



## WINNING THE CULTURE WARS (AT LAST)

Feast of the Ascension 2012

Dear Friend of Clear Creek Abbey,

**W**hen Our Lord departed this world, disappearing into the clouds of Heaven from a hill overlooking Jerusalem, He took a great deal more than His sacred and resurrected Body: in some sense He ascended with our own humanity, being Himself a summary and exemplar of the human nature, now restored and perfected beyond anything men of former ages ever dreamt of. He took us—or at any rate what is the best of us—with Him in hope. He did not drag our sins along to the place above, but whatever was found to be noble, pure, genuine, beneficial—whatever holy in the history of mankind—He carried it all to Paradise.

Inversely, since the moment of the Ascension, the world here below has never been quite the same. Whatever inspiration moves the heart of man from now on must carry the reference to the ascended Christ. In former times, poets and musicians were commissioned by kings and princes. They rarely composed anything without a certain reference to the sovereign they served. For the Christian after the Ascension, every work of the human genius, every work of art worthy of the name, must somehow point to the King who sits already in the Kingdom of Heaven begun in Heaven. By virtue of our Holy Baptism, we Christians are of a very noble race. We



can no longer live as children “under the elements of this world” as did the pagans of antiquity, as do the pagans of today. We have titles of nobility that hold us to a higher standard. “For the rest,” writes Saint Paul, “whatsoever things are true, whatsoever modest, whatsoever just, whatsoever holy, whatsoever lovely, whatsoever of good fame, if there be any virtue, if any praise of discipline, think on these things.” (Phil. 4:8)

But what do we see around us? What used to be referred to as ‘culture’ is now labeled ‘counter-cultural’; what in former times was disregarded as merely ‘counter-cultural’ or ‘sub-cultural’ is now

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honored with the title of 'art'. Christian culture has disappeared almost entirely, at least from what is seen as the 'cutting edge' of modern culture. What are we to do?

In fact, the situation, though grave, need not depress us beyond measure. The Kingdom of Heaven and its Sovereign cannot be overthrown. What is base can never replace what is noble and divine. "Who then shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or persecution, or the sword?" (Rom. 8:35) One might continue the Apostle's line of questioning, asking, 'Who shall separate us from the ascended Lord? Shall lies, or false promises, or politicians, or social celebrities, or the threats of this world?' In any case the answer remains the same: "But in all these things we overcome, because of Him that hath loved us." (ibid. 37)

In reality the moment is most opportune for a radical renewal of culture. Against the backdrop of our decadent society, there is a golden opportunity to make a statement that counts, in contrast to the empty words and images of a cultural wasteland. All that is needed is a vein of inspiration, and this is already in our midst. In any culture worthy of the Christian name, it is the Holy Spirit, the Holy Ghost that replaces the Muses who moved the poets of old. And where do we find the Holy Spirit? 'The Spirit breathes wherever He wills,' but the Holy liturgy is the prime place where His life-giving influence is directly felt. The solemn monastic liturgy bears out this principle.

In the earliest ages of the Christian Faith, it was the glorified Christ that was the main focus of the soul. Only in the Gothic period did the Crucified one take center stage, as an object of devotion. There is nothing wrong with this devotion, of course, but it is interesting to see how the first Christians envisaged the world. In his important work, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger explained the point of view of early Christian art with respect to this attention to the glorified Lord:

It is always the risen Christ, even on the Cross, to whom the community looks as the true *Oriens*. And art is always characterized by the unity of creation, Christology, and eschatology: the first day is on its way toward the eighth, which in turn takes up the first. Art is still ordered to the mystery that becomes present in the liturgy. It is still oriented to the heavenly liturgy. The figures of the angels in Romanesque art are essentially no different from those in Byzantine painting. They show that we are joining with the cherubim and seraphim, with all the heavenly powers, in praise of the Lamb. In the liturgy the curtain between heaven and earth is torn open, and we are taken up into a liturgy that spans the whole cosmos. (Part III, chap. 1)

So, let us go up with Christ, through the clouds, beyond the highest choirs of angels—beyond the cherubim and seraphim themselves—in order to live in spirit and in hope with the Lord. And let our music, our art, our literature—our culture in its entirety—reflect at least something of that celestial light and truth. Impossible, you say? That may be true for those who have already seen too much of the world, for those who are too realistic as to venture anything new. But the young have not thus been subjected to the disenchantment of things. In the words of the prophet Joel (2:28), they are ever apt to "see visions" anew. The world may be old, but God is ever young, and His Holy Spirit is never at a loss for inspiration. May the new generations take their place—and an eminent one—in the long and glorious history of Western Civilization, centered on the King of Kings, who has ascended into Heaven. May they also draw light and love from the figure of the Queen, who sits at His right hand, the Blessed Virgin Mary. Thus the venture can only succeed.

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