

## **What Is It, Then, To Be a Priest? – Some Examples From The Culture of Catholic Literature and Their Effects**

\*\*\*

### **Epigraphs**

“The saintly curate of Ars used to say that if you remove a priest from a community, it will turn into a collection of wild beasts.” (The words of the faithful priest, Don Mario, in Eugenio Corti's *The Red Horse* (1983), p. 775)

\*

“Blessed be he who has saved a child's heart from despair.” (The words of the little Curé of Ambricourt in Georges Bernanos's *The Diary of a Country Priest* (1937), p. 50)

\*

“As in the valley of Arbuzov, again we had before us God the Castigator .... It seemed to us impossible that events as terrible as those we were experiencing, simply depended on the whims of a few small men. Those men were nothing other than a castigation for the whole of mankind. Only this way can war be explained .... To prevent war occurring, therefore, mankind as a whole had to cease making it inevitable by accumulating before God one sin after another – sins that at a certain point become an avalanche, which moves, and strikes, and engulfs.” (Eugenio Corti, *Few Returned*, 1947 and 1997, pp. 187 and 224)

\*

“... always bearing in mind the fact that God has, for His own inscrutable reason, chosen not to endow the charism of infallibility upon Papal prudential judgments.” (Frances T. Burke, “An Injudicious Adjournment? – *De Auxiliis* Revisited,” *Apropos* (Saint Mary Magdalen 2009), p. 162)

\*

“The tide of organized anti-Christianity was rising in all of Europe; would these men – half-Christians – be able to stand up to it...?” (Eugenio Corti, *The Last Soldiers of the King: Wartime Italy, 1943-1945*, p. 307)

\*

In all the great literatures of the world – vivid expressions of the human spirit from within very disparate cultures down the years – an acute question from the heart is always implicitly posed, and often openly stated: “What is it, then, to be a man?”

For those of us who would hope to help form a more integral Catholic Culture, under Grace, – and not only a more faithful and complete Liturgical Culture – a related question also presents itself: “What is it, then, to be a Priest?”

This is an important question, indeed, in the context of the Pope's recently designated “Year of the Priest 2009-2010.” But, what exemplary and vivifying evidence is also presented to us – for our own inward and outward imitation – in the world's great and varied Catholic Literature: to include Georges Bernanos's *The Diary of a Country Priest* (1937), which was itself partly inspired by the intimate life of Saint John Vianney, Curé of Ars, the Patron Saint of all Parish Priests?

We might say that a faithful Catholic priest allows all the little children to come to Christ, and strives to enable everyone he meets to live and to die in the state of sanctifying grace. A true Catholic priest, like Bernanos's Curé of Ambricourt, tries to consider everyone whom God's Providence puts into his life to be his own potential companion in *Vita Aeterna* – in Beatitude – if he and they also both faithfully persevere unto the end, in Grace. (In the life and death of the Saints, we see how the Grace of Christ is finally victorious.) For, a true priest also knows that the Gift of Final Perseverance is itself, in the dogmatically defined words of the Council of Trent, a “Great Gift” (a *Magnum Donum*). That gift of God is never to be presumed upon. Until the moment of our death, we retain the permanent possibility of voluntary defection from Divine Grace and from God Himself: in what Dante called “the Great Refusal.” Such is “the terrible dowry” of our human freedom, for we can only love God freely. It cannot be forced.

The Church furthermore teaches us that the Holy Ghost's infused “Gift of Fear” – i.e., the *Donum Timoris* – is a further guardian against the danger and twofold sin of Presumption, which is both a form of pride and also a sin against the theological virtue of hope. For hope always implies risk and the real possibility of failure, and therefore leads us in a life of danger, and hence of true adventure.

In his posthumously published *Autobiography* (1936), G.K. Chesterton wrote, near the very end of that moving and humble book, the following words about hope and about what he explicitly

calls “the chief idea of my life”:

[It is] one idea [i.e., a “single truth”]; which I hope it is not pompous to call the chief idea of my life; I will not say the doctrine I have always taught, but the doctrine I should always have liked to teach. That is the idea of taking things with gratitude, and not taking things for granted. Thus the Sacrament of Penance gives a new life, and reconciles a man to all living, but it does not do it as the optimists and the hedonists and the heathen preachers of happiness do it. The gift is given at a price and is conditioned by a confession. In other words, the name of the price is Truth, which may also be called Reality; but it is facing the reality about oneself .... I never saw the two sides of this single truth stated together anywhere, until I happened to open the Penny Catechism and read the words, “The two sins against Hope are presumption and despair.”<sup>1</sup>

Such an ethos preserves the poise of trust and high adventure during our probationary journey in this world, “during our short time through the daylight” (H. Belloc). It fosters, moreover, a regenerative equilibrium of magnanimity and humility within the deeper culture of the Catholic Faith. But, here we need to retain a distinction between Faith and Culture.

The difference between the Catholic Faith and Catholic Culture was made poignantly clear to me some twenty years ago by a Czech exile of 1968, Dr. Rio Preisner (d. 2007), who told me a story from his time as an inmate in a Communist prison camp after the end of World War II, from 1952-1954. (He once told me that he had also once been a prisoner of the Germans.)

He told me that a Catholic priest was with him among the prisoners in that Communist camp and, after resourcefully gathering enough valid matter over several months, this priest proposed to offer the sacrifice and sacred action of the Mass. He celebrated that Mass surrounded by a ring of prisoners who were reading Communist-Worker Newspapers during a break from their punitive labor. This group of eight or so prisoners shielded thereby the sacred action of the priest, such as the elevated Host and the thimble-full-of-wine in a little Chalice, which he then also consecrated. When the prisoners were finally to receive Holy Communion, they each moistened the tip of their little fingers and discreetly took a small particle of the consecrated Host from the paten protectively held by the sheltered priest inside the ring of conspicuously opened anti-Catholic newspapers.

This Czech exile – himself a Czech poet and philosopher and University Professor of German

---

<sup>1</sup> G.K. Chesterton, *The Autobiography of G.K. Chesterton* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1936), pp. 341-342 – my emphasis added. My mentor, Josef Pieper, always said that “presumption is the premature anticipation of final fulfillment, and despair is the premature anticipation of final non-fulfillment.”

– then unexpectedly said to me: “Was Catholic Culture present there? But, was the Catholic Faith there? The Faith, Robert, cannot be reduced to Culture; but an integral Catholic Faith always produces a Catholic Culture.” Professor Rio Preisner's deeply piercing narrative and concluding contrastive insights have still remained in my heart and often chastened my own over-romantic and defective understanding. I shall always also remember the tone of his voice and the look in his eyes, as he told me that poignant tale. He was for me an important Catholic Witness in my life. As was that reported example of the faithful Catholic priest whom Rio Preisner once personally knew as a fellow prisoner.

Much later, learning from the faithful followers of a former Jesuit Priest, Father Leonard Feeney – especially from his close disciples such as the beloved Father Michael Jarecki and recently deceased Brother Francis (Dr. Fakhri Maluf) – I also came to understand better the kind of Catholic Witness Father Feeney manifested and always fostered when he himself spoke of “an integral Catholic culture.” His intended meaning and his own example of “Witness” further recalled to me what the courageous Whittaker Chambers once wrote in 1952 in his own book, explicitly entitled *Witness*.<sup>2</sup>

In a moving introduction to his book, Whittaker Chambers even wrote a “Forward in the Form of a Letter to My Children”:

In time, therefore, when the sum of your experience of life gives you authority, you will ask yourselves the question: What was my father?

I will give you an answer: I was a witness. I do not mean a witness for the Government or against Alger Hiss and the others. Nor do I mean the short, squat, solitary figure, trudging through the impersonal halls of public buildings to testify before Congressional committees, grand juries, loyalty boards, courts of law. A man is not primarily a witness against something. That is only incidental to the fact that he is a witness for something. A witness, in the sense that I am using the word, is a man whose life and faith are so completely one that when the challenge comes to step out and testify for his faith, he does so, disregarding all risks, accepting all consequences.<sup>3</sup>

“The final test is martyrdom” (in the oft-repeated words of Dr. Samuel Johnson, another great-souled man).

---

<sup>2</sup> Whittaker Chambers, *Witness* (New York: Random House, inc., 1952)

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5 – my emphasis added.

So, too, was it the case with the wholehearted Catholic Witness of Father Leonard Feeney, who also knew many deep trials and even a kind of martyrdom in his life, and especially within his heart, though the outward “blood witness” may not have been visibly seen.

What is the reinforcing Witness we may also find to nourish us in the sacramental literature of Catholic culture? That is to say, even from the residual Catholic cultures of modern France, Spain, and Italy – where the implications of the Incarnation and of the mediating Sacraments of the Church are often still so vividly present in the literary language?!

For example, in Eugenio Corti's historical novel, *The Red Horse (Il Cavallo rosso – 1983)*, one of the memorable characters, the orphan Manno Riva, says to the young children of Father Mario's oratory school, as follows:

Art, if it's authentic, brings us to God ... This, as I repeated any number of times to you before I left [for the war in June of 1940], is the conviction that is fundamental to all our explanations; you know that.<sup>4</sup>

The novel's narrator then characterizes this young military officer, Manno, as “another young person impassioned by God” (75). Indeed, he says, “Manno was of quite a different type, more refined and self-possessed” (75) than most young Lieutenants, and he had been, until recently, a “second-year architecture student” (75) at the University of Milan. To one of Father Mario's attentive young students, Manno Riva goes on to ask an even further-probing question:

Why is it I say and repeat that art takes us to God? Do you remember or don't you? (75)

After the student's shy silence, Lt. Manno Riva then decides to answer his own question: “Art takes us to God” (75) because “art ... is the universal in the particular.” (76)<sup>5</sup>

Such a view of Literature (and of all Art) is rooted in the Incarnation and in the Incarnation's continuation in the Seven Sacraments of Christ; especially in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, where the Eternal Himself intersects with Time, where Sacred Mystery and Concrete Intimacy are graciously

---

4 Eugenio Corti, *The Red Horse* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002), p. 75 – my emphasis added. The subsequent brief words come from that same page, page 75 – with my emphasis also added.

5 Shortly before the heroic Lieutenant Manno Riva was to be killed in action in the battle of Montelungo (nine miles away from Monte Cassino Abbey), on 8 December 1943, he remembered “the boys in the oratory” (p. 541) and then his own emphatic and special words to them: “Art is the universal in the particular” (*The Red Horse*, p. 541).

conjoined. Such is the *Actio Sacra* – the Sacred Action – of the Mass. The Universal is present in the Particular. It is also present to our manifold senses, especially in the Mass's sacramental visibility which elevates and draws us unto our rapt contemplation of God, with love. That is to say, “*ut dum visibiliter Deum cognoscimus, per hunc in invisibilium amorem rapiamur*” (in the beautiful words used in the Preface of the Mass of the Nativity). That is to say, from the visible to the invisible beauty, the heart with love is raised in rapt attention to God.

Eugenio Corti speaks about such a Mass, such a Sacrifice, in another one of his books. In his war memoirs, *The Last Soldiers of the King: Wartime Italy, 1943-1945*, Corti describes what transpired on Sunday, 9 July 1944, and what was soon to follow:

Don Romano, the regiment's chaplain, came over to celebrate Mass .... in a field of stubble on the same ridge defiladed from the valley of the battle and the view of Filottrano [southeast of Florence, Italy; near the Adriatic Coast]. The sun was bright and the sky a beautiful blue; everything was in vivid colors. The robust chaplain performed the signs of sacrifice in front of the field's altar .... As always, those of us present felt peace in the incommensurable size of what was being performed in the stubble field between earth and sky, and in the simplicity of the place, and in those four pieces of linen and that poor Chalice. It was as though these material things were suited to contain the immaterial Presence. We too felt like we were vessels of God, in spite of our troubles, the viscid sins of the flesh, the blasphemies and idiocies that sometimes came out of our mouths. For the One who had given us the right, we could have moved the levers that lead beyond the almost unimaginable abyss of all things and of power: millions of light years, and the sum of forces of the [created] universe. Everything that morning, inside and outside of us, was like all field Masses.<sup>6</sup>

Then comes the shock:

However, it was our chaplain's Last Mass. By the end of the day he would be murdered. He could not have known it, and no one realized to what extent he was [*“in persona Christi”*] similar to Christ who was sacrificed on the altar in his hands; he was similar to the unconscious lamb about to be sacrificed, meek and draped in gold [the color of his chasuble].<sup>7</sup>

Eugenio Corti always leads us to intimate and ultimate things.

---

6 Eugenio Corti, *The Last Soldiers of the King: Wartime Italy, 1943-1945 (Ultimi Soldati del Re – 1994)* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2003 – English translation of the Italian Original), p. 163.

7 *Ibid.*, pp. 163-164. When Lt. Corti first met his friend, then “recently assigned to the regiment as chaplain,” he described him as being “blond and robust, with the white and red of some of the peasants from the Mantuan plains, from which he came.” (*Ibid.*, p. 112.)

After Don Romano's military truck “had blown up on a mine,” he was “wounded very gravely,” having “lost a leg at the groin.”<sup>8</sup> It turned out to be a mortal wound and he “died before nightfall,” after which Lt. Eugenio Corti remembered his beloved friend:

Dead, poor chaplain of Christ, with his mother waiting for him in the countryside of Mantova, beating the endless hours on rosary beads. He was done fighting in that obstinate way of his, one hand in the hand of God, against others and against his own youth. The Mantuan women would no longer torment him at the confessional because he was handsome and strong: he would no longer complain of it with us, his friends; things that a priest doesn't discuss easily, not even at the front.<sup>9</sup>

Corti soon takes us from the scene of Father Romano's Last Mass to Father Mario's Last Rites, which he, too, had recurrently offered on the battlefield, but especially on the Russian front:

My eyes stopped far in the distance [there on the east coast of Italy] on the roofs of a monastery that emerged between the tree tops. A former [military] chaplain whom I had gone to visit a few days earlier – Father Mario, still under serious trauma from the things he had witnessed on the Russian front – spent his time there on his knees, in front of a cross. He once again found within Christ's grimace, hung on wood for all, his [own] infantrymen's grimace as they lay on their backs dying in the snow, when he [Father Mario], with his face toward their faces, kneeled to impart their last absolution.<sup>10</sup>

In recalling Father Mario's spiritual works of mercy, Corti himself realized that he, too, needed the sacrament of God's forgiveness. For, he had just barely – and reluctantly – overcome a severe temptation against purity and had then even had an outburst against God:

“Our God is cruel,” I cursed.<sup>11</sup>

Corti's Guardian Angel then once again came to his aid with a stern ironical question to the suffering but ingrate-Lieutenant: “Would that be the God, who died for you, who is cruel toward men?”<sup>12</sup> Father Mario himself had given absolution, not malediction!

Such was the insight and the grace that Corti himself then contritely and memorably received.

---

8 *Ibid.*, p. 176.

9 *Ibid.*

10 *Ibid.*, p. 224 – my emphasis added.

11 *Ibid.*

12 *Ibid.*

In his earlier 1947 war memoir, *Few Returned: Twenty-Eight Days on the Russian Front, Winter 1942-1943*, Eugenio Corti had also written about the selfless generosity of another heroic priest, Father Celestino:

And that is how we [Italians] came out of the Valley of Death [of Arbuzov, 22-24 December 1942, in temperatures of minus 30-40 degrees Fahrenheit, in winds, as well]....Behind us we left a valley strewn with corpses .... Perhaps still more harrowing than the thought of the thousands of dead was that hundreds and hundreds of wounded abandoned on the snow, on almost no straw. I later heard that a chaplain had insisted on staying behind at a dressing station [i.e., an improvised military infirmary in the field for the wounded]. I vaguely heard his name – Father Celestino, probably of the Fifty-second Artillery. (I had no idea at the time that this chaplain had already been dead several days, stabbed to death by a Bolshevik while – almost blinded by grenade shrapnel - he [Father Celestino] was groping his way among the wounded, giving the last rites.)<sup>13</sup>

Who could forget such scenes? Who could forget such fidelity to Christ?

In Corti's own words: “Reader, do you know what that meant?”<sup>14</sup>

In his historical novel of the Second World War, *The Red Horse* – which was originally to have been called *The Horses of the Apocalypse (Il Cavalli dell' Apocalisse)*<sup>15</sup> – Eugenio Corti also presents one of the Alpinists' priests, “the Tirano chaplain, Don Crosara, a Franciscan,”<sup>16</sup> during the Italian encirclement by the Soviet Army in the winter of 1942-1943:

From a nearby isba [a simple, thatched hut] a Russian soldier unexpectedly came out. He was armed only with a dagger and did not appear to have any intention to do battle .... The chaplain suddenly noticed the Russian soldier and looked at him with surprise. Then the Russian took his hands from his pockets and with his right one removed the dagger from its sheath, while with his left hand he lowered the collar of his overcoat to stab himself in the throat. “No,” the chaplain yelled. “What are you doing? No, no!” He raised his crucifix on high and ran to him. “No, no, don't do that!”<sup>17</sup>

---

13 Eugenio Corti, *Few Returned* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1997), pp. 102-103 – my emphasis added. After their 28 days of Russian encirclement, only 4,000 of 30,000 Italians were able to break out to return home.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 103.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 249. In the important footnote # 22 near the end of *Few Returned*, Corti writes a profound letter to his friend, Giorgio Bruno Barresi, about Divine Providence and about “war as a castigation by God.” The letter, dated 30 October, 1973, also speaks of his then-forthcoming novel, which was finally published ten years later, in 1983; it concludes with these words: “I'll develop these concepts more fully in the novel that, as you know, I've been working on, heart and soul, for some time now, and that will probably be titled *Il Cavalli dell' Apocalisse*” (p.249) – War, Conquest, Famine, and Pestilence.

16 Eugenio Corti, *The Red Horse*, p. 354.

17 *Ibid.*

In his spontaneous mercy, Father Crosara continued to reach out to this enemy Russian soldier, even though, indeed,

The Russian looked at him in dismay, confused. The chaplain grabbed his hand with the dagger and waved the crucifix with the other in front of his face. “Why do you want to kill yourself, why, why?” he kept shouting. At last the Russian's gaze turned to the crucifix. He clutched the priest's hand holding it and pressed the Christ figure to his lips. The Alpine men were watching the scene in silence. The Russian handed the priest the dagger, which he hurled as far as possible. “The Mother of God loves you,” Don Crosara panted out. “Dearly loves you, you understand? God is not like us men.” The Russian, without understanding the words, wearily made a sign that he did.<sup>18</sup>

That Priest's merciful Witness was also a gift to the elite Alpini, who had also been so gravely tested and often themselves tempted to give up!

Even more memorably and extensively, moreover, Eugenio Corti also presents to us Father Carlo Gnocchi, the overall chaplain of the elite Alpine Regiment. Though brave himself, Don Carlo, for good reason, “was also worried”:

It was absolutely necessary to do something .... He had arrived from Nikitovca on his own initiative (chaplains had a great authority and freedom among the Alpine men) to comfort the wounded and confess the dying, like the Tirano chaplain, Don Crosara.<sup>19</sup>

When the heroic Alpinist, Corporal Luca Sambruna, “wanted to greet him and ask him for his blessing,” he found Don Carlo “bending over the wounded in the isba infirmary and did not dare bother him,”<sup>20</sup> but:

Luckily Don Carlo was aware of his presence. On his pleasant face with eyes strangely sunken was an expression of surprise, as if to say, “Well, well, my countryman, you're still with us!” He raised his hand and traced the sign of the Cross over him. That was enough for Luca to return to his post comforted. Now Don Carlo ... worried that so much sacrifice might not come to anything.<sup>21</sup>

After a brilliant tactical move – another “encircling maneuver” – by a small heroic patrol of

---

18 *Ibid.*, pp. 354-355 – my emphasis added.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 346 – my emphasis added.

20 *Ibid.*

21 *Ibid.* In the words of the *Dies Irae* - “*Tantus labor non sit cassus*” – May so much labor – so much suffering – not be in vain, after all, dear Lord!

the Alpinists – including Luca Sambruna himself – there occurred a great massacre of the Russian soldiers who had entrenched themselves in an almost insuperable ambush-site “huddled in the channel.” (It was thirty degrees below zero, Fahrenheit; and this decisive combat was later called the Battle of Arnautovo).

After the actual battle – and some further signs of Luca's Catholic heart – we are shown that

The [Italian] wounded were quickly gathered up and loaded onto sleds [in the snow]. On some they had to be piled up: there were sleds with ten or more wounded on them. The battalion chaplain, Don Crosara, moved among them. However, Don Carlo Gnocchi was not to be seen. As Luca was to find out, he had gone to the channel [where the enemy felt “the unexpected enfilade fire” from the Alpinists' machine guns] with two volunteers to look after the Russian wounded, to see if there was a truck coming for them. (Two days before he had attended General Eibl, the German commander of the destroyed Twenty-Fourth Tank Corps, as he lay in extremis.)<sup>22</sup>

These last, revealing acts of mercy concerning the German General “in extremis” – “*in hora mortis*” – also are to recall the recent prayerful words of mercy of Corporal Luca Sambruna, as well. Again and again, even while shooting away down into the channel at the Russians who were “in enfilade under fire” from his very accurate machine gun, Luca was also “mentally saying” a prayer: “*Now and in the hour of our death, now and in the hour of our death.*”<sup>23</sup> However,

Luca did not like this horrible game at all, but there were people he had to save: the two wounded men [Italian Alpinists] they had left under the thickets above all, and then the men from the sleds and the tens of thousands of the disbanded [retreating soldiers] who were waiting for them [the elite Alpinists] to open the road [and break out of the deadly Russian encirclement], and his mother at home, and Giustina [his beloved back in Italy]. There was no other way out. *Now and in the hour of our death, now and ...* It came to him [as a grace] that now he was saying that prayer for the wretches [the Russians huddled down in the channel] there on the snow [and now] running from his firing.<sup>24</sup>

Such are the unforgettable signs of humanity, revealing the most precious truths in unlikely places. Was there Catholic Culture in these battles? And yet, the culture of Catholic Literature has preserved these grace-filled and piercing scenes for us, memorializing them and even enhancing them.

---

22 *Ibid.*, p. 349 – my emphasis added.

23 *Ibid.*, pp. 349, 346, 348.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 349 – my emphasis added.

Eugenio Corti later allows us to see Luca and Don Carlo Gnocchi once again together – after the war, in August of 1948:

Father Carlo Gnocchi emerged from the sacristy and moved toward the altar [to witness a marriage and then offer the Nuptial Mass for the former Lieutenant Ambrogio Riva and his bride]. Soon after the end of the war Father Gnocchi had funded [and founded] various schools for mutilated children. He wore a white surplice embroidered in gold and had an agreeable handsome face. On seeing him Luca stiffened and remembered the face and how it had been during that terrible night battle in Arnautovo, with yellowed skin under a bristly beard, the sunken eyes. He remembered how Father Carlo, kneeling among the wounded in front of the isba aid station, had recognized him despite the darkness and had blessed him, making the sign of the Cross over him. Afterward there had been that senseless attack when, with [Alpinist Sergeant] Pedrana and the others, they attempted to move the Russians from a fold in the ground (“Now and in the hour of our death ...”) and then the great march [in retreat] to Nicolaievca, during which Captain Grandi had died to the tune of his Alpine troop's mournful singing.<sup>25</sup>

Moreover, then in the presence of Father Gnocchi, “the wedding took place before the celebration of Mass” – according to Tradition – and “a high point of the Mass was Father Carlo's homily,” which was “so unaffected as to be perfect.”<sup>26</sup>

Almost eight years later, “early in 1956,” there came a shock:

Local newspapers carried a report that the Alpine regiment's former chaplain, Father Carlo Gnocchi, had been taken to the hospital because of serious ill health. [He was only 54 years of age.] .... Father Carlo was by that time well known all over Italy. His associations to aid wounded children had spread through the central and southern parts of the country .... On February 28, Father Carlo understood that his end was near. The cancer that had consumed his flesh had left his frame spare and skeletal, and he felt a paralysis stretching from his stomach to his feet. His eyes would occasionally rest on the Crucifix on his bedside table, a Crucifix his mother had given him on the day of his priestly ordination. Gazing at it, he prayed silently .... A few minutes before dying, he became lucid and opened his eyes for the last time; with a supreme effort he grasped the Crucifix and placed it on his own chest. Who could know how many Alpine soldiers whose eyes he had closed in the cold snows would now be impatiently awaiting him in the beyond?<sup>27</sup>

---

25 *Ibid.*, p. 890 – my emphasis added.

26 *Ibid.*

27 *Ibid.*, p. 916 – my emphasis added.

Father Carlo was buried in the city of Saint Ambrose:

His funeral cortège in Milan gathered an enormous multitude of people. There were large numbers of former Alpine soldiers, all wearing their distinctive military headgear, and there were hundreds of mutilated children. During the sad procession the Alpine veterans carried the crippled children on their shoulders.<sup>28</sup>

Two former officers and close friends, Lt. Ambrogio Riva and Lt. Michele Tintori – the latter had also been a prisoner in the Soviet Gulags and repatriated only in 1947 – both wondered “why God would have taken Father Carlo from the earth when he was so much needed here and when he was still so young, only fifty-four years old.”<sup>29</sup> Both of them, as they walked in the funeral procession, then reflected profoundly together on the general and particular Providence of God and the mystery of original sin and of a man's “individual death.”<sup>30</sup>

Unlike another great priest, Father Turla, who had been in the cruel Soviet prison camps with Lt. Michele Tintori, Father Brevi – another faithful priest in the camp – was never repatriated.<sup>31</sup>

After Michele Tintori had finally returned to Italy and was reunited with his beloved Alma Riva, and with the whole Riva family in their home, he recalled – while attempting to go to rest that night – an incident in the Soviet camps which involved the courageous Father Brevi:

One terrible night the men suffering from typhus – all of them convinced they were about to die – had raised up the only chaplain available there, dying on his cot, his eyes large and vague, looking grotesque in just a shirt and his underpants. A soldier had guided the priest's inert hand to grant final absolutions: the chaplain, with those staring eyes, started mumbling the formula for the rites, absolving all of them *in articulo mortis*. Later, once more placed on his own cot, the priest had continued mumbling words of absolution, yet didn't himself die. It was that priest, Father Brevi, who later .... well, enough. Poor Father Brevi hadn't been repatriated; now he would be somewhere in Siberia, along with the other untameables who had strongly resisted conversion to the Communist doctrine. Who knows where he'd be at this moment? He was paying dearly for his courage, very dearly. Who knew if one day he'd come home ... but, enough, enough. At least for a while ... enough of these atrocious memories.<sup>32</sup>

---

28 *Ibid.*, p. 917.

29 *Ibid.*

30 *Ibid.*

31 On Father Turla and his faithful conduct, see, for example, *The Red Horse*, pp. 460-464, 550, 559-560, 729, 795-800, 805, 818, 906.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 808.

Along with his ever-grateful acknowledgement and reception of God's Grace, Michele's deep and growing love for Alma helped to heal him: "He continued to think that she was the embodiment of that old antiphon: *Lord who created for me this distant love.*"<sup>33</sup>

But now he gratefully realized that Alma was no longer distant, no longer far away, as she had been while he was still in prison, thousands of miles away. What joy they were soon to have in their own marriage, though they would never have children together – and Alma would later die while selflessly and eagerly coming to see him.<sup>34</sup>

*The Red Horse* itself covers a rather lengthy period of thirty-five years: namely, the period from May 1940 (the fall of France to the Germans in World War II), up until 13 May 1975 when the explicitly anti-Catholic Divorce Law, which Eugenio Corti himself personally and actively resisted, first went into effect. This law has thereafter subversively permitted widespread divorce in Italy. (This promulgated new law also occurred only two weeks after another shocking event: the Vietnamese Communist conquest of Saigon, on 30 April 1975, which sealed the unmistakable American defeat.)

In a certain sense, that 13 May was Our Lady's Day, too, but in a sorrowful sense – since it also commemorates the day when she first mercifully appeared to the Little Children at Fatima in Portugal during World War I: on 13 May 1917. The warning words of mercy from the heart of the Mother of God were not much heeded then, as it seems, or even now. (Papal Diplomacy – Ostpolitik and Ecumenism – is no substitute, no replacement, for Our Lady's warning words of mercy from Heaven.)

Throughout *The Red Horse*, the loyal and variously expressed priesthood of Don Mario is also exceptional, and his intercession is even gratefully noted on the very last page of the novel, in words of gratitude: "thanks to the tireless prayers of Father Mario."<sup>35</sup> And we shall not forget him either.

For it was Don Mario, we may recall, who first invited Lt. Manno Riva to his Oratory school to speak to the Catholic youth on the Humanities, and Father Mario himself gratefully supported Manno's deep doctrine that "authentic art brings us to God" and that "art is the universal in the particular."

---

33 *Ibid.*

34 *Ibid.*, pp. 1009-1015. The novel ends with Alma's unexpected death, and gracious transformation.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 1015. Concerning Father Mario, see also pages 20, 75-80, 231, 407-408, 561, 642, 750, 765, 774-775, 857, and 912.

Later in the novel, after the War, Don Mario also said something important to Pierello Tito, another former prisoner of war in a Soviet camp, in Kazan and elsewhere, but who was not an officer like Michele Tintori. After Tito had been finally repatriated (and it was before Lt. Tintori himself), he was for some time in the hospital in Italy:

Every morning he [i.e., Tito] was visited by Father Mario. His presence pleased Tito. With his baby face, glasses, and untidy crewcut, the priest would talk about the definitive chance to salvage their souls that God had given through Christ .... On one occasion, remembering his lectures at the seminary, he said, “The saintly curate of Ars used to say that if you remove the priest from a community, it will turn into a collection of wild beasts. And he was right, completely right.” Tito always regarded him with his pained look. “It is true [Tito concurred], yes, that's how it is.”<sup>36</sup>

This opinion of Saint John Vianney and Father Mario would be further enhanced by insights in Georges Bernanos's *The Diary of a Country Priest*.

The humble little Curé of Ambricourt does not, in his humility, realize that his own “spiritual childhood” would deeply touch and awaken the souls of his little village unto a greater life of grace. At the beginning of his private *Diary* – which is later to be read, but only after his death – the little Curé appears discouraged:

My parish is bored stiff; no other word for it .... We can see them being eaten up by boredom, and we can't do anything about it. Some day perhaps we shall catch it ourselves – become aware of the cancerous growth within us.<sup>37</sup>

The little priest, who explicitly identifies so closely with Our Lord's own mental and mortal Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, will later himself die of cancer.

Looking out at his village under a rainy November sky, the Curé says:

I had never been so horribly aware both of my people's loneliness and mine. I thought of the cattle which I could hear coughing somewhere in the mist, and of the little lad on his way back from school clutching his satchel, who would be leading them over sodden fields to a warm sweet-smelling byre .... And my parish, my village seemed to be waiting too – without much hope after so many

---

36 *Ibid.*, pp. 774 and 775—my emphasis added.

37 Georges Bernanos, *The Diary of a Country Priest* (New York: Image Books – Doubleday and Company, 1954 – French original, in 1937), p. 1.

nights in the mud – for a master to follow towards some undreamed-of, improbable shelter .... Villages do not scramble to their feet at the call of a little boy. And yet, last night, I believe a saint might have roused it ....<sup>38</sup>

Never to be seen so by himself, he was nevertheless to be that Little Child, that Saint, who would arouse them – and touch so many hearts. In his purified Spiritual Childhood, he was to be a channel of Grace to many – not only the Countess, Chantal, Louise, Seraphita, and the French Foreign Legionnaire (Monsieur Olivier), but also his wise and beloved counsellor, the Curé de Torcy himself, who was himself to be sent the private Diary after the Curé of Ambricourt's death, which had sadly occurred at some distance from his parish.

The final words in that Diary are:

Yet if pride could die in us, the supreme grace would be to love oneself in all simplicity – as one would love any one of those who themselves have suffered and loved in Christ.<sup>39</sup>

Presenting us with his discernments of the state of the modern world just before World War II, the little Curé of Ambricourt had further developed his own earlier insight about boredom – ennui and spiritual sloth and its rootlessness and “roaming unrest of spirit” (i.e., what Saint Thomas Aquinas's Latin called “*evagatio mentis*,” as an habitual disorder, or moral vice):

Well, as I was saying, the world [of 1937] is eaten up by boredom. To perceive this needs a little preliminary thought: you can't see it all at once. It is like dust. You go about and never notice, you breathe it in, you eat and drink it. It is sifted so fine, it doesn't even grit on your teeth. But stand still for an instant and there it is, coating your face and hands. To shake off this drizzle of ashes you must be forever on the go. And so people are always “on the go.” Perhaps the answer would be that the world [in its revolt against God and the “*quies mentis in Deo*”] has long been familiar with boredom, that such is the true condition of man [the natural man, without grace, and without final hope]. No doubt the seed was scattered all over life, and here and there found fertile soil to take root [in the soul]; but I wonder if man has ever before experienced this contagion, this leprosy of boredom: an aborted despair, a shameful form of despair in some way like the fermentation of a Christianity in decay.<sup>40</sup>

Like the other priests we have also thus far encountered – especially the military chaplains in

---

38 *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2 – my emphasis added.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 231 – my emphasis added.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 2 – my emphasis added.

the Second World War – the little Priest of Ambricourt is a Providential instrument of divine grace to serve many souls in need.

The Curé of Ambricourt, while enroute to the doctor in Lille, is soon unexpectedly to discover a friend: a new friend, Monsieur Olivier, a French Foreign Legionnaire. He also soon discovered, and then even seemed to heal, that Foreign Legionnaire's open “grudge against the Church.”<sup>41</sup>

M. Olivier had said to the little Priest that all his fellow Legionnaires “simply identify God with a kind of justice they despise, because it's a justice without honour.”<sup>42</sup> Moreover, with agony of heart, he added:

“There is no Christianity. There never will be again. .... Because there are no more soldiers. No soldiers, no Christianity .... The last real soldier died on May 31, 1431, and you killed her, you people. Not only killed her, cut her off, burned her.”<sup>43</sup>

The Legionnaire was speaking of Joan of Arc who was condemned by an Ecclesiastical Court. (She was later exonerated by an Ecclesiastical Court, after a Papal initiative, in justice. In the twentieth century, Pope Saint Pius X beatified her, and Pope Pius XI canonized her.)

What was Monsieur's further “grudge against the Church,” the Curé of Ambricourt courageously asked? The Legionnaire answered:

You've secularized us. The first real secularization was that of the soldier. And it's some time ago now. When you go snivelling over the excesses of nationalism, you should remember it was you [i.e., the Catholic Church] who first pandered to the law-makers of the Renaissance, whilst they made short work of Christian rights and patiently constructed under your very nose, right in your very faces, the Pagan State: the state which knows no law but that of its own wellbeing – the merciless countries full of greed and pride .... Outside Christianity there is no place in the West for soldiers or fatherland, and your [i.e., the Church's] shifty compromises will soon have permitted the final shame of both.”<sup>44</sup>

The Curé of Ambricourt then records both his own spontaneous response to these heart-

---

41 *Ibid.*, p. 192.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 190--my emphasis added.

43 *Ibid.*, pp. 191-192 – my emphasis added.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 192, 194 – my emphasis added.

rending words, and then its unexpected effect on the Legionnaire himself :

Each of his words stirred the very depths of my heart .... Should we [priests] ever know how to die as they do? I asked myself. For one moment I hid my face, appalled to feel the tears slip between my fingers. To weep in his presence, like a child, like a woman! But Our Lord restored some of my courage. I stood up, let my arms drop, and with a great effort – the thought of it hurts me still – I let him see my sorrowful face, my shameful tears. He looked at me for a long time. Oh, pride is still very much alive in me! I was watching for a smile of scorn, or at least of pity on those willful lips – I feared his pity more than his scorn.

“You're a good lad,” he said at last. “I wouldn't like any priest but you around when I was dying.”

And he kissed me, as children do, on both cheeks.”<sup>45</sup>

Eugenio Corti also showed us the indispensable link between the soldier and the priest.

During his own combat duty as an officer in 1943-1945 wartime Italy, Lt. Eugenio Corti and his military unit (near the Adriatic east coast of Italy) stopped near a Franciscan monastery:

We came to a halt for a day and night in the land of Forano near an old monastery with a wide open door. The monastery [despite the active combat] had remained open day and night for the Germans, too, with a Franciscan offer of peace to all. Since, however, the Germans [apparently] hadn't gone in, we too at first didn't enter; we were held back by a confused restraint. Maybe we, who carried weapons, even if out of necessity, didn't want to contaminate the brothers of us all, who had chosen expiation for all [as did the little Curé of Ambricourt]. Even if as soldiers we felt, in fact, in some way expiators, there wasn't one of us who didn't acknowledge the superiority of contemplative atonement that wasn't mixed with killing and wounding.<sup>46</sup>

However, after one of these soldiers suddenly manifested an “inexplicable pain,” says Corti, “we decided to entrust him to the care of the monks”:<sup>47</sup>

The monks welcomed him gratefully in their arms and laid him down in a cell to take care of him. “We monks,” one of them said, “are also responsible for all these sufferings. The Church is going through a bad period [it was July 1944], like many other times, but we, as few, weren't able to play the part like those

---

45 *Ibid.*, p. 194 – my emphasis added.

46 Eugenio Corti, *The Last Soldiers of the King*, pp. 149-150 – my emphasis added.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 150.

good soldiers who though few were able to play the part of many.” The other monks assented to these words. “When this is over, we'll return to our homes,” two artillerymen interjected. “You'll stay here to do penance. Does that seem little to you? What more could you do?” “When one takes a pledge [i.e., makes a religious vow],” the monks answered, shaking their heads like lambs, “one should care to fulfill it well, especially a pledge like ours. But we are not fulfilling it well. We haven't compensated in front of God for the sins provoked by the war, and even now many of those who are dying have a fate of damnation only because we, for little love of sacrifice, are not gaining their grace.”<sup>48</sup>

In addition to the fact of expiatory suffering, Corti reflected further on the causes of war, and said:

It [war] is something that we produce and that gradually builds in the moral order, which at a certain point moves *like an avalanche* and, regardless of our efforts to the contrary, drags us along. The war, then, comes from *a break* in the moral order. It is the product of human immorality, nothing more or less.<sup>49</sup>

James Russell Lowell's nineteenth-century poem, “Ode to France – February, 1848,” presents, in his first stanza, an image of the gradual build up to war, and does it by way of a vivid simile:

As, flake by flake, the beething avalanches  
Build up their imminent crags of noiseless snow,  
Till some chance thrill [i.e., piercing sound] the loosened ruin launches  
And the blind havoc leaps unwarned below,  
So grew and gathered through the silent years  
The madness of a People, wrong by wrong.<sup>50</sup>

That is to say, the madness grew drop by drop, titrated, as it were, as in the build up to the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), by one bitter injustice after another! So, too, with the outbursts of other wars and violent revolutions, as in Russia, momentarily, in 1905 and then in 1917.

However, one last sequence of scenes and vivid images from Eugenio Corti's own war memoir, *The Last Soldiers of the King*, will show us the remaining Christian humaneness that shows forth even during the desolation of war, to include the living wisdom and charity that is still to be found in an ancient Benedictine Monastery in Subiaco Italy.

---

48 *Ibid.* – my emphasis added.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 183.

50 James Russell Lowell, *The Poetical Works of James Russell Lowell* (Boston: Houghton, Osgood and Company – the Riverside Press, Cambridge, 1880), p. 92.

Lt. Eugenio Corti and Lt. Antonio Moroni had decided to walk from Nettuno, near Rome, all the way to the southeastern part of Italy, in Puglia, near Bari. They wanted to join the newly forming Italian military units – after the 8 September 1943 Armistice – in order to fight the remaining Germans in Italy.

On one leg of the trip, they were not able to reach Subiaco, their goal on the day's march cross country:

As we crossed the mountain the darkness caught up with us in the middle of the vineyards; after a few useless attempts to proceed in the dark we knocked on the door of a small farmhouse. Two women opened it, one old and one young; upon learning that we were soldiers, they let us in .... The house was very poor. The women made us sit at a rough table and immediately placed warm food in front of us. “Now I'll prepare somewhere for you to sleep,” the younger one said briefly, adding, “My husband is also a soldier, and is away. May God help him and, like you, may He bring him home, too.” Shortly after, while we finished eating, we heard her whisper in the next room to the other woman: “We have some milk left: we can drink that.”<sup>51</sup>

After these whispered words, Antonio and Eugenio suddenly realized the truth: “They gave us their dinner,” as Corti said.<sup>52</sup> His companion then added, and “with unusual force”: “People like this make taking action, continuing to fight [in the ongoing war], worthwhile.”<sup>53</sup> Then, there comes another surprise, another grace, for their attentive and receptive hearts:

We lay down on large bags on corn leaves; in the kitchen the two women had begun to say the rosary softly, so as not to disturb us. After some hesitation, we too decided to recite it. From that night on, following the example of those two country women, we would preface our individual prayers with the rosary, our communal prayer; like, after all, we did when we were home.<sup>54</sup>

(The book even concludes with Corti's vivid memory of this special hospitality: the touching generosity and reverence they had known in the presence of these two poor and selfless women. He then quoted his companion, Antonio's grateful words once again: “One feels a need to fight for people like this.”<sup>55</sup>)

---

51 Eugenio Corti, *The Last Soldiers of the King*, p. 51 – my emphasis added.

52 *Ibid.*

53 *Ibid.*

54 *Ibid.* – my emphasis added.

55 *Ibid.*, 329 – my emphasis added – There appears to be an error in this text, citing “Antonio Morandi,” instead of “Antonio Moroni” (as was correctly rendered on pp. 37, 51, and 299, for example).

After that scene of hospitality and more, the immediately following section (Chapter 5 of part Two) presents the further hospitality of the Benedictines. Corti now shows us the small city and “ancient convents” (monasteries) of Subiaco. This Chapter 5, only three pages, should be, I believe, very closely read and savored in its entirety.

But we can now only cover a part of the Benedictine hospitality which Lt. Moroni and Lt. Corti receive, while they also try to gain some practical, local knowledge and even a useful, reliable map and trustworthy recommendations for their continuing march through wartime Italy, through the mountainous Abruzzi down to the South.

After first seeing the small city of Subiaco along the narrow river of the Aniene, and a beautiful bridge, Antonio Moroni said: “These medieval cities seem to have a soul: we meet them as we meet people.” (Antonio himself came from “Upper Bergamo,” in the mountainous north of Italy.) Corti continues:

We crossed Subiaco at a good pace, from one end to the other, and headed toward the largest convent, Santa Scholastica [named after the sister of Saint Benedict himself], which, we learned, had been founded by Saint Benedict a millennium and a half before .... To think of this gave me peace and confidence, like thinking of the Catholic Church: When the clamor of modern times will become a brief stroke of silence in the panorama of the past, she [*Sancta Mater Ecclesia*] – in spite of all the pain she endures and will continue to endure – will increase in size and power.<sup>56</sup>

The two officers soon met privately with the Abbot himself, who had a great dignity of bearing and manly warmth, too. After giving them a map and some good guidance for their march, he suddenly said:

“Poor men, ... how I pity you! You who are so young pay today for the ills committed mostly by others. Remember, however, that the mystery of reversibility is remarkable, and perhaps one day you most of all will find grace from the suffering of others.” He then raised his hand to bless us, like a king: “Never hate anyone: maybe the German who dies trying to hurt you, dies also for you.”<sup>57</sup>

(Later in the book, the elite Germans themselves even “began dragging and sheltering our

---

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 53-54 – my emphasis added.

[own] wounded men” – wounded Italian soldiers after their sustained, heroic battle – that is, sheltering the Italian wounded “near their [own safe German] houses”, after the fierce battle of Grizzano:

And finally, when they departed [i.e., retreated north], they left their doctor [even their own German doctor!] there to take care of them [the wounded Italians]: 'As a sign of admiration,' the doctor declared himself.”<sup>58</sup>

(These are the words of an heroic Italian Lieutenant, Antonio Castelli, who reported them in person to his close friend, Lt. Corti, when they were seated together later near the place of battle.)

After they descended from the Benedictine monastery, very comforted in heart, they took “a long look this time, drinking in medieval Subiaco and the walls that sustain its monasteries.”<sup>59</sup>

Given Corti's recurrently reinforced view, nourished by his own Catholic education, of “the destructive spirit of the Enlightenment” which had shaped almost “everything in contemporary culture,” he further declares that

I felt an unsettling prejudice toward quite a few of the realities that make up contemporary Italy. But when I happened to encounter one of its most ancient sites [such as Subiaco], intact in an isolated place, like on that day, I found it to be unexpectedly consistent with my spirit: I felt as though I was collecting an inheritance from our forefathers, and I collected it with spontaneity and gratitude, like something prepared for me that had been missing for too long. So, with this insight, in those days of disintegration, my spirit affirmed itself, and nourished itself, and built itself.<sup>60</sup>

Such is the external channel of grace of a rooted Catholic Culture, inspired also by the longstanding spirit of Benedictine hospitality: “*Hospes venit, Christus venit.*” When a guest comes, it is as if Christ were also to come.

## Conclusion

Near the beginning of Evelyn Waugh's *Sword of Honour* (1965) – the final version of his own profound War Trilogy – the English protagonist, Guy Crouchback (who was then himself living on the northwest seacoast of Italy) says the following – on that momentous day, 1 September 1939:

---

58 *Ibid.*, p. 301.

59 *Ibid.*, p. 54.

60 *Ibid.* – my emphasis added.

Just seven days earlier he had opened his morning newspaper on the headlines announcing the Russian-German alliance [the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact] .... When Prague fell [“the year before”], he knew that war was inevitable. He expected his country to go to war in a panic, for the wrong reasons or for no reason at all, with the wrong allies, in pitiful weakness. But now [with the German attack on Poland], splendidly [as it were], everything had become clear. The enemy at last was plain in view, huge and hateful, all disguises cast off. It was the Modern Age in arms.<sup>61</sup>

(Eugenio Corti was effectively to say the same thing, in his own fiction and his non-fiction.)

Later, the English officer – Lieutenant Guy Crouchback – was to become much more manifoldly disillusioned, especially after the shocking events of 22 June 1941. Guy Crouchback was, at that time, convalescing in Egypt after his own recent and harrowing escape from the Island of Crete, where the British had suffered a humiliating military defeat in their protracted combat against the Germans.

One morning in Egypt in that June of 1941, Guy Crouchback made a request of his hospitable British friend, that he be able to see again his long-time senior companion and fellow-combatant, Colonel Tickeridge:

That was early in the morning on 22 June [1941] – a day of apocalypse for all the world for numberless generations, and for Guy among them, one immortal soul, a convalescent lieutenant of Halberdiers. Algermon Stitch [Guy's British Consular host] brought the news of the invasion of Russia, when he returned for luncheon.<sup>62</sup>

There it was now, the shocking and unmistakable fact of the German invasion of Russia:

Nothing else was spoken of at luncheon – the Molotov pact, the [Nazi-Bolshevik] partition of Poland, the [Soviet] annexation of the Baltic republics, the resources of the Ukraine, ... American popular opinion, Japan and the Anti-Comintern Pact .... But Guy remained silent.<sup>63</sup>

For Guy now needed something more than even a deep-souled and consoling friend. Indeed,

Guy needed [much] more than Colonel Tickeridge. It was just such a sunny,

---

61 Evelyn Waugh, *Sword of Honour* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1965), pp. 14-15 – my emphasis added.

62 *Ibid.*, pp. 530-531 – my emphasis added.

63 *Ibid.*, p. 531.

breezy Mediterranean day two years before [back in August of 1939] when he read of the Russo-German alliance, when a decade of shame seemed to be ending in light and reason, when the Enemy was plain in view, huge and hateful, all disguise cast off; the modern age in arms. Now that hallucination was dissolved, like the whales and turtles on the voyage from Crete [in his drifting life boat, during which his acute fever had so gravely disoriented his mind], and he was back now after less than two years pilgrimage in a Holy Land of illusion in the old ambiguous world, where priests were spies and gallant friends proved traitors and his country was led blundering into dishonour.<sup>64</sup>

But some of the dishonour was not the result of mere blundering. For, Guy Crouchback's own country – as Waugh himself so acutely remembered and later also wrote in his Trilogy – was soon to add to their deliberate dishonour: by declaring war on heroic little Finland itself, on 6 December 1941. Supported by the cynical Churchill himself, this perfidious declaration of war on anti-Bolshevik Finland came soon after the fateful British Alliance with Stalin's markedly inhuman Soviet Union, into which immoral coalition the United States – under the eager President Franklin Roosevelt – would soon be much more openly and also fatefully drawn. Great Britain's own shameful declaration of war on Marshal Mannerheim's Finland occurred, moreover, one day before the provoked Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, and less than six months after the 22 June German invasion of Russia from the West.

Let us try to imagine what these events did to faithful Catholic officers like Captain Evelyn Waugh and Lieutenant Eugenio Corti.

There is much to be learned and deeply savored by comparing and contrasting Evelyn Waugh's *Sword of Honour* War Trilogy and Eugenio Corti's analogous War Trilogy: *The Red Horse* and *Few Returned* and *The Last Soldiers of the King*. For Corti's two eloquent works of non-fiction profoundly illuminate his lengthy, long-incubating, and wholehearted historical novel, *The Red Horse*, especially his frequent depiction of faithful Catholic priests.

Such literature, so deeply rooted in Catholic Culture and the Catholic Faith, will lead a reader to a much deeper knowledge of reality and the love of God. Sometimes they are also Painful Graces, to be sure!

---

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 531-532 – my emphasis added. One of Lieutenant Crouchback's friends and fellow officers – Ivor Claire – had recently deserted his men and mission on the Island of Crete, and Guy had also encountered a foreign priest's suspicious military questions in the Internal Forum, during his recent Sacramental Confession in Egypt.

We should therefore conclude our essay with one more scene from the end of José Maria Gironella's own historical novel of Spain on the eve of the Civil War, *The Cypresses Believe in God* (1953).<sup>65</sup>

Since the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) was itself a kind of prelude to the Second World War – what Sir Arnold Lunn himself, in his own fine book, called, indeed, *The Spanish Rehearsal – The Cypresses Believe in God* presents to us another vivid example of Catholic literary culture that may further touch the hearts of many, especially the attentive and receptive hearts of those of the Catholic Faith.

Gironella's Spanish novel covers the period from April 1931 through 30 July 1936. It ends shortly after the less latent warfare of the Spanish Civil War exploded into open military warfare after the brutal and perfidious assassination of the Catholic political leader, Calvo Sotelo, on 13 July 1936.

Gironella's story is especially mediated through the Alvear family – Matías and Carmen Elgazu and their three children, two sons and a daughter: Ignacio, César, and Pilar. Though most of the story is set in Catalonia, especially in the city of Gerona (near Barcelona), the father of the family (Matías) came originally from Castile – from Madrid; and Carmen Elgazu, the mother is a Basque and from the Basque country; and is herself a deeply faithful Catholic woman, unlike her more superficial and sceptical husband, who nevertheless loves her dearly. Before moving north to Catalonia, moreover, the young family had lived in Andalusia, in the south of Spain, for some years, especially in places such as Málaga on the beautiful Mediterranean seacoast. We are thereby constantly made aware of all the varied regions of Spain.

Now, at the end of our reflections, we shall only depict the final relationship between a deeply faithful priest, Father Mosèn Francisco, and his young protégé, the Catholic Seminarian, César Alvear.

It is July of 1936 and the Communists and the Anarchists are killing many priests now, as well as other purported Counter-Revolutionaries. At the end of the novel, they had now come for César the Seminarian himself, and they called him by name.

Though a professor, Professor Civil, tried to hide and shield him in the prison there together,

---

<sup>65</sup> José Maria Gironella, *The Cypresses Believe in God* (*Los Cipresses Creen en Dios*, 1953, in Spanish – English translation, 1955) (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005). Gironella was born in 1917 and died in 2003.

César said: “Let me go, they are calling me.”<sup>66</sup>

One of the other prisoners, Señor Corbera also “took his place in the line” with César, but much less willingly so. He even cursed one of the savage revolutionaries who had once been his untrustworthy employee: “May God damn you.”<sup>67</sup> These bitter words “wounded César to the depths of his soul,” and, therefore,

César hoped they might tie them together, his wrist linked to that of Señor Corbera on one side, and on the other to that of the parish priest of the Cathedral. In this was he could manage to do two things: ask the blessing of the priest at the last moment [before their execution], and say to Señor Corbera: “Sir, don't curse anyone when you are so close to death ...” But it was not to be. Neither to the one nor the other.<sup>68</sup>

The truck that soon then transported César to the cemetery surrounded by cypress trees went by the river in Gerona where he also painfully saw “the [large] crucifix of the Sacred Heart” sticking upside down in the river where it had been so blasphemously flung:

The wind was blowing in their faces, and César, suddenly, without knowing why, looked at the stars, which were growing dim, and then thought of his age: exactly sixteen years, three months, and two days. Then he thought of the ciboria he had hidden in the walls [of the church, in order to protect them from further desecration]. “I have taken Communion sixty times today,” he said to himself.<sup>69</sup>

Then,

As they rounded the last curve before the cemetery, he thought of his family, of his mother, Carmen Elgazu, his father, Matías, of Pilar and Ignacio [the novel's somewhat ambiguous and more than indecisive protagonist]. And of José of Madrid [their irreverent cousin and a young atheist] .... “So many souls, Lord, so many souls!” And then he thought of Dimas and Agustín. How was it possible that Dimas and Agustín, who had pledged their word, should have gone to the prison [where César was finally found and taken] to kill him? He forgave them. He regretted that his prayers for them would have to be brief, for he had so few minutes of life left.<sup>70</sup>

---

66 *Ibid.*, p. 794.

67 *Ibid.*

68 *Ibid.*

69 *Ibid.*, p. 795.

70 *Ibid.* It is poignant to know that, objectively, César was in error here. Dimas and Agustín had not actually come “to kill him.” But, César never found out the truth. Thinking they did, he forgave them anyway, and from the heart.

Now comes another surprise:

César had hidden one Host, just one, in his vest. As the prisoners were being lined up against the niches [in the cemetery], and the firing squads readied, he took it out with his free hand. He was getting ready to put it into his mouth and swallow it slowly, forgiving the militiamen [of that revolutionary firing squad]. At his side he heard the sobbing and the uninterrupted murmur: “Criminals, criminals!” He turned and said to the priest nearest to him: “I repent of my sins, Father. Will you give me absolution?” Then he looked at Señor Corbera, whose eyes glittered with rage. “Take this,” he said to him suddenly. And he elevated the Sacred Species [the Host], holding it between his thumb and index finger. Señor Corbera blinked three times and suddenly, understanding, took Communion. A volley rang out, and César felt something gently pierce his skin.<sup>71</sup>

Now we come to the last surprise – it is in the final paragraph of the book:

Moments later [after César had been gravely wounded] he heard a voice saying “I absolve thee in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,” a voice coming nearer and repeating: “I absolve you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” And he also heard groans [there in the cemetery]. He opened his eyes for a moment. He saw a militiaman kneeling and taking tiny Communion wafers from his wrist watch and putting them into the mouths of his fallen neighbors. In the militiaman he recognized Mosèn Francisco [César's beloved friend and sacramental confessor]. César's eyes closed. He felt a kiss on his forehead. Then his heart closed.<sup>72</sup>

Father Mosèn Francisco was a Catholic priest, like the devoted and faithful priest in Rio Preisner's own Communist Prison Camp in Czechoslovakia almost twenty years later.

Was there Catholic Culture present there in that cemetery of Gerona, Spain? More importantly, was not that integral Catholic Faith present there which can always produce and nourish an integral Catholic culture and its literature? Even a literature that is itself an external channel of grace!

After we have now considered in this essay some of the literature of Eugenio Corti, Georges Bernanos, Evelyn Waugh, and José Maria Gironella from the four differentiated cultures of Italy, France, England, and Spain, do we not better understand how Catholic literature helps to form an integral Catholic culture?

---

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 795-796.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

Eugenio Corti cherished the great Catholic Italian author, Alessandro Manzoni and Manzoni's own profound historical novel, *The Betrothed (I Promessi Sposi)* which was set during the Thirty Years War of 1618-1648 and which also, like *The Red Horse*, deals with the “Four Horseman of the Apocalypse”: War, Conquest, Famine, and Pestilence. In *The Red Horse*, moreover, Alessandro Manzoni is often explicitly referred to. For example, Gerardo Riva, the father of the central family in *The Red Horse*, is widely known to read only one novel himself, and again and again, namely *The Betrothed!*

And we may recall that Manzoni's *The Betrothed* also memorably depicts faithful priests of Christ, like Archbishop Federigo Borromeo of Milan, and the manly, selfless Capuchin priest, Don Cristoforo, who was so exemplary in his corporal and spiritual works of mercy during the Great Plague in Milano, too, and also knew the importance of “forgiveness from the heart.”

May these varied and vivid examples of faithful Catholic priests be a greater channel of grace for us all, especially during this Year of the Priest 2009-2010.

These examples may better fortify us all, perhaps especially if the Providence of God should also call for us to live amidst the trials of “war, conquest, famine, and pestilence” – and still always remain faithful to Christ unto the end. Hence selflessly generous in charity, which, Saint Paul said, always “*congaudet veritati*” (“takes joy in the truth”). Saint Augustine himself often spoke of the “*Gaudium de Veritate*” (that “inner and radiant joy that comes from the truth”).

Further fortification may be drawn from Pope Benedict XVI's former friend at the University of Münster, my own beloved mentor, Professor Josef Pieper. Josef Pieper has written many books of great wisdom and eloquence, such as *On Hope, Hope and History*, and especially his profound and timely book, *The End of Time*.<sup>73</sup> These lucid and modestly unassuming books will also illuminate and fortify our own true Catholic Witness, whether we are priests or not, amidst great trials and even the ultimate tests of the *Mysterium Iniquitatis*, which is mysteriously permitted to operate under Grace and in the Providence of God.

--FINIS--

---

<sup>73</sup> All three of these books by Josef Pieper have been published by Ignatius Press in San Francisco, California: *On Hope* (1986); *Hope and History* (1994); and *The End of Time: A Meditation on the Philosophy of History* (1999). Ignatius Press has also published English translations of Corti's *The Red Horse* (2000), and Gironella's *The Cypresses Believe in God* (2005).

## Coda

“I turned my thinking to the enormous problems that the insertion of Jewish Messianism on the modern world had produced. It was a fact that Jews – finally out of ghettos, as they should have been – even if they had lost their faith in large numbers, they hadn't lost their Messianic expectation. On the contrary, at times their foremost intellectuals only needed any acquisition of knowledge to immediately build a theory – always definitely anti-Christian – on the redemption of man.” (Eugenio Corti, *The Last Soldiers of the King*, p. 215)

\*

“They [the Germans] had given us Nazism; half and half with that other nation, the Jews, who in the vanguard of modernity refused Christ, they [the Germans] had given us Marxism as well: the two doctrines most laden with death in our time and certainly in the time to come, at least as far as I could [then] see [i.e., in 1945, as a young man of twenty-four years of age].” (Eugenio Corti, *The Last Soldiers of the King*, p. 324)

\*

But what about us?

And, from our vantage point now, almost sixty-five years later, and after many other wars and religious revolutions, we may also wonder what Eugenio Corti might say today as a man now in his eighty-eighth year of life. For, Eugenio Corti is still alive.

What would he see and also, with truthful candor, say today? Especially about the Catholic Church and her Priests.

(This essay is dedicated to Father Michael Jarecki, who loves the Blessed Mother very much, and is himself very beloved – and he has, for many, many years now, remained so deeply faithful to Christ, knowing both the tears of sorrow and also the tears of joy.)

© 2009 Robert D. Hickson