

TRIBUTE TO HILAIRE BELLOC

We mark today the 66th anniversary of the death of Hilaire Belloc († July 16, 1953). The passage below is taken from *Hilaire Belloc, A Memoir* (London, 1955) by his close friend, the journalist John Morton.

“If Europe returns to the Faith, I think [Hilaire Belloc] will stand out as the principal champion of that, at present, unpopular cause. If, on the other hand, the decline continues, and Europe enters another Dark Age, I think that when the Church has once more saved the remnants of our civilization, and we emerge to build again what has been destroyed, [he] will be looked back upon as the great figure of the period, the polemist who fought with all his strength to divert the catastrophe. In either case, whether he is seen as the leader of the vanguard or the inspirer of the rearguard, he will be saluted as one who challenged the false philosophies, and that mechanical thinking which is all that is left of public opinion. Many people realize today that the tragedy of our time is not the economic chaos, not the bankruptcy of statesmanship and diplomacy, but the loss of religion—a loss that has produced these results. But nobody said this so clearly and so repeatedly as Belloc. The instrument at his command was a prose at once flexible and disciplined. His sentences were built, constructed, properly proportioned. This is as true of his majestic rhetoric as of his logical exposition. When he rises to a great occasion, he does what the poet does; he sets his words to music, making an incantation which rouses an answering emotion in the reader. But his own emotion is controlled. There is no excess. And when the occasion demands, he can appeal to reason in reason’s own unemotional language.” (pp. 145-6)

Another Dark Age *is* upon us, upon Europe and the world, worse than the first, where the pagans are not attacking from without but rising up from within; where (in contrast to the first) the followers of a false religion are entrenched in civilization’s midst. Belloc would have been shocked, but not surprised, that the new Dark Age had been facilitated by serial failures of the bishops of the Catholic Church and of her popes. He was never surprised by the effects of Original Sin; he understood how grievous was the threat of the Modernist heresy. He knew the evils that had afflicted the Church down all her long history; knew that what had happened in the past might happen again. And, alone among his contemporaries, it was he who predicted the rise of a rejuvenated Islam.

How unfortunate for our age that we had no one with Belloc’s authority to mock the absurdities of the theologians, of the bishops and the popes of the 1950s and 1960s. One can imagine, for instance, the scorn that he would have poured upon the sophistries and special pleadings in the *relatio* Bishop Emil de Smedt addressed to the bishops of the Second Vatican Council on November 19, 1963, to disrupt the fundamental truth that the Catholic religion is the one, and unique, means in the world of man’s salvation. And, had that appalling document managed to see the light of day in the face of his scathing criticism, how devastatingly he would have

mocked *Dignitatis Humanae* for its breach of the supreme principle of logic—a breach precipitated by Paul VI's desperate attempt to save that fundamental truth in the face of the document's heterodoxy.

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Here is a reproduction of one of Belloc's memorable poems.

BALLADE TO OUR LADY OF CZESTOCHOWA

Lady and Queen and Mystery manifold
And very Regent of the untroubled sky,
Whom in a dream St Hilda did behold
And heard a woodland music passing by:
You shall receive me when the clouds are high
With evening and the sheep attain the fold.
This is the faith that I have held and hold,
And this is that in which I mean to die.

Steep are the seas and savaging and cold
In broken waters terrible to try;
And vast against the winter night the wold,
And harbourless for any sail to lie...
But you shall lead me to the lights, and I
Shall hymn you in a harbour story told.
This is the faith that I have held and hold,
And this is that in which I mean to die.

Help of the half-defeated, House of gold,
Shrine of the Sword, and Tower of Ivory;
Splendour apart, supreme and aureoled,
The Battler's vision and the World's reply.
You shall restore me, O my last Ally,
To vengeance and the glories of the bold.
This is the faith that I have held and hold,
And this is that in which I mean to die.

ENVOI

Prince of the degradations, bought and sold,
These verses, written in your crumbling sty,
Proclaim the faith that I have held and hold
And publish that in which I mean to die.

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In 1973 I stayed for a week at the farm of a friend, Denis Keep, at Mangoplah, south of Wagga Wagga, New South Wales. We spent an evening in front of the fire putting together a cassette tape for our associate, Mary David, then in Barcelona. On a whim I took from Denis's library the book in which Belloc portrays different aspects of his own character in an imaginary ramble across Sussex, *The Four Men* (London, 1911). As I recited from it the doggerel which runs—

Pelagius lived in Cardanoel
And taught a doctrine there;
That whether you went to heaven or hell,
It was your own affair¹... —

there fell from its leaves an old newspaper clipping which reported Belloc's death. We were sitting before that fire on 16th July, 1973. He had died twenty years before—to the day.

I said a Rosary that night for the repose of his soul.

Michael Baker

July 16th, 2019—*Our Lady of Mount Carmel*

¹ *The Song of the Pelagian Heresy for the Strengthening of Men's Backs and the Very Robust Outthrusting of Doubtful Doctrine and the Uncertain Intellectual*; see J. B. Morton, *Hilaire Belloc, A Memoir*, London, 1955, p. 168.