

Tridentine Community News

April 14, 2013 - Second Sunday After Easter

Religion and Art - Part 4 of 5

We continue our reprint of excerpts from an essay entitled Religion and Art by Fr. James Bellord, originally published in the 1910 book, *A Pulpit Commentary on Catholic Teaching*.

Enter an old Catholic church in an old Catholic city and you are awed into mute wonder. It speaks to you of the eternal, the ancient of days, the immutable: it seems as if its multifarious beauty could never be grasped, and it is certain that man, as at present, could not again produce its like. You feel that it is truly the house of God and the gate of Heaven, a blessed vision of eternal peace. But if it be one that has passed from the Catholic to some reformed Church, what a picture of desolation it presents. It is a desert of monotony and inutility, a storehouse for incongruous tombstones. It is a corpse. That sense of life which comes from the presence of the Most Holy with the beacon lamp and kneeling worshippers is absent. It is the Jerusalem of the captivity. "How doth the city sit solitary that was full of people: how is the sovereign of the Gentiles become as a widow? . . . The ways of Sion mourn because there are none that come to the solemn feast: all her gates are broken down. . . . The enemy hath put out his hand to all her desirable things, for she hath seen the Gentiles enter into her sanctuary, of whom thou gavest command that they should not enter into thy Church" (Lam. i, I, 4, 10).



It is just the same with these altar-pieces, triptychs, chalices, reliquaries and vestments, removed by vandal governments from their natural home to picture galleries and museums. They have lost half their beauty; they are no longer parts of a living beautiful body, but anatomical specimens. How sad and useless they are, taken forever from the service of God, put under glass shades, turned into mere objects of curiosity, from being part of the eternal worship of the Church and aids to faith and virtue!

In painting, too, the soul is gone when faith has ceased. The old monk-artist sought inspiration in prayer and fasting, before taking his brush to portray the Virgin Mother and her Divine Infant. He sought to make men realize spiritual truths and move them to purity and love. The modern artist, pipe in mouth, works from questionable models to make a reputation or to fill his pockets. Modern painters are undoubtedly superior in technical knowledge, in manipulation, archeological correctness of detail; they will reproduce exactly the scenery amidst which our Lord lived, the particulars of His costume, the type of face then prevalent: but the figures are not divine, all spiritual beauty has fled.

Turn from these to the frescoes of Giotto, or the rude mosaic of Ravenna: anatomy, perspective, details are all astray, but you have seen in these works a spiritual life. You feel as if you were

actually before the stern, all-seeing, impartial Judge of Mankind, or as if you had seen, face to face, the most pure and most blessed of women. You may see young men, as they come suddenly into the presence of the Madonna di San Sisto, check their laughter, snatch off their hats, and stand silent and motionless, as though they saw a real glimpse of heaven through the parted veil.

A Protestant Dutch School of Art arose some couple of centuries ago. Light and shade portraits, domestic life, tavern orgies, dead game, pots and pans, texture of tapestries and furs they rendered with unexampled perfection. But when they forgot the limits of their powers and tried to soar to the higher level of religious ideas, their incapability was shown by the grotesque and soulless results. Turning to modern days, we may compare ordinary exhibitions of sculpture with the delicate, lovely, and touching conceptions in the great cemeteries of Genoa and Florence. We may see, too, in the undue sentimentalism and ingenious filthiness of academies and salons, how Art can fall when the purifying and ennobling influence of faith is cast off.

Again, the stage is a branch of Art with which the Church has little to do, except to watch it with suspicion, and occasionally to pronounce a warning. Part of it is respectable and really belongs to the domain of high Art. But it has often been a powerful instrument of immorality, and its associations are not always lovely. Yet the Church originated the modern drama in her miracle

plays, which still survive in the Passion Plays among remote mountains. These furnish a rare occasion of observing the association of Religion with this form of Art. After feeling the thrilling effect produced by untutored mountaineers, whose chief qualifications are their devotion and belief, and who receive holy Communion by way of preparing for the play, one can understand how much moral power and spiritual and artistic beauty there may be in the drama.

Ruskin has remarked that the decay of a country begins in its Art, and its prosperity is measured by its possession and appreciation of fine artists. The character of its art and the direction of its taste are, of course, closely allied with its national character, in its decline or improvement. I may, perhaps, go farther, still, and suggest that the art of a nation, and especially its religious art, may throw a sidelight on the character of its religion and of its religiousness.

Tridentine Masses This Coming Week

Mon. 04/15 7:00 PM: Low Mass at *St. Josaphat* (Feria of Paschaltide) [Celebrant may choose a Votive Mass]

Tue. 04/16 7:00 PM: Low Mass at *Assumption-Windsor* (Votive Mass of the Angels)

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