffering of the "Black Death."

This doctrine that explains the interconnection of the virtues is concretized again for us in the life of Olav, *The Master of Hestviken*. After being forced to flee the city in which he is staying, because of swinging his axe too freely in a fight, he returns

to his home to find his betrothed Ingunn with child by another man. He avenges the deed by secretly murdering the man. But because of his fear of disgrace for himself and Ingunn, he does not confess the crime. The rest of his life becomes one long seige of remorse of conscience. His character, thus infected, begins to reveal other blights. Where, as a young man, he had never attempted to escape his share of blame, he now looks for ways to transfer the guilt. Whereas he had once shaken his head at stories of heathen ceremonies, he now falls into occasional practice of such rites himself. His instinct for seeking out good men faithful towards God slowly leaves him, and he becomes just as much at ease among the lawless. He lends more ear to rumor and scandal and "in a way he was not displeased at heart to find some fault or other in a man especially if he were a priest or a monk."

Moreover, the manner in which these traits are introduced is another revelation of Sigrid Undset's mastery of the novel-form. Many times we are shown Olav correcting the faults of his adopted son, Eirik, and at the beginning he does this with justice, if somewhat severely. But one day, knowing the boy is not at fault, he accuses him all the same. Scenes of the boy receiving fair and equitable punishment are climaxed by his being brutally beaten. Yet the situation is entirely plausible and it serves to move the story forward, for this ill-usage causes Eirik to leave home and enter the service of a noble lord. And then a new chapter in the fortunes of *The Master of Hestviken* opens up.

Olav's personality becomes increasingly dour and somber. He communes less and less with other men, except on a purely superficial level. He begins to grow restless with Hestviken and looks about for a chance to get away; temptations to despair appear more and more frequently. In the judgment of his neighbors he is "odd and unsociable, a joyless companion in a joyful gathering." And here again St. Thomas gives us theological evidence that Madame Undset's development of Olav's character is completely in accord with sound doctrine. For the development could not be otherwise, given the principle that the first effect of charity is joy. Olav himself understands well that this joy is not something in the emotions, but rather an exaltation of the will, and he longs to possess it.

The artistic portrayal of Kristin Lavransdatter's character also bears witness to this principle. During the sinful months surrounding her marriage the air is always heavy with guilt and anxiety. There is a frenzied concern to keep everything quiet

and not to lose honor before men. The knowledge of her betrayal of God and family cannot be disregarded; it excludes all hope of inner peace. Even the ordinary family joys are impossible for Kristin. She can no longer manage her thoughtful, confident smile for her father. Erlend's request for her hand in marriage brings with it a feeling of shame rather than that joyous pride which should characterize the moment. And her mother's pre-marriage preparations, cooking and sewing, plans and advice, instead of adding to a feeling of happy expectation only bring an uncomfortable blush to her cheeks.

We can see from all that has been said that Sigrid Undset impregnates her novels with a striking theological knowledge. But in appraising the works of this twentieth century Dominican tertiary, we should not imagine that her command of theology is the only element in her novels that made her a master, lest we be left with the absurdity that abstract truths alone constitute fine art. When a man states that a sacrament is an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace, he has spoken the truth, but that does not make him an artist. Obviously Sigrid Undset's seemingly unlimited command of language, her poetic sense, and in the words of one critic, her "almost omniscient knowledge of human nature" are the major factors contributing to her genius, along with a phenomenal knowledge of history, archeology, medieval law, sociology, and Scandanavian folk-lore.

But we submit, nonetheless, that the queen of the sciences deserves prominent mention in the list of Madame Undset's many accomplishments. Theology serves as a constant check on personal intuition, a guide in avoiding poetic extremes, which could quickly vitiate the power of her novels and surround her characters with an aura of unreality. Moreover, the Wisdom which is theology provides her with a rule in determining the universal applicability of her own personal experience. In the sense that theology perfects not only a man's intellect but also his way of acting in his chosen profession, therefore, we do not hesitate to say that Sigrid Undset is truly the heir of St. Thomas Aquinas, probably the one literary genius of the twentieth century to portray in her works the catholicity of understanding that theology alone can give to the human mind. This June will mark the tenth year since she ended her earthly life, but the life that she breathed into her novels will continue on until all earthly words and truth find repose in Him who is the Eternal Word, the Everlasting Truth.