

WELCOME NEW HISTORY OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

Kenneth D. Whitehead

James Hitchcock, *History of the Catholic Church: From the Apostolic Age to the Third Millennium*, Ignatius Press.

This is a book that we have needed for a good while now: it is a one-volume history of the Catholic Church which goes back to the very beginning and brings everything up to date. We need to know the true facts about the very beginning of the Church—that she was indeed founded by Jesus Christ upon the apostles—if we are truly to be able to understand what she is and what she does today. This is essential in an era when so many try to deny that Christ really founded any Church at all—and when the stock reaction of many who encounter the existing Church is too often to reject her claims out of hand and even to oppose and attack her.

We further need to bring her history up to date if we are truly to realize and appreciate that it is the very same Church founded by Jesus Christ that is still very much in business today, two thousand years later, carrying on with what Christ originally commanded the apostles to do, namely, “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that [Christ] commanded...” (Mt 28: 19).

The Catholic Church is a unique institution. There is nothing else like the Church in the whole world. In numbers she is the largest single organized religious institution in the world, with more than a billion adherents. In years she is the oldest continuously existing organized religious institution in the world (or perhaps continuously existing institution of any kind). In area she is the farthest-flung and most extended of

all the world's diverse institutions, with members in virtually every part of the world today (if only in small numbers in some places).

No more fascinating story exists than the story of how what Christ started so long ago by sending out the apostles has resulted in today's vast worldwide Church functioning on every continent under the leadership of the pope and the Catholic bishops in communion with him. Not less fascinating are the varied and multitudinous events that have occurred along the way in the course of the Church's long history. In this book Saint Louis University historian James Hitchcock has undertaken to tell this story in less than six hundred pages. Such an undertaking could never have been anything less than a formidable challenge, but readers will find, as this reviewer has found, that Professor Hitchcock has acquitted himself very creditably. He has produced a smoothly flowing, readable, and accurate narrative that is exactly what the book's title advertises itself to be, that is: a full-fledged history of the Catholic Church.

Such an up-to-date history of the Church (that people will actually read) has been needed for some time, particularly in view of the tumultuous events that have characterized the Church's life in the post-Vatican-II era, our era. Rarely has the Church known such sustained and continuous unrest, and even assaults from both within and without, as has been the case in the past half century since the Council. Professor Hitchcock's treatment of precisely this era in his final chapter is one of his best. He shows that the Church's life has almost never been entirely tranquil; but in our day the outcome of a Council that was supposed to renew the faith, but instead became the occasion of determined attempts by dissident and disloyal elements to transform her belief and practice in accordance with their own alien agendas, created an entirely novel situation. Combined with the assaults from without by an increasingly aggressive secularism, this

situation has been urgently in need of the kind of understanding and explanations that Hitchcock has now largely been able to provide.

For this author is well known from his writing and speaking as an articulate exponent and defender of authentic Catholicism. He is the author of a major work on religion in the decisions of the U.S. Supreme Court, of what remains one of the very best contemporary books on the sacred liturgy, and of numerous other works in both book and article form. But he is also a professional historian and it shows in this welcome new *History of the Catholic Church*. He has evidently consulted the main historical sources for the major historical periods, and he provides a clear, balanced, and reliable narrative that also not infrequently conveys the *excitement* of so much that is exciting in the Church's long history.

However, the book is not just another chronicle of popes and kings and their interactions. Popes and kings are naturally included because they are an essential part of the whole story; but in this history Professor Hitchcock has given relatively greater attention to broad Church developments and movements, and, especially, to important individual figures—theologians, philosophers, saints, and the like—than you will usually find in a general history. Prominent in this narrative along with the popes and kings are sketches of important figures such as, for example, Athanasius, Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Pascal, and Newman. The same thing is true of the great saints and founders of religious orders such as a Benedict, Bernard, or Loyola; or a Catherine of Siena, a Teresa of Avila, or a Joan of Arc.

If, by the way, you think that a particular pope or saint or theologian is sometimes being short-changed, read on, because the author sometimes treats of major historical Church figures on more than one occasion as he proceeds.

Also in this book, relatively more attention is given to

Christian art and architecture, and even to music and literature, than you will often find in general histories. This kind of emphasis is surely quite proper, after all, since these things figure among the *glories* of the Catholic Church. Even though the Church's basic aim is the sanctification and salvation of souls, the salutary influence she has also had on human culture, particularly in the West, cannot and should not be minimized, and it is not minimized here.

Even though the author typically likes to pay particular attention to individual popes or kings, saints or scholars, he does not neglect larger events, tendencies, movements, heresies, and the like—e.g., Arianism, Donatism, the great Christological councils, conciliarism, Jansenism, Modernism, and such. I thought his brief but lucid account of the causes and consequences of the Protestant Reformation was one of the best I have ever encountered. I would have preferred greater attention to the Church's relationship with Eastern Orthodoxy, but the author obviously had to make choices to stay within the limits of his study.

The author's basic method is to present a smooth continuous narrative into which he then introduces the various events and people he is treating in a given chapter. The book's fourteen chapters are not broken up into sections or sub-chapters; rather, the author helpfully includes in the margin throughout the book a brief descriptive title (usually one word) for each paragraph. (In the helpfulness department, he also provides in parentheses a translation of the Latin titles of the many Church documents he mentions.)

The successive chapters in the book are divided into historical periods that are more or less conventional in Church history; they bear such titles as Chapter 1's "Beginning at Jerusalem," Chapter 7's "East and West," or Chapter 9's "Reform and Counter Reform." This book excels over many other histories, however, in its inclusion of a Chapter 12 entitled "To the Ends of the Earth," which tells the

marvelous story of the great missionary expansion of the Catholic Church—how she got to be the unique worldwide institution she has become. Also interesting and helpful for English-speaking readers is a Chapter 13 entitled, “The New Nations,” which is specifically about the formerly non-Catholic areas of Britain, North America, and Australia—areas which have become increasingly significant in Church terms only in recent times.

Chapter 14, the final chapter, entitled “Joy and Hope, Grief and Anguish,” takes its title from the first line of Vatican Council II’s Pastoral Constitution on the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*. It will be noted that Professor Hitchcock includes here not only the first words from that conciliar text, “Joy and Hope,” but also those that immediately follow in the same text, namely, “Grief and Anguish”—thus restoring the proper balance that so many liberal interpreters of the Council have so often left out. As already mentioned, this chapter dealing with the post-Vatican-II era presents a perceptive but concise account that explains how things got out of hand following the Council as well as you will find it explained anywhere.

Only now, fifty years later, have things gotten stabilized in such a way that it can perhaps finally be said that some of what was always the promise of Vatican II has now actually been achieved. Professor Hitchcock gives great credit for this to the leadership of Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI, themselves both men of the Council, who continued against no little opposition to insist on its proper interpretation in the course of their pontificates. Remarkably, Hitchcock speaks of the present pontiff, Benedict XVI, as “the greatest theologian ever to serve as pope”—who succeeded on the chair of Peter the pope our author describes as “the greatest philosopher ever to do so,” Blessed Pope John Paul II. At least it cannot be said that the Church has lacked for leadership in the midst of her post-conciliar tribulations!

In conclusion, what must finally be mentioned about this book is the *honesty* it consistently exhibits. Professor Hitchcock amply shows that he is not engaged in a white-washing or sugar-coating of the Church's record. Whether he is writing about such deplorable incidents as the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre carried out by the French Catholic party in 1572, or the failure of the Catholic bishops in our own day to deal adequately with the homosexual-oriented clerical sexual abuse crisis, he is unsparing in his respect for the truth. The same thing is true in his treatment of the "bad popes." On the other hand, where the Church's reputation has been blackened by exaggerated and even unjust accusations, as, for instance, in the Galileo case or in that of the Inquisition, he brings out and puts on the record the true facts of the matter.

All in all, it remains the case that the Catholic Church's story is truly one of the most amazing stories in the entire history of the world, and in this book it is retold in a way that today's Catholics can profitably read, refer to, and rely on. Ignatius Press is to be commended for commissioning it and James Hitchcock for writing it.

Kenneth D. Whitehead is the author, among other books, of The Renewed Church (Sapientia Press, 2009). He is a member of the Board of Directors of the Catholic League.