

## SON ET LUMIÈRE

*A Footnote to France*

ILLTUD EVANS, O.P.

**D**URING the last few years French taste and ingenuity have added a new dimension to the tourist's pleasure—*Son et Lumière*, the articulated harmony of spoken commentary, music and floodlighting which evokes the past glory and the present beauty of such places as Versailles or Vézelay. As night falls the buildings come to life, their details made piercingly true in the brilliantly devised arc and shadow, and their meaning recalled in the actors' declaiming of a sermon of St Bernard's or a passage from Madame de Sévigné. And the music of Rameau or Lully, marvellously amplified without distortion or excess, completes the illusion of the years of magnificence.

Sound and Light: there remains Heat, the third of the trinity of the Physics one learnt at school. And Heat is absent on these summer evenings, so gracious yet so cold. Each monument has fundamentally the same history: war or revolution, the edicts of secular power, eviction, destruction, death. And now, for a moment, it painfully springs to light, but not to life, not to the warmth of a place where men live or of an altar where men worship—except it may be by occasional concession, the toleration that can be exercised now that the power is gone.

It is perhaps a fantasy to find in this an analogy of the state of France today, but it is as useful as any other. There seem as many diagnoses of the disease as there are men to make them. Political instability, inflation, a fossilized bureaucracy, the freemasons, alcoholism, religious unbelief: you may take your choice among these easy explanations and many more besides. It needs no wisdom to discern the sickness, but perhaps the worst symptom of all is the almost universal wish to find its cause in abstractions, systems, tendencies, and not in the failure of the men who, in the last analysis, have the power to heal but lack the life to exercise their power. The failure may indeed be the result of a long process of attrition, and generalizations can do much to explain why this is so. But the rationalization—the sound and light in fact—can never reach the heart of the matter, and that perhaps is why the

true cause of the miseries of France remains so elusive. It lies beyond systems or syllogisms, and Frenchmen are reluctant to admit that uncomfortable truth.

The legacy of Descartes lies heavily on this land: the illusion of *idées claires*, the crystal clarity of reason. And the goddess of Reason has meant more than a momentary madness in the heat of the Revolution. The very structure of French life, and especially of its education, has seemed to eliminate all that is surprising and uncovenanted. The rigid syllabus for the *baccalauréat*, for instance, or the rules that govern entry by competitive examination to the various civil services, reflect a reliance on system that is often less than fair to the individual who fits uneasily into a pattern that is logically impeccable. French administration, at its best a marvellously complete provision for every conceivable eventuality, seems paralysed when it is attacked from without by the inconceivable. The present tragedy in Algeria is in one sense a terrible commentary on this limitation, for administrative inflexibility seems unable to deal with a situation which the 'system' had not foreseen.

Historically it is easy to explain much that seems inelastic and ill-adapted to the needs of the modern world. A centralized economy, dominated by Paris—a map of the French railway system is revealing here—reflects the unification which the Revolution effected and which the single genius of Napoleon confirmed in every detail. (It is said that even such minute regulations as those which govern the *pompes funèbres* owe their origin to him.) The division of the country into artificially constructed departments (themselves intended to destroy the traditional and organic regions of France), with its stiff hierarchy deriving in all respects from the prefect—which is to say Paris, is the geographical parallel to that mathematics of the mind which the last century and a half of French education has been designed to promote. The result can be a literalism, often amusing enough, but symptomatic of a rigidity really less than human. One recalls a notice outside a country *mairie*, announcing new regulations for working hours in bakeries. In language of some importance, laws and decrees were rehearsed, and the decision of the prefect recorded, and the mayor's formal publication declared. The legality of the document demanded a signature, and this was a copy—and so, with a humour altogether unintended, this was

said to exist, but (in brackets) *illisible*. It would be foolish to draw too serious a moral, but the indisputable strength—and weakness—of France lies in this resort to reason. When it works and its limits are recognized, there is precision and an ordered rule: when it fails and its use is exaggerated, it can lead to cynicism and contempt for the law.

It may at first seem a contradiction that so rationally determined a country should at the same time be so politically uncertain, but—perhaps fortunately—the administration abides while the luxury of party politics is still indulged in. The sad fact is that ‘luxury’ is not an unfair description. A passion for manifestations and manoeuvre can evade the single act of courage which may sometimes be a political imperative. At a time of political crisis in France the newspapers are full of party programmes, ambitious and oracular, with many an appeal to justice and the rights of reason. But their implementation is quite another matter—a matter of compromise, of formulas that can be reasonably interpreted to allow commitments that will hardly survive a severe challenge. And so there begins another crisis, and the moral authority of a nation goes by default. Increasingly there is a demand for a *réforme des structures* which would cut the intolerable knot of political instability. But that would mean a sacrifice, a recognition that the things that unite men can matter more than those which divide. And one can only conclude that the habit of debate is too deeply rooted for such a sacrifice to be willingly accepted unless war or some other disaster should make it inevitable. There is, too, the spectre of the *coup d'état*, the memory of the alternatives of the past—the fear that it is Napoleon or nothing.

Yet it must be conceded that since the war a huge Communist element has been contained, and patronizing Anglo-Saxon regrets that France should be so sick do not always recognize how infinitely more serious the malady might have been. A nation does not depend for its survival merely on its political structures, or France's days would indeed have been numbered. The serious thing is not so much the mere instability of governments—the music-hall aspect of French politics: it is rather the elimination, by design and over many years, of elements essential to the healthy life of human society. And among those elements religion stands first—and last. The secularization of French

education, reflected in the excessive rationalization of its syllabus, has been a far graver threat than the occasional acts of open aggression, such as the notorious Association Laws of 1905. The confiscation of ecclesiastical property is never likely to commend itself to the Church. But the Church is happily more than the sum of the things it owns: its essential freedom owes nothing to the privileges of establishment and a protected status. But the abolition of religious instruction from the schools, the assumption that religion is optional and an extra, is a corroding process that achieves its purpose with terrible certainty. The Church's attempt to provide its own system of religious education, parallel to that of the state, has become economically impossible. In whole areas of the countryside the only schools are those of the State, and where the *écoles libres* exist they are threatened by financial difficulties which make those of the Catholic Church in England small in comparison.

It is not merely a question of excluding religion from the schools. It is, in the sense of the analogy I have used, a consciously determined rationalism that has no place for the warmth of the natural and instinctive life which religion exists to sanctify. And the recent history of the Church in France can only be properly understood in the light of this indisputable fact. Critics who complain of the 'extremes' of some aspects of the French Catholic revival need to bear in mind how likely such a reaction must be. The danger is a real one, but it is largely induced by the irritation—even despair—induced by a rational formalism, which seemed even to have affected the Church itself in some of its official and inherited capacities. Hence an exaggerated insistence on 'charity' as the (largely unspecified) solvent of all difficulties. Hence, too, an antinomian enthusiasm, a suggestion that 'law' is not enough, that 'charity' would in any case cover its infringements. The story is by this familiar, and the tragedy of the worker-priests episode needs to be seen in this perspective. More recently the crisis in the movements of Catholic Action reflects the same mood, and has surely the same explanation. Many young French Catholics have reacted with some violence not only against the secular assumptions of organized French life but equally against the sanctions which any hierarchical order must presuppose. Theirs is an exaggerated protest, no doubt, and a dangerous one in so far as it so often confuses the Church's function by demanding

her intervention, or claiming her authority, for a 'spiritualization' of politics which in effect is anarchic. The last twelve years have seen a series of sad events, which, from the *Jeunesse d'Église* movement to the recent controversies and resignations in Catholic Action, have this in common: all have been generous in intention, concerned to vivify the life of the Church within the nation, but they too easily led to impatience and disobedience. The blame, if blame there be, lies not so much with those who went too far in the pursuit of fundamentally noble ideals. Rather is it to be traced to the paralysing effect of long years of organised secularism and the pursuit of the rational 'system' and the reaction it inevitably created. Paradoxically the reaction itself was that of making ideas themselves—Christian ideas this time—the single solution, without allowing for the infinite varieties of time and place and temper which must modify their particular application. The fire of undisciplined charity—and the virtue of charity for the Christian is never apart from his faith or alien to his obedience—can easily become a prairie fire which consumes but does not give warmth.

But it is unjust to dwell only on the sad cost of a movement of Catholic rebirth that is in so many ways restoring the essential constituents to French life—the things that made France great, and for want of which she has often seemed mean and resentful and very sick. It is no easy task for the Church to turn back the huge tide of secularist optimism (so disappointed as it essentially is), and, deprived of so many of the necessary material means, to build up again the integrated Christian life which sanctifies all that is human and finds room in the city for every man and his needs. Perhaps the greatest obstacle is the inherited memory of the Church as merely socially significant, as part of the order of things but making no deep personal demands—or at least evoking no personal response except on the occasions which family tradition defines. Almost every parish priest will acknowledge, for instance, the inadequacy of the *Communion Solennelle*, that strange social ritual, with its commercial importance in terms of costume, banquets, photographs and family reunions. And of recent years the emphasis has been on making this ceremony a real preparation for adult Catholic life. Too often it marks instead the practical ending of close association with the Church. The Church in fact is accepted so long as its demands are not too

sacrificial: its place is a tolerated one, and, if nowadays open conflict is rare, that can itself mean a serious denial of its true mission. Hence the indignation, the sense of frustration, which convinced Catholics must often feel.

*Son et Lumière*: the sound and light are what men discern, and what gives life and warmth is hidden. For France, and for every other nation as well, the Church exists not only to be admired, a piece of history to be acknowledged: its work is here and new, and it is a life-giving work, born of the fire of Pentecost. And in France quite specially that truth is known, and the eldest daughter of the Church is in many ways the youngest in spirit, the one most adapted to the world that is hers to redeem.

