

WAS THE CONSOLATION OF PHILOSOPHY BY BOETHIUS
THE PRODUCT OF A THOROUGHLY CHRISTIAN MENTALITY

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Anicius Manlius Torquatus Severinus Boethius, often called "the last of the Romans and the first of the Scholastics", was born of the old and illustrious Anician family about 480 A.D. in Rome. During his youth he received an excellent education, spending much time studying in Athens. Becoming master of Arts, Science, Philosophy, and Theology, he returned to Rome. His thorough knowledge of Greek literature won for him the esteem of the Ostrogothic king Theodoric, who was at that time master of Rome as vicar of the Emperor in Constantinople. He entered the service of the Roman Empire, becoming a Consul in 510. A bright and glorious future seemed in store for him, but it was short-lived. As Roman Consul, he incurred the disfavor of Theodoric by championing the people of Campania who were sorely oppressed by an edict that required them to sell all their grain to the government. He also defended Albinus, chief of the Senate, from the accusation of holding treasonable correspondence with Emperor Justin at Constantinople. It was a trumped-up charge. Boethius won the case, but in doing so he brought down upon himself the wrath of Theodoric, who was angered by his power and popularity as Consul. He was thereupon accused of maintaining "suspicious relations with the Byzantine court" and was imprisoned in the red brick tower of Pavia. His confinement

lasted two years, during which time he was occasionally tortured and then finally put to death in 524 or 526.

"Boethius was a powerful thinker, inclined to abstract speculation and fond of Metaphysics and Logic. He was not, however, exclusively a philosopher shut up in the realm of ideas. He was at the same time a scholar, a littérateur, a poet on occasion, an orator when necessary, and always a man of the world and a gentleman. The language of 'the last of the Romans', as he is called, though not free from affectation, is pure and elegant, and far superior to that of his time." (1)

Boethius thought that the chief need of the Latin world was Greek philosophy. He had a burning desire to translate into Latin, with commentaries, all the works of Plato and Aristotle, but due to his imprisonment and early death, he was unable to finish this tremendous task. He did, however, translate into Latin the Categories, the De Interpretatione, the Topics, both Analytics and the Sophistical Arguments. Perhaps Boethius translated other works of Aristotle besides the Organon, but it is uncertain. He translated Porphyry's Isagoge, which became the center of a dispute concerning universals which so agitated the early Middle Ages and stimulated the study of philosophy. In addition to these translations and commentaries, he composed other original treatises, especially on the syllogism. One of his most famous original works is, of course, The Consolation of Philosophy. On account of his extensive labor expended on translations and commentaries, he may be called the "bridge" between Antiquity and the Middle Ages. (2) He gave the West the benefit of Aristotle's philosophy and thus was the inaugurator of Scholasticism. "His translations of Porphyry and of

the logical works of Aristotle, accompanied by his commentaries and his own logical writings, were the only philosophical tool known to Western writers for centuries." (3) "He wrote with such beautiful sincerity and wisdom that the Middle Ages revered him above any other writer." (4) The book he wrote in prison, The Consolation of Philosophy, was a masterpiece and was read avidly throughout the Middle Ages. "Its success in the Middle Ages was phenomenal. Very few books have been translated and commented upon so often." (5) Later, in the thirteenth century, when St. Thomas Aquinas wrote his vast philosophical works, it is quite evident that he was thoroughly familiar with all the translations, commentaries, and original works of Boethius. There are numerous references to them all through his writings, especially to The Consolation of Philosophy. Boethius prepared the way for the work St. Thomas was later to do. "Had not the Platonism of St. Augustine been balanced by the Aristotelianism, however incomplete, of Boethius, history would not have been ready for St. Thomas Aquinas." (6) "Had his life been spared, Boethius might have saved St. Thomas Aquinas his gigantic task, or, rather, have performed it in a different way." (7)

There is no doubt whatsoever that Boethius was a Christian and a Catholic. However, was he only a superficial Catholic, and fundamentally a pagan? What shall we answer? His De Fide Catholica is fully Catholic in tone (Trinity, Creation, Original Sin, Redemption, Christ, Sacraments, Grace, the worldwide Church, Resurrection, Beatific Vision, etc.). "His Theological

Tractates gave to the medieval Latin world many of its technical terms and formulas, and were the basis of extremely important commentaries by the great theologians of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries." (8) However, it has been asked whether an author, who, when face to face with death, wrote a whole treatise, The Consolation of Philosophy, without any appeal to religion or any explicit mention of Jesus Christ, might be said to be a Christian in the full sense. This paper maintains, with others, that the book The Consolation of Philosophy is the product of a thoroughly Christian mentality.

Boethius was unjustly condemned on a trumped-up charge to imprisonment and death by Theodoric, who was jealous of his power and popularity. It must also be borne in mind that Theodoric belonged to the religious sect called Arians. This group was a heretical sect of the true Catholic Church. "If he (Boethius) was not a martyr, properly so-called, his Catholic faith was at least partly responsible for the unjust treatment to which he was subjected by the Arian king." (9) As has been stated earlier, one of the chief proximate causes for his imprisonment was his victory in defending and freeing Albinus, chief of the Senate, who was also facing a trumped-up charge. There is no doubt about it. Boethius was done a great injustice. Not only his brilliant career but even his life came to an abrupt halt. During the two years he spent in the tower of Pavia, the miserable Boethius sought the answer to the cruel way that Fate had dealt with him. He wrote a book, The Consolation of Philosophy, in which he answers the questions

which kept pounding in his head as he stood face to face with death. The book is in the form of a dialogue between himself and Lady Philosophy. Short metrical pieces, little masterpieces in themselves, are interspersed here and there in the prose. The work is arranged into five short books.

"In Book I Philosophy appears to the author and asks him the cause of his grief. Boethius explains how and why he has been thrown into prison, and expresses some doubt of Divine Providence, whose government does not seem to extend to man. Book II treats of fate and fortune, the vicissitudes of which we must accept all the more readily, as the seat of true happiness is in the interior of man and does not depend on his external condition. Book III is a dissertation on the "summum bonum", which indeed exists, but is not to be identified with riches, or honor, or power, or pleasure; -- these are imperfect goods; it is God, towards whom all things tend, however unconsciously. In Book IV he returns to the question of Providence. Why, in this world, are the wicked happy and prosperous, whereas the righteous go without reward? Philosophy contests the truth of this general assertion and shows that order is re-established in the future life. The sufferings of the just are frequently a necessary or useful trial. Finally, Book V treats of chance and the foreknowledge of God. Boethius establishes the harmony of the latter with the free will of man." (10)

Is it a proof that Boethius was not thoroughly a Catholic because there is no specific mention of Christ or an explicit appeal to religion in his Consolation of Philosophy? Certainly not! Several things must be remembered. First of all, Boethius was both a great philosopher and a great theologian. His works bear witness to this. Philosophy, however, cannot be immersed in theology. Philosophy has been called "the handmaid of the-

ology" and certainly there is no conflict between true philosophy and Catholic theology, but one cannot be immersed in the other. We must also remember that at this time the Romans still held pagan philosophers and ancient culture in high esteem. Christianity had not yet absorbed the ancient culture, and Boethius, true to his times, turned to philosophy for consolation. This was the natural thing to do for he had made the study of philosophy his life's work and it was ever on his mind. He did not, however, sacrifice any of his Catholic beliefs for pagan philosophy. On the contrary, philosophy strengthened his faith. His great ambition in life had been to give the writings of Aristotle to the West. Is it any wonder that in prison, with idle time on his hands, he would turn to his life work of expounding philosophy? Isn't it only natural that he would write such a book as the Consolation of Philosophy? Certainly it is! Just because there is lacking theological terms and specific mention of Christ in it does not at all necessarily mean that he is not a good Catholic. But some on account of this maintain he was only a superficial Catholic at the most.

"Yet . . . the Christian note is not so entirely absent from the Consolation as would at first appear; and, furthermore, we must make allowance for the particular bent which habitual association with philosophers gave to the mind of Boethius. A lifelong philosopher, he may, at the approach of death, have sought motives of resignation in philosophy, without renouncing his Christian convictions. In this he was but following a tradition common to the men of his type and time." (11)

Whether or not the Consolation of Philosophy was the product of a thoroughly Christian mentality can best be answered by looking at the book itself. It is divided into five small books, and the subject matter of each of these books has been given previously in this paper. An exposé of the fourth book shall give ample evidence that the Consolation of Philosophy definitely is a product of a thoroughly Christian mentality.

The whole book is in the form of a dialogue between the imprisoned Boethius and Lady Philosophy. The fourth small book is divided into seven parts; i.e., seven pieces of prose with seven little poems separating each one. The reason for these little poems interspersed throughout his book is clearly seen by his words after the sixth part of prose where Lady Philosophy says to him, "But I see that long since burdened with so weighty a question, and wearied with my long discourse, thou expectest the delight of verses; wherefore take a draught, that, being refreshed, thou mayest be able to go forward." (12)

Now let us devote our complete attention to an exposé of this fourth book. In the first part, Boethius, in speaking to Lady Philosophy, points out that the truths of philosophy can strengthen faith by supporting beliefs with reason when he says: "O Thou who bringest us to see true light, those things which hitherto thou hast treated of have manifestly appeared both to be divine when contemplated apart, and invincible when supported by thy reason, and what thou hast uttered, though the force of grief had made me forget it of late, yet heretofore I was not

altogether ignorant of it." (13) Then he sets forth his chief complaints for which he seeks an answer from philosophy through reasoning. "But this is the chiefest cause of my sorrow, that since the governor of all things is so good, there can either be any evil at all, or that it pass unpunished." (14) "But there is another greater than this; for wickedness bearing rule and sway, virtue is not only without reward, but lieth also trodden under the wicked's feet, and is punished instead of vice." (15) And he hastily adds: "That which (things) should be done in the kingdom of God, who knoweth all things, can do all things, but will do only that which is good, no man can sufficiently admire nor complain." (16) Lady Philosophy reassures him:

"It were indeed infinitely strange . . . if, as thou conceivest, in the best-ordered house of so great a householder the vilest vessels were made account of and the precious neglected; but it is not so. For . . . know that the good are always powerful, and the evil always abject and weak, and that vices are never without punishment, nor virtue without reward, and that the good are always prosperous, and the evil unfortunate, and many things of that sort, which will take away all cause of complaint, and give thee firm and solid strength." (17)

She tells him that she will show him the way which will carry home.

"And I will also fasten wings upon thy mind, with which she may rouse herself, that, all perturbation being driven away, thou mayest return safely into thy country by my direction, by my path, and with my wings." (18)

And thus ends the first part of book four.

In the next part Lady Philosophy begins offering her proof that "good men are always powerful, and evil men are of no

strength." (19) She points out that if we can prove that "goodness is potent, the weakness of evil will also be manifest," (20) or vice-versa. Then she begins her reasoning process by first of all recalling a few things mentioned in the preceding discussions. "Dost thou remember, then, that it was inferred by our former discourses that all the intentions of man's will doth hasten to happiness, though their courses be divers?" (21) Boethius agrees that this has been proved. "Dost thou also call to mind that blessedness is goodness itself, and consequently when blessedness is sought after, goodness must of course be desired?" (22) Boethius heartily agrees. "Therefore all men both good and bad without difference of intentions endeavor to obtain goodness." (23) Again he agrees. "But it is certain that men are made good by the obtaining of goodness." (24) Then Lady Philosophy brings out her point:

"Wherefore good men obtain what they desire. And if evil men did obtain the goodness they desire, they could not be evil. Therefore, since they both desire goodness, but the one obtains it and the other not, there is no doubt but that the good men are powerful and the evil weak." (25)

This is a valid argument and an easy proof to understand. She continues:

"Again, if there be two to whom the same thing is proposed according to nature, and the one of them bring it perfectly to pass with his natural function, but the other cannot exercise that natural function but after another manner than is agreeable to nature, and doth not perform that which he had proposed, but imitated the other who performed it: which of these two would you judge to be more powerful? . . . But the good seek to obtain the chiefest good . . . by the

natural function of virtues, but the evil endeavor to obtain the same by various concupiscences, which are not the natural function of obtaining goodness." (26)

Lady Philosophy again says later:

"Ponder likewise the immense impotency of wicked men. For they are no light or trifling rewards which they desire, and cannot obtain: but they fail in the very sum and top of things: neither can the poor wretches compass that which they only labor for nights and days: in which thing the forces of the good eminently appear. For thou judgest him to be most able to walk who going on foot could come as far as there were any place to go in: so must thou of force judge him most powerful who obtains the end of all that can be desired, beyond which there is nothing." (27)

Farther on Lady Philosophy concludes this part of the discourse by summing up:

"For they (evil men) do what pleases their senses but cannot perform what they would. For they do what pleases their senses, thinking to obtain the good which they desire by those things which cause them delight; but they obtain it not, because shameful action cannot arrive to happiness." (28)

In the third part of book four Lady Philosophy continues to show that the wicked miss their target entirely while the good score a bull's-eye. The target they are aiming at is happiness. Both seek the same end but they try to attain it by different means. No one can deprive a good man of his virtue nor his reward to come. This power lies within the good man himself because he has a free will and is personally responsible for the ultimate happiness or complete frustration which follows this earthly life. And by being good in this life, good men, as it were, get a foretaste of heaven. Virtue makes a man a real man,

but wickedness likens a man to a beast. Lady Philosophy brings this point out very nicely:

"But since virtue alone can exalt us above men, wickedness must needs cast those under the desert of men, which it hath bereaved of that condition. Wherefore thou canst not account him a man whom thou seest transformed by vices. Is the violent extorter of other men's goods carried away with his covetous desire? Thou mayest liken him to a wolf. Is the angry and unquiet man always contending and brawling? Thou mayest compare him to a dog. Doth the treacherous fellow rejoice that he hath deceived others with his hidden frauds? Let him be accounted no better than a fox. Doth the outrageous fret and fume? Let him be thought to have a lion's mind. Is the fearful and timorous afraid without cause? Let him be esteemed like to hares and deer. Is the slow and stupid always idle? He liveth an ass's life. Doth the light and unconstant change his courses? He is nothing different from the birds. Is he drowned in filthy and unclean lusts? He is entangled in the pleasure of a stinking sow. So that he who, leaving virtue, ceaseth to be a man, since he cannot be partaker of the divine condition, is turned into a beast." (29)

At the beginning of the fourth part of book four Boethius agrees with Lady Philosophy that she has amply shown that vicious men are like brute beasts. But, he argues, why doesn't God restrain them from harming good men? She answers that they indeed are restrained, as she will explain more fully later. Further, they are more unhappy when they have fulfilled their evil desires than if they had not been able to do so, for these deeds do not bring them the true happiness they are seeking. Besides, she points out, life is short and the wicked will be punished for all eternity in the next life while the good will enjoy perfect happiness. This concept of life as a journey ending in Heaven is a thoroughly Christian concept. And even in

this earthly life, the good are happy and the wicked miserable. Indeed, Lady Philosophy says, wicked men are more happy being punished than if they escaped the hands of justice, for "the wicked have some good annexed when they are punished, to wit, the punishment itself, which by reason of justice is good, and when they are not punished, they have a further evil . . .

Wherefore the vicious are far more unhappy by escaping punishment unjustly, than by being justly punished." (30) Knowing human nature, Boethius comments that the wicked usually will not admit they are unhappy, but go to great care always to appear happy. The true philosopher will lift his eyes to things above and not wallow in the mud with these wicked men. These wicked men are to be pitied more than hated because they are, as it were, sick with the greatest malady that may be. "Love then the good, and pity thou the ill." (31)

In the fifth part of book four Boethius continues to quiz Lady Philosophy, especially seeking the answer to a question that many great philosophers have attempted to answer throughout the ages. We see in this world that oftentimes the wicked prosper and the good have a wretched time, and that the wicked sometimes seem to have all the strokes of good fortune and the good to have all the strokes of bad fortune. Boethius, knowing that the world is governed by a Supreme Governor (God), asks Lady Philosophy the cause of this "luck", since if it has no cause it would be accidental chance. Are the fortunes of men the result of blind chance?

Lady Philosophy answers him in the sixth part of the book.

"Then she, smiling a little, said, 'Thou invitest me to a matter which is most hardly found out, and can scarcely be sufficiently declared; . . . For in this matter are wont to be handled these questions: of the simplicity of Providence; of the course of Fate; of sudden chances; of God's knowledge and predestination, and of free will; which how weighty they are, thou thyself discernest. But because it is part of thy cure to know these things also, though the time be short, yet we will endeavor to touch them briefly."
(32)

Lady Philosophy explains Providence by saying it is Divine Reason itself, while Fate is the unfolding in time of the plan of Divine Reason.

"For as a workman conceiving the form of anything in his mind takes his work in hand, and executes by order of time that which he had simply and in a moment foreseen, so God by His Providence disposes whatsoever is to be done with simplicity and stability, and by Fate effects by manifold ways and in the order of time those very things which He disposes." (33)

Fate obeys Providence. There is a series of causes for everything that happens, and this series of causes goes back ultimately to the Uncaused Causer, who is God. We mortals sometimes fail to see the chain of causes which determine our fortune, but nevertheless Divine Providence guides everything, and all events are subject to it. Why should adversity and prosperity happen to both the good and the wicked seemingly indiscriminately? Lady Philosophy explains this very nicely. It is not through blind chance, but God's Providence is ever guiding events. God "beholding from His high turret of providence seeth what is fitting for everyone, and applieth that which He knoweth to be most

convenient." (34) God knows what is best for everyone. Sometimes good men are completely in power. Sometimes though

"She (Providence) mixeth for others sour and sweet according to the disposition of their souls; she troubles some lest they should fall to dissolution by long prosperity, others are vexed with hardships, that they may confirm the forces of their mind with the use and exercise of patience. Some are too much afraid of that which they are able to bear. Others make less account than there is cause of that which they cannot endure. All these she affrayeth with afflictions that they make trial of themselves. Many have bought the renown of this world with a glorious death. Some, overcoming all torments, have showed by their example that virtues cannot be conquered by miseries, which things how well and orderly they are done, and how much to their good upon whom they are seen to fall, there can be no doubt." (35)

Although we may understand Providence in a limited way, we certainly cannot know the designs of God. "For it is impossible for any man either to comprehend by his wit or to explicate in speech all the frame of God's work." (36)

In the last section of book four Lady Philosophy sums up.

"Wherefore a wise man must be no more troubled when he is assaulted with adversity, than a valiant captain dismayed at the sound of an alarm. For difficulties are the matter by which the one must extend his glory, and the other increase his wisdom. For which cause virtue is so called, because it hath sufficient strength to overcome adversity. For you, that are proficient in virtue, are not come hither to be dissolute with dainties or to languish in pleasures. You skirmish fiercely with any fortune, lest either affliction oppress you or prosperity corrupt you. Stay yourselves strongly in the mean! For whatsoever cometh either short, or goeth beyond, may well contemn felicity, but will never obtain any reward of labor. For it is placed in your power to frame to yourselves what fortune you please. For all that seemeth unsavoury either exerciseth or correcteth or punisheth." (37)

With this little summary packed with wisdom, the fourth book comes to an end. This exposé of the fourth book has been made in order to lay before the reader a part of his work, and to demonstrate that the Consolation of Philosophy is the product of a thoroughly Christian mentality. If after reading the entire work and making a thorough study of it a person would deny that Boethius was thoroughly a Christian, I contend, with Very Reverend Patrick Cummins, O.S.B., that "the lack of full Christian mentality then (I cannot avoid the conclusion) is to be found rather in the critic than in the layman of the sixth century."
(38)

There is yet one more point which must be discussed. Isn't the Consolation of Philosophy Neo-Platonic in inspiration and tainted with Stoicism? I answer that perhaps upon first glance such would seem to be the case, and, in reality, it certainly was influenced by Neo-Platonic and Stoic philosophy. But, it must be remembered that it was written in the 6th century when such philosophy was prevalent. We are prone to make the mistake of judging people by our own times instead of the times they actually lived in. In the light of his times, there is no doubt in my mind but that Boethius was thoroughly a Christian -- a great and outstanding Catholic. That he was influenced by his times cannot be denied. Wasn't St. Augustine also influenced by Neo-Platonism? Wasn't he at one time considered a Neo-Platonic philosopher? Yet he is a canonized saint today. Later in his life he saw some of the errors of his philosophic writings and he retracted some of his Neo-Platonic statements. Boethius did not

have a chance. His tragic life came to an end far before its time. He had far from developed all his talent as a philosopher and he did not have time to study thoroughly all the philosophy which he yearned to study. If one judges him by the period he lived in, I think he would agree that fundamentally Boethius was thoroughly a Christian.

This paper by an exposé of a part of his Consolation of Philosophy and by other arguments has attempted to demonstrate this. An over-all picture of his life must be considered in order to make a just decision. This paper contends with Rand of Harvard and the Very Reverend Patrick Cummins, O.S.B., of Conception, Missouri, that the Consolation of Philosophy was the product of a thoroughly Christian mentality. And this paper agrees wholeheartedly with Otto Bardenhewer of Munich that the Consolation of Philosophy is:

"A work of art, redolent of mind, imagination and heart, wherein poems, deeply felt and perfect in form, interchange with prose, offering refreshing pauses to scientific effort. The author is a Christian, a Christian of deep faith, as is clear from the purity of his principles, dogmatic and ethical, and still more clear from the steadiness and warmth wherewith those principles are upheld." (39)

As the first Scholastic, we owe him much. St. Thomas Aquinas quoted him very frequently in his works, and the Scholastics of the Middle Ages revered him exceedingly. His name deserves a place on the list of great philosophers of all times. Scholastic philosophers of our own day would do well to give greater heed to Boethius, "the first Scholastic".

FOOTNOTES

1. The Reverend J. Tixeront, A Handbook of Patrology, translated by S.A. Raemers, Ph.D., p. 357.

2. Cf. The Reverend Frederick Copleston, S.J., A History of Philosophy, Volume 1, Greece and Rome, p. 485.

3. Anton C. Pegis, The Wisdom of Catholicism. Edited, with an introduction and notes, by Anton C. Pegis, President, Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, Toronto, Canada. (Fourth and Fifth Books of The Consolation of Philosophy by Boethius translated by F.H. Stewart and E.K. Rand.) p. 160.

4. Anna Mary Devlin, "Great Books Written in Prison," Ave Maria. 47(June 11, 1938)748.

5. The Reverend J. Tixeront, op. cit., p. 359.

6. The Very Reverend Patrick Cummins, O.S.B., Boethius and Benedict. A Paper delivered before a meeting of the American Benedictine Academy, New Orleans, August, 1949. p. 1.

7. E.K. Rand, Founders of the Middle Ages, as quoted by the Very Reverend Patrick Cummins, O.S.B., op. cit., p. 2.

8. Anton C. Pegis, op. cit., p. 160.

9. The Reverend J. Tixeront, op. cit., p. 357.

10. Ibid., pp. 358-59.

11. Ibid., p. 358.

12. Anton C. Pegis, op. cit., p. 181.

13. Ibid., p. 161.

14. Loc. cit.

15. Ibid., p. 162.

16. Loc. cit.

17. Loc. cit.

18. Loc. cit.

19. Ibid., p. 163.

20. Loc. cit.

21. Ibid., p. 164.
22. Loc. cit.
23. Loc. cit.
24. Loc. cit.
25. Loc. cit.
26. Loc. cit.
27. Ibid., p.165.
28. Ibid., p. 167.
29. Ibid., p. 169.
30. Ibid., p. 172.
31. Ibid., p. 174.
32. Ibid., p. 176.
33. Ibid., p. 177.
34. Ibid., p. 179.
35. Loc. cit.
36. Ibid., p. 181.
37. Ibid., p. 184.
38. The Very Reverend Patrick Cummins, O.S.B., op. cit. ,
p. 11.
39. Quoted by the Very Reverend Patrick Cummins, O.S.B.,
op. cit., p. 18.

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