

Juvenal Again

November 29, 2008

Last week “Eleison Comments” drew attention to the remarkable (in a pagan) natural wisdom in matters spiritual of the Roman satirist Juvenal, who was in his prime about 100 years after Our Lord was born, but who is not known (as far as I can discover) for any contact with the Catholic religion then rising in Rome.

A first lesson drawn from the passage concluding the Tenth Satire was that grace is in line with that God-given nature of ours from which Juvenal was working. Grace is only out of line with our fallen nature, which fell with Adam and has ever since been flawed with original sin in all of us, making all too easy the succession of our personal sins. On this sinful nature, as sinful, grace does make war, but only to heal and elevate that God-given nature which necessarily underlies the sinful nature, as some apple necessarily underlies the rot of any rotten apple. That Juvenal with no apparent help from grace could write so well not only of human rot but also of the underlying nature refutes the dreadful heresy that there is nothing in human nature which is not rotten.

A second lesson for our own times was that the ancient pagan satirist who promoted natural sanity even without any notion of supernatural grace, was a better man than the mass of apostate post-Christian pagans who are today rotting and rooting out both nature and grace. Similarly, to one who visited a week ago the Washington DC Museum of Modern Art, the current exhibition of ancient artistic pieces from pagan Pompeii offered much more for the human heart and mind than did all the modern exhibits put together.

A third lesson, accentuated by modern times, might be the value of reading the classical Latin authors, such as Juvenal. When it comes to the learning of Latin, some pious souls argue

that Catholic youth should be immersed rather in the abundant Latin texts of the grace-filled Church Fathers than in pagans like Juvenal. True, the Church Fathers are stainless where pagan authors are always more or less stained, but precisely because the Fathers are filled with grace, surely they cannot in the same way testify to that God-given nature in us which is prior in being, not in value, to God-given grace. Does not this nature need today all the help it can get?

Kyrie eleison.