

Our Neglected Heritage

J. L. McKenna

As we turn the pages of history we are reminded, from time to time, of the culture of the great nations of the past. Indeed to the ages of the Greek, of the Roman and to the Medieval period we ascribe the term "highly cultured." Moreover we pride ourselves today in maintaining that the culture we now enjoy can be traced directly to these. But we wonder if our present-day standard of culture may be ranked as high as that of the Middle Ages. How few of us realize the truth of Goethe's words:

*"That which thou didst inherit from thy sires,
In order to possess, it must be won."*

But what have we inherited from our sires? We may indeed ask that question; although we have only to look back a few hundred years to the Middle Ages to find the answer. What a contrast there is between that age and ours! Then we find a flourishing cosmopolitanism within the confines of the Church; a church which sought the benefit of all; a church which kept materialism in check and subordinated to the idealism which found its expression in the comradely regard of man for man, in the chivalrous attitude of man for woman, and in such fundamentally idealist ventures as the Crusades, truly magnificent examples of subordination of mere individual comfort to the attainment of a greater aim. It is absolutely impossible to imagine a Crusade being contemplated, much less taking place, today. We probably console ourselves with the thought that it would be unsporting to kill the infidels because they do not happen to agree with our religious views; what we really would mean is that such a venture would entail too much trouble, unless of course there were a chance to make some material profit.

The common culture of medieval times effectively bridged gaps between nations, and, although there was fighting among them, this was regarded more as a sport, rough though it was, than a matter of conquering for material gains. Nations of that age saw the good in each other. Treaties among them were pledges made before God; men would die rather than break them. The whole basis of life was firmer. There existed a greater sense of

communal responsibility. Social inequalities were neither so flagrant nor so frequent as they are today. The spirit and general culture of that age had been handed down and filled in, not in the superficial and pretentious way characteristic of present-day development, but in a logical sequence agreeing with what had gone before. Undeveloped, untutored and uncouth according to modern standards, medieval people may have been, but they were the richer for a life founded upon a basis of practical idealism; in strange contrast to the materialism of today, when each man is a law unto himself and love of one's neighbor is always qualified by individual definition of the word "neighbor." Indeed it is not too much to say that Medievalism, a term invented by contemptuous materialists, did make a better showing and did produce a stronger justification for its existence than our present mode of living has.

The Middle Ages have left us a legacy of life bounded by certain definite moral principles; a life based on a practical idealism which kept in check the incipient materialism of that day; a philosophy of life which did not consist in getting as much as possible for little effort, but rather emphasized mutual co-operation for the benefit of all. In fact this medieval life was not egocentric but one in which each man and woman was a unit, bound to the rest by mutual love and respect. This, then, is what we have inherited from our ancestors; but it must be won, consolidated and supplemented from age to age. The effort to win it, strange to relate, seems to have been too much for us today.

Such a state of affairs was due to the all-embracing influence of the Church. But even if Luther had never had qualms of conscience about indulgences, and even if Henry VIII had never tired of Katherine of Aragon, it would be too much to expect that the Church would serve the world today "in the office of a wall." Ours, we like to think, is the most civilized of civilized ages; and from superior height we look down upon and sneer at the feeble efforts of former times to make life worth living. But are we superior? Let us read what a noted author has said of this age. "Since the French Revolution 'civilized humanity' has become the surrogate for the Christian Church. The Church has disintegrated into numerous churches and sects For the civilized world

conscience has come to take the place of the voice of God; instead of calling upon God, they appeal to the world conscience" and, we may add, pay as little attention to it. Religion today is regarded merely as an appendage, not as the foundation of life. It has felt the materialist influence of the "Safety-first" school of thought. Now-a-days it is unfashionable to speak of Hell; there are no longer any penalties attached to the commission of what were once sins; everyone will get to Heaven quite safely in the end; everything is made very easy and comfortable; there is no need to worry; the strait way has been greatly broadened under a new town-planning scheme; and after all there are plenty of reserved seats in Heaven. Why worry? It will be all right in the end.

Such are our "soi-disant" Christians views on religion; Christians who subscribe to the view of that one of their number of whom David Grace has so aptly written:

*"He proudly said, "I have no need of God,"
And, worshipping himself, serenely trod
God's earth; but now a thought, though very dim,
Dawns on his mind; God has no need of him."*

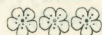
In view of this tendency to make modern religion fit the individual whim and caprice, it is not surprising to find that the ideals of which the Christian faith was, at one time, the foundation, are, for the most part, relegated to the ash heap. There is a divorce, an abyss between religion and the culture of today; between the sacred and the secular there is an impassable canyon, impassable because of the failure of either the sacred or of the secular to bridge it.

So throughout practically every country in the world, in religion, in politics, in philosophy, and in everyday life, we can see that idealism of former times subordinated to a materialism which can only be pernicious in its final effects. For one nation to see good in another is inconceivable; too many people are busy making too much money; mistrust is altogether too prevalent; armaments are piled up, fortifications mount higher and higher, new weapons, new poisons are being daily invented; and new rumours, new scares are hourly being manufactured by the sensation-creating press for the better fouling of international goodwill. All this is due to that dread modern scourge, nationalism. All this has resulted from the dis-

graceful neglect of that legacy which has been passed on to us by our fore-fathers.

Thus we have shown that marvellous heritage which is ours. The social and philosophical aspects have been treated. The principles upon which society must be based if it is to gain its end, man's happiness, have been inherited from the Middle Ages. But they are not surrendered to us on a silver platter. "In order to possess, it must be won."

We must, first of all, have intellectual reconstruction. Those ancient ideals must be modernized. Modern materialism must be discarded. An objective philosophy must be substituted for the modern subjectivity. From this will follow the others. Social restoration will be obtained. A wider and juster distribution of property will come about. The realization that no good is done under compulsion, that man can do no good unless he has the will, will result in many and great changes. A complete reversal in mens' mode of thinking, a right-about-face in the economic world will, at long last, bring to us that heritage that is our due. Lastly, did not Napoleon say: "A state without religion is like a ship without a compass." Perhaps it is too much to hope that the world will return to the true fold. But every man can and must place absolute trust in God. Surely then, and only then can we hope to see the world return as a prodigal to find its long-due heritage.



"He Who created you without your help will not save you without it."—*St. Augustine.*

"Think of nothing but thy salvation; care only for the things of God."—*Thomas a Kempis.*

"All who joy would win
Must share it—
Happiness was born
A twin."

—*Byron.*