

THE CHURCH AND ART

When idolatry, error, sin, superstition and paganism spread the dark mantle of their malice over the face of the earth and warped the intelligence of man, the Light "that enlighteneth every man" was seen to shine forth—the Light whose lustre increased as the years lengthened until its all-powerful influence dispelled the darkness of ages. Among the inhabitants of Palestine had the Light arisen, and among them had He spent three years in an active apostolate, preaching and teaching the law which was to affect men in every age and clime. The religion He preached—a religion of love, peace and supreme charity—exercised an irresistible charm upon the people. It became a balm for the weary and troubled soul; it loosened the bonds of slavery, error, sin and corruption which had held the human heart captive so long; it united a disrupted race into a living, cognate society which was to endure to the consummation of the world.

This society, the Church, entrusted with His mission, endowed with the gifts of God and strengthened by the Holy Spirit, went forth at Christ's command to teach all nations and preach the Gospel to every creature. In proclaiming the truths that had been confided to her care, she was to possess not only an interior life, but was to maintain external relations with the world and its people. And thus, though her mission was essentially spiritual, we find her ready to utilize even sensible and material means to achieve her purpose. Among the media thus chosen Art, in the truest conception of the term, stands foremost. As her Founder was not only the law and the truth, but all beauty, the Church, the spouse of Christ, seeing that Art, properly guided, could not conflict with her teachings, united it with religion in a bond of mutual harmony, causing the former to become the handmaid of the latter; bringing the artistic productions of man into her mission and uniting the object of art to the object of religion.

In the long, interesting and varied history of Art under the benign and maternal influence of the Church, no link is missing in the series of centuries. Through the vista of ages we behold the cradle of Christian art entrenched in the Catacombs, enshrined in the obscurity of symbolism. Rude were the mural decorations wrought to decorate the tomb of some holy martyr or to ornament the places of worship in these underground re-

cesses, where "they buried their dead and on the walls of the chambers sketched rude symbols of their hope and faith,"—rude, but giving expression to feelings and sentiments that animated the zealous defenders of infant Christianity.

From these mazes of catacombs and crypts, from these sanctified chambers where once reposed the bodies of martyred pontiffs or saints, where paintings hide sepluchres, the pious pilgrim passes to the monuments that slowly creep above the earth—churches whose tombs and reliquaries communicate with the subterranean cells of which they are a part and above, with the more noble edifices of human genius. They recall the reign of Constantine the Great, recorded as the founder of basilicas, which the marks the end of the Church's persecuted and embryonic stage of existence, reminding the traveller of the age when edicts proclaimed Christianity to be the State religion; when the Cross—the sign of hope and redemption—was united to the standard of the army, the labarum; when royal arms mingled the Cross with the Roman eagles. It was the age of basilicas, which was to continue until the early Middle Ages.

As the Light had shone in the darkness, as error had given way to truth, so did the light of Christianity shed its lustre into the deepest recesses of paganism, warring with its adherents and eventually triumphing over its error and superstition, and pointing out the Light, the Way and the Truth. And with the controversy between these two virtually at an end in the reign of Theodosius the Great, we behold the Church, kind and generous to the vanquished, purifying and transforming what was best in paganism and rendering it capable of serving a higher and nobler purpose.

Through her basilidas she appealed to her artist children to give their all to erect temples of God which should be worthy of Him both in design and execution. The results attest the influence of their newly-found parent upon their work. Her care was at once maternal and generous—maternal, inasmuch as she guided, aided and instructed the artist in the execution of his works; generous, for she placed at his disposal all she possessed, her legends, her truths, her life—all sublime and new to the people of that age. Constantine and his saintly mother erected and endowed basilicas throughout the Empire. The Holy Land, the land of Christ and His Blessed Mother, was the scene of their first gifts to God in the basilicas of the Holy Sepluchre, of the

Ascension and of Bethlehem. And in the decoration of such buildings as these we find the artist drawing his themes from the Gospel story, but still influenced by nature, uniting the natural and the supernatural until the interior is veritably a minature ocean, from whose midst rise the pillars like so many islands, while above, overshadowing the work, is the vaulted ceiling, worthy representation of the heavenly expanse. The whole was history in its spiritual sense, for it was a combination of the three elements of nature—the earth, the sky and the water. But in every case the interior decoration was in strict accord with the teachings of the Church. The mural decorations told the story of events depicted in the Testaments. Taking his themes from this hallowed source, the artist endeavored to tell in color what the inspired writers had told in prose. Thus were truths and dogmas made tangible to the faithful adorers to whom, perhaps, the written or the spoken word might have proved unintelligible. For, as Gregory the Great writes: "What Holy Scripture is to him who can read, pictorial representations are to him who cannot; because in them the untutored behold patterns which they may copy in their lives; they are books that can be read by the illiterate."

When theological, christological and exegetical disputes arose and hampered to some degree artistic development, we see the Church intervening, and through the medium of her councils, establishing rules to govern the artist in his attempts to depict the Gospel narratives. These laws not only affected the figures of the picture but extended also to the accessories, and the result was an earnest endeavor to portray all scenes drawn from the Bible with careful regard to their true setting.

As an emperor gave an impetus to art, so too, did an emperor attempt to check its growth, for the iconoclastic element, under the leadership of Leo the Isaurian, broke forth in relentless fury, destroying all the productions of art that fell into their hands. The people, feeling that it was an attack on their religious life, rose in heated protest. And the Church, solicitous for her children and all that pertained to them, viewed the conflict as a direct and an open assault upon the faith. Rising to the needs of the times, some of the most brilliant and intellectual churchmen warmly espoused the cause of art and defending the use of images and pictures as a means of propagating the truths of Christianity and of softening the characters of men. Gregory II

appealed to the Emperor to desist in his policy, and Gregory III threatened with excommunication all who aided in the destructive propaganda of Leo.

Mention must be made here of monasticism, which began to flourish in the third century. Although the inhabitants of the monasteries had given their lives to God and religion, though they lived in austerity and penance, beneath the coarse habit that clothed them beat hearts as human, as feeling, as any without in the wide world. To these men the world owes an infinite debt for their fidelity in preserving and transmitting to future generations priceless treasures of civilization which they had accumulated, for "the quiet air of the monasteries nourished learning as well as piety. The monks became teachers, and under the shelter of their monasteris established schools." They became copyists, and with scholarly care and much labor transcribed manuscripts and books of every description. Much of their work being illuminated with a marvelous skill and delicacy that is still the admiration of the world. They "thus preserved and transmitted to the modern world much classical learning and literature that would otherwise have been lost." And they likewise became the cultivators of Art. When the iconoclastic element would have wiped it from the face of the earth, Art fled to the cloister and there found many of its most devoted disciples and patrons. The monks even shed their very blood to defend the treasures of past ages of which they were the custodians. In some cases they were successful in preserving them. Frequently, however, their attempts proved of no avail, and they saw their churches and convents demolished before their eyes, beheld the mosaics and the paintings that had broken the bareness of the gray walls either torn from their settings or whitewashed. But their labors were not in vain. As the blood of the early martyrs proved beneficial in the propagation of the faith, so did the blood of these men fertilize the soil upon which Art was to thrive, rendering it productive of fruit that was to mature fully in a later age. Though their convents and churches had been laid waste beneath the oppressor's hand, though the priceless products of their artistic skill and love were gone, there were to come other mosaics, other paintings, other churches and convents.

And so we pass along the centuries until we stand on the threshold of the Middle Ages. In the preceding age the glory of the ancient world, shrouded in the past and rich in the creations

of human genius, begins to pale, the Graeco-Roman civilization slowly decays and at the beginning of the Middle Ages we find the home of culture and refinement permanently transferred from the East to the West, from the South to the North. In these ages, improperly termed the "Dark Ages" the Church was the inspiration of the thoughts, the actions and the words of the men and women throughout the world. Under her guidance religion took precedence of all and after she had "set the foundation of the edifice upon a base which could not be shaken, her maternal hand returned to crown its summit with light and beauty."

As the great basilicas emerged gradually from the Catacombs, so did the basilicas, in turn, evolve into the grand cathedrals of the North. Aside from the wondrous beauty of these cathedrals they are more living, more expressive, than the massive Egyptian, the stern Doric or the elegant Corinthian. They are the living teachers of history, to be regarded more as the "adamantine book of history than a mere conglomeration of stone, proportion and elegance." They give an insight into the feelings and the sentiments of people of an age in which layman and the cleric vied with each other in contributing to the glory of their worship. They bring to mind the faithful children who gave their manual labor to visualize what the minds of others more gifted had designed—a combination which stands to day as an example of pure art and the glory of the nations.

In this age monasticism again plays an important part, for it is in its full vigor. Its loyal adherents, versed in all the intellectual and artistic pursuits of the time, originators of scholasticism and mysticism, occupy their time in expounding the truths of Catholicism and bringing the idea of Christianity more fully to man, so that he may penetrate its depths more clearly and find its true significance. And to understand these men we must follow Wiseman when he states: "You must throw open to the spectator the interior of monastic life. You must show the aged monk in a nook of his abbey library engaged in writing and illuminating the great choral books of his Church. You must in another compartment exhibit the monastic workshop. There the thoughtful and intelligent designer stands with his novices in the midst of shrines and reliquaries and pyxes of quaint forms and precious materials; here one is busy engraving the pure gold chalice; there another is fitting the alternate jewels and the glowing enamels in the costly reliquary; while the heavier metal-

work of the tomb and altar-screen lies scattered about. In another place you will see the religious artificers conducting the whole manufactory of their glorious pictures from the furnace to the window, drawing, coloring, and tinting with pencils that might have been dipped in the rainbow figures that heaven's sun was to give life and glory. Again, the carver is to be seen artfully extracting from the gnarled oak features of graceful sweetness and forcing the rocky stone to yield the image of compassionate sorrow to stand beneath the rood." Yes, we must return to the monastic cell and watch the inhabitant as he grinds, sifts, boils and washes the pigments that are to color his undying masterpieces, or behold him selecting a tuft of hair to be used in the painting of some new picture to decorate the cloister. At the entrance we must pause to watch the saintly devotee of art kneeling before the canvas, asking heavenly guidance ere he takes the first stroke upon a Madonna or an Ecce Homo. Here is a union between prayer and art that produces the works which for centuries the world at large will treasure as priceless! And the names of Angelico, Bartolomeo and Giotto rise to attest that monasticism fostered art in the precincts of her cloisters.

In the field outside, in the schools that arose at different periods, the names of Michael Angelo, Titian, Raphael, Da Vinci and a host of others come forth to form a crown to deck the Church which aided and guided them in their labors and was ever their generous patron. Through her themes were given to the genii who in coloring wrought the Masterpieces known to the world as "The Last Supper" and the "Annunciation"—Da Vinci and Cimabue. It was in the "The Last Supper" that Da Vinci solved the problem of all art—the elevation of the natural by the infusion of supernatural. No need of comment on the long list of pictures that bear the stamp of Angelo, some of which adorn the Vatican, nor those wrought by Raphael, for the press has made them known and loved by all. Every country, every city and nation brought forth its artists. Italy had her Angelo, Giotto, Cimabue and Raphael; Flanders her Van Eyk; Florence her Bartolomeo and Angelico, while Spain produced the youthful Murillo, whose "Immaculate Conception" is a masterpiece combining all the elements that compose the beautiful.

Architecture, painting and sculpture had been utilized by the Church in the construction and decoration of her churches and cathedrals, the expressions of faith and loyalty. Her liturgy now

remained to inspire the genius of some devoted child. It did, and music, the sister to these three, harmonising thought and sound, gave birth to melody that, swelling through the vaulted aisles or naves, completed the work the hands of religious-minded men had wrought.

Such was the harmonious bond that existed between the Church and Art. In its infancy it was cradled in the dismal and dreary recesses of the Catacombs, but at length was carried into the open air and displayed to the world. Not that something new had been inaugurated. No, the Church had taken what paganism had used and transformed it, introducing two elements that hitherto had been held as incompatible—the union of beauty and purity, embodied in the Blessed Virgin; of sorrow and divinity, exemplified in Christ. The horizontal lines of the Grecian and Roman temples, which like their religion had run parallel with the earth, were transformed and rose and extended heavenward, to be lost in the spires that were crowned with the cross. The halls of the monastic houses, of the palatial residences of Popes and bishops—in all Art found a shelter when persecuted. There, sheltered from earthly surroundings, it passed as gold through a refining fire, to return to the world with newer elements, newer ideals and newer themes. It was in the Church that it found the artist ready to depict the scenes of the Gospel; and it was in the Church that the artist himself was more at home, for in her sacred story, her solemn and sublime festivals and in the personages of Christ and His Virgin Mother, he found themes sufficient to inspire his mind with noble conceptions. Responsive to her charms and call, he depicted these, and today they stand as masterpieces which command the attention of the world—masterpieces whose color and beauty time has not lessened but enhanced.

—Theodore Finnegan, O. P.