

Horror and Hope at Christmas

Frank Walker

My sitting room contains so many pictures of Mary the Mother and her child that a stranger coming into it might be tempted to exclaim, What a Catholic house this is – just look at all these pictures of the Virgin Mary! This would be an understandable conclusion, perhaps, but in my case not correct. I very much admire the great work done all over the world by the Roman Catholic orders of charity. I am not anti-Catholic, though I may join with many ordinary Catholics in being saddened by the abuses that have occurred in schools, children's homes and churches, but I'm well aware that abuses occur in all manner of large institutions including churches of all denominations.

So why do I have all these pictures in my house? Because I think these are some of the most beautiful and meaningful pictures there can be. I consider them the most beautiful Christian icons, but not in any exclusive or sectarian sense. Similar images occur in all cultures and in all ages all over the world. The Chinese have their own ideal Mother, strikingly like Mary, but who has emerged entirely independently of Christianity. I am not claiming anything supernatural by displaying my pictures.

Inherited from a minister's daughter who lived into her hundredth year, I have a large reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci's portrait of Mary with St Anne and the infants Jesus and John the Baptist. There is a photograph of a statue from the French cathedral of Autun, famous for its marvellous sculptures, a plate from the Vatican Museum, an icon from a Russian Orthodox convent in the Auvergne, an imitation Della Robbia plaque from my Italian daughter-in-law's native city, Bologna, a very English-looking Mary from my favourite English parish church, Thaxted in Essex, and dozens of postcards from French churches, abbeys and cathedrals. My favourite is from a church in Rome, in which Mary and her baby are both laughing at a little bird fluttering in the child's hand.

My latest addition is the picture the *Sistine Madonna* by Raphael on the front cover of a book that I recently received as a gift: *Horror and Hope* by Dominic Kirkham, who was for 35 years a Roman Catholic monk in Sussex and then priest of

a Catholic church in Manchester. He became ordained, inspired by Pope John XXIII and the ideals of the great Second Vatican Council, designed to bring the Church up to date and make it a friend (albeit not an uncritical one) of the modern world. He left the priesthood because he felt that during the time of Pope John-Paul II the work of the Council was being systematically discredited and dismantled. He became an admirer of Don Cupitt's 'non-realist' theology and an advocate of a thoroughly humanitarian expression of Christianity. He has become deeply involved in community businesses and enterprises, often advising and carrying out repairs in the homes of the disabled and elderly and teaching classes in arts and crafts.

He is the author of three outstanding books: *From Monk to Modernity*, an autobiography, *Our Shadowed World*, a thoughtful account of humanity's present perilous position, which he continues to explore in his latest book, *Horror and Hope, The Conflicted Legacy of Christianity*. I cannot praise or recommend these books highly enough. They are wonderful!

He relates how he has recently read a new biography of the great Russian writer and chronicler of the Soviet era, Vasily Grossman. Grossman lived during one of the most tyrannical regimes in history, the era of Josef Stalin. As an official war correspondent he reported on one of history's most barbaric battles, the battle of Stalingrad. Then he followed the Red Army across the Ukraine. So complete was the utter destruction there seemed no evidence that humans had ever lived there. He sought out the village where he had grown up and struggled to find any news of his mother. There was nothing, only an absolute desolation surrounding him.

He followed the Red Army into Poland and new places of destruction: Treblinka, Sobibor, Majdanek. He saw something that had never happened before with such a degree of systematic planning and intellectual fore-thought, carried out with such a degree of brutality: the extermination of an entire people and their culture. Understandably he fell into a deep depression. Many contemplating what he saw have been driven to suicide. They

could no longer live with a humanity capable of committing such horror. Out of all this came Grossman's great book, *Life and Fate*, inevitably to be condemned by the Soviet censorship. While he was writing his book, Grossman was stunned and confused by an unexpected event.

In 1945 the victorious Red Army had brought back trophies and treasures from a defeated Germany. These included paintings from Dresden, now brought to Moscow. It was not until 1955 that Khrushchev allowed these paintings to be put on public display. It was something of a sensation. Among them was Raphael's *Sistine Madonna*. Grossman saw it. He was overwhelmed. He said, 'As soon as you set eyes on this painting, you immediately realise one thing, one thing above all, that it is immortal.'

Interestingly enough, a hundred years earlier, another Russian writer, Dostoevsky, a great explorer of the depths of the human soul had stood before the same painting and declared it to be a 'supreme expression of life and humanity.' It comes upon us like a fantastic ray of light in a darkened world. Grossman was not a Christian and thought of himself as a humanist, but he saw this painting as 'the power of life, the power of what is human in man', a spiritual force that cannot be wiped out by violence or captured by tyranny. As a reporter he tried to reveal the truth of people's actual lives. For this he was denounced, vilified and suppressed. He fearlessly depicted the regime's murderous and callous cruelties, the total lack of justice, the over 70 million lives destroyed. As one of his characters from the Ukraine asks, 'Is it really true that no one will be held to account for it all? That it will just be forgotten without a trace?' Grossman did not allow it to be forgotten, but attempts are still being made



Raphael, *Sistine Madonna and Child*. en.wikipedia.org

in today's Russia to cover up Stalin's horrors.

The *Sistine Madonna* has been seen by at least twelve generations over five hundred years. For each generation it has reflected profoundly something of their own lives and experiences. She was the young mother who brought her child into the world where vast crowds roared their love for Adolf Hitler. Grossman writes, 'It was she, treading lightly on her little bare feet, who walked over the swaying earth of Treblinka; it was she who had walked from the station

where the transports were unloaded to the gas chamber. I remember her by the expression on her face, by the look in her eyes. I saw her son and recognized him by the strange un-childlike look on his face ... here she is boarding the transport train. What a long path lies ahead of her.'

Until I received Mr Kirkham's book I was not aware of this painting by Raphael. I can't remember ever having seen it before. I can see at once its tremendous power. Mary, the Mother who is every mother, looks out with an extraordinary determination. We can't express how utterly strong she is. She sees all, but she will face all and never give in, her humanity will never give up; it is without limit. The gas chambers will destroy her body, but what she represents, what she is, is indestructible. Her son, who is every child, in the same way does not look out with the gaze of an infant who understands nothing. He has, as Grossman says, a mysterious unchild-like look, he sees everything; he understands everything, including the utmost horror, he looks out with an infinite sympathy and sorrow, and because he sees all his compassion know no limits.

The world is deep
and deeper than the daytime thought.
Deep is its pain.
Yet deeper than heartache is delight.
Pain says: Go away!
But joy yearns for eternity,
deep, deep eternity.

So, famously, wrote Friedrich Nietzsche. He could have said it in response to this painting of Raphael's. More than any creed could possibly say, this great painting represents our deepest beliefs and hopes in ways that formal religion, philosophy and

theology cannot adequately convey. With its Christmas theme it throws a great ray of light into a darkened world with all its cruelty and hate, expressing beauty, unconquerable strength, kindness, gentleness, compassion, brotherhood, sisterhood, motherhood and peace.

Frank Walker was a Unitarian minister (and teacher of English in Further Education) in Halifax, Bristol and Cambridge, 1959 - 2000. .

Naturally

I love this garden but am grieved
when some who praise nature feel
they must immediately contrast it
with a gleeful loathing of humanity.
They wallow in the wrongs that we have done –
which indeed we have – but disregard the rest,
the kindness and imagination.

I walk through the park
where a mass of alkanet, madonna blue,
mingles with pink campion
and cow parsley in glorious array.
In the playground I see the children,
black and white and pink and brown,
with mothers and fathers chatting,
exchanging worries and stories.
Each keeps an eye on them playing,
ready to help or intervene.

One encourages a timid boy to climb:
'Put your foot there. Hang on! Yes, that's right!'
Another tells her girl who barges in:
'No, we must wait our turn.
We share. The swing's for everybody.'
With routine toil and tender care
day after day forming small citizens.

Love is builder of cities.
We fall in love and may create new life.
We cook and feed a family and guests.
All kinds of loving,
maybe ecstatic or just ordinary,
strong, persistent, unrecorded,
goes on everywhere, all the time.
Naturally.

We are Londoners and I remember
moments in London's history.
1936. The Battle of Cable Street
when Catholic Irish dockers
and many more Eastenders
joined their Jewish neighbours
to stop the fascists marching through.
No pasarán! they shouted
in solidarity with Spain.

No need to translate the words
just the action. And how that watchword
echoed in revolutionary Nicaragua
in a famous poem which thousands sang:
'Even though we may not be together,
love, I promise: No, they shall not pass!'

Although defeat and failure
come repeatedly, so do kindness
and poetic vision. The struggle continues
for the shining garden city
where everyone can flower.
Mortal fellow creatures of the Earth,
still is the human form divine
and humankind is part of nature
not its enemy.

Dinah Livingstone

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