

Editorial

THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH IN CANADA: 1967-2067

THE TITLE OF THIS EDITORIAL expresses a hope rather than an unqualified assurance. In the third quarter of this troubled twentieth century there are at least three obvious reasons for questioning any easy optimism about Canada and its churches. To begin with, the future of man himself is clouded, and it is less than certain that civilized mankind will manage to survive into the twenty-first century. Furthermore, even if the human race should contrive to live through all the mortal perils of its own devising, it is at least arguable that Canada is unlikely to endure for another century as a political entity. Finally, in an era of rapidly accelerating secularization it is palpably unrealistic to take it for granted that our organized Christian churches will be able to maintain themselves for long in anything like their familiar form. (After all, churches with nobler histories than we can boast have utterly vanished from the map of Christendom.) All things considered, we clearly have no firm guarantee that either Canada or the Canadian churches will be among those present and prospering in A.D. 2067.

But of course none of these warnings can properly be exploited as an excuse for despair and inaction. Those who look for the appearing and the Kingdom of Jesus Christ are invited to live by a hope and to work for a purpose beyond anything that men who have no eyes for things invisible can grasp. The Christian "life style" requires believers to work as if their achievements might either endure for a thousand years or be destroyed tomorrow. Anyone who means to be an authentic Christian must learn to walk, not in the alternating light and darkness of human expectations, but in the steady and sure light of the expectation of God's Kingdom. It is in this spirit that we must ask what the Christian church in Canada should be trying to accomplish in the second century of Confederation—if only it is given the opportunity.

In point of fact, if we accept that premise we are already on the way to the deepest answer to our question. The church must practise the same "life style" as the individual Christian. The church has been created by God to serve his purpose, not invented by men to serve theirs. Its sure hope lies in God's providence, not in man's prudence. Consequently, it would be futile for the Canadian churches to waste time peering into a crystal ball in the hope of discovering what they might best become twenty-five or fifty or a hundred years from now. What really matters is that they should announce and celebrate and serve God's Kingdom—and in so doing place their destiny unconditionally in his hands. They are meant to be communities in which God's self-disclosure is received, his grace confessed, his glory adored.

They are meant to be witnesses before the world of men to God's self-giving. They are meant to be families in which the loveless can find the Father's own love embodied in generous acceptance and heartfelt concern. In a word, they are meant to be true churches of Jesus Christ. If they remain faithful to that purpose, we may hopefully entrust their future to the wisdom of God. If, on the contrary, they betray it, we have no good reason to care whether they survive or not.

Thus far, our attention has been focussed on God's purpose and providence as the foundation of the church's life and hope. To think in those terms is to put first things first. But it would be no less wrong than it is easy to draw the conclusion that God favours stupid believers and irresponsible churches—just as he is often alleged to care especially for drunkards and idiots. Once a church is committed to God's purpose and abandoned to his providence, it is right for it to exploit all the resources of human prudence in the service of God. For example—and perhaps this is the most pertinent example—it is right for churchmen to explore and exploit all the modern media of communication with a view to the most effective presentation of the gospel. Indeed, they would be guilty of cowardice and sloth and infidelity if they failed to make use of any available human means of evangelization. No doubt it is true that vital communion between man and God is beyond the power of human ingenuity to engineer; not even the wizards of the mass media have mastered the divine secret of opening men's hearts to the grace and truth that filled Jesus Christ. But it is only the church that is doing its human best to communicate the gospel that can maintain its right to rely on the providence of God.

If our Canadian churches wholeheartedly undertake to be the Christian church in the Canadian world, they will merit—and perhaps even win—the respect of the larger community. They will then, and only then, be in a strong moral position to influence that community towards the fuller realization of its common good.

This Centennial issue of our *Journal* suggests one direction in which whatever influence the church comes to deserve may usefully be exercised in the foreseeable future. In different ways, its first four articles present a contrast between 1867, when an obdurately divided church was a divisive factor in Canadian life, and 1967, when a church seeking unity promises to strengthen the ties between Canadian and Canadian. Of course, there are times when an honest church must place theological or moral principle above secular unity. But in our day there is a happy coincidence between our country's desperate need of deeper unity and a genuinely theological and moral impulse towards the reintegration of a long-divided church. Given that coincidence, who knows how great an effect the Canadian churches may have on the future course of Canadian history?

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