CARDINAL MERCIER—AN APPRECIATION

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NOT long ago the press of the world announced the death of the Primate of Belgium, Desiré Joseph, Cardinal Mercier, Archbishop of Malines. News bulletins for weeks before had kept the public informed of the distinguished prelate's failing condition. His passing was the signal for the simultaneous publication, in all the important papers of the world, of long and appreciative notices on the life-work of the deceased scholar, priest and patriot. Editorial comment in the columns of the press of Europe and America reflected the esteem and admiration which the heroic life of the Belgian Cardinal had inspired in the hearts of millions of people to whom Mercier was a symbol of enlightened patriotism.

Apart from certain flagrantly erroneous statements, such as those which Dr. Kitchin pointed out in the Associated Press report, the syndicated press gave to the world an account of the life and work of the great churchman which was substantially correct. If error there was, it was rather an error of emphasis. Naturally, the average man is more interested in the imposing figure of a red-robed prelate defying the power of a fierce invader, giving a modern setting to the dramatic situation which history describes as the encounter between Leo and Attila, than in the humble priest with his simple devotions, or the learned scholar in the dust of his library. In the present article I should like to shift that emphasis, to present the scholar who created the patriot, and to give some personal impressions of the saint who inspired the scholar.

My first personal introduction to Cardinal Mercier took place in the month of November, 1922. For many years previous to that date, I had known him principally through his philosophical writings and the critical appreciations of his published works in the pages of philosophical reviews. That meeting in the late autumn of the year 1922 was destined to be the first of several interviews with the eminent prelate, in which I had the opportunity of getting intimate glimpses of the man whose courageous scholarship I had early admired, and for whose learning I had profound respect.

Armed with a letter of introduction from the Rector of the Catholic University of America, I presented myself at the Archiepiscopal Residence at Malines, and enquired of a secretary if it were possible to arrange an audience with the Cardinal for me, some day within the next couple of weeks. The secretary withdrew to consult with His Eminence, returning presently with the announcement that the Cardinal would receive me immediately. This lack of formality astonished me, the more so because I had recently had a very different experience. A matter of business brought me to the office of an obscure personage who occupied an official position in Brussels. After a searching enquiry as to the nature of my business, conducted by an underling, I was kept waiting in an anteroom for an unconscionable time, and finally had to explain my mission to a representative of the chief. The contrast with the Malines episode was striking. But, as I afterwards recognized, it merely impressed upon my mind the habitual simplicity of Mercier. The absence of formality in personal interviews with the Cardinal was notorious. An American visitor to Belgium once said to me, "Of all the prominent men in Europe, Cardinal Mercier is the easiest to see." And I myself was later a witness of the crowd of visitors of every condition of life, from bepurpled monsignori to prim peasant matrons in their Sunday best, waiting in the antechamber to be admitted, each in turn, to the presence of the Cardinal. Besides those audiences privately arranged for, His Eminence gave up two whole mornings every week to receive all who came to seek his counsel or to ask his judgment. It was often after two o'clock before the last caller was dismissed, but the Cardinal resolutely refused to sit down to luncheon until he had seen all who, as he said to me, "had put themselves out to come and see me."

Mercier spoke fluent English, with the trace of an accent, but with a choice of diction which stamped the scholar. His long, lean frame, with shoulders slightly stooped, gave the impression of a dignified though frail figure in the attitude of a gracious bow. And his keen, clear eyes spoke kindly welcome. The discussion of a point of philosophic interest would arouse in him a vivid animation, and light up his face with a glow of youth which made his thin grey hair seem premature. At parting, his fatherly blessing gave earnest of celestial benediction.

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Though popular notions in our modern age may relegate asceticism to a much-misunderstood mediaeval civilization, the austerity of life which Mercier exemplified suggests that such opinions are not always to be followed. A man whose eminent learning gained him recognition in the world of twentieth century science as well as honoured fellowship in the most exclusive circles, academies and societies of international scholarship, long before the accident of a war made him a popular hero, can scarcely be regarded as other than modern in his thought and outlook. Yet, in private life the Cardinal lived as simply and austerely as an anchorite. Replying to a virulent attack upon his personal character which appeared in the columns of a Socialist daily during the last general elections in Belgium, Mercier proved that the spirit which breathed courage into the famous Pastoral Letter of 1914 was still alive, and he called upon those who knew him intimately to witness whether his private life did not resemble the poverty and privation of the common people far more than the lives of not a few of those who claim to espouse the cause of the oppressed. Many of our college students—and students are notoriously penurious—would bitterly complain, were they forced by circumstances to occupy the poorly furnished quarters of Belgium's Primate. To add to that, the Cardinal would never allow his study to be heated, and those who lived in Flanders during the years of the war know how cold and penetrating Belgian winters can be. Think what we may of such rigid self-abnegation! The facts are these, and they clearly show a modern man whose heroism and scholarship have alike won high esteem, and whose philosophy of life dictated the Christian stoicism of a mediaeval ascetic.

A phase of Mercier's career about which but little has been said in the press of this country (and that little in very general terms) constitutes the outstanding contribution of the late Cardinal to the civilization of his time. It is trite to remark that an age is ruled and characterized by the current of its thought. The breadth and depth of the Cardinal's learning, his profound conviction of the abiding value of mediaeval philosophy, and his indomitable courage in the field of science, succeeded in divertiug the current of philosophical thought in our twentieth century into the undreamed-of channels of mediaevalism. The story of those efforts is the romance of his life. But to appreciate the part he played in it, we must go back to an age not far removed from our own in terms of years, though distant as the stars in its conception of the rôle of science and philosophy.[1]

Not quite fifty years ago, the encyclical letter of Pope Leo XIII on the study of philosophy issued a summons to the Catholic world to quit dandling with fantastic theories, and to get down to serious study of the works of St. Thomas Aquinas and his mediaeval contemporaries. For a whole century before that time, philosopher after philosopher had made frantic efforts to devise some system in which the traditional doctrine of Christianity could be reconciled with the discoveries of science. The tide of Agnosticism was running high; the priests of the new cult—Comte and Taine, Mill and Spencer—spelled science with a capital S and placed their goddess in the sanctuary. Meanwhile thoughtful men, who felt the grip of Christian revelation slacken, groped about for solid footing. Some (like Rosmini, Gioberti and Ubaghs) looked to Descartes or Schelling or Hegel for their inspiration. They built up curious structures of speculative thought wherein revealed doctrines were sadly distorted and transformed. Others (like Bautain, Bonnetti and de Bonald) proposed to drag reason from her seat of honour, reduce her to silence, trample her in the dust, and raise upon her dead body an edifice of faith builded upon itself and giving foundation to all certitude and all thought. Neither the audacity of the former nor the zeal of the latter was favourably regarded in Rome. In the neglected treasures of mediaeval writings there was a philosophy built upon reason, and in full accord with doctrinal statements in their plain and undistorted sense. Leo XIII determined to restore it to its one-time place of honour.

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[1] In the paragraphs which follow I have copiously borrowed from an article by Leon Noe which appeared in the columns of "Les Nouvelles Littéraires," Paris, Jan. 30, 1926.

As a matter of fact, the philosophy of the scholastics was practically unknown in the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century, except to a very restricted circle of Catholic students, mostly clerics. It was taught in ecclesiastical seminaries as an introduction to theology; yet even there many views which claimed St. Thomas as their author were rather interpretations of his teaching by the great master's later followers, condensed and formulated in Latin phraseology, dry and devitalized, remote from the living stream of actual thought. The movement for revival aimed at delving deeper into the legacy of the Middle Ages, and drinking the learning of the mediaeval thinkers at the authentic spring. Its purpose was not to exhume the philosophy of St. Thomas and place it in a museum of archeological curiosities, but to make it the source of an actual, living current of thought. It hoped to give a cure for social anarchy by healing the anarchy of ideas.

Such was the motive behind Pope Leo's encyclical. To people who knew the attitude of the later nineteenth century and breathed its atmosphere of scientific progress, such an idea must have appeared literally preposterous. One must indeed be living in an obstinate dream, out of all touch with the palpable realities of the age, to put any faith in such an undertaking. Romanticists might find a charm in the picturesque traditions of the Middle Ages; their chivalry might thrill the novelist; poets might muse or mope upon the melancholy spectacle of fair maidens weeping in dark castle halls for gallant knights who would ne'er return; the legends of a more truculent sort might furnish opportunity for theatrical display: but to draw from the darkness of the thirteenth century philosophical methods and ideas which could command the respect and attention, not of fantastic dreamers, but of serious thoughtful men—that *was* a far cry! Every student knows that, for the historians of philosophy, "In Neo-Platonism, ancient philosophy committed suicide. This is the end. . . Christianity triumphs, and sweeps away all independent thought from its path. There is no more philosophy now, till a new spirit of enquiry is breathed into man at the Rennaissance . . . Then the new era begins, and gives birth to a new philosophic impulse, under the influence of which we are still living. But to reach that new era of philosophy, the human spirit had first to pass through the arid wastes of scholasticism."[1]

Moreover, in the middle of the nineteenth century, *all* philosophy was discredited. After the theological dreams of its infancy, after the metaphysical verbiage of its youth, human reason had at long last reached maturity. Henceforth, its sole concern must be the discoveries of positive science,—exact relations among the facts of experience, the only realities knowable to man. True, the revivalists urged that scholasticism could live in domestic harmony with modern learning in the household of science. They even insinuated that the influence of philosophy in the family would be fraught with beneficial results for the scientists themselves. But this was only adding insult to absurdity. Was it not a recognized historical fact that, since the days of Galileo, scholasticism had fallen into disrepute precisely because it endeavoured to impede progress in science by opposing sterile formulae to the established facts of observation? To revive those defunct doctrines, and to attempt to establish contact between them and the triumphant discoveries of modern science, was doubly impossible. The emancipation of scientific thought dated only from the time when doughty pioneers began their progressive march by trampling them underfoot.

This was the world of thought into which Pope Leo XIII was bent on introducing the philosophy of the mediaeval masters. His encyclical bears the date of August 4th., 1879. In 1877, after a brilliant course of theology at the University of Louvain, l'abbé Mercier was appointed professor of philosophy at the Collège St.

[1] W. T. Stack, *A Critical History of Greek Philosophy*, p. 377.

Louis, at Malines. There he had leisure to reflect upon the project of the Pope, and to put its suggestions to the test in the actual work of the class-room.

Meanwhile, a request from Rome was presented to the authorities of the University of Louvain, asking that a special chair of philosophy be founded for the purpose of pursuing a deep and intensive study of the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas. The policy of the Pope in this matter had its roots in the past, as Leo XIII himself afterwards explained. As Papal Nuncio at Brussels, Joachim Pecci (later, Pope Leo XIII) became intimately acquainted with the spirit and character of the University of Louvain. The penetration of his keen mind gave him immediate insight into the unique advantages of that institution. Alone in all the world it enjoyed the twofold privilege of being at once a distinctly Catholic centre of higher studies and a complete university, the home of a national culture for centuries, endowed with all the prerogatives of a State institution, supremely respected in every branch of learning, scientific, literary and professional, giving instruction to the intellectual élite of a country placed in the midst of modern civilization. There were to be found the very conditions in which the problems of philosophy could be studied to best advantage, in the light of scientific researches and discoveries made on the spot by men whose names were known and honoured in the world of learning. The Nuncio at Brussels grasped the possibilities of the Belgian university; and when the Pope set his heart upon the realization of his dream of Thomistic restoration, his thoughts quite naturally turned towards Louvain.

In July, 1882, the establishment of the chair of philosophy requested by the Pope was an accomplished fact, and the undertaking was confided to the care of Canon Mercier. Following close upon his appointment, Mercier received a summons to Rome to consult with the Pope on his plans for the realization of the project. That was no banal interview—between the keenest of the modern Popes and the young professor who was destined to be, one day, the celebrated Primate of Belgium. Leo XIII was a severe master. He expected great things, and demanded high ideals. But on this occasion he was fully satisfied. Here was the very man for the work. Mercier had great faith in men, in reason, and in science. He loved his age, and spurned the attitude of reminiscent *laudatores temporis acti*. He seized upon the promise of the present enterprise, and was ready to devote to its achievement a breadth of view and a personal enthusiasm which should assure success if success were possible.

In the course of his personal studies, he had learned to appreciate the soundness of Thomistic thought, which could scale the summits of metaphysical speculation without losing contact with the material universe or relaxing for an instant the logical chain of rigorous reasoning. Thoroughly acquainted with the writings of the master-minds who dominated the thought of his own age—the empirical psychologists of England and the positivist philosophers of France—he realized that no mutual understanding could be dreamed of until some common ground for interchange of thoughts were definitely established. The very language of scholasticism was unintelligible to the modern scholar. Experience was the supreme criterion of Mercier's contemporaries, and to convince them that the loftiest theories of scholastic thought were linked to the data of factual observation it was futile to appeal to the casual experience of the everyday man. According to the accepted ideas of the age, the truest aspects of reality were revealed in the retort of the chemist, under the scalpel of the surgeon, and beneath the objective of the biologist's microscope. The only hope of meeting these thinkers on their own ground was to study the methods of modern science and familiarize one's self with the technical practice of research.

Mercier felt that his present scientific equipment was unequal to the task. But that did not dismay him. Just at this time the theories of Charcot on abnormal mental conditions were the vogue in psychiatry. So he betook himself to Paris to learn the latest developments of the science in the lectures and clinics of the celebrated French physician. Later on, he followed the courses of physiology, chemistry and mathematics at the University of Louvain. In the neurological laboratory he studied under Van Gehuchten the methods of this famous authority on the nervous system. With Louis Henry he learned the latest discoveries in chemistry. Paul Mansion revealed to him the deep significance of higher mathematics. Under the direction of Carnoy and Van Beneden he pursued researches in biology. Harlez opened up to him the treasures of philological lore and linguistic science. No department of modern scholarship remained foreign to him. His mind was filled with an abundance of scientific facts. He adapted his methods to the needs of the time, and accustomed himself to follow the procedure of the experimenter in the laboratory. The purpose he had set out to accomplish was achieved. He could stand with the man of science upon his own level, appreciate with scientific impartiality the value of discoveries, and suggest solutions in a language which every scholar understood.

Meanwhile, from the rostrum of his lecture-hall, Mercier expounded the philosophy of St. Thomas. Students from every faculty in the university flocked to hear him, the congenital curiosity of the university man aroused by the novelty of the situation. They listened, politely at first, then with increasing interest as each one heard the language of his own particular pet subject spoken with ease and fluency by this new professor. These lectures did not resemble the tissue of silly speculations which they had expected, bristling with obsolete oddities and ridiculous anachronisms. Yet scholasticism it surely was. For soon the observations of science were grouped and harmonized by the skill of the lecturer, and the principles of St. Thomas were summoned from the past, stripped of their Latin clothes, paraphrased in the vernacular, and they were found to express in vivid language just what was expected and foreshadowed in the discussion of the problem. The living actuality of Mercier's thought impressed itself upon his hearers. His success was as complete as it was unforeseen.

From this success arose the Institut Supérieur de Philosophie of the University of Louvain, the foremost organization for the study of philosophy in any Catholic institution in the world, *La Revue Neo-Scolastique*, founded by Mercier and since published by La Société Philosophique de Louvain, and the Thomistic School of Louvain, which continues to carry on the work of its eminent founder and to broaden out the application of his methods.

About 1899, Mercier began the publication of his philosophical works. His thought had assumed definite form, and the learned world viewed with amazement mediaeval ideas cast in a modern mould. The spread of his fame was rapid, though not wide. His achievements appealed rather to the professional philosopher than to the general public. Before very long his works were translated into the principal languages of Europe, tributes of respect to their author appeared in the leading philosophical reviews, and the learned societies of the world accounted it an honour to inscribe the name of Mercier on their rolls.

Thanks to the indefatigable energy of the man whose undaunted courage was to manifest itself in quite other circumstances in time of war, the learning of the mediaeval masters had been revived in many quarters where twenty years ago it was unknown. The atmosphere of the learned world has, doubtless, changed. Positivism is dead; science is more critical and less prophetic; Kantism has returned to the objective realism of its founder: a new spiritualism, born of psychology, demands pragmatic sanction. In the face of these vicissitudes, the men whom Mercier trained will cling to that method which seeks a common plane of discussion, anxious to profit by every progressive step to rejuvenate its work, and advance steadily in harmony with the forward trend of true science.

Practically everywhere to-day Catholic thinkers adopt this method of mutual understanding. But how many could be found to do so before Mercier blazed the trail? Some few, whose sympathies for Agnosticism weakened their hold on revealed religion, rejected their faith. Others, jealous of their traditional beliefs, wrapped themselves in sullen isolation, or condemned every adversary and "refuted" him by a curt syllogism, without taking the trouble to understand the intricacy of his thought.

Mercier's attitude was much wiser, more adroit—in a word, more Christian. Before discussing any view which he could not accept, he made an earnest effort to understand it. To ingratiate his doctrine, he rendered it gracious. The spirit of the gospel brought forth in him that rarest of its fruits, intellectual charity, which the zeal for orthodoxy too often smothers. If there exists in the learned world to-day a hearty respect for mediaeval thought, if the teachings of St. Thomas are eagerly studied in all the great secular universities of Europe and in many in America, if but yesterday the delegates to an international congress of philosophy with one accord agreed to set aside a whole day of their sessions to celebrate the six-hundredth anniversary of the canonization of the Angel of the Schools—the secret of this growing triumph must be sought in the courageous energy of the late Belgian Cardinal, and the holy inspiration of his noble soul.