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Erasmus's Pictures of Church Conditions

Sir Walter Scott's *Quentin Durward* and Charles Reade's *The Cloister and the Hearth* give us pictures of Europe just before the Reformation; but we get clearer ones with the candid-camera eyes of Erasmus, the greatest of the Humanists. And what the writer saw at seventy-five he'd like to show his brethren of twenty-five.

"Erasmus was the son of the parish priest of the neighboring town of Gouda and his servant, whom he sent when pregnant to a city near by in order that his offense might remain hidden," writes old Cornelius Loos.

The boy was born on October 27, about 1466, and named for Erasmus, Bishop of Campania, martyred under Diocletian, and popular in the Low Countries and in England. The father's name was Gerard and the mother's Margaret, daughter of a physician of Zevenberge. We pity the poor boy for that handicap.

Pope Alexander III in 1180 decreed: "Let not the sons of priests and others born in fornication be promoted to Holy Orders, unless they become monks or live regularly in a canonical community; but let them hold no office whatever."

Instructions to enforce this order were given at the councils of Constance, 1414; Salzburg, 1420; Koeln, 1423; Tortosa, 1429; Basel, 1435; Freising, 1440; Mainz, 1441; Tours, 1448; Lyons, 1449; Koeln, 1452.

Figures do not lie; what do they reveal?

When about nine, the lad went to school at Deventer under the Westphalian Alexander Hegius, a pupil of the great Rudolf Agricola, and in 1480 at Bois-le-Duc. His teachers were "a race of men the most miserable, who grow old in penury and filth in their schools—*schools* did I say? *prisons! dungeons!* I should have said—among their boys, deafened with din, poisoned by a fetid atmosphere, but, thanks to their folly, perfectly satisfied so long as they can bawl and shout to their terrified boys and box and beat and flog them and so indulge in all kinds of ways their cruel disposition. . . . I was somewhat more learned than my teachers in those very branches which they professed to teach."

He wasn't the only one in that awkward fix of knowing more than his teachers.

A former roommate at Deventer by the name of Cornelius, in 1483, got him to enter as a novice the Augustinian cloister of Emmaus at Stein near Gouda, and in time he became a monk and sat up whole nights reading the Latin classics with his admired Cornelius.

Here he wrote a *Sapphic Ode in Praise of the Archangel*

Michael and in 1486 *The Contempt of the World*. This was in praise of the monasteries, and yet he says:

"Now, alas, many monasteries are tinged with the follies of the world and are no more beyond worldly influences than the human body is beyond the influence of its internal organs. In these there is such a lack of discipline that they are nothing but schools of impiety, in which no one can be pure or good; and their title to the name of religious serves them only to do with impunity what they desire. And it is to such as these to whom the world would not trust its sculleries, that the affairs of the Church are entrusted."

It was not uncommon for every two monks to have three servants.

John Labeo — "Thick-lips" — of Bergen was credited with ten legitimate and thirty-six illegitimate children; one of the bastards was Henry, Bishop of Cambrai and Chancellor of Burgundy. He dreamed he had a cardinalian bee buzzing in his episcopalian bonnet and needed a Latin secretary to go with him to Rome. He took Erasmus with the consent of the Bishop of Utrecht and of the Prior and General. The monk jumped at the chance of quitting his dismal cell about 1491. On April 25, 1492, when Columbus discovered something he knew not what, the Bishop of Utrecht ordained Erasmus a priest. The priest concealed his illegitimate birth, making the ordination illegal!

It took money, much money, to buy a red hat, and the Bishop did not have enough money. When he awoke from his fond dream, he no longer needed a traveling companion, and Erasmus awoke from his fond dream of a trip to Rome.

On October 21, 1496, the Bishop married Philip the Fair, son of Kaiser Max, and Joanna the Monomaniac, daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella and mother of Kaiser Karl V and brother Ferdinand.

The natural thing for the greatly disappointed priest to do was to go back to his cell; but he begged to go to the University of Paris to get a degree of Doctor of Theology — an honor also for his convent.

Though under no obligations, the good bishop got him a bursary, or scholarship, at the College of Montaign, the *Domum Pauperum*, headed by Father John van Standonk, himself an alumnus of this poor man's college.

The monk was under the vow of poverty; he had free bed and board; what more did he really need to study? He had more. The good bishop sent money, so that he was called "my fatherly patron, my Maecenas." And yet the ingrate will write his close friend, the Westphalian Conrad Goclen, Professor of Latin at Louvain: "Some yearly allowance was promised; nothing was sent. That is the fashion of princes."

He will whine about the moldy wine, the rotten eggs, the putrid meat, the ice on the washing water, the hard bed, the hard discipline, the hard everything. Beggars can't be choosers; true enough, but they can be grumblers, and Erasmus was a chronic grumbler. He could have sung the good old hymn "I am a great complainer."

A fellow-student was Noel Bedier, Natalis Bedda, who will attack him. Another was John Major, who will become a great light at St. Andrews. Later will come Ignatius Loyola and be flogged, and John Calvin, and Patrick Hamilton.

Born with a hammer, he was a knocker from Knockersville, and he knocked his professors. George Hermonymus of Sparta "could not teach if he would and would not if he could; twice a Greek, always hungry and charging big fees."

A caustic caricature, to be sure.

Curiously enough, the same Greek George taught John Reuchlin to master Aristotle in Greek. That gives rise to the surmise it is just barely possible after all there may be a difference in pupils.

The priest studied the theology of Duns Scotus, but he ridiculed it and its teachers.

Diogenes Laertius tells us Epimenides of Crete fell asleep for fifty-seven years and became the laughing-stock of the town. Erasmus wrote Epimenides "came to life again in Scotus, and we seem hardly able to wake up at the voice of Stentor. In our sleep we not only write but slander and wench and get drunk. What if you saw Erasmus sit yawning among these cursed Scotists while Gryllard is lecturing from his lofty chair? If you observed his contracted brow, his staring eyes, his anxious face, you would say he was another man. . . . Jokes against the theologasters of our time, whose brains are rotten, language barbarous, intellects dull, doctrine thorny, manners rude, life hypocritical, talk full of venom, hearts black as ink." So he wrote his friend and pupil Thomas Grey in August, 1497. Certainly vigorous, virulent, and venomous. Let us make a note of it for future reference.

The story of Epimenides was lifted from Erasmus by Washington Irving in his Rip van Winkle, who slept forty-seven years.

Down with a fever, he called in Dr. William Cop of Basel, physician to Francis I, and also on St. Genevieve. Again when sick again.

"I recovered, not by the aid of the physician, but of St. Genevieve alone, a most noble virgin, whose bones are deposited in the convent of the Canons Regular here, and daily bristle with prodigies."

Long after he paid his vow with a hymn to the helpful saint.

To one Lewis he wrote in 1502: "I send you three prayers, one to Jesus the Virgin's Son, and two to the Virgin Mother."

Erasmus on horseback strained the lower part of his spine. "I could think of nothing but death. I made a vow to St. Paul that I would complete my commentary on the Epistle to the Romans if I escaped this danger. . . . I offered my thanks to God and St. Paul." So he wrote Lord Mountjoy from Ghent in July, 1514. He did not pay his vow to St. Paul, did not finish the commentary on Romans.

"When the devil was sick, the devil a monk would be.
When the devil was well, the devil a monk was he."

Though the monk had no sense of the value of money, he had a fine sense for luxuries; he kept a servant and two horses. He couldn't steal, and so he had to beg.

"Thirty gold crowns I must have. If I remain at Orleans, there will be a catastrophe, and I and all my knowledge will come to wreck. Nobody gives except N., whom, wretched being, I have so drained that he has nothing left to give."

Surely he was brother to the two daughters of the horse-leach, crying, "Give, give," Prov. 30:15. He was eager to make the fashionable Italian tour, and Batt suggested a complimentary letter to Lady Veer, whose son he was tutoring. She was the widow of Philip the Bastard of Burgundy, late Governor of Flanders, son of Antony, "the Grand Bastard" of Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy, and was proprietor of the Castle of Tournehem, where his daughter-in-law was living—Anne of Borssele. The fawning flattery was put on with the Erasman trowel. Then he wrote friend Batt to press his suit. Why?

"Other divines whom she maintains preach obscure sermons; I write what will live forever; they, with their ignorant rubbish, are heard in one or two churches; my books will be read in every country in the world; such unlearned divines abound everywhere, the likes of me are scarcely found in many centuries."

Know thyself! He had no need of the good old Scotch prayer, "Lord, give us a good conceit of ourselves." The world owed his transcendent genius a living, and he would have it handed him on a silver platter.

How was Batt to get the money? Without batting an eye, the genius bade him lie!

"Do not be shy. Do not mind telling a lie or two in a friend's interest. I am one of a thousand and am not to be weighed in a balance with others. You will not mind a few whopper lies for Erasmus. Add, besides, that I am losing my eyesight from overwork, as Jerome did; that you have this from me and know it to be true. Tell her that a sapphire or some other gem is good

for bad eyes and persuade her to send me one. . . . You know your old way of lying profusely in praise of your Erasmus. . . . From great people you should not ask for any paltry favor; and for the sake of a friend no attempt is discreditable. In serious matters I am obliged to speak seriously. . . . If you obtain a large sum from my lady, as I trust you will, send Lewis at once to us"—he wanted at least 200 livres.

The trickster got something out of the lady but not all he wanted, and he was furious. He wrote Batt: "She plays the fool with her N. . . . She has means to keep those cowed libertines and good-for-nothing scoundrels and not means to maintain the leisure of one who can write books which even posterity may value, if I may speak somewhat boastfully of myself. . . . She has chosen to associate with that insignificant coxcomb rather than with a grave and serious companion suitable to her sex and age," etc.

Durand de Laur is one of the most sympathetic biographers of Erasmus, but he is forced to write: "One blushes to find in the correspondence of Erasmus a letter so bitter and insulting to the lady whom he calls his benefactress, giving the lie in so revolting a manner to the adulations which preceded it and breathing the most greedy rapacity. It may be explained but cannot be excused by the irritability of his character."

The Lady Veer played the Lady Bountiful also to William Hermann, which made Erasmus jealous of his rival, and he vented his spleen on Batt. Even the worm will turn, and even Batt resented the letter and let the writer know it; then Erasmus tried to mollify his faithful Man Friday.

The priest was a parasite; was he also a "Parisite"? Says he: "Nowhere do they form youths in less elegant science and in worse morals."

"The best way to learn French is from the little women of Paris."

Faustus Andrelinus, at twenty poet laureate at Rome, since 1489 poet to King Francis and Professor of Poetry at the University, was notoriously immoral and a boon companion of Erasmus, who says the Italian's "lectures on all parts of the poets, even on the *Priapeia*, were in a manner, to say nothing worse, truly Faustine." With him the monk exchanged gay notes during a lecture and letters on the kisses he had given and received.

English students rented a spacious apartment in the Latin Quarter under the charge of a guardian, or tutor, and Erasmus lived there in the autumn of 1496. "I could not be more splendidly or honorably used even if I were a bishop myself. I am eagerly courted and sought for all around. I have already tasted what it is to be somebody."

This was written in February, 1497. In March he wrote the Bishop of Cambrai: "My skin and my purse both need filling, the one with flesh, the other with coins. Act with your usual kindness, and farewell."

About 1498 Hector Boece, a young Scotchman, is quite charmed with the lectures of Erasmus and still praises him after thirty years; he became the first principal of Kings College, Aberdeen.

One of his pupils, it seems, was James Stewart, Duke of Ross, brother of King James IV, for whom he wrote a declamation in the fall of 1496; the next year he became Archbishop of St. Andrews. He was praised by Ariosto in his *Orlando Furioso*. Another pupil was William, Lord Mountjoy, later tutor to Henry VIII. Others were Thomas Grey and Robert Fisher, kin to Bishop John Fisher of Rochester. The tutor or guardian of these became suspicious of the relations between them and Erasmus, and the tutor put him out. Ugly rumors ran the rounds; "he did nothing but feast, play the fool, and fall in love." He had to reply to his old comrade William: "You say there is much talk where you are about me. What kind of talk? If good, I am glad, if otherwise, it is their own affair. Here at any rate there is nothing but praise for me, perhaps because I have deserved it. In exhorting me to virtue, you do as becomes William." That is hardly a denial, much less a refutation.

The Bishop of Cambrai asked Father John van Standonk of Montaign College to investigate; as a result the Bishop would have no more to do with the priest. Later the monk confessed to his Prior Servatius: "Although at one time I was inclined to an excessive affection, I was not its slave, and to Venus I was never in bondage."

He says he never boasted of his chastity, in Ep. 1433, lines 150 ff.

He had written of the tutor of the English house: "I am living with a most courteous English gentleman. I could not be more splendidly or honorably used, even if I were a bishop myself." Now he wrote:

"Traitor; thief; neither man nor beast, but Erinny's herself; consummate hypocrite; assassin of Erasmus; tears in harlot fashion he has always ready; furies in his breast; this ungrateful scoundrel; noble he boasts himself, religious he pretends to be. . . . As often as his memory comes into my mind, I not only grow furious but am much more struck with amazement that so much poison, so much envy, so much treachery, so much perfidiousness, and so much impiety could dwell in a human heart. A deformed soul in a body entirely worthy of it. Beneath the shaggy forest of his eyebrows lurk his deep-set eyes with their ever savage glare. A clifflike forehead with no sign of a modest blush in the cheeks.

His nostrils, filled with bushy bristles, expose to view a polypus. Flabby jowls, livid lips, a perky voice without control, from some nervous defect, so that you could swear that he was barking when he speaks, — and with all this a crooked neck and bow legs. There he used to sit, bald and wrinkled, with the saliva flowing down his shaggy beard, peering at his teacher with those beastly eyes and bushy eyebrows, head a-bobbing, livid lips, yellow teeth, while from his filthy mouth he breathed out an infernal stench."

A grotesque gargoyle, to be sure; but is vituperation a refutation?

The priest gave a course of sermons *On the Praise of the Saints*.

To John Falke he wrote in February, 1499: "He is wise in vain who is not wise for himself. Admire literature and praise it but follow gain. Beware of being out of humor with yourself; it casts a shadow on your beauty. Above all things take care of number one. Postpone everything else to your own convenience. Cultivate friendship for the sake of yourself. Touch learning with a sparing hand. Love ardently; study moderately. Be prodigal of words and sparing of money."

The priest went to Paris to get a degree; after about six years he left Paris without a degree; and he left without leave from his prior at Stein.

Erasmus received a yearly pension of a hundred crowns from Mountjoy, who, of course, became a "Mount of Joy." With his pupil and patron he went to England, away from the "*merdas Gallicas*" — a most vile epithet for the French, who had never harmed him.

William Wordsworth sings of

"That glorious time

When learning, like a stranger, come from far,
Sounded through Christian lands her trumpet, roused
Peasant and king."

Arthur Gray refers that to the coming of Erasmus to England.

Two strangers met in a discussion, "You are either More or nobody!" "You are either Erasmus or the devil!" Compliment? More's great-grandson Cresaere declares it was a reproof, "because he sought to defend impious positions and had a delight to scoff at religious matters, and find fault with all sorts of clergymen." He had the priest's number all right. They became fast friends, and More presented him to a manly lad of nine years, Prince Henry, the future Henry VIII.

In the winter of 1499 Erasmus was singing the praises of Aquinas to John Colet, till he at last burst out: "Why do you preach to me of a man like that who must have had boundless arrogance, else he could not have been so rash or presumptuous as to define all things; so much of the spirit of the world, else he

would not have contaminated the whole doctrine of Christ with his profane philosophy?"

That led Erasmus to study the Angelic Doctor and to agree with Colet.

At the same time the serious Colet urged him, once for all, to come out boldly and do his part in the great work of restoring that old and true theology of Christ, so long obscured by the subtle webs of the schoolmen, in its pristine brightness and dignity. Why not take Genesis or Isaiah and expound it, as Colet had done the epistles of St. Paul?

"Whenever I feel that I have the needed firmness and strength, I will join you."

Colet might well doubtfully ask him, "When will that be?"

What Erasmus would not do some one else would do. Colet likely resided at Magdalen College at Oxford, and there a young man was poring over the Scriptures—William Tyndale.

The Humanists had a veritable craze to translate their names into Latin and Greek.

John Krachenberger wrote Reuchlin: "You will recollect the request I made to you to invent me a Greek name which would have a more respectable look at the end of my Latin epistles than my own, that has the look of barbarism; if you have not yet done it, I beg leave in this place to repeat my request."

And they had a craze for hyperbolic classic compliments. Erasmus called Colet a Plato. The palm of victory must be awarded to Trithemius, who wrote of Dalberg: "Among philosophers he is a Plato,—among musicians, a Timotheus, —among astronomers, a Tirmicus,—among mathematicians, an Archimedes,—among poets, a Vergil,—among geographers, a Strabo,—among priests, an Augustine,—and among the cultivators of piety a Numa Pompilius."

Holbein finely hit off two Humanists as asses braying compliments at one another.

Milwaukee, Wis.

(To be continued)

W. DALLMANN

Die Disputationen Luthers

Eine Kritik, die schon des öftern an Luther geübt worden ist, findet an ihm eine große Schwachheit in der Tatsache, daß er kein Systematiker war, daß er sich z. B. zu stark auf Melancthon's Loci gestützt hat und daß die Form der Augsburgerischen Konfession und die ganze Apologie nicht sein Werk waren, sondern daß dies Verdienst auch dem Melancthon zugesprochen werden muß.

Über diese Kritik ist nicht ganz zutreffend. Denn einmal finden

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