

ERIC GILL¹

ERIC GILL was indisputably a great sculptor. But he was something greater and more important still; he was an apostle. He exercised his apostolate in the use of his chisel, just as the preacher and theologian exercise theirs in speech or writing. The message he felt himself entrusted with to give to the world is none other than 'the good news' of the Gospel, summed up in that only word of life: *Truth*. 'I am the Truth,' said our divine Master. *Truth can only be found in true things.* It is not only a quality of the mind of man, but also a quality of things of being. The human mind possesses this quality, we say, when it answers to the object of its knowledge and reflects it faithfully; but things are termed true when they reflect faithfully the idea of them that is in God's mind. The second Person of the Holy Trinity is the *Truth* because He is the *Word*, the perfect expression of the divine mind. Hence it is through Him that the divine Artist has made all things, and these things are true in themselves in so far as they answer to the divine idea. Among the material beings God has created, man alone can fail to reflect God's idea of him, in the measure that he abuses his free will and withdraws himself from God; then he ceases to be true.

The Incarnation of the *Word* is the means chosen by God to re-establish men in truth—not only in truth of mind, which is indeed an indispensable preliminary, but in truth of being as well. Men must not only know Christ; they must be one with Him. But, as I have just said,

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this truth of being must first be sought with the mind. Men must know Christ, must understand His teaching and see everything in relation to Him. Those who already have this knowledge, understanding and life, have the duty of bestowing it on others, of being apostles. Such men must use the talents God has given them, whether they be endowed with the golden tongue of a Chrysostom, the inspired pen of a Thomas Aquinas, the brush of a Fra Angelico, or the chisel of an Eric Gill. It is not only their divinely given talents which make these men great; it is even more the truth that is in them, which is part of their being, which cries aloud for diffusion (as the good always does), and for self-communication to others.

That, in my opinion, is the real meaning of Eric Gill's sculpture. He was given a gleam of Truth and this gleam became part of himself. He used his gift to embody this truth in things to the best of his ability, so that the things he has made are not just 'works of art,' but expressions of a truth—not merely of a human truth, the product of his own mind, but a reflection of the objective truth which comes from God. There lies the secret of his inspiration. I do not pretend that all his works are equally inspired in this way; sometimes, I think, the light was veiled from him, as the star was hidden from the sight of the Magi. But it is evident in almost all his religious works, and in a good number of his secular ones, for all who have eyes to see.

There is no doubt something unusual and unexpected in this artist's work; those who view it superficially will often be disconcerted by that, while others (which is the more regrettable attitude) will find attraction solely in its novelty. The fact is that we mostly tend to prefer what is usual and mediocre. What is fashionable is not necessarily good—a truth evident even in the Incarnation; Truth was there a stumbling-block for many in Israel just because of the prejudices of the Jews. Whether Eric Gill's

art is or is not worthy of remark, let it not be condemned because it is different from the horrors which are common in religious sculpture, the statues and other 'pious' representations which so often mar our churches. These last, at any rate, can lay no claim to truth; often the very material used is a deception, and what is supposed to be a representation of divine persons and things is a mere travesty of truth, and ultimately provides an obstacle rather than a help to the faithful. The meaning of Eric Gill's work must be sought beyond outward representation, beyond even purity of line and perfection of figure: this work embodies an idea, or rather a truth, which will not be recognised by the hasty passer-by, but by those who linger to contemplate.

I have not the space, nor most likely the competence, to analyse either the artistic values or the meaning even of his more famous works. But I can speak with some authority of his apostolate, as being one who has had the honour to call him friend, brother even, since he was for twenty-two years a member of the Third Order of St. Dominic. I do not think it is a pure coincidence that he belonged to an Order of which the motto is 'Truth.' He possessed some at least of the qualities which mark the sons of St. Dominic and the brethren of St. Thomas Aquinas; not the least among them was the fearless and disinterested pursuit of what he knew to be the truth, whatever the opinions of his contemporaries. And just as the truth preached by Dominic finally triumphed in Languedoc, and the truth taught by Thomas finally prevailed in the universities of Europe, so, making due allowance for obvious differences, the truth taught by the chisel and the pen of this new apostle has begun to prevail in this age of lying and false sentiment.

Mr. Gill's humility would probably not have allowed him to recognise himself in the apostle whose portrait I have sketched, but he would most certainly have wished to subscribe to the ideal of the apostolate which I have

tried briefly to outline. I am the more certain of it in that his writing too was masterly, and he has set forth his ideas in numerous articles published in BLACKFRIARS and other important Catholic and non-Catholic periodicals. Not content with being enlightened and carried away passively by his inspiration, he showed an understanding of no common quality in his study, under the guidance of St. Thomas, of the philosophy of art and beauty, and of what they hold of value for theology. He found that art and beauty form an integral part of life, that life itself consists in knowing, loving and serving God. His enquiry led him to consider art in relation to industrialism, and perhaps it is in this field that the apostolate he marked out for himself and his work is most clearly seen. In this short article it is impossible for me to give even a brief account of this point of view. I will limit myself to quoting a phrase which he loved and was never tired of repeating: 'The artist is not a special kind of man, but every man is a special kind of artist.'

HILARY J. CARPENTER, O.P.

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We have now to record with deepest regret the recent death of this apostolic man. His art, his writing and speaking, his mode of living, were all marked with the one great quality of fearless and absorbing sincerity. His inspired chisel, his vigorous pen and his gentle but persuasive voice have gone; but his sculpture, his books, his teaching, the truth that for him was life, these will remain.

MAY HE REST IN PEACE.

EDITOR.