

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND AESTHETICS.*



NOT infrequently does the brush drop listlessly from the hand of the artist, as he contemplates the unfinished picture before him, and sees in its limpid colors what the fishermen caught a glimpse of in Lough Neagh's waves—a mere reflection of the artistic splendor of other days.

Whilst these gigantic towers and massive castles of beauty and art loom up before him, he finds himself irresistibly drawn in spirit over the same road which so many aspiring to fame, have already trodden in the flesh—he finds his footsteps bent towards Italy, towards Rome, the land where the fine arts have enjoyed a perpetual summer of existence. And as he approaches the eternal city, he is struck by the somewhat strange coincidence that the centre and fountain-head of the fine arts is the centre and fountain-head of the Catholic Religion also. Is this somewhat strange coincidence a matter of chance only, or could it be otherwise? Did the Catholic Church take up her headquarters where the fine arts flourished; or has she been their Foster-Mother, and where her towers and battlements were raised, have they sprung up and sought and found protection? These, and like questions, the artist's reflections propose to him—and such are the questions that we purpose to answer.

To accomplish our aim it will be necessary first to determine in what the fine arts may consist; secondly, to inquire into their respective conditions before and after the dawn of Christianity, in order to discover what, if anything, they may owe the Church; and finally, if indeed they are found indebted to her for anything, to ascertain by what means she has placed them under such an obligation. The term art has various significations. As opposed to science, art means a collection or system of rules. Science lays down principles; art applies them—science is speculative; art is practical. A man may be thoroughly acquainted with the science

of music, and yet not be proficient in the art of music. One must acquire science, many have been gifted with art; for the latter is an aptitude, a skill or readiness which facilitates the performance of an action, and hence, may be natural or acquired. There may, therefore, be as many arts as there are different kinds of actions. Only a comparatively small number, however, have received the name of art. Hence we often hear the terms, art of reading, of writing, of speaking, the liberal arts, the mechanical arts, the industrial arts. But art, as we intend to here consider it, is that which has for its object the expression of the beautiful. Those arts that are directed toward the expression of the beautiful through the instrumentality of sensible objects are known as the fine arts. Poetry, painting, sculpture and music—to which architecture may be added—are generally included in the category of the fine arts; for these have for their object principally the expression of the beautiful.

Poetry and Music, so near akin in many respects, we shall discuss at some future day. For the present we will occupy ourselves with Painting and Sculpture, treating them as fully as the scope of a brief essay on the beautiful will permit.

There is only one great source of beauty, as there is only one great fountain of truth.

St Augustine has said: "O Beauty, ever ancient and ever new, too late have I learned to love thee!" He meant God.

But this God of all beauty is a spiritual being, while our senses of perception are material.

This Infinite Beauty, therefore, could never be perceived by us, were it not made manifest to us in either of two ways,—Revelation or Creation.

Revelation was a school enjoyed only by a cherished few; Creation was an art-gallery open to the many.

God, then, is the artist *par excellence*; his sublime conception was the conception of himself, and the creation is the picture he has given us of a part of that conception. All matter is beautiful only inasmuch as it gives expression, in some man-

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