

Considerations on the Ends of the Canadian Catholic Historical Association

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With this meeting the Canadian Catholic Historical Association completes its thirtieth year. Its life has been a rather difficult one, as is the life of so many learned societies; but it has adjusted to problems, surmounted them and, now after a generation, can look back with some satisfaction on its achievement. At the moment the Association faces serious problems and new opportunities, which may require some adjustment of purpose and activity. Of course a challenge to a society such as ours can be the occasion of new vigour if that society adjusts to the demands made of it. The adjustment must be made knowingly; much understanding can often be gained by examining an institution and analysing the reasons for and the direction of change within it. The information can then be used to redefine the end and manner of activity of that institution.

My intention in the present paper is to examine the accomplishment of the CCHA and suggest lines of future activity in relation to current trends in the historiography of the Church. I propose, first, to sketch the rather impressive developments in the study of the history of the Church during this century in an effort to show the general scholarly milieu in which our Association was born and has lived; second to analyse the life of the Association, its accomplishments, problems and disappointments, setting off certain tendencies that are discernible there; finally, to suggest lines of development in relation to the trends already shown in the general historiography of the Church and the more limited experience of our own society.

The last eighty years have seen a remarkable increase of interest in the history of the Church. This interest has been most fruitful; not only has it led to a more profound understanding of the Church's past; it has contributed much to secular history as well. Evidence of this interest is of many sorts. There has been, first of all, an increased importance attached to the investigation and teaching of ecclesiastical history by the Church in her official acts. The encouragement of research by the papacy is a very old tradition, but it has received new impetus in modern times in a series of decisions and discourses, extending from the opening of the Vatican

Archives by Leo XIII in 1881 to the important address of Pius XII to scholars gathered in Rome in 1955 for the Tenth International Congress of Historical Studies.¹ Of a more practical nature is a series of acts touching the training of professors and the teaching of church history in seminaries. Of these the most important are the following : the Encyclical *Depuis le jour* of Leo XIII (Sept. 8, 1899),² the Apostolic Constitution *Deus scientiarum Dominus* (May 24, 1931)³ and its interpretation by the Sacred Congregation of Studies (June 12, 1931),⁴ in which the status of church history was raised so that it became one of the ‘discipline principales’ of the theological education of the priest, a decree of the Sacred Congregation of Seminaries and Universities, establishing a faculty of Ecclesiastical History at the Gregorian University (Aug. 6, 1932),⁵ and a series of talks on the education of future priests in which Pius XII returned again and again to the importance of this field of study.⁶ Furthermore, within this series of directives, there is a pronounced shifting of emphasis from the letter of Leo XIII, where much attention is given to the apologetic use of historical studies, to the discourses of Pius XII, where the primary interest is the history of the Church itself. Thus, while Leo XIII would end his remarks with the sentence: “Studied in this manner, Church history of itself alone constitutes a magnificent and conclusive demonstration of the truth and divinity of Christianity,”⁷ Pius XII, in the allocution of 1939, would say: “Historical science as part of your curriculum, should not be limited to critical or purely apologetic problems, whatever their importance, but should rather demonstrate the activity of the Church; what she has done and suffered etc.”⁸

Another indication of the quickening of interest in ecclesiastical history is the appearance of new societies and reviews. Here in Canada, the Canadian Church Historical Society was launched in 1946 and the Canadian Society of Church History in 1958. The appearance of the excellent review

¹ *The Pope Speaks*, II, Washington, 1955, pp. 205-215.

² *Lettres apostoliques de S.S. Léon XIII*, 6 vols., Paris, 1885- , VI, pp. 101-102.

³ *Acta Apostolicae Sedis commentarium officiale* (henceforth cited *AAS*), XXIII (1931), pp. 241-262

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 270-271.

⁵ *Periodica de re morali, canonica, liturgica*, XXXIII, Rome, 1944, pp. 233-234.

⁶ Allocution to Seminarians, July 12, 1939, *AAS*, XXXI (1939), p. 248; Letter on the training of professors of ecclesiastical history, Feb. 10, 1944, *AAS*, XXXVI (1944), p. 101; address on the fourth centenary of the Gregorian University, *L'Osservatore Romano*, 19-20 Oct., 1953, pp. 1-2.

⁷ *Depuis le jour*; see above, n. 2.

⁸ *AAS*, XXXI (1939), p. 248.

Church History since 1932 is some indication of the activity along similar lines in the United States. The same pattern is discernible in other countries. In England, for instance, the last few years have seen the establishing of the Oxford Conference in Post Reformation History, the Ecclesiastical Historical Society, the Lambeth Lectures, *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, and various groups and reviews dealing with recusant history. The new Catholic center of research to be established at Cambridge University in a few months is to direct much of its attention to the history of the Church. Many more examples could be given. However, these suffice to demonstrate the rich variety of current studies in the history of religion and religious institutions.

Yet another interesting pattern is the increasing number of joint sessions between Catholic and non-Catholic church history societies or between groups concerned primarily, with religious and secular history. Our own Association has acquired some little experience of this sort, as for instance in joint sessions with the Canadian Historical Association beginning last year and in sending a lecturer to the meeting of the American Catholic Historical Association at Washington in 1961. Wider experience of other societies would seem to indicate that this technique, so much in the spirit of our age, promises to be very fruitful. Perhaps the most evident indication of its importance, one that also underlines a direction of research that is likely to be most fruitful, is the foundation of the International Committee of Comparative Ecclesiastical History during the International Congress of Historical Studies at Stockholm in 1960.

Finally, the study of the history of the Church has made considerable progress in the universities. In North America this has been rather slow to come about; there are reasons for this in the long religious polemic, with which we are familiar. None the less, the exclusion of the history of the Church meant that many of our universities had systematically omitted the study of a vast area of human experience. This object of study frequently made its entrance into academic circles, by the back door as it were, through departments of comparative religion and anthropology. Now it is beginning to find a place in history departments as well and first-class scholars appear with gratifying frequency occupying chairs of ecclesiastical history. (I have to say with regret that Catholic colleges and universities have often been strangely negligent in this regard.) Another indication of this increased academic interest is the number of important term papers and master's and doctor's theses devoted to the investigation of the history of the Church.

In the foregoing I have said nothing of the content of this historical investigation, of the new problems that are being posed, of the new insights and wisdom made possible by these studies. In addition to the deepened understanding of the Church's past and of the Church itself, which is

obvious, it is not an exaggeration to say that the brilliant revival of biblical and patristic studies, and progress in theology and ecumenism have been assisted and, occasionally, been made possible by this historical ferment. However, this is not the occasion to develop these notions; let it suffice to say in conclusion to this first part that our century has seen a remarkable increase of interest in the history of the Church and the appearance of many institutions to carry out historical investigations and publish their results. I see no indication that this surge of interest has reached its peak. Evidence of the moment would indicate the contrary.

The birth and growth of the Canadian Catholic Historical Association is one small part of the vast movement that I have described. The Association was founded with a rather broad purpose. The constitutions published in the first Report list the ends of the society:

To encourage historical research and public interest in the field of Catholic history;

To promote the preservation of historical sites and buildings, documents, relics and other significant heirlooms of the past;

To publish historical studies and documents as circumstances may permit.⁹

Early reports reveal efforts to implement these intentions in the activity of committees on archives, publications and bibliography, and in luncheon meetings for the discussion of the teaching of church history in Catholic colleges and seminaries. But the secretary's reports soon admit that these plans involved professional, and therefore very expensive help, so that, given the financial structure of the society, they would have to remain in abeyance for the time being.

With regard to archives, the desired depot was not found and the deposit of archive material on a large scale did not occur. In the seventh *Report* secretary Kenney mentioned the receipt of some documents which were placed in the National Archives, Ottawa, but this was exceptional.¹⁰ More within the possibility of the Association was the description of ecclesiastical archives of Canada. Here the French section has made some contribution with five valuable reports. Until this morning the English section had contributed nothing in this field.

⁹ *Canadian Catholic Historical Association, Report, I (1933-34)*, p. 93.

¹⁰ *Report, VII (1939-40)*, pp. 7-8.

So far as publications are concerned, the *Report* itself is the chief accomplishment of the Association. No doubt some of the founders would be disappointed that this should be the extent of the society's activity along this line. Some of the papers may not be of the calibre that one might wish. Yet there are now twenty-eight volumes on the shelf, an accomplishment that cannot be ignored, one in which the Association can take pride.

As for the stimulation of public interest in the history of the Church, here again there has been a not insignificant success. Several hundred papers dealing with the life of the Church in Canada and elsewhere published in the *Report*, and the desire of academic institutions, public libraries and other groups to possess our publication are sufficient evidence of the Association's success. Furthermore, in its attempt to obtain members, the Association has stimulated an interest in the history of the Church among groups and persons whose regular activity would not ordinarily lead them in that direction. The importance of this sort of interest is difficult to weigh but it is probably considerable. In a word, the annual meeting, the publicity attending it, the publication and distribution of the *Report* are the chief accomplishments of the Association.

When the meetings and *Reports* are examined several interesting qualities and tendencies of the activity of the Association become apparent.¹¹ First, there seems to have been some confusion as to the extent of the society's interest: should it be concerned with the history of the Church in Canada, or should it cast its net wider to deal with any historical problem touching the Church? The contents of the first eight volumes of the *Reports* and a point of view that has been revealed in many ways from the beginning to the present indicate a preference that it should be concerned exclusively with the history of the Canadian Church and its immediate antecedents. However, since the ninth *Report*, papers dealing with the Church in a wider frame of reference have appeared more and more often, especially in the meetings of the English section. This group includes papers that from some points of view are among the most important that the Association has published. There is, then, a pronounced tendency to widen the purview of the society's activity.

There is another trend that is usually in the opposite direction. The idea of a central theme, now so popular at joint meetings of historical societies, appears in the *Report* of 1940. At Sherbrooke that year, the French section heard several papers dealing with "Les problèmes religieux au Canada après la conquête." However, this rather precocious appearance of the central theme dealing with a special problem in history did not begin a trend. Concentration of interest became geographic rather than topical, usually being concerned with the local history of the region in which the meeting was held. Here again, the French section was the pioneer (the first example was at the meeting at Levis in 1938), and it has been the more successful in the development of this type of program. Certainly the thirteenth volume of the *Rapport*, dealing with the history of the region of Saint-Jean is a very useful piece of work. A similar plan was adopted occasionally by the English section, for example in its

¹¹ Here I wish to acknowledge my debt to the paper "Où en sommes-nous en fait d'histoire de l'Eglise canadienne," read by Msgr. Arthur Maheux at the Toronto meeting of 1959: *Rapport*, XXVI (1958-59), pp. 13-18.

meetings at Windsor (1951) and Antigonish (1953). This concentration of investigation on the history of the area in which the meeting is taking place has undoubtedly served to stimulate local interest in the local history of the Church.

Another trait, becoming increasingly evident in the past decade, is the large proportion of papers delivered by trained historians or by men and women preparing for that career. This has been one of the sources of the improved technical level of the *Report*. It is also related to the increased number of papers dealing with the history of the Church outside of Canada mentioned a moment ago, for most of these papers have been prepared by members of this professional group.

Finally, and closely connected with the preceding development, a broadening of view vis-à-vis other scholarly groups can be discerned. The most important step in this regard was probably the decision to meet in conjunction with the Conference of Learned Societies. It was suggested at the meeting of 1959, and the proposal was adopted the following year. In 1961 the Association met with the Learned Societies in Montreal. The decision, if it is the correct one, indicates that our society has attained a considerable degree of maturity. It may be that we seek a level to which we have not yet attained, for the new arrangement does not accord well with some procedures that have proved successful in the past and therefore poses problems to us. At any rate, with this step the possibility of the joint session with the Canadian Historical Association presented itself and was acted upon, beginning with the Hamilton meeting of 1962. We have also been approached for the same purpose by the Canadian Society of Church History and, in fact, one of our members presented a paper to that society this year, though in a private capacity, rather than as a member of the Association.

Looking back, then, over the thirty years of our Association's life, we see that several trends have been established within it. They cause us to view the future with some alarm, but also with much hope. To that future let us now turn. Our problems are difficulties of program and difficulties of organization. I shall limit my remarks to the former, speaking of organization only where it is related to matters touching the program of the Association.

First a word on the aims of the society. The English title (though not the sub-title) bears the interpretation that ours is merely a society of Catholic historians and, in fact, there have been a few papers dealing with purely secular history. They were exceptional, however; we take it as granted that our Association is concerned with the history of the Church. We have seen that although the primary interest has been the history of the Church in Canada, there is an increasing number of articles dealing with the Church in the broader perspective. For some members this trend is a disappointing one; it has meant a proportionate diminution of the information which has been made available on the history of the Church in this country. On the other hand it is important that we remember the immense scale in time, space and human experience of that Church of which we write. The articles which take us beyond our immediate area are a corrective to local interest that, with all its accomplishments, has occasionally run the risk of the antiquarianism that plagued so much ecclesiastical history in the nineteenth century. I think that the decision to include these papers was a happy one and recommended that the practice continue.

On the other hand, if the CCHA could find its way to undertake bibliographical studies, I would recommend that they be strictly limited to Canadian church history. My recommendations on this matter are two. First, I suggest that the interest in the preservation and description of archives that was so strong in the early years of the society be revived. If our *Report* each year carried a short account of the holdings of a single depot of archives, even a very humble one, its value would be much enhanced in the eyes of scholars throughout the country. It would not, I think, be unkind to add that the public description of a collection often tends to bring it greater stability and care; this too is desirable. Others have spoken or are to speak of this matter. I mention it here only to place it within its proper frame of reference. Secondly, I warmly recommended that our *Report* contain an annual section with a brief account of books, theses, articles and private studies and projects dealing with the history of the Church in Canada. If nothing more were possible, even a list would be of use. Msgr. Arthur Maheux has already made precious suggestions here.¹² I would only add that it is important to limit our interest to that which is feasible. There need not be and, in fact, there should not be an attempt to treat of general Church history; this scholarly service is available elsewhere. Our need is a means of knowing what is published and what is being prepared on the history of the Church in Canada. If our *Report* acquired the reputation of being the place where this information could be found and to which this information should be sent then, once again, its value would be much enhanced.

Closely connected with the desire to attain the ends of the CCHA are the problems and opportunities attendant on our decision to meet with the Conference of Learned Societies. This decision has caused considerable doubts among many members of our Association. The shift of date of the meeting from autumn to early summer has been inconvenient for some: witness the small attendance at the sessions of 1961 and 1962. It is unlikely that the older arrangement whereby the annual meetings alternated between French-speaking and English-speaking centres will continue, though, as it happens, it has done so thus far. Furthermore, the meeting in smaller diocesan centres, meetings that often produced interesting collections of essays on the history of the locality, meetings that were undoubtedly responsible for considerable financial support, will no longer be possible. This loss will be a serious one, especially to the French section.

It is possible to meet or to soften some of these objections. The change of date, for example, has proved very convenient for the academic members of the Association. The simultaneous meeting of the Canadian Historical Association adds to their advantage. From a positive point of view, many benefits should flow from the new arrangement. The stimulation and exposure to new notions and problems that will follow from the relationship with other societies is very precious. Furthermore, there is an aspect of this decision to which we have not paid enough attention. One of the ends of the society, established from the very beginning, was to encourage historical research and public interest in the history of the Church. We are now given an opportunity to spread knowledge of and interest in the history of the Church to the groups that teach in our schools, write our text-books and, in fact, control the

¹² See the previous note and *Rapport*, XV (1947.48), pp. 141.147.

knowledge of history throughout this country. This is a splendid opportunity. In addition, the new arrangement means that through joint sessions and in other ways much of the professional historical skill in this country will be turned to precisely those studies that concern us, namely, the exploration of the history of the Church, especially in Canada. Therefore, if I say that the relationships that follow on our adherence to the Conference of Learned Societies are of value to us, in that they educate us, I say with greater insistence that they help us to accomplish the ends of our society and bring a wealth of new human talent to aid us in our work.

A moment ago, it was mentioned that one objection to the change of date of the annual meeting was the small attendance at the different sessions. If you will bear with me for a few moments more I shall make one final suggestion that may help to remove this admitted difficulty. I should add that there are other, more profound reasons for this suggestion; they will become evident as we proceed. It was remarked above that our problems are difficulties of program and of organization. It is evident, I think, that in both areas our structure is unwieldy. For a society with such a small permanently active membership, the duplication of effort flowing from double organization and program is a luxury. It may be necessary. Here I must admit that my experience is limited, so limited in fact, that I am perhaps rather bold in proceeding to make suggestions as I do. Yet I think that we should re-examine the reasons for this duplication. After careful thought I recommend that we adopt a single bilingual program. This arrangement would help provide a reasonably large audience for all speakers, something that I understand has never been consistently possible in the past. There are other reasons for making this recommendation. In fact the arguments that have been advanced in favour of the relationship with the Conference of Learned Societies apply here as well. It would once more be a sign of maturity and would conduce to it. Furthermore, while the present structure of program and organization reflects the linguistic-cultural division of the country with reasonable accuracy, it does not adequately correspond to the patterns of Canadian Catholicism. To mention only three illustrative examples, the very important Ukrainian Church, the Polish communities, the large Italian ecclesiastical structure that is developing in Montreal and in Ontario do not properly fit in to the English section even if they consider English to be their second language, or even their mother tongue. A program in which the speaker addressed himself to an audience representing the whole Church of Canada without considering himself or his problem to be identified with one cultural group or the other would, I think, be more perfectly in accord with the words "Canadian" and "Catholic" which grace the title of our Association.

My conclusion is a brief one. We have seen the rather impressive scale of scholarly activity touching the history of the Church. Its value as an exploration of historical truth itself is clear. In an era of rapid and, sometimes, thoughtless change, these studies assume a practical value undreamed of even a generation ago. Our society is a small current within this vast stream. As the years have passed several tendencies have become apparent within it. These trends have developed without an over-all plan; they appeared, rather, as a response to some new need or opportunity. However, when we examine them with the perspective permitted by the passage of time, it becomes apparent that most, though not all, of these tendencies fit together, sometimes complementing each other in a remarkable way. Furthermore, we discover that the direction in which our Association is moving is one in which it is highly

possible that it will be able to achieve its ends with greater efficacy than ever before. The evolution within the society can now become something that is understood and willed. The logic of past events, short-sighted if you will, has presented us with an excellent opportunity. I suggest that, making necessary adjustments to our ways of thinking and to our organization, we seize that opportunity, and that our grip be firm.