

New Trends in the Study of Church History

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For more than fifty years now, methods of historical investigation have evolved considerably. As a result, new fields of investigation have emerged. Several factors have especially marked this development: scientific measurements, sociology and psychology (both social and cognitive), and linguistic analysis. All of them have changed the parameters within which the historian must exercise his or her métier. Thus, the historian turns his attention to outlooks, moral conduct, and the evolution of social structures. Ideas, events, and historical figures still play a role in historical studies, but the new historian must look at these classical points with a new eye and—to complete the metaphor—under a new light.

Thus, for example, we have recently seen that historians have produced studies on topics such as education, urban and rural life, the family, marriage, sexuality, old age. The most recent expression of this trend includes what the French have called *la vie privée*—translated into English with the title, *A history of the private life*. This discipline seeks to capture those important moments of life that are the least public but which occupy the vast part of our actual, “historical” lives. I mean to describe those intimate moments in each one’s life, which although we jealously keep to ourselves, engage a considerable amount of our emotional energy. It is really the challenge of writing “the history of everybody.”

Today religious history follows these new directions. We know that the previous two or three decades have so canonized the reveries or discoveries of historical psychoanalysis that nearly every historian must confront the phenomenon of psychohistory. I was pleased to discover in the United States a journal devoted to this discipline.

Thus religious history approaches pious devotions, religious sentiments, superstitions with a freshness and vigor heretofore unknown. For example, I could cite the literary analysis of wills. In this case, to be sure, one recognizes the confluence of a public gravity with the heart of one's private life.

This religious history, however, has followed its own paths without as yet making sufficient contact with the new historical approaches about which I have already spoken. To the best of my knowledge, there is only one exception to this rule, namely, some research on German protestantism.

But are there not significant points of *rapprochement* between conduct both social and individual, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, what we know from Church history, to wit, theology, ecclesiastical disciplines, and Christian spirituality? Given the fact that the family remains the *locus* where these various dimensions of human life meet, I have chosen to write about the place of the child in the family as a way of probing this *rapprochement*, which I consider essential for contemporary historical studies. Is it not true to affirm that the family exhibits both the profane and the religious, the public and the private sides of life better than any other case one might propose? However, in order to establish some parameters for this essay, I have chosen the cadre of the Roman Catholic Church after the Council of Trent. This essay includes three sections: the first two briefly describe the relation of the Child to the Family and the Family to the Child. In each of them I will approach the subject matter from both the perspective of the "new way" and that of the religious historian. Subsequently, a third section will raise certain programmatic issues.

The Church and the Child: From the Reformation to the Enlightenment

The theses advanced by Philippe Aries in 1960 in his book, *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'Ancien Régime*, translated as *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, remain generally accepted. This is especially true if we take account of his replies in 1973 to certain objections raised by Natalie Z. Davis and Lloyd DeMause. The former raised critical remarks from a historical perspective; the latter, on the other hand, from the standpoint of psychology. Whatever its limitations, the work of Aries remains foundational.

For Aries, before the age of classicism, childhood meant, in effect, infancy. One confided the infant-child to the care of womenfolk. The child was not that special object of affection that we know today. The child appeared more as a family pet, a sort of toy which even amused the adult world by its awkwardness, so that one actually regarded the child as something which one could easily replace. Perhaps this helps explain the relative indifference with which parents reacted to infant mortality so frequent during this period of time. Montaigne — enigmatic as always — captured this feeling best: "I have lost two or three children at the breast, not without regret, but without great sorrow." About the age of seven, boys and girls joined the men and women respectively in order to learn from them how to work and get along in life.

This situation underwent modification as a result of the development of formal education with the necessary grades and levels which speculative learning requires. Whereas formerly the kind of practical apprenticeships which the children learned at home kept them close to adults, now schooling necessarily formed the children into peer groups. Michel Foucault's term "the age of confinement" could well apply here: The child acquired a special dress and, from the 18th century on, a special room, at least in the well-off families. In short, the child was *cultivated*, so to speak. When Erasmus proposed his *De civilitate morum puerilium*, he marked the beginning of this epoch, as several historians have remarked. The transition from the toy-child to the child as full person has begun. The miniature adult has become a schoolchild. In passing, one speaks about an intervening adolescence only from the beginning of the 19th century.

Such is the sketch the secular historians provide us. Let us now turn to the practice of the Church, which, it is true, accepted this abrupt and early passage into adulthood as a matter of accepted practice. Indeed, both the institutions of Church and State were slow to incorporate the new conception of childhood as a period of personal development. Social historians are tempted to proffer explanations, but these must take account of the variety of experiences in the different parts of Europe over a long period of time. For instance, as late as 1681 — well into the period of transition — the French king permitted Protestant children who had completed their sixth year to convert to Catholicism even without parental consent. This happened as a prelude to the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. How can we interpret this? Simple political expediency or a decided attachment to the medieval conception of the child?

This gives an example of what we have become accustomed to call the age of reason or the years of discretion —“*aetas rationis; anni discretionis*.” We should not, however, assume that this canonical age was precisely fixed at a specific chronological age. On the contrary, it was easily adapted to fit changing views on when a child reached maturity. Thus, the so-called *Catechism of the Council of Trent* took explicit account of the fact that different children reach the age of discretion at diverse moments in their development. It required, for example, that the child were able to “distinguish the Body of Christ from ordinary bread” (ch. 20 IV) before receiving the Eucharist. So although the age of reason remained set at the completion of the sixth year, the Church still took the precaution of prescribing a later time for the reception of the sacraments. In this perspective, the case of the young French King Louis XIII, who made his first confession at the age of five, obviously remains a royal exception.

One can also consider the new conception of childhood from the perspective of spirituality and from the devotional life of the Catholic world. In fact, from the 17th century we see a marked increase in the number and in the kinds of images which represent the Christ Child. The newly-introduced devotion to the Holy Childhood largely inspired and explains this phenomenon. The Franciscan tradition has always preserved the medieval image of St. Anthony holding the child Jesus in his arms. This devotional representation, as you know, found its way into so many examples of Italian statuary. But it fell to the Carmelite tradition to give the devotion its shape and form. This occurred only at the end of the 16th century. We need only recall the importance which St. Teresa of Avila attached to the statue of the Infant - her little “bambino.”

This innovation in the Carmelite tradition took root quickly; and it spread along with the Carmelite Reform. Thus in France (at Beaune) the Carmelite nun Margaret of the Blessed Sacrament propagated a devotion to her “little King of Glory.” In turn, the veneration spread throughout Europe, especially as a result of the renowned Infant of Prague. It may be of interest to remember that this much-reproduced statue is actually a petite wax figure, which was given to the Discalced Carmelites in Prague by a member of the higher nobility—the Princess Lobkovitz—in 1668. I am aware that a simple reflection on the first evangelization of the Philippines reveals the presence of the Devotion to the *Santo Niño*. The present Philippine *Ordo* has a proper feast of the *Santo Niño* celebrated yearly throughout the country on the third Sunday of January.

In France, a blood sister of Blaise Pascal, Jacqueline, even composed a prayer in the convent of Port Royal which gave expression to a fresh vision of childhood: "Deign, O Lord, we beseech Thee, that we may remain forever children by our simplicity and innocence." Here we find (again) a paradox! On the one hand, the theme of childhood became slowly transformed into describing a spiritual state, one of innocence and simplicity, which the devout ought to both foster and preserve. Whereas, on the other hand, childhood still remained a starting-point from which everyone must grow if he or she is to overcome ignorance and weakness. Thus, along with the ascendancy of spiritual childhood in the Church's pious teachings, we also witness the beginnings of a gargantuan effort on the part of the Church in the field of education from the 16th century on. Of course, the Jesuits come to mind first of all. But fairness required that one also cite the work of the Oratorians, the Ursuline sisters, and the La Salle Christian Brothers. All this means that the children of Europe by now find themselves at school; they constitute a new social category. Accordingly, we can easily imagine that the family itself will undergo substantial modifications.

II. The Emergence of Familial Intimacy

As the history of portraiture indicates, the immediate family took on a new significance from the beginning of the 16th century. At this time, formal family portraits began to find their setting in the hitherto private rooms of the family residence. For instance, Peter Bruegel (+1569), and especially his sons, were the first to choose the ordinary rooms of Flemish farmhouses as settings for their subjects. This trend in painting heralded the changed attitude towards family life and intimacy. In particular, we should note that these portraits often placed the children at the center of the scene.

Indeed, the Child now emerges from its forgotten anonymity. From now on, their elders will take special care of them. So we discover, for example, special celebrations for children, such as the custom of Santa Claus. Parents also began to take an active interest in the education of their children. And, as the historians of family life go to great pains—statistically—to convince us, they also began to limit the number of their offspring.

Yet there is a hint of paradox in this estimate of the social historian. Jean Louis Flandrin advances the view that "many couples

limited their progeny, precisely because the moralists of the Catholic Reform had made them realize all too well the obligations which accompanied responsible parenthood." It was not, then, an unadulterated hedonism which explains the increase of birth control, but a raised consciousness concerning parental obligations.

The moralists insisted as well that parents had the obligation to insure a proper education for their children, even if this meant a long period of separation from familial affection, which this custom necessarily entailed as a matter of parental duty. This state of affairs reached such a point that during the 18th century, with all of its concern for sensibility and its skepticism for the institutional Church, parents actually turned back to the practice of pedagogues and home education.

Can we discover certain parallels in this analysis from social history in Catholic Church history? One can not help but remark the fact that the favored devotion of the Catholic Reform was that to the Holy Family, Jesus, Mary, and St. Joseph. This devotion exists only since the end of the 17th century. Prior to this period, for example, we find that religious painters always included the extended family of the Savior: St. John the Baptist, Zachary, St. Elizabeth, and other biblical figures.

A Spanish Jesuit, Pedro Morales (+1614), was one of the first to introduce the custom of representing the Holy Family itself. And in 1633, a French Sulpician, le Pere Bourgoing, solidified the movement by organizing at Aix-en-Provence a pious confraternity: "Association of the Holy Family of Jesus and Mary under the protection of St. Joseph." The devotion passed quickly to the New World, in particular to New France, where the devotion to St. Joseph remains a center of Catholic life to this today. The French Jesuit Pierre Chaumonot (+1693) started this movement as part of the great missionary effort of the Society of Jesus in the 16th century. As early as 1684, a feast of the Holy Family was authorized for the diocese of Montreal (?); and this liturgical celebration was extended to the universal Church at the end of the 19th century.

The Church and the Child: A Programme for Further Research

Religious history puts some needed precisions into social history: chronological precisions, for example, or a softening of the rigid distinc-

tions made by the latter discipline. This should come as no surprise, however, since the findings of social history remain disputed even among social historians themselves. The refinements and new perspective of Church history can, therefore, assist developing the general view of the period. At the same time, social history throws some new light onto developments in Church history.

Let's take a particular example. Public opinion today takes great exception to the practice of the Church, especially common in the Renaissance and even later, which permitted young people, even very young boys and girls, to receive ecclesiastical dignities and benefices. John Calvin's father obtained a benefice for him when he was only twelve years old! St Charles Borromeo enjoyed the same treatment, and at the same age. Mother Angelique started her illustrious career as Abbess of Port Royal as early as the age of seven. If this scandalizes the modern student of history, it happens only because he or she fails to grasp the evolution which terminated in *le siècle des lumières*.

Now I would like to raise a question. Can we find parallel cases, for instance, in ethics, in public decorum, and even in our private sensitivities, which an interdisciplinary approach will also illumine? For the moment, I intend to offer only some programmatic suggestions for the history of the Roman Catholic Church from the Reformation to the Enlightenment. In other words, I suggest that we need a book for the Roman Catholic Church that accomplish the same goals which Steven Ozment's remarkable study has done for the Child and the Family in German Protestantism: *When Fathers Ruled. Family Life in Reformation Europe* (Harvard, 1983).

Let me set forth some themes which this potential historian might consider:

(1) *The definition of the Child*. I have already made a number of allusions to this issue, which serves as a sort of foundation for any further investigation. We need a study historical, symbolical and canonical on the meaning of the age of reason. Do the exact same provisions exist, for example, in the sphere of civil law? How did this age of reason function in the Church for the reception of the sacraments, especially, penance, holy communion, and confirmation? The age of seven years strikes one as too close to a numerical mystagogy in order to argue that it represents a true social convention. If we really want to know what the Church and society considered adulthood, one must look at the provisions made for contracting a valid marriage and for

professing religious vows. For the latter question, we know that an especially aggravated debate arose during the Enlightenment. Why did the *Encyclopedia* argue that raising the age for entrance into religious life counted as a principal element of Church reform?

We have already spoken about devotion to the Infant Jesus. But we need to look more deeply into the question. I suggest, furthermore, that we need a history of exegesis for those texts in the New Testament which speak about childhood or being "like unto a little child" (cf. Mk 9:36-37). The liturgy likewise can serve this purpose. For example, we know that the Church has traditionally provided especial funeral liturgies for children, for which formerly white vestments were reserved. But since when and until what age was this practice allowed?

(2) *The education of the Child.* Education ordinarily began at seven years of age. At the end of the Middle Ages, doctors even judged that this age marked the end of *pueritia* and the beginning of *juventus* for males. So, this middle period between childhood and physical maturity lasted another seven years. In effect, the history of education remains one of the most examined areas of research at the present time. Still there is room for further research. For example, one needs to study the sorts of adaptations which were made to the catechisms of the period. What reasons might we offer to explain why St. Peter Canisius drew up three major catechisms? And if one examines them closely, it seems that they were meant for different age groups. Is there a connection between their success and the saint's respect for the child's developing psychology? In like manner, one should undertake a study of the science of pedagogy which really began to flourish after the Reformation.

(3) *The moral upbringing of the Child.* Up to this moment, historians such as Noonan and Flandrin, have brought to our attention the questions of abortion, contraception, and infanticide. Obviously, in these matters, the Magisterium of the Church plays a decisive role. But there still remains much more to uncover. John Boswell has well led the way in this research by his recent book, *The Kindness of Strangers* (New York, 1988) where he studied the abandonment of children in Western Europe from late Antiquity to the Renaissance. In like manner, one might also study the history of breast feeding, where we might be surprised to discover, for example, that religious images, such as, "*Maria lactans*" — the *Nuestra Señora de la Leche*, which the Spanish missionaries brought to Florida — perhaps played an determining role. Does this and other similar representations of the nursing Virgin reflect

the actual preaching and instruction given in the Churches? In a similar vein, one might inquire about the "churching" of women, which took place, even up to our day, after they had delivered. One must also consider the kind of moral instruction given to the children. To be sure, the catechism again plays an important role. How did it explain the 4th commandment: "Honor your father and your mother"? From a larger perspective, we really need a history of obedience—to parents, to teachers, to the State, to the Church. It would also be interesting to see how past ages regarded the onset of puberty. If we accept the testimony of Heroard, the young Louis XIII's doctor whose journal reported every single movement of the royal baby, infantile masturbation did not cause much concern to his age. On the other hand, Heroard was a doctor, not a theologian.

In conclusion, I would like to suggest a bolder program for further research. One which might remain impossible for anyone to complete. Can we discover in the relationship of the Church to the Child and the Family something parallel to the evolution of moral theology? The Princeton scholar Lawrence Stone, in effect, had already suggested this for Protestantism. He argued that the epistemology of British empiricism, for instance Locke's *tabula rasa*, especially as this influenced his pedagogical works, replaced the earlier view of the human soul put forth by John Calvin. In the latter case, theology taught that the soul was already filled with (untoward) sense images-concupiscence; in the former case, philosophy restored to man his pre-lapsarian innocence. Victorian preoccupations with prudishness, however, soon changed the English mood. Certain movements within Roman Catholicism, on the other hand, raise other questions. For example, does the dialectic between pessimism about fallen nature—usually associated with rightwing augustinianism—and optimism about restored free will—usually designated a pelagian tendency—find a reflection in both theories and practice concerning how to bring up a child? It would be altogether curious to discover to what use they were put the celebrated passages in St Augustine's Confessions which suggest one drinks in original sin with the nursing milk and the pear tree robbery.

In the Church as a whole, we certainly find in the way one considers the child a reflection of those differences which appear successively in the 16th-century, marked by the humanism of the Jesuits, the 17th-century, characterized by Jansenism, and the 18th-century, which signals a return to a confident trust in the powers of human reason. Thus, it is clear that the research which I am proposing

on the Child in the Church would, of necessity, require interdisciplinary study.

What title would I suggest to this interdisciplinary team? Why not "*From the discovery of the Child to the discovery of Childhood.*"? In 1762, Jean-Jacques Rousseau in *Emile* witnessed to a decisive evolution when he wrote: "Laissez murir l'enfance dans les enfants." Let childhood come to full term in the children. As always, the genius of great authors can express in a few words what the historians require so much time to discover and describe.

To produce Church history today implies a knowledge of new approaches and new methods. Yet it is important not to neglect the more traditional history of culture, ideas, events and great men. If we can and should profit by the new views, we should avoid falling into a kind of "historical nominalism" where whatever is singular, from the moment it is perceived as part of a series, becomes the last word on history. The "new historian" can become the slave of statistics or of a voracious mania for encyclopedias, which will oblige him to draw no conclusions, or to propose syntheses very difficult to verify.

The historian must, first of all, tell what a text actually says, what a personality has done or written, what an event has left in his wake. He will also try to maintain his perspective in the light of what all historians have succeeded in agreeing, whatever be his specialization, his philosophical and religious inclination, or his temperament. In this sense, it has been well said that the historian has no country (Paul Veyune).

But what if through faith, one professes belief in a heavenly fatherland? I believe that, as far as the Church historian is searching for truth, his use of new methods, his consideration of new trends in the study of Church history, will certainly help him (and others) to a better understanding of what the truth is, while waiting, as the Church herself, for the manifestation of full light in heaven.