

THE THEOLOGIAN LOOKS AT LIFE

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K. CHESTERTON once said that the really worldly man never understands even the world. He is, indeed, quite incapable of making a judgment about it, just as a man in an upper berth is incapable of forming an opinion about the speed of the train. He is too completely in the world, and considered purely by itself the world is not particularly understandable, for it explains neither its own beginning nor its own end. The worldly man in this regard is much like the playgoer who comes at the beginning of the second act and leaves with the third act still in progress. Everything that transpires is meaningless because it is not seen in its proper relation.

Strangely enough the only one who really understands the world is the one who *ex professo* is least concerned with it, the one who tries to see all things not as they are in themselves, but as they are in relation to God Who is the Beginning and End of all things. This is the man whom we have chosen to call the theologian, although we mean that in no narrow sense of the word. We might just as well have called him the man of Faith, the true Christian.

The Christian and the pagan must certainly regard the world in different ways. For the Christian all things take on a peculiar aspect in as much as they are manifestations of God intended precisely to lead men to Him. It is in keeping with man's nature that while knowing visible things he should be raised up to the invisible. He must begin with sensible things but he must not remain there. Thus in the divine plan all things in the world are disposed to raise his thoughts to God. That is why we can speak of the "sacramental character of nature," not only regarding those sensible things which God has consecrated by making them the matter of His Sacraments, but indeed of all nature in the sense that all things are manifestations of God intended to lead man to Him. St. Thomas has written most beautifully of this particular outlook which should characterize the man of Faith. In speaking of the ways in which created things are useful to the Faith¹ he sees them, in virtue of their wonderful order,

¹ *Summa Contra Gentiles*, II, 2.

speaking to us of Divine Wisdom, and leading us to admire it. Because of their majesty and power (Could he be thinking of towering mountain peaks, the rolling of the sea, and the awfulness of a thunder storm?) the works of nature make us reflect upon the majesty of God exciting in us fear and reverence, for "he that made (these things) is mightier than they." (Wisdom, XIII, 4). From the contemplation of goodness and beauty in nature, we are led to Him who is the cause of these things. "If the goodness, beauty, and sweetness of creatures are so alluring to the minds of men, the fountainhead of the goodness of God Himself, in comparison with the rivulets of goodness which we find in creatures, will draw the entranced minds of men wholly to itself."

The man of Faith, the theologian, if you will, sees manifestations of Divinity in all nature. For him, as Browning has put it,

*Earth's crammed with heaven
And every common bush afire with God. . .*

yet he is infinitely removed from the pantheist who sees nature not as a manifestation of God but as identified with Him. For the man of Faith, all these manifestations are signs put there by a loving God to draw man ever nearer to Himself. He finds goodness and truth and beauty in nature, but he knows that these are but broken and imperfect images of Him who is All Goodness and Truth and Beauty; and so, while he enjoys these things and uses them, he never rests in them, never bows down and adores them. For to adore created goodness or truth or beauty is idolatry; and he who burns incense at the altar of Science or Art is just as much an idolator as the half-naked savage cringing before his gods of mud. The sin may not seem so gross or repulsive, but perhaps for this very reason it is even more distasteful to Almighty God.

In his attitude toward the things of the world the Christian is guided by one basic principle. Man has but one last end—the enjoyment of God for all eternity. To that end all his activities must be directed. There can be nothing in his life that is not in some way ordained to this. In the light of this principle, all things must fall into their proper place.

If this is true in man's use and enjoyment of the ordinary things of life, it must be even more true of those activities wherein man most nearly imitates God—of his pursuit of the Arts, wherein he imitates God's creative power, and of the Sciences wherein he imitates the Divine Intellect in contemplating truth.

Unfortunately, both Science and Art have much in them that

makes them sought for themselves, for they are both very good. "Art for Art's sake" is a maxim we hear frequently, and even the statement of the schoolmen that the speculative sciences are sought for themselves has been misunderstood till Science is made an end unto itself. This cannot be true. Art and Science are both human activities, and as such they can claim no exemption from the general law that all human acts must be ordained to man's last end.

If we look to that great doctor and man of science of the thirteenth century, St. Albert the Great, we find a striking example of Science ordained to the service of God. St. Albert's knowledge was by no means limited to Theology. It extended to every branch of human learning with which his century was familiar. Yet all this vast store of knowledge had for him but one end, one purpose: to lead souls—his own and those of his disciples—to God. As Père Janvier has said of him: "If he studied the stars or the sea, rocks or minerals, plants or animals, it was that he might find there the traces of Divinity, the rays of the Supreme Beauty Who has made all things and keeps them in being. If he studied the ethics and politics of the ancient philosophers, it was that he might show that true happiness is to be found only in the love and service of God. If he delved into the subtleties of metaphysics, it was that he might be better able to come to some understanding of the great mysteries of our religion—the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the Eucharist."²

Science for him had its proper place in the scheme of things. Science is for man, and man is for God.

Just how this subordination is to be obtained in every case is a difficult problem to solve, but it will not be solved by those who proudly seek to measure the things of God by their laboratory instruments, nor yet by those who timidly keep Science and Theology in airtight compartments, believing, like the character in one of A. A. Milne's books, that their religion is too sacred a thing to allow it to become contaminated by contact with their everyday life. It will be solved ultimately only by those who approach humbly and reverently the created things which are the objects of Science, regarding them as manifestations of the Creator and seeking to learn the lessons He would have us learn from them and the uses He would have us make of them.

Just as Science must be subordinated to man's final end, so too must Art. Art for Art's sake, if this is understood as constituting Art as its own end, is just as false as money for money's sake. There

² *L'Ame dominicaine*, I, pp. 146-147.

is nothing sought for itself except God alone.

Art is the expression of the beautiful, and as such is an expression of one of the attributes of God and apt to lead the soul to Him. That does not mean that all Art must be religious art, pointing directly to God. It suffices that beauty be presented in such a way that the beholder is not prevented from rising to a consideration of the Source of all Beauty. This is the function of beauty in nature; it should also be its function in Art. In this lies the fault of all those branches of Art (the Romantic poetry of the nineteenth century is a classical example) wherein the tone is notably pantheistic, and creatures, man and natural beauties, are deified and worshipped as an end in themselves.

Not all beauty however is what the aesthete would call "sublime" and so not all Art will be capable of raising us to a consideration of God. Art may serve a humbler purpose yet be truly ordained to man's last end. Often, then, the principal function of Art will be to give pleasure. (St. Thomas defines the beautiful as that which, when it is seen, gives pleasure.) Now pleasure has its proper place in the divine scheme of things and can and must be ordained to man's eternal happiness. Even our jokes, St. Thomas says, are capable of leading in some way to our final end. Art under this aspect is to be regarded as recreation, and while not leading directly to God, it furnishes refreshment both to soul and body, thereby rendering man better able to direct his life to God.

This function of Art as recreation is particularly true of the literary arts and of music, and to these in particular must be applied the laws regarding recreation. Since recreation is to further man's progress to his final goal, it is obvious that there can be in it nothing leading away from that goal. Thus, anything which is of its very nature sinful, such as so-called works of art that are clearly obscene, is ruled out. Nor must the recreation be of such a nature that it actually destroys the quiet of the soul, thereby rendering man incapable of returning to his real task with renewed vigor. This fault might be charged against much of our modern music, both popular and classical, which often leaves us in a state of nervous exhaustion, and against many of the Russian novels which leave the reader so depressed that he is, at least for a time, unfit for human society.

Although making a legitimate appeal to the emotions, the arts must never excite emotion to run outside the bonds of reason, nor should they engender an emotion which is unbecoming to man. Thus, for example, works of art whose aim is to induce melancholy are not a legitimate form of recreation, for melancholy is a complacency in

sorrow. Sorrow is itself a legitimate emotion; there are times when it is good for man to be sad. The purpose of sorrow is to make us realize our own insufficiency, our dependence upon God. That is the example the Church would give us in the Requiem Mass. Still she does not abandon us in sorrow but holds out hope and leaves us with the strains of the Communion antiphon ringing in our ears like a triumphal march. Melancholy takes pleasure in being sorrowful—a perversion of the order of reason. The morality of Shakespeare's Jacques, who could "suck melancholy out of a song as a weasel sucks eggs," might certainly be called into question on this point.

Only the godly man can ever really understand the world, for he alone can see the plan which makes the world understandable—God's plan. And because he alone can understand it, he alone can use it as God meant it to be used; he alone can enjoy it as God meant it to be enjoyed (for God did make things that men might enjoy them.) For him the things of the world are good, but not *the Good*. They are so many means, so many paths to lead him to his true home. Because these things are good, he can love them; but because they are not *the Good* and because he is weak, man must use them cautiously lest he become ensnared by their goodness and impeded in his journey to his real good. That is why he may, notwithstanding their goodness, sometimes turn his back on them, deny himself the pleasure they give, lest he become enslaved by them. In this, man is not like the animal content in the food placed before him, but like the child who leaves his new toy to go across the room to say thank you to his father.

All the things of the world are man's, given to him not that he may forget God, but that he may remember Him. All things are to be seen and used and enjoyed in reference to God, for the world is for man, but man is for God.