

Dickens Conference

August 16, 2014

The Dickens Conference held two weeks ago at Queen of Martyrs House in Broadstairs, England, went very well, within its modest limits. On the Saturday there was only a little rain, the Sunday was all sunshine, and nearly 30 participants, mostly from England but also from Denmark, France and the USA, much enjoyed the house, one another's Catholic company, and the three lectures of Dr David White on three novels of Charles Dickens (1812–1870), England's best loved writer after William Shakespeare.

"Within its modest limits" because outside of the devoutly attended Masses on the Saturday and Sunday, there was little outwardly supernatural about the Conference. Let us say that it was a session of sanity rather than sanctity, but we notice immediately that at least in English the word "sanity" makes up three quarters of the word "sanctity." Grace builds on nature, and it can hardly build on the insanity and corruption of nature to which the world around us is giving itself over, day by day. Sanity is therefore more important than ever, even for supernatural purposes. If the "Resistance" is presently making so little apparent headway, is it not because there is just not enough sanity still around to recognize and cast out the mind-rot, and the rot of true obedience and sanctity?

In Dr White's first lecture he spoke of *David Copperfield*, Dickens' own favourite amongst his many novels, and specially linked to Broadstairs. This is because on Dickens' many visits for work or holidays to his beloved seaside town, he came to know an eccentric old lady who lived in a small house still existing on the sea-front. She so impressed him that he built her into *David Copperfield* as Betsy Trotwood, an eccentric old lady who takes in the orphaned hero of the novel and protects him until he finds his way in life. In her mouth Dickens puts his own hatred of Puritanism and Calvinism, said Dr White. At

least once in his life Dickens was told that Catholicism is the one true religion, but he never became a Catholic. However, he had a supreme respect for the Gospel of Christ, and genuinely good-hearted characters tumble over one another in the pages of his novels.

On Saturday afternoon there followed a visit to the sea-front house of "Betsy Trotwood," now a Dickens Museum; full of Dickensian memorabilia and with a Dickensian curator. Then the second conference was on *Bleak House*, first novel of Dickens' second period, when England was growing darker. *Bleak House* attacks lawyers and the law in particular, but in general, said Dr White, it attacks a System more and more in control of society, demoralizing and crushing the innocent sheep. Politics are becoming meaningless and the aristocracy is losing touch with reality, but an inhuman System is driving forward until it will finally collapse under its faksehood, in the manner of Vatican II, added Dr White.

The third lecture presented on Sunday morning *Hard Times*, another of the darker novels, about the total lack of real education, 150 years ago! Without education of the heart, Dickens knew that human beings will be cold and inhuman. Dr White drew on his decades of teaching in the USA Naval Academy to back up Dickens' portrait of the enormous stupidity of the social robots engineered by an "education" spurning history, the arts, music, literature and especially poetry. The result, he said, is the boundless boredom of youngsters today, a reflection of pure nihilism.

However, Conference participants went home feeling neither bored nor nihilistic, but much refreshed. Deo Gratias.

Kyrie eleison.