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The Six Ages of the Church

IN SPITE OF THE UNITY AND CONTINUITY OF the Christian tradition, each of the successive ages of the Church's history possesses its own distinctive character, and in each of them we can study a different facet of Christian life and culture. I reckon that there are six of these ages, each lasting for three or four centuries and each following a somewhat similar course. Each of them begin, and end, in crisis; and all of them, except perhaps the first, pass through three phases of growth and decay. First there is a period of intense spiritual activity when the Church is faced with a new historical situation and begins a new apostolate. Secondly there is a period of achievement when the Church seems to have conquered the world and is able to create a new Christian culture and new forms of life and art and thought. Thirdly there is a period of retreat when the Church is attacked by new enemies from within or without, and the achievements of the second phase are lost or depreciated.

At first sight these successive movements of achievement and retreat are a somewhat perplexing phenomenon since they seem to suggest that the history of Christianity is subject to some sociological law which limits its spiritual freedom and prevents the complete fulfillment of its universal mission. It is however a commonplace of Christian teaching that the life

of the Church on earth is a continual warfare and that it cannot rely on any prospect of temporal and terrestrial success. From this point of view the successive ages of the Church are successive campaigns in this unending war, and as soon as one enemy has been conquered a new one appears to take its place.

This pattern of Christian history is found most clearly in *the First Age of the Church,* when from the first moment of its existence it became involved in a life-and-death struggle with the Roman Empire and with the civilization of the pagan world. And when after three centuries of conflict the Church was victorious and the Empire became Christian, the Church almost immediately had to face a new enemy in the form of a Christian heresy supported by the new Christian Empire. At the same time the first age of the Church is unique inasmuch as it was not following an existing tradition of faith and order as all the rest have done, but creating something absolutely new. Hence its initial phase, the Apostolic Age, stands in a sense outside the course of Church history as the archetype of spiritual creativity. For in that movement the creative activity of the Church was inseparable from the actual creation of the Church itself, so that Pentecost was at once the birthday of the Church and the beginning of the Church's apostolate. Moreover the new-born Church was faced almost at once with a second change of a more revolutionary character than she ever had to meet subsequently—that is to say, the extension of the apostolate from a Jewish to a Gentile environment and the incorporation in the new society of the great body of new converts drawn from the anonymous mass society of the great cosmopolitan centers of the Mediterranean world from Antioch to Rome itself. We have a contemporary account of this change in the New Testament and this gives us an invaluable and unique insight into the beginnings of the Church of the Gentiles. But we possess no comparable account of the change from the Judaeo-Christian point of view, nor are we much

better informed with regard to the origins of the vernacular Syriac Christianity which was to have so great an importance for the future of the Church in the East.

But the main achievement of the first age of the Church was the successful penetration of the dominant urban Roman-Hellenistic culture and for this there is no lack of materials. Although the Church remained outside the pale of civic society, without legal rights and subjected to intermittent persecutions, it nevertheless became the greatest creative force in the culture of the Roman world in the second and third centuries. It created a new Christian literature, both Greek and Latin. It laid the foundations of a new Christian art, and above all, it created a new society which existed alongside of the established order of society and to some extent replaced it. There is perhaps no other example of a similar development of which we possess such a full historical record, and apart from its religious significance, it is also of great sociological interest, since the primitive Church was not a mere sectarian cult-organization but a real society with a strong sense of citizenship and a highly developed hierarchical order.

The cultural achievement of this first age reached its full development in the first half of the third century—the age of Clement and Origen in the East, of Tertullian and Cyprian in the West. But the third phase of cultural retreat and disintegration, which normally marks the later years of every age, hardly exists in this case; it was overshadowed by the vast catastrophe of the last great persecution which threatened to destroy the existence of the Church but actually ended in the Church's triumph.

The Second Age of the Church begins with the most spectacular of all the external victories which Christendom has known—the conversion of Constantine and the foundation of the new Christian capital of the Christian Empire. This marks the beginning of Christendom in the sense of a political society

or group of societies which find their principle of unity in the public profession of the Christian faith, and also of the Byzantine culture as the translation into Christian terms of the Hellenistic culture of the late Roman Empire. Both of them were to endure, for good or ill, for more than a thousand years, since the alliance of Church and State in a Christian Commonwealth which was inaugurated by Constantine and Theodosius remained a fundamental factor in Christian culture right down to the modern period.

But from the point of view of Church history, the three centuries or three hundred and thirty years between the Peace of the Church and the Moslem conquest of Jerusalem and Antioch and Alexandria have an internal unity and coherence. It has always been known as the Age of the Fathers *par excellence,* and both the Eastern and the Western Church have looked back to it as the classical age of Christian thought and the fountainhead of theological wisdom. The Fathers were not systematic theologians in the same sense as St. Thomas Aquinas and the great theologians of later periods. But they formed the mind of the Church and determined the norms of theological thought that were followed by the theologians of the Christian world in later centuries. In this way the three great Cappadocian Fathers, St. Basil, St. Gregory of Nazianzus and St. Gregory of Nyssa, remain the classical exponents of Eastern Orthodox theology, as St. John Chrysostom was the classical exponent of Scripture; while in the West St. Augustine was the seminal and creative mind that moulded the theological thought of the West, and St. Jerome laid the foundations of the Western tradition of Biblical and historical scholarship.

Now if we apply to this second age the threefold divisions which I described at the beginning of this chapter, we have first the period of creative achievement which covers the age of the greatest of the Fathers in East and West alike, from

St. Athanasius to St. Augustine, St. Jerome and St. John Chrysostom. This first century also saw the rise and development of Christian monasticism which had such an immense historical and spiritual influence on Christian culture and which represents the most distinctive contribution of the Oriental as opposed to the Hellenic element in Christianity. For though monasticism spread with extraordinary rapidity from one end of the Christian world to the other—from Persia and Mesopotamia to Gaul and the British Isles—it retained the imprint of its Egyptian origin. The solitary ascetics of the Nitrian desert and the cenobitical monasticism of St. Pachomius remained the two archetypes of the monastic life, whether in the center of the Byzantine world or in the barbarian societies of Wales and Ireland.

At the same time this first century also saw the flowering of Christian art and architecture and liturgical poetry, which reached their full development during the second phase of this period as the Eastern Empire became fully mature. The Age of Justinian was a great age of Christian culture in the sense that every aspect of social and artistic life was subject to Christian influence. St. Sophia and the basilicas of Ravenna still give us some idea of the greatness of Byzantine culture and the closeness of its association with the liturgy and with the life of the Church. Yet already the spiritual vitality of the age was beginning to flag and it was evident that the vast opportunity that had been offered to the Church of the previous period for the conversion of the Eastern world to Christianity had been lost.

During the last phase of the period the progressive alienation of the subject nationalities of the East from the state Church of the Byzantine Empire showed itself by the formation of new national churches that rejected the orthodox dogmas as formulated in the third and fourth general councils and were in open schism with Constantinople and Rome.

Finally the Age of the Fathers ended in the loss of the Christian East and the establishment of the new world power of Islam which separated not only Syria and Egypt but the rest of North Africa and the greater part of Spain from the community of Christian peoples. Thus at the beginning of *the Third Age* in the seventh century the Church found herself beset by enemies on all sides, by the Moslem aggression in the South and by the pagan barbarism of the North. In the South she failed to regain what had been lost, but she won the North by a long and painful missionary effort and thus laid the foundation of a new Christian culture which has been somewhat ineptly termed "medieval."

In this age, more than ever before or since, the Church was the sole representative of the higher culture and possessed a monopoly of all forms of literary education, so that the relation between religion and culture was closer than in any other period. The transplantation of Catholicism from the civilized Mediterranean world in which it had been born to the coasts of the Atlantic and the North Sea had far-reaching effects on its social organization. It ceased to be a predominantly urban religion; the old link between bishop and city was broken, and the monastery became the real center of life and Christian culture. There was a remarkable, but short-lived, flowering of Christian culture in these new lands which produced a classical historical record in the case of Bede's great *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*.

In the course of the eighth century this new Christian culture extended its influence to continental Europe by the work of the Irish and Anglo-Saxon missionaries, above all St. Boniface, who was the chief agent in bringing about the alliance of the Frankish monarchy, the Papacy and the Benedictine order which was the cornerstone not only of the Carolingian Empire but of the social order of Western Christendom in the Middle Ages. For the enduring importance of the Empire

of Charles the Great is not to be found in its political achievements, which were ephemeral, but in its educational and liturgical work, which laid the foundations of that common Latin ecclesiastical culture which underlay the subsequent development of medieval civilization. On the other hand the attempt to create a new form of Christian state on these foundations, in the Anglo-Saxon kingdom and in the Carolingian Empire alike, failed owing to their lack of material resources and the absence of an educated class of lawyers and officials, such as still existed in the Byzantine world.

The collapse of the new Christian state under the pressure of the barbarian invasion was followed by a social relapse into a state of barbarism which threatened to overwhelm the Church itself. Nevertheless even in the darkest hour of this dark age the missionary apostolate of the Church continued, and the conversion of the Scandinavian peoples of the North and of the Czechs, the Poles and the Magyars, together with the Bulgarians and the Russians, in the East completed the task which had begun more than five centuries before, in the dark days of the barbarian invasions.

The *Fourth Age* of the Church began with a movement of spiritual reaction against the secularization of the Church and its absorption in the feudal society. It began as a movement of monastic reform in Lorraine and Burgundy and gradually extended its influence throughout Western Christendom. The turning point came in the middle of the eleventh century when the influence of the reformers reached Rome, and the Papacy put itself at the head of the movement to free the Church from its dependence on the feudal State and to restore the hierarchical order and the canonical discipline of Catholic tradition. Although this involved a tremendous and long-drawn-out conflict with the temporal power as represented by the Western Empire and the feudal principalities, it was not in principle a contest for political power. Its true aims are ex-

pressed in the final appeal which Gregory VII addressed to the Christian people from his exile in Salerno:

> Since the day when the Church placed me on its apostolic throne my whole desire and the end of all my striving has been that the Holy Church, the Bride of God, our mistress and our Mother, should recover her honor and remain free and chaste and Catholic.

So long as this alliance between the Papacy and the monastic reformers continued—that is to say, for nearly two and a half centuries—the Church exercised a dynamic influence on almost every aspect of Western culture; and the spiritual reformers, like St. Hugh of Cluny, St. Gregory VII, St. Anselm and above all St. Bernard, were also the central figures in the public life of Western Christendom. So too in the following period it was the influence of the Church that inspired the revival of Western learning and philosophy and the creation of the universities which were founded as international centers of higher study for Western Christendom as a whole.

Yet in spite of all this the movement of reform was never completely successful. The medieval Church was so deeply involved in the territorial economy of feudal society that it was not enough to free the Church from secular control so long as it retained its own temporal power and privileges. The reformers were indeed conscious of this dilemma and they found a personal solution in a strict adherence to the ascetic ideals of the monastic life, but this was not enough since even the most ascetic of the reformed orders, like the Cistercians, still remained wealthy and powerful in their corporate capacity. It was left to St. Francis, the Poor Man of Assisi, to take the further, final step by renouncing corporate property also and pledging his followers to total poverty. His ideal was not to found a new monastic order but to institute a new way of

life, consisting in the simple and literal observance of the precepts of the Gospel, "the following of the poor life of Christ."

This marks the climax of the reforming movement, and the greatness of the medieval Papacy is nowhere more evident than in the way in which it accepted this drastic breach with the traditional order and made the new institution an organ for the evangelization of the masses and an instrument of its international mission. A century later this would not have been possible, for from the end of the thirteenth century the international unity of Western Christendom had begun to disintegrate and the alliance between Papacy and the party of religious reform was breaking down. During the last two centuries of the Fourth Age this disintegration shows itself in the defeat of the Papacy by the new national monarchies, like that of Philip IV of France, and in the rise of new revolutionary movements of reform, like the Wycliffites and the Hussites, and finally by the Great Schism in the Papacy itself. The attempt to overcome the schism by the Conciliar movement only widened the gap between the Northern European reformers and Rome, and the age ends with the acute secularization of the Renaisance Papacy and the great religious revolution of Northern Eurpoe which is known as the Reformation *par excellence.*

Thus *the Fifth Age of the Church* began in a time of crisis which threatened the unity and even the existence of Western Christendom. On the one hand there was the direct theological and ecclesiastical challenge of the Protestant Reformation which separated the greater part of Northern Europe from Catholicism, and on the other there was the cultural challenge of the new lay culture of the Italian Renaissance, which had replaced the theological and philosophical traditions of the medieval universities. Finally the external relations of Western Christendom had been transformed by the Turkish conquest of Southeastern Europe, and by the widening of the horizon

of Western culture by the discovery of America and the opening of the Far East to European trade and navigation.

All these factors affected the character of Catholicism in the following age. The reaction against the Reformation produced the Tridentine reform of the Church and the revival of the religious life through the influence of new religious orders. The cultural issue was met by the development of a new form of Christian humanist culture and education, while the age of discovery was followed by a great outburst of missionary activity, which found its greatest representative in St. Francis Xavier, the apostle of the Far East. These new developments reached their maturity in the first half of the seventeenth century when the Catholic revival found expression in the new Baroque culture which dominated the artistic and intellectual life of Europe and represents the more or less successful fusion of the tradition of the humanist Renaissance and the spirit of the Catholic revival. In its religious aspect the most distinctive feature of this Baroque culture was the great development of Catholic mysticism which took place at this period and had a considerable influence on the art and literature of the age.

But the success of the Baroque culture was comparatively a short one. Its weakness, and that of the Catholic revival itself, was that it was too closely dependent on the success of the Catholic monarchies, especially the Hapsburg monarchies in Spain and Austria. When these declined, the Baroque culture declined with them, and when the third great Catholic monarchy was destroyed by the great political and social cataclysm of the French Revolution, the Church was the first victim of the change. As the armies of the French Republic advanced through Europe, the established order of the Catholic Church was swept away. The monasteries and universities were destroyed, church property was confiscated and the Pope himself was deported to France as a political prisoner. In the

eyes of secular opinion, the Catholic Church had been abolished as a superannuated relic of the dead past.

Thus *the Sixth Age of the Church* began in an atmosphere of defeat and disaster. Everything had to be rebuilt from the foundations. The religious orders and the monasteries, the Catholic universities and colleges and, not least, the foreign missions had all been destroyed or reduced to poverty and impotence. Worst of all, the Church was still associated with the unpopular cause of the political reaction and the tradition of the *ancien régime*.

Yet in spite of all these disasters the Church did recover and a revival of Catholicism took place, so that the Church was in a far stronger position by 1850 than it had been a hundred years before when it still possessed its ancient wealth and privileges. This revival began in France during the Revolution, under the shadow of the guillotine, and the exiled French clergy contributed to the creation or restoration of Catholicism in England and America. Indeed the whole history of Catholicism in the United States belongs to this sixth age and is in many aspects typical of the new conditions of the period.

American Catholicism differs from that of the old world in that it is essentially urban, whereas in Europe it was still firmly rooted in the peasant population. Moreover from the beginning it has been entirely independent of the state and has not been restricted by the complex regime of concordats which was the dominant pattern of European Catholicism in the nineteenth century.

But at the present day it is the American rather than the European pattern which is becoming the normal condition of the Church everywhere except in those regions like Eastern Europe or China where it exists on sufferance or under persecution. I will say no more about the present age as it is dangerous to generalize about a period which is still unfinished. The present age of the Church still has centuries to run and

who can say what even the present century will bring forth? On the one hand Christians are faced with an external threat more formidable than anything we have known since the time of Islam. On the other hand the intellectual and spiritual lassitude that marked the last two centuries has largely disappeared and we see on every side the awakening of a new apostolic spirit and a wider concern for the unity of the Church.

Each of these ages has only a limited duration; each ends in a crisis, a divine judgment in which a whole social world is destroyed. And insofar as these social worlds have been Christian ones, their downfall creates a problem for the Christian who sees so much that appeared to be part of the consecrated, God-given order swept away together with the evils and abuses of a corrupt society. This however is only a particular example of the problem of the relativity of culture with which all historians have to deal. But whereas the secular historian is in no way committed to the cultures of the past, the Catholic, and indeed every Christian, is bound to recognize the existence of a transcendent supra-temporal element at work in history. The Church exists in history, but it transcends history so that each of its temporal manifestations has a supernatural value and significance. To the Catholic all the successive ages of the Church and all the forms of Christian culture form part of one living whole in which we still participate as a contemporary reality.

One of the main reasons why I dissent from the current threefold division or periodization of Church history as ancient, medieval and modern is that it is apt to make us lose sight of the multiplicity and variety of the life of the Church, and of the inexhaustible fecundity with which, in the words of the liturgy of Easter Day, God continually calls new peoples into the divine society, multiplying the Church by the vocation of the Gentiles. I have spoken of the Six Ages of the Church—there may be sixty before the universal mission of the Church

is completed. But each age has its own peculiar vocation which can never be replaced, and each, to paraphrase Ranke's famous saying, stands in a direct relation to God and answers to Him alone for its achievements and its failures. Each too bears its own irreplaceable witness to the faith of all.