

'STUDYING EGYPTOLOGY IN ICELAND OR WORKING AS A MEDIEVALIST IN QUEENSLAND

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In November, 1987, I spent an enjoyable few days at Campion Hall, Oxford, as a guest of the English Jesuits. When I met the College's Rector, he asked me what discipline I studied back in Brisbane. When I told him I was a Medieval Church historian, he retorted: "I suppose that must be something like studying Egyptology in Iceland." The aptness of this comment was to dawn on me later.

On first appearances, anyone wishing to study the Middle Ages from our part of the world labours under certain disadvantages. We are unable "to walk the ground in our stout pair of boots", as Manning Clark used put it. The sites of the events of medieval history are far removed from us and we are unable to study them at first hand.

Even the number of one's local academic colleagues is few; and one's need for stimulation from others often remains unfulfilled. There are, however, certain conferences held from time to time, at which individual scholars can meet to discuss their work and ideas. Perhaps the most famous of these are those of the Australian & New Zealand Association of Medieval & Renaissance Studies (A.N.Z.A.M.R.S.), held every eighteen months. Its scientific sister-organisation, the Australian & New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science (A.N.Z.A.A.S.) is well known, while the relative obscurity facing the humanities-based colloquium reflects something of popular priorities in our region.

There would appear to be in this country of ours a surprising lack of a "sense of history". Look, for example, at the sort of thing that the *Courier Mail* prints on its back page under the headline 'This Day in History'. How many of these events can you remember personally? How many belonged to the lifetimes of your parents and grandparents? Is this 'History'? Or is it more properly called 'Current Affairs'? Where does one cease and the other start?

Australians' lack of appreciation of history is expressed in other ways, as well. Occasionally we hear our contemporaries describing something as "positively medieval". What does this mean? Have you ever stopped to ask yourself why the Early Middle Ages are popularly known as the "Dark Ages"? (It's certainly not because we lack information about them!)

The Australians' lack of appreciation of history is something which goes beyond any stance that may be adopted towards the world of the Middle Ages; it pervades our society's approach to history in general. How many of us, for example, know the story of the rock paintings at any number of Aboriginal sites throughout this country? Or who, in our Church of Brisbane, knows what went on at a Bora Ring? (Yet there is one at the corner of one of our key properties: Pius XII Seminary, Banyo!) Sites such as these, no less than things medieval, risk being consigned to the "dustbin of memory".

Given the lack of interest - and even the sometimes smouldering hostility - that one can encounter within both our society and our local church community, it may strike you as strange that I should even be here at all to talk about "working as a Medievalist in Brisbane". Why, when so many problems in contemporary and Church life require urgent solutions, would I have the temerity to stand here and urge you to undertake a renewed study of the period of the Fathers of the Church?

The answer to this simple. This was a time when our Latin, Western, Christian (call it what you will), Tradition was being formed. The beginnings of our language of symbol and ritual, of administration and law, of scholarship, of life in a Community of Believers, are to be found within this age of our history. Things we do and hold sacred today have their origins fixed firmly in the past. We have, consequently, a certain commonality of language and experience with the individuals of the past.

Now, as then, one world is fading while another is being born. Now, as then, the Church is carefully discerning spiritual and cultural values in a process of assimilation and purification that enables her to maintain her own identity and to offer in today's complex cultural panorama the riches that the human expression of faith must give to the world⁽¹⁾

In meeting this challenge, a medieval historian can work just as well in Australia as in other parts of the world; since the products of the medieval expression of faith are to be found just as much in their written texts as in their cathedrals or other great works of art. The Venerable Bede successfully addressed just such a challenge in his remote monastery, during the seventh and eighth centuries, using material gathered from elsewhere. Brisbane has a fine Patrological collection; built up with so much care by Bishop James Quinn and his successors; and now housed in the library of Pius XII Seminary, Banyo. Finally, thanks to the twentieth century revolution in

communications technology, this data base may be supplemented by means of inter-library loans from virtually any library in the world. This opens up to the modern medievalist sources which would have been beyond the wildest dreams of the Venerable Bede.

Having obtained the desired written material, the would-be Brisbane Medievalist faces the question of evaluating its significance. This is a difficulty which is perhaps greater than any to which we have, as yet, referred. It may be likened to a process of open-cut mining; something with which we are very familiar in Queensland. The overburden of centuries of distance and cultural accretion needs to be removed in order to expose the mineral deposit of the Tradition and of the Church Fathers.

The greatest challenge is presented by differences of language. The works of the Tradition are not written in English; and any modern scholar wishing to study the works of the Fathers and the Medievalists needs to have access to several languages. First among these are Latin and Greek, the languages of most of the original texts; but in addition, since much contemporary work is being done in languages such as French and German, exposure to them is also necessary.

Now, Australians often do not "sit" easily with foreign languages. This is manifested by the difficulties that programmes, such as "English as a Second Language", or other linguistic studies, have experienced. Yet, organisations do exist at which one or other of the various modern languages may be learned. At Banyo Seminary, thanks to the influence of its Scripture scholars, Greek is a part of the curriculum of study. All its students are expected to complete one year's Greek; and a second Advanced Level is offered as an elective. Those wishing to study either the Scriptures or the works of the Greek Fathers are thereby able to have access to them.

What gives me greater cause for concern, is the current neglect that Latin studies endure. Before the Second Vatican Council, all official Catholic Church documents were written in Latin. Even today, Latin remains the primary text for these documents. For the medieval historian, Latin is a fundamental tool. Without it, one is like a miner who knows there is ore to be found underground, but has not the means of reaching it.

When I went to school, Latin was an everyday part of the secondary school curriculum. Not so today; one has to look elsewhere. The Classics Departments of universities still teach it; but what of Church institutions, whose students might perhaps be expected to have some knowledge of it? I made enquiries of Banyo Seminary and was informed that, while Latin was offered as an elective subject every two years, most of its men who are ordained for the priesthood have not attempted the course. Sadly, I believe this is by no means unique in Australian seminaries.

This raises a disconcerting question. What access, in a practical sense, does one have to the accumulated wisdom of centuries of Latin Catholic Tradition? Or, to put it another way, in what sense can one claim to live and work in continuity with that Tradition?

To meet this difficulty, the Congregation of Catholic Education, Rome, issued its "Instruction on the Study of the Fathers of the Church in the Formation of Priests" on 10 November, 1989. This document urged that

everything possible will have to be done to strengthen the study of Greek and Latin in centres of priestly formation.⁽²⁾

The Congregation observed that the inclusion of the historical dimension in the scientific work of today's theologians is of vital importance since it demonstrates "the vital link that exists between tradition and the most urgent problems of the present moment". If theology is "detached from the stream of tradition it is either reduced to pure 'biblicism' or it becomes a prisoner of one's historical horizon by being taken over by various fashionable philosophies and ideologies of the day". If this happens, the end result is that the contents of the Creed are "flattened" and risk being "reduced to a purely earthly dimension".⁽³⁾

Consequently, it must be asserted that theology must not concentrate on natural and human sciences at the expense of the study of the Church Fathers.

Historically, the age of the fathers is the period of some important firsts... It was they who set 'the entire canon of the sacred books', composed the basic professions of faith..., defined the deposit of faith in response to heresies and contemporary culture, thus giving rise to theology... It was they who laid the foundations of canonical discipline... and created the first forms of liturgy... The fathers gave the first conscious and reflective response to the divine Scriptures... They were... the authors of the first great Christian catechesis⁽⁴⁾

The Congregation called for a 'real commitment' to the study of the Fathers, on the part of students of the Catholic Tradition because:

- 1) The fathers are privileged witnesses of the tradition.
- 2) They have passed down to us a theological method that is both enlightened and reliable.
- 3) Their writings offer cultural, spiritual and apostolic richness that makes them great teachers of the church yesterday and today.⁽⁵⁾

Before concluding this study of this most important document on the place of the study of the Fathers in contemporary Church life, it must be noted that the Fathers

provide examples of the enculturation of the Christian Tradition in the world of human experience. In this regard, the Congregation adopted the principle outlined by St Augustine of Hippo in his work "De Doctrina Christiana":

*If they who are called philosophers have said true things in harmony with our faith... not only should they not cause fear, but... they should be claimed for our use... Is this not precisely what many of our good faithful have done?**⁽⁶⁾

Finally, I would like to make some comments, taken from my own pastoral experience, which demonstrate some benefits that can be obtained from a study of the Age of the Fathers and of the Medieval period.

As a priest involved in active parochial ministry, the sermons of the Fathers provide an invaluable preaching aid. They are not to be consulted in a plagiaristic or in a purely repetitious way; but their reflections on the Scriptures and on certain situations presented by human experience provide insights into a possible response that we can make to these conditions today. Without their example, we are so much the poorer.

My study of the relationships between Latin and Eastern Rite Christians during the period of the Crusades has contributed to my understanding of certain aspects in the field of Ecumenism. It is possible to gain an insight into the various positions and their origins; identifying in the process various positive and negative factors on both sides. In the climate of today's dialogue, this is necessary, if one is to come to a true "meeting of minds", rather than the domination of one group by another.

In studying for my Master of Arts degree, I chose the topic "Authority and Power in the Thought and Practice of Pope Gregory the Great". At first sight, the study of Church government at the end of the sixth century appears remote from our experience. Yet, surprisingly perhaps, on closer examination the link between that Church and ours is strongly evidenced in a number of areas: Gregory's title 'servus servorum Dei', still used by the Pope today; the framework for Synods of Bishops; the organisation of Papal representatives ('Rectors'); missionary initiatives (including the conversion of the English); the relationship between Church and State (be that State Byzantine or Barbarian); and the development of both Moral Theology and Canon Law, being some of them.

Finally, I turn to the field of research in which I am currently engaged. In this 'decade of evangelisation' the history of Christian Missions has been sadly neglected; and the Medieval period has been almost totally ignored. I have been able to find only two out-of-date works on the subject written in English; and, to my knowledge, none is in the course of preparation.

That this area of Church scholarship has suffered from neglect has also been observed by that famous historian of missions, Stephen Neill. In a paper, which appeared in 1970⁽⁷⁾, he outlined the current situation throughout the world. In Germany, there were six professorships of missions in Protestant faculties⁽⁸⁾ and one in a Catholic faculty (Munster). In the United States professors of missions were 'a remarkably numerous species', with most seminaries having a chair in this discipline. But,

In many cases these chairs are held by retired missionaries...an arrangement which is very nice for the retired missionaries, perhaps less so for the students whose expectations in the matter of academic standards are not always fully met.

In the United Kingdom there was, sadly, not a single, full-time professorship of missions.⁽⁹⁾

In the twenty or so years since Neill's comments were made, the situation does not appear to have drastically changed. More than once, I have had to face questions of the relevance of such a studies to the Brisbane Church. Yet a study of the history of missions would appear to be of major importance to any church actively engaged in the work of Evangelization. In particular this would appear to be so for the medieval period; a time in which the Catholic tradition was being formed.

For all our claims to multi-culturalism, the story of the Church in Australia is intimately linked to the faith of our European forefathers. We share a common racial heritage with them. We have common concerns as well. We too have to come to terms with a society which is changing in many respects: in education, in the structures of family life and social mores, in our relationship with a world where Christian values are not always prized, and so on. Can we relate the medieval experience to the contemporary situation in which we find ourselves? What medieval missionary techniques and approaches were successful? Which ones failed? How might we apply their insights today?

When seen in this light, being a medievalist in Brisbane is essentially a future-oriented activity. One does not remain confined to a set of restricted traditions, but rather seeks to 'mine' the deposit of the past for material which will be relevant to the new situations which life presents to us. In adopting this approach, it is my aim to realise the words, used by Jesus, to describe the work of the faithful scribe:

Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.
(Matt.13:51-52).

References

1. *Instruction on the Study of the Fathers of the Church in the Formation of Priests*, Congregation for Catholic Education, Rome, 10 Nov. 1989 (hereafter cited as "Instruction"), Introduction par.4.
2. *Origins*, 19.34 (25 Jan.1990), p.549.
3. Cf *Instruction*, I.I. The Fathers in Theological Studies Today.
4. *Instruction*, II.I Privileged Witness to Tradition, b)
5. *Instruction*, II Why Study the Fathers.
6. *De Doctrina Christiana*, ii.40.60-61 as cited in "Instruction" II.2b).1 Christian originality & Inculturation.
7. S.Neill, *The History of Missions: An Academic Discipline*, "Studies in Church History" 6 (1970), pp.149-170.
8. He looked forward to this soon becoming seven.
9. S.Neill, op.cit., pp.149-150.

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