

# Meaning and the Fact

## Catholicism in History: The Opening of the Vatican Archives

By Owen Chadwick

Cambridge U. Press. 174p \$13.95

"First charity and then truth, even in writing history." Such was the comment of Cardinal De Lai of the Roman Curia in 1895 when he learned the contents of Volume III of Pastor's *History of the Popes*, a work that laid bare the scandals in the life of Pope Alexander VI. It is little wonder that Pastor should have replied: "If that were true, all history would be impossible." It would, indeed. This is but a single enlightening incident in this fascinating book, wherein the Regius Professor of Modern History at the University of Cambridge once again puts all lovers of history—one is tempted to say all lovers of civilization—in his debt by the richness of content, the critical interpretation of the evidence and the sympathetic spirit in which he treats sensitive and delicate matters relating to the Church of Rome. The five chapters embody the Herbert Hensley Henson Lectures of 1976 at Oxford University. It is an intriguing thought to consider how that highly controversial and advanced liberal Anglican Bishop of Durham would have reacted had he found his name associated with the subject chosen by Professor Chadwick.

This book represents scholarship at a high level. Scholars will appreciate the breadth of the author's reading as shown in the notes, the general reader will feel repaid by the facts that enrich a narrative enhanced by touches of quiet humor and all will find the select bibliography and index added features of merit.

After an introductory essay, Professor Chadwick's account gets under way with an order of Dec. 18, 1809, by

which Emperor Napoleon ordered the Vatican Archives brought to Paris, a process that was finally completed in February 1811. The precious documents were in the French capital only three years when Napoleon's Government fell, whereupon his successors ordered them returned to Rome, a long and arduous undertaking in the course of which many documents were lost before the last wagonload rolled into Rome in December 1817. From that time until the arrival of the Oratorian, Augustin Theiner (d. 1874), as the responsible custodian, the papal collections were subjected to so many fumbling moves and misguided policies that it was a minor miracle that so much ultimately survived the curial inefficiency, indifference and fidget over the disclosure of what they contained.

### THIS WEEK'S REVIEWERS

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The author wisely decided to relate the story through certain key episodes, e.g., the complicated case of the records of the trial of Galileo, in which the archivist Msgr. Marino Marini (d. 1855) figures, and the equally entangled case of the minutes of the Council of Trent, wherein Theiner came to grief for letting Trent's order of business be examined by certain bishops at Vatican Council I. In the late 1870's there emerged the young Ludwig Pastor, student of the distinguished priest-historian, Johannes Janssen (d. 1891). It was Janssen who introduced Pastor to Leopold von Ranke's *History of the Popes*, which fired the young Pastor with the ambition to write

a history of the popes that would offset that of the Lutheran historian. After several disappointments, Pastor at length gained entrance to the Vatican Archives in January 1879, won the favor of Leo XIII and continued there for over 40 years to publish his multivolume work, which carried the papacy to the death of Pius VI in 1799. As mentioned above, it was Pastor's third volume that became a cause célèbre, but the support of Pope Leo held amid the maneuvers of fretful curial critics who wished to stop him, and the work was in the main finished by the time Pastor died in 1928. The latter failed in his repeated efforts to secure a teaching position in a German university and had to remain content with his professorship at Innsbruck, for he declined an invitation to join the faculty of the Catholic University of America in Washington, since that would put him too far from the Vatican's indispensable documents.

"Commitment to tradition was also commitment to history, and a main reason why the study of Christian history was inescapable in Catholic teaching," Chadwick writes. Here, he touches upon an important point, which, unfortunately, has been shockingly disregarded in more than one Catholic theological faculty since Vatican II. The disciples of the "now generation" have not been confined solely to student bodies. They have had more than their just due of influence in seminary faculties that have sponsored what they considered current fashion by relegating the study of church history to the sidelines while they furthered what they termed "historical theology" and other alleged substitutes. This trend has produced a sizable crop of young priests and religious who are all but illiterates from the viewpoint of history (e.g., the seminarian examined by a colleague of mine a year ago who was asked who it was that exercised the greatest influence

in shaping the mind of St. Augustine, and answered: "Erasmus"!). Other examples could easily be cited from the seminary students enrolled after 1965. There is no substitute for the history of the church, and the sooner that is realized by academic administrators and faculties in seminaries and theological schools of every Christian denomination, the better it will be for all concerned.

Chadwick raises another ecclesiastical problem. There have been relatively few

serious historians of modern Catholicism who have escaped the handicap of ecclesiastical officials frightened by the prospect of unpleasant truths being brought to light by their research and writing. These have never accepted the dictum of Georg H. Pertz, founding editor of the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, whose memorable statement of 1828 Chadwick rightly quotes. Pertz said: "There is no better defense of the papacy than to unveil its inward being. If weakness is shown up,

you can reckon on a more friendly judgment through historical understanding than if, as often until now, it is all kept secret and men are left to suspect what they will." True, insofar as the Vatican Archives are concerned, it has been churchmen who in the main have been responsible for this obscurantist viewpoint—with notable exceptions such as Leo XIII, Cardinal Hegenröther and Augustin Theiner. Parenthetically, Chadwick clears up the mistaken notion that Theiner died outside the church. But churchmen have had no monopoly on this policy, for prominent laymen have held the same view (e.g., Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti of Italy who in 1912, was heard to say: "It would not be right to have beautiful legends discredited by historical criticism").

Research in the incomparable riches of the Vatican Archives has been handicapped by another persistent problem, namely, lack of adequate trained personnel. In 1872, the staff consisted of only two persons, and though it has been greatly increased in more recent times, the Archives of the Holy See are still woefully understaffed for the gigantic task of ordering and processing their enormous collections.

Among the many interesting facts contained in Professor Chadwick's book is the prominent role played by more than one non-Catholic historian in helping to pry open the Vatican Archives, e.g., Theodor von Sickel (d. 1908), whose studies on the *Privilegium Ottonis* attracted the sympathetic interest of both Leo XIII and Cardinal Hegenröther. That is not to mention the absorbing story of the convert English priest, Joseph Stevenson (d. 1895), who, after 1872, was in the hire of the British Government to copy documents for the Public Record Office with a pension granted by Prime Minister William E. Gladstone.

All historians of Catholicism will agree with the author in regretting the present policy that keeps the Vatican Archives closed for all material dated after 1878, and they will join Chadwick when he says: "We must hope that soon provision will be made for opening to 1903 if not to 1914 or 1922." When it is recalled that in the early 1880's these Archives were opened to the year 1815, it makes the current policy seem even more incongruous. Furthermore, when one

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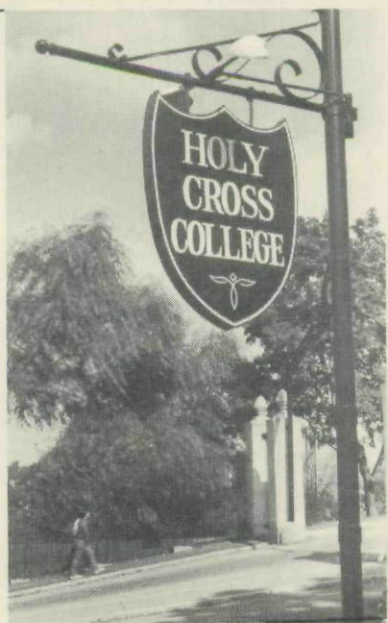
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realizes that the voluminous papers of the pontificate of Leo XIII (1878-1903) have for some time been readied for use of scholars and additional space provided for research workers, the present ban appears all the more unfortunate.

Only a few aspects of this absorbing book have been suggested here. If space allowed, much more could be said about the role played by the future Lord Acton in the drama of the Archives after the young historian's arrival in Rome in 1866, the controversial careers of Heinrich Denifle, O. P., of Cardinal Gasquet and many others. The description of the discovery of priceless documents in the Vatican Archives by various scholars brings to mind similar discoveries in the history of American Catholicism—the examination of the contents of two trunks in the attic of the old chancery of the Diocese of Richmond in the summer of 1946 by Henry J. Browne and myself, which brought to light the highly significant papers of Denis J. O'Connell (d. 1927), which have since figured in almost every really important study of the period 1880-1920. In the same category was the discovery in the early 1950's in the library of the Abbey of Saint Paul-Outside-the-Walls by Colman J. Barry, O.S.B., of Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minn., of the papers of Bernard Smith, O.S.B., Irish-born Roman agent of so many American prelates. And this is to mention only two such instances, for there were others—the unearthing of the papers of John Ireland, Archbishop of Saint Paul, a quarter-century or more ago. No one acquainted with the history of Catholicism in the United States since the 1880's would say that it could have been known as it is now known without these collections that had remained hidden or virtually unknown for decades.

I found only two minor points on which to question the author's account. At Bayswater in London in June 1950, while I was working on the biography of Cardinal Gibbons, I was given completely free access to the papers of Henry Edward Manning, Archbishop of Westminster. Chadwick says that, three-quarters of a century after Edmund S. Purcell's life of Manning (1896), "we are still unable to study the Manning archives freely." Secondly, in treating Pastor's desire for a post in a German university and his

failure to secure it because of his papal sympathies, the author states that "the majority of professors of history in German Catholic universities" followed Döllinger out of the church after Vatican Council I. First, strictly speaking, there were no "German Catholic universities" then or now; perhaps he meant the Catholic faculties of theology in the state universities. Johann Friedrich (d. 1917) of Munich certainly departed from the church, but who, I wonder, were the others? Again, was it

these German Catholic faculties of theology or seminaries that were meant when Professor Chadwick refers to Hegenröther's help in "the difficult process of rebuilding 'scientific history' in the Catholic colleges of Germany"? In any case, these are quite minor points in a narrative that contains so much that is enlightening and that makes such absorbing reading for the specialist and nonspecialist alike who have a serious interest in the history of modern Catholicism. JOHN TRACY ELLIS

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