

INSPIRATION

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Inspiration by John Herbert Williams

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JOHN HERBERT WILLIAMS

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J. HERBERT WILLIAMS

Quis haec scripserit, valde supervacaneae quaeritur, quum tamen auctor libri Spiritus Sanctus fideliter credatur. Ipse igitur haec scripsit QUI SCRIBENDA DICTAVIT.—S. GREGORIUS MAGNUS, *De consensu Evangelii*, I., i. c. 35.

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PREFACE

THE *Providentissimus Deus* of Leo XIII. directs attention to the work of the earliest

Patristic Fathers of the Church in the exposition
and tion of Holy Scripture, beginning
Scholastic. with immediate disciples of the Apostles, St Clement of Rome, Sr. Ignatius of Antioch, and including such famous names as Cyril, Chrysostom, Origen, Augustine, Jerome. The authority of these early Fathers is pre-eminent, not only for their learning but for their sanctity, which suggests that they may possess a divine illumination. We are also to perceive that "a new and more abundant (*laetiora*) growth" belonged to the Scholastics of seven centuries later, and to St Thomas of Aquinum beyond all. The work the Scholastics inaugurated was of a special character. Distinction of the meanings of words, their precise theological significance, the design of the sacred writer, the connection of his argument, were matters considered and explained. With the

revival of Greek, the ancient codices were sought up and edited, the text of Scripture was critically determined, the aid of multifarious learning was enlisted in elucidation. The generation following the Council of Trent "saw the golden age of the Fathers (*nobilissima Patrum aetas*) almost returned."

A various style is clamant in the bare description. Either kind was required, and each had its own excellence. But in the **Modern development.** Patristic age there was freshness and freedom and devotional inspiration. Later the study was more scientific, for theologians rather than for the general public; not less valuable for its scientific character, more valuable, but losing in attractiveness for the lay mind. Theological science, thus perfected, is grown a clerical preserve and avoided by lay intelligence. Unless expressed in the Scholastic terminology and observing the Scholastic distinctions, theology is disallowed. This is a mistake. The trees of the Paradise of God are according to the natural growth, not pollard, not cut into shapes of human design. St Augustine of Hippo or St Thomas of Aquinum are as the grace of God caused them to grow. Let the Catholic repudiate everything that is contrary to the Divine Tradition. But let him not find fault because the expression is un-

accustomed.¹ The spirit is the living thing, when the letter is dead and disregarded.

It goes without saying that neither the Patristic nor the Scholastic style is within the **Literary presentment.** compass of the chance writer. But there is still the choice between a scientific and a literary treatment of the subject, between writing for the learned and for seminaries, and writing for the general reader. The general reader, it should be observed, is not the good Catholic, nor yet the Catholic *sans phrase*. The aim must be, in such *literary* work, to interest first and to influence, if it may be, after. And orthodoxy is no recommendation; only, if unobtrusive, it may pass. The hazard must be ventured of the book being suspect with the self-styled theologian, who turns over the pages, and his eye fails to catch the received and regular turn of phrase. There is ironical statement or indirect allusion in a literary presentment, which are unrecognised, and the conclusion is taken for serious which is *petitio principii* writ large.

But the consequence is inevitable. A paragraph here and a paragraph there, which are not as usually reasoned, which appear to have

¹ To say that Christ "died for men" is ordinary and goes unnoticed; but that He "perished for humanity" creates alarm; it is socialist; it would have been better unsaid.

an erroneous sense, cannot be excised or amended. The style is possibly not the man, but it certainly is the treatise.

Picturesque on the side of the coomb stands the cottage. You make it more orthodox if you remove the thatch and point the stones. But it ceases to be a coomb cottage. No one turns his steps that way any longer to view it.

There is opportunity, or should be, in religious literature for other than the best work; not only **Apologetic** books that are text-books, books of reference, and that are recognised as authoritative in their subject for long future years. Something less perfect, something with which there is fault to find, ephemeral, evanescent, has its place besides, and for its very imperfection exercises a greater influence in the formation of opinion. It is more on the level of the reader and speaks his language. It is human in its mistakes and in its foolish manner of speech.

For the security of the Catholic there is always existent the tradition of the faith.

Limits of admissible error. Nothing must conflict with that, and every opinion that will not square with it is at once outlawed. But surely a *distinguo* enters into such general proposition. If no writing is to be tolerated unless faultless, nothing will be written. The

greatest Saints and Doctors have written error— St Augustine, it is said, St Jerome, St Gregory of Nyssa or of Nazianzum. Much more must writers of our less intellectual and less spiritual age. Moreover, the judgment of the reader is liable to error no less than the intelligence of the writer; the volunteer critic, it may be, is not better informed than the author. The *distinguo*, then, is between plain and direct contradiction of the doctrine of the Church on the one hand, and on the other an imagined divergence from theological opinion, however general, however commonly prevailing, which remains opinion, and is not yet embodied in any instrument of obligation. Once we pass beyond the confines of Catholic tradition, or have arrived on its outer border, there is no assurance either in assertion or rejection. Let divergence that there appears be argued, and one or other version be disproved. But without offence taken.

Another palpable distinction concerns the difference of the writer and consequently of the design. When a Bishop writes anything, he anticipates that his words will be received with submission. Or when a Theologian of name and eminence issues a fresh dissertation, what he writes will be taken to be the authorised account of the

Difference
of design.