

God in Translation

by

Leona Francombe

'What I don't like about your politics,' said my Belgian piano tuner the other day, looking up from a troublesome bass note, 'is that the good Lord figures in everything. Why are American politicians always saying "God bless America"?'

Marc is a man of fierce logic, a pariah who spends weeks in his Brussels workshop, alone with pianos. If there's anyone who has the leisure to contemplate God, it's he.

And he's right: no politician here would ever say "God bless Belgium". The very idea would leave people incredulous: as if the good Lord could really be expected to lead this turbulent little country out of its political mess! Anyway, in Belgium, God is officially Catholic. And the Catholic Church...well, these days, it's treated like the unwanted guest at a dinner party: you just pray that you don't end up next to him at the table!

Catholicism has stretched its fingers across Europe for over a thousand years. There are countless villages on this patchwork continent that still wake and sleep according to the church bell, the hours of Mass, the incontrovertible word of the priest. Poland, Italy and Spain come to mind. But the Church's paternal grip is faltering. In openly secular France, Belgium and Germany, priestly robes no longer seem so pure. Belgian police didn't hesitate to raid a sumptuous church property a few months ago, looking for evidence in the abuse scandal. They even drilled into the tomb of a bishop who thought he had safely departed for paradise. Suddenly, those lordly old men in robes are looking vulnerable, like magicians who have dropped their cards and botched the act.

Enter one of the great cathedrals of Europe; walk through the cool stones of collective piety. Centuries of sin, penitence, martyrdom all hang thickly in the air like incense. Guilt clings to the musty folds of the confessional curtain. But people whisper: *whose guilt?* One can forget all this, surrounded by the glories of Gothic vaulting and stained glass, and statues so rapturous that even heathens shed tears. Yet formal religion in northern Europe is fossilized, the pews two-thirds empty.

Every week I cross paths with three elderly women on their way to Mass, and an ailing abbot, pale as an Easter lily, and vague, as if he has stepped into the wrong century and mislaid his indulgences. The church to which this little party is headed is a sombre edifice, with one of those hooded, menacing towers right out of Hitchcock. On the way, you pass a café, and a

gourmet grocery where a lady patrols the sidewalk, handing out samples of fresh melon and mango. Most people don't make it beyond these watering holes to the church. If it's handouts of a more spiritual nature than fruit that they're looking for, they find them elsewhere: in their books, or gardens, or in quiet moments over a bottle of crisp rosé. God is an intensely private quest.

It's surprising how alive a thousand years of religious history still are here. The Catholic Church was behind both the bloodiest crusades, and the most sublime beauties. Think of the Sistine Chapel. The paradox is still fresh for many Europeans. And on Armistice Day, when priests file solemnly to the First World War killing fields of Ypres and the Somme, a silent cry grips the crowd: "Where was God in these murderous trenches?" Only the priests don't seem to hear.

Marc was tuning the piano's tenor register. This is where its soul lives. Indeed, if, as they say, there are many paths to God, playing a melody on these keys is surely one of them.

'The Church shouldn't meddle in spirituality,' Marc said wryly, his head deep inside the piano. 'Let alone the politicians.'

'But what about all those religious holidays you have here?' I counter. I remind him how annoying it is when shops close for Pentecost, and All Saints' Day, and Blessed Ascensions or Assumptions of one kind or another.

Marc grinned. 'It's about time we take advantage of all those centuries of Catholic rule!'

He put away his tools and gestured to the piano.

'Try it,' he said.

I did.

And it was...well...*divine*.