

## **BOOK REVIEW**

**Prof. Dr Norman Tanner**, *New Short History of the Catholic Church*, London: Burns and Oates, 2011, Pages: vi+260. ISBN 9780860124559.

*New Short History of the Catholic Church* is yet another contribution from the famous Church historian, Norman Tanner, a Professor of Church History at the Gregorian University in Rome. He is known for the monumental two volume edited work, on the Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils.

Can the history of the Catholic Church with more than one billion people from among the world population of seven billion be presented in a 260 page book? Is it possible to present the history of the mammoth organization in its 2000 odd years of existence with its long list of events that exemplified the growth and history of the Catholic Church? The answer is found in this book. It is amazing to read how the story of twenty centuries of Catholic Church's resilience and presence in the world is summarized in this book giving emphasis to the religious dimension without forgetting the institutional aspect.

Divided into five chapters, the book is presented in the historical setting of Ancient period, Early Middle Ages, Central and Late Middle Ages, Early Modern Period from 1500-1800 and Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries. The last two chapters seem to be more interesting from the fact that the author tries to look at the Church beyond Europe, actually where the Church is and will be active in the world, and the latest happenings like the intellectual challenges in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Starting from the Pentecost the book traces the history of the Catholic Church from Apostolic times, moving through persecutions in the early Church, highlighting contributions of the earliest of the theologians like Clement of Rome and Ignatius of Antioch and the establishment of Christianity with the decision of Constantine to declare it as the state religion. The role of the Eucharistic celebration and baptism getting a central role in the life of the Church is well reflected. Focusing on the Mediterranean world, the chapter deliberates on the growing number of the Christians in the Roman empire and even beyond with Armenia becoming the first Christian nation. The fourth century was also important for the Church due to the intense theological debates introduced through the councils of Nicea and Constantinople.

The fifth and seventh centuries saw the tribes embracing Christianity and the survival of Christianity among the indigenous population of the former Western Roman Empire. The second chapter is unavoidable for any reader for the basic understanding of the history of the Catholic Church in Europe. From

expansion in the fifth century to the split of the Church in the eleventh century, the discussion takes us to the basic formulation of the teaching of the Church on Christ's divinity and humanity. The invading tribal groups in the Roman Empire being converted to Christianity served as the base of the religion in many countries of Europe. The realistic slices of history of the early middle ages is not limited to its growth in Europe. The threat posed to its existence in the Iberian peninsula from the onslaught of Muslim occupation and the resultant *Riconquista*, the vigour of Christianity in North Africa and forced conversion of many Christians there to Islam, etc. get their due consideration by the author. The epoch making events in the history of the Church and the basic doctrines, in the form of Ecumenical councils like that of Ephesus, Chalcedon, Constantinople II and III and Nicea find special attention along with contributions of theologians like Cyril of Alexandria, Theodore of Mopsuestia, John of Damascus, Augustine of Hippo etc. and the establishment of the religious orders.

Delving on a lengthy period from late eleventh to the end of the fifteenth century, the third chapter takes us to the diverse backgrounds and religious beliefs which led to the devastating schisms with the Orthodox Church and the Protestant Reformation, intellectual developments, the menacing effect from the Muslim expansion including that of the Tartars, formulation of the seven sacraments at the second council of Lyons and the dissident movements within the western Church. An avid reader will find that this chapter has the most interesting section dealing with popular religion giving an understanding about the practical aspects of faith and its expression through the sacraments and devotions. Retaining the authority to appoint the Bishops and parish priests from the time of Pope Leo IX, although started with the right intention of strengthening of Papacy, it led to the straining of relationships with many kings. Eventually the misunderstanding between the westerners and easterners led to the division and the schism of 1054 with the Orthodox Church. A clear understanding of the contribution of Popes including that of Gregory VII (especially his *Dictatus Papae*), Boniface VIII, Avignon Papacy, Renaissance Popes like Nicholas V, who founded the Vatican library and Sixtus IV, who all gave a better image of and direction to the Church through their contributions to the city of Rome makes this chapter vivid in description. The life and teachings of great theologians Anselm, Peter Abelard, Thomas Aquinas and establishment of Universities like Bologna, Paris, Oxford, Cambridge etc., and contributions through the works of literature art, architecture and music indicate that the dynamism and creativity permeated throughout the organization. A soul searching analysis gives more meaning to this chapter with the description of the dissidents within the western Church, Inquisition and the persecution of heresy, continuity of strained relations with the Orthodox and Eastern Churches, Jews and Muslims.

The next chapter elaborately speaks about the differences in the Catholic Church which point to the variations in historical time periods that are present within the Church. Deviating from the trends in historiography, the chapter is titled Early Modern Catholicism, covering the sixteenth, seventeenth and

eighteenth centuries, focusing on the most painful and diverse periods of the Church in the modern world. Various aspects of Reformation and Counter Reformation find their explanation in the life and times of Martin Luther, John Calvin, Henry VIII and the Council of Trent.

The Catholic Church vis-a-vis the secular world finds its expression through its painful experiences in French Revolution, Spanish Civil War, the two World Wars and the intellectual challenges from Charles Darwin, Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud. This is highlighted to show the effect of the same in the Church as it became more spiritual and worked more towards Christian objectives. An interesting section of the Chapter titled Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries is Saints and Sinners which reflects the dichotomy of human existence. It speaks about the great lives of John Henry Newman, Teresa of Lisieux, John Bosco, Marie Vianney, Edith Stein, Mother Teresa, etc. Special attention to the two ecumenical councils of Vatican I (1869-70) and Vatican II (1962-65) is praiseworthy – mainly the reform and dynamism brought to the Church by “opening its windows” by the Second Vatican Council. The latest happenings in the second half of the twentieth century in Africa and the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe and its effect on the Church, the media and Church focus on the Church in the contemporary world and its response.

As a historian who is more familiar with the Western Church, although he has a lot of Asian experience, it seems that Dr Tanner presents the history of the Catholic Church more from a western perspective. I doubt whether the presence of Catholic Church throughout the centuries in Asia, America and Africa gets adequate importance and space in this book. Titled as missionary work and Catholicism outside Europe, the section in chapter four is inclined to focus more on the Catholic Church which came through the European missionaries. Christianity originated in the East; hence, the role and importance of the Eastern Catholic Churches could have been better acknowledged. Since the author says that ‘nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw tenfold increase in the number of Catholics as well as shift in the focus of the Church to the world outside Europe,’ perhaps it could have been given a bit more attention. Concerning the Indian Church, the author mentions about the apostleship of St Thomas to India in the first chapter, but there St Thomas Christians in India and the schism brought by the European missionaries which led to the split in the church are not given much attention. The focus is more on the western Catholicism as arrived through the European missionaries, it seems. Similarly, it would have been better to mention the contributions of the Syro-Malabar Church, the second most populous and dynamic among the Eastern Catholic Churches, and the SyroMalankara Church, which are in the St Thomas tradition. But, all these may depend on the nature of this edition. Since it is a “Short History,” the author might have been under constraints of limiting the space. Evidently, in such a “short history,” it is difficult to pay attention to every detail.

Another point somewhat missing is the encounter of the Church in Asia, Africa and Latin America with the native tribes, though there is an interesting

section on the so-called “Reductions in Paraguay for indigenous Americans” (page 188). To understand how far the Church succeeded in accommodating their culture and how far the Church failed in this endeavour, will be enriching. Here again, the limitations of a “short history” seems to be the main factor behind.

The periodization seems to be a bit different from the traditional one where the ancient period is from the beginning till 692 AD. But, every historian has his/her own logic for this.

Though there are some such limitations, mainly due to the nature and scope of the book, this book deserves special attention of anyone interested in the history of the Catholic Church. The book will be helpful not only to scholars and students of ecclesiastical studies, but also to all those who want to know the Catholic Church more closely. It should be a necessary entry in the libraries. The author, with his profound knowledge and vast experience, can, perhaps, undertake a ‘longer history’ of the Catholic Church, which will be a great contribution. The book was printed in India, and this makes it economically more affordable to those who would own a personal copy of it. Read this book and be a part of tomorrow’s history!

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