

LEON BLOY: A MAN FOR THE MODERN WORLD

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SOME THREE decades ago, the weary soul of Leon Bloy sped from this mortal earth. His fame and influence were comparatively small and seemed destined for quiet oblivion; yet today his reputation is international and his literary and spiritual stature grows steadily. It seems strange that Bloy should appeal to the modern world. He has been likened to a prophet of ancient Israel, an apologete of the second century, and a medievalist; thus he was apparently a misfit in the twentieth century. A little reflection, however, makes it clear that this is the source of his attraction, for the modern world sorely needs and desires the spirit of the past ages of faith. The hollow shell is all that remains of the great edifice of Western civilization, and individuals and nations are looking about for the tools and materials of repair and reconstruction. Bloy offers them, indeed, thrusts upon them the original foundation, the Faith.

His life mirrored in miniature much of the confusion, rebellion, and longing of present society. He lost and regained his faith, alternated between vice and sanctity, then finally persevered in the practice of ascetical piety. He suffered a great deal from poverty and injustice. His literary efforts gained for him little money, scant praise, and much abuse.

It is not too difficult to understand why his books were not popular with his contemporaries. To the Catholics they were disturbing and puzzling, and their author seemed to be a defender of the Faith more to be feared than any attacker. Arrogant and uncharitable, tinged with anticlericalism, Bloy lashed the faithful unmercifully, heaping scorn upon their tepidity, mediocrity, and respectability. He was a self-appointed, unruly bodyguard at a fashionable gathering. To those outside the fold he was an implacable foe. His vitriolic pen flayed them and all they held most precious. He called Maupassant an insect; Daudet, a plagiarist of Dickens; Ernest Renan, a scientific wine tub; and he compared the writings of Zola to a bilious cloud. Bloy was a dogmatic reviler of the art, culture, science, materialism, liberalism, and paganism of his day. His use of imprecations and invective was so skillful and penetrating that all of his talented victims ultimately sought refuge in silence.

SIGNS OF GENIUS

Thus far this has been an unflattering, one-sided portrait of Leon Bloy. He was not a religious fanatic, opposed to everyone and everything. He had a tremendous love for God, boundless compassion for the poor and oppressed, profound understanding of contemplation and suffering, deep devotion to the Blessed Virgin, and a relentless passion for Divine Justice. His was a heart of fire toward God, a heart of flesh toward the down-trodden, but a heart of steel towards his enemies. A tree is judged by its fruits; and Bloy replied to his critics, "Some people ask for Baptism after having read me. What divine sanction for my violence!"¹

Today all has changed, Leon Bloy has achieved recognition as a literary master, and he is respected, if not universally admired and championed, by the Catholic world. His appeal to those without the Faith, who are honestly seeking truth, is strong and constant.

In English-speaking countries Bloy's reputation as an author is based chiefly on his classic novel, *The Woman Who Was Poor*. This book is obscure in parts, and is an exception to the rule that exaggeration causes poor literature. It manifests most of Bloy's gifts and failings; even in translation it displays his command of language, his vivid portrayal of persons and events, his bitterness, his realism, and his faith. Most of the "best-sellers" of the past few years that have been presented as naturalistic and socially-realistic literature are seen as unvarnished pornography when compared to the realism in Bloy's novel. Flashing from the depths to the heights, he depicts equally well vice, poverty, suffering, sordidness, and sanctity. The author traces the rise of a noble girl from a hovel of wretched misery to the peaks of holiness. In her ascent she is deprived of her home, her husband, her child, her friends, her possessions—in short—of everything but her God.

Bloy has been instrumental in the conversion of many souls. His most famous converts are Jacques and Raissa Maritain. His spiritual renown, however, does not rest solely on these conversions but also on his prophecies. Bloy considered himself as an emissary of Divine Justice and a propagator of the message of La Salette. He preached penance to a sinful and unrepentant world. When he saw that he was unheeded he foretold the wars and catastrophes that have engulfed the nations of the earth. Fifty years ago he wrote to a friend, "Expect moreover, and prepare yourself for catastrophes. . . . I know that

¹ The selections from Bloy's works given here are taken from the collection, *Leon Bloy—Pilgrim of the Absolute* by Raissa Maritain. Pantheon. New York. 1947.

the world is threatened as never before . . . we are at the prelude of an inconceivable Drama, the like of which has not been witnessed for twenty centuries; I suggest to you some amount of meditation." Again he declared, "I behold very clearly the unavoidable disasters that will occur. The threats of La Salette must be accomplished. The time of repentance is gone . . . today, on the brink of the Apocalypse to which we have now arrived, on the edge of an abyss the depth of which is unknown to us. . . . I thought on the future—the inconceivably, unspeakably terrifying future—which has already begun."

AWAITING THE COSSACKS

To understand Leon Bloy it is necessary to know about the appearance of Our Lady at La Salette. There, two shepherd children saw the vision of the Blessed Virgin who wept and foretold dire misfortunes for the sinful world. The authenticity of the vision was doubted, the children were persecuted, and all attempts at the fostering of devotion to the Lady of La Salette were discouraged. To Bloy there was no doubt, and he undertook a personal crusade to spread the message and devotion of La Salette. He wrote *Celle qui Pleure*, a book dealing with the event, and constantly referred to the vision in his conversation, letters, and journals.

Due to the apparitions at Fatima and the second great war the Catholic world has become increasingly aware of Divine Justice. This explains much of the interest of the faithful in Leon Bloy, for Bloy considered himself the "Voice of Justice." As he beheld mankind busy about many secular things, but heedless of warnings and portents, he complained, "I die for need of Justice."

It seems more than coincidental that Bloy was born in the year of the apparition at La Salette and died in the year of the apparitions of Fatima. His love for Mary was tremendous and he spent the greater part of his life publicizing her warnings. Were he alive today he would undoubtedly be a tireless champion and trumpeter of the message of Fatima.

NEED FOR QUALIFICATION

Bloy, however, cannot be recommended without qualification. His writings contain much that is sordid and sensual; and many of his criticisms are unjust and uncharitable. His works must be interpreted and distinguished to be understood correctly; if taken literally they present a distorted view of Catholicism. He apparently ignores Prudence and Temperance and restricts the cardinal virtues to Justice and Fortitude. He excludes all ordinary virtue and permits only sin or heroic virtue. He exalts the First Commandment but ne-

glects the Second. He eliminates most of the joy of Catholicism until it becomes a kind of Holy Week without the crown of Easter. Yet most of this difficulty is more apparent than real, and can be traced to Bloy's consistent use of hyperbole. Exaggeration was natural to him and he used it for a definite purpose.

When he intended to author a new book, he wrote, "I am burning to tell a few profound truths amidst all the literary lies and dramatic omissions." His constant use of hyperbole and his "dramatic omissions" have rendered his writings tremendously effective, but at the same time left the gates open for an army of misconceptions. Indeed when quoted out of context his words can be used by both opponents in a controversy. Thus Bloy was accused of anti-Semitism despite the fact that his *Le Salut par les Juifs* is a brilliant defense of the Jews.

GADFLY TO THE COMPLACENT

Despite these defects Bloy deserves all the fame and attention that he is now receiving. It is foolish and unfair to dismiss him as eccentric or to minimize his influence. He has more than an empty appeal to the modern world; he has a message. It is the message of the heroine of *The Woman Who Was Poor*, namely, "There is but one sadness, that is for us not to be saints." In that terse phrase Bloy compounded the disease and cure of modern society. He beatifies the poverty and adopts the suffering that the humanistic Liberals have sought in vain to eliminate. To these confused people Bloy gives hope and a new vision of the Church they have misunderstood. Instead of the stagnant, reactionary, home of Pharisees they have imagined, he shows them a dynamic and radical society that is supernatural but not superstitious, and deficient only in its members. Bloy's appeal is emotional rather than rational, for he claimed that he was bored by philosophy and overwhelmed by theology. He does not argue, he affirms; he does not plead, he commands. He is still a gadfly to complacent Christian consciences, but he becomes more popular as mediocrity becomes a more impossible position in these decisive days. He is proclaimed as the "Prophet of the Poor," the champion of the outcasts and the exploited, the denouncer of the sweatshops and the evils of industrialism, the foe of Communism. If you read Bloy's works you may be inspired or repelled, but you probably will not be bored. Catholics can find in the midst of his fierce writings many sublime thoughts that will give them a more awakened sense to suffering, justice, and the Absolute. To those without the Faith, perhaps his works may help to lead them to ask for Baptism. It would be a further sanction for Leon Bloy's violence.