

PLAINCHANT, ICONS AND MOSAICS

BY

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HERE are, broadly speaking, an active and a contemplative life. Are there, perhaps, correspondingly also a contemplative and an active art? By this is meant an art born of, and again conducive to, contemplation, and, on the other hand, an art reflecting the active temperament of an epoch or an artist. Or, expressed differently, an art that is nourished by

the contemplation of the Divine, of the eternal; an art that is, therefore, itself objective, timeless, expressing Being in so far as it can be expressed by human media; and, again, an art that observes the fleeting moment, the actual and temporal, and which, therefore, is itself subjective, timebound, expressing Becoming. Take the Gregorian plain chant and Bach's Mass in B Minor, take the 'Madonna of St Luke' in Santa Maria Maggiore and, say, the Sistine Madonna, take any mosaic executed between the 5th and the 12th centuries and any fresco painting of the Renaissance, and you have the two kinds of art that might be distinguished as 'contemplative' and active'.

Plainchant, icons and mosaics are the expression of contemplative man; they 'go together' as it were; they have the same austerity, the same spiritual intensity that is born of a severe discipline of the emotions. For as a true spiritual life is possible only after the emotions have been mortified (St John of the Cross never wearies of teaching this truth), so spiritual art, that is, art fully expressive of man's worship of God, must be mortified in its emotional elements, mortified, above all, in the expression of the individuality of the artist. That is why, so often, Renaissance and post-Renaissance paintings and sculptures are admirable in a museum but somehow out of place in a church.¹ This is why non-liturgical church-music may be lovely music indeed, yet may fail to be the perfect accompaniment of the Mass and the Divine Office which is the Gregorian plain chant. If art is to be the perfect interpretation of the contemplation of the Bride, it must be in some way impersonal, for how can it follow the Bride on her way to her Spouse if the artist's own personality intrudes itself, as is natural that it should do in secular art? Plainchant, if it may be so expressed,

¹ Of course these are generalisations; we would not, for example, suggest for a moment that the very personal art of an El Greco or Gruenewald was not deeply contemplative or unsuitable for a church; yet one need only mention these names to make it clear that they belong to a spiritual world fundamentally different from the impersonal, or rather supra-personal, triad we are considering.

is the lovesong of the Bride making love to the Bridegroom, playing enraptured on one syllable, for it is in no hurry, seeing the Spouse is eternal—pondering here an *Introit*, prolonging there an *Alleluia* as if to leap out of time right into his Timelessness—sometimes tender, sometimes forceful, joyful or sorrowful, but never for the split of a second sentimental. This complete absence of 'sentiment', the term understood without any derogatory meaning, is perhaps the most striking feature of these three forms of man's worship of God by art, which seem to us to complement each other perfectly. It must be so, for the art that would interpret the liturgy expresses not the feeling of an individual but the mood of the Church, of the Bride who follows the Lamb wherever he goes, who, to change the Scriptural metaphors, is built on the rock that is Christ. What is built upon a rock, on *this* rock, cannot waver, cannot run hither and thither after sentiments and fashions; it can never leave its foundation. Therefore the chant of the Church has about it that air of eternity that, precisely because it is not 'personal' and individualistic, makes it the perfect expression of every individual mood, of all the joys and sorrows not only of the Mystical Body as a whole, but also of every single one of its members. That is its mystery, its unique charm; this is why contemplatives of all times have never wearied of singing or listening to it, for it liberates from the fetters of all-too-individualistic existence into the freedom of redeemed life.

This same freedom from emotional individualism makes the charm of those icons, some of which, like the 'Madonna of St Luke' or 'Our Lady of Perpetual Succour', have become famous throughout Christendom. We must not, however, think of them as reproduced on the ordinary prayer book cards, with sugary smiles and pink cheeks. The true icons of the *Theotokos* of the brown skin, the almond-shaped eyes and firm lips are far removed from the popular modern ideal of feminine beauty. Their head slightly bent to the head of the divine child, their grave yet tender eyes have gathered all the joys and sorrows of virginal motherhood into one fathomless glance that seems to come from eternity. Whereas the Renaissance virgins are generally very lovely, but equally very earthly women, the old icons of the Madonna reflect some of the mystery of the Virgin Mother; and it is significant that St Bernadette should have singled out the Madonna of St Luke as the image most closely resembling her visions.

The icons, it is true, do not yield themselves at a glance; there is seldom a falling in love with them at first sight. As the Church sings of her Queen: *Omnis gloria ejus filiae Regis ab intus*, so the beauty of these icons is something hidden. Only if the heart looks

upon them lovingly, only if the soul prays humbly before them, will the inner glory begin to radiate, only then will the picture reveal its hidden life and draw man into the orbit of the Star of the Sea.

Once this kind of art has exercised its attraction on a soul all else begins to seem insipid. Perhaps this is even more evident in the case of the old mosaics of Rome or Ravenna. These mosaics have the additional charm that here the art of the creature is aided by the art of the Creator; for only when the sunlight plays on the tesserae do they reveal their full glory. And it is glory indeed, for they are perhaps the most perfect expression, in colour and in form, of the Divine that is possible to human beings. Their colours are of an unsurpassed brightness and richness that seem hardly to belong to this earth. Dark blue and shining gold, emerald green and a deep, warm brown vie with each other in expressing the realities of another world. For the mosaics reflect another world, indeed seem themselves to be of another world. Nothing could be further removed from both the realism of the nineteenth and the 'surrealism' of the twentieth centuries than this art of the type and the symbol. In its symbolic language God the Father is not represented as a venerable Old Man, as is the Father of Michelangelo's 'Creation of Adam', which for all its grandeur must necessarily be unduly anthropomorphic, but by the symbol of the omnipotent, creative hand. Christ, the Redeemer, is the Lamb of the Apocalypse, before whose throne the twenty-four Elders cast their crowns, and from the foot of the Cross flow streams of living water which the deer have come to drink.

And as these truths are represented by symbols, so human persons are crystallised into types. Christ is the king, the awe-inspiring ruler of the universe; our Lady the queen, enthroned with her child or crowned by her son; saints are hieratic figures, standing in postures of infinite calm or moving with dignified bearing and gesture, expressive of adoration, joy or humble devotion. And there are the angels. Not the sensual, all-too-human cherubs of the Renaissance, but transcendent beings whose gaze seems ever to contemplate the face of the Father. Standing before these angels of the deep blue haloes or the dark wings, for example in St Zeno's Chapel in San Prassede in Rome, in Santa Maria Maggiore or in Santa Maria in Domnica, one thinks quite naturally of the celestial hierarchies of Pseudo-Dionysius and of the treatise *De Angelis* of St Thomas—so truly do they express the spiritual order.

Yet these mosaics are not all symbols and hieratic beings. Our Lord asks us to regard the lilies of the field; and one of the most charming traits of the mosaics is their flowers and garlands of leaves

and fruit. In Santa Maria in Domnica, especially, the red and white anemones and lilies that spring up under the feet of angels and saints in glorious profusion give the whole an exquisite loveliness, setting off all the more perfectly the austere dignity of Christ and his mother.

These mosaics that reflect another world make the soul pray. One has come to see, and one stays to pray. For they are contemplation become art, and they lead again to contemplation. And this, perhaps, is the reason why the Christian mosaics flourished between the fifth and thirteenth centuries and after this no more. For plainchant, icons and mosaics presuppose a religious civilisation. By this is meant a civilisation whose main concern is man's relation to God. That in 431 the rabble of Ephesus and Alexandria could go mad with excitement because our Lady had been declared by the Council to be Theotokos; that in the eighth and ninth centuries the Byzantine Empire was shaken in its foundations by the Iconoclastic controversy, that in the twelfth the liberation of the Holy Land could rouse the conscience of all Europe—whatever political motives may have been mixed up with these events (as they certainly were), they show quite clearly that it was religious issues which roused most profoundly the peoples of the civilised world, not, as it is today, political and economic ones.

These forms of art, then, are the products of a religious civilisation; like flowers that can grow only in a certain soil they spring up only in congenial surroundings; for they are not the creation of an individual mind, as, for example, the art of a Greco or Gruenewald, but the blossoming forth of a religious culture. This is the reason why they cannot be revived. There are, indeed, modern mosaics, like those in Westminster Cathedral. But to anyone who has seen the ancient and medieval mosaics in Italy these products of a later age will appear like empty shells, devoid of life. They just aren't 'mosaics'.

Alas, there is no way 'back to icons and mosaics'. There is never a 'back to'—such things are the fruits of long, organic development and cannot be artificially revived. Yet they can come to life again—though probably in a different form, but in the same spirit—when divine providence causes similar conditions to develop. Perhaps we are nearer to such a restoration than it may seem to the superficial observer. The flowering of these 'contemplative arts' followed the age of the martyrs. And we are indeed back in the age of the martyrs, of martyrdoms perhaps more cruel than any of the persecutions of antiquity. For whereas the martyrs under Nero, Domitian and Diocletian were at least allowed to die confessing Christ, many of our own martyrs are deprived even of that supreme consolation;

driven out of their minds by diabolic devices of modern science they have to die like the Holy Innocents of whom the Church says: '*Non loquendo sed moriendo confessi sunt*'.

Yet this very fact may give us new hope. The blood of the martyrs has ever been the seed of the Church, and it was after the age of the martyrs had passed that Europe became Christian and the degenerate art of paganism was transformed into the beauties of plainchant, icons and mosaics. Thus, instead of ruefully looking back into a past that could produce these wonders should we not rather be filled with hope for a better future, a Christian future obtained for us by the blood of the martyrs? This future will surely produce its own characteristic art—perhaps even from the ruins of the degenerate art of neo-paganism. But in the meantime we may well feed on the wholesome art of the past and assimilate it—not by 'back-to' movements but by living lives of prayer and virtue, imitating our martyrs as far as in us lies in our own small way. Then, perhaps, future generations may once more produce an art worthy of our faith, an art that will equal, in its own characteristic manner, those glorious expressions of the faith of a past age: plain chant, icons and mosaics.



CONTEMPLATION AND CONTEMPLATIVES

BY

JOHN CORSON

SOME confusion seems to exist on the subject of contemplation and the contemplative life—if we may judge from the correspondence in *THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT*. The point is one of great importance and the confusion extends to a great number of people to judge by the quotation made in the December issue from *Cross and Crown*. It may therefore be of some use to offer one or two distinctions which may at least form a basis for further discussion and elucidation.

From the first we should distinguish clearly between the act of contemplation, the contemplative life, and a contemplative state or Order. These are three different things which are always being used as almost synonymous. Contemplation as an act of an individual human soul has been described as a *simplex intuitus veritatis* or we might almost say a *simplex intuitus deitatis*. It lies in the realms of unseeing faith, the most perfect form of which can