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HISTORY OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

From the Apostolic Age to the Third Millenium

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Introduction

The Catholic Church is the longest-enduring institution in the world, and her historical character is integral to her identity.

The earliest Christians claimed to be witnesses to the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus, thereby making Christianity a historical religion, emanating from a Judaism that was itself a historical religion. Christianity staked its claim to truth on certain events, notably that at a precise moment in history the Son of God came to earth. The Gospels have a ring of historical authenticity partly because of the numerous concrete details they contain, the care with which they record the times and places of Jesus' life.

While there is no purely historical argument that could convince skeptics that Jesus rose from the dead and appeared to His disciples, His Resurrection can scarcely be excluded from any historical account. Marc Bloch, the great medievalist who was a secular-minded Jew (he perished in a German prison camp), observed that the real question concerning the history of Christianity is why so many people fervently believed that Jesus rose from the dead, a belief of such power and duration as to be hardly explicable in purely human terms.¹

But an awareness of the historical character of the Church carries with it the danger that she will be seen as only a product of history, without a transcendent divine character. While Christians can never be indifferent to the reliability of historical claims, since to discredit the historical basis of the Gospel would be to discredit the entire faith, they must be aware of their limits.

The modern "historical-critical method" has provided valuable help in understanding Scripture—explicating the precise meaning of words, recovering the social and cultural milieu in which Jesus lived, situating particular passages in the context of the entire Bible. But it understands the Bible primarily in terms of the times in which it was written and can affirm no transcendent meaning.

Also, modern scholarship itself is bound by its own times, and the historical-critical method has a history of its own that can also be

¹ Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* (New York: Vintage Books, 1954), 32.

relativized. Some scholars cultivate a spirit of skepticism about almost everything in Scripture, including its antiquity and the accuracy of its accounts. A major fallacy of this skepticism is the assumption that, while religious believers are fatally biased, skeptics are objective and disinterested. Some practitioners of the historical-critical method take a far more suspicious view of Christian origins than most historians take toward other aspects of ancient history. (Far more is known about Jesus than about many of the Roman emperors.)

Then there are the attempts of some historians to make Jesus a modern man—the claim that He “liberated” women in the feminist sense or that He was the leader of a political movement. Such claims necessarily assume that from the very beginning the leaders of the Church systematically falsified the record, concealing the fact that women were among the Twelve, for example.

The distinction between “the Jesus of history” and “the Christ of faith” was formulated by certain modern theologians as part of the effort to “demythologize” Jesus as the Son of God and Redeemer of the universe, dismissing that belief as a theological construct only loosely connected, if at all, to the actual, historical Jesus.

A fundamental flaw of the historical-critical method is that, while at various times it has called virtually all traditional beliefs into question, it offers no sure replacement, merely many competing theories. If the babel of scholarly voices is taken at face value, it forces the conclusion that there is no reliable knowledge of Jesus. But Christians can scarcely think that God gave the Bible to man as a revelation of Himself but did so in such a way as to render it endlessly problematical, or that for many centuries its true meaning was obscured and only came to light in modern times.

Thus, while making use of scholarship, Christians must ultimately read Scripture with the eyes of faith. Its central message—salvation through Jesus Christ—is incomprehensible to those who treat it as a merely human document.

The most influential recent attempt to discredit the historicity of the New Testament is the rediscovery of certain “Gnostic gospels” (all written later than the New Testament itself) upon which popular works such as *The Da Vinci Code* are based. These “gospels” are accounts of Jesus’ life and teachings allegedly written by Mary Magdalen, Judas Iscariot, and the Apostles Philip and Thomas.

Gnosticism (see Chapter Two below, pp. 36–39) was the only heretical movement in the history of the Church that considered it unimportant whether the Gospel narratives were historically true. The Gnostics rejected the historical accounts in the New Testament not in order to propose a different history but in order to turn the faith into a myth that stood outside time. For them, the historicity of the New Testament was an embarrassment, since the wholly spiritual God could not have entered into the world of matter and time.

The most lasting division in the history of Christianity was the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, but even then, both Catholics and Protestants agreed on the ultimate authority of the New Testament and the early creeds, a core of faith that was normative. Now, however, proponents of the Gnostic gospels, including even some professed Christians, seek to reopen questions that had been settled since at least the fourth century.

By excluding in principle the very possibility of divine revelation, they imprison Christianity entirely within the movement of history, essentially reducing questions of faith to factional struggles within the Church. If orthodox Christianity does not represent revealed truth, it must be seen as merely the triumph of one party over another, making it possible to cancel seventeen centuries of history in order to redefine the very foundations of the Church.

Modern feminism has much to do with this effort, because the Gnostic “gospels” can be used to claim that the New Testament was actually a kind of masculine conspiracy to conceal the role of women in the early Church, despite the fact that Gnosticism by no means respected women in the sense that feminists understand respect. Gnosticism also has a certain modern appeal because it offers “spirituality” divorced from dogma, its “gospels” treated as interesting and possibly inspiring myths to be read in the same way the myths of other religions can be read, embodying no final and binding truth.

The historical character of the Church is embodied above all in her affirmation of Tradition—the handing on of the faith from generation to generation, guided by the Holy Spirit. The attempt to appeal to the Scripture against Tradition is a denial of that historicity.

The question of the historical character of the Church does not cease with her biblical roots but has relevance to her entire history. A great deal turns on one of the most basic (and most disputed) questions of the Church’s history—the development of doctrine. As with the truth of the Bible, it is a question that ultimately cannot be settled by history itself but only by faith.

Quite early, Christians realized that the Gospel did not provide a detailed exposition of every aspect of their faith. Rather, it was an embryo or seed, containing the whole of divine revelation but awaiting a gradual unfolding. Thus fidelity to Tradition is a paradox that has been at the heart of virtually all theological issues over the centuries—the faith must be handed on intact, but the Church’s understanding of that faith develops in ways that could not have been anticipated in earlier times. The development of doctrine is a progressive widening and deepening of the meaning of the original truth, and heresy can be either false innovation or a rigid adherence to older teachings. (Some heretics rejected the decrees of the Council of Nicaea as innovations.) Dogma is seldom officially defined unless it has first

been questioned, and heresy perhaps serves the divine purpose of forcing the Church to reflect more deeply on her beliefs, to understand them in ever more comprehensive and precise ways.

As in the Reformation of the sixteenth century, there have been repeated moves to “purify” the faith by removing its “accretions”. But such a process violates the historical nature of the Church, which does not allow for the nullification of teachings that have become part of the core of belief. The movement of history is irreversible.

Unlike classical Protestantism, modern attempts to find “authentic” Christianity is driven less by the desire to recover the original Gospel than by the desire to be free of dogma of any kind. But those who think that doctrinal orthodoxy is unimportant, even a distortion of the Gospel, must recognize that this “error” was perpetrated very early in the history of the Church, again raising the insoluble conundrum of how God could have given men the Gospel, then allowed it to be distorted almost immediately, only to be recovered many centuries later.

After the Second Vatican Council, many Catholics, in the name of “objectivity”, in effect surrendered their right to have their own history. But at precisely that moment, the legitimacy, even indeed the inevitability, of “committed” scholarship was being urged with respect to racial or ethnic history, women’s history, and numerous other subjects, all of which demand a sympathetic, even apologetic, approach to their subjects.

Rather than historical “objectivity”, which implies personal detachment on the part of the scholar, the historian’s ideal ought to be honesty—an approach that is committed but strives to use evidence with scrupulous fairness. A temptation for all committed scholars (by no means only Christians) is that of deducing historical reality from dogmatic principles instead of studying the evidence. Believing historians must avoid the trap of nostalgia, whereby the Middle Ages, for example, are presented as the highpoint of history, from which everything since has been a decline—an approach that proves embarrassing when neglected inconvenient information surfaces. (Modern social history requires a more complex understanding of the “ages of faith”, for example, by showing that there was often a wide gap between official Church teaching and popular practice.)

To idealize a past age is actually heretical from a Christian perspective, implying as it does that the age was without sin, that the redemption of mankind was completed at some point. On the contrary, with their knowledge of the subtleties of the sinful heart, Christians should be especially sensitive to the ways in which good is often perverted even by righteous men.

One of the Catholic elements that throughout history has been a stumbling block to some are the sacred rituals that have always been integral to the life of the Church. A recurring heresy is an excessively

“spiritual” concept of the faith. The Church is sacramental, in that, invisible grace is ordinarily transmitted through visible means—something that is fitting, even necessary, because of the Incarnation itself: the eternal God took flesh, even becoming subject to death, and the Church must therefore also be incarnate in the world.

The divine and human realities of the Church came together, for example, in some of the general councils, which were marked not only by often ruthless maneuvering but even sometimes by violence. The *odium theologicum* (“theological hatred”) wells up over and over again, precisely because theological questions are the most important of all—not only of life and death but of eternal salvation and the very order of the universe. Passion is appropriate but always in need of being tempered by charity. The Church believes that, despite such human frailties, the Holy Spirit protects her from fundamental error and that good is brought out of evil.

While in every age the Church demonstrates her power to transform the world, the moral weaknesses of both her leaders and her members are at the same time both a scandal and an ironic witness to her divine character—mere men could never have accomplished the good that the Church has achieved over two millennia. Left entirely to men, the Church ought to have perished at many points in her long history.

Some modern Catholics, under the influence of the prevailing cultural relativism, are preoccupied with “inculturation”—the ways in which the Gospel is incarnated in particular cultures. But although the term itself is new, the entire history of the Church is really the history of inculturation, which occurs continuously, whether or not consciously. This must occur in order to make the Gospel meaningful, even though it carries the risk of betraying the Gospel. Modern skepticism (including that of some professed Catholics) treats all change as self-validating, all forms of inculturation as legitimate. But inculturation has perhaps occurred most authentically whenever the faith has been young and vigorous, confident of its ability to absorb elements of a pagan culture and transform them for its own purposes. When the Church is in a spiritually weakened condition, the reverse often happens—the Gospel is used for alien purposes.

Beginning with the Judaism of Jesus’ day, the Gospel has always had a disruptive effect on cultures. If it did not, it would not be the Gospel, which requires fundamental conversion on the part of its hearers, does not allow them to remain part of their culture unchanged, and ultimately requires the transformation of the culture itself.

The Christian understanding of history is intimately bound up with one of the most perplexing of all doctrines—divine providence. Blessed John Henry Newman said that human experience seems to force the conclusion that mankind was implicated in some

“primordial catastrophe”. History offers believers no knowledge of the exact nature of that catastrophe, but faith informs them that it occurred. Even on a purely human level, history cannot be understood apart from the reality of sin, especially of universal selfishness. Rooted in universal human nature, sin is a constant in man’s affairs, although its character and intensity vary with time and place. Those who deny that a tendency toward evil is basic to human nature cannot make sense of history, which becomes merely endless, incomprehensible tragedy.

Divine revelation reveals little about the inner nature of God but much about His actions in history. The Incarnation itself validates history, as the eternal descends into the temporal, and men have no way of working out their salvation except in this life.

But one of the greatest temptations for Christians is to deduce the specific manifestations in history from a general belief in divine providence. Whole theologies of history have been based on this, but each has finally failed as a comprehensive explanation of historical events. In particular, the belief that specific catastrophes are direct divine punishment for sin dies hard, and for obvious reasons—the laudable desire to make sense of events and the less laudable desire to see one’s enemies punished.

Edifying stories of devout people saved from danger by divine intervention (a city spared the plague, an angelic visitor steering a child away from a precipice) leave unanswered the question why countless other people, even more pious and innocent, have been allowed to perish. Christians can readily understand this on the individual level—suffering is redemptive, and God takes His servants when He wants them. But it is far more difficult to explain the fate of whole societies, the mystery with which Israel was forced to wrestle obsessively.

Christianity played a crucial role in the development of man’s understanding of history itself, vanquishing the cyclical view of endless repetition that expressed a kind of despair, the sense that men were trapped in a process they could not control. Christianity gave history an *eschaton*, a goal toward which it relentlessly moves and which for the first time allowed that movement to have meaning. But the Christian approach to history is also not completely linear; it revolves around a particular moment—the coming of Christ—from which time is reckoned both forward and backward.

The Hebrews’ sense of history was driven by their urgent need to find a comprehensible purpose in the repeated catastrophes that they suffered, even as their faithless enemies repeatedly triumphed over God’s chosen people. Making moral sense of history has preoccupied men ever since, since the story of mankind is to a great extent the story of good betrayed and turned into evil. If history were solely the story of the saints, it would already be infinitely valuable, but its value lies also in the story of sinners, of the entire great drama of human life. The

dichotomy of time and eternity is nowhere more evident than in the fact that justice often does not triumph in this world. The study of history confirms that evil men often flourish and the good are often defeated, with no reversal or vindication in this life.

But how then can men be held to account for their wickedness? It is a question that often leads to the use of history for moral judgment. Contemporary secular historiography is awash with this kind of moralism, as the past is continuously ransacked for examples of alleged injustices to select peoples (by no means everyone), and appropriate condemnation is pronounced.

Such moralism is perhaps inevitable to Secular Liberalism, which is almost required to assume man's goodness, is sympathetic with everything it deems to be "progressive", and can only salvage meaning from the wreckage of man's dreams by pronouncing condemnations on those who appear responsible. But a basic flaw in such moralism is that it can no longer have any effect—the perpetrators have passed into God's hands.

The Christian recognition of man's freedom is the only resolution of the mystery of evil—since men can and do make responsible decisions, to understand all is not to forgive all. Jesus' parable of the wheat and the tares teaches that good and evil exist together in the world, and the reality of human freedom provides the only satisfactory explanation of moral evil—God's mysterious willingness to grant that freedom and permit its full exercise, even when it is used to thwart His divine plan. Brutus was free not to assassinate Caesar, but then in what sense did God will the death of Caesar? His death was not a pre-ordained script that had to be played out as written.

The Protestant historian Herbert Butterfield saw the action of God in history as like a composer masterfully revising his music to overcome the inadequacies of the orchestra that plays it.² There is a constant double movement, both upward and downward, and the work of redemption proceeds only slowly, against the inertia of human resistance. Men are surprised by each new turn of the pages of the book of history.

² Herbert Butterfield, *History and Human Relations* (New York: MacMillan, 1952), pp. 13-14.