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ANCIENT AND MODERN IDEAS OF PURITY

Few persons who are not scholars have any knowledge of the difference which there is between ancient and modern ideas of purity, and few moralists have considered or admitted how very largely the comparison, if fairly made, must tell in favour of the ancients, who may be reckoned, in this matter, to have ceased about the time of the Reformation. As it was impurity which first brought fig-leaves into fashion, so the wonderful and altogether unprecedented addiction to that fashion, during the past three hundred years, may be taken as a fair measure of what puritanism has done, during that period, for us, and is still doing,—still doing, for, within the last few years, the actual fig-leaf has invaded the Vatican itself; and even there we are no longer allowed to contemplate "the human form divine," unprofaned by reminders of the niceness of nasty thinkers.

If we go back to those first ages of Christianity—which modern good people, who know nothing about them, regard with such reverence—we shall find that the greatest and purest of the "Fathers of the Church" were in the practice of addressing their flocks with an outspokenness which is not surpassed even by the ancient expounders of the Eleusinian and Bacchic mysteries, or, for that matter, by the Bible itself. St. Augustine, for example, in the *City of God* and elsewhere, says things fit to throw decent people into convulsions; and nowhere, in ancient Christian writings, do we find ignorance regarded as even a part, much less the whole, of innocence:—witness the words of Her, who is the model of innocence to all ages, in her answer, at thirteen years of age, to the message of Gabriel.

Strange to say, this modern notion of purity is not limited to those Churches which owe their origin to the Reformation. Their spirit has so deeply infected the Mother Church that, though her abstract doctrine remains the same as it was, she practically enforces the negative idea as jealously as it is enforced among good Protestants, or even more jealously, so that the ancient idea of positive purity, as a sacred fire which consumes and turns into its own substance all that is adverse to it, is now substituted by the conception that it is of the nature of stored snow, which must be kept artificially dark and cool, lest it disappear for ever. "Why, papa, I thought that marriage was rather a wicked sacrament!" said a young lady, who had been brought up at one of the best convent schools in England, the other day to her father, when he happened to be praising that institution. And in the great English Catholic Colleges for boys, the wonderful phenomenon may now be seen of two or three hundred lads and young men whose minds, with regard to the relations of the sexes, are exactly in the same condition as those of the girls, and whose only idea of marriage—gathered from the shyness with which the whole subject is avoided by all about them—is, that it is "rather a wicked sacrament." The prolongation of the innocence of ignorance into advanced youth would probably be unmixed gain were it not that knowledge, being left to come by accident, is almost sure to become poisoned in the moment of acquisition. It is of little use calling the legitimate connection of the sexes a "great sacrament," if no pains are taken to identify the knowledge of that connection with the knowledge of what is meant by a sacrament, this latter knowledge being the ground of the immense difference between the pagan and Christian of chastity, married or unmarried, is left to be discovered only by the obscurity of the conscience in its loss. The whole sphere of the doctrines of the early Church, like that of all the great mythologies, revolved about mysteries which the modern Churches, in practice, absolutely ignore, but which nature, however improved by grace, absolutely refuses to ignore. The result is a practical Manicheism, which is as serious in its effects upon morals as it is treasonous to the truth. The prodigious evils of unchastity prove sufficiently that chastity is no merely negative good. *Corruptio optimi pessim.* But where is the safeguard of purity if its corruption is imagined to be the corruption, not of the "best," but of some shadowy and negative state? To avoid this immeasurable evil there should be prudent and bold plain-speaking, on fitting occasions.

Plain-speaking does not vitiate. Even coarseness is health compared with those suppressed forms of the disease of impurity which come of our modern undivine silences.

A young man or woman must be hopelessly corrupt who would be injured by the freest reading of the Bible, or Shakespeare. The most pure and exalted love-poem that was ever written, Spenser's *Epithalamion* on his own marriage, is also one of the most "nude"; and all art-students "from the life" know that it is ingenious dress far more than the absence of dress that has dangerous attractions.

The boldest confession of the doctrine of the Incarnation, with all its corollaries, has been the father of that splendid virtue which was but dimly foreshown in pre-Christian ideas of purity. Wherever this doctrine has been denied or hesitatingly taught, it is a fact of simple experience that chastity has suffered with it. For what considerations can ordinary morals or the widest suggestions of worldly expediency substitute for those with which the New Testament abounds? "Bear and glorify God in your bodies"; "shall I take the members of Christ and make them the members of a harlot?" "God for the body, and the body for God," etc.