

"Christian Art in Our Age."

An Appreciation by "Crux"

In 1891 the office of the "Ave Maria," at Notre Dame, Indiana, published a work entitled "Christian Art in Our Age," from the pen of the late Eliza Allen Starr. It was with no ordinary pleasure that I then read that charming and highly instructive production of a most brilliant pen. Recently I noticed that the introductory remarks of the work have been reproduced in some of the American Catholic weeklies. At this I am not surprised, for I have ever considered that preface one of the most beautiful as well as judicious tributes to the influence of Christianity upon art that was ever written. I may incidentally remark that I have invariably found a charm in Miss Starr's writings, and especially in such of her unnumbered contributions to literature that treat of art and religion. Some few years ago I had the privilege of exchanging letters several times with Miss Starr. She was then contributing some of her brightest effusions to the columns of the "Ave Maria," and other leading Catholic periodicals. She occupied her home, St. Joseph's cottage, in Chicago, that shrine of learning, of culture and of art, and there delivered her weekly lectures before select audiences composed of the most refined, learned, and appreciative citizens of the Western metropolis. Her letters, in all seven, each of ten pages, are now before me, and I can say, without the shadow of exaggeration, that they are so many literary gems. A Ruskin might have written them; yet the author of "The Stories of Venice," with all his perfection of diction and lucidity of appreciation, could never have touched with such feminine delicateness the minor chords of religious sentiment. It seems to me, on account of those letters, that I had been a personal acquaintance of that venerable and many-gifted lover of the beautiful. I am going to take the liberty of reproducing that introduction to "Christian Art in Our Age," merely dividing it into paragraphs, in order that its distinctive parts may be the more readily distinguished and appreciated.

ETERNAL BEAUTY.—Eternal beauty of the Eternal God-head! ever ancient yet ever new; marvelously stirring in the mind of Deity, while our world, a shapeless mass adrift in infinite space, held in itself the elements of the wondrous beauty of earth, of air, and of sea, which we see around us to-day; working more marvelously still when a germ of the uncreated beauty, like that of the uncreated justice, truth, goodness, was planted by the Creator Himself in the soul of man; to be transmitted to the Adam and Eve to the end of time; which no barbarism should utterly destroy, and which, although turned so often to the service of the material and the perishing, is gifted with a sense which roots itself from age to age in the divine intellect, and has held of the infinite beauty of God as its end. Eternal beauty of the Eternal Godhead, story of our song and theme of our praises!

THE SOURCE OF BEAUTY.—Only by tracing the sense of beauty back to its uncreated source, and regarding it as the inheritance of mankind from the beginning, can we account for the universality of its possession by all races and peoples, and in all ages, without a break from the primeval to the present. Whatever may have been the feebleness of tenure of the hereditary possession, however imperfect its results, it has existed; and every age has left, either in the ruins of its monuments, or the sculptures on the native face of its rocks overlooking island sea or rolling river, its proof of the existence of an art which had its source in the sense of beauty and the desire to reproduce what had excited its admiration. This fact puts an end to all theories limiting the progress of art or its achievements in ages to come. The art which created is not shortened, nor has the love which prompted creation grown cold. Every age possesses in itself, like our world while still without form, the elements of the most glorious periods of production; and revival and decline are to be noted, as we note the seasons of the year, by the budding, unfolding, and full of the leaves of the forest and grove, while certain conditions or circumstances may be counted upon as sure to favor the noblest types for the season of efflorescence.

RELIGIOUS INFLUENCE.—The first of those controlling or restraining conditions, of these apparent or subtle influences, is the religious fervor of the times. Nothing is plainer than that the noblest periods of Greek art were those in which the belief in the gods was the most sincere. It was the story of the gods in the Iliad and Odyssey of Homer, their praises as celebrated in the hymns of the pious Pindar, which so exalted the imagination of Phidias that his colossal statues of Jupiter and Minerva were less precious for their ivory and gold than for a certain majesty and serenity which placed them above the possibilities of

nature, and made them the embodiments of the noblest human ideals of goodness, power and wisdom, such as men might be drawn to worship. But art, whether Greek or Roman, whether at the hands of native or foreign genius, shared the same fate as the gods themselves. It was a mere formal rendering of homage to the will of the state. The imagination, no longer stimulated by coming in contact with the popular belief, languished, and the last days of paganism gave an art in the "sick and yellow leaf" of its existence. In our sense, and so far as production went, that sleep of winter had set in, when seeds, already sown, are preparing in the depths of the soil to send forth their shoots with the first rays of spring. The art of the catacombs, which goes far to make up the terranean gloom, might well be regarded as something more than the germ of a forthcoming period of unparalleled significance and grandeur, since the ideals of even Greek art are necessarily transient, while those of the Christian are eternal.

ART IN CATACOMBS.—"To one just making acquaintance with the art of the Catacombs, great is the astonishment to find the subjects familiar to us to-day treated on the walls of the art historian, no longer confined within subterranean chambers, finds itself in the full light of day. No greater change was ever seen in the plant grown within prison walls on coming to air and sunshine. Not only are forms perfect, but the coloring is all the splendor of pure tints and the charms of delicate gradation. One hundred years from Constantine's entrance into Rome, saw works in mosaic which utterly eclipse anything attempted in this manner by the artists of pagan antiquity. In fact, Christianity is allowed to have developed this imperishable form of pictorial art in a way unheard of, unthought of, and the year 440 in Santa Maria Maggiore, and 462 in San Paolo fuori le Mura, saw the artists of triumph in mosaic which stand lasting monuments to the march of Christian art; while Ravenna kept pace with Rome under that noble Empress Galla Placidia, encouraged and inspired by the Great. Through the fifth, sixth, into the seventh century these magnificent compositions, in all but imperishable mosaic, continued, and frescoes, as testified on the new subterranean walls of San Clemente, took on the same characteristics of nobility of form and splendor of color.

BYZANTINE ART.—"We need only turn to our histories of the succeeding ages to understand the causes of what has been named the Byzantine period, which was the great conservator of Christian traditions during its decline; deserving well at the hands of the art historian, and the pit to which the priests of God entrusted the fire from the altar when the nation was carried into Persia, and which Nebemiah rescued after many years when he came with the children of promise to their own land. The revival is requested to turn to II. Maccabees, I. 18-36, for an account of the preservation of the sacred fire.) The revival of these Christian traditions in all their loveliness, with the morning dew and sunshine upon them. In the twelfth century, is one of the most marvelous in the story of art. From the time of its recognition among the nations. This revival, beginning literally at the tomb of St. Francis of Assisi, had its full efflorescence in Michael Angelo, Raphael, Correggio.

LEO X. AND LUTHER.—"Had the influences which surrounded that efflorescence continued, it is impossible to say what might have been the result; but when we remember that the same Leo X. who knelt beside Raphael on his bier and shed tears over his early death, was the same Leo who saw Martin Luther lay violent hands upon the seamless robe of Catholic dogma, carrying with him, like another Lucifer, a third part of the kingdoms heretofore in allegiance to the Church, need we be surprised at the sudden decline, not so much of the technique of art as its spirit, changing its motives, robbing it of its celestial ideas, anatomizing pious customs out of which had sprung, as from a fruitful root, some of the most charming conceptions which have blessed the earth? The heresy of Luther passed like a cyclone over the homes of art, smote its foundations, snapped its budding branches, and, worst of all, took from the souls of the artists themselves the one essential element of an atmosphere in which Christian art can breathe—that of belief, absolute faith."

HUSKS OF MATERIALISM.—"So sterile, in fact, had the work of imagination become—so utterly had the old themes passed out of the memory of the generations succeeding each other after this awful catastrophe; so insensible had grown the minds of thousands upon thousands among the most highly educated ranks of society, to the spiritual quality of the exquisite compositions of the age of efflorescence, still more to that of the significant preceding period, when Leonardo da Vinci, Lorenzo di Credi, and Perugino set forth the mystery of the in-

carnation with so profound a sense of its sacred beauty—that the Crucifixion was banished from homes claiming to be Christian, the crucifix denounced, as well as those representations of the Blessed Virgin and her Divine Babe, which Christendom had loved so much, until nothing was left to that immortal sense of beauty, craving celestial nourishment, but the perishing types of naturalism; still worse, the husks of materialism.

VERY GOD; VERY MAN.—"But there was another result of this alienation from the belief which painted itself on the walls of the Catacombs, where, however rude the handicraft, one never loses the thrilling sense of the natural surroundings. We are in this world, to be sure, but into this world has come what raises the world infinitely above its level as merely a part of the solar system; for Jesus, who is called Christ, was born into this world to be sure, but into the nature of man, so that He is both very God and very man. He was not only born into this world, but lived in it and died for it. There was not a plant, there was not a creature on this earth that did not take a new significance from this advent of the God-Man. Henceforth it must be considered as something more than the natural abiding place of human beings. It shared in our sin, it has been associated with our Redemption. This is more than the planet Earth, for it bears the footmarks of the Incarnate One of the Redeemer, so that when we come to the Cemetery of Saint Domitilla, we find landscapes and animals painted according to their natural similitude, but bearing a supernatural significance. This is altogether the spirit of the catacomb art."

NATURALISTIC ART.—"But what we see in that naturalistic school which took the place of all this when the revolt came which spread such desolation over the realm of imagination as well as of the intellect, is the work of a man, a Virgin Mary saluted by an angel on a benediction, making reverence due to her who is to be the mother of God; but a gentle girl, who lays her hands crossed on her blue mantle, standing in awe before an angel high above her in the air—in fact, the Superior Being! This is our Angel of Annunciation, our Lady-Day picture!"

EXAMPLES.—"We have a Nativity, but, for some reason, which it is hard to put into words, it seems like some domestic event; and wondering curiosity in the shepherds has taken the place of worshipful awe, while the angels are merely decorative attendants. We have a Flight into Egypt, but the Mother, holding her infant close to her heart, to her cheek, for fear of dangers by the way, is hardly noticed amid the luxuriant foliage and the wild scenery through which she is passing. We scarcely can take this Day, standing with such assurance among His elders, for Him who was sought, sorrowing, during three days, was found sitting in the midst of the

doctors, both hearing and answering their questions. We have a Wedding in Cana of Galilee, but one must search among the crowd of guests and all the conviviality of a wedding feast to find Him who performed His first public miracle—turning water into wine to honor His Mother. We have the Christ before Pilate, but the One who stands before that judgment seat, instead of being the "meek Lamb standing dumb before His abusers," has the denance of a man sitting, the testimonies against him to rebut them. We have the Crucifixion, but the blazonry of banners, the gorgeous array of Roman officials leave in the distance that cross on whose banner hung the Redeemer of the World. We have the Taking down from the Cross, but the pathos is lost in the busy officiousness of the attendants."

THE CENTRAL THOUGHT.—"In each and every instance we find the human and the divine coming between us and the Divine Personages of the central thought, and to whom the eye should be directed as such. Yet all this time the eye, so quick to take in beauty of form, so susceptible to the charms of color, and so habitually skilled to reproduce them, have brought to wonderment that men have admired without realizing that God had been left out of His own world. Only the humanity of the God-Man was thought of, and therefore only His humanity has been presented to our eyes. Might we not say, therefore, that the artist's lamentations, 'How is the gold become dim, the finest color is changed, the stones of the sanctuary are scattered in the top of every street? The gates of Zion are sunk into the ground; her kings and her princes are among the heathen; the law is no more, and her prophets have found no vision from the Lord?'"

I will make no apology for having occupied so much space with the analysis of the rise and decline of Christian art, and of the causes and effects in connection therewith. I would so much like to comment upon each paragraph, but that would be impossible under the circumstances. However, I promise to return, on another occasion, to all subject. There is food for no end of serious reflection in those few pages. The reader can form a faint idea of the beauty, the grandeur, the charm of the whole work, when the introduction is so full of deep thought, lofty conceptions, and delicate appreciation. These few paragraphs agree, "mirror the mind of their author," as the poet priest said of his own poems. If the reader can imagine a stately, elegant, refined elderly lady, animated with a quiet and holy zeal, with a subtle but all-absorbing enthusiasm imparting to all who came within the circle of her influence, an impulse almost angelic in its heaven-life aspirations, and then, picture a veritable sanctuary of art constituting the surroundings of that lady, and the idea may be formed of Eliza Allen Starr, who was during the last twenty years of her remarkable and beautiful life.

A TRUE STORY, And a Lesson.

A Pathetic Incident in the Life of the Late Father James Callaghan.

WRITTEN FOR THE TRUE WITNESS.

There are miracles of grace in the daily life of a holy priest, that the world never dreams of. The following little incident which occurred in the ministry of the late lamented Rev. Father James Callaghan needs no glowing words to tell its tender story. It is just one flower from the garland of a beautiful life which I dare to take with most reverent hands to lay upon his tomb ("In Memoriam.")

It was an evening in May, one of the last of our Heavenly Queen's lovely month, when Father James after a long day of toil in His master's vineyard, passed from the noise and glare of the dusty streets into the quiet solitude of the "Hotel Dieu" Chapel. The evening shadows had already crept in before him, nestled into the dusky corners, but the never-fading ruby lamp beckoned him on, and with his breviary under his arm and his long swinging footstep so familiar to us all, he approached and knelt at the foot of the altar. He had been but a few moments in prayer when the sound of a voice attracted his attention, and a plaintive child's voice broke upon the holy stillness.

"Oh, good Lady, hear my prayer! Oh, good, good Lady, cure my little sister!"

"Turning around he beheld, just a few steps away from him, the figure of a little girl, she was kneeling before a picture of the Blessed Virgin, her hands were clasped in an agony of supplication, and again and again she sobbed her sad little litanies—"Oh, good, good Lady, cure my dear little sister." She was perfectly unconscious of the presence of an observer; the tears poured from her eyes, and at last as if overcome by the passion of her childish sorrow, her head drooped lower, lower—her sailor hat fell to the ground unheeded, and her hair lay in golden waves about her. "Oh, good Lady, you must hear me—save, oh! save my little sister!"

No one knew better than Father James how to sympathize with the sorrows of others, particularly those

of a child. He hesitated for a moment until the storm of grief which shook her little frame had subsided, and then his voice was very tender as he said: "Your are in great trouble, my poor little one."

Startled, she arose to her feet immediately, and looking at the priest with vague astonishment in her moist eyes, she shrank back timidly from him.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "I thought I was alone. I did not know there was any one near me. I came late purposely, because—because—I do not belong to your church."

"Do not fear, my child. I do not wish to disturb you," he said, "this is not my church, but God's church, and all are welcome, particularly those who come to lay their sorrows at His feet. But you are very young to have such a great bit trouble."

"Come, perhaps I might be able to help you if you care to tell me about it." And taking her hand, which now she placed in his with childlike confidence, he led her out into the garden. There, standing among the fallen apple blossoms, in the red grey twilight, she told him all. There were many tears, and sobs, and broken sentences in her story. "My little sister is dying, she is just six years old; four years younger than I am. There were three doctors to see her this morning, and they said she would die to-night, and if she dies, mother will die, and Father, and oh! I cannot live without her. I went to a convent school for a little while, there I heard them speak of the Good Lady Mary, they said that she never refused to listen to our prayers, and she can obtain whatever she wishes from her Son, because she is the Mother of God, so I did not tell anybody, but just started out to this church to ask her to save our little Muriel." "Do you think she will listen to me?" she asked. "I am afraid, because I am only a little girl, and I never prayed before, and I am not a Catholic." The tear-stained little face was very pathetic and never before in his moments of greatest action, did Father James more ardently and more gratefully proclaim the power and love of our Blessed Lady than at that moment

to this little child. Concluding, he said: "I, too, will pray with you. To-morrow morning I will offer the Holy Mass, the greatest of all prayers, for you and all your family; but, oh, dear little one! God knows best what is good for us. If it should be His divine will to save your little Muriel from all future sorrow and sin, and bitter tears like those you have shed to-night, and make her a bright angel in a land where all is beauty and delight, where she will see Him and dwell forever close to His mother, then be sure, your prayer will still be answered for sweet peace and holy resignation will steal into your heart and blessings without number will fall upon you all along the path of your life. Now go, my child, your mother will be wondering where you are. Go, have confidence, and God bless you." He laid his hand for a moment in benediction upon her head, and strangely comforted, she dried her eyes with a faint smile. "Where am I, and how did I get here? I have been tripped lightly away beyond the shadows of the high grey convent wall. Father James followed her with his eyes till she had disappeared, and then returned to his devotion; but all through the evening and all through the next morning he prayed for the afflicted family. The next morning after he had offered the Holy Sacrifice and his hospital duties were accomplished, he too passed through the wide stone gate bent on a mission, which he could scarcely define. "Where am I, and how did I get here? I have been tripped lightly away beyond the shadows of the high grey convent wall. Father James followed her with his eyes till she had disappeared, and then returned to his devotion; but all through the evening and all through the next morning he prayed for the afflicted family. The next morning after he had offered the Holy Sacrifice and his hospital duties were accomplished, he too passed through the wide stone gate bent on a mission, which he could scarcely define. 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