

*We always have the duty of trying to make Jesus
Christ King of both our
own lives and of the life of our social order.*

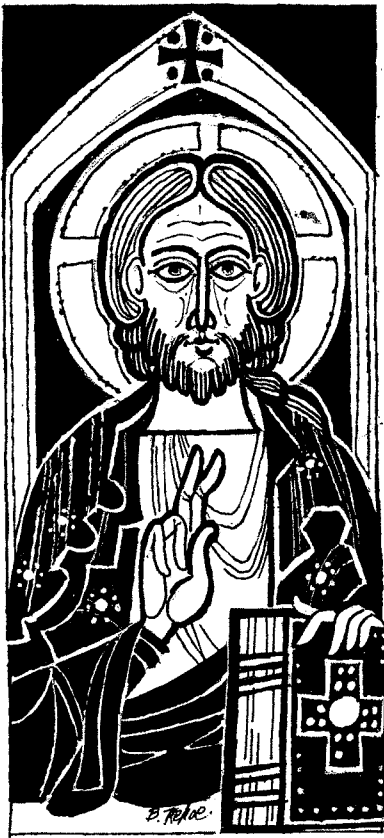
Christendom: God's beachhead in a rebellious world

By Thomas Storck

■ It is very easy for a Catholic to come near to despair as he regards the shape of twenty-first century life. Everywhere the laws of God are ignored, disdained and ridiculed, while sin and wrongdoing are not only practiced but justified, encouraged, recommended and praised. The institutions that form and define a culture, in religion, government, education, the fine arts, for the most part are in definite opposition to large parts of the moral law and to the Catholic view of life. Meanwhile the voice of the Catholic Church, the true oracle of God, is confused and muted because of the raging dissent, indifference and turmoil within her ranks. Of course, sin has always been pervasive on the earth, for if it had not been for sin, we would have had no need of a Redeemer. But what is especially troubling about this now is not that men sin, but that sin is pub-

licly accepted and justified, and virtue derided. It is the *public* and *official* acceptance, and even promotion, of sin, by institutions, by our culture as a whole, and at the same time, the rejection of a Catholic way of life, that is especially disturbing. But in this essay I will argue that even this should not surprise us too much, if we reflect on certain facts about our world.

In C.S. Lewis's novel, *Out of the Silent Planet*, Professor Ransom is carried to Mars and there converses with that planet's Angelic ruler. The Angel tells Ransom that the Earth is the "silent planet," for a long time subjected to the rule of its evil chief angel, and that there is no communion between Earth and the rest of the cosmos, which is inhabited by un-fallen beings and good angels. All this is simply an imaginative retelling of the truth that our Lord told us, that Satan is the prince or



ruler of this world.¹ In other words, since this world has been given over to the powers of darkness, we should not expect peace and goodness, for "here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come" (Heb. 13:14). And especially and in particular, here on this earth, *Christendom* will never be stable and lasting.

What is Christendom?

Christendom is sometimes used to mean those countries in which the majority of the population is Christian or at least has Christian traditions, or is used roughly to describe the totality of Christians existing throughout the world. But it really means something much more majestic than this. Christendom is nothing else but the attempt to make real, even in this fallen world, the social reign of Jesus Christ the King; to make every part and aspect of human life subject to his authority; to shape public life; and, as far as may be done in private life, to reflect the reign of Christ the King. Pope Leo XIII briefly described such a situation in the following words:

There was once a time when States were governed by the principles of Gospel teaching. Then it was that the power and divine virtue of Christian wisdom had diffused itself throughout the laws, institutions, and morals of the people; permeating all ranks and relations of civil society. Then, too, the religion instituted by Jesus Christ, established firmly in befitting dignity, flourished everywhere, by the favor of princes and the legitimate protection of magistrates; and Church and State were happily united in concord and friendly interchange of good offices. The State, constituted in this wise, bore fruits important beyond all expectation, whose remembrance is still, and always will be, in renown, witnessed to as they are by countless proofs which can never be blotted out or even obscured by any craft of any enemies.²

In other words, a truly Christian state of affairs would involve a political and cultural order subordinate to the reign of Jesus Christ. It would not be simply such obvious offenses against the law of God as abortion or divorce which would be prohibited, but aspects of social life which are often overlooked by many modern Catholics, such as the economic order, would also be regulated for the glory of God and the welfare of mankind. As Pius XI put it:

It is therefore very necessary that economic affairs be once more subjected to and governed by a true and effective guiding principle. . . . To that end all the institutions of public and social life must be imbued with the spirit of justice, and this justice must above all be truly operative. It must build up a juridical and social order able to pervade all economic activity.³

In other words, when Christendom flourished, the political order, the economic order, artistic activity, the legal system, all of these, in their own proper ways, were conceived of as subordinate to Almighty God. Indeed, the entire life of man was to be lived within an order that stretched from the inanimate world through plants and irrational animals, to man, the highest and rational animal, through the various orders of angels to the Holy Trinity. But it was not merely man as an individual

(continued on page 44)

CHRISTENDOM: GOD'S BEACHHEAD IN A REBELLIOUS WORLD

(continued from page 32)

who was part of this order, but the human community. The state *as such* owed allegiance to Jesus Christ and to his representative on earth, the Sovereign Pontiff. This beautiful order was expressed theologically by St. Thomas, especially in his *Summa Theologiae*, and by Dante in his *Divine Comedy*, as well as in a host of other writers, theologians, philosophers and poets. Even in a document written after the Middle Ages had begun to decline, the Prologue to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, one can see the entire array of society, the activity of each man and woman, meant to serve God and the common good in its unique way.

The decline of Christendom

This Christian civilization had been gradually built up over many centuries, from the beginning of the Christianization of the Roman Empire under Constantine, until the High Middle Ages. But at the moment when it seemed the Church had finally succeeded in establishing a social order somewhat in keeping with the teachings of Jesus Christ, it began to unravel. As Christopher Dawson wrote:

The fourteenth century was an age of division and strife, the age of the Great Schism, which saw instead of the Crusades the invasion of Europe by the Turks and the devastation of France by England. And at the same time the intellectual resources of Western society which had been so much strengthened by the extension of the university movement no longer assisted the integration of Christian thought but were used negatively and critically to undo the work of the previous century and undermine the intellectual foundations on which the synthesis of the great thinkers of the previous age had been built. It is as though the spiritual tide which had been steadily making for unity for three centuries had suddenly turned, so that everywhere in every aspect of life the forces that made for division and dissolution were predominant.⁴

And another historian spoke of it in this way:

The influence of the Church had never seemed greater than in the third quarter of the thirteenth century, and some modern historians have claimed that the pontificate of Gregory X (1271-1276) marked the peak of papal power.

Yet the young men who witnessed the execution of Conradin, who studied under Thomas Aquinas, who accompanied St. Louis on his last crusade, were hardly more than middle-aged when the medieval papacy received a blow from which it never fully recovered. In an open conflict between the head of the Church and the kings of France and England, the secular rulers carried off the victory. As a result of this victory the popes deserted Rome and established themselves on the borders of the kingdom of France. The prestige of the papacy was tarnished and the leadership of the Church was shaken. The popes of the fourteenth century could no longer make all important social activities serve the cause of Christianity. They were placed on the defensive and had to devote most of their energy to the task of preserving the machinery of ecclesiastical government.⁵

How brief was the pinnacle of the Catholic Middle Ages. And how often in the course of history has the attempt to establish or preserve a Christian civilization proven elusive! How often has the "prince of this world" defeated the best attempts to organize or maintain a Catholic social order on this earth. As the Middle Ages continued to decline, suffering not only from the effects of the Great Schism, but from a series of worldly popes and the corruption of philosophical and theological instruction by nominalism, heretical movements increased their activity in all corners of Europe, until suddenly in 1517 Martin Luther issued his challenge to some aspects of the doctrine of indulgences, a challenge occasioned by an indulgence that was being preached in different parts of Germany, and which masked a rather shady financial deal between the new Archbishop of Mainz⁶ and Pope Leo X.

With the success of Luther's revolt in north Germany and Scandinavia, and of other Prot-

estant movements in parts of Switzerland and France, the geographical basis for reestablishing the fullness of Christendom throughout Europe was destroyed. And shortly thereafter the intensely Catholic country of England was separated from the Faith due to the pride and lust of her king, Henry VIII. Then after the short reign of Henry's son, Edward VI, Queen Mary Tudor began the restoration of the Faith in England, to the great joy of most of the people. But her premature death in 1558 left unfinished her efforts at restoration, efforts which were then entirely undone by her treacherous half-sister, Elizabeth. Later the failure of the Spanish Armada in 1588, caused in part by "Protestant winds" which blew King Philip's ships off course; and later still the failure of Louis XIV of France to heed the request of our Lord, transmitted through Saint Margaret

Mary Alacoque, that he publicly honor the Sacred Heart of Jesus and thereby obtain victory over his enemies—all these contributed to the final demise of a Catholic social and cultural order throughout Europe.⁷ And although the Faith remained the official basis of the polity in Catholic Europe up till the French Revolution of 1789, and even later in Latin America, by then rationalism had sapped the foundations of this social order, which was a mere shell of Christendom. Though the peasants in many places continued to live Catholic lives and observe Catholic customs, no one could say that eighteenth century Europe was a Catholic culture. The aristocracy, most intellectuals, even many of the higher clergy, espoused ideals that were not Christian, ideals that matched the degenerate lives many of them led.

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The modern world

Of course the Church did not cease to exist with the Revolution of 1789. In fact, in many ways, there was a revival of Catholic life in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But one important difference was that Catholic life from now on rarely encompassed entire social orders.⁸ Catholicism was now, for the most part, a matter of individual or family commitment. Although Catholic intellectual life in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries entered on a period of brilliance, this renewed Catholicism failed to become the framework in which whole nations lived, in which their political, intellectual, and social life was conducted, as it had been during the Middle Ages. The revival of personal commitment to the Faith and of Catholic thought was, of course, both excellent and necessary, but this should have been the springboard to a new political, intellectual and social conversion of the entire Western world. Instead, after beginning to run out of steam in the 1950s, it vanished abruptly after the Second Vatican Council.

But should we be surprised by all of this? Should we be surprised that it is only in brief periods that the fullness of Catholic life triumphs? Should not the state of our world, as a *fallen* world, make us expect exactly this? Not that we should fall into the Protestant

error of condemning God's creation. As many passages of Holy Scripture make clear, especially the beautiful hymn in Daniel 3:52-90, the physical creation is engaged in a ceaseless praising of God, and still retains the approbation that God pronounced upon it in Genesis 1. It is mankind that has sinned and it is the order that we have established that always tends away from God.⁹

Christendom, then, whenever and wherever it has been established, has been a heroic attempt to reclaim a part of the world from the Devil's power, to make effective even now the Kingship of Jesus Christ, a Kingship that in its fullness will not be known till after the Second Coming. Since men have a constant tendency to sin, the clerics and statesmen who in the past have ruled over Christian social orders were facing an uphill battle to maintain that happy state of affairs. And one wonders whether God had not given extraordinary graces at one period of the world's history that for his own reasons he has withheld at other times. As in the passage from Christopher Dawson that I quoted above, it seemed as if everything which had been working for good suddenly ceased and began working for discord and evil.

It is as though the spiritual tide which had been steadily making for unity for three centuries had suddenly turned, so that everywhere in every aspect of life the forces that made for division and dissolution were predominant.

It is not possible to understand entirely God's purposes in history. The best we can do is sometimes to get a glimpse of them. But our duty always remains. Whether in favorable or unfavorable times, we always have the duty of trying to make Jesus Christ King of both our own lives and of the life of our social order and even of the entire world. Even though the social reign of Jesus Christ the King will never rest upon secure foundations in this world, still we must do all we can to achieve a Christian social order. As

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St. Paul wrote (1 Cor. 15:25), *Opus est illum regnare*: He must reign! ■

¹ Satan is called the ruler of this world several times in St. John's Gospel, 12:31, 14:30, 16:11. St. Paul refers to Satan as the "god of this world" (2 Cor. 4:4) and as the "prince of the power of the air" (Eph. 2:2). Cf. also Satan's words, who, after showing our Lord "all the kingdoms of the world . . . said to him, 'To you I will give all this authority and their glory; for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will.'" Luke 4:5-6 and Matthew 3:8-9.

² Encyclical *Immortale Dei* in *The Great Encyclical Letters of Pope Leo XIII* (Rockford, Ill.: TAN Books, 1995) pp. 118-19.

³ Encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*, no. 88.

⁴ Christopher Dawson, *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1950) pp. 238-39.

⁵ Joseph R. Strayer and Dana C. Munro, *The Middle Ages, 395-1500* (Pacific Palisades, Calif.: Goodyear Publishing, 5th ed., c. 1970) pp. 418-19.

⁶ Albert of Brandenburg, also Archbishop of Magdeburg and administrator of the diocese of Halberstadt. He was only twenty-six years old and had been a bishop since the age of twenty-two!

⁷ Among other things, Louis XIV was told to put an image of the Sacred Heart on his flag and to build a chapel dedicated to the Heart of Jesus, and in turn he was promised success to his arms. But it is not certain whether this communication ever reached the King.

⁸ Of course there were valiant attempts to revive Catholic political and social structures, in places as varied as Ecuador, Austria, Spain, and Quebec, to mention only a few.

⁹ Of course man's sin has had effects on all of creation. Cf. Romans 8:19-23.

Cf. also these words of Josef Pieper, "In his *Commentary on St. John's Epistle*, St. Thomas remarks that we can find in Sacred Scripture three different meanings for the term 'the world': first, 'the world' as the creation of God, and second, as the creation perfected in Christ; last, as the material perversion of the order of creation. To 'the world' in this last-named sense, and to this world only, may one apply the saying of St. John: 'The world is seated in wickedness' (I John 5:19). It is precisely the claim of St. Thomas that the first meaning of 'world' (as creation) may not be identified nor interchanged with the third—('world' as material perversion of the order of creation); the world as creation is *not* seated in wickedness." *The Silence of St. Thomas* (Chicago, Ill.: Henry Regnery, 1965) p. 31.



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