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OUR CATHOLIC LITERARY HERITAGE

BY BROTHER MICHAEL C. BRANGAN, S.M., Belleville, Illinois

INTRODUCTION:

It would be utterly impossible for me, in these few minutes, to give you even a sketchy outline of Catholic Letters. I shall attempt to give you a few of the highlights. Even then I will have to be very discriminating and present only the beaconlights.

My aim is to acquaint you with the fact that our heritage is a rich one and that at the present time we are enjoying what is termed a Catholic Literary Revival. I would ask you to picture to yourself this revival as a great tree that sinks its roots down through twenty centuries of Catholic tradition and culture, drawing from them the inspiration and sustenance for the great trunk that symbolizes the unity, universality, and strength of Catholic letters, the branches and leaves representing countries and their respective authors drawing life from the trunk of the Catholic Church that is one in doctrine, one in authority, and one in Christ.

We must read ourselves into a realization and appreciation of our past, and into the conviction that our present literary revival is no clinging vine or withered shrub with no depth of earth, but a rich and precious burgeoning of a tree that sinks its tap-root down to Christ Himself, and is fertilized by the pollen blown across the centuries from the hill-tops of our heritage: Pius XII is extending

his hand to Peter across the unbroken centuries; Christopher Dawson is building on the foundations of Augustine's "City of God"; Sister Madelva is taking up the pen that Teresa laid down four centuries ago; Fulton Sheen is echoing the words of Newman: "The kingdom of God and His justice will be restored on the earth when man restores God to his heart and aspires to holiness."

FOUNDING OF CHRISTENDOM . . . APOSTLES, FATHERS AND DOCTORS OF CHURCH:

As the Apostles prayed, the Holy Spirit rested upon them in tongues of flame, and they became a conflagration over the earth. Giants with inspiration quivering on their lips, they streamed from the Cenacle to topple the Jupiters and Molochs of those pagan days. And the crash of them resounded against the ears of Satan and his deputies who trembled in fear, standing on their cloven hooves. They turned the Christians on the wheel, tore them on the rack, burned them at the stake, fed them to the lions, and drove them into the earth, where they cherished the Word against the face of Satan.

But truth cannot be shackled, and it ran forth into every civilized land springing even into the heavens, where Constantine saw the sign of it, and professed the

Faith. Goths and Vandals thundered down upon the Empire, but their deluge broke against the Word. And Clovis burned what he had adored and adored what he had burned, bowing his head in baptism, and his people with him.

Outstanding amongst the writers of this period (—500) which I have so rapidly sketched are the Fathers and Doctors of the Church: St. Ignatius, St. Polycarp, St. Irenaeus, St. Athanasius, St. Jerome, St. Gregory Nazianzen, St. John Chrysostom, St. Ambrose, St. Augustine, etc.

St. Athanasius is noted for his brilliant work in defense of the faith against the Arians. Jerome gave us the Vulgate—the translation of the Bible into Latin. Augustine—the great Doctor of the Church—gave us that magnificent work “The City of God” which became the handbook of ruling monarchs for centuries. It was Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo in North Africa who, by his writings shaped and molded the spiritual life of Europe during the succeeding centuries. Read his *Civitas Dei* in the near future. In it is to be found the vision of what the world ought to be and would be, if Christians lived up to their Faith. You will be surprised at the similarity of present conditions with those of the rotting Roman Empire as described by Augustine.

500-1000 THE SIEGE OF CHRISTENDOM WITHIN AND WITHOUT AND ITS DEFENSE BY HOLY AND LEARNED MEN:

Benedict and his stalwart men came down from Monte Cassino, walked upon the ruins that the barbarians had made, and raised beacons of light in the darkness. The scimitars of Islam poured across the Loire to extinguish the light, but Charles the Hammer sent them back in splinters. And in the North, Boniface laid his axe to the sacred oak of Geismar and fetched the stroke that felled paganism in Europe. The time was now ripe for the formal erection of the City of God. On Christmas day of the year 800, Leo III placed the imperial crown on Charlemagne, making him collaborator in accomplishing the will of God on earth. And that indeed he was. After him, King Alfred the Saxon became the guardian of the Sacred City, keeping watch against the Danes on its ramparts in the West. Cyril, Methodius and their successors extended its boundaries in the East, pouring baptism upon the Slav from the Elbe river to the Don, and from the Baltic sea to the Adriatic.

Benedict gave us his famous rule which even today is used as the basis for religious congregations. The Venerable Bede, in England, gave us his “Ecclesiastical History of the English People” which is the principal source of the history of England from the earliest times to his day. Alfred the Great, also of England, translated numerous Catholic works into the Anglo-Saxon spoken in his day.

(1000-1500). THE FLOWERING OF CHRISTENDOM . . . ITS GRADUAL WITHERING AND DECLINE:

Lawless kings arose within the walls who would imprison the Pope and thrust Europe back into barbarism. But Gregory VII who was of the very substance of the Rock, brought Henry IV to his hypocritical knees before the gates of Canossa. And because he had protected them against their evil passions, the princes of the earth remained strong to lead their armies in the Crusades to reclaim the homeland of Christ. While they struck great blows in the East, Francis and his Friars carried mercy and kindness to the West, making that the homeland of Christ also.

The souls of men were sweetened with the coming of peace, and their spirits thrilled to the vision of truth and beauty that was their heritage. Putting down their swords they took up the pen, the brush, and the chisel, and aspired to mirror the beauty of their Creator. Schools and statues and cathedrals rose up under their hands. Printing presses rolled back the clouds of ignorance and error, and men whose hearts were large with zeal went down to the sea in ships, stepped upon pathless shores, and spoke the Word to heathens in thirst to hear it.

The disappearance of strong kings gave rise to the feudalistic system in Europe. The expansion of the Church into all the lands brought with it much property. As time passed the practice of lay

investiture put into high offices of the Church men unworthy of the dignity. Greed and selfishness raised their heads and goodness and justice were seen to falter. Strong kings were returning and there were some who coveted the land, using coercion, and Churchmen that turned their eyes from the light and were wicked. Doubt entered the minds of men, and in their hearts there was the stirring of dark passions.

Great amongst the men of this period are Gregory VII, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, Thomas Becket, Dominic, Francis of Assisi, Albert the Great, Bonaventure, Thomas Aquinas, Dante, Petrarch, Chaucer, Catherine of Siena, Raphael and Leonardo da Vinci.

Pope Gregory VII put up a terrific fight to destroy the evil practice of lay investiture and restore the clergy to its pristine fervor. St. Bernard reformed the Cistercians; Dominic and his army of learned men rose to combat rising heresy; Francis of Assisi began his mendicant orders to preach the poverty of Christ in a world when ecclesiastics were wealthy.

Thomas Aquinas, the Seraphic Doctor, is the brilliant light of all times. His great work, the *Summa Theologica*, is still the basis of real thought and reasoning in the world today. Two outstanding educators in the United States right now base all their reasoning and teaching on St. Thomas. Those two men are Doctors Robert Hutchins and Mortimer Adler of the University of Chicago. Hut-

chins is berating Catholics for not adhering more closely and forcefully to the philosophy of Life which is ours. Neither Hutchins nor Adler is Catholic but are more so in thought than many Catholics so-called.

(1500-1944). THE REFORMATION AND ANTI-CHRISTIAN CONSPIRACY FOLLOWING UPON IT:

The devil, fuming the while, plotted evil in the darkness, filling proud men and covetous princes with his hate and greed that was primeval. Heretics of his making assailed Christendom, and it staggered even to the Rock that Christ had planted it upon. But learned men took counsel at Trent, strengthened the bastions of the keep, and struck a mighty counterblow. Satan, in his dismay, sent the Turk to do his will. But Don Juan, sailing under the banner of the Virgin Mary, crushed him at Lepanto. And missionaries flung him from pagan hearts in distant lands. False prophets rose again, mocking the Son of God. Man, they sneered, was made to the image of an animal. And they destroyed those who would not hold with them in their evil called naturalism. But they in their turn were destroyed by the patience of those they persecuted. The word was then revived in the pens of great ones, led by Newman and Alice Meynell. Through the long night they labored ceaselessly for the victory of the Word, and in the dawn they heard the footsteps

of Christ the King coming to possess His kingdom—the hearts of men.

And so we find Thomas Moore, that great chancellor of Henry VIII, writing his *Utopia*; Ignatius Loyola, the ruler of the Jesuits; the satirical Cervantes penning a perennial favorite, *Don Quixote*; Bousset, Fenelon, Alphonsus Ligouri, Chaminade, Chateaubriand, Ozanam, Wiseman, Leo XIII, Pius XI and numerous others joining the ranks of the great in Catholic Letters.

It is unfortunate that so few of the Catholic laity at present are in any way acquainted with the brilliant galaxy of Catholic writers. Since the beginning of the Oxford Movement in England under the lead of Cardinal Newman there has been a growing tide of writers propounding Catholic truth and thought in all the varied forms of literature. It is noteworthy that some of the giants of this movement are converts to the Faith from the Anglican Church: Owen Francis Dudley, Arnold Lunn, Evelyn Waugh, Christopher Hollis, Ronald Knox and that immortal G. K. Chesterton of whom Brother Schuster writes in his *Living Catholic Authors*: "On the morning of July 20, 1922, a great shining knight came riding into the camp of the true church, new baptism on his brow, the sign of the Cross on his shield, and the laughter of giants ringing on his lips. Christian men rose up. And the great shining knight led them full tilt at the enemies of Christ

and Christians. Such a leader was Chesterton, master of the pen that was as sword."

I may be pessimistic but how many of the aforementioned writers do you recognize? Do you know Maisie Ward, who has just produced a Best Seller—Gilbert Keith Chesterton; Hilaire Belloc, the writer with a punch; Daniel Sargent, Katherine Burton, Helen C. White, Theodore Maynard, William Thomas Walsh, Leonard Feeney, Dorna Hurley, Lucille Bordan, Dorothy Day, Agnes Repplier, Emmet Lavery, Joseph Husslein or Carlton J. Hayes? I note the light of recognition in some eyes at the last mentioned. Yes, he is the very same you see mentioned in our daily papers—our present ambassador to Spain. He is an educator, brilliant historian, and author who has **worked** since his conversion to plant the yeast of the encyclicals for the rise of justice and charity. Do you know Christopher Dawson? Do you know Jacques Maritain? He is one of the giants in the philosophical world. Of course, you know the humorous and saintly Monsignor Fulton J. Sheen, whom we Brothers are proud to claim as a former student.

Gentlemen, we must read. Our minds must be fed as well as our bodies. Since a man lives the way he thinks, we must as Catholic men nourish our minds with the diet served us by our outstanding Catholic writers. That diet need never become unsavory since we have all types of authors writing

in every field of literature for both young and old. Our Catholic newspapers are a vital factor in the lives of all.

The field is so vast and the books so numerous that it is difficult to suggest just those any one individual would find to his particular taste. I will, however, make an attempt to do so.

Every thoughtful man should read Sheen's "Philosophies at War." No man should miss reading Franz Werfel's "Song of Bernadette." Although not a baptized Catholic, Werfel has indicated that he will spend the rest of his life writing to make the truth and beauty of the Catholic Faith better known and loved.

If you have not yet read "Damien the Leper" by Farrow do so before many more weeks pass. Farrow is a Hollywood producer, the husband of Maureen O'Sullivan, and is now serving in the armed forces. The timely book of travel by Archbishop Spellman, "Action This Day," will give you an excellent insight into men and places very much in the news of the world today.

Some may think me a bit too optimistic in suggesting Farrell's "A Companion to the Summa," but any thinking man will find the rationalization of the commandments and teachings of the church into everyday life, useful as well as stimulating.

The Best Seller by Maisie Ward, "Gilbert Keith Chesterton," will acquaint you not only with the man Chesterton, but also with

many other outstanding in the field of Catholic Letters. You can't help laughing with and loving the man who was Chesterton. By all means put this on your must list.

An outstanding work in the journalistic field is Romulo's "I Saw the Fall of the Philippines." It will give you an interesting and true insight into the conditions in the Southwest Pacific. If you like war stories read Casey's "Torpedo Junction" or Lt. Wittaker's "We Thought We Heard The Angels

Sing." The latter is the spiritual epic of Rickenbacher's fall into the Pacific which he himself recounts in "Seven Came Through."

Gentlemen, I could go on indefinitely, but the time is growing short so I will conclude with a suggestion that you read and have others interested in the church read: "Amen! Amen!" by Constantino and "What Other Answer?" by Grant. These are the latest in up-to-date presentation of Catholic thought.

Medical Mission Sisters Report 1943 Attendance Largest in History of Mission Hospital

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which are native sisterhoods. The students also include sixteen young women from the South of India who are to form the first Indian community of Medical Mission Sisters.

One of the immediate objectives of the Medical Mission Sisters is the enlargement of the present Holy Family Hospital to a 200-bed capacity. Overcrowded conditions make this an absolute necessity. In building a new 200-bed hospital the sisters will increase their facilities for training nurses and other medical workers. The importance of this phase of the Medical Mission Apostolate was particularly stressed at the

July 1943 conference of the newly organized Catholic Hospital Association of India, which placed first among its objectives: to teach and safeguard Catholic principles in medical and nursing practice.

To the report of their hospital work the sisters add a plea that the friends and benefactors in America who have been so generous in the past, may give them continued and even greater support, to enable them to carry out this urgent and important undertaking.

The Motherhouse and Novitiate of the Medical Mission Sisters is located at 8400 Pine Road, Fox Chase, Philadelphia, Pa.