A Contemporary Prodigy — by Fr. Gillis, C.S.P.

I think it was Padraic Colum who said some time ago, "It takes a writer to write." The phrase is pregnant; there is more in it than appears. It suggests a long line of equivalent truisms: it takes a shoemaker to make shoes, a bricklayer to lay bricks. You may continue the catalogue ad lib, beginning with manual labor and rising to intellectual works. It takes a thinker to think it takes a philosopher to philosophize. So far, everyone agrees, unless a few would insist on the right of any cop to philosophize.

But when you take one step more, mounting from philosophy to theology, then suddenly the whole world disagrees. It doesn't take a theologian to "theologize." Any Tom, Dick or Harry can do that little thing. At least that seems to be the opinion in America. If a man invents an incandescent lamp, he becomes ipso facto an authority on the immortality of the soul. If a man professes chemistry or biology or anatomy in a university, he is necessarily empowered to judge the truth or error in the Christian religion. If a man makes a million dollars, at anything, oil, steel, stocks, bonds, chewing gum, chain stores or what-not, he becomes automatically a P.D. He can answer the question, "What think you of Christ?" and get the answer infallibly right. He can tell whether the Catholic Church is a divinely established organization, a vast political machine, or a universal humbug.

I have been lured into these platitudinous reflections by reading a little paragraph in the papers about Bruce Barton. "He is," says a columnist, "perhaps the most versatile scribbler in America. From his lectures, he writes a monthly essay for a magazine, a novel or so a year, humorous magazine articles, newspaper syndicate articles, is head of a large advertising agency, speaks at two or three luncheons a week, and finds time to play golf."

The columnist has not mentioned the two chief discurses of Barton, both theological, "The Man Nobody Knows," and "What Can a Man Believe?" The first is an answer to the question that has deserved the life-long study of the greatest theologians, "Who and What is Jesus Christ?" The second covers even a wider territory, the entire field of faith, Christian, Mohammedan, Jewish, Buddhist, heretical.

How did the advertising man find time to study these profound and vastly important questions? Monsieur, child, don't be silly. He didn't find time. He couldn't. Why then does he rush an entire great scholar for to read? Why? Can't he make a million? Isn't he head of a big business?

Ah, but he must have studied! Is all the news he has scattered over the pages of that book of what to believe, essentialism, Galileo, Kierkegaard, St. Francis Bacon, St. John Bosco, Aristotle, Barrow, St. Anselm, Harry Foord, Joshua Chamberlain, St. Paul, Henry Ford, John Calvin, Michael Servetus, Thales, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Henry Ford, John's Irish son, men or country, Henry Ford, and others or only Ford. You should see the historical facts! Say, my, how does he do it? How does he make himself with him to be an expert? Does he dig into Aristotles and Thales between his customers and the dead-hand?

He says he must understand a big business man to automatically be a theologian? All you have to do is study conditions: what you can write. Life of Christ, or a book based on faith, or all are all. But think about those names! Tennyson, St. Paul, have you ever heard of the Century Encyclopedia, or, for instance I say again, the Five Foot Shelf? It's your brain if you can work with it. And you can get away with it if you have the million, or even if you have fifty thousand and never...