

CHRISTENDOM AWAKE: ON RE-ENERGISING THE CHURCH IN CULTURE by Aidan Nichols OP *T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1999. Pp.xiii + 255, £14.95 pbk.*

Not many books live up to their blurbs. This one does and even surpasses it. Aidan Nichols has produced a judicious analysis and nuanced study of the basic nature of contemporary society in the West, which he sums up as progressive, secular and pluralistic.

The author sets out his overarching thesis in 16 chapters framed by an introduction and an epilogue. Each chapter is self-contained and linked to the previous and to the next by one common thread: a wake-up call to recreate Christendom and revitalise culture with its four dimensions— intellectual, moral, material and practical.

Having presented the core of his argument in the introduction, Fr Nichols proceeds to give it substance in the succeeding chapters. Chapter II offers a Trinitarian paradigm for authentic culture, and seeks to 'recover the lost sapiential framework of cultural experience in the West'. The most impressive chapters present the role of liturgical aesthetics as an authoritative witness of faith (III and IV). Drawing upon the theology of Balthasar, the author demonstrates how and why the splendour of the liturgy is the fruit of a sound Christology. These chapters offer an integrated view of Aquinas's ontological foundation of beauty which goes hand in hand with the 'metaphysical eloquence of *being* in art'. Artists can learn from the intelligible beauty of the liturgy, through icons which proclaim the cross and the glory of the incarnate Word of God.

Chapters IV and V are a sustained and emphatic treatment of Aquinas's approach to the relationship between faith and reason. Theology needs a philosophy which is consistent with revelation and compatible with divine and human truth. The moral vision of Aquinas is laid out as a pattern of virtues to be lived. The author sees the need to reinvigorate doctrine with a sound criterion of orthodoxy. He states that 'doctrine, articulated by dogma, is the festival of the mind celebrating the mystery of the existence of God'.

The renaissance of the natural family and the biblical foundation for a theology of the *polis* or State (VI and VII) both cover familiar ground. Fr Nichols quotes Claudel's understanding of a truly Catholic reading of Sacred Scripture in the Church, in the light of her Tradition, in the spirit of the Fathers, under the guidance of the magisterium and the Christian vision of the universe (XII). The book's interpretative centrepiece deals with the formation and effects of ideology in the societal structures of power (IX). This chapter explains how and why the political and ideological concerns of 20th-century feminism are subversive to family, Church and society. The nub of the argument focuses on feminist theology which 'marginalises Christology and rejects the male role in female flourishing'.

In 'Re-making Religious Life', Fr Nichols reiterates the well-known fact

of the importance of consecrated life in the Church, especially in its most bridal form, that of contemplative women. He further explains that the monastic vows are not a sacrament because they anticipate the heavenly life to which all the sacraments mediate entry. This chapter points out that all is not well with religious life today because of the invasive impact of modernity and the accelerating pace of secular agendas. Again, a wake-up call for renewal of the evangelical models of religious consecration: community life, liturgy, personal prayer, vows, silence, study and the wearing of the religious habit.

I do have some reservations about the full doctrinal content of Menezes's 'catechetical vision and interlocution' on the salvific status of aborted infants (XI). While readers may wish for clear-cut answers and more summary statements, perhaps it is best that the insights not be distilled into some simple essence or truth. This chapter is a firm introduction to fuller studies and research. Are aborted infants 'companions' of the Holy Innocents of the gospel? Are they martyrs to faith? Is the abortion holocaust an affront to the Triune God indwelling in the womb? Good questions.

An overview of Christian prayer vis-à-vis the person of Christ in the eucharist shows the 'family resemblance' of some spiritual masters and mistresses in the last hundred years: Thérèse of Lisieux, Charles de Foucauld and Edith Stein to name a few (XIV). The author raises questions of fundamental concern to the contemporary mind-set. Can faith and contemplation blossom in the spiritual desert of today's secular society? Can spirituality flourish apart from the theological, historical, sacramental and moral structure found in the Church's doctrine?

Chapter XV might well have been the epilogue of the entire book. It gives the three-fold challenge of this new millennium: intellectual, to confirm our faith; spiritual, to sustain hope; and moral, to rekindle charity. The assigned epilogue (XVI) focuses on the renewal of sacrifice and mission as the defining themes of Catholic priesthood. It points out that the eucharist is the revelation of God's awesome glory while preaching is the transmission of the Catholic faith in all its integrity. This final chapter indicates the need to re-energise the spiritual, mystical and devotional dimensions of the revised rites in Catholic worship. Fr Nichols then urges the conversion of England.

To sum up, this book was written with a vision in the spirit of the prophet Ezekiel. It represents the mature reflections of a distinguished scholar and theologian. Weaving in and out of tradition and contemporary issues, Fr Nichols maintains a coherent and unified position throughout. Compelling as the book may be, it is necessarily incomplete, leaving plenty of room for others to fill the gaps. Some arguments include hidden suppositions, supposedly obvious, but in fact unsupported premisses and conclusions. The ultimate test of the book's impact will be the way in which it inspires students and scholars to probe further into the overarching thesis of Christian renewal in the postmodern world.

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