

# Celebrating Twenty Centuries of Christianity

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It all began on a silent night when into our midst came love incarnate. We know the story -- the teachings, the healings, the encounters with authority, the death on Calvary. Then, outside his tomb, the Risen Christ shocked Mary Magdalene out of her state of grief, and ever since the disciples of Christ have proved irrepressible in their witness to his name and spirit.

This morning we want to present you with a chorus of voices testifying to Christ's spirit, as a way of celebrating twenty centuries of Christian living and witness. I recognize that there are many limitations to the selection you will hear, many voices not mentioned, glaring omissions, no doubt. Our attempt is but to present a small chorus of witnesses, warts and all, who tried, to the best of their ability to incarnate Christ's spirit.

A helpful image to tie these voices together might be the image of a cornucopia -- a cornucopia of thinkers, artists, architects, leaders, popes, musicians, and so on. And just as there is no need to catalogue all the fruits and vegetables in a Thanksgiving cornucopia to appreciate an image of abundance, so a cornucopia of Christian voices is enough to recognize an abundance of blessings, and to evoke in us a spirit of gratitude and celebration.

## Voices of Persuasion, Correction, and Wisdom

Despite much opposition, the new Christian movement spread throughout the Near Eastern world. Churches sprang up all over the place, like the one started by Lydia and her friends at the riverside. Christians found they had to explain themselves to a world unfamiliar with the Christian story. And so you have in existence, for example, The Epistle to Diognetus in the 2nd century, sharing with this Greek enquirer the story of a mysterious "New Race," as the epistle calls it.

The fledgling Christian movement also had to explain itself to those who wanted to persecute Christians. And there are countless stories of courageous witnesses, like Polycarp, who died martyrs' deaths. Listen, for example, to the voice of Aristides, another 2nd century apologist, replying to those who were harassing and persecuting Christians.

Aristides' Reply to Typical Charges against Christianity (c. 140)

The Christians, O King, ...know and trust in God, from whom they received commandments which they engraved upon their minds.... Wherefore they do not commit adultery nor fornication, nor bear false witness, nor embezzle what is held in pledge, nor covet what is not theirs. They honour father and mother, and show kindness to those near to them; and whenever they are judges, they judge uprightly. They do not worship idols...; and whatsoever they would not that others should do unto them, they do not to others.... And their oppressors they appease

and make them their friends; they do good to their enemies; ...And when they see a stranger, they take him into their homes and rejoice over him....

And if they hear that one of their number is imprisoned or afflicted on account of the name of their Messiah, all of them anxiously minister to his necessity, and if it is possible to redeem him they set him free. And if there is among them any that is poor and needy, and if they have no spare food, they fast two or three days in order to supply to the needy their lack of food.

...Great indeed, and wonderful is their doctrine to him who will search into it and reflect upon it. Verily, this is a new people, and there is something divine in the midst of them.

The early centuries saw times of great persecution, as under the Roman emperor, Diocletian, in the 4th century, but these were also times of consolidation, as Christian institutions and tradition developed to deal with heresy, and to reflect theologically on the times. Thinkers like the 2nd century Origen and 4th century Augustine contributed much to Christian theology. The emperor Constantine gave Christianity wide acceptance, if dubious integrity. There were Church Councils which debated the issues of the day; the development of the papacy; struggles against barbarians.

Throughout there were faithful leaders urging the faithful to be faithful, like the 5th century Salvian, Bishop of Marseilles. Listen, as he urges Christian believers to purity of life by comparing the social life of Roman Christians unfavourably with that of the barbarians.

Salvian, Bishop and Social Critic, on Roman-Christian Social Life (c.400)

In what respects can our customs be preferred to those of the Goths and Vandals, or even compared with them? And first, to speak of affection and mutual charity (which our Lord teaches, is the chief virtue...), almost all barbarians, at least those who are of one race and kin, love each other, while the Roman Christians persecute each other. ...

Roman Christians oppress each other with exactions, nay, not each other: it would be quite tolerable, if each suffered what he inflicted. It is worse than that; for the many are oppressed by the few, who regard public exactions as their own peculiar right....

... The state has fallen upon such evil days that a man cannot be safe unless he is wicked! ... So the poor are despoiled, the widows sigh, the orphans are oppressed, until many of them...flee to our enemies that they may no longer suffer the oppression of public persecution. They doubtless seek Roman humanity among the barbarians, because they cannot bear barbarian inhumanity among the Romans!

The 7th century saw two great tides of thought meeting, the tides of Celtic and Latin Christianity, one coming from the old lands of the West -- Wales, Ireland, Iona -- the other from Rome. One tide was passionate and mystical, the other controlled and cerebral.

It was also a time when monasticism was emerging, providing security in a time of great insecurity. It was through such communities that the fragile elements of civilization

continued to be preserved and developed. One such community, a Celtic community, was the one founded by Hilda of Whitby.

Hilda of Whitby (614-680)

Hilda of Whitby was related to King Edwin of Northumbria, and like him she became a Christian through the preaching of St. Paulinus, when she was thirteen years old.

Moved by the example of her sister, who became a nun, Hilda did the same. In time she ruled a double monastery of monks and nuns at Hartlepool with great success, and eventually established a monastery at Streaneshalch, a place which the Danes a century or two later named Whitby.

The monastery at Whitby became famous under Hilda's rule. It was a place of serious Scriptural study, and no less than five of its members became bishops! It was there, in 664, that she hosted an important synod at which, for example, the observance of Easter was decided. It was also at this synod that the two tides -- Celtic and Latin Christianity -- fused and mingled, thanks, in part to Hilda's passionate defence of Celtic customs.

The fame of St. Hilda's wisdom was so great that monks and royalty came to consult her from far and near. There are a dozen or more old English churches dedicated to St. Hilda on the northeast coast of England.

## **Voices of Music, Art, and Literature**

Christianity has contributed to our culture an untold richness in art, literature, and music. They are too numerous to mention, but the musical tradition in our churches is due, in no small part, to figures such as the 12th century John of Salisbury. Listen to his perspective on the legitimate use of music in the Church:

John of Salisbury (1180) on the Legitimate Uses of Music

One should not slander music by charging it with being an ally of the frivolities of courtiers.... Music is indeed one of the liberal arts and it has an honourable origin.... Because of the great power exercised by it, its many forms, and the harmonies that serve it, it embraces the universe; that is to say, it reconciles the clashing and dissonant relations of all that exists and of all that is thought and expressed in words by a sort of ever varying but still harmonious law derived from its own symmetry. By it the phenomena of the heavens are ruled and the activities of the world...governed. Its instruments form and fashion conduct and, by a kind of miracle of nature, clothe with melodies and colourful forms of rhymes and measures the tone of the voice, ...and adorn them as with a robe of beauty.

... When this type of music is carried to the extreme it is more likely to stir lascivious sensations in the loins than devotion in the heart. But if it be kept within reasonable limits it frees the mind from care, banishes worry about things temporal, and by imparting joy and peace and by inspiring a deep love for God draws souls to association with the angels!

No doubt musicians have always had to spend time justifying their works, and this was true even in the 4th century, when St. Ambrose said, in defence of his hymns:

Some assert that the people have been beguiled by the strains of my hymns. I deny it not. It is a lofty strain, than which nothing is more powerful. For what can be more powerful than the confession of the Trinity, which is daily celebrated by the mouth of the whole people?

## **Pastoral Voices, and Voices of Protection**

Popes had to rule the Church, protect the Church, and correct the Church. Pope Gregory, for example, who led the Church in the latter 6th century, said of the pastoral care of souls...

Pope Gregory (590-604), on the Pastoral Rule and the Care of Souls

No one presumes to teach an art till he has first, with intent meditation, learnt it. What rashness is it, then, for the unskilful to assume pastoral authority, since the government of souls is the art of arts! For who can be ignorant that the sores of the thoughts of men are more occult than the sores of the bowels? And yet how often do men who have no knowledge whatever of spiritual precepts fearlessly profess themselves physicians of the heart, though those who are ignorant of the effect of drugs blush to appear as physicians of the flesh!

Leaders of the Church in England, noticing the decline of the English Church and clergy at the time of the Norman Conquest, sought to correct these abuses. Listen to the voice of one 11th century commentator lament the decline:

The attention to literature and religion had gradually decreased for several years before the arrival of the Normans. The clergy, contented with a little confused learning, could scarcely stammer out the words of the sacraments; and a person who understood grammar was an object of wonder and astonishment. The monks mocked the rule of their order by fine vestments and the use of every kind of food. The nobility, given up to luxury and wantonness, went not to church in the morning after the manner of Christians, but merely, in a careless manner, heard...masses from a hurrying priest in their chambers....

Drinking in parties was a universal practice, in which occupation they passed entire nights as well as days. They consumed their whole substance in mean and despicable houses, unlike the Normans and French, who live frugally in noble and splendid mansions.

The Church also sought to defend itself from other religions, and especially considered the occupation of the Holy Land an affront. In the 13th century Pope Innocent III, after consultation on the matter, declared the following:

Pope Innocent III and the Crusades (1215)

Since we earnestly desire to liberate the holy land from the hands of the wicked, we have consulted wise men who fully understand the present situation. And at the advice of the holy council we decree that all crusaders who shall determine to go by sea shall assemble in the kingdom of Sicily a year from the first of next June. ... If the Lord permits, we shall also be there in order that the Christian

army may, with our advice and aid, be well organized, and set out with the divine benediction and papal blessing.

...All clergymen of whatever rank, who go on the crusade, shall diligently devote themselves to prayer and exhortation, by word and example teaching the crusaders always to have the fear and the love of God before their eyes.... ... Thus, equipped with spiritual and material arms, they shall fight more securely against the enemies of the faith, not resting on their own power but hoping in the divine strength.

The 14th century also saw the great plague sweep through Europe, and like any disaster, it brought out both the best and the worst in people, including Christians.

The Great Plague, Pogroms against Jews, and Protection by the Pope (1349)

In the year 1349 there occurred the greatest epidemic that ever happened. Death went from one end of the earth to the other.... In some lands everyone died so that no one was left. Ships were...found on the sea laden with wares; the crew had all died.... So many people perished that it would be horrible to describe.

...In the matter of this plague the Jews throughout the world were reviled and accused in all lands of having caused it through the poison which they are said to have put into the water and the wells...and for this reason the Jews were burnt all the way from the Mediterranean into Germany, but not in Avignon, for the pope protected them there.

## **Voices of Monasticism and Mysticism**

Religious Orders sprang up in an attempt to more earnestly exemplify Christian living and Christian community. Among them were the Franciscans (c. 1223), described by one eye-witness as follows:

For some time I was at the Papal Court, where I saw much that distressed me. Everybody was so preoccupied with secular and temporal matters, pertaining to kings and kingdoms, to disputes and lawsuits, that one could hardly speak of spiritual things.

One solace, however, I have found in these parts. Great numbers of men and women, many of them worldly and wealthy, have forsaken everything for Christ.... They are called Brothers Minor, and the Pope and the Cardinals hold them in great esteem. They do not trouble at all about temporal things, but strive every day with fervent longing and vehement zeal to save souls, detaching them from the world and guiding them. ...

They live according to the tenets of the primitive church.... In daytime they go out into the towns and villages, so as to harvest souls by active work, at night they return to the hermitage or some solitary retreat and practise meditation.

The women immure themselves in divers hospices near the towns; they accept no gifts, but live by the work of their hands.

The attempt to be faithful to Christ led some in monastic directions, others in mystic directions, some in both. It gave rise to communities like the Benedictines, and to important figures like the 12th century Bernard of Clairvaux, the 13th century Meister

Eckhart, and the 16th century Teresa of Avila, to name but three. Teresa of Avila was born Teresa Sanchez Cepeda Davila y Ahumada, who received her education among Augustinian nuns.

The Letters of St. Jerome persuaded Teresa to adopt the religious life, and she entered a Carmelite convent. She herself founded several convents, of friars as well as nuns. Her writings on mystical theology are filled with deep insight, and her analytical gifts enabled her to explain them clearly. Plagued by illness all her life and wracked by disturbing visions, she determined to seek a more perfect life. Listen to her thoughts on humility:

Avoid being bashful with God, as some people are, in the belief that they are being humble. It would not be humility on your part if the King were to do you a favour and you refused to accept it; but you would be showing humility by taking it, and being pleased with it, yet realizing how far you are from deserving it. A fine humility it would be if I had the Emperor of Heaven and earth in my house, coming to it to do me a favour and to delight in my company, and I were so humble that I would not answer His questions, nor remain with Him, nor accept what He gave me, but left Him alone. Or if He were to speak to me and beg me to ask for what I wanted, and I were so humble that I preferred to remain poor and even let Him go away, so that He would see I had not sufficient resolution. Have nothing to do with that kind of humility, daughters.... (Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), on the Way of Perfection)

This was an age of great thinkers, with people like Thomas Aquinas writing tomes of thought that would reverberate for centuries and centuries. Time does not permit us to sample his painstakingly reasoned treatises, but his theology affects us still.

### **Voices for Reformation**

Voices of correction have been heard in almost every generation of Christianity, but a strong call for reformation began to appear in the 15th century, both from fringe groups like the Waldensians, but also from within the Church. Listen, for example, to a decision that came out of the Church's Council of Pisa in 1409:

We, each and all, bishops, priests, and deacons of the holy Roman church, congregated in the city of Pisa for the purpose of ending the schism and of restoring the unity of the church, on our word of honour promise God, the holy Roman church, and this holy council now collected here for the aforesaid purpose, that, if any one of us is elected pope, he shall continue the present council and not dissolve it, nor, so far as is in his power, permit it to be dissolved until, through it and with its advice, a proper, reasonable, and sufficient reformation of the universal church in its head and in its members shall have been accomplished.

There were, of course, more stringent voices calling for reformation, and while a Church poised for change was finally pushed into it by such figures as Martin Luther, one of the voices that set things up for change was that of the irascible Erasmus, whose satirical pen left no priest, theologian, or leader of the Church unscathed. The following excerpts are typical of his satire.

Desiderius Erasmus (1509), regarding indulgences

What shall I say of such as cry up and maintain the cheat of pardons and indulgences? ... By this easy way of purchasing pardons, any notorious highwayman, any plundering soldier, or any bribe-taking judge, shall disburse some part of their unjust gains, and so think all their grossest impieties sufficiently atoned for; so many perjuries, lusts, drunkenness, quarrels, bloodsheds, cheats, treacheries, and all sorts of debaucheries, shall all be, as it were, struck a bargain for, and such a contract made, as if they had paid off all arrears, and might now begin upon a new score!

Though we cannot ignore the beginnings of our own church in this era, consider that they were but small fish in a much larger pond, albeit irritating to have around. Several Swiss cities, for example, officially outlined the alleged errors of the Anabaptists in an edict dated 1527:

They seduce members from the congregations...and assail the public preachers with abuse; they babble in corners, woods, and fields; ... glory in divine revelations and miracles; ... will not carry swords; pronounce usury...wicked; ...have all external goods common..., ...and forbid Christians to accept the magistracy or to say an oath....

In order that this growth, dangerous to Christianity, wicked, harmful, turbulent, seditious, may be eradicated, we have thus decreed: if any one is suspected of anabaptism he is to be warned by the magistracy to leave off, under penalty of the designated punishment. Individuals...should inform upon those favourable to anabaptism, and whoever shall not fit his conduct to this dissuasion is also liable to punishment....

Other Reformers set change in motion in a more orderly fashion, as laid out, for example, in John Calvin's "Ordinances," in which he lays out precise rules concerning worship, and the penalties to be paid if you do not follow them. Meanwhile, the Catholic Counter Reformation gave birth to such groups as the Society of Jesus -- the Jesuits -- whose Spiritual Exercises brought change to the Church.

## **Modern Voices of Mission, Unity, and Renewal**

Christianity has given birth to some outstanding satiric voices, like the 17th/18th century Jonathan Swift, an eccentric but loyal churchman who wrote, among other things, a piece entitled "Argument Against Abolishing Christianity". A masterpiece of comic irony, he argues against the "witty, intellectual free-thinkers" who propose the abolition of Christianity. His satire is not only a defence of Christianity, it is an indictment of the smug hypocrisies found among the free-thinking Deists as well as among "nominal Christians."

Alongside the satiric voice of Swift and the elegant voice of John Milton were the more sober and earnest voices of John and Charles Wesley, who brought renewal, and much 18th century hymnody, to Christianity.

John Wesley had strict rules for members of his Methodist Societies, calling on them to live holy lives, pure lives, avoiding evil of every kind, including an intriguing one, the use of "many words in buying or selling". Generally, Wesley appealed to Christians to do

good, to be merciful, to give food to the hungry, clothe the naked, visit those in prison, and faithfully observe other such biblical injunctions.

It was an era that saw the rise of evangelical pietism and the birth of the Quakers, while a century later Methodist-like principles were applied more rigorously to society, with the emergence of the Salvation Army and in other quarters the Social Gospel. Walter Rauschenbusch (1889), with three friends, founded a monthly journal for working people that outlined the following principles:

To apply the ethical principles of Jesus Christ so that our industrial relationships may be humanized, our economic system be moralized, justice pervade legislation, and the State grow into a true commonwealth....

1. As Christians we believe that the words and example of Jesus Christ have a direct bearing upon our social problems.

2. As students of political economy we believe that the disorders of our present system point towards a higher order, that such a higher social order will be characterized by better forms of association, by more perfectly moralized industrial relationships, by a more equably ordered legislation, and by a more rational and humanized economic system.

The 20th century sparked great efforts of mission, ambitious attempts to evangelize the world, inspired in part by the great Missionary Conference of 1910. It also saw great efforts to promote Christian unity, expressed, for example, in the establishment of federal councils of churches, and the World Council of Churches in 1948. Theological trends, like liberalism, came and went, but perhaps one of the events most troublesome to the Church, the German Church, in particular, was the rise of Nazism. While a good portion of the Church aligned itself with Hitler, there were opposing voices which expressed themselves in The Barmen Declaration of 1934:

In view of the destructive errors of the German Christians and the present national church government, we pledge ourselves to the following evangelical truths...

We repudiate the false teaching that the church can and must recognize yet other happenings and powers, images and truths as divine revelation alongside this one Word of God, as a source of her preaching.

... We repudiate the false teaching that there are areas of our life in which we belong not to Jesus Christ but another lord, areas in which we do not need justification and sanctification through him.

... We repudiate the false teaching that the church can turn over the form of her message and ordinances at will or according to some dominant ideological and political convictions.

Several decades ago Vatican II introduced enormous change to the Church. The efforts of world missions, aided and abetted by the forces of globalization, will continue to change Christianity's centre of gravity.

Our faith has survived, if not flourished, in a wide variety of cultures, been expressed in a multiplicity of languages, and its communities organized in a variety of forms. Like the Apostle Peter, it has had its sublime moments as well as its embarrassing, even tragic

moments. Throughout, however, the spirit of the Galilean who began this good work has been conveyed, and he will do doubt bring it to completion, if we but bind ourselves to him.

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