

THE CHURCH IN HISTORY

By FRANCIS O'CONNOR

THE abiding presence of the Lord was made very clear in the history of the People of God from the time when he made his covenant with them and said to them: 'I will take you as my people and I will be your God'.¹ 'You must also make for me a sanctuary that I may dwell among you'.² And dwell among them he did, in their long journey of the exodus from exile to the land that he had promised to them. His presence was manifested by tangible signs: he made bitter waters sweet, he cleared a passage for them through the sea, he formed a pillar of fire and a cloud to guide them through the desert wastes. So does the bible describe some of the visible signs of the presence of the Lord among his people. For those who had eyes to see, there was no mistaking these signs and their meaning. They were manifestations of God's presence and of his love and fidelity for his people.

Centuries later, his fidelity and his love came to earth in another visible form. This time the sign was Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word. If the Lord had promised in the Old Testament that he would be with his people, this promise was perfectly fulfilled in Jesus Christ: for in him the 'Word was made flesh and lived among us'.³ God took human form. He was born of, and nursed by, a human mother. The child grew in grace and wisdom to young manhood. To many of his contemporaries he remained always merely the son of the carpenter. But for those who had eyes to see, Jesus of Nazareth embodied in himself the presence and the love of the Lord, faithful to the covenant. God lived among his people in Jesus Christ, the God-man. In him men could see God's love made visible and God's kindness made concrete. The thoughtfulness of Christ for the widow of Naim,⁴ his tears of compassion for the dead Lazarus,⁵ his delicate courtesy with the centurion,⁶ his gentleness with children,⁷ his simplicity with the apostles,⁸ his refined humour with the little man Zaccheus perched in the tree:⁹ all of these told the story of the unchanging love of God for the world.

¹ Exod 6, 7.

² Exod 25, 8.

³ Jn 1, 14.

⁴ Lk 7, 11-17.

⁵ Jn 11, 1-45.

⁶ Mt 8, 5-13.

⁷ Mt 19, 13-15; Mk 10, 13-16; Lk 18, 15-17.

⁸ Cf especially Jn 21, 1-14.

⁹ Lk 19, 1-10.

The passage of Jesus from earth through death to his glorious presence at the right hand of the Father could have meant the end of the manifestation of his presence on earth through such clearly visible signs. But the presence of God's love continues today in the continuation of Christ in his mystical body, the Church. The Church is the sanctuary which the Lord commanded to be built so that he might dwell among men.¹ His Spirit abides within her, giving to her his life and his love to be communicated to men. In her men can see the continued love of God for them, the same love which had previously been manifested in Jesus Christ himself. Her gentle love for men, her patient search for the truth, her motherly care for the poor, her wholehearted concern for the souls of all men: all these are signs of the love of God himself for the world, now exercised through the Church, the body of Christ on earth. Thus, the God who poured out his love upon his people with whom he formed his first covenant and who was made manifest in the wonderful signs of the exodus, was the same God who became manifest in Jesus Christ and who continues to be revealed to the world of today in the continuation of Christ on earth: that is, the Church. The God and the love are ever the same, though the signs which manifest them in history have changed with time.

The Church is therefore the sign of the permanent fidelity of a God 'compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness to the thousandth generation'.² The simple joys of the *koinonia* or life-in-common which characterized the early Church of Jerusalem, as described in the Acts of the Apostles, manifest the presence of a loving God to his people, as Peter's preaching in Jerusalem emphasizes. He told the men of Judea that if they repented and were baptized, they would receive the gift of the holy Spirit: 'for the promise of it belongs to you and your children'.³ The preaching of Peter to the men of Jerusalem was then accompanied by great signs of God's power: 'Everyone felt a sense of awe, and many signs were done by the apostles'.⁴ And faithful to his promise to them, the Lord brought great numbers of jews into his infant Church: 'And every day the Lord added people who were saved to their number'.⁵ The joyful breaking of bread 'with glad and simple hearts', the sharing with each other of all they possessed, the power of the Lord displayed in the wonders worked by the apostles: all these elements formed the sign which this early christian community

¹ Exod 25, 8.

² Exod 34, 6.

³ Acts 2, 39.

⁴ Acts 2, 43.

⁵ Acts 2, 47.

offered to the world that God's love dwelt among them and that he was being faithful to his people.

But the redemptive fidelity of the Lord extended far beyond the boundaries of his chosen people. Peter assured the jews that the promise of the Spirit belonged not only to them but also 'to all those far away whom the Lord our God calls to him'.¹ Peter therefore baptized Cornelius the centurion, 'a captain in what was known as the italian regiment'.² The Lord Jesus was also proclaimed to the greeks at Antioch who were then converted to christianity in great numbers by the impulse of the Spirit of God.³ Paul became the apostle to the gentiles, the non-jewish nations, according to the word of the Lord to Paul: 'I have made you a light for the heathen, to be the means of salvation to the very ends of the earth'.⁴ The early Church, animated by the Spirit, was the sign of the permanent fidelity of the Lord of the covenant to all men.

This fidelity of God to his people is to continue until the final coming of the Son in glory. As he was about to send the disciples on their universal mission, Christ promised that he would be with his own until the consummation of the world.⁵ He explains this faithful presence in his description of the signs that would precede 'the end'. There would be wars and insurrections, great upheavals of nature, terrors from heaven. There would be persecution of christians who would be imprisoned, hated, put to death for his name. There would be betrayal of one member of a family by another. Yet through it all, there is the assurance that he would be with his own: 'I myself will give you words and wisdom, which all your adversaries will not be able to resist or gainsay. But you will be delivered up by your parents and brothers and relatives and friends; and some of you will be put to death. And you will be hated by all for my name's sake; yet not a hair of your head will be lost. By your patience you will save your souls'.⁶ In their suffering for his name, he will remain with them: protecting, inspiring, saving. In their suffering before the end, the christians will remain the sign of the presence of a God faithful to his people.

Thus does the Church take pride in a certain sameness in history. From the days of her infancy, when the power of God worked great wonders through her, to her final hours on earth when she will be brought to trial and assisted by him, she stands as the sanctuary

¹ Acts 2, 39.

² Acts 10, 1.

³ Acts 11, 20 ff.

⁴ Acts 13, 47.

⁵ Mt 28, 20.

⁶ Lk 21, 22 ff.

where God dwells and acts upon men to save them. In the years between her beginning and her consummation on earth, in spite of the scandal of human weakness and sinfulness, she remains conscious of her function to reveal to a changing world the presence of a God who is unchanging in his love and fidelity.

Her constant search for the truth and her preservation of it once found is a case in point. Early in her history she was forced to face up to exaggerations concerning the humanity and the divinity of Christ. Some Christians, well meaning perhaps, but fearful of and hostile to the material world, could not fully accept the incarnation of the divine word. Others believed that the human body of Christ must be a phantasm; it could not be real. Still others refused to believe that Jesus Christ was 'God from God, light from light, begotten not made, of one nature with the Father'. Guided by the Spirit within her, the Church, through human instruments, periodically stated and re-stated more explicitly the truth about Christ which had been committed to her care, the truth which she was to reflect on and present to the world in which she lived: Jesus Christ is truly and fully God and man. Her constancy in holding to what she comes to know to be the truth does not always make her popular with, or even acceptable to, the world of which she is a part; but she cannot do otherwise. Her function is to be the sign of the revealed living truth committed to her care. It is hers to preserve intact and to share with the world which she is to save. Were she to allow this truth to be diluted, she would cease to be the true sign of the constant fidelity and love of God for men, for she would be then leading them astray. Her search for the explicit truth is often slow and painstaking: she may struggle for years to find an appropriate and meaningful formulation of the truth for the age in which she lives at any one moment, using the hammer and anvil of fiercely conflicting theological opinion. But she is fortified with the presence of the Spirit of him who is the way and the truth and who has assured us: 'I shall be with you even to the consummation of the world'.¹

Granted this constancy in the Church as the sign of God's fidelity to man, it would be naive to look upon the history of the Church or the history of the world into which the Church is sent, as a series of disconnected moments in which the past has no influence on the present. The past has formed and shaped the present. The questions

¹ Mt 28, 20.

put to the Church in ages past drew from the Spirit within her the christian truths which we live by today. The immutable God who is revealed in the Church as the Lord faithful and kind to his people is the same today as he has always been. His same life still pulsates through her members; his same truth enlightens them; the same promise of his constant presence still reassures them. A rejection of the past is effectively a refusal to see God operative in the history of the Church and of the world which he is saving through her. His abiding with his people did not begin with the twentieth century; the redemptive process is not a uniquely modern phenomenon. There has never been a moment when the covenant established by the blood of Christ has ceased to bind together God and his people into a community. All this is history; and it is in this history that the fidelity of the Lord has been exercised and manifested in the Church. To recognize and to love the past for what it is – namely, the series of connected moments in which the constant love of God has been poured out upon men – is to be truly conservative.

If the God whom the Church reveals to the world is a changeless and faithful God 'even to the thousandth generation',¹ he is also a God who renews his Church, so that she may reveal to men in terms they can understand the face of God present among them in their own lives and circumstances. She must always remain herself and thus be conservative. But she must also learn and speak the language of the world in which she exists. She must present herself as attractive and beautiful to men of the age in which she lives. She cannot be out of date by clinging to what is antiquated. She must constantly study herself and the world, and present herself to it as young and modern, even though her roots lie in the past. This effort is the task of christian renewal – an expression descriptive of the prevalent mood in the christian churches today – which is hopefully awaited even by many non-christians of our modern world.

If christian renewal is the atmosphere of our day, religious renewal is not entirely modern. The bible is an ancient witness to religious renewal: the faithful God spoke of renewal to Israel through the prophet Ezechiel: 'I will give you a new heart and place a new spirit within you, taking from your bodies your stony hearts and giving you natural hearts. I will put my Spirit within you and make you live by my statutes, careful to observe my

¹ Exod 34, 6.

decrees . . . I the Lord have promised and I will do it'.¹ Jeremias the prophet also reveals the promise of renewal of Israel by the Lord: 'I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel'.² And St Paul reminds the thessalonians that they had been called to a new way of life, a life of charity and holiness, and he exhorted them to 'make more of it than ever', to renew constantly their commitment to their new life.³

The bible describes renewal as a change for the better. But that is not all: the change is worked by the immutable God himself: 'I will cleanse you', said the Lord to his people, 'I will give you a new heart';⁴ 'I will make a new covenant with them . . . I will place my law within them'.⁵ In fact, the bible sees the whole work of redemption as a great renewal by God: 'If anyone is in Christ, he is a new being; his old life has disappeared, everything about him has become new. This, as always, is God's doing; it is he who, through Christ, has reconciled us to himself, and who allows us to minister this reconciliation of his to others'.⁶ This renewal is a gradual process and therefore we must be patient with it: 'And while our bodies may be wearing down bit by bit, yet our inner life is refreshed day by day'.⁷ This renovation is the work especially of the Spirit, suggests St Paul to Titus: 'God our Saviour saved us, and it was not thanks to anything we had done for our sanctification; in accordance with his own merciful design, he cleansed us, giving us new birth and restoring our nature through the holy Spirit'.⁸ *Veni, Creator Spiritus*: it is God who renews. 'Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created, and you shall renew the face of the earth'. 'Creator Spirit, come . . . fill with heavenly grace the hearts that you created'.

If christian renewal was an urgent task in the very early Church, it is also very modern. The recent surge towards renewal, especially within the Catholic Church, was given its greatest impetus in 1959 in the very unlikely person of Pope John XXIII, with his eloquent call for the 'increase of the Catholic faith, a true renewal of morality among christian people, and the adaptation of ecclesiastical discipline to the needs and conditions of our time'.⁹ The change of atmosphere, felt both inside and outside the Church, is evidence enough of the serious response to this appeal. The work of the

¹ Exod 36, 26-27, 36.

² Jer 31, 31.

³ Cf 1 Thes 4, 2-10.

⁴ Ezek 36, 24-30.

⁵ Jer 31, 31, 33.

⁶ 2 Cor 5, 17-18.

⁷ 2 Cor 4, 16.

⁸ Tit 3, 5.

⁹ Encyclical *Ad Petri Cathedram*, June 29, 1959.

second Vatican Council may be slow, but it is producing results. Mass now celebrated in an understandable tongue is but one very concrete example. The recent proclamation of the Council Fathers to all the world that every human person has the right to worship God as his conscience tells him, and that this right is to be respected and even protected, has been greeted by men of all creeds and nations as a landmark in history.

Nor is the Church intent simply on her own interior renewal, as though telling the world that if it wishes to benefit, it must enter her fold. The protracted and often anguished discussions of the Council Fathers on the schema *The Church in the Modern World* have made it plain to all men of good will that the Church has made the world's problems her own: to seek for solutions to hunger, war, overpopulation, family problems, the plight of the under-privileged, is an integral part of the Church's mission. Every problem which affects and exercises the human person is the Church's problem.

In all these ways the Church, in response to the creator Spirit within her, is ever moving towards her own renewal; and at the same time, reaching out to the world at this stage in history, telling that world that she takes it seriously, that she is not isolated from it, that she is not afraid of it, that she loves it, and that she wants to serve the men who people it today.

Renewal, whether in the biblical events or in the modern Church, whether in a people or in an individual, is the unfolding, in time, of God's plan for the world. Each moment of time – day by day forming history – carries with it a moment's worth of newness, of transformation, of growth. The Church and the individual person who are open and ready and poor enough actively to accept and welcome the working out of God's plan are constantly being renewed. This plan in its unfolding is new and renewing: it is never revealed, at the various stages in the Church's history, in exactly the same way. The persons whom it touches are necessarily different. The people of God in the Old Testament were not the same after the Lord entered into a covenant with them; the new people of God, and the world as a whole, have not been quite the same since the faithful God inspired his Vicar on earth to summon the second Vatican Council. The Church is enlivened by the Spirit living within her and working within her. She is therefore renewed day by day, and the immutable God whom she reveals to the world is renewing the world through her: 'See I am making everything new. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the

beginning and the end'.¹

The Church in history has been the sign to the world in each age of the God who has remained faithful to the world in love and kindness and truth. His presence in the Church has meant his presence in the world of which the Church is a part. She has been the sanctuary in which he has dwelt among his people. She has remained faithful to him whom she manifests and therefore has remained faithful to herself throughout history. By being herself she has let the world know the presence of God among them, for she has revealed God to the world. But in order to be constantly herself, the Church has had to reflect upon her function and to renew herself – or rather to allow herself to be renewed from within by the Spirit who inhabits her. And so she is at once conservative because in being herself always, she remains in history the sign of God's permanent fidelity and presence to men, but she is also truly progressive because the God who gives all newness is renewing her each day. Always the same, yet ever changing, at once both ancient and new: such is the paradox of the Church in history.

¹ Apoc 21, 5 ff. See *Vocabulaire de la théologie biblique* (Paris, 1962), 694–698.