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one hundred or five hundred years hence.*

The apostasy of the gentiles

By Thomas Storck

*The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's
shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar . . .*

—Matthew Arnold, “Dover Beach”

■ The phrase “the apostasy of the gentiles” was coined by two outstanding nineteenth-century converts to the Catholic faith from Judaism, twin brothers, Auguste and Joseph Lemann.¹ In response to the general secularization of European thought and life in the decades after the French Revolution and the falling away of so many from the Faith, they recalled the words of St. Paul in 2 Thessalonians, that the return of Christ would not occur “unless the apostasy² comes first” (2:3), and in Romans that “a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the gentiles come in, and so all Israel will be saved” (11:25-26). Thus if the European world was falling away from the Faith, perhaps “the

times of the Gentiles” (Luke 21:24) were coming to an end. And the *Roman Catechism* had already told us that “the general judgment will be preceded by these three principal signs: the preaching of the Gospel throughout the world, a falling away from the faith, and the coming of the Antichrist.”³ It is to the second of these two signs that I wish to turn my attention in this article, for it seems to me, however close we may or may not be to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, that the process of the “apostasy of the gentiles” has begun and is well under way. That is, the loss of faith among the peoples who once constituted Christendom is well advanced, and I would argue that this is part of the “falling away from the faith” that will precede the return of Christ. This apostasy, however, is gradual and has taken place in stages. It has been going on for nearly half a millennium. It would be more than rash to predict that we are close to its finish. But the process has definitely begun. We are winding down to the Second Coming, whether that event will take place one hundred or five hundred years hence.



Thus without committing myself to any particular view of the exact circumstances preceding the end of the world and the return of Jesus Christ, much less to a timetable for these events, I will describe the gradual secularization of life in what was once Christendom, until in our own day it seems as if those ominous words of our Lord can be fully applied, "Nevertheless, when the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (Luke 18:8).

The apostasy of the gentiles, while certainly it has picked up speed in recent decades, can hardly be dated from anytime except the late Middle Ages. Since that time there has been a process, sometimes gradual, sometimes swift, of apostasy from the Christian faith and social order as established by the Church of Christ, the Catholic Church.

In the first place, in order to understand the genesis of this decline, we must look at what the Church had laboriously brought about in

Europe through the work of many centuries. Europe at the height of the Middle Ages consisted not only of many Catholics, persons individually committed to the Catholic Faith and, to one degree or another, living that Faith, but to a Catholic social order, or Christendom. That is, the societies, laws, institutions and customs of that social order were, at least in intent, Catholic. Instead of the situation we have today, in which Catholics must attempt to live Catholic lives within the public forms of an anti-Catholic society, Catholics, as is natural, transformed the social order to reflect Catholic truth. Today in Europe, despite the presence of a few vestiges of public Catholicism, the real and active political and social forces, especially those of the European Union, are actively hostile to the Faith, while in the United States the political order has always formally prescinded from any concern with religion, while social life has been shaped by Protestantism, and lately by secularism.⁴ Both these ways of life are unnatural for Catholics. It is true that in Latin America in some countries there are public manifestations of the true Faith, such as laws against divorce or abortion or even laws giving a special place to the Catholic faith in the life of the nation, but all this is being swiftly undermined by hostile forces, both secular and Protestant.

But the Catholic social order that reached its zenith during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, curiously and suddenly began to decline. Christopher Dawson wrote of it as follows.

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.⁵

Thus the long effort toward building a Christian society quickly began to collapse. We are familiar with many of the landmarks of this collapse, the Great Western Schism, the Protestant revolt, the Thirty Years War, the French Revolution, the seizure of Rome and the Papal States by the Piedmontese in the 1860s, the strange internal situation of the Church since the mid 1960s, a situation brought about chiefly by self-inflicted wounds, the current acceptance in most countries of the grossest sexual immorality as normal and healthy, with legal abortion as a convenient method of getting rid of the inconvenient results of unchastity. What I wish to call attention to, however, is the way that the apostasy of the gentiles has de-Christianized, one at a time, specific sectors of our culture, so that until recent decades many people hardly realized what was going on. Thus the intellectual, the political and the economic sectors or aspects of the Christian world were secularized long before the current crises in Church and society, and these earlier efforts made it all the easier for the forces of evil to gain their current victories.

Secularization of intellectual life

Christopher Dawson, in the passage I quoted above, mentioned that

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Today we practically take for granted the notion that most highly educated people and intellectuals will be hostile to the Faith and to Christian morals. But what an abnormal state

of affairs this really is! Above all, those who spend their lives in study and investigation of truth should exhibit a love of revealed truths as much as of natural truths. There is no enmity between learning and Christian faith, no hostility between the intellectual life and the spiritual life. But in fact, this aspect of life and culture was one of the first to show signs of secularization and hostility to Catholicism. The rise of nominalism in the medieval universities, the philosophical doctrine that restricted our knowledge to individual things and which led directly to contemporary unbelief, and, in the next age, of thinkers openly skeptical of the Faith, proceeded apace, so that by the nineteenth century it can be taken for granted that most of the intellectual life of the Western world was no longer Catholic.

This effective de-Christianization of European intellectual life has been chiefly responsible for the myth that religious faith is necessarily an enemy of learning or thinking. Thus today most people unreflectively assume that someone of high intelligence or learning will not hold orthodox religious doctrines. Although as a matter of fact there are many examples of intelligent and learned persons who are orthodox Catholics, the general impression created by the popular media is that such persons do not exist. The atmosphere in most institutions of higher learning is unrelentingly irreligious. Thus many people can simply ignore religion—after all, they might say, no intelligent person could possibly believe all that, so why bother to investigate it.

Until fairly recently many people were sufficiently removed from the intellectual life of their societies that they might ignore, and even be largely unaware of, these pervasive irreligious attitudes. Most people did not attend college or university nor did they read the books and periodicals in which the intelligentsia discussed their ideas. But nevertheless they were profoundly influenced by them.

As Leo XIII pointed out in his encyclical *Aeterni Patris*,

Whoso turns his attention to the bitter strifes of these days and seeks a reason for the troubles that vex public and private life must come to the conclusion that a fruitful cause of the evils which now afflict, as well as those which threaten, us lies in this: that false conclusions concerning divine and human things, which originated in the schools of philosophy, have now crept into all the orders of the State, and have been accepted by the common consent of the masses. For, since it is in the very nature of man to follow the guide of reason in his actions, if his intellect sins at all his will soon follows; and thus it happens that false opinions, whose seat is in the understanding, influence human actions and pervert them (no. 2).

Thus even those who might never have read a learned book or article were affected. A good example is Freud. Although few have actually read him, how many talk of complexes, repression, the unconscious, etc. How many talk of "paradigm shifts" who have never read Thomas Kuhn. And this has been true since the advent of mass literacy and widely diffused reading matter in the late eighteenth century. The secularization of the Western mind began with a segment of the intellectuals, but has now gradually conquered the minds of most people. Even in the United States, where belief in God and adherence to religion is much more widespread than in Europe, most churchgoers *think* in essentially secular categories. Thus the rejection of universals by the nominalists in the fourteenth century universities has led to the rejection of the supernatural in twenty-first century mass society.

Secularization of politics

After the beginnings of de-christianization in the intellectual sector, it was the political sector that next experienced secularization. Although the Protestant revolt did not seem to shake the medieval notion that civil governments ruled in the name of God and by his authority, paradoxically it was the doctrine of the Divine Right of Kings that led directly to

the downfall of medieval political ideals. This doctrine held that God had designated one particular individual or family to rule, in contrast to the more flexible medieval doctrine that, although there were many ways by which a king could come to power, once legitimately in power, whatever authority he had came from God. Moreover, the Renaissance doctrine of the Divine Right typically excluded the people from all say in government. Thus medieval assemblies, which had sometimes forced monarchs to temper their power, very often ceased to meet after the sixteenth or early seventeenth centuries, and monarchs held nearly absolute power, something few medieval rulers ever did. But when the reaction to this came, as in the English Revolution of 1688 or the French Revolution of 1789, it swept away all vestiges of divine kingship, both legitimate and illegitimate, and made governments simply dependent on the will of the people, with no place for God.

St. Paul's dictum, "there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God" (Romans 13:1), was now seen as a quaint doctrine of past times. The state then was no longer from God and thus not bound by the laws of God. Expediency was king, and to subject the state to the moral law was considered as hopelessly naive and weak-minded. As Secretary of War Henry Stimson made clear in his article, "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb,"⁶ moral considerations entered into this decision very little, if at all. The means were chosen to accomplish the end desired. And indeed, how could the means have been blamed by those who had already sanctioned aerial attacks, which as Stimson said, had

been more destructive of life and property than the very limited number of atomic raids, which we could have executed. . . . In March 1945 our Air Force had launched its first great incendiary raid on the Tokyo area. In this raid more damage was done and more casualties were inflicted than was the case at Hiroshima.

Of course, this had been done previously in Europe, and the United States was by no means the only guilty country. But the point is that this shows the degree to which the state had come to see itself as divorced from God. Leo XIII, in his encyclical *Libertas* (1888), made it clear that states, as much as individuals, are bound by the moral law.

There are others, somewhat more moderate though not more consistent, who affirm that the morality of individuals is to be guided by the divine law, but not the morality of the State, so that in public affairs the commands of God may be passed over. . . . But the absurdity of such a position is manifest (no. 18).

If each human being is bound by the law of God, how could that law cease to bind us when we undertake action in concert? In any case, regardless of the type of government, monarchy or republic, those who rule receive their authority ultimately from God, and since God cannot be the author of sin, they too may never command or authorize sin.

Secularization of economic life

After the political, the next area of human life to become divorced from God and the moral law was the economic realm. Before the sixteenth century, however much individual Catholics may have sinned, the economic order itself was conceived of as an expression of divine order in the world. That is, its purpose was to provide mankind with the material goods we obviously need, but the notion of individual enrichment was limited in accordance with the well-known admonitions of Sacred Scripture about the dangers of riches.⁷ The medieval attitude can be briefly summed up in this passage from Bede Jarrett's *Social Theories of the Middle Ages*:

We can, therefore, lay down as the first principle of mediaeval economics that there was a limit to money-making imposed by the purpose for which the money was made. Each worker had to keep in front of himself the aim of his life and consider the acquiring of money as a means only to an end, which at one and the same time justified and lim-

We no longer ask ourselves whether perhaps our houses or our cars are not already big enough, or whether we truly need more new clothes or more gadgets. The whole order of production and acquisition of material goods has become divorced from a Christian conscience.

ited him. When, therefore, sufficiency had been obtained there could be no reason for continuing further efforts at getting rich . . . except in order to help others. . . .⁸

Although the desire for individual gain was held in check by the monarchies of the Baroque era, which sought to orient all economic activity toward royal and national aggrandizement, in the eighteenth century this system too broke down, and the way was now open for the frank acceptance of economic motives, and what St. Paul had once called "the root of all evils" now became the mainspring of the economy. Thus in our own day the state of economic life can be summed up in the words of Pius XI's encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931):

In the first place, then, it is patent that in our days not alone is wealth accumulated, but immense power and despotic economic domination is concentrated in the hands of a few, and that those few are frequently not the owners, but only the trustees and directors of invested funds, who administer them at their good pleasure (no. 105).

This power becomes particularly irresistible when exercised by those who, because they hold and control money, are able also to govern credit and determine its allotment, for that reason supplying so to speak, the life-blood to the entire economic body, and grasping, as it were, in their hands the very soul of the economy, so that no one dare breathe against their will (no. 106).

This accumulation of power, a characteristic note of the modern economic order, is a natural result of unrestrained free competition, which

permits the survival of those only who are the strongest. This often means those who fight most relentlessly, who pay least heed to the dictates of conscience (no. 107).

Even though this was written at the height of the 1929 depression, nevertheless with few changes it can serve as a description of our economy today, where principles of restraint are not only rarely adhered to but are usually denied as having application.

In other words, the reason for the existence of external goods is generally forgotten, as is also the fact that the inordinate desire for money, like the inordinate desire for sexual pleasure, is one of the chief means whereby a soul can turn away from God. We no longer ask ourselves whether perhaps our houses or our cars are not already big enough, or whether we truly need more new clothes or more gadgets. The whole order of production and acquisition of material goods has become divorced from a Christian conscience. Advertising exists to incite us to buy, whether we need something or not, and credit often exists to enable us to buy it, whether we can afford it or not. But the fact is, many Christians are hardly aware that this is a secularized way of looking at things. The attitudes of our medieval fathers are unknown to us. As Fr. John Cronin wrote in 1950, ". . . sermons on greed, avarice, selfishness in business matters, unwarranted ambition, and unsocial conduct are as rare today as they were common in medieval times."⁹ Man's economic activity is now conducted as if God did not exist.

Secularization of the arts

The human arts, especially those called the fine arts, have been used in the service of God and for other legitimate human ends for many centuries. But in our time these arts have also, to a great degree, become parts of mankind's apostasy against God. Art, like economic activity, is now seen as necessarily free from all restraint of morality. In part this is because

the artist no longer works to support a function, such as composing music for use in the Church, but works simply for whatever ends he proposes to himself, supported by private patrons or government funds. Governments have always supported the arts, but in the past they did so to promote useful works, things to adorn public life. And most importantly, in the past those who paid the bills considered themselves entitled to judge the artist's work. Now, in what has become a process of self-judgment, only the artists themselves and the "arts community" are held to be able to pass judgment on any piece of art. So no matter how destructive works of art may be toward public morals, those who are not part of the "arts community" are loudly told to shut up, mind their own business and hand over the check. But of course this is a real perversion of the function of art and the place of the artist, who ought to work to beautify and adorn human life and civilization, including above all, the worship of God. The eighteenth century saw the beginnings of the emancipation of the artist from all social and religious context and control, so that in our own day obscenity will be defended so long as it can pass itself off as art. Just as sexual activity entirely divorced from its procreative purpose produces perversion, so the arts, removed from their social purpose, likewise produce perversion.

But all these secularizing movements, of the political, the economic, the artistic, could often be ignored by the average man, because he did not encounter them directly in his own life.¹⁰ But this is no longer the case.

The secularizing attack on the family and the human person

Now in our time the process of secularization has progressed to such a point that it is impossible for anyone with a modicum of Christian conscience to ignore it. This is because it has intruded into the most personal and intimate areas of human life, into marriage and

the family, into our very bodies. Already in the nineteenth century marriage was an issue, which set the Church at odds with the world. In the *Syllabus of Errors* of 1864 Blessed Pius IX devoted an entire section (nos. 65 through 74) to marriage questions. Here the Pontiff was concerned chiefly with indissolubility of marriage and with civil versus Catholic marriage, which shows that the attack on the family goes back at least to the nineteenth century. But with our time it has taken on a new virulence. Certainly divorce has reached levels that Pius IX could never foresee. In addition, due to the availability of technology, we have such barbarities as more effective methods of contraception and abortion, freezing of embryos, embryonic stem cell harvesting, the possibility of human cloning, and the like. We also have the widespread acceptance of homosexual conduct as normal for human beings. It is now clear that mankind's very existence and nature are being threatened. Can human apostasy and rebellion from the divine plan go further than this? It seems that man's apostasy has now invaded every segment of human life and culture: the intellectual (which was a necessary prelude to all the rest), the political, the economic, the artistic, and now the personal. At this point do we await anything more than the further consolidation of Satan's rule over this world before we see the remaining signs of our Lord's return?

The apostasy in the Church

But there is one more affliction with which mankind has been visited. This is the internal situation in the Catholic Church since the mid 1960s. Although it is true that the everyday life of Catholics was becoming more secularized in many respects since at least the nineteenth century, and Pius XI lamented the loss to the Church in that century of the working class, intellectually the Church remained firm in her opposition to modernity, and millions of faithful, supported by a solid liturgical and

spiritual life, lived as practical Catholics. Within the Church bishops, theologians, and intellectuals promoted a vision of life at variance with that of the apostasy of the Christian social order. The Church was even able to renew herself both spiritually and intellectually after the French Revolution and entered the twentieth century apparently largely intact, despite the crisis of modernism at the turn of the century. There were even attempts to create a Catholic life not just for individuals and families, but for whole societies. But the life and discipline of the Church suddenly collapsed. It was as if a grace had been withdrawn, so that men who before had upheld both piety and common sense, now began to

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But the life and discipline of the Church suddenly collapsed. It was as if a grace had been withdrawn, so that men who before had upheld both piety and common sense, now began to talk and act both impiously and nonsensically.

talk and act both impiously and nonsensically. And the confusion and apostasy within the Church allowed civil society itself to degenerate further. In the United States, for example, would the Supreme Court have dared to permit abortion if the Church had maintained her internal discipline and been willing to boldly confront evils, including lukewarm Catholic politicians? But of course, one evil always spawns another, and in fact the various cultural sectors, that one by one became secularized since the late Middle Ages, all interacted and influenced each other in ways that I do not have space to describe here.

“The preaching of the Gospel throughout the world, a falling away from the faith, and the coming of the Antichrist”—with these words the *Roman Catechism* tells us to look for the end of the world and the return of our Savior. The Gospel has certainly been preached in most of the world. The falling away from the Faith (apostasy) has destroyed not only Christendom as a civilization, but in our time the faith of millions of Catholics. And although I think that both these two signs will exhibit further development, may we nevertheless think that, as these signs run their course, that it is the third sign that we must now expect? As I said, I am setting forth no timetable. It may be hundreds of years. All I am arguing is that the process has begun, and that we know what its conclusion will be.

I must deal briefly with an opposing theory, one recently brought forward by Philip

Jenkins in his book, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*.¹¹ Professor Jenkins argues that the locus of Christianity has shifted from the north, Europe and North America, to the south and that we can expect a new Christendom to be built there. But there are several difficulties with Jenkins's thesis. First, many of what Jenkins considers hopeful signs must, to a Catholic, appear as the very opposite, such as the proliferation of sects in Latin America, or some Catholic churches having “[m]illet and corn replace wheat in the host, while wine is made from palm or banana” so that “the Eucharist [becomes] a genuine banquet . . . rather than an imported symbolic affair.”¹² The flourishing of sects in Africa and Latin America by no means argues for the triumph of the Church of Christ there. Moreover, reports of various sexual scandals among some African priests seem to indicate that they too are beset by difficulties similar to those that afflict the clergy of North America and Europe.¹³ And even more to be deplored are examples of heresies and false doctrine in these Churches, such as those of Fr. Tissa Balasuriya of Sri Lanka¹⁴ or the excessive politicization of religion by liberation theology in Latin America. Without belittling the achievements of our brethren in those places, we may well ask ourselves if we can really expect a regeneration of the whole Church from the southern continents. Moreover, for a Catholic, Latin America is an old Christian land, and can hardly be considered as part of a “new Christendom.” In fact, it was part of Christendom well before North America!

If my argument here is generally sound, then we are in the midst of a process foretold long ago by our Lord, of the gradual loss of the Faith, of that public faith which produced Christian civilization, and now of that private faith which produces Christian families and Christian men and women. Our task, however, is still the same, wherever we may be in this process. To preach the Gospel, to do penance

and reform our own lives, to create whatever institutions and structures to promote Catholic civilization that God will allow and bless. For the rest, we must simply wait on Him. ■

End Notes

1. It is interesting that in nineteenth-century France alone there were several sets of Jewish brothers who embraced the Catholic faith. Besides the Lemanns, they include Alphonse and Theodor Ratisbonne and Francis Libermann and his brothers Samson, Felix, David and Samuel.

2. Some translations render this as *rebellion*. However, the Greek word is *apostasia*, and thus apostasy seems like a fitting translation. The Vulgate uses the word *discessio*, a falling away.

3. *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, translated by John A. McHugh and Charles J. Callan. Rockford: TAN Books, c. 1982, p. 84. St. Thomas Aquinas, in his *Commentary on the Epistle to the Thessalonians*, caput 2, lectio 1, echoes this same teaching of St. Paul. See also the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 674-75.

4. Although in the decades after the American Revolution several of the individual States had Protestant ecclesiastical establishments, the general tenor of American thought was that religion was a purely private matter. These State churches did not represent serious efforts to create Christian political orders.

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

6. *Harper's Magazine*, February 1947.

7. For example, Proverbs 23:4; Micah 6:12a; Matthew 19:24; Luke 1:53b; I Timothy 6:6-10; James 5:1-3a.

8. (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1942) pp. 157-158. The entire chapter on Money-Making runs from pages 150 to 180. Numerous similar quotes could be taken from the works of Belloc, Christopher Dawson, Richard Tawney and other historians of medieval economics.

9. *Catholic Social Principles: the Social Teaching of the Catholic Church Applied to American Economic Life* (Milwaukee: Bruce, c. 1950) p. 45.

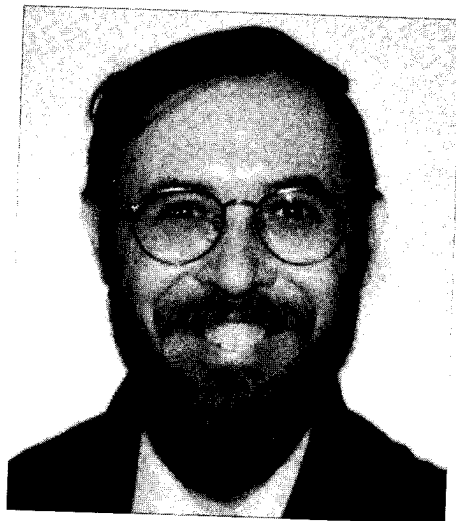
10. Until the last thirty years or so, mass culture did not exhibit the same degree of immorality as contemporary high culture, and thus the average person could largely ignore what was going on.

11. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002)

12. *Ibid.*, p. 115.

13. For example, see *Guardian Unlimited*, March 21, 2001, "Catholic Priests Abusing Nuns for Sex." www.guardian.co.uk

14. He was the subject of a Notification by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1997 for "statements incompatible with the faith of the Church regarding the doctrine of revelation and its transmission, Christology, Soteriology and Mariology."



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