

Laughter and Good Red Wine

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Zac Vermeer on fasting, feasting and philosophy

Chesterton once observed that over the last two thousand years the enemies of Christendom have attacked our faith from almost every possible angle. Gibbon found Christianity womanish and weak, with its talk of pity and peace, and looked with admiration on the warrior creed of Mohammed; whereas our postmodern professors decry it as hard and intolerant, the religion of the Crusades and the Inquisition. Protestants thunder that Catholicism is too abstract and rationalised, overburdened with Greek philosophy and Aristotelian logic, full of theological quibbling about substances and essences, and yet also that it is grossly materialistic and superstitious, the religion of transubstantiation and relics. Chesterton went on to observe that something hated for so many different reasons must, at the very least, be something most extraordinary.

The truth is, of course, that the Catholic faith, since it is true and of God, is something far, far bigger and richer than the narrow, unbalanced obsessions of succeeding ages. Our word 'heresy' is derived from the Greek word for 'choice'. Heresy is the intellectual sin par excellence; and, as with all sin, it takes something good and misuses it. Each heresy receives whatever truth it has from the Catholic faith, but seizes on its favourite truth and corrupts it by putting it into opposition to the whole truth. Thus, Protestantism seizes on the necessity of individual faith in Christ and puts it in opposition to sanctification of life within Christ's body, the Church; while the modernists exult the real dignity of man as God's noblest earthly creation to the exclusion of the doctrine of original sin and of the necessity of redemption. Although the word 'heresy' properly only applies to erroneous doctrines which still claim the title of 'Christian', even the most avowedly secular ideologies in our civilisation, a civilisation indelibly haunted by Christ even in its 'post-Christian' decadence, can be seen primarily as Christian heresies. Is not Marxism, the atheist philosophy par excellence, a perversion of the love of the poor and weak that Christ taught, exalted at the expense of the vital truth that the Kingdom of God is not an earthly utopia but a spiritual reality?

What is the dominant heresy (in the broader sense) of our age? What does society put before us as the highest good, the aim of life, in place of the beatific vision? The answer is relatively simple. Our society is Epicurean; hedonism is our creed. To enjoy the pleasures of this life while we can — sex, food, drink, travel — without worrying about seemingly insoluble questions of ultimate value or life after death; this is the approach of most of our contemporaries. It is an approach to life as old as civilisation; it is even disputed who coined the ancient phrase 'Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we shall die.' As Pope Benedict acknowledged in his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, Christianity is accused of having poisoned the sweet enjoyment of the sensual and of the pleasures of the world, of being a grim, miserable, life-denying religion of penance and mortification.

Now, no Christian can or should deny that our religion is one of penance and mortification, nor that our appetite for the pleasures of this world is disordered and must be tamed and brought into subjection to our first end, love of God. This is the very heart of our faith; we must deny ourselves, we must die to self, we must take up our cross and follow our Master. The most nauseatingly trivial parody of Christianity is that which omits the Cross, which omits the challenge of self-denial and other-worldliness, which reduces itself to sprinkling holy water over our comfortable selfishness and materialism. The softness of modern hedonism has infected us Catholics; we no longer think it necessary to war against the flesh and its pleasures. The collapse of fasting is perhaps the most obvious example of this. Our two days of fasting a year are looked on with either contempt or pity by our Eastern brethren. The worship of our demanding, all-loving God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Joseph, whose burning desire is that we be His in heaven, purged of our sinfulness by Christ's suffering and our own suffering joined with His, is in danger of being replaced by 'Morally Therapeutic Deism', the worship of a kindly uncle-figure who asks nothing of us and whose only purpose is to help us live cosy 'fulfilled' lives — Christ gives way to Oprah. Yet neither is our religion Puritanism; that is the opposite heresy attacking the Catholic faith, as always the golden mean, from the opposite direction. The Puritans loathed Catholicism as a religion of pagan wordly pleasures, theatre and music and Christmas. Methodists pursed their lips at Catholics who drank strong beverages, seemingly oblivious to the fact that Our Lord's first miracle was to turn water into wine at a party (although we are solemnly assured that the text actually means 'grape juice').

Catholicism has always built a civilisation immersed in *joie de vivre*. Beer is a product of the Catholic Middle Ages, as is, to a great extent, the language and symbolism of romantic love. And who can fail to note that, whenever the inhabitants of our post-Protestant Anglo-Saxon civilisation dream of a sweeter life, with all the lands of the earth from which to choose, they dream of Catholic lands, Italy or the south of France? As Belloc famously put it:

'Wherever the Catholic sun doth shine

There's always laughter and good red wine

At least, I've always found it so;

Benedicamus Domino! Of course, drink and revelry and eros can all be put to bad use; but they are not bad in themselves. They are God's creation; it is man's will that corrupts them, and thus it is man's will that needs to be mortified by asceticism. The goodness of the physical creation and its pleasures, which Catholicism has always maintained, is a logical deduction from the Incarnation; the opposite view, Manichaeism, is the Gnostic heresy which the Church has always so strongly opposed. Catholic civilisation has always embraced the real joys of our earthly existence in the basic gifts of God, real home-cooked food and married love and family and community and real music. The emblematic worldly pleasures of our modern world, however, are fake, synthetic ones: drugs, casual sex, mass-marketed pop music, all delivered to us in an atomised society where the bonds of family and community, surely the most fundamental requirement for the good life, are weakened. And there is another great irony in our modern civilisation — the hedonism which rules our spare time co-exists with the expectation of the most rigid discipline during the long working hours required by capitalism. To use the phrase coined by sociologist Daniel Bell, this is the "cultural contradiction of capitalism" — we are expected to be good Victorians during the day, sober and hard-working, while at night we are to be decadents. Of course, as Josef Pieper noted in his classic book *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, both these sides of our civilisation reinforce each other — for men who have no higher end, work fills the gap and becomes the source of all meaning in life; and this new religion of work leaves us too exhausted for the real pleasures of life, from contemplation and art down to the basic human pleasures of sharing a home-cooked meal and conversation, leaving us with easy synthetic pleasures instead. This is Huxley's vision in *Brave New World* of a civilisation based on promiscuity and soma come true. Our "fast-food" culture, which proclaims its dedication to maximising human enjoyment, actually saps the real sources of human joy, even on a purely worldly level.

The Catholic religion, in short, unites asceticism and gaiety, fast and feast, in a natural and complementary whole. They are inseparable from one another; there is no Lent without Easter, and no Easter without Lent. Our culture, with its professed hedonism co-existing with its work-day drudgery, is a diabolical parody of this unity of fast and feast. And thus, a paradox: how much more joy there is in our Catholic feasts, for which we prepare amidst solemnity and self-denial, than in the perpetual self-indulgence of the world, so dull, so meaningless. A similar point can be made in relation to the *idée fixe* of our time, sexual indulgence. How beautiful is the act of love within marriage, given its value and richness by its exclusivity, a sacrament in which the couple are priests of life; how tedious, in contrast, the life of the voluptuary, the same act reduced to a mechanical and loveless entertainment, like watching TV! Here is the great secret: the pleasures of the world quickly reveal their ennui to those who live for them alone; it is only he who lives for something higher who can truly enjoy them for what they are, in their proper measure.

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