

## A PLEA FOR MEDIEVAL STUDIES

ONE would think that it was unnecessary to commend the study of history to Catholics, and that they would be quick to recognize the historical action of the Church upon the world of secular society as the chief formative influence in European civilization. Especially interesting would be the study of the "Middle Ages," as those centuries witnessed some of the most specific developments of essentially Christian ideas.

By the Norman Conquest the Church in England was invigorated; the development of Feudalism was more than counterbalanced by the creation of the system of Law and Administration; while the conflict between Church and State, which everywhere took place, assumed in England an exceedingly interesting and important form. Nowhere was the idea of Liberty better understood or more strenuously vindicated than by such champions as Becket, Langton and De Montfort. Imagination might sometimes be stimulated by the thought that we ourselves have seen history made, and that the recent startling changes in the map of Europe bring it back again to a strange resemblance of what it was five hundred years ago.

Then, as now, there was a united and independent Poland coming down to the Baltic; a kingdom of Hungary; a kingdom of Bohemia; Ukrainia and Ruthenia interposed between Europe and Moscovite Russia; there was, until 1389, a Greater Serbia; a Greek kingdom still dominated the Straits and most of the Egean Islands; the Dalmatian coast and islands were under an Italian Republic. Then, too, was held the first European Congress, the Council of Constance.

Without some study of the Middle Ages we cannot understand the most remarkable events and characters

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of modern times. The problems which confronted Napoleon, Bismarck and Cavour had their origin then. The problems which torment us now are likewise the issue of medieval thought in action. The ownership of the soil, the rights of the worker, the relations of Church and State were not new questions at Renaissance and Reformation. As Catholics are the only people to-day who hold clear views, based upon definite principle, in regard to those questions, so in the near future will they probably be the only people able to discern the just limits of State action or, to take a smaller but more pointed example, who understand the right uses of ecclesiastical establishments and endowments.

It was in the Middle Ages that the nations of modern Europe were definitely fashioned. Of the forces then at work the Church was, even, in purely secular affairs one of the strongest—in intellectual and spiritual she was supreme.

This inquiry should be useful alike to the “born Catholic” and to the convert, because it aims at an unity of knowledge that neither is likely to possess in its fullness. Each is apt to be circumscribed in his historical outlook.

Now Catholics know as little as most people other than students of this important epoch. The general reader of biographies and memoirs is better acquainted with Richelieu and Mazarin than with Gregory VII and Innocent III, much more so with Talleyrand or the Cardinal de Retz than with St. Thomas à Becket. Whilst most of us know something of classical antiquity, and all of us something about modern times, comparatively few take any interest in the Middle Ages which account for one-third—and that the central portion—of the history of Europe.

There is the more reason for the educated Catholic to give some of his attention to this period, as hitherto

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he has heard of it mainly through the misrepresentations of those who dislike or despise the Faith. In the great majority of the books published in the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century the *suppressio veri* was constant—it is still—and the *suggestio falsi* was exceedingly frequent. A hundred examples will occur to anybody. Since then a wondrous change has come over the scene, and it is interesting to note that the change of tone makes itself felt *pari passu* with the fuller and progressive revelation of the new material. The history of England, as related by Mr. H. W. C. Davis or Mr. H. A. L. Fisher, is a very different thing not only from the history of Macaulay or Froude, but of Freeman, Stubbs, and J. R. Green. Catholics ought to endeavour to follow and profit by the efforts of the army of workers in historical research that are now labouring—whether they mean it or not—for the ultimate benefit of the Church. We may well say, adapting our Tennyson :

Whatever record leap to light  
*She* never shall be shamed,

and we may remember the publicly proclaimed conviction of the most learned historical scholar who ever lived, that “no secrets that the innermost depths of history can disclose” will ever have any terror for us.

We are all more or less familiar with the persistent attempts that are made—and they are not going to be relaxed—to disparage the Church in the Middle Ages as organized Superstition and Fanaticism, and to minimize or ignore wherever possible her beneficent work in the advancement of all that makes for true civilization. Until quite recently one was accustomed to the most fantastic panegyrics of “Renaissance” and “Reformation” as epochs that terminated the Middle Ages and *ipso facto* inaugurated the era of

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Liberty and Progress. To-day, however, we hear considerably less of this once familiar theme.

The attempt to ignore the Church is the most hopeless of all. Omission was easier at one time, but the standard of modern scholarship is too high for that now ; a man can no more ignore the Fourth Lateran Council, in the thirteenth century, than he can ignore Trent in the sixteenth ; he cannot explain the rise of Representative Government without the Friars or Democracy without the Schoolmen, any more than he can understand the French Revolution without the *Constitution Civile*, or Napoleon without Pius VII and Consalvi. The Church is so closely woven into the very fabric of history that you cannot follow up any question, you cannot even read the annals of any country, without being confronted by that majestic shape. To keep it out is simply impossible—*tamen usque recurret*. Nevertheless, the Christian, i.e. Catholic and generally clerical origin of nearly every good custom or beneficent institution, of nearly every important intellectual or charitable foundation, is carefully ignored in so far as it is possible to do so.

Disparagement in every tone, from the most polite to the most strident, is also practised ; but this again we need not fear when we contemplate around us in the world to-day the effects of other creeds and philosophies as revealed by the logic of events. It is clear to anyone who reflects that Christian civilization has been built up by the Church, and not by the influences that oppose her.

It may be objected that few have time or training for such studies, and that a competent knowledge of the Middle Ages is an affair of a lifetime. That, of course, is true in a certain degree. But it is infinitely easier to acquire a fair knowledge than it used to be, and it is abundantly worth while. And we are doubly gainers by the effort ; we have the excitement of the

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adventure and the satisfaction of the right conclusion. Old things become new and present themselves with the force and freshness of a discovery. "On est déjà bien assez nouveau par cela seul qu'on est vrai." Such an interest in things medieval speedily becomes to an educated Catholic a rich source of interest and information. It is not antiquarianism, but a practical endeavour to give full value to what others of a set purpose suppress or distort. It is the desire to know the full breadth and depth as well as the length of our traditions. It is not an affair of dates and text-books that bore schoolboys. It is not literary sentimentalism or the mere wish to escape the evils of the present. It is not an impossible desire to see a revival of Feudalism or any other thing that has passed utterly away; not, in the memorable words of Lord Acton, "a burden on the memory but an illumination of the soul."

These considerations will, I doubt not, find a powerful exponent in *BLACKFRIARS*, which would appear to be peculiarly suitable for bringing them before the educated Catholic layman who has the inclination and the leisure for serious reading and any intellectual curiosity about those who have handed on the lamp to him.

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