ERASMUS: *THE PRAISE OF FOLLY*

To this same class of fools belong those who beguile themselves with the silly but pleasing notion that if they look upon a picture or image of St. Christopher,—that huge Polyphemus,—they will not die that day; or that he who salutes an image of St. Barbara with the proper form of address will come back from battle safe; or that one who approaches St. Erasmus on certain days with wax candles and prayers will soon be rich. They have found a new Hercules in St. George,—a sort of second Hippolytus. They seem to adore even his horse, which is scrupulously decked out with gorgeous trappings, and additional offerings are constantly being made in the hope of gaining new favors. His bronze helmet one would think half divine, the way people swear by it.

And what shall I say of those who comfortably delude themselves with imaginary pardons for their sins' and who measure the time in purgatory with an hour glass into years, months, days, hours, with all the precision of a mathematical table? There are plenty, too, who, relying upon certain magical little certificates and prayers,—which some pious imposter devised either in fun or for the benefit of his pocket,—believe that they may procure riches, honor, future happiness, health, perpetual prosperity, long life, a lusty old age,—nay, in the end, a seat at the right hand of Christ in heaven; but as for this last, it matters not how long it be deferred: they will content themselves with the joys of heaven only when they must finally surrender the pleasures of this world, to which they lovingly cling.

The trader, the soldier, and the judge think that they can clean the Augean stable of a lifetime, once for all, by sacrificing a single coin from their ill-gotten gains. They flatter themselves that all sorts of perjury, debauchery, drunkenness, quarrels, bloodshed, imposture, perfidy, and treason can be compounded for by contract and so adjusted that, having paid off their arrears, they can begin a new score.

How foolish, or rather how happy, are those who promise themselves more than supernal happiness if they repent the verses of the seven—holy psalms! Those magical lines are supposed to have been taught to St. Bernard by a demon, who seems to have been a wag; but he was not very clever, and, poor fellow, was frustrated in his attempt to deceive the saint. These silly things which even I, Folly, am almost ashamed of, are approved not only by the common herd but even by the teachers of religion.

How foolish, too, for religious bodies each to give preference to its particular guardian saint! Nay, each saint has his particular office allotted him, and is addressed each in his special way: this one is called upon to alleviate toothache; that, to aid in childbirth; others, to restore a stolen article, bring rescue to the shipwrecked, or protect cattle,—and so on with the rest, who are much too numerous to mention. A few indeed among the saints are good in more than one emergency, especially the Holy Virgin, to whom the common man now attributes almost more than to her Son.

And for what, after all, do men petition the saints except for foolish things? Look at the votive offerings which cover the walls of certain churches and with which you see even the ceiling filled; do you find anyone who expresses his gratitude that he has escaped Folly or because he has become a whit wiser? One perhaps was saved from drowning, another recovered when he had been run through by his enemy; another, while his fellows were fighting, ran away with expedition and success; another, on the point of being hanged,
escaped through the aid of some saintly friend of thieves, and lived to relieve a few more of those whom he believed to be overburdened with their wealth.

These various forms of foolishness so pervade the whole life of Christians that even the priests themselves find no objection to admitting, not to say fostering, them, since they do not fail to perceive how many tidy little sums accrue to them from such sources. But what if some odious philosopher should chime in and say, as is quite true: "You will not die badly if you live well. You are redeeming your sins when you add to the sum that you contribute a hearty detestation of evil doers: then you may spare yourself tears, vigils, invocations, fasts, and all that kind of life. You may rely upon any saint to aid you when once you begin to imitate his life."

As for the theologians, perhaps the less said the better on this gloomy and dangerous theme, since they are a style of man who show themselves exceeding supercilious and irritable unless they can heap up six hundred conclusions about you and force you to recant; and if you refuse, they promptly brand you as a heretic,—for it is their custom to terrify by their thunderings those whom they dislike. It must be confessed that no other group of fools are so reluctant to acknowledge Folly's benefits toward them, although I have many titles to their gratitude, for I make them so in love with themselves that they seem to be happily exulted to the third heaven, whence they look down with something like pity upon all other mortals, wandering about on the earth like mere cattle.

Then they hedge themselves about with such an array of magisterial definitions, conclusions, corollaries, propositions explicate and implicate, and do so abound in subterfuges, that chains forged by Vulcan himself could not hold them so firm but that they could escape by one of those distinctions which enable them to cut all knots as easily as with a two-edged ax, so readily do they think up and rattle out new and prodigious terns and expressions.

Finally, the theologians are at their best when they are explaining (in their own opinion) such deep mysteries as: How was the world founded and brought into order? How is original sin transmitted to posterity? How can the accidents subsist in the eucharist without their substance? Nay, these are trite and easy questions. The great and illustrious theologians, as they dub themselves, will only awaken when something like the following is proposed: Does supernatural generation require time for its accomplishment? Has Christ a double relation of sonship? Is the proposition possible, "God the father hates the Son"? Might God have chosen to assume the form of a woman, a devil, an ass, a gourd, or a stone?...

St. Paul, they admit, was distinguished for his faith, but nevertheless when he said, "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen," he defined it but inaccurately. He may have excelled in charity, yet he fails to limit and define it with dialectic precision in his first letter to the Corinthians. Chapter XIII. The disciples administered the eucharist reverently, and yet had they been asked about the terminus a quo and the terminus ad quem of transubstantiation; as to how a body can be in two places at the same time; of the differences which exist between Christ's body in heaven, on the cross, and in the holy wafer or at what point does transubstantiation occur, since the prayer through which it is effected is, as a quantitas discreta, in a state of flux,—asked of these matters the apostles would not have replied with the acuteness with which the followers of Scotus distinguish and define these subleties.
The apostles knew the mother of Jesus, but who of them could philosophically prove how she was preserved from the sin of Eve, as do our divines? Peter received the keys, and from one who would not commit them to unworthy hands, but whether or not he knew how one could have the key of knowledge without knowledge itself, he certainly never discussed the matter. The apostles baptized, but never taught the formal, material, efficient, or final cause of baptism, nor do they mention delible or indelible characters.... The apostles inculcated grace, but never distinguished between gratia gratis data and gratia gratificans. They exhorted to good works, but did not perceive the distinction between opus operans and opus operatum. They frequently urge charity upon us without dividing "infused" from "acquired," or explaining whether charity be an accident or a substance, a created or an uncreated thing.

Next to the theologians in their self-satisfaction may he ranked those who are commonly called the religious and the monks, both terms quite wide of the truth, since a good part of them are a long ways from religion, and as for the monks (whose name suggests solitude), they are to he met in every byway. I do not see who could be more miserable than they unless Folly came to their aid in many ways. Although every one so execrates that stripe of man that even a casual meeting with them is regarded as ominous, yet they have a magnificent idea of their own virtues. First they deem it the most exalted piety to have let learning so completely alone that they cannot even read. Then when they bray out the psalms—which they cannot even understand—in the churches, they flatter themselves that they are delighting the ears of the saints with their sweet harmonies. Some of then laud their beggary and filth as great virtues and loudly clamor for bread from door to door. They beset the inns, coaches, and ships, not a little to the prejudice of other beggars....

The greater part of the monks exhibit such confidence in ceremonies and trivial human traditions that one would think a single heaven would scarce suffice as a worthy reward for their merits. They little think that Christ will put them off with a “Who hath required these things at your hands?” and will call them to account only for the stewardship of his legacy of love. One will confidently call attention to his paunch, filled with all kinds of fish; another will pour out a hundred bushels of psalms; a third will enumerate his myriad fastings and will tell how a single meal nearly killed him; a fourth will produce as many ceremonies as would fill seven merchant ship; a fifth will plead that for threescore years he never so much as touched money except he fingered it through double thick gloves; a sixth will bring along his hood so old and nasty that no sailor would venture to protect himself with it.... But Christ shall interrupt their boastings: “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees! I left you one great precept, but of that alone I hear nothing from you. I told you plainly in my gospel, with no disguising parables, that my Father’s kingdom was promised, not for cowl's, petitions, and fastings but for deeds of love. I know them not who rely on their own merits.”

When the monks and friars shall hear these things and shall see simple sailors and carters preferred to them, how shall their faces fall as they look at one another!