

The Renaissance and the Revival of Learning.



T is a statement commonly made, and repeated in and out of season, that the Renaissance marks the revival of learning. Prior to the period so defined, secular knowledge was, so it is asserted, practically non-existent, or at least looked on as incompatible with the profession and practice of a pious Christian. According to this view, therefore, the Renaissance signifies the emancipation of the human mind from the ignorance and superstition, from all the spiritual and intellectual trammels of the Dark Ages.

That, one takes it, is approximately the ordinary, non-Catholic conception of the Renaissance; possibly, also, of certain modern and very enlightened Catholics. Great minds, it will be readily admitted, are to be found here and there, in the centuries immediately preceding the later fifteenth and early sixteenth, among whom Saint Thomas of Aquin stands, by common consent, first and without a rival. But even Saint Thomas seems, to believers in the Renaissance, to have frittered away his powers on questions of no practical value to humanity, of interest at most to schoolmen and theologians.

On the other hand, the view which regards the Renaissance as "the devil's travesty of the New Birth," is not without supporters, even in the twentieth century, as it certainly was not in the age which saw the dawn of this supposed intellectual and spiritual freedom. Admitting, however, all that is claimed by the heirs of the Renaissance, what defence is the Catholic to make for his forbears in the Faith?

The lines of defence, indeed, are not far to seek, nor need we summon Catholic evidence alone. The Puritan of the age almost immediately succeeding the Renaissance was, most assuredly, not a believer in either intellectual or spiritual freedom, as conceived by the originators, or by the champions of either. To him as to the monk of the Dark Ages, as to Saint Jerome, Saint Augustine, or Tertullian, God and the soul were of such paramount concern that