



The Catholic Cultural Revival

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It is ten years since the late, great John Paul II wrote his *Letter to Artists* and, as such, it is timely to remind ourselves of the power of Christian beauty to evangelize the culture in which we live. All but the most insensitive of men will admit to, and will admire, the great beauty produced by Catholic culture over the centuries. From the great art of Giotto, Michelangelo, Leonardo Da Vinci and Fra Angelico to the great architecture of St Peter's in Rome or Chartres Cathedral in France, the Catholic Church has bestowed upon humanity the most magnificent cultural edifices, all inspired by a love of the One True God who is the Greatest Artist of all. In the fields of music and literature, as much as in the fields of art and architecture, the genius of the Church has shone forth in the works of her creative children. From the simple serenity of Gregorian chant to the intricate integrity of polyphony and the rousing passion of Romanticism, from Palestrina, Thomas Tallis and William Byrd, to Bach, Mozart and Bruckner, the greatest sacred music continues to resonate in the hungry heart of man. And what is true of music, is equally true of literature. From Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* in the glorious middle ages to the plays of Shakespeare during the throes of the iconoclastic Reformation, Catholic writers have produced truly great Christian literature, putting their words at the service of the Word.

Yet Catholic beauty does not only blossom in the brilliance of the Catholic middle ages or in the magnificence of the Catholic Counter Reformation, it blooms also in the midst of the desert of modernity. One of the most exciting and powerful manifestations of such beauty arose in the Catholic Cultural Revival in England over the past two centuries. From its genesis in the rise of English Romanticism at the end of the eighteenth century to its crowning achievements in the middle of the twentieth century, the English Catholic Revival would produce some of the greatest artistic masterpieces of all time.

It all began with the disillusionment of certain English poets with the false promises of the so-called Enlightenment and age of Reason. Poets such as William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge were horrified by the mass murder, known as the Great Terror, that

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followed in the wake of the French Revolution. Although Wordsworth and Coleridge had initially been attracted by the French Revolutionary cause, the full horrors of its butchery and totalitarianism, carried out in the name of “reason” against religion, caused them to recoil in the direction of Christianity. Both poets rejected their youthful agnosticism and pantheism and embraced Anglican Christianity, expressing their rediscovery of beauty in what became known as Romantic poetry.

In the wake of Romanticism came the rise of neo-medievalism, a rediscovery of the beauty of the Catholic middle ages by a new generation of English artists and thinkers. The first of these manifestations of neo-medievalism was the Gothic Revival in architecture, the most famous example of which is the Houses of Parliament in London. The most prominent figure of the Gothic Revival, Augustus Pugin, would follow his aesthetic sensibilities to their logical conclusion by becoming a Catholic. He would be the first famous convert to the Faith in a Revival that would soon see a flood of converts. Another manifestation of neo-medievalism was the Pre-Raphaelites who, as their name suggests, sought a purer vision of the arts by seeking inspiration from those medieval and early Renaissance artists who were painting prior to the innovations of the Renaissance artist, Raphael. The third manifestation of medievalism, and the one which would have the greatest impact on the Catholic Cultural Revival, was the Oxford Movement. This was a movement within the Anglican church which sought to embrace a “catholic” understanding of the liturgy and a “catholic” interpretation of ecclesiology. Members of the Oxford Movement became known as anglo-catholics, insisting that Anglicanism was part of the Catholic Church. One of the leaders of this movement, John Henry Newman, became convinced, through his study of history and the early Church Fathers, that the claims of the Oxford Movement were invalid, that it was wrong in its claim that Anglicanism was truly Catholic. Following the logic of his own conclusions, Newman was received into the Catholic Church in 1845, his conversion heralding the true birth of the English Catholic Revival.

Newman was universally recognized, by friend and foe alike, as one of the greatest minds and one of the finest prose stylists of the Victorian period. The revelation that this great man had become a Catholic sent shockwaves of seismic proportions through the highest echelons of English society. In his wake, the trickle of Roman converts became a veritable flood. Newman’s semi-autobiographical novel, *Loss and Gain*, describing a young man’s journey to conversion, remains a true classic of conversion literature as does Newman’s *Apologia pro Vita Sua*, his masterful defence of his reasons for conversion. Much of Newman’s poetry is among the finest of the Victorian period, not least of which is *The Dream of Gerontius*, a tour de force in the spirit and tradition of Dante which would later be put to music by Sir Edward Elgar.

In 1866, a little over twenty years after his own conversion, Newman received a young man named Gerard Manley Hopkins into the Church. Hopkins, who would become a Jesuit priest, was destined to become perhaps the greatest and most important poet of his generation. In sublimely beautiful poems, such as “The Wreck of the Deutschland”, he would combine the Franciscan philosophy of Duns Scotus with the mysticism of St. Ignatius Loyola in seamless splendour.

The Catholic Cultural Revival took an unusual turn in the final decade of the nineteenth century with the conversion to Catholicism of many of the writers and artists of the English Decadent movement. Recoiling in horror from their diabolical dabbling with the darker side of life, these Decadents sought escape from their sins in the reconciling arms of Mother Church. Among the Decadent converts was the artist Aubrey Beardsley, and poets such as Ernest Dowson and Lionel Johnson, but the most famous Decadent convert was the inimitable Oscar Wilde who was received into the Church on his deathbed. In his famous

poem, “The Ballad of Reading Gaol”, Wilde had poured his broken and sinful heart as a libation to Christ: “How else but through a broken heart may Lord Christ enter in?” It should also be noted that the English Decadents were following in the footsteps of the French Decadents on the path to Rome. Charles Baudelaire, Paul Verlaine and Joris Karl Huysmans were all received into the Church, the last of whom spending his final years in a monastery.

In the early years of the twentieth century, the great G.K. Chesterton became the most powerful voice of the Catholic Revival. In novels such as *The Man Who was Thursday* and *The Ball and the Cross*, and in non-fictional works such as *Orthodoxy* and *The Everlasting Man*, Chesterton’s humour and humility, and his incisive wit and wisdom, ushered countless converts into the Church. Chesterton’s great friend, Hilaire Belloc, was also a powerful and blustering voice calling people to the sanity and sanctuary of Rome. Other converts from the early years of the twentieth century include R.H. Benson, author of the classic novels, *Come Rack! Come Rope!* and *Lord of the World*; Maurice Baring, author of many wonderful works of Catholic fiction; and Ronald Knox, satirist and wit, who would later translate the Bible into what he hoped would be “timeless English”. Benson’s *Confessions of a Convert* and Knox’s *Spiritual Aeneid* are true classics of conversion literature, in the spirit of Newman’s earlier *Apologia*.

In the years between the two world wars, two of the greatest novelists of the century would be received into the Church. Graham Greene would write darkly about dismal sinners starving for the love of Christ, most memorably perhaps in the wanderings of the whisky priest in *The Power and the Glory*, and Evelyn Waugh would write *Brideshead Revisited*, perhaps the finest novel of the whole period, in which the hidden hand of grace works its wonders in the lives of one troubled family.

Without doubt, however, the greatest achievement of the whole Catholic Cultural Revival is *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien, an astonishing work recently turned into an epic three-part movie. Tolkien described his masterpiece as “a religious and Catholic work” and it is surely heartening that a work palpitating with Catholic theology should be consistently voted as the greatest work of the twentieth century. Even in the increasingly secularized culture of modern England, the truth of Catholicism shines like a beacon of hope to a darkened world. At the beginning of the Catholic Cultural Revival, the Church was marginalized and had minimal influence on the wider culture of England; by its culmination with the publication of Tolkien’s masterpiece, Catholicism was not only back at the centre of English cultural life but at its very summit also. Such is the power of the goodness, truth and beauty of the Church to evangelize today’s secular culture.