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FRENCH CULTURE AND CANADIAN CIVILIZATION

The Samuel Robertson Memorial Lecture, delivered at Prince of Wales College, Charlottetown, February 19, 1951 by Msgr. Ferdinand Vandry, C.M.G. Rector of Laval University, Quebec.

AS the representative of a French University whose mission is to preserve, expand and diffuse French culture in America, I presumed it would not be taken amiss if I dared to assert frankly, boldly, without any after thought, why it is most desirable that my English speaking compatriots should acknowledge that French culture is a precious enrichment to Canadian civilization. Should I succeed in convincing you I shall at the same time make you realize that English Canada would gain nothing by the disappearance from the map of Canada of an ethnical group so deeply involved in Canadian life through its history, treaties and laws.

This French group has become an essential element of the true physiognomy of this country whose spiritual wealth it has furthermore largely helped to assure and enlarge. My ambition is to show you that, thanks to its bilingualism, Canada is destined to become for all nations of the world the living pattern of the marvels of civilization which democracies can produce, if such democracies are really concerned about placing at the foundation of their national life a sincere Christian brotherhood.

To attain my goal I must first define what I mean by culture and by civilization.

Culture must be understood as the expansion of the intelligence in its search after truth and beauty. Indeed culture must be defined by the qualities which enrich the intelligence in the order of knowing; that is to say, the knowledge of the speculative sciences, of the liberal arts, and in general of all the imitative arts, as well as the moral sciences in so far as they remain in the field of speculation and thus add to the enlightenment and splendour of the intelligence. Thus when we speak of Greek culture we mean above all the philosophy of the Greeks, their literature, architecture, sculpture, painting, etc.; in a word, Greek thought and not their way of life. Hence culture, as it has been said, "is the intellectual and moral patrimony that a nation accumulates, perpetuates, and transforms in the course of centuries and at the source of which any one who so desires may draw."

But it is to be noted that a man may be highly cultivated in the sense we just defined without for all that being good or civilized. Because, civilization, unlike culture, should be defined, it seems to me, by the virtues which direct the will of man towards the good; that is by the virtues which make man righteous in the sphere of action and not only in the sphere of thought. Civilization is the art of living well. But as man cannot live well without a minimum of liberty absolutely necessary to the expansion of his personality, it follows that civilization must guarantee to man the possibilities of developing in himself and of bringing into play around himself the moral virtues which render man good, honest, human, in the service of human good, the good of all.

Therefore man is really civilized only to the extent that he acts in conformity with moral virtues, and according to the laws which place these same virtues in the service of the community. A nation will be civilized only to the extent that it acts or tends to act conformably to just laws; it is barbarian if it lives without laws or according to laws in no wise consonant with reason.

As the perfection of human life requires a certain domination of man over matter, and furthermore the reduction of matter to the service of the human community, the practical arts by which man masters nature will also have their role in civilization. Thus the art of assuring the economic life of a nation and the welfare of the citizens will largely contribute to put into concrete form a civilization. However, in a well ordered civilization, these practical arts must always remain

directed towards human good, and chiefly to the welfare of the community. For the more perfect these arts are, the more pernicious would be their effects if they were used against human good. It is clearly evident that to assure the superiority of a civilization it is essential to give one's attention first to the moral perfection of man, to develop within the nation the moral virtues which make man good. If one neglects to do so, it will fatally lead to a complete materialistic civilization whose sole ambition will be the domination of matter for the benefit of the well-being and comfort of man, without the slightest concern about his moral perfection.

These few preliminary thoughts will help me to state precisely what I think of the future reserved to culture in Canada in relation to Canadian civilization.

Let me firstly say that I do not like the expression 'a Canadian culture'. Canada, indeed, is and must remain a country with two cultures. This, according to history, to the treaties of peace, to the spirit of the Canadian constitution and to natural law is an undisputed fact. Why should we try to realize the impossible? Canada must endeavour to seek the perfection of its civilization in the expansion of two clearly different cultures which must unite without blending, develop side by side and mutually enrich each other by their respective vitalities, while remaining each one perfectly distinct. They cannot merge one into the other without losing their cultural value. Our duty is to use to the limit the spiritual wealth of these two cultures for the benefit of the homogeneity of a civilization which must reflect the true genius of the two great races which built this country.

I have mentioned the homogeneity of Canadian civilization. This means it must be one and indivisible. The reason is that civilization, as we mentioned above, is a way of life. It is not, like culture, a thought. Now, it is necessary that Canadian life be one, if we wish to be a nation. But in this life which should be that of Canada, there is no objection to discerning two trends of thought which manifest the action of two living cultures. Unity in diversity, such should be the formula of Canadian life. The unity of civilization in the diversity of cultures and languages so that we may build a great country. It is not compulsory that we think in the same manner on all problems; it is not necessary that we all express in the same tongue a national ideal which may be identical, notwithstanding the shades which vary its aspects; it is not necessary

either, that the distinguishing ethnical traits be expressed in works marked with a similar stamp. The essential, I believe, is that there be enough charity in our hearts to bring together minds that have not been formed in the same pattern. Let us not tie our hearts to our ideas, however excellent they may be. It is at this price that with dissimilar ideas we will be capable of building a civilization at which the world will marvel.

It is at the service of such a civilization that French culture in Canada wishes to place itself. The dream of the French Canadians is nothing else than to have all the vitalities of the French genius serve the grandeur and prosperity of the Canadian nation. The culture of which they are both the proud heirs and the representatives is bearer of spiritual wealth with which all of Canada has interest in enriching its national patrimony. To convince you, allow me to dwell at some length on three factors which seem to have more largely contributed to establish the fortune of French culture, three very distinctly marked characteristics without which French culture would not be what it is, three characteristics which it could not sacrifice without ceasing to be what it always has been. I mean humanism, spiritualism, and Christianity. These are, in my estimation, three eminently precious contributions which French culture can and must bring to the enrichment of the Canadian civilization. I see in them also an ideal which should contribute to the bringing together and uniting by the links of a solid friendship the two races to which divine Providence has entrusted the mission of creating a Canadian civilization.

Humanism should be considered as an element common to our two cultures. The great universities of England, particularly Oxford and Cambridge, have been and are still seats of humanism wherein have been formed to shine with an astounding brilliancy superior minds who have marked the Anglo-Saxon culture with the stamp of their genius. It is the role of our English universities to extend and to preserve in our country this spiritual tradition which has been received from the British Isles.¹ To this work of spiritual regeneration our French Universities are equally determined to devote their best efforts. Heirs of a tradition several centuries old, they wish to form the minds of young French Canadians to the image of the best brains given by France to the world of thought so as to provide Canada with a picked intellectual personnel

(1) I am very happy to find and to appreciate this same tradition in this college of yours, which places most interest in the teaching of the classics.

which it cannot do without. You know very well how strongly the French Canadians hold to the admirable instruments of the humanities to fashion the young minds in search of the enlightenment of truth. One of our most conspicuous assets, which has greatly contributed to assure the survival of our ethnical character, is the Greco-Latin humanities. They are at the core of our classical teaching. Never shall we over-estimate what we owe them. Until now we have been inviolably attached to them. They have been the keystone supporting the French structure of our mind and soul. We wish to preserve them in their integrity, because we see in them a wealth which benefits the whole of Canada. We are firmly convinced that the forsaking of the Greco-Latin humanities would lead us to the forsaking of our language and traditions, two of the precious jewels of our legacy. It would be an infidelity, a treason to the past, and, at the same time, a lessening of the cultural wealth of Canada for the present and the future. The whole, indeed, is worth what the parts are worth.

What benefit has Canada as a whole reaped from such a conception of classical studies? In answering such a question, I shall refrain from advancing too far on notoriously slippery ground. I cannot, however, help recalling that many French Canadians who have played a prominent role in building our country and who have largely contributed to make it what it is to-day have nearly all been profoundly imbued with this culture grounded in the humanities. They are very interesting representatives of our classical culture; they constitute some of the wealth we have placed on the credit sheet of Canada. Spiritual values have this particular quality that one can share them with neighbours without impoverishing one's self. Quebec has lost none of the glory these men shed far and wide. They have peremptorily proved that French culture is a great asset to Canada.

But what is really the value of the language by means of which this French culture is expressed in Canada? No one can doubt that the value of a culture can quite easily be appreciated by the wealth and beauty of the language which is its vehicle. The soul of a nation can be discovered in its language. The spirit which animates a nation is judged by its language. Hence it is natural to ask what kind of French is spoken in the Province of Quebec. You may have asked yourselves such a question more than once. The answer is very simple: the French of Quebec is the French of France. For too long a time it has

been thought in the English provinces of Canada that the language of the Province of Quebec was not authentic French. Fortunately we are better known to-day. Indeed, it is sufficient to know French and hear it spoken by Frenchmen from France to realize immediately that the language spoken and written in Paris is not different from that spoken in French Canada. The numerous French intellectuals who visit us, the French professors teaching at the Universities of Quebec and Montreal speak as we do and we speak as they do. It even often happens that they are delightedly pleased in hearing racy expressions of the 17th century, even of the 16th century, fall from the lips of our country people, expressions which they are sorry not to find any longer in France to-day. Our own professors who are invited to give lectures or conferences in France find themselves in an intellectual atmosphere absolutely identical with our own. I myself have been invited to address audiences in several parts of France and on each occasion I found that I was in perfect communion of language with my listeners. A very interesting remark is that the French spoken by my compatriots is the same everywhere in Canada, while in France it is not so and people of one province frequently do not understand people of another province.

No one can doubt that the language we speak is authentic French, as well as the culture of which it is the expression.

French culture is very rich in spiritual values. These spiritual values are the keystone of human culture. These spiritual values are precisely what makes culture worth while. French culture was built on these values. What is of the utmost importance to the value of culture is that it asserts the primacy of the spirit over the matter. It is by his spirit that man has true value; and in man all must be subordinated to the superior interests of the spirit. Furthermore the only values which are eternal are those of the spirit, while all others soon are outdated. Culture expands the spirit of man only in so far as it detaches him from the servitudes of matter and from the allurements of secondary values, to immerse him into the splendours of the light of the spirit.

Let me explain what I mean. The spirit, indeed, what is it? Where is it? This spirit is in you, it is your intelligence created in the image of God to be a created reflection of the divine intelligence. The spirit is your intelligence whose light appears to you all-laden with the primary truths which the wisdom of the Creator has accumulated in your soul to render possible

the governing of your life. It is your intelligence whose light is projected on things to draw from nature the hidden secrets which you must make use of to enrich your knowledge. The spirit, is, moreover; human reason enlightened by faith, and thus initiated in the secrets of divine wisdom. The spirit is again the breath of God always hovering over the world as during the first days of creation, seeking a place to land, unceasingly searching for a human intelligence sincerely desirous of being in intellectual communion with His thought and being enkindled by the contact of His love. The spirit is God Himself; it is the Spirit of God in Whom eternally dwell the infinite treasures of wisdom and science. The spirit is also all that the spirit thinks and contemplates. It is the sum of all the spiritual values entrusted by God to the spirit of man or accumulated by the human race since its beginning; it is the spiritual assets of humanity from which man must draw the formulas for the social, political and economic restorations of to-morrow if they are to be grounded on the respect of the rights of God and rights of man. You are well aware of these formulas which should be placed at the foundation of each human life. We must recognize in them a categorical imperative which must guide the life of the world. They constitute the principles of action from which nations as well as individuals cannot stray without exposing themselves to fall into the most lamentable errors. Here are some of the spiritual values indispensable to human life. You know them: the rights of God and the rights of human persons; the requirements of human brotherhood; the interdependence of souls in the bosom of the great human family; the superior laws of Christian charity enfolding in its divine embrace all the nations of the earth, and, with greater reason, all the groups in the same nation; the transcendent requirements of truth which always remain one above all the ignorances, all the prejudices, and all the passions; the imprescriptible rights of Christ and His Church. These are some of the spiritual realities which constitute the charter of our rights and by the same token that of our duties. We are bound to make them the fundamental rule of our lives.

Such is the spiritualism we must live on if we wish to walk in the light. This spiritualism which is at the base of French culture is the one I offer to your admiration tonight. We also find it throughout the glorious expansion of English culture with which you claim kinship. It is such a spiritualism which we have the responsibility of placing at the base of Canadian

civilization. It is such a spiritualism, strongly tested by centuries of history and suffering that French culture offers you. If you are keen on having the Canadian civilization deeply saturated with this spiritualism, you should be interested in French culture.

Endowed with two cultures which will compete in ardour to enrich its spiritual life, Canada will be called upon to offer to the world the spectacle of a civilization wherein will be made concrete, the ideal and the noble aspirations which have been the honour of our two great races.

Let us add that it is to the greater interest of our country that its civilization be strongly permeated with Christianity. To reach this ideal, French culture will be the most precious. I presume that you wish, as well as I do, that our country be and remain always a Christian country, a country whose legislation, institutions, politics and ambitions, draw their inspiration from the teaching of Christ. I also mean a nation whose sons are profoundly attached to Christ Himself. English and French people of Canada are the sons of a Christian tradition. We are bound to pay homage to Christ of all that we are, of all that we have, of our country as well as of everything else. But I do not forget that Catholics and Protestants do not understand Christianity in the same manner. Let us be frank enough to admit that, relative to Christianity, they are at diametrically opposite poles. Nevertheless, there exists in both groups concerning Christ, His divinity, His doctrine, His spirit, as well as concerning the moral obligations which every man has to become His disciple, convictions which meet and which should be pooled together so as to create a Christian atmosphere in the entire country, from ocean to ocean.

Thus by adhering more profoundly to Christ, by putting Christ more fully in our lives, in our homes, in our social activities as well as in our political life, we take the chance of making Christ penetrate more deeply into our Canadian life and civilization. Let us also put Christ frankly in the relations which should unite us, Catholics and Protestants. It is for this reason that I bring Him into my discussion; so that He may bring us together. Let us take it to heart to know one another; let us love one another as brothers. Let us not tie our hearts to our ideas, as I already said; let us learn to love even those who think differently from ourselves. Let us imitate Christ Who loved all those who lived with Him under the sun

of Palestine. He loved even those who did not think as He did, even those who cursed and persecuted Him.

The sentiments that I express I borrow from the Christian education I received, from the French culture in which my mind has been bathed since my tender years. They are the sentiments of millions of French Canadians who live with you in this country. They are the sentiments which French culture distributed throughout Canada. Let us look for truth. If we wish to find it, let us go to seek it where it is, in Christ. It is no where else. All other lights are a reflection of His, borrowed from His. Canadian civilization must diffuse such a light. If we sincerely desire it, we shall be able to build a Christian nation which could serve as a lesson to the world, a nation where Christ will be at home, where His teachings will be laws, His spirit will inspire the laws, where all men will be brothers; in a word, a Christian nation where all the citizens will have the ambition of walking in the light of Christ, towards His light, trying to enkindle their hearts at the fires of His divine charity.

Whether Protestants or Catholics, it is our duty to do our utmost to establish in our country a genuinely Christian civilization. To reach that goal French culture can be of immense service. The quality of humanism in which French culture is interested, the genuine character of its spiritualism and the inspiration of Christianity which enlightens its activities, such are the reasons why French culture should appear to you as a great asset to Canadian civilization.