

THE SOCIAL DYNAMIC OF THE MIDDLE AGES

BERNARDINE QUIRK, O.P.



IF ONE word can bear the dubious distinction of being both canonizing and damning, it is the term "medieval." Those who have come to believe that almost everything short of television was at least presaged in and around the thirteenth century, fairly breathe it in hushed reverence. While to those who are convinced that only the latter part of the sixteenth century definitely terminated the Dark Ages, "medieval" connotes anything from outright barbarism to the refined cruelty of the Spanish Inquisition.

However, if either viewpoint can be said to have predominated, it is certainly the latter. But reputable historians, through diligent research into sources that until comparatively recent times have been either ignored or unknown, now write with increasing respect for the Middle Ages. Through their combined efforts, a very marked reorientation has taken place. History is in the process of being rewritten. But those whose knowledge of this period is either superficial or culled from outmoded works of decided bias categorize anything and everything medieval as the quintessence of ignorant intolerance. For them, all the things in life worth living for, including the abstract notions of liberty, fraternity, and tolerance are either a throwback to the Greek and Romans or a distinct contribution of modern liberalism.

Perhaps the most notable intrusion of this particular attitude of mind is to be found in the current output of many of our better-known newspaper columnists and radio commentators. Rushed for time and striving for succinctness and effect, these ladies and gentlemen apparently have found no term of indictment more sweepingly comprehensive than "medieval." In their castigation of dictators and dictatorships, the term is bandied about like the literary football it has become, with no real effort to clarify its meaning or to make necessary distinctions.

It would be bad history to maintain the thesis that the Middle Ages were something of a modified millenium. It is worse history to assert or to insinuate that this period represents a total blank in the record of man's halting progress toward the goal of a fuller life.

Truth lies in the middle. And the truth in this case has been admirably stated by our late Holy Father, Pius XI: "At one period there existed a social order which, though by no means perfect in every respect, corresponded nevertheless in a certain measure to right reason according to the needs and conditions of the times."¹

If we are to evaluate this period properly, it is of paramount importance that we have an adequate idea of its underlying philosophy. It is absolutely futile to approach this span of years with the perspective of our own age. We cannot apply the criteria of the twentieth century to the Middle Ages and expect to get a true picture of what was actually the concrete reality. Unfortunately, this procedure has been altogether too general.

It is the purpose of this effort, then, to attempt a brief analysis of the Middle Ages from the standpoint of its social philosophy. It is our conviction that the Middle Ages have bequeathed mankind a precious heritage which, having been progressively lost in the last four centuries, must once again become operative in our own. That heritage is an ideal, the pursuance of which enabled medieval men to approximate perfection in the social, political, and economic orders. If the ideal never became a sustained reality, we must at least pay tribute to an age that conceived it and, for a brief period, proved that it could in part be realized.

Presupposed to any adequate estimation of the Middle Ages is a knowledge of its historical background. It is necessary that we make a fair appraisal of the social, political, and economic framework of the period before we venture a judgment on the reaction of medieval man to those peculiar situations with which he was confronted. Moreover, while any attempt at analysis makes it convenient to differentiate the various phases of medieval life—social, political, economic—actually and in practice there were no clear lines of demarcation between the three orders. As will be demonstrated later, the activities of medieval men were determined ultimately by their individual and collective efforts towards the attainment of the common good. Departmental living and thinking were unknown to the period. If emphasis is placed here on the economic aspect of medieval life, it is only because the vastness of the field makes a certain theoretical isolation imperative.

No little controversy is attached to the effort of determining just when the Middle Ages actually began. Since our purpose here is primarily to consider medieval life in its most representative period—the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries—it is of no essential

¹ *Encyclical Quadragesimo Anno*, (N.C.W.C. pamphlet, 1936) p. 31.

importance if we place the dawn of this era around the sixth century rather than earlier or later. Actually at this time the faint outlines of a new social order were discernible, and this order was largely discontinuous with that which had preceeded it.

Toward the end of the fourth century effete Rome had yielded to the virile barbarian, and the doom of the Empire was signed and sealed. Under the sustained incursions of the northern tribes the imperial order swiftly disintegrated and with this disintegration came the passing of the unified economic structure that had flourished under the aegis of the Caesars. Basically, the one factor that had insured this order had been the marvelous system of Roman highways. These arteries of communication and traffic had linked together the far-flung provinces and colonies of the Empire. Apart from Roman law they had contributed most to the *Pax Romana*. Roman legionaires had not only traversed their smooth surfaces as agents of war but also had guarded them as custodians of peace. When the legions were no longer effective the increasing danger of maintaining contact with the city by the Tiber tended to isolate its subject peoples from the center of their corporate life. And so it can be truthfully said, from an economic point of view at least, that the prestige and power of Rome diminished proportionately to the disruption of her communication arteries. What was to become the Christian commonwealth of Europe presented, at the beginning of our period, a picture of isolated, disorganized provinces and tribal communities.

With facilities for trade at a minimum, agriculture became the dominant occupation of the majority. About nine-tenths of the population of Europe lived on and by the soil. Life came from and centered around the farm. The fundamental unit of this agrarian economy was the large estate. These huge parcels of land were owned and controlled by the feudal lords who in turn apportioned them among their tenant subjects. The latter lived in communal villages, often within the very shadow of the bulking castle walls of the lord. These villages were autonomous in nature, complete with dwellings, church, smithy, mill, wine-press, etc. For all practical purposes they were self-subsistent.

The real origins of feudalism are lost in obscurity. Perhaps the best explanation of the beginnings of the system is to be found in the theory of "commendation." According to this opinion, medieval men, exposed to the chaos of the post-imperial period, naturally gravitated towards the stronger leaders. Progressively, a certain hierarchy emerged from the process, and we have the structure of feudal aristocracy with its concomitant serfdom. The lord's manor became the

fundamental unit of the new order.

Holding the manor and its surrounding estate in fief from his superior lord or king was the vassal lord of the region. Usually these fiefs were hereditary in nature and granted originally for some service of fealty to the superior lord or king. In addition to being an economic unit the fief was also a territorial government. Within the confines of his estate, the vassal lord was something of a king in his own right. He levied taxes, demanded military services of his peasants, built fortifications, and administered justice. The extent of the individual lord's power and prestige depended both upon the position he held in the feudal aristocracy and upon his actual control over subordinates. "A fact often lost sight of is that the fief was primarily an office rather than a piece of land. . . . What was held was essentially a right of government within a particular region, and the accompanying estates served merely to provide a livelihood for the holder."²

At the other end of the social ladder, which he rarely scaled, stood the peasant. Ultimately it was he who provided the basis of feudal economic life. The peasant class was subdivided into "serf" and "villein." Actually, however, the distinction was little more than nominal. But, theoretically, the villein was considered to be more the freeman than his brother serf. For, while subject to the arbitrary authority of the lord, the villein in many instances was not considered the bodily property of the master, as was the serf. The peasant who really occupied the upper stratum of serfdom was he who was free enough to render only a fixed service to the lord and who was at liberty to dispose of his holdings and depart to distant regions.

Serfs lived together in communal villages. Because of certain deficiencies inherent in medieval agricultural methods, the serf found it quite necessary to pool his resources with those of his neighbors in order to realize a minimum return on his labors. During this period the "three-field" system of raising crops prevailed. Each peasant was given a strip of land in two of three fields. Yearly the third field was allowed to lie fallow. The strips were so scattered throughout the two fields, the farm implements so few, and the beasts of burden so scrawny that cooperative labor by all the villagers was the indispensable custom. Plowing, harrowing, sowing, and reaping were done in common. But each serf received at harvest time only what had been raised on his own little strips. Dispersed among the serfs' acres were the "furlongs" of the lord. These were cultivated along with the others and their produce given to the lord alone.

² Stephenson, Carl, *Medieval History*, (New York, 1933) p. 253.

In addition to the strips of arable land (usually about thirty acres) each peasant was allowed to graze his cattle on the stubble after the harvest was in. Furthermore, he shared the hay crop gathered in the common meadow for both lord and serf. His swine roamed the forest along with those of the lord, and from this same wood he obtained lumber for building and fuel for his hearth. Specialized labors were the rule within the confines of the village. The miller made flour, the iron worker shod horses, etc. "The medieval village was based upon cooperative labor and rights of common—not on communism. Individual property in land was fundamental, and we have no evidence of a time when it was not so."³

The relations between lord and serf have remained the subject of diverse opinions. Some historians incline to the theory of real exploitation. They maintain that the rule of the manor was excessively restrictive and in some instances decidedly cruel. Others contend with equal vigor that the lord exercised a paternal rule over his serfs and that manor and its village resembled one big happy family. Neither position is wholly correct. Carl Stephenson seems to have drawn a fairly accurate picture of existing conditions when he says: "The entire feudal class was supported directly or indirectly by the peasants. This fact should not be taken to imply that, in general, the latter were cruelly treated. . . . Although the average peasant's life may seem inconceivably hard by comparison with modern conditions, it was all they knew or hoped for; and it was, after all reasonably secure. Even serfdom was infinitely preferable to starvation or to the constant fear of death by violence. Under the lord's protection the peasant was assured only of a bare living; it was, nonetheless, a living."⁴

Of course certain taxation for a variety of petty causes sometimes became intolerable and oppressive. Inheritance taxes were levied, military services or their equivalent in money demanded, fees for use of wine press and mill required, "tallage" or special exactions for the lord's financial needs periodically extracted. But, on the credit side, real poverty was not at all common in the early Middle Ages. The lord was bound in conscience to care for the physical and spiritual needs of his subjects under pain of sin. And, since the Christian scheme of things was unquestionably accepted by lord and serf alike, a real effort was made to approximate its ideals.

This, then, is a thumb-nail sketch of medieval life at the end of one phase of its duration. The beginning of the eleventh century

³ Stephenson, *op. cit.*, p. 264.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, pp. 267-8.

witnessed the incipient stages of certain radical changes. The growth of towns, the faltering beginnings of industry, the revival of trade and commerce, and the growing importance of finance, all these were vital factors in the ultimate transition.

European towns, apart from those that had persisted since Roman times and those that were the seats of either ecclesiastical or monarchical authority, trace their origins to the middle phase of our period. During the earlier Middle Ages the town was regarded as something definitely parasitic. In contradistinction to the manorial village, which was the communal dwelling place of the serfs, the larger towns had little practical utility other than that they served as primitive marketplaces of surplus farm produce of the manor. The real beginnings of the larger towns would seem to coincide with an increasingly pronounced trek away from the land. The breakdown of the manorial system of agriculture, occasioned by the inability of production to meet the demands of an expanding population, caused large numbers of peasant sons to seek their livelihood away from the family holdings. Among those who left the parental hearth were many skilled artisans, men who had gained proficiency in some trade under the manorial regime. These artisans, establishing themselves in the towns, catered to the needs of the rich landowners and small merchant class. However, it was not until stimulated commerce, with its consequent demand for finished products, touched the towns that industry really began to develop, and the towns grew proportionately. This was particularly true of the towns situated along the great trade routes. Travelling merchants either made these their temporary headquarters or used them as depots of exchange and barter. Money began to circulate more freely, and the smaller villages came to depend upon the larger towns for their multiplying necessities. Tools and wearing apparel were purchased here, and the surplus produce of the farm brought in for sale or barter. Periodic fairs, usually held at one or another of the towns, also increased their importance.

The Crusades contributed materially towards expanding trade and commerce. They gave powerful impetus to trade with the Orient. Spices, silks, and all manner of Oriental delicacies and novelties found a rich market in the West. About the eleventh century, the Italian cities with the aid of the Crusaders swept the Mediterranean free of Saracen raiders. In the North the Hanseatic League cleared the Baltic and Atlantic of those Vikings who had not turned respectable traders. With these two routes once open to trade and with the land routes made comparatively safe through the efforts of kings and nobles, who were becoming increasingly conscious of the possibilities

for greater national prestige and wealth, commerce grew by leaps and bounds. And the towns responded proportionately to their new importance.

As has been noted above, towns in their origins were attached for the most part to some manor. At least they were indirectly dependent upon the lord of the fief. However, as the town assumed new dignity, townsmen, resenting the restrictive rule of the lord, set in motion concerted efforts to liberate themselves from the more or less arbitrary manorial supervision. Among the privileges they demanded were the substitution of fixed annual payments to the lord rather than individual payment of individual levies; the management of their own market; the right to administer their own justice according to a code other than that which had been in existence since the beginnings of feudalism; the right to tax citizens and, subsequently, to pay the lord a lump sum as a levy for the whole town.

That the townsmen were ultimately successful in their demands is ascribable principally to the organizing genius of groups known as merchant guilds. Religious and social in nature, these guilds came to exercise a tremendous influence in the destiny of the towns. Although they contributed services to their sick members, attended to the needs of widows and orphans, and supplied a solid protective front to excessive demands of the lord of the manor, their most effective function was, certainly, regulation of their own home market. "A conviction prevailed that the guild was morally bound to enforce honest, straight-forward methods of business, and the wardens appointed by the guilds to supervise the market endeavored to prevent, as dishonest practices, 'forestalling' (buying outside the regular market), 'engrossing' (cornering the market), and 'regrating' (retailing at higher than the market price Cheats were fined heavily and if they persisted in their evil ways, they might be expelled from the guilds."⁵

In their heyday, the merchant guilds had a real grip on the economic life of their respective communities. They demanded honesty and fairness in the business transactions of medieval men. And, for the most part, they were effective. However, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries particularly, the human element predominated to the extent that the original high purpose of the guild gave way to an oligarchic rule of stultifying restrictions. The result was the loss of their influence and power to the craft guilds.

The craft guilds existed side by side with the merchant guilds.

⁵ Hayes, Carlton, *Political and Cultural History of Modern Europe*, (New York, 1936) I, 57.

Like them they were religious and social in nature. They were largely the result of specialization in industry and professional life and were composed of all sorts of tradesmen and members of the various professions. Insisting on justice and fair play in all business activity as did the merchant guilds, they were unlike the older organizations in that each guild was made up only of men in a single trade or profession. Manufacture as well as the marketing of products was subjected to the detailed scrutiny of the craft guild.

These newer groups were divided into distinct categories within the framework of their own organization. The master held the highest position in the hierarchy of functional status. Maintaining his own establishment, which he merited by virtue of having produced a masterpiece in his particular trade, the master employed both apprentices and journeymen assistants. The apprentice was a novice at his trade, and under the tutelage of his master he was expected to become progressively skilled until he should reach the point where he would become a journeyman. Journeymen were, in a sense, graduated apprentices. They worked for the master, for a wage, until they themselves could produce the masterpiece that would give them the right to establish their own shop. Between master, apprentice, and journeyman there were absolutely no class distinctions. The origins of those distinct economic groups, Capital and Labor, date from a period when the spirit of the Middle Ages had lost its effectiveness. Carlton Hayes says of the craft guild: "The guild had rules specifying the quality of goods to be used and often the methods of manufacture; it might prohibit night work, and it usually fixed a 'fair price' at which goods were to be sold. By means of such provisions, enforced by wardens and inspectors, the guild not only perpetuated the 'good old way' of doing things, but assured to the purchaser a good article at a fair price."⁶

During the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries, craft guilds exercised a tremendous influence for good. Had they combined flexibility with effective regulative discipline, the assertive capitalism of the later Middle Ages might have been controlled. However, the inability to adapt themselves to changing conditions and the marked departure of the craft guilds from their primary objectives spelled their doom. They passed from the scene when that scene was no longer laid against a Christian background.

The increasing importance assumed by money was still another factor in the progressive departure from the bona fide feudalism of the earlier Middle Ages. It is correct to maintain that both individual

⁶ *Op. cit.*, I, 59.

men and their communities, in the initial stages of the medieval period, were familiar with money and its function. But any kind of general currency was quite unknown. Local lords and ecclesiastical authorities coined their money, and its objective value differed accordingly. With the rapid rise of trade, however, a financial mechanism familiar to our own age became the common possession of practically every large town. Letters of credit, advanced loans, interest, and insurance—all these devices of twentieth-century banking had their counterpart in medieval financial circles. Because loans were for the most part non-productive, the taking of interest on such was condemned by the Church. However, certain titles, extrinsic to the loan itself, were considered sufficient justification of reasonable charges for use of the principal of loans. Medieval theology denied the productivity of what it considered a sterile thing—money. But it admitted, with certain reservations, the productivity of what we understand today as “capital.” Jews alone were left comparatively undisturbed in their usurious money-lending. Certain Christians, however, chafing under the restrictions of the Church and envious of Jewish wealth, soon found means of circumventing the law. It was these Christian families and financial dynasties that eventually came to control money-lending in the later Middle Ages. The Jews, for the most part, handled only smaller loans made for the immediate necessities of their debtors. This fact explains why the common people attributed much of their financial doldrums to Semitic exploitation. From all this it is evident that the advent of our modern era, with its liberated capitalism, had at its disposal the framework of an elaborate banking system ready to carry on a familiar role in a new order.

The purpose of the above paragraphs has been, primarily, to delineate the broad outlines of the medieval background. If it seems that too much emphasis has been placed on this aspect, we feel that such a procedure is justified by the rather general confusion concerning just these historical factors that we have tried to explain. As has been indicated, the Middle Ages are divided roughly into three distinct periods. Our defense of the medieval ethos is essentially a defense of what happened in the middle years—the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries. It was only at this time that Christian social thinking and acting crystallized into an incomparably marvelous synthesis. The cursory description of what went before these three hundred years and the insinuations of what followed them merely serve, we think, to accentuate their brilliant uniqueness.*

* Note: The second and concluding part of this article will appear in the December issue.