

THE CLERGY AND THE HEATHEN

What would have become of the barbarians, unless some kind monk or Hermit had taken pity on them? I used the words "Monk or hermit" with a special reason. It was by their influence that the Teutons or northern tribes, after the destruction of the Roman Empire were saved from becoming, and continuing to be, hordes of savages destroying each other by continual warfare.

What we owe to the Roman Clergy, I will try to demonstrate to you. To give them their due share of praise is an extremely difficult task. We can only begin by imagining, if possible, the novel and terrible conditions under which they were placed. But they did the work of God and wisdom is justified of all her children.

This may sound like optimism, but it also sounds like truth to anyone who has fairly studied that fantastic page of history—the contrast between the old monks and our own heathen forefathers. The more one studies the facts, the less inclined is one to ask that sneering question so often flung—why was it not done better?—the more inclined to ask—could it have been done better? Were not the celebrate clergy from the 5th to 8th centuries, exceptional agents fitted for an exceptional time, and set to do a work which, in the then state of Europe, none else could have done?

The monk and clergyman, whether celibate or not, worked on the heathen in one of three capacities; as a tribune of the people, as a hermit or solitary profit, as a colonizer; and in all three, worked as well as frail human beings are wont to do in this most piecemeal world.

Let us first look back on the hermits. We are all aware of the hermit and his importance in the old romances and ballads; all are not aware of his greater importance in actual history. Scattered through all wildernesses from Sarmatia to Erin, they put forth a power uniformly for

good. Yes, truly, we remember our hermit in the old romance: how some bold Sir Roland or Bors, wearied with the burden of his sins stumbles on one of these dwellers apart and talks with him and goes on his way a wiser and a better man; or, mayhap, he crawls out of some quarrel, reeling on his saddle bow; and ever he went through a waste land and barren, and amid caverns gloomy and rough, so that it seemed he must surely starve; and anon, he heard a little bell whereat he marvelled greatly; and then, was he made ware of a grotto nigh a rivulet and an hermitage, and there the holy man was saying Mass, for he was a priest and a great leech in the curing of wounds as well. And so the knight tells his sad story—how he fought Sir Randolph for the love of the fair Elinore, and how he was worsted, and how he thought to avenge himself, and how he he wasted his enemy's lands, and how he finally was smitten and nigh wounded to death—the usual story of mad passion, drink, pride and revenge.

And then, the holy man shrived him and made him swear on the blessed Gospels that fight he should not, save in his liege lord's quarrel, for a year and a day; and then he abode, until he was well healed, and went his way.

Must not this man, fresh from rapine, have gone away a wiser and a better man? And, perhaps—and it often happened—after twenty or thirty years fighting and drinking, this same knight, finding that the lust of the flesh and the eye and the pride of life are poor pay-masters, and that the "wages of sin is death," remembered this incident and returned to this place as a hermit, may even have become a priest and died in honour, having done countless good deeds to those in distress and to wayfarers.

Praying and preaching continually, these men lived on foods dogs would not eat, and in exposure dogs ought not to live in. They had their reason; they knew in such generations as they lived in, men could not be taught save by striking example. Nothing less startling could have

touched dull hearts, could have convinced the dull brains of fierce, ignorant, and unreasoning men.

Ferocity, lawlessness, rapine, cruelty, and sensuality were the evils which were making Europe uninhabitable for decent folk, and history, as Milton calls it, a mere battle of crows and kites. Then the example of the hermit had its power, especially if the hermit was a delicate, highborn woman. Only this could teach the untutored savage the absolute superiority of soul to body, of spiritual to physical force, and have said to them not in words but in solid acts—"All that you follow is not the way of life"—and convince them of the freedom and nobility of service. Let us honour the enormous moral force which enabled them to bear witness that not the mortal animal, but the immortal spirit is the man. And they did teach that lesson. They were good while other men were bad, and men saw the beauty of goodness and felt the strength of it. Read the legends of the hermits of the German forests, or the lives of the Irish saints and see what we mean by this.

Take St. Bridgid; some say there were eleven St. Brigids, but for the purpose of history that does not matter; the high moral character was there and had its effect. Man's imagination does not create; it only pictures and combines its experiences, and if there had not been persons like St. Bridgid in Ireland, the Irish would not have imagined them.

Therefore, it makes but little difference to the wise man, standing in the top of Croagh Patrick, the grandest mountain with the grandest outlook in the British Isles, whether St. Patrick himself owned the ancient image which is venerated on that mountain-peak or the ancient bell which used to hang in the sanctuary; it matters little whether St. Patrick did or did not stand on that mountain-top wrestling with the demons of the storm; but we know that he conquered not by brute force,

like Hercules or Theseus, but by the spiritual force of which it is written; "this kind cometh not out but by prayer and fasting"—till he smote evil things with the golden rod of Jesus and they rolled over the cliff and perished in the Atlantic below. It matters much that there is set forth the victory of good and beneficent men over evil, whether of matter or of spirit. It matters much to him that that cell, that bell, that image are tokens, that if not St. Patrick, some one else did live and worship on that mountain-top in remote, primeval times—in a place where, perhaps, we could not endure life for a week. It matters much to him that the man who so dwelt there gained such power over the minds of the heathens round him that five, nay more, millions of their Christian descendants worship God on account of him, to this day.

O! We might mention St. Severinus, or St. Columbia, or St. Aidan and countless others, and in all, shines forth like a light to any age, the grace of God and the likeness of the Son of man, who came to save and to serve.

Let us turn to the priest as tribune of the people, supported usually by the relics of some saint. One may see that side of his power in Raphael's immortal design of Attila and the Pope before the gates of Rome. Here the proud Hun, the "Scourge of God," recoils as he sees St. Peter and St. Paul, floating terrible and threatening above the Holy City. Was it a myth? It not could have been; Attila saw them, if not in the sky, then, in his own mind; and it was well for Attila and mankind that he should tremble before the spiritual and invisible, confessing a higher law than that of his own ambition and self-will, a higher power than his Tartar hordes.

And this was true of more than Attila; each wild chief was made aware, at last, of something which made him pause. Sometimes it is a little walled town, the ruins of some great city with its minster towering over thatched roofs; more than once had it been sacked, more than once

has the surviving priest crawled out of his hiding place when the sound of war was passed, and dug up the bones of the dead for christian burial, fed a few widows and orphans, organized some orderly life out of the chaos of blood and ashes, in the name of God and "St Quemdeusvult," whose relics he guards. And thus, he has established a temporary theocracy and become tribune of the people, magistrate and father—the only one they have.

And so, this priest, or maybe he is a bishop, goes out to face some marauding king, clad only in spiritual armour. The wild king and his wild knights pause. They are men of blood, too, men of evil lives, and conscience makes them cowards. Then they come, trembling and awkward, into the great dom-church. Inside, lies the saint asleep, yet ever awake. The Bishop speaks and asks them to consider in whose presence they are, and to fear God and "St. Quemdeusvult," and to cast away the seven deadly sins wherewith they are defiled, for the saint is a righteous man and died for righteousness, and those who rob the orphan and the widow and put the fatherless to death, he cannot abide. In short, the bishop preaches to the king a good round sermon, calling things by their true names, and in a tone which makes the strong armed men blush and tremble before the weak and helpless one.

Yes, spirit is stronger than flesh. "Meekly bow thy neck, Seccamber," said St. Remiguis to the all-conquering Clovis, as he stepped into the baptismal font. "Burn what thou hast adored, and adore what thou hast burned;" and the terrible Clovis trembled and obeyed.

Just a word about the priest in his capacity as a colonizer. This good work of the church, especially in the preservation and even the resuscitation of the municipal institutions of the towns, may best be discovered in Guizot and Sismondi. There, you may see the clergy as the only practical organic remnant of the Roman Empire, and you may see the work they did.

The difference between the clergy and the Teutonic conquerers was not only a difference of creed and civilization, but an actual difference of race. They were Romans to whom the Teuton was a savage, speaking a different tongue, with different laws and conceptions of life. And he was, moreover, an enemy and a destroyer. The Teuton was to them as the Hindoo or Bantu races are to us, with the terrible exception that the propositions were reversed—that the Teutons were not the conquered but the conquerors. It is easy to feel humanity and Christian Charity towards races we have mastered; it was not so easy for the Roman priests to feel them toward a race which had mastered him. His repugnance to the "barbarian" must have been intense. He never would have conquered it, had there not been in him the spirit of God and the firm belief in the Church Catholic, to which all men and all races ought alike to belong. This true and glorious idea—the only one that will ever prevail against the barrier of racial and tribal antipathy—this idea was the sole possession of the Roman Clergy, and by it they conquered, because it was true and came from God.

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