

The Catholic Mind

By JUDE P. DOUGHERTY

A Catholic mind is one formed by the Hebrew Scriptures, the Gospels, and the Fathers of the Church as commented upon through the ages. But there is another sense in which "the Catholic mind" is to be understood. The Catholic mind is one that is historically conscious, one conscious of origins. So constituted it provides a forum that allows the ancients, no less intelligent than we, to speak to us across the ages. They can teach us much about the moral order, human nature, and political organization, wisdom that is experience based and otherwise unavailable. So oriented, we can feel at home with Plato and Aristotle, understand the Stoics, appreciate the dilemma faced by Justin Martyr, and identify with St. Augustine and countless others across the ages.

Such knowledge brings with it participation in a great dialogue that transcends centuries. Theologians speak to theologians, philosophers to philosophers, and not without consequences. Ideas beget ideas; books beget books. Thus the historically aware can follow through generations the progression of an idea as it shapes and reshapes thought. To provide one example, we can follow the effects of Hume's empiricism upon Kant, and Hegel's reaction to Kant, and follow that discourse on to Heidegger and others, and in a different progression from Comte to Durkheim to Marx and Dewey. The historically aware can dis-

cern where intellect has faltered or perhaps made a modest contribution to the vault of knowledge. Dramatically, the Catholic mind spills over into the arts, as Thomas influences Dante, as the development of dogma bears artistic fruit in the paintings of the Italian Renaissance.

The reader may object that that these observations are self-evident. Why bring it up? But these truths are not evident to all. For many schooled in a progressive educational system, the past appears as a dark background against which the present and the future shine with alluring promise. Where knowledgeable professors have to fight for even a one-semester college course in Western civilization, something is amiss. A society forgetful of its own past is ill-equipped to take the measure of the present. "To be steeped in history is to cease to be a Protestant," wrote John Henry Newman. May we similarly say: to be steeped in the history of ideas is to cease to be a materialist, a Marxist, or a Darwinian. Understanding where ideas came from is a gift to be treasured. There is a remark attributed to the French novelist, Francois Mauriac: "Tell me what you have read and I will tell you who you are." Heidegger, his contemporary, said much the same thing.

The formation of a Catholic mind is not easy when professional historians, writing from chairs at prestigious universities and with access to major presses, distort history to promote a

view or to advance a cause in the face of evidence to the contrary. Popular histories, written with a view to effect, are as old as the events they purport to describe. Many a mind has been permanently formed by erroneous accounts of the Crusades and the Spanish Inquisition. Witness Henry Higgins's reference to the Spanish Inquisition in *My Fair Lady*.

Pope Leo XIII, recognizing that some historians are frankly partisan, established in 1883 a Pontifical Commission for Historical Sciences that continues its work today. In an addressing to that Commission in March 2008, Pope Benedict XVI cites Leo's remark when making the Archives of the Holy See accessible to research: "We do not fear the publication of documents." Benedict adds, "Since then the cultural context has undergone a profound change. We are not concerned solely in facing a historiography

hostile to Christianity and the Church. Today it is historiography itself that is undergoing the most serious crisis, having to fight for its very existence in a society shaped by positivism and materialism." He observes that in many fields of study, history is taught from the beginning of the French Revolution as if nothing of consequence occurred before that: "This inevitably produces a society ignorant of its own past and therefore deprived of historical memory. No one can fail to see the grave consequences of this as the loss of memory provokes a loss of identity in the individual and analogously for society as a whole."

Benedict goes on to say that even though the Church is not of this world, it lives in it and by means of it, and consequently cannot be oblivious of the demands of the historical context in which she is transmitting her

teaching. As if to accent that point, Walter Cardinal Brandmüller, President Emeritus of the Pontifical Commission for Historical Knowledge, recently entered the dialogue concerning the meaning of *Amoris Laetitia*. "It is complete clear," he said in an interview with a representative of LifeSiteNews, "and also not new that the promulgation of the teaching of the Church has to be adapted to the concrete life situations of society and of the individual, if the message is to be heard. But this applies only to the manner of the proclamation and not to its inviolable content. An adaptation of the moral teaching is not acceptable." Time-transcending moral teaching can change only if human nature itself changes. Brandmüller, with three other cardinals, has issued a request to Pope Francis to clarify the meaning of *Amoris Laetitia*.