

# Sermons in Light and Color

By CHARLES J. CONNICK, A.F.D.

**P**OETS and symbolists of all ages have long celebrated the dreamer whose dream comes true. They have sung of his alliance with great spiritual forces and have celebrated his achievements in all walks of life. But there is one persistent dreamer who is not always accredited with the fruit of his dreaming. The priest who preaches to such purpose that his messages become creative impulses to flower forth in significant beauty and power, is not so well known as he should be.

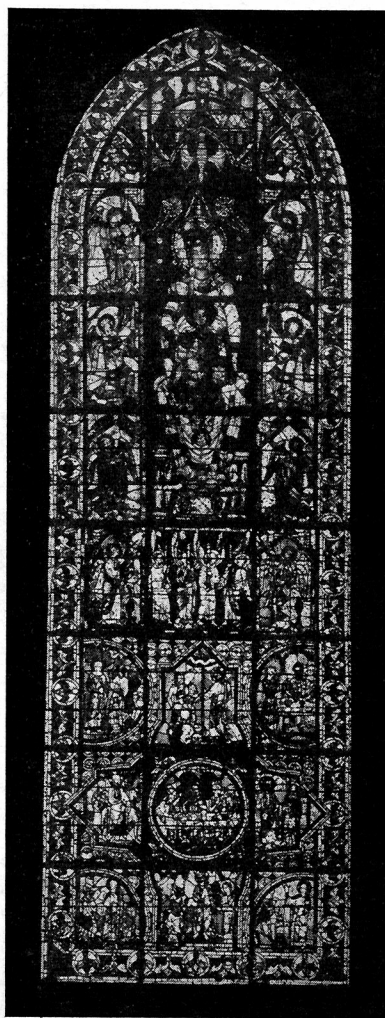
As I write these words, I am thinking of Theophilus, who was also called Rugerus, priest, monk and craftsman, who wrote a remarkable treatise\* upon various Christian arts in or about the twelfth century. That treatise is in three books, and as a preface to each book, he has written a sermon.

To me those brief and friendly sermons of Theophilus are among the most memorable preachments I have ever known, for the mighty craftsmanship that followed his words throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries seem to have put into enduring form the very spirit of his discourses.

For example, consider these words from his preface to the third book. Notice his attitude toward the creative artist, and notice the clear and forceful fashion in which he develops the significance of that splendid verse, Isaiah 11:2, "And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord."

\*"An Essay Upon Various Arts, in three books, by Theophilus, called also Rugerus, Priest and Monk, forming an Encyclopedia of Christian Art of the Eleventh Century. Translated, with notes, by Robert Hendrie, London; John Murray, Albemarle Street, 1847."

"Therefore, most beloved son, you will not doubt, but believe with an entire faith, that the Spirit of God has filled your heart when you have adorned His temple with so much beauty, and with such variety of work; and that you may



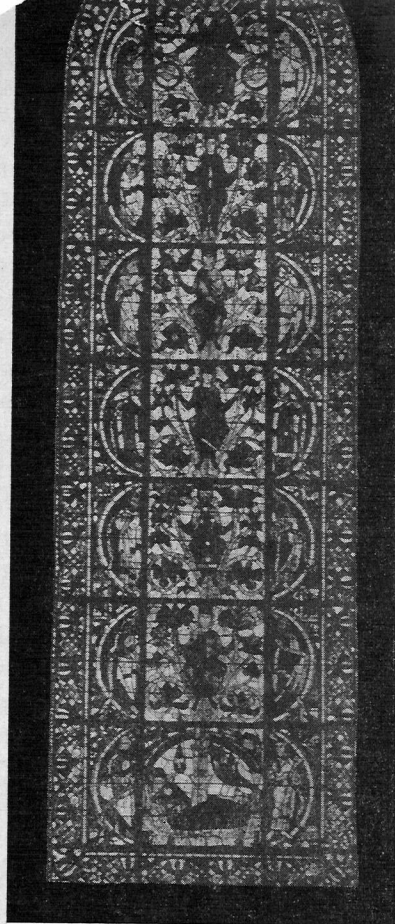
NOTRE DAME DE LA BELLE VERRIERE

not chance to fear, I can prove, with clear reasoning, that whatsoever you may be able to learn, understand, or invent in the arts, is ministered to you as a *gift* of the sevenfold Spirit.

"Through the spirit of *wisdom* you know that all created things proceed from God, and that without Him nothing exists. Through the spirit of *intelligence* you have acquired the faculty of genius, in whatever order, in what variety, in what proportion, you may

choose to apply to your varied work. Through the spirit of *counsel* you do not hide the talent conceded to you by God, but by working and teaching openly, with humility, you faithfully expound to those desirous to learn. Through the spirit of *perseverance*, you shake off all lethargy of sloth, and whatever with quick diligence you commence, you carry through with full vigour to the completion. Through the spirit of *science* accorded to you, you rule with genius from an abounding heart, and from that with which you entirely overflow you bestow with the confidence of a well-stored mind for the common good. Through the spirit of *piety* you regulate the nature, the destination, the time, the measure and the means of the work; and, through a pious consideration, the price of the fee, that the vice of avarice or covetousness may not steal in. Through the spirit of *fear of God* you meditate that you can do nothing from yourself, but you consider that you possess, or will, nothing unconceded by God; but by believing, confiding and giving thanks, you ascribe to divine compassion whatever you have learned, or what you are, or what you may be.

"Animated, dearest son, by these covenants with the virtues, thou hast confidently approached the house of God, has decorated with the utmost beauty ceilings and walls with various work, and showing forth with different colours a likeness of the paradise of God, glowing with flowers and verdant with herbs and leaves, and cherishing the lives of the saints with crowns of various merit, thou hast, after a fashion, shown to beholders everything in creation praising God, its Creator, and hast caused them to proclaim Him admirable in all His works." What a sweeping power those words have when they are set forth in the presence of the Christian art of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries!



THE TREE OF JESSE WINDOW AT CHARTRES

The masterpiece in glass that I always associate with Theophilus is the great Tree of Jesse Window in the Western Group of Chartres Cathedral. Rumor says that the window was made in the Abbé Suger's workshop in Saint Denys, and placed in the Cathedral on or about the middle of the twelfth century. Those were troublous times, and we can only speculate as to whether or not the kindly, powerful Abbé had sufficiently recovered from his later crusading experiment to visit Chartres and to see the window before he died.

He is said to have invented the symbol of the Tree of Jesse from that same chapter of Isaiah which was chosen by Theophilus as the text for the most eloquent of his sermonlike introductions.

Then, too, The Seven Gifts of the Spirit which Theophilus invoked for the craftsman's guidance are also strikingly evident in this window. They are symbolized by boldly patterned doves that surround the head of Our Lord in the topmost area of the window.

Those great doves are designed to tell at vast distances. They complement the dominating figure of Christ that is clothed in deep greens and warm tans—colours that become spring greens and autumnal crimson browns in brilliant afternoon sunlight. The primitive doves themselves are tinted with a sort of autumnal brown, as though to suggest their nearness to the good earth with all their heavenly, spiritual gifts.

Whenever I see them in the actual window, or whenever I recall them as quiet silhouettes in a morning light, or dancing in a curious golden glow in a late afternoon, I think of Theophilus and of his sermon. For in their place at the top of this shimmering jewel of a window, designed and put together as a glorious playground of the sun, those sturdy doves announce the coming true of Theophilus' prophetic words.

I call them prophetic words because they so clearly and sympathetically outline the spirit of those artist-workers who created that window. As one who has long experimented with the vocabulary of color and light, I feel that I can discern the answering paeans of praise and prayer in the Tree of Jesse Window. They say in terms of lead, glass, paint and iron, that the spirit behind that lofty masterpiece is precisely what Theophilus said it should be.

"Animated by these covenants with the virtues" rather than by a passion for money-making, those workers in glass have come to serve me as typical examples of what has well been called the character of mediaeval Christian art. For it is significant that the words I have quoted are from the preface to the third book which deals principally with metal work—including bells, organs, sacred vessels and jewelry.

Here is the answer to a question I have often heard set forth by tough-minded travelers who themselves are workers in some phase of creative art. One famous

novelist who visited the Cathedral of Chartres for the first time a few years ago wrote a message something like this in lead pencil on the back of a postcard as he sat on a bench facing that mediaeval miracle of stone:

"What happened here? What forces were loose in that older time to express themselves with all this beauty and power? Whatever we may call it, our words are bound to be inadequate for this evidence of the creative spirit at work."

When I read those words I smiled to think of Theophilus and his sermon on The Seven Gifts of the Spirit. It seemed as though out of the vastness we call time, since the days of that craftsman priest, had come from a most unexpected source a sincere and fervent "Amen, brother." And since that time, I have heard, one after another, similar expressions of appreciation and wonder about that great jewel of Christian art.

So it is easy to see why I value Theophilus and his sermon so highly, and why I see in that sermon an eloquence beyond that usually associated with words. For the sentiments of that good craftsman priest have been strengthened and developed to mighty proportions by what I and my friends have seen and felt in mediaeval Christian art—above all, in the twelfth century windows of France.

The three great masterpieces that I associate most directly with the creative spirit expressed by Theophilus are these:

The Tree of Jesse Window in the West Wall of Chartres; the window called "Notre Dame de la Belle Verrière" in the South Ambulatory of Chartres; and the Crucifixion Window in the Cathedral at Poitiers. After hundreds of years, marked by warfare, cruelty and other types of selfishness, those windows still sing in vibrant light and colour of the spiritual ideals taught by Theophilus.