

## BOOK REVIEW

### **The Growth of the Christian Church: A Search for Faith, Form and Freedom (AD 30-2000) and The Growth of the Christian Church: A Search for Faith, Form and Freedom (A Reader)**

**Author:** Robert Ignatius Letellier - Author and Lecturer, Madingley Hall, Cambridge

These two books are being reviewed together as they are substantial works which complement each other, or as Letellier puts it, "supplement each other." Nevertheless, they each make worthwhile reading as individual scholarly works. In the e-edition they are magnificently illustrated with 261 coloured portraits and religious pictures. The title, *Growth of the Christian Church, 30-2000* suggests that the work is chronological, and it is divided into three chapters: The Early and Medieval Church; The Protestant and Catholic Reformations; and The Church 1683-1983. In addition, there is a substantial appendix: The Development of Doctrine: A timeline of Magisterial Teaching. Finally, there are substantial references, English, French, German, Italian, and Latin, thematically listed. These references alone make it a valuable research source.

*The Growth of the Church, 30-2000* opens with the emergence of Christianity on the world of Judaism and pagan Rome. Thus, from its commencement it is spreading the Good News to both Judaism and paganism. From the onset it must overcome opposition, heterodoxy, heresy, and the challenges of Greek philosophy. Letellier, writes lucidly of Church Fathers challenged externally, by pagan ideas but also internally by Gnosticism, Marcionism and Montanism. These are problems of the early Church which still resonate today. The Alexandrian and Antiochian schools of high and low Christology are explained. The development of liturgy and the Church as the Body of Christ are both recurring themes in the book; and, also, the implications of a property-owning Church. This discussion of the growth of Christianity is enlivened by many insights into of the history of the period.

The errors of Arianism, Nestorianism and Monophysitism are concisely detailed. The issue of Grace is examined along with the conflicting views of Pelagius and Augustine. The emergence of the Papacy and the Latin Church is discussed and, also the Spirituality of Catherine of Sienna, Marjory Kempe, Birgit of Sweden and Thomas à Kempis. However, with the emergence of the Brethren of the Common Life we get indications of ideas of faith which could challenge orthodox ideas of the Church, while the Cathars, Waldensians, Bogomils and Wyclif clearly meant opposition. Allied to this was the mechanistic teaching of the great ideas of Scholasticism as taught by Aquinas along with the emergence of Erasmus and Humanism.

The chapter on the Reformation is substantial and very balanced; as the wise Sir Roger de Coverley said, "Much may be said on both sides". Letellier commences by noting the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks and hence the power of the Orthodox Church shifted by 1489 to Moscow. However, it was in 1517, when in response to indulgence abuses, Luther, with his 95 Theses, commenced the Protestant Reformation. This was paralleled by great changes in Europe. Thus, the long running impact of the Plague, the opening up of the New World, the Renaissance, printing, the decline of feudalism and many political conflicts as the old, unified Europe broke up, all contributed to challenging change. Within the Church was the conciliar debate, the decline of scholasticism and with William Occam philosophy questioned religion. Furthermore, the Church was challenged from within by the Avignon controversy and a papacy that often let the Church down. The response of the Church was the Council of Trent. On the side of the Reformers, theological controversies

emerged, notably over the Eucharist. Thus, Calvin and Zwingli disagreed with Luther but also between themselves on issues such as the interpretation of scripture, the Presence, Church governance, and relation to the state. In contrast, Reformation England simply sought an Erastian Church. In contrast to England, Scotland, through Knox and Calvin, established the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, independent of, but protected by the state. Regarding Church state relations, Zwingli was the most uncompromising.

Letellier writes of the richness of the mystics, St Teresa of Avila and St John of the Cross: but also, St Philip Neri, St Peter Fourier, St Frances de Sales, St Ignatius Loyola and Mary Ward who all founded orders to take the Church out to the expanding and changing world. Letellier rigorously analyses this complex period and explains how the Church produced its own Counter Reformation for the emergent sceptical world of the Enlightenment.

The final chapter is called, The Church 1683-1983, but it references Popes St Benedict XVI and Francis. This covers a range of topics, and many relate to a global rather than a European Church. There are many fascinating gems. For example, by 1800 there were 23 universities in Spanish speaking South America. Nevertheless, the Church still faced controversy and heresy. Thus, we read of Jansenism, the Jesuits, Gallicism, Josephism, the French Revolution and indifferentism along with the political intrigues of a warring Europe. Theological issues surrounding Vatican I, the Tubingen School, Newman and Neo-Thomism are also discussed.

The book concludes with a chronology of Magisterial teaching, covering 75 pages. Much of it comes from Neuner and Dupuis, *The Christian Faith*. It could be read on its own, but it can provide the reader with a better idea of all the factors impacting the Church at the period being read about. Hence, it adds to our understanding of the Church through time. A very small criticism of this book might be that a few foreign words are not always translated, but I would not let this deter the reader.

The *Reader* is perhaps the book with the greatest riches. It covers topics such as the Conciliar Documents on Revelation, The Trinity, The Scriptural Roots of *Laudato Si'*, Original Sin, The Incarnation, The Nature of Jesus, Conversion and Discipleship, Scholasticism and Philosophy, Philosophy and Religion, Pilgrimage, Papal Primacy, and a Chronology of Major, Historical, Theological and Philosophical events: 400BC to 1900AD. The richness comes from the extensive use of primary sources such as Scripture, and writings of Boethius and the Sts. Augustine, Aquinas, Anselm and Silvia. The examples of the writings of the mystics such as Rolle, and the anonymous Cloud of the Unknowing, Julian of Norwich, St Catherine of Siena, St Birgitta and Marjory Kempe are also included. It ends with documents of Popes Gregory VIII, Boniface VIII and Pius IX relating to Papal Primacy. The eclectic chronology chapter at the end sets the development of the Christianity within the chronology of history, politics, science, and philosophy.

These two substantial books, beautifully illustrated, offer an excellent and comprehensive account, comprehensible to a general readership, of the *Growth of the Christian Church*. However, with its *Reader* and its extensive references these two books would be invaluable reading for those entering the priesthood, but it could also be worthwhile reading for those entering the Reformed ministry, and those with a secular interest in the history of religion.

**Robert F Gibson**

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