

Reading Pagans

June 4, 2011

Some Catholic eyebrows may have been raised a while ago when “Eleison Comments” (EC 188) recommended the reading of the pagan Greeks to get a handle on the universe’s moral framework. Why not rather read Catholic authors? But the same great realities of life, suffering and death were faced by the Greek tragedians as are faced by the Catholic Doctors: why, as it seems, are we born on this earth, only to suffer and die, and by death be separated from everything we have learned to love? The question is basic, and can be agonizing.

The Catholic answer is clear and complete: an infinitely good God gives to each of us life, free-will and time enough, if we make the right use of the suffering exactly dosed by his Providence (Mt.X, 29–31), for us to choose to spend our eternity rather with him in Heaven than without him in Hell. The Greek answer is incomplete, but not wholly wide of the mark. Instead of God the Father, they have a Father-god, Zeus, and instead of Providence they have Fate (Moiras).

Now whereas for Catholics Providence is inseparable from God, the Greeks separate Zeus from Fate so that they sometimes clash. That follows from the Greeks having a too human concept of their gods. Nevertheless they do conceive of Zeus as more or less benignly directing the universe and of Fate as being unchangeable, as is Providence within the true God (Summa Ia, 23, 8; 116,3), so that they are not wholly wrong. Moreover they have more respect for their mythical gods, and for the moral order guarded by them, than do a host of modern writers, who have no respect for any god at all, and who set out to negate any trace of a moral order.

But the Greeks have one advantage even over Catholic writers. When they present great truths, these are drawn from raw life and not just – so to speak – out of the Catechism. The same

holds true for any non-Catholic witness to truths taught by the Church. Just as today's Talmudic Jews, precisely because they reject Jesus Christ, render a special witness to him by guarding jealously in their synagogues the Hebrew text of that Old Testament which speaks of Our Lord from beginning to end, so the ancient Greeks give special witness to God and his Providence when, independently of the Catechism, they demonstrate the world's moral order in action. In this way they prove that such natural truths are accessible not only to believers, rather they belong to the very fabric of life as lived by everyone, if only it is sanely understood.

Another advantage of the ancient classics in particular is that having preceded Christ, there cannot be in them a trace of that apostasy which mars, more or less, even pious writers coming out of Christendom after the Middle Ages. Natural truths are presented by the ancients with a certain innocence and freshness which can no longer be recovered. The waters are too muddied.

In fact it was the Church's monasteries which ensured the survival of the manuscripts of the ancient classics in medieval times. Count on the true Catholic Church to save them once more in modern times from the new barbarians, liberals! For wherever the so-called "scholarship" of the liberals prevails today, it turns all classics to dust.

Kyrie eleison.