

# From Desiderius Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly* (1509)

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Retrieved from Modern History Sourcebook: <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1509erasmus-folly.html>

**TO STUDENTS:** *This is a work of satire. Take it as such, remembering that a satirist typically uses humor and sarcasm to make serious points. In what ways did Erasmus contrast the Church leaders of his day with the apostles from whom they claimed to derive their authority? It may be helpful to familiarize yourself with the doctrine of [apostolic succession](#) before reading.*

## **The Lights of the World Reduced to a mere Wallet**

**ACTIVE READING**

In like manner cardinals, if they thought themselves the successors of the apostles, they would likewise imagine that the same things the [apostles] did are required of them, and that they are not lords but dispensers of spiritual things of which they must shortly give an exact account... they would not be so ambitious... or, if they were, they would willingly leave it and live a laborious, careful life, such as was that of the ancient apostles.

And for popes, that supply the place of Christ, if they should endeavor to imitate His life, to wit His poverty, labor, doctrine, cross, and contempt of life... who would purchase that **chair**<sup>1</sup> with all his substance? or defend it, so purchased, with swords, poisons, and all force imaginable? ...

....

A most inhuman and abominable thing, and more to be execrated, that those great princes of the Church and true lights of the world should be reduced to a staff and a wallet. Whereas now, if there be anything that requires their pains, they leave that to Peter and Paul that have leisure enough; but if there be anything of honor or pleasure, they take that to themselves. By which means it is, yet by my courtesy, that scarce any kind of men live more voluptuously or with less trouble; as believing that Christ will be well enough pleased if in their... ceremonies, titles of holiness and the like, and blessing and cursing, they play the parts of bishops. To work miracles is old and antiquated, and not in fashion now; to instruct the people, troublesome; to interpret the Scripture, pedantic; to pray, a sign one has little else to do; to shed tears, silly and womanish; to be poor, base; to be vanquished, dishonorable and little becoming him that scarce admits even kings to kiss his slipper; and lastly, to die, uncouth; and to be stretched on a cross, infamous.



Theirs are only those weapons<sup>2</sup> and sweet blessings which Paul mentions, and of these truly they are bountiful enough: as interdictions, hangings, heavy burdens, reproofs anathemas, executions in effigy, and that terrible thunderbolt of excommunication, with the very sight of which they sink men's souls beneath the bottom of hell: which yet these most holy fathers in Christ and His **vicars** hurl with more fierceness against none than against such as, by the instigation of the devil, attempt to lessen or rob them of **Peter's patrimony**. When, though those words in the Gospel, "We have left all, and followed Thee," were his, yet they call his patrimony lands, cities, tribute, imposts, riches; for which, being enflamed with the love of Christ, they contend with fire and sword, and not without loss of much Christian blood, and believe they have then most apostolically defended the Church, the spouse of Christ, when the enemy, as they call them, are valiantly routed. As if the Church had any deadlier enemies than wicked **prelates**, who not only suffer Christ to run out of request for want of

preaching him, but hinder his spreading by their multitudes of laws merely contrived for their own profit, corrupt him by their forced expositions, and murder him by the evil example of their pestilent life.

<sup>1</sup> The Chair of St. Peter (the Pope's throne)

<sup>2</sup> "For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God..." -- 2 Corinthians 10:4

### **Folly Attends a Theological Dispute**

I was lately myself at a theological dispute, for I am often there, where when one was demanding what authority there was in Holy Writ that commands heretics to be convinced by fire rather than reclaimed by argument; a crabbed old fellow, and one whose supercilious gravity spoke him at least a doctor, answered in a great fume that Saint Paul had decreed it, who said, "Reject him that is a heretic, after once or twice admonition." And when he had sundry times, one after another, thundered out the same thing, and most men wondered what ailed the man, at last he explained it thus, making two words of one: "A heretic must be put to death." Some laughed, and yet there wanted not others to whom this exposition seemed plainly theological; which, when some, though those very few, opposed, they cut off the dispute, as we say, with a hatchet, and the credit of so uncontrollable an author. "Pray conceive me," said he, "it is written, 'Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.' But every heretic bewitches the people; therefore, etc."

### **Folly Quotes Christ in Her Praise**

Folly is so gracious above that her errors are only pardoned, those of wise men never. Whence it is that they ask forgiveness, though they offend never so wittingly, cloak it yet with the excuse of folly... So Saul makes his excuse of David, "For behold," says he, "I did it foolishly." And again, David himself thus sweetens God, "And therefore I beseech thee, O Lord, to take away the trespass of thy servant, for I have done foolishly," as if he knew there was no pardon to be obtained unless he had colored his offense with folly and ignorance.

And stronger is that of Christ upon the cross when he prayed for his enemies, "Father, forgive them," nor does he cover their crime with any other excuse than that of unwittingness- because, says he, "they know not what they do." In like manner Paul, writing to Timothy, "But therefore I obtained mercy, for that I did it ignorantly through unbelief." And what is the meaning of "I did it ignorantly" but that I did it out of folly, not malice? And what of "Therefore I received mercy" but that I had not obtained it had I not been made more allowable through the covert of folly? For us also makes that mystical Psalmist, though I remembered it not in its right place, "Remember not the sins of my youth nor my ignorances."

#### **Questions to Consider:**

1. Identify at least three ways that Erasmus contrasts the Church leaders of his day with the apostles.

<b>The Apostles</b>	<b>Renaissance Era Church Leaders</b>

2. According to Erasmus, is it biblical to execute heretics?
3. What is the relationship between Folly and forgiveness?
4. What makes *The Praise of Folly* a humanistic work?

# An Obituary of Henry VII, from the *Anglica Historia*

Retrieved From Tudor England: <http://englishhistory.net/tudor/hobit.html>

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## ACTIVE READING

He [Henry VII] well knew how to maintain his royal majesty and all which appertains to kingship at every time and in every place. He was most fortunate in war, although he was constitutionally more inclined to peace than to war. He cherished justice above all things; as a result he vigorously punished violence, manslaughter and every other kind of wickedness whatsoever. Consequently he was greatly regretted<sup>3</sup> on that account by all his subjects, who had been able to conduct their lives peaceably, far removed from the assaults and evil doings of scoundrels. He was the most ardent supporter of our faith and daily participated with great piety in religious services....

But all these virtues were obscured latterly by avarice, from which he suffered. This avarice is surely a bad enough vice in a private individual, whom it forever torments; in a monarch indeed it may be considered the worst vice since it is harmful to everyone and distorts those qualities of trustfulness, justice and integrity by which the State must be governed.

What were Henry VII's <i>virtues</i> as a ruler?	What were Henry's <i>vices</i> ?
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How did Henry's actions as described above make him a typical "new monarch?"

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<sup>3</sup> To feel sorry for the loss or absence of; basically, he was missed