

BOOK REVIEW

History of the Catholic Church: From the Apostolic Age to the Third Millennium. By James Hitchcock. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012. 580pp. \$ 29.95. ISBN 978-1-58617-664-8.

James Hitchcock's *History of the Catholic Church* is both a timely and important book for re-evangelizing the Catholic Church. Much error abounds in our culture around the history of the Church with modern media constantly distorting the historical facts to fit their own agendas. The church is constantly being attacked for its historical relationship with Constantine, the Crusades, Galileo, the Reformation, Pope Pius XII, Feminism, Colonization, or the more recent sex scandals. These events are too often covered in a one-sided manner and usually have little relationship to what actually occurred. Untrue or incomplete facts keep getting bandied about and no one looks to correct these errors. James Hitchcock has written a book that can give the ordinary person a very clear understanding of these historical issues and clear up the many misunderstandings of Church history that seem to be so prevalent in our culture. He is not an apologist for the Faith but he is very successful in giving a fair and balanced view of the Church's history. He is not afraid to either defend the Church or point out valid criticisms. Hitchcock's book will enable readers to better understand Catholic Church history and be in a better position to explain to others the historical inaccuracies so often tossed about in our culture.

Since Vatican II the Catholic Church has come under attack both internally and externally to conform to modernity. Many Christian and non-Christian scholars proclaim that the Church is out of date and there is a call for the Church to follow other Christian denominations and revisit its longstanding dogmas and traditions. James Hitchcock is not one of these scholars. He is a well-known writer and speaker and defender of orthodox Catholicism. He is a professor of history at St. Louis University and the author of several books and many articles on history and liturgy.

In a one volume, five hundred eighty page book Hitchcock is able to give us a very thorough understanding of how the Church grew from a small frightened group huddled in a room in Jerusalem on the first Pentecost to being the single largest organized religion in the world. From this humble beginning, the Catholic Church now has over one billion members scattered throughout the world drawn from almost every culture and language. Hitchcock shows the unique role the Church has in history. No other institution has her longevity. It has influenced both the spiritual and temporal world and has been the major contributing force in Western theology, philosophy, culture, politics and art. Such an impact has resulted from the efforts of Jesus' followers to obey his command to "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 I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age." (Mt 28: 19)

The Catholic Church's identity, like the Judaism from which it grew, has an essentially historical character. The Apostles and the other early Christians claimed to be witnesses to the life, death, Resurrection, and Ascension of Jesus. Christianity is based on the essential claim that its founder, Jesus, the Son of God, became man and lived in a precise time in history. Without the Incarnation there is no Catholic Church. Yet many Scripture and history scholars who have become preoccupied with the "historical-critical method" have in the process removed Jesus' divinity and reduced him to being merely a holy man. In his introduction, Hitchcock acknowledges that the historical-critical method has benefits for understanding Scripture: "explicating the precise meaning of words, recovering the social and cultural milieu in which Jesus lived, situating particular passages in the context of the entire Bible" (11). However, he points out the limitation of the method by noting that its users only understand the Bible in terms of how it was composed and without any affirmation of its divine inspiration and transcendent meaning. "Some scholars cultivate a spirit of skepticism about almost everything in Scripture, including its antiquity and the accuracy of its accounts. A major fallacy of this skepticism is the assumption that, while religious believers are fatally biased, skeptics are objective and disinterested." (12) Hitchcock explains, "The distinction between 'the Jesus of history' and 'the Christ of faith' was formulated by certain modern theologians as part of the effort to 'demythologize' Jesus as the Son of God and Redeemer of the universe, dismissing that belief as a theological construct only loosely connected, if at all, to the actual, historical Jesus (12). For Hitchcock the fundamental flaw of the historical-critical method is that, "while at various times it has called virtually all traditional beliefs into question, it offers no sure replacement, merely many competing theories" (12).

Hitchcock tells us that if we follow exclusively the historical-critical method of scholars we are forced to accept their conclusion that there is no reliable knowledge of Jesus. For Hitchcock, this conclusion is unacceptable. "Christians can scarcely think that God gave the Bible to man as a revelation of Himself but did so in such a way as to render it endlessly problematical, or that for many centuries its true meaning was obscured and only came to light in modern times" (12). While we need to use the tools of scholarship, "Christians must ultimately read Scripture with the eyes of faith. Its central message—salvation through Jesus Christ—is incomprehensible to those who treat it as a merely human document" (12). This defense of the true identity and mission of Jesus is foundational for a proper understanding of the history of the Catholic Church and implies that this book is written by a believer for believers.

Hitchcock begins with Pentecost where the Apostles and other early followers of Christ were frightened, confused and huddled in a room in Jerusalem. Their leader and founder, Jesus, had been crucified and was no longer with them, or so they thought.

However, they clung to the hope that Jesus would fulfill his promise and send the Holy Spirit to be with them and the Church he founded for all time. When the Holy Spirit came upon them they were transformed and their fears vanished and they were filled with the zeal and courage to go forth and spread the message of Christ. Once infused with the Holy Spirit, this collection of very imperfect men would become a force that would transform the world. This book is the story of how the Church founded by Jesus Christ and nourished by the Holy Spirit has become the force that it has been for the last two thousand years. This infusion of the Spirit that started at Pentecost has continued to inspire the Church to this day.

While Hitchcock gives Scripture its proper place he also firmly believes that the historical character of the Church is embodied in the affirmation of Tradition, the handing on of the faith from one generation to another under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Hitchcock clearly states that the Protestant appeal to the supremacy of Scripture is a denial of that historicity. John Henry Newman has shown that doctrines have undergone development. "The development of doctrine is a progressive widening and deepening of the meaning of the original truth, and heresy can be either false innovation or a rigid adherence to older teachings." (13) The entire history of the Church is relevant to this development of doctrine and to the interpretation of Scripture. Hitchcock reminds us that early Christians quickly found out that the Scriptures did not give detailed answers to every aspect of the faith. Instead, the Scriptures gave "an embryo or seed, containing the whole of divine revelation but awaiting a gradual unfolding. Thus fidelity to Tradition involves a paradox that has been at the heart of virtually all theological issues over the centuries: the faith must be handed on intact, but the Church's understanding of that faith develops in ways that could not have been anticipated in earlier times" (13). Throughout history, dogma was not just explained but instead due to heresy and controversy the Church needed to address these issues in a more comprehensive and precise manner. Hitchcock provides excellent descriptions of the different Councils and theologians who under the guidance of the Holy Spirit resolved these issues based on Scripture and Tradition. Unlike what some current historians maintain these Councils were not simply power struggles between people who had their own personal agendas but rather they were opportunities for divine providence to let the Holy Spirit inspire the Church. Hitchcock's section on the early Church and the Church Fathers gives an excellent description how heresies arose and how the subsequent Councils combated them by formalizing in creeds the tenets of the faith.

History of the Catholic Church also helps us to understand the relationship of the Church to civil authorities by focusing on the Church's interaction with political leaders. Notable political leaders such as Constantine, Charlemagne, Bonaparte, Stalin, and Hitler are covered but so are lesser-known individuals. Hitchcock enables us to appreciate the political situations in which the Church operated during different

periods and we gain a much better awareness of the limits placed on the Church by these political forces. In historical ignorance it is easy to criticize many of the Popes but Hitchcock helps us to understand the constraints many of them were under in their decisions and actions.

The saints are discussed throughout the book and Hitchcock explains how these saints were both reflective of their times and how they developed new ways of thinking and living the faith. By their holy lives and new insights they were able to renew the ancient faith for their generation. I particularly liked reading about the saints of the Patristic era and the Counter-Reformation when the Church was often in crisis and things looked dark but the Holy Spirit raised up new saints to defend and restore the Church.

One delightful distinction in Hitchcock's history from other histories I have read is his discussion of liturgy throughout the book. We are exposed to the "*Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi*" of each period. As mentioned earlier, Hitchcock has written a book on the liturgy and he is very successful in explaining the liturgical praxis of the people during each period. While the Catholic Church's rich liturgical tradition has caused problems for some groups they are an integral part of the life of the Church. This rich liturgical life has also given rise to many of the masterpieces in art and music. Reading about these liturgical practices you appreciate how the ordinary person understood and lived the faith. Hitchcock also employs a literary device of having key words in the margins that help you to focus on what each paragraph contains. This is helpful for gaining a quick idea of what he is going to discuss or for looking up specific subjects later.

Hitchcock helps us to appreciate the value of history. From any history book, the reader can at times be appalled and shocked at "man's inhumanity to man." Hitchcock's history however gives us hope and not despair. Pain and suffering become meaningful to Christians because of the Paschal Mystery and the belief in the coming *eschaton*. Today it is fashionable to look back in history and see who can be blamed for causing the ills of society. Hitchcock says this is useless as it is not up to us to see that the guilty are punished and the just rewarded; that is God's domain. Hitchcock informs us that one shortcoming of secular liberalism is its belief in utopia. Liberalism's foundation is built upon the premise that if everyone did what they were supposed to be doing then paradise would be realized on earth. This is not true for the believing Christian since we know the effects of original sin and realize that even the best of people can have their actions perverted by evil. By studying the history of the Catholic Church we can find evidence that the Holy Spirit remains present in the Church guiding her. Despite human frailty the Holy Spirit protects the Church from fundamental error so that good will eventually prevail. "While in every age the Church demonstrates her power to transform the world, the moral weaknesses of both her leaders and her members are at the same time both a scandal and an ironic witness to her divine character—mere men could never have accomplished the good that the

Church has achieved over two millennia. Left entirely to men, the Church ought to have perished at many points in her long history" (15). Hitchcock's book should find a place in the libraries of all people that want to better understand the history of the Catholic Church and be better prepared to keep proclaiming the message of the Church established by Jesus.

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