The Range of Irony in Three Visions of Judgement:

Erasmus’ Julius Exclusus, Donne’s Ignatius His Conclave, and Lucian’s Dialogues of the Dead

by SISTER M. GERALDINE THOMPSON, C.S.J.

WITHIN the time-span of the Renaissance and the context of Christian humanism, there were, I venture to say, not two but three reformations: the Protestant Reformation that put a cleavage into the believing world, and the Counter-Reformation, a movement also pro-test-ant, and congruent in its later stages with the Council of Trent; and a third reformation, though it is not third in time, for it preceded the other two, merged with them, and outlasted them. Whatever it protested about or countered—and there was much to protest and counter—its prime focus was not the rebuttal of credal differences or distinctions in theology, but the moral and spiritual life of the people of God. And it was not a united movement, like the other two, but the result of disparate efforts on the part of a “saving remnant”—there is always a saving remnant—who deplored and sought to remedy the abuses and negligences obtaining in the later Middle Ages. This percipience of widespread abuse and the zeal to reform it was the common denominator in

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all three "reformations." The evils that cried for reform were many: materialism, superstition, monastic and clerical irregularities, and, underlying all these, as both cause and consequence, ignorance, especially ignorance of revealed truth, and especially in rural areas and among the rural clergy. And of those early reformers crusading relentlessly against ignorance, perhaps none was more relentless, and certainly none more effective, than Erasmus.

In this paper all three reformations meet, and two of the reformers: Catholic Erasmus and Anglican John Donne, both intent on reform and on the indissoluble relation of religion to ethics, both concerned with the dissemination of knowledge and the correction of ignorance, along with whatever abuses accompanied such ignorance; and both well aware that the wise man communicates his message not only in pulpit and classroom, but also in bookshop and library, where fictional writing—even fictional writing—fuses delight with instruction.

That repeated word "both" seems to leave Lucian as odd man out, and I hasten to remind myself and my readers that, if Lucian, a Greek and pagan writer in the second century after Christ, had not also recognized the value of fiction as corrective, and especially the ironic dialogue, Erasmus might never have written the Colloquies or the Julius, and Donne might never have written the Conclave, and I, like the old woman in the rhyme, might never have got my bonny bunch of blackberries.

I have used the word "range" in my title: it was probably a slip, for I suspect I meant "modes" of irony, not "range." But "range" is a good word, and its appearance here in the title a happy fault, for Erasmus is a little like the fellow Gilbert and Sullivan thought up who boasted that his catalogue was long through every humour ranging, and promised to tune his melody to every changing mood. His Praise of Folly, for instance, punctures the witless, the pretentious, and the pseudo-devout, with irony, but then, without any irony at all, praises the man of holiness; his treatise on matrimony includes many a column on education and on parental guidance; his educational tracts embrace some di-

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1 See, for instance, James Tracy, who cites Gerald Strauss (Luther's House of Learning, Baltimore, 1978) as saying there was a "dawning realization among scholars that humanism, Reformation, Counter-Reformation and certain late medieval movements were all, in different ways, efforts by religious and learned élites to elevate the behavior of ordinary folk to a new moral standard" ("Humanism and the Reformation" in Reformation Europe: a Guide to Research, St. Louis, Missouri, St. Louis Center for Reformation Research, 1982, p. 47).