

Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow

by Father Daniel Callam, C.S.B.

“We no longer live in the kind of Platonic world that Gregory Nazianzen lived in. Our age, like him has its own world view. And that means that a sacramental theology that was useful and appropriate in the fourth century may be neither useful nor appropriate in the twentieth.”

THIS STATEMENT from a British theologian seems to call into question our conviction that the Church today can be identified with the Church of the fourth century. For us Catholics, this is an alarming idea, for the Church sees itself throughout history as essentially the same Church that was founded by Jesus Christ and proclaimed by the Apostles. John Henry Newman put it vividly shortly before his conversion:

I think the Church of Rome in every respect the continuation of the early Church. I think she is the early Church in these times, and the early Church was she in those times. They differ in doctrine and discipline as child and grown man differ, not otherwise. I do not see any medium between disowning Christianity, and taking the Church of Rome.

Letter of 11 July 1845

Newman's belief, which has been the Church's in every age, is not much talked about today; there seems even to be a predisposition on the part of some *against* the traditional view. This attitude is more or less that associated with the modernist movement of the turn of the twentieth century. In essence, it was then held that the defined dogmas of the faith, the Bible, the person of Jesus himself, are to be scrutinized and then evaluated by historical research which is to have the final say on their meaning and significance. The effect was an openness to the possibility that the Church could have misinterpreted the meaning of Jesus, or that the Christ of our faith is a theological construct far removed from the man Jesus, or that the Bible, incoherent and incorrect to begin with, has been misunderstood as often as not. This attitude leads easily to an expectation that the Church should alter its teachings and practice—among ecumenists, for example, who are embarrassed by papal infallibility or the Marian dogmas, or among

various liberationists who see only oppression in the past. Are we to place our British theologian in this camp? The answer is no, if we can distinguish among revelation, dogma and theology

Revelation is primarily a person, Jesus Christ. God's perfect and exhaustive revelation of himself exists only in the man Jesus, and it cannot be fully captured in any human language. This does not mean that we can say nothing true about God, only that what we say will be inadequate and partial. The most authoritative verbal expression of divine reality is the Bible. But the solemn teachings of the Church—dogmas—also express aspects of this revelation, however limited they may be in the face of the transcendent reality of God. Because they are true they merit re-examination and re-expression; if they were false they would be simply discarded.

The task of this re-examination and re-expression belongs to theology. The language and experience of the fourth century is not ours, and to transfer its religious truths and experiences into our culture requires study, reflection, and docility to God's grace. This process is theology, so that everyone, in a way, is a theologian. The baroque liturgy, magnificently suited to an aristocratic age, is a good example of what I am talking about. The Tridentine Mass embodied the religious sentiments and social realities needed to present the truths of salvation to that society, as we can see from its centuries-long survival and the holiness it engendered. And bishops and teachers of the fourth century constructed a religious culture, Platonism included, for the faithful then, one that has largely continued to the present time and has been taken as the norm for our own liturgical renewal.

Parts of our ancient inheritance are unalterable; the canon of Scripture is the most obvious, but there are others such as the decrees of the General Councils and the basic form of the liturgy. We simply find means to appropriate them. Other elements, such as popular philosophies, social structures, economic systems, general culture, do change. This means that our faith has to be re-expressed in our day, for the dialogue between God and man effected by Jesus Christ belongs as much to us as to our ancestors in the faith. ❧