

## Kirk and Italy: A Note on the Relevance of Roman Heritage

One evening in 1963, Russell Kirk and the Italian free-lance journalist and scholar Mario Marcolla tried to enter La Scala theater in Milan, the world-renowned opera house which is a sort of "pilgrimage place" for Americans visiting the city. The two had some problem with their tickets and, as a result, with the guard at the theater entrance. Dr. Kirk, as was customary for him at the time, was wrapped in a large black cape, looking very like the "Bohemian Tory" he had described himself as in his book published that year. Marcolla, acting spontaneously, asked the guard, with affected surprise, if he did not recognize his special guest. The guard irritably responded in the negative. "Well," Marcolla exclaimed, "this is the Duke of Mecosta!," thus asserting the nobility of his friend. Without hesitation, and probably amazed at the charming unfamiliarity of that "dukedom," the guard admitted them to the theater.

Though America does not allow noble titles, Kirk was in actuality a man of the highest nobility—that of manners and inspiration, and above all, of soul, heart, piety, and faith. To my knowledge, Kirk's first visit to Italy was in 1961, to participate in a Mount Pelerin Society meeting in Turin, chaired by the famous Italian president Luigi Einaudi. In 1963, he visited Rome and the beautiful towns of Piacenza, Turin,

and Verona. Over the years, he made frequent visits to Italy and to the "Eternal City" of Rome.

In 1989, Kirk made a popular Italian lecture tour. The tour occurred during the time of the *Bicentenaire*, the celebration of the two-hundredth anniversary of the French Revolution, which marked the beginning of political modernity (or the end of the tormented period of its gestation, anyway). About this historic philosophical event, Kirk, like his cultural mentor Edmund Burke, had developed an intelligent critique and serious opposition. For Kirk, the French Revolution represented the beginning of structured ideology, the "armed doctrine" (in Burke's phrase), inverted religion, immanent messianism, and political gnosticism.

That year, he also participated in an Italian conference on T.S. Eliot, speaking on his personal friendship with the poet. Later, Kirk wrote in *National Review* about the honor of having lectured in the theater of the Royal Palace in Monza, a few miles north of Milan, on that occasion. The Palace houses the Iron Crown of the Italian

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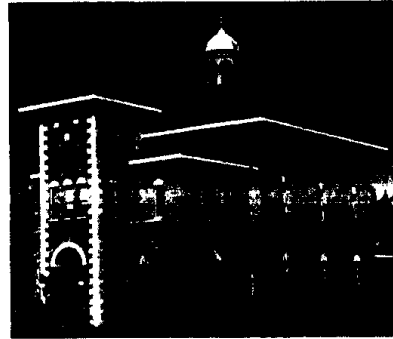
kings, made from the nails of Jesus Christ's cross. It stands in what Kirk called the "green Brianza" region, not far from another pleasant country town called Monticello which, with its Jeffersonian suggestions, seemed to reinforce our Italian-American friendship.

In 1991, Kirk came once more to Milan and lectured on the U.S. Republican Party's errors regarding the New World Order, international involvements, and the abandonment of the traditional classical republican worldview. At that time, the Persian Gulf crisis and subsequent war was being used to promote the "make the world safe for democracy" ideology which Kirk battled throughout his life, employing the thought of Orestes A. Brownson who wrote that each country has its own peculiar constitution, according to its history, local customs, and the character of its people.

Kirk surely loved Italy—as is testified by his original "Italianate style" house, Piety Hill, hidden in the woods of Michigan. He also appreciated its art, history, and beauty. Indeed, one of the most important elements in Kirk's personal formation and historical view was classical Rome and its heritage. Even though Scotland and the British tradition was the chief source of Kirkian wisdom, the young Russell Kirk was strongly influenced in mind and character by Stoic philosophy, particularly the Roman Stoics. This intellectual position was only partly abandoned in later years, when he grew in spiritual consciousness and eventually converted to Roman Catholicism in 1964. The best of the Stoic philosophical attitude, in fact, could be Christianized, and we find traces of this in his later works: moral resistance to the "Sea of Troubles" we sail upon, sobriety of life, and life itself as *militia super terram*. Kirk acknowledges this, though indirectly, in the final chapter of *The Politics of Prudence*. Beyond that, the universal dimension of Roman civilization—through

which the Church found the structures to evangelize Europe—may also have played a role in directing him to Roman Catholicism.

In *The Roots of American Order*, Kirk is in search of the various elements which, molded together in unity, deeply affected the American Republic. In the fourth chapter, entitled "Virtue and Power: the Roman Tension," he closely analyzes the achievements and failures of Roman civilization, at several points comparing Rome at its deca-



Kirk's Italianate house at Piety Hill.

dent end with the United States today. To Kirk, "all the way from the Roman Republic to the American Republic, a continuity runs," since "seeking for the roots of order, we are led to four cities: Jerusalem, Athens, Rome, and London."

The whole Kirkian argument on Roman heritage is synthesized in his book *America's British Culture*. It is highly relevant to find an assertion of the Roman influence in this latter book even though it is devoted to the strictly British influence on America. He defines America as part of the Western world, the most extreme "appendix" of European culture. America is shaped by the British culture which, after all, has been deeply affected by elements of Roman origin and taste, though not actually Roman in themselves.

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Let us follow Kirk in listing the Roman achievements which shaped the Western world and thus America. First, the "high old Roman virtue," the traditional Roman morality demanding the performance of one's duties and determined courage. Second, from the Roman period of decadence, Kirk states that America's Founding Fathers learned to fear centralized power, and so adopted a federal system of government. Third, to avoid class warfare, they sought a concrete means of social reconciliation among men which would eliminate the causes of class conflict. With a truly Burkean insight, the Founding Fathers attempted to prevent revolution by immediately eliminating the premises of struggle and dissent. This is a kind of philosophically pre-modern way to approach social and political troubles (through trial, error, and historical experience), aiming at harmony between men, rather than exploiting hatred for ideological reasons to gain power as the philosophically modern regimes do with bloody results. Kirk called the Roman experience a "cautionary lesson" for colonial Americans.

Kirk emphasizes, however, that the influence exerted by antiquity on the American Founding was not directly political:

If, then, the Greeks and the Romans bequeathed to America no political institutions—why, what is America's inheritance from the ancient world? Primarily, that patrimony is a body of great literature. The poets, the philosophers, the rhetoricians, the historians, the biographers, the satirists, the dramatists of the ancient world move us still; their aphorisms are embedded in our schooling, their descriptions of the human condition tell us what is tragic and what pathetic. Aye, the theologians of the late centuries of the Graeco-Roman culture move us, too; for Augustine of Hippo and Gregory the Great were men of the classical culture, and so were other Fathers of the Church, West and East.

This is how Kirk, as a student at the

University of St. Andrews in Scotland, perceived the antagonism of two civilizations:

*Santa Maria Maggiore: praising the Lord,  
Colorless, seamed, a priest, plump corpse still  
animate.  
Outside the heavy gorgeous door, the noise  
insensate  
Of Fiat, Packard, Cadillac, Austin, Olds, Ford,  
Nunc dimittis; pax vobiscum; et quo vadis?  
Ave Roma.*

Rome stands for a whole traditional worldview, opposed to the "noise insensate" of machinery. If *quo vadis?* seems to echo the fundamental question of modern civilization, *Ave Roma* is surely the answer given by Kirk.

Law was certainly one of the most important elements of the Roman age. Shaped by the British tradition of Common Law, however, America (with the partial exception of Louisiana) never knew the Roman Civil Law, nor even its twisted modern variant of *Code*, product of the French Revolution and issued by Napoleon. Though not unfamiliar with the Roman Civil Law, Kirk points out, America learned from the Romans not their actual legal system, but rather a superior element: the very idea of law and the rule of law, expressed as the need for order, the relationship between natural and positive law, freedom through restraints, freedom to achieve a goal, the balance between rights and duties.

Though different societies devised differing legal systems, their goal was the same: to build and defend order, the dimension of true freedom. This is the transcendent unity of the old societies. Legal institutions can be seen as skeletons of civil societies—as what supports the whole body and what remains after the rest is vanished, evidence of the premises and values that the society chose to follow in its life. Through analysis of Rome's skeleton we find its understanding of law: the positive expression of belief

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in a natural law of divine origin.

Kirk wrote: "The Ciceronian teaching of natural law, though much assailed and battered since the closing years of the eighteenth century, still has vitality—if sometimes in curiously distorted forms." The core of the Roman understanding of law is natural law, first expressed by the Stoics, and by Cicero, in the sense that these Romans were the first to define natural law as being written in the human heart.

One more element deserves a final look: the Kirkian appreciation of classical Rome shaping social institutions, a theme which allows us to return to the whole of Italy. "In Italy, and to some degree in Spain, it still is possible to find functioning, especially in old-fashioned towns and villages, remnants of social usages that apparently have survived many centuries of devastation and radical social alteration—even of vast demographic changes." Kirk points to the institution of the family. Of Rome he writes, "The Roman state never forgot that the family was the footing of all civil social order; the state was solicitous for the family's well-being—if, at the end, unsuccessful in its protections. This function of safeguarding and upholding the family passed from the dying Roman state to the emerging universal church, gradually, but most notably during the reign of Gregory the Great. Thus the Church, in medieval times and in modern, labored skillfully to nurture family love and family duties: the institution of classical Rome transmuted into the institutions of Christian Rome."

Kirk praised Rome since he saw it as the

symbol of restraint from the appetites of indulgence which could shatter the human race. Family, the cell of the "little platoon we belong to in society," as Burke phrased it, is the first means of this christianized "Roman restraint."

Kirk spent his lifetime trying to teach virtue, temperance, piety, reverence, the marriage of rights and duties, moral restraints, and obedience. He taught the necessity of the order of the soul which liberates and fulfills human aspirations. And upon that order of the soul was based the order of civil society. For his endeavors, he has been called "the American Cicero."

Providence had placed Kirk in one of the most disordered ages in history. Far from being pessimistic, however, Kirk continued to cultivate his own little garden—the space he had power over, and the only realistic means of improving the outer world as well. He taught the rising generation that cultivating one's own field, particularly one's soul, contributes to the good of the whole.

Nowadays, Roman restraint is no longer exercised in Italy, and it is under fierce attack in the whole Western world. Italy, in actuality, seems to be rotten in its cultural core and needs more than superficial changes. In a small section of Rome, however, we still have the most important defender of the withholding Roman power. It was for this man that Russell Kirk, dying, prayed—Pope John Paul II.

Russell Kirk, after being "named" the Duke of Mecosta in Italy, is now a citizen of classical and Christian Rome—*honoris causa*.

