

# Introduction to Ecclesiastical History



- By Rev. Fr. Nilindra Gunsekera sss

## I. Nature of Ecclesiastical History and Its Importance

Ecclesiastical history is the scientific investigation and the methodical description of the temporal development of the Church considered as an institution founded by Jesus Christ and guided by the Holy Spirit for the salvation of mankind.

The Church is the external historical form of Christianity, viewed as the religious association of all the faithful who believe in Christ. As the institution which the Son of God founded for the realization on earth of the Kingdom of God and for the sanctification of man, the Church has a Divine element and a human element. The Divine element comprises all the truths of Faith which her Founder, the Son of God entrusted to her. It includes the teachings of Jesus, the fundamental principles of the Church's organization as an institute destined for the guidance of the faithful, the practice of Divine worship, and the guardianship of all the means by which man receives and sustains his supernatural life. The human element in the Church appears in the manner in which the Divine element manifests itself with the co-operation of the human free will and under the influence of earthly factors.

The Divine element is unchangeable, and, strictly speaking, does not fall within the scope of history. It is the human element that is subject to change and development. Hence, this human element ensures that the Church has a history. Change takes place because of the extension of the Church throughout the world. During this process of expansion, various forces were at work partly from within the Church, partly from without, as a direct result of which the expansion of Christianity was either hindered or advanced. The development of the ecclesiastical hierarchy and constitution, of the worship of the Church, of the legislation and discipline which regulate the relations between the members of the Church and maintain order, are also subject to change and therefore, become the subject for historical study.

The scope of ecclesiastical history is the scientific investigation and methodical treatment of the life of the Church in all its manifestations from the beginning of its existence to our own day among the various divisions of mankind hitherto reached by Christianity. These changes notwithstanding, the Church remains essentially the same. The changes highlight the nature of the Church's internal and external life. Concerning the external life,

ecclesiastical history makes known in detail either the local and temporal expansion or restriction of the Church in the various countries. Concerning the internal life of the Church, ecclesiastical history treats of the development of ecclesiastical teaching, based on the original supernatural deposit of faith, of the forms of ecclesiastical government and the exercise of ecclesiastical functions, of the different ways of cultivating the perfect religious life, and of the disciplinary rules whereby Christian morality is cultivated and preserved and the faithful are sanctified.

## II. Methods of Ecclesiastical History

The ecclesiastical historian must apply the principles and general rules of the historical method exactly and in their entirety. The cornerstone of all historical science is the careful establishment of facts. The ecclesiastical historian will accomplish this by a full knowledge and critical treatment of the sources. An objective, reasonable, and unbiased interpretation of the sources, based on the laws of criticism, is the first principle of the true method of ecclesiastical history. Systematic instruction in this field is obtained through the historical sciences usually known as auxiliary or introductory, i.e. **palaeography** (the reading and dating of all kinds of manuscript sources. It was first scientifically investigated and formulated by Mabillon, "De re diplomaticâ" (Paris, 1681), **diplomatics** (cf. it teaches how to examine critically the form and content of historical documents - e.g. charters, privileges, to pronounce on their genuineness, to understand them correctly, and to use them methodically. It is usually combined with paleography), and **criticism** (i.e. to treat in a correct and critical way all the sources known to him and to combine the results of his researches in a methodical narrative – cf. Fr. Blass, "Hermeneutik und Kritik" in Iwan Müller's "Handbuch der klassischen Altertumswissenschaft", I, 2nd ed., Munich, 1893). Secondly, ecclesiastical history must ascertain and explain the relation of cause and effect in the events. It is insufficient merely to establish a certain series of events in their objective appearance. He must lay bare their causes and effects.

Individuals and groups without exception are members of the one human race created for a sublime destiny beyond this mortal life. Thus, the action of the individual exercises its influence on the development of the whole human race, and this is true in a special manner of the religious life. Ecclesiastical history must therefore give us an insight into this moral and religious life, and lay clearly before us the development of the ideas active therein, as they appear both in the individual and in the groups of the human race.

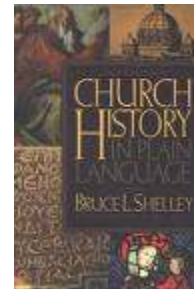
To discover fully the really decisive causes of a given event, the historian must take into account all the forces that concur in producing it. The influence of given individuals on the development of the whole body must be properly appreciated. Scientific church history must therefore take into consideration both the individual and the general factors in its investigation of the genetic connexion of the outward phenomena, at the same time never losing sight of the freedom of man's will. The ecclesiastical historian, moreover, cannot also exclude the possibility of supernatural factors. That God cannot intervene in the course of nature, and that miracles are therefore impossible is an assumption which



has not been and cannot be proved. Herein appears the difference between the standpoint of the believing Christian historian, and that of the rationalistic historian, who rejects even the possibility of Divine intervention in the course of natural law.

The believing ecclesiastical historian also estimates the value and importance of the events in their relation to the object of the Church, whose sole Christ-given aim is to realize the Divine economy of salvation for the individual. The Christian historian keeps in view the fact that the founder of the Church is the Son of God, and that the Church was instituted by Him in order to communicate to the whole human race, with the assistance of the Holy Spirit, its salvation through Christ. It is from this standpoint that the Christian historian estimates all particular events in their relation to the end or purpose of the Church.

The ecclesiastical history should be pragmatical in the following sense. The ecclesiastical historian applies first that philosophical pragmatism which traces the genesis of events from a natural standpoint and in the light of the philosophy of history, and tries to discover the ideas which underlie or are embodied in them. But to this must be added theological pragmatism, which takes its stand on supernatural revealed truth, and strives to recognize the agency of God and His providence, and thus to trace (as far as it is possible for the created mind) the eternal purpose of God as it manifests itself in time. The Catholic historian insists on the supernatural character of the Church, its doctrines, institutions, and standards of life, in so far as they rest on Divine revelation, and acknowledge the continual guidance of the Church by the Holy Spirit. All this is for him objective reality, certain truth, and the only foundation for the true, scientific pragmatism of ecclesiastical history. Ecclesiastical history is impartial. This consists in freedom from every unfounded and personal prejudice against persons or facts, in an honest willingness to acknowledge the truth as conscientious investigation has revealed it, and to describe the facts or events as they were in reality. In the words of Cicero, to assert no falsehood and to hide no truth (*ne quid falsi dicere audeat, ne quid veri dicere non audeat*, "De Oratore", II, ix, 15).



### III. Division of Ecclesiastical History

Ecclesiastical Historians have variously treated the abundant material for scientific investigation that the long life of the Church offers us. We first mention the exhaustive works of a universal nature, in which the entire temporal development of the Church is taken into account (Universal Ecclesiastical History). Alongside of these works we find researches on individuals and institutions of the Church (Special Ecclesiastical History). These particular expositions treat either of the internal or external life of the Church, as has been explained at length above, and thus lead to a distinction between internal and external history. There are also, many works which must consider both phases of religious life.

Special ecclesiastical history falls naturally into three main classes. First we meet with accounts of the lives and activity of individuals (Biographies), who were during their lifetime of special importance for the life of the Church. Second, we encounter special ecclesiastical history which treats of particular parts and divisions of the Church in such a manner that either the whole history of a given part is discussed or only selected features of the same (cf. dioceses, parishes, monasteries, churches). Third, we have the history of the popes, of cardinals, of councils, collections of the lives and legends of the saints, the history of orders and congregations; also of patrology, dogma, liturgy, worship, the law, constitution, and social institutions of the Church.

#### IV. Universal History



The office of universal ecclesiastical history is to exhibit a well-balanced description of all phases of ecclesiastical life. The investigation and treatment of the various phenomena in the life of the Church furnish the material of which universal church history is built. It first treats of the one true Church which from the time of the Apostles. It proved herself to be in full possession of revealed truth.

The Catholic historian does not admit that the various forms of the Christian religion may be taken, roughly speaking, as a connected whole. For the Catholic historian there is but one Divine revelation given us by Christ, and one ecclesiastical tradition based on it. Hence one only Church can be the true one, i.e. the Church in which the aforesaid revelation is found in its entirety.

While, however, the Catholic Church is the central subject of universal ecclesiastical history, all other forms of the Christian religion must also be considered by it, for they originated by secession from the true Church.

Ecclesiastical history has generally been divided into three chief periods, each of which is subdivided into shorter epochs characterized by changes of a less universal nature.

##### First Period (1<sup>st</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> Century):

The foundation of the Church and the development of fixed standards of ecclesiastical life within the limits of Græco-Roman civilization. The uniform and universal Græco-Roman civilization there prevailing was a propitious soil for the growth of the new ecclesiastical life, which displays three main phases.

- (1) The foundation of the Church by the Apostles.
- (2) The expansion and interior formation of the Church amid more or less violent but ever persistent attacks on the part of the Roman government (Epoch of Persecutions).

- (3) The third epoch is characterized by a close union between Church and State.

Heresies regarding the person of the Incarnate Son of God bring to the front important dogmatical questions. The first great councils belong to this epoch. The ecclesiastical hierarchy and administration are developed more fully, the primacy of Rome standing out conspicuously as in the preceding epoch. Monasticism introduces a new and important factor into the life of the Church. In the eastern half of the empire, later known as the Byzantine empire, this development went on quite undisturbed.

*Second Period (7<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> Century):*

The Church as mistress and guide of the new Romanic, German, and Slavic states of Europe, the secession of Oriental Christendom from ecclesiastical unity and the final overthrow of the Byzantine empire. This second period was marked by events which greatly affected ecclesiastical life. Three main epochs suggest themselves.

- (1) The first centuries of this epoch are characterized by the development of a close union between the papacy and the new Western society and by the falling away of the Orient from the centre of ecclesiastical unity at Rome.
- (2) A second part of this period shows how the Christian West grew into the great fellowship of the peoples under the supreme guidance of a common religious authority. Popular life everywhere reflects this Christian universalism. The papacy rose to the zenith of its power, not only in the religious, but also in the temporal domain. New orders, particularly the mendicant, fostered a genuine religious life in every rank of society. The universities became the centres of a notable intellectual activity, devoted for the most part to the development of theology.
- (3) A third epoch of this period is filled with reaction against the evils of the preceding time, and with the evil results of wide-spread worldliness in the Church and the decline of religious life. The Church suffered a grievous loss of authority through the Western Schism and had difficulty at the time of the reform councils (Constance, Pisa, Basle) in stemming a strong anti-papal tide. It also witnessed the isolation of the Byzantine Church and its final rupture with Rome (Trullan Synod to Leo IX, 1054). The Byzantine Empire was completely overthrown by the Turks, Islam gained a strong foothold in south-eastern Europe and threatened the entire Christian West.

*Third Period (16<sup>th</sup> Century to date):*

The collapse of religious unity among the two western nations, and the reformation from within of the ecclesiastical life, accomplished during the conflict against the latest of the great heresies. -- Immense geographical expansion of the Church owing to the zealous activity of her missionaries through whom South America, part of North America and numerous adherents in Asia and Africa, were gained for the Catholic Faith. In this period, also, which reaches to our own time, we rightly discern several shorter epochs during which ecclesiastical life is characterized by peculiar and distinctive traits and phenomena.

- (1) The civil life of the various Western peoples was no longer regarded as identified with the life and aims of the Universal Church. The Ecumenical Council of Trent laid a firm foundation for a thorough reformation in the inner or domestic life of the Church.
- (2) The subsequent epoch shows again a decline of ecclesiastical influence and religious life. French revolution.
- (3) With the nineteenth century appeared the modern constitutional state. It was based on principles of the broadest political liberty. Although in the first decades of the nineteenth century the Church was often hampered in her work by the downfall of the old political system, she nevertheless secured liberty under the new national popular government, and fully developed her own religious energies. To their credit, the great popes guided this advance with a strong hand despite the loss of their secular power. The Ecumenical Council of the Vatican, by defining papal infallibility, supported with firmness ecclesiastical authority against a false subjectivism.

The great turning-points in the historical development of the Church do not appear suddenly or without due cause. This first period ended with the seventh Century.

Turning points within the chief periods of Church History:

- The conversion of Constantine the Great .
- Charlemagne,
- Gregory VII,
- Boniface VIII,
- The Greek Schism
- The Crusades



## V. Sources of Ecclesiastical History

Historical sources are those human products which were either originally intended, or which are preeminently fitted, to furnish knowledge and evidence of historical facts. The sources of ecclesiastical history are whatever things that can throw light on the facts that make up the ecclesiastical life of the past. These sources fall naturally into two classes:

- Remains (*reliquiæ, Ueberreste*) or immediate sources, i.e. inscriptions, necrologies, sacred edifices, monasteries, hospitals, liturgical vessels and books, 'bullaria,' papal and synodal decrees, rules of faith, ecclesiastical laws
- (B) Tradition or mediate sources, i.e. such as rest upon the statements of witnesses who communicate an event to others. Tradition may be oral (narrative and legends), written (writings of particular authors), or pictorial (pictures, statues).

For eg. Acts of martyrs, lives of saints, ecclesiastical literature, paintings and sculpture.

The critical treatment of the two kinds of sources differs. It is usually sufficient to prove the authenticity and integrity of "remains" in order to establish the validity of their evidence. In dealing with tradition, on the other hand, it must be proved that the author of the source in question deserves credit, also that it was possible for him to know the fact.

Among the auxiliary sciences such as palæography, diplomatics, and historical criticism, that would assist in the pursuit of Ecclesiastical History other sciences such as *epigraphy* (i.e. a guide for the reading and methodical use of the Christian inscriptions on monuments), *heraldry* (cf. it teaches the student how to read accurately the coats of arms etc., used by ecclesiastical and secular lords), *sphragistics* (i.e. the science of seals -Gk. *spragis*, a seal its object is the study of the various seals and stamps used in sealing letters and documents as a guarantee of their authenticity), and *numismatics* (i.e. the science of the coins of various countries and ages, since not only the popes but also the numerous bishops, who once possessed secular power, exercised the right of coinage), prove useful in the compilation of Church History.

