

A LANDMARK IN LITURGICAL ART*

THE worst enemies of an art are those of its own household, the people with natural talent but no aesthetic education, and whose technical training too often merely gives them greater facility in expressing and more show of authority in propagating their own bad taste. For how many art schools, even among the best, teach anything of the general and fundamental principles on which all craftsmanship should be based? In an age of classic art instinctive good taste might be looked for as part of natural talent, but in these days the critical faculty is warped before it has time to develop, by low standards in music, literature, architecture and art in the narrower sense of the word, whether domestic, decorative or pictorial. Even Rubens, for all his genius, did not escape the coarsening influences which the later Renaissance left behind it; and his pictures could never be universally loved for their beauty as are those of a Fra Angelico who, although his drawing is not always accurate, had lived in fourteenth century Florence. How many potential musicians might be found in a jazz band, writers among journalists who have never read an English classic, and artists in the perpetrators of the so-called devotional art displayed in 'Catholic repositories.'

L'ouvroir liturgique, quoted in *Vestments and Vesture* (pp. 220-221) on the subject of professional workshops, says :

The unlucky thing is that everyone imagines that he himself possesses that quality of good taste which, in the realm of the beautiful, occupies the position which belongs

* *Vestments and Vesture*. A Manual of Liturgical Art. By Dom E. A. Roulin, O.S.B., Monk of Ampleforth Abbey. Translated by Dom Justin McCann, O.S.B., of the same Abbey. (Sands & Co. ; 15/- net.)

Blackfriars

to good judgment in the realm of reason—innate qualities both of them, but capable of development by practice and study. They require a clear vision, deliberate choice, and the power of drawing the particular out of the general . . . The aesthetic part of the work should be allotted to persons with aesthetic gifts and training.

For though innate artistic perception is not proof against the baneful influences that hinder its growth, it often needs little education to make it develop rightly. Those who possess it are generally quick to recognise true principles and hence true art, once they are presented and explained. Those incapable of such perception must be asked to take on trust, as they would in the case of any science, those universally accepted principles which lie deeper than the divergences of schools and periods, and to refrain from condemning as a fussy dilettantism that keener sense to which the spurious in art is like notes played out of tune to a musical ear.

Liturgical art is in one sense the most important, as bearing directly on the chief work of man, the worship of God. It is now becoming the fashion—and a blessed fashion—to be liturgical. But since what is popularised is thereby placed at the mercy of all manner of men, art fares ill at the hands of fashion, being imperilled by a thousand ignorances and exaggerations. Dom Roulin's book comes therefore as a god-send in the fullest and most literal meaning of the word. It is not only a book for the present hour, but one such as priests, communities of nuns, altar societies and all makers, buyers and sellers of vestments and church needlework have needed for the past four and a half centuries: and if you who read this represent any of these categories, or feel generously inclined to make a precious gift to those who do, I strongly advise you to skip the rest of this review and order a copy at once. It treats of the material, make

A Landmark in Liturgical Art

and decoration of every detail of vestments, altar linen and hangings, and is particularly valuable for Dom Roulin's careful explanation of the principles on which his admirable mingling of theoretical and technical instruction is based. Would that every educated Catholic might read the author's preface, chapter the first on the *Essential Principles and Evolution of Liturgical Vesture*, and chapter the fourteenth on *Faults of Taste and their Cure*. Those who read this much will probably read more, for the book has all the charm of a work written with enthusiasm tempered by a thorough knowledge of the subject, a knowledge founded on erudition as well as practical experience.

Antiquarians, rubricists and embroiderers have all written books on church vestments from their respective points of view, and Dom Roulin has used and correlated the information they supply, in achieving his own purpose. This, he tells us in his preface,

has been to produce a practical guide to liturgical and beautiful vestments, in order to help not only the professional makers of vestments, but also those devout women who take up the work from religious motives, and especially priests, who are concerned to follow the best liturgical traditions and who have to deal with the serious question of costs This book does not deal so much with the technical processes of manufacture as with the aesthetics of vestments. It has much to say about the conditions of beauty, or at least of its salient qualities; it has many comparisons to make between vestment and vestment, between this design and that design It is my hope and desire that the book may prove a manual of 'practical theory,' such a theory of good vestments as will help to produce good vestments.'

Few are so well fitted for this task as Dom Roulin :

For many years now I have had practical acquaintance with the subject of this book, for I have been asked from the most various quarters to design vestments and their accessories. Now it was a parish, now an abbey, now a

Blackfriars

diocesan seminary; another time the request came from a Cardinal Archbishop, and the vestments were to be made for his metropolitan cathedral. In this way I have been compelled for many years to be busy constantly with pen and pencil and brush; and I have experimented with many designs from very various sources. It has been my business to settle the cut, quality and ornament of every sort of vestment, and then to negotiate for their making with the firms who make such things (Preface).

Several hundred illustrations, ingeniously sought and chosen, together with the remarks appended, do nearly half the work of the book, and are an education in themselves. Pictures by old masters, photographs of brasses and sculpture show the vestments of the period to which they belong. There are drawings, diagrams, designs in detail or in full, photographs of sanctuaries, altars, and vestments ancient and modern. The illustrations are used especially for comparing good, bad and indifferent vestments. The best models outnumber the less good, but we have also examples of the worst modern productions from dealers' catalogues, and other examples of work having both faults and good qualities to be noted. A banner designed in a liturgical periodical is described as 'a mass of languishing angels.' Four stoles are shown side by side, two good, one of the 'spade' variety labelled 'horrible shape and mincing ornament' and the fourth 'more suitable for a necktie.' A mitre on the head of a bishop is criticised as 'a pretentious construction, badly shaped and much over-decorated,' and ecclesiastical gossips are discreetly silenced ('Who is he having a hit at? Isn't it rather like the Bishop of So-and-so?') by the additional remark that 'the face is not a portrait.'

But Dom Roulin's criticism, often humorous and at times righteously indignant, is never unkindly, though its humility and broadmindedness seem to have escaped the notice of the reviewer in *The Month*, who

A Landmark in Liturgical Art

finds him too arbitrary. 'Take, for instance,' he says, 'the question of lace albs. Dom Roulin does not like lace, and no one disputes the fact that lace was not used in the sanctuary even in the later Middle ages. But why should medieval custom decide the matter? To our thinking a flounce of lace upon a delicate cambric alb is a much more artistic form of ornamentation than those oblong patches of *appliqué* embroidery which, six hundred years ago, were supposed to enhance the beauty of the priest's inner vesture.' But Dom Roulin, far from wishing that 'medieval custom should decide the matter,' especially in favour of non-continuous apparels, says of these 'oblong patches':

The nineteenth century with its zeal, or rather infatuation for the Middle Ages, strove to copy these accessories and many other unnecessary items. . . . But this rather petty and narrow and imitative art is languishing and dying; the cold chill of routine and convention has stolen over it. . . . Men are seeking now more and more to preserve the primary and dominant character of things, and to discard defective custom and mere antiquarianisms. . . . These non-continuous apparels are only reminiscences of a past age and not very satisfactory as ornaments (p. 24).

The *Month* reviewer continues, 'And surely such a lace-bordered alb is a more convenient and practical liturgical inner garment than a voluminous and stuffy swathing after the measurements of St. Charles Borromeo. This is especially true of the bishop who, in a hot climate, has to wear it over both tunic and dalmatic' But Dom Roulin nowhere advocates a voluminous alb, and quotes the measurements of St. Charles only in reference to the length of rochets and surplices and the size of chasubles and finger-towels. And has his critic read the author's closing words on the subject of lace?

Blackfriars

But let us hasten to add that there are no rules in these matters Many kinds of lace have been and are being produced, some of which are superb These laces add a special beauty and distinction to the rochets of prelates. In many churches the other members of the clergy and the men and boys who serve at the altar wear vestments of linen which are without lace and perfectly simple. We humbly submit to competent authority this suggestion for an appropriate distinction (p. 17).

And again on page 34 :

We must have that broadmindedness which is characteristic of our Mother the Church. . . . Rochets adorned with rich and beautiful lace serve as a very proper and distinctive dress for ecclesiastical dignitaries.

Dom Roulin's opinions will not always be fully shared by all his readers (some, for instance, will question the choice of the specimens of embroidery from the Abbey of Maria Laach as representing what is best in modern art); but there seems no reason why he should not be allowed to express his preferences, especially as, having explained the reasons, artistic, traditional or liturgical, which lead to his conclusions, he expressly disavows any wish to be exclusive. He is ready to accede to popular taste wherever this is possible without detriment to the dignity and beauty of Christian worship and the prescriptions of the Church. In him, the artist's love of art is always subordinate to the monk's love of God.

On pages 26-27, he says :

We should like to make it clear in this place, and we shall repeat it again, that we have no intention of usurping the functions of the Sacred Congregation of Rites. It hardly needs saying, and yet we say it to avoid misunderstanding : All our criticisms and suggestions are made in fullest deference to the authority of that Congregation.'

For Dom Roulin there is no question of merely aesthetic considerations where the Church, by tradi-

A Landmark in Liturgical Art

tional usage or otherwise, has made clear her own preferences, much less where she has laid down a rule, even when long tolerated custom may plead against the obligation of following it.

But the Church's intentions and the principles of true art safeguarded, he encourages personal initiative. He has no sympathy with the unintelligent idea that work inspired by some particular school must borrow from it exclusively; as though the artists of any period developed the characteristics of their art with the desire that time should petrify them into rigid rules of 'pure Byzantine' or 'correct Gothic,' and were not seeking simply to achieve beauty by any means that came to mind or hand. Of the early ages of the Church Dom Roulin says :

We shall how them a marked predilection because . . . they offer and will ever offer an ideal. But we do not suggest that there should be any servile imitation of the past . . . The world of thought and taste does not want any more of that inferior and fossilized art which was so widely practised in the nineteenth century . . . What it wants is that we should seize the *essential* character of liturgical vesture, and that we should be *inspired* by the best, without respect to style or epoch or country. The consequence of such a logical and sincere effort will inevitably be the production of vestments which are not of any rigorously exact style, whether that be antique, Romanesque, Byzantine, Gothic or Renaissance. It will produce Catholic vestments, yet vestments which shall be in harmony with the individual spirit, taste and feeling of each nationality (p. 10).

The French edition of Dom Roulin's work appeared under the title of *Linges, Insignes et Vêtements Liturgiques* a few months earlier than the English version. The difficulties of translating his characteristic style have been well overcome by Dom Justin McCann; there is hardly an awkward word or phrase in the book. In the next edition, the line missing at

Blackfriars

the bottom of page 40 should be supplied, and the last word but two on page 150 should be *cope* instead of *hood*. Some of those for whom it is written, especially among parish priests, can ill afford to spend fifteen shillings on a book, however far beyond that price may be its intrinsic worth. How welcome to these would be an abridgement, made, if possible, by Dom Roulin himself, which would bring the book within the scope of a greater number of purses and so widen the sphere of its much needed influence.

M.B.

ESCAPE

WASTE not on trivial things
Thy passionate heart. Small cares
May heavy weigh, slight stings
Smart sorely. Spread thy wings;
Elude thy dull despairs
In the bright regions of the upper airs.

There brooding love distills
Healing from bitterest bane;
Beckon the lights on hills
Aquiver with daffodils;
There, as the grass drinks rain,
Thou too mayst drink of long-lost joy again.

There shall thy heart be free
To spend, sans loss, its power—
One with the shouting sea,
The deep-dug swaying tree—
Exultant, hour by hour,
In the glad life that beauty brings to flower.

THEODORE MAYNARD.