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NIELS STENSEN

AMONG the Catholic scientists pictured in the permanent display of the Federation of Catholic Physicians' Guilds is to be found the likeness of Niels Stensen (Nicolaus Steno) whose cause for beatification is now before Rome. At the suggestion of the Executive Board to present biographical sketches of the Catholic men of science chosen for the exhibit, it seems fitting to begin with Bishop Stensen; interest in his life and work will be a stimulus to the efforts of those endeavoring to have the Church set her seal on this servant of God by raising him to the honors of her altars.

Niels Stensen was born on January 1, 1638 in Copenhagen. Already as a student at the university of that city he showed remarkable aptitude for physical sciences. During a period of research in Holland he won international repute by his anatomical discoveries (Stensen's duct, glands, structure of heart and muscles). Later he gave his famous lecture on the anatomy of the brain at Paris, whence he traveled to Florence. Here in the congenial company of men of science who were both gifted and profoundly

religious, Stensen's genius achieved extraordinary results; he laid the foundations of entirely new branches of science: geology, crystallography, paleontology.

In spite of these triumphs he remained humble and unassuming. Nor did he restrict his keen powers of observation, rare acumen and intellectual honesty to the domain of science: disagreement among protestants shook his faith in the Lutherism of his early years; a Corpus Christi procession made a great impression upon him; acquaintance with devout Catholics of learning and culture; a conviction of the holiness of the Church—these were some of the factors which led him, after prolonged study and reflection, to make his profession of faith on November 7, 1667.

Happy in his new faith he continued his research work until 1672, when he was appointed royal anatomist in Copenhagen. However, intolerance and misunderstanding soon made him return to Florence. Struck by the need for men devoted entirely to the salvation of souls, he decided eventually that he could serve God and humanity better as a priest

than as a scientist. In 1675 he was ordained, adding to his vow of celibacy one of voluntary poverty. An experienced writer, he used his pen to good effect (e.g., his open letter to the philosopher Spinoza), and in every way showed great priestly zeal.

Appointed bishop with jurisdiction over Northern Germany, Denmark and Norway, Stensen spent the last nine years of his life striving after personal holiness and working tirelessly for souls. He died after much suffering in Schwerin on December 5, 1686. His body was taken to his beloved Florence and buried in San Lorenzo.

All who study the life of this great scientist, convert and bishop will agree with the verdict of his contemporaries that he was a man of unusual sanctity; they will not fail to be impressed by his brilliance as a scientist, attracted by his gentle, unassuming goodness and edified by his holiness.

In the words of His Eminence John Cardinal d'Alton, Archbishop of Armagh Primate for all Ireland, "The story of Niels Stensen's life reads more like a romance than a reality. One of the happy results of the increasing interest in the history of science has been to rescue him from the comparative oblivion into which he had fallen, and to establish his outstanding importance as a scientist. He was clearly a many-sided genius endowed with rare gifts as an investigator in whatever field he laboured. He was able to make contributions in the sphere of

anatomy that were remarkable for his day, and that have earned for him an honoured place in every textbook of repute. But his rich and varied talents were equally conspicuous when he applied himself to the study of geology. Here he is regarded as a pioneer, who securely laid the scientific foundations on which subsequent scholars were enabled to build."

Further observations of Cardinal d'Alton indicate his opinion that apart from his achievements as a scientist, Niels Stensen has a special significance for our time. He states that we have passed through a century of dreary agnosticism, during which it was fashionable for scientists to deny God, or to ignore Him in their work. Man's discoveries in the realm of nature have been acclaimed without any reference to his Creator, and without any limits being set to their possibilities. The horrors of two world-wars, and the frightful potentialities of nuclear weapons have destroyed some cherished illusions, and have convinced not a few that something besides the gospel of materialism is needed to bring peace and happiness to a sorely troubled world. To Stensen it was clear that the study of nature must lead back to nature's God. He would agree that whenever science opens a new door, it always finds God behind it. So for him there could be no real conflict between religion and science, for God is the author both of the truths of science and the truths of revelation.

A small leaflet with a picture of Niels Stensen and a brief biography has been printed in English. The following notation is included:

Although care has to be used, before the approbation of the Church, in avoiding all that could be called public cult of Niels Stensen, there is no reason why

as many as possible should not ask his intercession, study his beautiful life profoundly and ask God to glorify his servant with beatification. All cases of favours and graces received through the intercession of Niels Stensen and all inquiries should be sent to G. Scherz, C. S. S. R., Hans Bogbinders Allé 2, Copenhagen, S. Denmark.



THE WHITE MASS is scheduled for October 18 to honor St. Luke, Patron of Catholic Physicians. Plan to assist at Mass with your Guild for this special observance.

