

# Aging Hippies or Old Western Men?

— Thomas Storck —

**S**everal issues ago someone wrote a letter to the editor of this magazine in which he charged that *Caelum et Terra* was “published by and evidently for superannuated flower children.” That is, ageing, or maybe already old, hippies. Actually, a dictionary that I have at hand defines superannuated as “incapacitated or disqualified for active duty by advanced age.” I can speak only for myself, of course, but whether or not I was ever really a flower child or a hippie (that depends on how one defines those terms), I probably am “incapacitated or disqualified for active duty” in those professions because of my “advanced age.” But continuing with my research in the dictionary, I find the definition of hippie beginning thus: “a usually young person who rejects the mores of established society....” I am afraid that I am no longer young, but as to the latter part of that definition, I do indeed plead guilty. I do reject the mores of the established society I see around me. That is, I reject companionate marriage, divorce, birth control, abortion, fornication, television, wars waged against civilian populations or for the profit of corporations, the despoiling of the environment, economic life as a mere means of getting rich, relativism in philosophy, technology run wild, alcohol as a method of getting drunk, practical atheism, and many other things that are surely a part of the “mores of established society” nowadays. It is true that when the original hippies rejected “the mores of established society” they were embracing much evil as well as rejecting some good. But, as I have written more than once in the pages of this magazine, I am still convinced that those original hippies were reacting against a society that was even then thoroughly corrupted, though I freely admit that the legacy the hippies left behind has contributed much to its further corruption. But this is beside the point I want to discuss. I am not now interested in those hippies or flower children of the 1960s, but in whether these terms are good descriptions of the editors of *Caelum et Terra* today. And I would like, instead of “superannuated flower children,” to suggest another and more unfamiliar label for us, or at least for myself. It is “Old Western Men.”

The term “Old Western Men” is a phrase coined by C. S. Lewis and used by him in “De Descriptione Temporum,” his inaugural lecture as Professor of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Cambridge University in 1954. Let me give a bit of background to explain what he meant by it.

Because Lewis was professor of “Medieval and Re-

naissance” literature, he was at some pains to show that there was no big break in Western culture between those two eras. The Renaissance was not the beginning of modern times but a continuation of the classical and Christian civilization of the West. Instead Lewis placed the great divide between traditional and modern culture later. Modernity, on his view, began among some restless intellectuals in the late 17th century but did not permeate society as a whole until the first quarter of the 19th century. Since Lewis believed that the pagan and the traditional Christian have more in common with each other than either of them has with the secular post-Christian, he called everything before the birth of modern times “Old Western Culture.” And who are the Old Western Men, then? Simply those, like Lewis, whose convictions and attitudes place them on the earlier side of that gulf between the traditional West and modernity. They would be thus men (and obviously this includes women) who realize that man’s place in the cosmos is essentially a limited one, one limited by the fixed nature given him by his Creator. This, it seems to me, is the most essential difference between the old and the new culture—is man the master of his own will and fate or is he a subject of the Almighty Creator and Sustainer of all things, whose ways and whose will we must conform ourselves to? Of course, Old Western Culture contains much more than this, but I have tried to reduce it here to its essentials.

If all this is the case, how does it relate to the editors and writers of *Caelum et Terra*? Obviously what I am about to say is not an official statement of the magazine, and perhaps applies fully only to myself. But I do not think it distorts too much what any of the other editors or writers might believe. If so, I know they are fully capable of distinguishing their own views from mine. In the first place, then, as religious believers, in fact as Catholics, we accept man’s radical dependence on God. A Catholic can hardly deny that if he wishes to be orthodox. But more than this we accept *society’s* radical dependence on God. We do not hold that somehow man becomes emancipated from God just because he has founded a political community or a business corporation or an artistic studio. And we do not hold that *Catholics* become emancipated from God’s Church in any of the above circumstances. If I am bound to obey God on pain of sin, then when I work with others, I had better see that the structures we establish do not become the “structures of sin” that Pope John Paul has spoken of in *Sollicitudo* and elsewhere.

But the permeation of society goes beyond this. It seems

strange to me that if the most important fact about man is his essential and radical dependence on God, that God can be ignored in any part of man's life. For myself, I do not see how God can be ignored in literature, in music, in the fine arts. Certainly this does not mean that we are to have only a "churchly" culture, a sort of perpetual Sunday School atmosphere. To give that notion the lie, one has only to look at the body of art and literature comprising "Old Western Culture." The essence of secularism is not concern with the world and with ordinary life, but such concern divorced from any acknowledgment of God's existence and importance.

In the Middle Ages even sacred buildings abounded with carvings and images of daily life, e.g., carvings of the typical work and occupations of each of the seasons, planting, harvesting, etc. But by the mere fact that these representations were carved on a church they were therefore related and subordinated to Almighty God. In medieval England the craft guilds produced lavish dramas around the time of the feast of Corpus Christi showing the whole of salvation history from creation to the Last Judgment. Were these akin to Sunday School skits? The historical facts and truths of the Faith were indeed portrayed, but amid

considerable farce and slapstick, such as Cain's greeting to his brother Abel in the Wakefield cycle, "Come kis mine ars" (*The Killing of Abel*, line 59). These are profoundly Catholic plays, but in their concern for the everyday life of mankind they mingle the sacred and the profane, as indeed God has done in his creation. God is never forgotten in these dramas but neither is the fact that God has redeemed ordinary men and women, sinners, in the midst of their ordinary lives.

But are the editors and writers of *Caelum et Terra* especially entitled to be considered Old Western Men? Certainly there are many others of these "Old Men" around and they have other publications as well. But I fear that there is much religiousness that is not of the Old Western Culture, but simply another form of modern thought. Certainly I include here what is called "liberal" religion, though I do not like to apply the words "liberal" and "conservative" to groups in the Church. But even more, consider the supposed highly religious nature of American society. Some writers, on the basis of how many Americans claim to believe in God or how many go to church more than once a month, are quick to claim that the United States is one of the most religious societies in the world. Do not be fooled. If all that kind of religion meant anything, then we would not have perhaps the most secularized, most materialistic society in the world. If we were as religious as we like to claim, why does lascivious television flourish among us as the green bay tree? The superficial manifestations of religiosity that we see among us should not be confused with those of a society that is deeply rooted in the

faith of Jesus Christ.

But if we of *Caelum et Terra* are just such old fogies, why does the faint suspicion linger that we might be "superannuated flower children?" However could such a charge have arisen? Well, as I myself have written several times in the columns of this journal, the counterculture of the 1960s had more in common with the traditional West, with Old Western Culture, than many people suspect. The problem too often is that the zealous defenders of Western civilization are not defending Western civilization, at least not Old Western

civilization. They are usually zealous for capitalism, for unrestrained technology, for education as technique instead of contemplation, in fact for most of the cultural heresies of the 19th and 20th centuries. They misunderstand, it seems to me, the entire course of western civilization since the late Middle Ages. It is true that those whom they declaim against, such as the multiculturalists or the militant secularists, are deserving of their scorn, but it is as important to know *why* something is our enemy as *that* it is our enemy. We are not true defenders of the Old Western Culture if we reject the '60s root and branch or if we defend American culture as a good example of the

historic Western world. The fact that many of the criticisms of bourgeois society made during the 60s were anticipated by like criticisms made by Christopher Dawson, Hilaire Belloc, and others should make Catholic thinkers realize that the matter is more complicated than many of them seem to appreciate. And perhaps those who in whole or in part repudiated the "mores of established society" in the 60s, whatever errors they might have embraced, can nevertheless repudiate the mores of bourgeois secular society and embrace the vision of a Catholic civilization more easily than those whose thinking has never led them to question the roots of the culture around them.

In any case, I am glad of the label "Old Western Man," just as I do not blush too much at the label "ageing hippie." Whatever errors and sins are included under the latter, mainstream American culture in the early 1960s was sorely in need of profound and radical questioning. If Catholics had been doing more of that questioning then, and if they had done it from Catholic premises, then the history of the last few decades might have been very different. But better late than never—if we can begin that Catholic questioning in the '90s, then perhaps we can do some of that good that our brethren omitted to do thirty years ago. And if we cannot have the impact on society they might have had, at least we can remake our own minds and our own souls. That is surely no small work.

*Old Western Hippie Thomas Storck writes from Greenbelt, Maryland.*

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