

Regret and Promise

"Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill." —Matthew 5:17

A MILLENNIUM is an arithmetical term: but also one with a strong metaphorical suggestion. At the end of the first one thousand years Anno Domini many people in Europe were gripped by a wave of mystical fear. It is unlikely that a similar reaction will occur among the peoples of the world at the coming of 2000 A.D.

Yet the history of the world (and especially of Western civilization) around 2000 A.D. is already marked by a condition that in 1000 A.D. had not existed in the consciousness of people. 1000 A.D. came around the middle of the great historical epoch of approximately one thousand years, enduring from the end of the Roman Empire (or of the Ancient Age) to the beginning of the Renaissance (or of the Modern Age). But people in 1000 A.D. (or, indeed, for centuries thereafter) did not know that they lived in "the Middle Ages." Things are different now. Many of us know (and more people sense) that we are living near or at the end of the "Modern Age": of the age that began approximately five hundred years ago with the Renaissance, humanism, the expansion of Europe, the scientific method, and a new view of the universe. (Why and how "Modern Age" is an imprecise misnomer is another, though connected, matter, the explanation of which I must forego at this point.)

In sum, we are more aware where we are *in historical time* than was any previous generation in the history of mankind. This is the outcome of the development of historical consciousness, one of

the most important (and least recognized) developments of the so-called Modern Age. A historian may consider, or at least speculate about what has happened and what is happening to Christianity in sight of the third Millennium—and also because 2000 A.D. happens to coincide with the passing of the Modern Age.

I shall now attempt, at the risk of considerable presumption, to list some of these developments, under two headings: regrettable and promising. I prefer these terms to "negative" and "positive" because of the abstract and soulless categorical sense of the latter terms, borrowed as they are from mathematics. Moreover, since all human knowledge is, in reality, past-knowledge (and since human history is unpredictable) our vision is necessarily more accurate about what is regrettable (that is, what has already happened) than about what is promising (that is, what is actually developing or what may be happening.)

The regrettable developments, and their phenomena, are these: the decrease of Christian practices among the white peoples of the earth; the decrease of Christianity in their intellectual lives; the decrease of the sacramental element in their consciousness; the decrease of their dependence on The Word.

Five hundred years ago "white" and "Christian" were nearly synonymous. There were very few Christians—and whites—living outside Europe. From 1500 to 1900 whites, Christians and Europeans (the latter adjective or category was

unknown to them for many centuries) conquered or colonized or, in some cases, populated entire continents. During the last two hundred years Christian religious practices among the white race have been diminishing. The majority of the white race are no longer churchgoers; in some countries regular churchgoers may be as few as three among one hundred.

Christianity, of course, is a matter of quality, not of quantity. It cannot be measured by statistics. Nor is attendance at church a proof of Christian belief. But there are ample evidences to suggest that during the last two or three generations at least the conscious knowledge of certain Christian traditions that for awhile survived the diminution of other Christian practices has occurred too. An example of this is the rapid decline of the knowledge of the Bible (which, especially in the English-speaking countries, served as a common base of reference to many people) in Protestant nations, and the decline of religious teaching, including a failing knowledge of the New Testament, among Catholic peoples.

Together with this intellectual devolution there has occurred a diminution of sacramental considerations in the lives and in the consciousness of peoples. The most evident example of this has been the desacralization of the marriage bond, leading, among other things, to the great frequency of divorces. Other evidences include the legal acceptance of abortions and, perhaps most telling of all, the drastic decline of religious vocations. Most of these developments have accumulated during the last fifty or seventy years. I think that they cannot be altogether separated from other developments, such as the devolving belief in the immortality of the personal soul among the mass of people; or from the increasing emphasis on the administrative training and functioning of priests and pastors, often at the expense of the representations of their sacramentality. This latter devolution also reduces the meaning of the, otherwise promising, ecumenical movement.

During the twentieth century another

development has also occurred whose ultimate portents we cannot ascertain but which, at least for the time being, is not unconnected with the abovementioned intellectual devolution. This is the increase—for the first time in five hundred years—of the mass of pictorial communications at the expense of verbal ones. This does not only involve the decline of printed matter. (It seems that the Modern Age, perhaps the Modern Age alone, was the Age of Books). It has already led to a development where the imagination of many people is pictorial, rather than verbal. On many levels this was true of the Middle Ages too. But at that time the relative infrequency of letters was not, unlike in our times, part and parcel of the decline in the respect and meaning of The Word, the crucial importance of which is at the essence of Christianity (and also, *mutatis mutandis*, of its forerunner Judaism.)

Near the year 2000 A.D. none of these regrettable developments seem to have run their course. It is quite possible that the number of practicing Christians will dwindle further; and that the secular ruling powers of the world, while tolerating their existence, will gradually cease to respect and observe the last remaining Christian traditions within their laws and institutions. At the same time there are symptoms indicating that the widespread destruction and corruption of the cult of Reason may bring about a massive revival of credulity; that a new Age of Faith may be emerging from primitive, virile, and emotional sources other than traditional Christianity, the essence of the faith of the latter being something very different from credulity.

But now, at least in the view of this historian stumbling toward the end of the pilgrimage of his life, the promising developments and phenomena are these: the increase of Christianity among other races; the increase in the prestige of the Papacy; the decrease of Constantinism (that is: nationalism and dependence on the state by the Church); and the increase in the quality of Christian humanism.

In most places of the globe where it

had been propagated during the last five hundred years Christianity seems to have survived the end of the European empires and the subsequent retreat of the white-ruling populations. Already during the nineteenth century the largest expansion of Christian missionary activities in Asia, Africa, Oceania, China took place at a time when in Europe and in America the observance of Christian practices was decreasing. It is both presumptuous and futile for us to judge the quality of belief of these Christian minorities among heathen peoples; but it is almost indubitable that Christianity has survived even in those places where the end of the Europeans' colonial rule was followed by a relapse into tribalisms and superstitions.

The prestige of the Papacy (which, having reached several lows during the eighteenth century, may have been at its lowest around 1870, with the ending of the temporal sovereignty of the Pope in Rome that many peoples, and not only liberals, had then applauded) has shown a fairly constant rise ever since the Second World War, involving, for the first time in centuries, Protestant people. In this phenomenon it may be premature to detect a yearning for the unity of Christians; what is not premature to detect within it are evidences of a genuine respect, if not yearning, for spiritual inspiration and for supranational leadership.

Ever since the Emperor Constantine the alliance of Church and State (and of nationalism with Christian belief) was often an insidious danger to the integrity of national hierarchies and to the quality of Christian practice and faith. This has been especially so in the tradition of the Eastern Christian Churches (which is why, despite their liturgical and theological similarities, the possibility of a reunion of the Russian, Rumanian, Greek, etc. churches with the Roman Catholic church is even now less likely than the reunion of the latter with some of its Western Protestant brethren). But among Western Christians, too, the popular identification of their Christianity with their nationalisms (as distinct from traditional patriotism) has

often led to lamentable consequences of xenophobia. This is why the present tendency of the Christian hierarchies to emphasize the supranational (as distinct from the merely international) message of Christ and mission of His Church is both salutary and fruitful.

That development is but part and parcel of the developing prospects for a renewed synthesis of Christianity and humanism which, in a larger sense, is *the* great heritage of the Incarnation of the Son of God, and in a more limited sense the best tradition of the so-called Modern Age. The great truth of the emptiness of faith in the absence of love (as expressed in St. Paul to the Corinthians, 1:13) is more evident to more people near the end of the twentieth century than perhaps at any time heretofore; and even though the recognition of this categorical supremacy may be easily corrupted or misinterpreted for sentimental or other reasons, it does suggest an increase of spiritual concerns.

Near the time of the third millennium this renewed synthesis of Christianity and humanism is probably only in its very beginnings. It should not in the least mean a weakening of a supernatural faith through the admixture of more and more worldly considerations. To the contrary: because of the grave faults and shortcomings of a purely (or, rather, impurely) secular humanism, it has become the task of Christians and of their churches to conserve and uphold the traditions of human dignity. But this task will require more than an armistice, or even than an alliance, between Christianity and "modern" humanism. It will require an insistence on the unique nature of man, and a radical rethinking of man's place in the universe.

The sacredness and the conservation of human life are becoming increasingly allied with the recognition of the necessity of conserving life on this planet, endangered not only by the destructive capacities of war but also by its pollution by technology (and it behooves Christians to recognize how the pollution of matter is but a result of the pollution of minds.)

Another promising development, la-

tent in some of the actual discoveries of quantum physics (though, as yet, far from being recognized by most physicists themselves), is the potentiality of transcending the dualistic (Cartesian) view of the universe by a chastened monistic one, flowing from the recognition that man is not separate from the rest of the world but that he is indeed a conscious participant in the universe, including his observation and interference with it. This means that man is not a product of material evolution but a conscious maker of his own history; and that the only evolution whereof we can (and should) speak is the evolution of consciousness. Thus the outlines of a new, post-Cartesian and post-Newtonian, post-Marxist and post-Darwinian view of mankind and the universe are beginning to appear: and their intellectual and spiritual consequences are fraught with great promise, suggesting as they do the validity

of Christ's truths about the spiritual nature of humankind.

In any event, one of the most difficult tasks for the minority of truly believing Christians in this world will be the *re-cognition* and the convinced propagation of a faith entirely contrary to the present, increasingly confused and confusing scientific theories about the pre-history of man and about the origins and nature of the universe. This faith must depend on the historical (and not merely on the fideistic) conviction that the coming of Christ to this earth as recently as 2000 years ago was *the central event* in space and in time—that is, within the enormous spaces of the universe as well as within the historic time allotted to mankind—which, *contra* Darwinism, may be much shorter than what we, in the past one hundred and fifty years, have been led to think.

—John Lukacs