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MAGDALEN COLLEGE
OF THE LIBERAL ARTS

Women of the day:

Rose Hawthorne and Elizabeth Browning

Come with me to Rome, in 1859. Why not? Everybody went to Italy then. You could hear plenty of English on the streets of Rome. It didn't mean that they were Roman Catholics from England. They were writers, artists, scholars, travelers, and a few rich people with time on their hands. They wanted to go to a city that was more than two thousand years old, where you could still see temples and columns and baths and roads built when Jesus walked the earth, and even before that. They wanted to drink from the wellsprings of western civilization – right from the wells, and not from bottles coming out of a modern factory.



So we are in a villa where an American couple and their children live. There was a time when every American knew the father. His name is Nathanael Hawthorne, and his wife is Sophia. You should read *The House of the Seven Gables*, a tale of mystery and wickedness, but also of goodness and the grace of God. Mr. Hawthorne is suffering from one of his frequent bouts of migraine

headache. Their little daughter Rose is with them. Rose Hawthorne will one day publish in a book the letters of her mother and father. She and her husband will join the Catholic Church, and after his death she will take religious vows. Her name then will be Mother Mary Alphonsa, the foundress of the Servants for Relief of Incurable Cancer, now known as the Dominican Sisters of Hawthorne. There is a village where they began their work for people who were dying of cancer and who needed people to feed

them, to change their bandages, to give them their medicine, and to be near to them in body and soul when they most needed a warm touch and a gentle look. That village is now called Hawthorne in her honor. Many famous Catholics are buried in the



cemetery there. They include a Babe who was as big as an ox – the baseball player Babe Ruth.

Back to the house in Rome. I don't know whether Rose herself recalled the day, but she did remember the visitors who came to visit. They are also a married couple. Their names are Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. They share much in common with the Hawthornes. They are poets, as Nathanael was a novelist or “romancer” as they were sometimes called, and Rose would become a poet too. The Brownings aren't Catholic,

but they are searching for something of an ancient faith and a Christian culture that they did not receive in childhood. The couples are now close friends, and Mrs. Browning, who is older than her husband and who has often not been in good health, has come over to provide her own homemade remedy for migraine. She's often needed it for herself.

It's a fine thing to behold those married couples. The Hawthornes were deeply in love with one another, as were the Brownings. Each man had married an intelligent and fiery-spirited woman who was loyal to him, and each woman saw something in her husband that was superior, and she received it as a happy gift.

Robert Browning was a regular bulldog if any critic should dare to criticize his wife's poetry, and it was Elizabeth's influence that seems to have led him gently back to faith in Jesus Christ.

Most people have heard the first line of Elizabeth's most famous poem, dedicated to her husband, "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways." But I'd like to look at another poem from the same collection. Elizabeth was six years older than Robert, and she suffered under a selfish father, who disowned each one of his daughters as soon as she got married. Elizabeth had also exhausted herself in work for the poor in England. She was like a candle guttering out when she met Robert Browning in 1845, and they fell utterly in love. They had to elope. They were married in a small church, privately, and then they moved to Italy, where they lived until Elizabeth's death in 1861. The local Italians loved her too and held a solemn procession to pay honor to her passing.

So when you read this poem, think of a woman who has been recalled to life:

*Beloved, my Beloved, when I think
That thou wast in the world a year ago,
What time I sat alone here in the snow
And saw no footprint, heard the silence sink
No moment at thy voice . . . but, link by link,
Went counting all my chains, as if that so
They never could fall off at any blow
Struck by thy possible hand . . . why, thus I drink
Of life's great cup of wonder! Wonderful,
Never to feel thee thrill the day or night
With personal act or speech, -- nor ever cull
Some prescience of thee with the blossoms white
Thou sawest growing! Atheists are as dull,
Who cannot guess God's presence out of sight.*

“Just as she did not know Robert one year ago, but he was there, so we should not be dull when it comes to God's presence. He is there whether we feel His presence or not.”

Just one year ago it was, she says, and she was like someone counting every link in her chains, and not suspecting for a moment that such a person as her Beloved even existed. She never saw a footprint, never heard a voice, never thought that some good man's hand might be raised to smash those chains that held her in the dark house of her

father and fling them away. Yet such a man as Robert was in the world. How could she not suspect it? And then comes the final sentence. Just as she did not know Robert one year ago, but he was there, so we should not be dull when it comes to God's presence. He is there, whether we feel His presence or not.

The poem suggests one of the purposes of marriage, and the one we are most likely to forget in our time. It isn't children. We still remember, sort of, that husbands and wives are supposed to have children if they can. It isn't simply the affection that husbands and wives feel for one another. We remember that one too. It isn't the help they give one another to get through hard days. It is no less than *to be made holy*. Husband and wife are to be, through the grace of God, saviors to one another, each helping the other to become holy. Elizabeth

brought her husband Robert back to God, but, she says, so Robert did the same for her, by saving her from her life of loneliness, a wintry life of chains and snow.

Her last word on earth, as she died in Robert's arms, was, "Beautiful."



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