

Virtuous Pagans

October 22, 2011

On reading (EC 221) how the music of Brahms is proof of a certain greatness of soul, a young Brazilian reader asks if the wick smouldering in Brahms was not smouldering better than it does in a lukewarm Catholic (cf. Mt.XII, 20). The contrast is designed to highlight the virtue of the pagan and to question the virtue of “warm, lazy” Catholics. Of course pagan virtue is praiseworthy and Catholic lukewarmness is blameworthy, but a greater question lies behind: just how important is it to be a believing Catholic? How important is the virtue of faith? The answer must remain, it is as important as eternity is long.

That faith is a virtue of supreme value is evident from the Gospels. How often does Our Lord, after working a miracle of physical or spiritual healing, tell the person involved that it is their faith that obtained for them the miracle, e.g. for Mary Magdalene (Lk.VII, 50). Yet Scripture makes it equally clear that this meritorious faith is something deeper than just an explicit knowledge of religion. For instance, Roman centurions can have known little to nothing of the true religion in its day, the Old Testament, yet of one of them Our Lord says he has not found so great faith in Israel (Mt.VIII, 10), another of them recognizes as the Son of God the crucified Jesus whom the experts in religion had done nothing but mock (Mt.XXVII, 41), while a third, Cornelius, blazes the trail for all Gentiles who will enter the true Church (Acts, X, XI). What did these pagan centurions have that the priests, scribes and ancients did not have, or no longer had?

From beginning to end of all men’s life on this earth, pagans and non-pagans alike are constantly confronted with a variety of things good, all coming ultimately from God, and of things evil, coming from the wickedness of men. But God himself is invisible while wicked men are all too visible, so it is all

too easy to disbelieve in the goodness or even existence of God. However, men of good heart will believe in the goodness of life while discounting, relatively but not absolutely, the evil, whereas men bad of heart will discount the good that is all around them. Now neither may have any explicit knowledge of religion, but whereas good-hearted men, like the centurions, will pick up on it as soon as it crosses their path, the bad-hearted will scorn it, more or less. Thus the innocent Andrew and John picked up immediately on the Messiah (Jn.I,37–40), whereas the learned Gamaliel took rather more time and persuading (Acts V, 34–39). Let us say then that at the heart of the explicit and knowing virtue of faith lies an implicit trust in the goodness of life and in whatever Being lies behind it, a trust that can be undermined by false doctrine or shaken for instance by scandal.

If we return to the case of Brahms, the question then becomes, did he have at least this implicit trust in the goodness of life and of the Being behind it? Surely the answer is no, because he spent the whole second half of his life in what was then the capital city of music, Catholic Vienna. There the beauty of his music must have led numerous friends and even priests to urge upon him the explicit fulfilment of that beauty in the profession and practice of Vienna's religion, but all such appeals he must have refused. Therefore it seems all too possible that he did not save his soul . . . God knows.

Nonetheless we thank God for his music. As St Augustine marvellously said, "All truth belongs to us Catholics." Likewise all beauty, even if crafted by pagans!

Kyrie eleison.