

PATRISTIC REVIVAL

FOR a Thomist the validity of any method in patristic study can be gauged by the effort to attain to an objective knowledge of patristic thought. It is only for its own sake that truth is to be sought for if we are to chance to find it. The theologian who brings his own preconceptions to the study of the Fathers will only rediscover what he has himself preconceived. The controversialist who uses patristic texts as missiles will find them both as malleable and as harmless as snowballs. It is a futile thing to read the Fathers in relation to problems and to controversies that were beyond their imagining, for their writings can only be intelligible in terms of their own setting, not of ours. Hesitatingly and clumsily we must try to place them in the time context and the cultural pattern of their lives.

It is only gradually that such a method is becoming possible. It would be naïve to ignore the value of the labour of the past. French and German Catholicism have maintained a record of continuous achievement in patristics which is only paralleled by the high tradition of Anglican scholarship. But of their nature such traditions cannot be static. Our knowledge of Hellenistic cultural factors is as new as the science of Byzantine palæography and both are critically significant for the reading of Greek texts. The study of Hadrianic culture has been transformed since 1906, scientific Byzantinism is not yet forty years old, but Hadrianic and proto-Byzantine culture formed the setting of two out of the three decisive epochs in patristic thought. The Epistle to Diognetos and the Pseudo-Dionysios are as separated by alien worlds as the Odes of Horace and the *Chanson de Roland*. Patristic literature as literature must remain only half intelligible apart from the cultural preconceptions that find reflection in it. There is a relevant commentary on any Father in the secular prose and the art forms of his time.

Precisely for this reason patristic study must still remain in transition. It is being constantly affected by the quick development of palæography and archæology and since

1929 each year has brought an increase to our knowledge of some grouping of the Fathers. Each added fragment of the truth has brought with it its own complexity. It is a primary defect of the text-book system that it fossilizes hypotheses that specialists discard. An effective revival of patristics must imply its closer alignment with classical and Byzantine studies and a more international collaboration among experts perceptive of difficulties and chary of their solution.

Such a revival of patristics would seem likely to be of gain to Catholicism as a whole. To a Thomist, action is not the purpose of the discovery of a truth but it is its sequel; we do not contemplate in order to be effective Dominicans but are only effective Dominicans if we are contemplatives. A patristic revival within the Church might revitalise Catholic Apologetic, bring a new understanding to Thomist theology and emphasise the Catholicity of Unity by linking our speculation and our spirituality with a source that is none the less Catholic because it is not Latin. All three developments would affect Catholics as Catholics whether they belong to laity or priesthood.

The principles of Christian apologetic remain constant, the method of their application must vary with the problems to which they are applied. To a Thomist a controversy is meaningless unless it is based on a premiss shared by both disputants. The premisses that have been increasingly presupposed since the first clash against the Donatists, a sacred Canon, an organized religion are vanishing in a post-Christian world. After eighteen hundred years we are not so very far from the second century. Beneath the serene acceptance of convention and the negligent acceptance of myth lies an instinctive certitude of much Natural Law and for some the conviction of a direct experience of the Divine. Half-hidden in the massed tedium of indifference two religious forces still stay vital, a stoicism of practice not of theory and the memory of an initiation in the greater mysteries. While increasingly through Europe the conflict has ceased to turn on the disputed dogmas of an acknowledged revelation and is coming once more to centre on the antithesis between the Catholic conception of the

individual and a unitary conception of the State.

Granted that there can be only an analogy between a post-Christian and pre-Christian world yet the work of the second century Greek apologists has become vividly apposite. We have no concern with the accidents of the form of its presentation; the veneered insubstantial learning, the diatribes of professional rhetoric, the heavy academic quips. But a conscious unity with their purpose and a revived knowledge of their argument would bring back to us the knowledge of an apologetic from natural law and the foundations of an apologetic from comparative religion. It is not only argument that we could develop from them. We should return with them to the use of the terminology as well as of the premisses of those who differ from us. We could renew from them that realization of corporate responsibility that dynamised the fumbling thought of Justin and the passion to go free and go to God. So much that is vital for our approach to controversy seems symbolised in a phrase from the Alexandrines: "Ivory is beautiful but it is not the Olympian Zeus."

The effects of a patristic revival on modern apologetic could not be restricted to the flaking walls of a seminary. By reason of the very nature of the Incarnation Catholicism is dynamic. Every Catholic is called to be an apologetic in so far as he is an apostle, is an apostle in so far as he is called to be another Christ. Because the Church is Christ's Body, not a synagogue; not only Calvary and Nazareth, but the apostolate of the lakeside towns still form the unbroken rhythm of the Christian life.

Only a decadent Thomist would think it treason to supplement St. Thomas from the Fathers. To St. Thomas it would be the inevitable corollary of his conception of patristics as a source. Ultimately the theology of the *Summa* is a synthesis between the Augustinianism of the 12th century scholastics and the new knowledge of the Greek Fathers that was slowly drifting westward. A revival in patristic theology would only bring a clearer understanding of St. Thomas's theological thought. Once again we could come to see his answer in relation to the question

that it answered. It is the cardinal sin of exegesis to analyse a sentence and to ignore its context, but patristic theology forms the context of three fourths of the Summa.

Necessarily as Thomists we hold that a deeper knowledge of the Summa would bring fresh life to all theological thought, and this too could affect each Catholic in so far as he is Catholic. By reason of the very nature of the Incarnation theology can never be professionalised within the limits of the classroom or the pulpit. In so far as we are members of Christ's body we have been raised above our nature and summoned to an end beyond human knowing. Yet we remain human, groping with a human reason among the mysteries of God. Each Catholic in so far as he is a Catholic is called to be in a real sense a theologian for through his mind he links the human with the Divine; truth gained by reason, truth revealed by Truth.

Catholic speculation might be widened as well as deepened by a revival of patristic theology. Europe has never been the faith, but for seven hundred years articulate Catholic thought has been indomitably European in the form of its expression and dominantly Latin; a direct contact with the teaching of the Eastern Fathers would re-link Western traditions with a thought world of new emphasis and fresh perspectives. Such re-union would only emphasize the Catholicism of a Church which strengthens as well as transcends the contrasted cultures of its children. The note of Catholicity can only throw into relief the note of Unity. To a Thomist it is not finite uniformity but finite multiplicity that reflects the infinite unity of the Divine.

Greek patristics cover a transition from an Hellenic to an oriental world. A Byzantine theologian, a Pseudo-Dionysios or a Damascene, thought on a plane as alien from the West as the court culture of classical China. It had been a slow transition; Byzantine civilization was not suddenly created by the impact of fresh influences from the East, it was a synthesis primarily due to the slow fusion of Greek and oriental elements in the town life of the great sea-ports of the Levant. As a cultural change it was not only gradual but sporadic; if Origen was the first of the Byzantinised

theologians the young Chrysostom of the *Homilies upon the Statues* was the last of the Greeks. Byzantine theology and spirituality was foreshadowed by the 3rd century Alexandrines, is defined in the 4th century Cappadocian Fathers, becomes dominant a generation later.

Oriental and Hellenic elements had long been present in Christian speculation. Often they had fused in some transient syncretism, but the gnostic temper of mind can illustrate the lack of cohesion that characterises a syncretising Orientalism. With the Byzantine theologians the two movements at last become synthetic and therefore integrated. An Hellenic clarity and subtlety of thought led to a realization of the incomprehensibility of the Divine which was to remain Oriental in its emphasis, an Hellenic conception of the unity of the known gained new vigour from an Orientalized, almost Gnostic, consciousness of an unbroken rhythm of descending powers. Their union was to find expression in a spirituality that remained purely liturgical, in a mysticism that remained purely that of blinded participation, in a world view that was to be often so oblivious of jarring human personality and in an ethic and a sacramental theology that was always to be not individualist but cosmic.

The character of the theological transition could be illustrated by the change in art-form since both were perhaps occasioned by the same shifting of cultural perspective. The detailed analyses of the Aphrodisian school and the recent study of Hadrianic sculpture have enabled us to estimate in some detail the art forms of the world of the Greek apologists. The same world view seems to find expression both in the official art of the medallions and the busts and in the unofficial art of the reliefs. The too-photographic sense of detail, the new representation of spatial depth, the new method of continuous narration, the seemly fleshly portraiture, all reflect a neo-attic world of conventionalised naturalism, acute social values, secure standards, ethical preoccupations and a pervading sense of *humanitas*. A world which, as the Epistle to Diognetos could assume a axiomatic, had been made for man.

Another world is illustrated by Byzantine art standards, a

world which, as the Pseudo-Dionysios could assume as axiomatic, had been made for God. Byzantine art was to remain a liturgy, a ritual of all created things through which the initiate moved securely in a shadow world intent upon the world it shadowed. In art as in spirituality and in exegesis the Byzantines were to hold that the literal sense is to the mystical as water is to wine. Even the miniaturists retaining a purely Hellenistic technique applied it on an alien plane. Their pleasure in small individual detail, their almost emotional delicacy of treatment, was combined with a new sense of the Transcendent. They were to style themselves the *zoographoi*, the painters of the living but the life that they painted was the life of the world of ideas. Byzantine humanism was only an attempt to translate human sense perception into the intricate pattern of the Divine Wisdom. Byzantinism was to remain a corporate culture, fundamentally orientalised, minutely patterned in its thought form, self-concentrated, self-enclosed.

The same transition seems reflected in the changing theological terminology of the patristic East. Thus the change from "soul-ensouled" to "flesh-ensouled" to signify the human unity might symbolise the two contrasted approaches to the central problem of human ethic. The first approach was that of Justin; the overburdened consciousness of moral tension and of the soul oppressed and imprisoned by the body. It had as its background the third Stoa and second century neo-Hellenism; its future lay with Augustinianism and the patristic West. But the conception of the human being as flesh-ensouled by reason might seem to suggest, however, clumsily, some of the serenity of the Byzantine moralist, the recognition of the dominance of the unseen and of the rule of cool and temperate mind.

For the change from Hellenism to Byzantinism would seem to have affected the subjects of theology as well as its phrasing. It was not only a coincidence that Soteriology and the disputes on Predestination, and the theorising on the *vulnera* of original sin and on the causality of the sacraments should have had so relatively little interest for Byzantine theologians. It seems inevitably the result of a

religious culture in which individual destiny, individual striving, was dwarfed by a conception of the Godhead as distant and as enclosing as the sky.

A patristic revival might imply a return to Byzantine theology not as a system but as a source. A clear realization of the implications of the doctrine of the Mystical Body is the pre-requisite to any vital progress in our apprehension of Christian dogma, spirituality and ethic. In the Divine economy of the Church it was perhaps the function of the last Greek Fathers to aid such realization. The limitations of a corporate orientalised culture, which in so many ways had stunted them, drove them to emphasize a conception of the Church as a corporate unity with the Divine. *Theosis*, *henosis*, to be divinised, to become One, were the recurrent motifs of their thought. Perhaps they could become motifs in our own. For we know that all Christian life has its meaning from that participation in the Divine Nature we name grace and we know that the meaning of a Christian ethic is to act as Christ has acted and to choose as Christ has chosen.

For the Greek emphasis on the cosmic significance of the Incarnation is that of all true theology. Christ is of the present not the past, we are as close to him as was Iscariot and when we sleep it is within Gethsemane. We can be baptised with that with which He was baptised and drink of the chalice that He drank of and hang beside Him in as real a sense as the thieves and always it is through the commonplace we go to God; the nails, the wood, the use of bread and wine. So petty, hesitating, commonplace a thing as a revived study of Greek patristics might bring us back a consciousness of the crowds beyond the four walls of our upper room, the new wind and the flames descending and the sharp clamour of contrasted tongues. For in the Catholic life each day is Pentecost.

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