

Theology Today

How can the Catholic Church today claim to be the Catholic Church of a hundred years ago, or five-hundred years ago, or a thousand? Can we Catholics be sure that we preach the message of the Apostles? Can we be sure that our liturgy celebrates what they celebrated? These are the concerns of the Catholic theologians in our century. Way back in the twentieth century, there was a dismissive attitude towards such matters. In 1964, a book was published under the title *Objections to Roman Catholicism* in which eight Catholic writers examined the foundation of their belief. The result of this examination was an appeal for rapid and radical change: “. . . ancient traditions and customs of value and even necessity in their times, but largely irrelevant in the world of today, should soon take a back place or be frankly given up.” A similar appeal marks many of the essays collected in *Why I am Still a Catholic* (1982). And in 1990 Hans Küng decided to reprint his essay “Why I Remain a Catholic,” whose title will be best comprehended by adding to it the phrase “in spite of everything.” The difficulty with the radical change these authors recommend is the implicit denial that there has been a revelation; and without revelation the claims of Catholicism are absurd.

An older approach to the question of continuity was to say that nothing had ever changed in the church. There was an instinctual conviction that Jesus would have celebrated the Last Supper with his back to the Apostles, standing before a crucifix in an alb that was lace up to the hips. This approach collapses under the weight of our accumulated knowledge of history. Although Bishop Bossuet could confidently say in 1688 that variation in the teachings of the faith must be a sign of error, anyone trying to defend this view today would have to qualify it out of existence.

A third position could be called the progressive version of the development of doctrine. According to it, doctrines become not only reformulated, but more fully or better expressed with the passage of time. This position is harder to criticize, but I am convinced that it must be wrong. Is it not equivalent to saying that we know more about the meaning of Jesus than did Saint Augustine or Saint Teresa, or even Saint Paul himself? Hence I would advise theologians to think of Catholicism as a series of re-expressions of the experience of salvation as it comes to us through the action of Jesus Christ in the Church. The point is that a re-expression need not be an improvement, even though it is chronologically later. An example may make my meaning clear. The canon of Scripture—i.e., the official list of books in the Bible—was defined only in 1546 by the Council of Trent in response to Protestant alterations to the canon of the Old Testament. Up to then the canon had been that collection of authoritative sacred writings identified by their use in the liturgy, in theology, and for devotion. It is worth noting that a canon of Scripture was first defined in Judaism around A.D. 100, a time when its varied tradition had become limited to Pharisaism. “Canon,” as James Barr says in his book *Holy Scripture*, “is an anachronism for ancient Judaism and for early Christianity.” A rigid canon is really a Protestant concern, necessitated by the Reformation slogan “The Bible and the Bible alone.” Consequently, while I recognize the necessity of Trent’s deciding the question of the Catholic canon, I do not see the situation after 1548 as better than that which went before. Another example would be the protracted debates about the person of Jesus in early Christianity, which diverted attention from the role of the Holy Spirit. One may thus say that even the great conciliar creeds represent loss as well as gain, in that a

dogmatic statement, by drawing lines where none had existed before, tends to section off approaches that may seem inconsistent with defined doctrine. Again, this is not to say that dogmatic formulations are unnecessary; my claim is only that they are not necessarily advances. They create new situations in which we, like our forefathers in the faith, must strive too realize the full revelation of Jesus Christ.

The preceding generation has cleared the ground in many areas of Catholicism. The theologian of this century will have to rebuild on this bare terrain. I would advise him to view the Church as a series of interlinked re-expressions of a religious experience that has been in essence the same at all times and places. An attitude that will help him in his work is the one we bring to the study of our own family history. We do not consider ourselves more human than our ancestors although, obviously, we live in different times. As Catholic we have a similar feeling for our predecessors in the faith. And, like our physical parents, our spiritual progenitors have left their mark on us. We shall understand neither ourselves nor our faith if we begin by denying that fact.