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Erasmus's Pictures of Church Conditions

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Erasmus's Pictures of Church Conditions

(Continued)

The Familiar Colloquies came out on January 1, 1519, and on the title-page state they are "useful not only for polishing a boy's speech but for building his character." E. F. H. Capey says: "Erasmus occasionally lapses into coarseness, but the *Colloquies* were written for men of nerve, not for children." What can you do with such biographers?

In this work Erasmus is proved a most peculiar priestly pedagogue. Froude calls Erasmus "the most gifted man Europe has ever seen," and this is his best-loved and most widely read work. It gives us a better picture of Catholicism than many volumes of general histories of the time; the *Colloquies* are "the very image and mirror of the time."

Hrotsuit, Roswith, the famous nun of Gandersheim, who died about 980, in an old legend of about the fifth century found the plot for her Terentian drama of *Paphnutius and Thais*, in which at last the harlot becomes St. Thais. Erasmus lifted this for his *The Youth and the Harlot*, in which the girl describes her profession with some slippery detail. But what would you? In the end she becomes converted! Charles Reade uses it in his *The Cloister and the Hearth*. The following paragraphs are intended to introduce the reader to the *Colloquies*.

The Maiden that Would Not Marry, Catherine, desires to enter a nunnery in order to preserve her virginity. Her lover, Eubulus, contends she can do so more safely at home than "among those coarse, overfed monks. For you must not fancy they are eunuchs. They are called 'fathers,' and they often do all they can to deserve the name. Believe me, all are not virgins who wear the veil." But she goes in.

The Repentant Virgin had not been twelve days in the nunnery when she demanded to be taken out, "the only way to save her life." Why? She would not tell. Probably in that short time she had been robbed of her virginity.

Eubulus is Erasmus himself and Catherine is the daughter of Peter Gilles, the secretary of Amsterdam, in whose garden Blessed Sir Thomas More wrote his *Utopia*.

The Parliament of Women has Catherine complain of the filthy remarks with which her husband, Titus, amuses his guests.

The Youth and the Maiden use astonishing non-prudish language in their courting.

The Lying-in Woman has two wives discuss the merits of their husbands — and how!

The Epicurean tries to measure the pleasure in sexual indul-

gence with a detail and care that is shocking for the instruction of boys!

In the *Artifice* Schiller advises:

"Would you at once delight both the men of the world and the godly,
Paint for us pleasure, but paint ye the devil therewith."

Roscommon holds:

"Immodest words admit of no defense,
For want of decency is want of sense."

The Soldier's Life quotes one: "I will go to the Dominicans, and there for a trifle I can compound with the commissioners. Yes, even if I had robbed Christ Himself and cut off His head, such sweeping indulgences have they, and such powers of compounding." That seems to top Tetzels' alleged saying about violating the Mother of God.

The Epithalamium of Peter Aegidius has this crack at Erasmus's University of Louvain. The Muses ask, "What place is for us where so many hogs are grunting, camels and asses braying, jackdaws cawing, and magpies chattering?" Great wit for the great wit.

The Soldier and the Carthusian is Erasmus's scurrilous revenge on the dead Hutten, his former fast friend.

The Unequal Marriage continues the disgusting ghoulish attack on the knight.

The Hippeus Anippus lampoons the dead von Eppendorf, his former friend, and denounces the wealth of the religious because it goes into their own capacious pockets.

The Sermon, or Merdardus, has a title so filthy it cannot be printed in English, and in the same spirit it ridicules Francis Titelman Hasselt.

The Rich Miser cruelly ridicules the great printer Aldus and his father-in-law, Andreas d'Asola, where Erasmus had been a guest — "starved to death."

The thing was so dirty that Julius Caesar Scaliger defended the Venetians and called Erasmus a great worker at table and a shirker at work. "Although you did the work of only half a man in reading proof, in drinking you were a three-bellied Geryon, and used to say you followed the example of Plato, who wrote that wine stimulates genius," etc.

He did guzzle the expensive Malrusey in such quantities as to disturb the frugal host.

There is so much truth in the slander that Erasmus admits much wine-drinking gave him the gout.

The Synod of Grammarians is the writer's revenge on Bedda, Quercus, and Sutor of the Sorbonne.

The Ichthyophagia — Fish-eating — lampoons Noel Bedda,

Erasmus's fellow-student at Paris and later enemy. "If a priest lets his hair grow or wears the dress of a layman, he is severely punished; but if he gets drunk and never opens his Bible, he is still a pillar of the Church. . . . If he neglects to mutter prayers at certain hours, he is excommunicated; but if he is a usurer or guilty of simony, no one has a word to say. If one should see a Carthusian in a habit not of his order or eating meat, what curses he heaps upon him! . . . But let the same person see our friend helplessly intoxicated, reviling his neighbor or playing tricks upon the poor, and he finds nothing to startle him. If any one sees a Franciscan wearing a girdle without knots or an Augustinian girl with a woolen one instead of a leathern or a Carmelite without one at all or a Rhodian with one, . . . will he not set the whole town in an uproar? . . . If a sick man should taste a bit of chicken, Christianity is imperiled. Yet during Lent, but especially on holidays, the people go mad with drink, shout, dance, and fight; they play at dice next door to the church and make such a noise that it is impossible to hear the sermon, and nobody takes offense." Some anecdotes are so spicy they cannot be printed in English.

The Youth's Piety was dedicated to his godson, Erasmus Froben. He says on entering the school, "I make my obeisance in three words to Jesus and the saints, one and all, male and female, mentioning the Virgin Mother by name and offering a special prayer to the saint under whose peculiar protection I rejoice."

Charon comes to the upper world looking for a ship because all the timber in the underworld had been used up in burning the shades of heretics.

The Inquiry Concerning Faith has Aulus—Erasmus—ask the excommunicated heretic Barbatus—Luther—: "Do you believe in Holy Church?" "No. I believe in a holy church, which is the body of Christ, that is, a congregation of all men throughout the world who agree in the faith of the Gospel. To sever oneself from this is mortal crime."

It borders on Arianism. "The Son also is God, but of God the Father. But the Father alone is of none and obtains the principal place among the divine persons." In the Apostles' Creed the Father alone is called God "because He is simply the Author of all things that are and the Fountain of all Deity. To Him even the Son and the Holy Ghost owe their divinity. Accordingly the chief authorship, that is, the principle of origination, resides in the Father alone, because He alone is of none. Nevertheless the Creed may be thus understood that the name of God is not personal but general and is afterwards distributed by the terms Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in one God; which word, expressive of

nature, comprehends the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, that is, three persons."

The Religious Banquet has this: "Probably the spirit of Christ is more widely diffused than, in our mode of interpreting Scripture, we are accustomed to suppose." He can never read Cicero on *Old Age* or *Friendship* or the *Duties* or the *Tusculan Questions* without pausing now and then to kiss the page and pay homage to that holy soul whom God's Spirit has so manifestly possessed. "I can scarcely keep myself from saying, 'Holy Socrates, pray for us.' I often feel sure that Vergil and Horace are saints in heaven." Saint Horace!

In *The Abbot and the Learned Woman* Abbot Antronius declares a pleasant life consists "in sleeping and feasting and liberty of doing what you please; in wealth and in honors."

"I would not live that kind of life" — reading a good author.

"I don't know what they teach" — Peter and Paul.

"I haven't leisure" — to get wisdom.

"Long prayers, the affairs of my household, hunting, my horses, and the attendance at courts" — hinder me.

"It is not much matter to me what sort of men my monks are if I am but a man myself."

He is forced to admit it is "a woman's business to mind the affairs of her family and to instruct her children," which wisdom she learns from books.

"I have threescore and two monks in my cloister, and you will not see one book in my chamber."

Latin is not fit for women "because it contributes nothing to the defense of chastity. Women are more secure from priests if they don't understand Latin."

"Books destroy the brains of women, who have little at the best."

Magdalia: "I had rather spend my brains in study than in prayers mumbled thoughtlessly, in all-night banquets, or in the draining of huge bumpers."

"Bookishness makes folks mad."

Magdalia: "How many more do you see go mad by hard drinking, unreasonable feasting, and sitting up all night tippling, which destroys the constitution and the senses and has made people mad!"

"I cannot tell how it is, but as pack-saddles do not become an ox, neither does learning become a woman."

Magdalia: "But I suppose you cannot deny that pack-saddles look better on an ox than a miter on an ass or a sow. What think you of the Virgin Mary?"

"Very highly."

"What books did she read?"

"The Canonical Hours."

"According to what usage?"

"Of the order of Benedictines."

"Indeed? What did Paula and Eustochium do? Did they not converse with the Holy Scriptures?"

"Aye, but that is a rare thing now."

"So was a blockheaded abbot in old times; but now nothing is more common. . . . If you do not take care of yourselves, it will come to that pass that we shall be professors of divinity in the schools and preach in the churches and take possession of your miters."

"God forbid!"

"Nay, it is your business to avert it. For if you hold on as you have begun, even the geese themselves will preach rather than endure a parcel of dumb shepherds. You see the world is turned upside down, and you must either lay aside your dress or perform your part."

"If you'll come to see me, I'll treat you more pleasantly."

"After what manner?"

"Why, we'll dance and drink heartily, and hunt and play and laugh."

"I can hardly forbear laughing now."

This Antronius — ass — is Bishop Standish of St. Asaph, whom he also dubs Bishop of St. "Ass."

The Poor Rich Men are Franciscans turned away from the door of a priest who would not trust St. Peter himself if he came in that dress.

They apply to an innkeeper and promise to work for what they eat. For the work he expects he points to pictures on the wall — one, of a fox preaching while a goose's head is visible behind protruding from his cowl; another, of a wolf pronouncing absolution, but with part of a sheep peeping out from under his frock; and lastly, one of an ape in a Franciscan dress, sitting beside a sick man in whose purse one hand is busy, while with the other he presents the cross.

In comes the wife: "You will be glad enough to have them with you when you are dying; so do not turn them out now."

Surlily he gives way. During supper they discuss the priest who had turned the monks away. He was an excellent customer at the inn, but if he had any knowledge of Scripture, he kept it all to himself. The innkeeper is quite won over by the talk of the good men and promises them a welcome whenever they shall repeat their visit.

The Shipwreck is that of Anthony of Bergen and Adolf of

Burgundy, Lord of Veere, son of Erasmus's patron, Lady Anne of Veere, when the Scotch merchantman *Good Fortune* had the bad fortune of being wrecked on the coast of Friesland in January, 1516.

"The sailors were singing their *Salve Regina*, imploring the virgin mother, calling her the Star of the Sea, the Queen of Heaven, the Lady of the World, the Haven of Health, and many other flattering titles, which the Sacred Scriptures never attributed to her.

In ancient times Venus took care of sailors because she was believed to be born of the sea; and because she left off to take care of them, the virgin mother was put in her place, that was a mother but not a virgin.

Some were lying along upon the boards worshiping the sea, pouring all they had into it, and flattering it, as if it had been some incensed prince. "Oh, most merciful sea! Oh, most generous sea! Oh, most rich sea! Oh, most beautiful sea, be pacified, save us!" and a deal of such stuff they sung to the deaf ocean.

There was an Englishman there that promised golden mountains to our Lady of Walsingham, so he did but get to shore alive. Others promised a great many things to the wood of the cross which was in such a place; others again to that which was in such a place; and the same was done to the Virgin Mary, who reigns in a great many places; and they think the vow is of no effect unless the place be mentioned. Some made promises to become Carthusians. There was one who promised he would go on a pilgrimage to St. James at Compostella barefoot and bare-headed, clothed in a coat of mail and begging his bread all the way. I heard one, and I could not forbear laughing, who, bawling out aloud, lest St. Christopher should not hear him, promised him who is at the top of a church at Paris, rather a mountain than a statue, a wax taper as big as he was himself. When he had bawled this out over and over as loud as he could, an acquaintance of his jogged him on the elbow and cautioned him: Have a care what you promise, for if you should sell all you have in the world, you will not be able to pay for it. He answered him softly, lest St. Christopher should hear him, "You fool, do you think I mean as I speak? If I once got safe to shore, I would not give him as much as a tallow candle."

Some had certain particular prayers not unlike magical charms against dangers. [Poggio tells of a sailor who promised a candle as big as a mast.]

The Religious Pilgrimage has a letter to Glaucoptulus (Zwingli). Mary, the mother of Jesus, to Glaucoptulus sendeth greeting. This is to let you know that I take it in good part, and you have much obliged me, in that you have so strenuously followed Luther and convinced the world that it is a thing

altogether needless to invoke saints. For hitherto I have been almost killed by the evil petitions of mortals. All things were begged from me alone, as though my Son were always an infant, because He is so painted in my bosom, as if He still waited for my nod. . . . One day a merchant about to sail to Spain committed to my care the chastity of his kept mistress. A nun, having cast aside the veil and prepared for flight, recommended to me the reputation she was about to prostitute. A wicked soldier going to slaughter cried out: "Blessed Virgin, give me the spoils of war!" A gambler cries: "Help me, saint, and part of the gain shall be yours." If the dice fall badly, he insults and curses me for not favoring his vice. She who lives on the wages of prostitution cries out: "Give me a rich haul!" If I deny anything, they say I am not the mother of mercy. . . . The maid prays: "Mary, give me a handsome, rich husband"; the wife cries: "Give me fine children"; and the woman with child: "Give me a good delivery." The old woman prays to live long without a cough or thirst; and the doting old man: "Send that I may grow young again." . . . The priest says: "Give me a fat benefice"; the bishop cries for the saving of his diocese, and the sailor for a prosperous voyage; the magistrate cries out: "Show me thy Son before I die"; the courtier, that he may make an effectual confession when at the point of death; the farmer calls on me for seasonable rain, and a farmer's wife, to keep her sheep and cattle. If I refuse them anything, then presently I am hard-hearted. If I refer them to my Son, they cry: "If you will but say the word, I am sure He will do it." How is it possible for me, a lone body, a woman and a virgin, to assist sailors, soldiers, merchants, gamblers, brides and bridegrooms, women in travail, princes, kings, and peasants? And what I have mentioned is the least part of what I suffer.

I am much less troubled with these concerns now than I have been, for which I would give you my hearty thanks, if this convenience did not bring greater inconveniency along with it. I have indeed more leisure but less honor and less money. Before I was saluted Queen of the Heavens and Lady of the World, but now there are very few from whom I hear an *Ave Mary*. Formerly I was adorned with jewels and gold and had abundance of changes of apparel; I had presents made to me of gold and jewels, but now I have scarce half a vest to cover me, and that is mouse-eaten, too. And my yearly revenue is scarce enough to keep alive my poor sexton, who lights me up a little wax or tallow candle. . . .

From our Stone House [near Basel], the Calends of August, the year of my Son's Passion, 1524. I, the Stony Virgin, have subscribed this with my own hand.

The Romish Maurice Wilkinson comments: "The words put into the mouth of the Blessed Virgin are of the highest wisdom. Downright unbecoming requests to her and to the saints were apparently often made and endless foolish ones. The latter we can easily believe, incredible as the former seem to our minds; but the age was ignorant—that is, the bulk of the folk—and superstitious."

The Seraphic Funeral satirizes Alberto Pio, prince of Carpi, under the name Eusebius. Told by the doctor he had only three days to live, he had his head shaved, put on the cowl and frock and girdle and sandals of St. Francis, and vowed before witnesses he would serve Christ according to the rules of that order.

A crowd of the four Orders of the Begging Friars almost came to a bloody battle with the parish priest at the bedside of the dying man, indeed in the very presence of Christ Himself, and all about money. They spread on the floor a mat rolled up at one end to make a pillow, sprinkled it with ashes, and there they laid the dying man. Over him they spread the Franciscan habit, having first blessed it and sprinkled it with holy water. The cowl was laid under his head, for it could no longer be put on him; and together with this was placed his indulgence with its exemptions. They assert that the devil has no power against those who die thus, and they allege that beside others St. Martin and St. Francis passed away in this manner. . . . They then gave the sick man a crucifix and a wax candle. He said of the crucifix, "I will oppose this shield to mine enemy." He said of the blessed candle, "I will brandish this lance against the enemy of souls." These were his last words. Bernardine showed him the image of St. Francis, Vincent that of St. Dominic, and shouted, "Be not afraid, George; you have for your defenders Francis and Dominic; be at ease. Think of what number of merits you possess and what an indulgence."

This went on for almost four hours. The man died the third day, just as the doctor had said.

The Seraphic Brothers affectionately washed the body, dissected it, fitted it up in those holy vestments, rapturously kissed the feet, leaving them uncovered, composed the hands in the form of a cross, and even made the face shine with oil, according to the Gospel precept.

After dinner they laid him out on a bier, and following Paul's precept "Bear ye one another's burdens," they carried their brother on their shoulders along the highway to the monastery. Then they buried him with the usual service.

While the venerable procession was moving down the street, several shed tears when they beheld the same man whom they had

before seen clothed in purple and fine linen now arrayed in the Franciscan dress, girt with a hempen rope, and in all respects laid out so religiously. The Seraphic Brotherhood, too, walking with bent heads, with eyes fixed on the ground, and singing so lugubriously that the ghosts of the dead could hardly outdo them, drew tears and sobs from many.

Had he the five wounds of St. Francis? That I shall not venture to affirm positively. There were to be seen on his hands and feet certain livid marks, and his dress had a slit in the left side; but I did not venture to examine closely, because they say in such matters curiosity has been the ruin of many. I saw some laughing; but I suspect they were heretics, of whom the world is full just now. Whoever takes monastic vows is forthwith enriched with the merits of the entire order, being grafted on the body of that holy brotherhood. No angel has revealed this to them, but Christ Himself, who, with His own lips, revealed this and many other things to the blessed Francis. They are most profound mysteries, and it is unlawful to impart them to the profane. I am afraid, if I tell these secrets, St. Francis will be angry with me and strike me blind or take away my reason, as he is said to have treated many who refused to believe in the marks of the five wounds. The saints who reign in heaven do not permit themselves to be insulted. On the day sacred to St. Francis all the souls, not only of the brethren, but of all who wished well to the order, will be freed from purgatory. No one will have a bad end who dies in the Seraphic dress, will not go straight to hell, whence there is no redemption. It does not save from purgatory except those who die on the festival of the saint. If the holy dress is put on after death and they intended it while living, the will is accepted for the deed.

At Antwerp I was present in the company of the relatives of a woman who lay at the point of death. With us was a Franciscan, a most reverend man, who, observing the woman to gasp for breath, took one of her arms and thrust it into the sleeve of his habit covering the arm and part of the shoulder. Thereupon a discussion arose as to whether the whole woman would be saved from hell or only that part of her body which had been shielded by the sleeve. The devils have an unspeakable horror of the Franciscan habit and stand in greater awe of it than they do of the cross of Christ. The dress, if worn, would save a Turk, nay, Satan himself.

When Eusebius was carried out, I saw, and so did others, swarms of black devils leaping at the body; yet none of them dared touch it.

Politian and Pico, the great Rudolf Agricola, and Christopher

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Longolius, the Ciceronian, two acquaintances of Erasmus, were also buried in the monkish gown. Erasmus grinned, "How happy are the lice that always dwell in that holy garment!"

John J. Mangan says: "Our Catholic ancestors deemed it an honor, and possibly a spiritual benefit, to be buried under the auspices and with the regalia of some order like that of St. Francis or St. Dominic. The custom was wide-spread, even many of the English kings electing to die in the habit of Francis or Dominic, and if this really trifling and immaterial thing gave them comfort at the hour of their passage into the mysterious beyond, who should grudge them that final consolation?"

The Religious Pilgrimage has a man saying: "My wife's mother had bound herself by a vow that, if her daughter should be delivered of a live male child, I should go to pay my respects to St. James in person and thank him for it. . . . He [St. James] made no answer at all, but upon tendering my present he seemed to smile and gave me a gentle nod, with this same scallop shell. . . . He was not doing so well by far as he used to be. This new opinion [Luther] that has been spread abroad through the world is the occasion that he has not so many visits paid to him as he used to have, and those that do come give him a bare salute and, either nothing at all or little or nothing else; they say they can bestow their money to better purpose upon those that want it. And this is cause that this great apostle, that used to glitter with gold and jewels, now is brought to the very block that he is made of, and has scarce a tallow candle."

(To be concluded)

Milwaukee, Wis.

WM. DALLMANN

Entwürfe über die von der Synodalkonferenz angenommene
Epistelreihe

Lütare

Offenb. 5, 8—14

Die heilige Leidensgeschichte, in die wir uns in der Passionszeit ganz besonders vertiefen, ist eine gewaltige, bedeutungsreiche Geschichte. Den glänzenden Mittelpunkt dieser Geschichte bildet das Lamm, das erwürget ist und das uns Gott erkaufte hat mit seinem Blut. Dieses Lamm ist und bleibt in alle Ewigkeit Gegenstand anbetungsvollen Jubelns, Lobens und Preisens. — Möge uns diese Geschichte und das Lamm nie etwas Alltägliches und Geringses werden!

Damit wir immer tiefer eindringen in das Geheimnis der göttlichen Liebe, die sich in der heiligen Leidensgeschichte offenbart, und immer freudiger erkennen, was sie für uns zu bedeuten hat an Glück