The Church at the Turning Points of History.
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The present edition of The Church at the Turning Points of History is based upon the English translation made by Monsignor Victor Day, Vicar General of Helena, and published in 1918 by Naegele Printing Co., Helena, Montana. The translation was made from the fifth French edition of the work, L'Eglise aux tournants de l'histoire, published in Brussels in 1913 by Librairie Albert Dewit. The substance of the work is based upon a series of lectures given by the author to a Women's University Extension in Antwerp, 1897–1899. The original author’s preface, which has been omitted in the present edition, explained that footnote citations were not provided for the facts cited, as most were presumed to be well known to readers, and the author begged that they "take his word" for the occasional facts that might be unfamiliar. Footnotes in the present edition are those added by Msgr. Day, with some modification by the editors.
The spelling, punctuation, and formatting of the original edition have been largely preserved. Minor editorial corrections have been made to the text, and the original foreword to the 1918 English edition has been slightly abridged.

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FRONTISPIECE: Triumph of the Church, a painting after Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640), oil on wood, created sometime after 1628. In the image, the Church – symbolized by the Eucharist led by the Keys of Peter – has in bondage Blindness and Ignorance, and tramples Hatred, Discord, and Evil.

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*by Patrick Foley, Ph.D.*

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*by Bishop John P. Carroll*

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THE CHURCH AT THE TURNING POINTS OF HISTORY

Chapter I

THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

In the history of mankind considered as a whole there are two grand divisions. On the one hand, there is the ancient world seated in the darkness of death; on the other hand, the modern world which advances in the light of the Gospel. This is, beyond compare, the greatest fact of history.

Christians opens new era for humanity.

The opposition between these two worlds is sharp and well-defined. The line of demarcation which separates them is very clearly drawn. It is not an imperceptible and gradual evolution that leads humanity from the one to the other. It is rather a new spiritual influence, a mighty impulse which brings about an immediate and radical change. We know the precise date of this great change, and we have taken that date as the starting point of our chronology. It is the Christian era that opens the annals of a new creation and a new humanity.

What is the vital principle of this new creation? It is the new ideal brought into the world by Jesus Christ, or, to adhere to the simplicity of the Gospel language, it is what Jesus Christ Himself calls the New Law. Deposited within the bosom of humanity as leaven in the paste – this comparison is also His – it produces there the marvellous fermentation that transforms the most refractory elements. Allow this leaven to do
its work. The more it acts the more substantial and nourishing will be the bread of civilization.

Christianity offers supreme happiness to all.

The principle of Christian civilization is essentially opposed to that of ancient society. Compare the two worlds: on the surface you perceive many characteristics common to both, but at the bottom of these common traits you perceive the irreducible contradiction of the fundamental idea on which they were based. There is question not merely of a difference of degree, but of a difference of nature, which has a bearing on a most important matter, on the most vital interests of humanity. The two societies differ in their respective conception of life and the solution they give to the problem of existence.

Antiquity has never proposed this problem in formal terms; moreover the ancients lacked both the courage and the knowledge required to solve it. In practice, however, they have always given the wrong solution. Christianity has proposed the question boldly and has answered it in a triumphant manner.

Why has man been placed in this world, and what is the end of his existence here below? Must he be only the ephemeral spectator of the tableau of creation, or the unconscious instrument of some mission higher than his own, or the lamentable plaything of blind forces that dispute the possession of his senses and of his heart? Is he, with the contradictions that are at the root of his being, and with his boundless aptitude for suffering, the abortive child of this world and the plaything of an eternal illusion? Has he a future to conquer, an end to attain, and are this future and this end worth the effort they cost him? Or is he only a fortuitous and lamentable combination of elements associated for the time in a community of joys and of sufferings, to be finally disassociated and recomposed later on in the eternal circle of pitiless fatalities?

Christianity answers these questions with absolute clearness and certitude.

Man is not a child of chance – he is the creature of God. God has made him the king of creation. He has given him a mind to know Him, a heart to love Him, and a will to be in accord with His own. He has
opened before him the way he must follow, He has taught him the law he must observe, He has promised him eternal happiness as the reward for fidelity in serving Him. In other words, He has made the fidelity of man to the Supreme Being the condition of his supreme happiness.

*Paganism brings empty pleasures to few.*

This is the teaching of Christianity. In this promise all religions and philosophies join Christianity. But, unable to rise with her to the pure and high sources whence flows the true happiness of the human race, they flutter about with their short wings in a common and feverish aspiration for happiness. They also promise happiness to men, but they do not understand it as Christianity does. The good, in which they make men hope to find this happiness, has none of the qualities that give it stability. It is not absolute, it is not pure, it is not eternal. It is a sum of joys that do not go beyond the duration of time, the boundaries of earth, or the reach of mankind. In a word, it is not happiness, but pleasure; – sometimes pleasure of a higher order, when, as with elevated souls, it consists in the intoxication of glory; other times pleasure of a low and degrading kind, when, as with the multitude, it limits itself to the gross pleasures of the senses. In every case, whether it be intellectual or material, it is but the shadow, or to speak better, it is only the appearance of happiness. And yet this sort of pleasure – and this alone – antiquity had the courage to promise to men, and the power to procure for some of them. And antiquity never meant anything else when there was mention of *Roman felicity* – that fiction so dear to the statesmen of the Empire of the Caesars.

Quite a complicated machinery was needed to realize this paltry happiness. It was necessary to place in common the powers of all men, and to deposit them in the hands of a being produced by their collectivity – the State. Invested with all the power and the rights which before could have resided in all and in each of its members, the State undertook to procure for them the sum of all the enjoyments which constituted their ideal of happiness. These enjoyments may be summed up in two words: idleness and voluptuousness. To eat one’s bread without labor and to pass one’s time in amusement was, to use a familiar and at the same time a very exact phrase, the *maximum* of felicity as the ancient State understood it.
It was not much, and, nevertheless, how few could enjoy this meagre happiness. It could be the lot of but a small minority. If a man lives without work, he forces others to work for him; if he lives for pleasure, it is necessary for him to have an army of people who will furnish him amusement. There existed, therefore, legions of slaves of every kind to procure bread and pleasure for the favorites of the State; the terrestrial paradise of the chosen few had for its correlative the terrestrial hell of the multitude. Even at this price, were the elect sure of their happiness? No: they wasted away with disgust and weariness. For such is the inexorable providential law attached to the abuse of earthly pleasures. Pleasure, chosen as an end, is a cruel god who devours his adorers. In the midst of pleasure the happy ones of the world felt themselves taken at the throat by the lurking hand of death which crouched within their poisoned joys. They saw these sources of prosperity that formerly were fed by the sacred sweat of labor dry up around them. The Empire was no longer defended except by Barbarians; public works were carried on only by slaves; the fields, deserted by the farmer, were fruitless; the ranks of human society began to thin out in a dreadful manner. Happiness, as understood by the ancient world, was nothing but the slow suicide of society. Thus, universal misery sprang from the very principle of the civilization that had promised to its votaries happiness here below.

The happiness Christianity promises to man presents a sum of characteristics radically opposed to those of the Roman felicity. It consists in the enjoyment of a Supreme Being, that is to say, in the union with God. It is perfect like the Good which is its principle, it is indefectible, it is eternal, it is made for all on the sole condition that they obey the law of love: – to love God above all things and one’s neighbor as oneself. The happiness of the pagan is not possible without the corresponding misery of the majority of the human race. The Christian cannot be truly happy unless he makes as many as possible of his fellow men participate in his happiness. He does this directly by the daily practice of charity, and indirectly by mortification and labor. By mortifying himself he frees those who minister to his pleasures; by working he produces a wealth that increases the well-being of others. In principle, a Christian society is a society of brothers, just as in principle, a pagan society is a society of slaves.
The Church is reservoir of divine life of Christianity.

It is not enough to know the difference—or better, the opposition—between these two principles. It is necessary also to see how the Christian principle was able to implant itself in human society notwithstanding the violence which it does to human nature, how it could continue in existence notwithstanding the bitter war which all the passions have declared against it, how it has succeeded in becoming the guide and the light of the better part of the human race. Why does the word which has promulgated the New Law always dominate the development of our civilization, as an ideal acclaimed even by those who misunderstand it; while so many other golden words, fallen from the lips of the ancient sages, have suffered the lot of those delicious perfumes which are exhaled by some choice flower but which, after having for a time perfumed the neighborhood, scattered and vanished in the air without leaving a trace save in the memory?

Christian faith answers that this word is a divine word, and that the words of Jesus Christ, according to His promise, will not pass away. But the Christian, who seeks to give an account of his faith, is not forbidden to study the manner in which Providence assures to His word the indefectible authority it should have over men. If Christianity has been more than a sublime philosophical doctrine, if it has been a principle of life and of action which has permeated, quickened, and transformed the world, it is because, from the first, it was so constituted that it could live and perpetuate itself on earth. It was clothed with a living body which became the agent of its transcendent action; this body is the Church.

The Church, with her powerful and incorruptible organism, is the reservoir of the divine life of Christianity, distributing this life and renewing it at its source. She has been created perfect, because to fulfil her mission she must have in herself the principle of life; sovereign, that she may be fettered by no one; universal, to embrace all men; indefectible, to extend to all generations. It is in her and by her that the human race realizes its supernatural mission, which is the conquest and the enjoyment of the Supreme Good. She assumes the direction of the moral life, but leaves to the State a portion beautiful enough. This portion is the earth which the State has at all times claimed and striven to obtain. The Church reserves for herself heaven in which the State has no concern.
The State is the society of bodies, the Church, of souls. The former is the kingdom of men, the latter is the Kingdom of God. The Church does not declare war on the State, she extends to it the hand of friendship. If the State helps the Church, she blesses it; if the State respects her liberties, she asks nothing more; if the State attacks these liberties, she sheds her blood rather than allow it. For she cannot renounce her mission. She has received charge to teach all nations. She is responsible to God for the salvation of humanity and, with regard to this duty, every man has the right to call her to account.

**How the Church fulfils her mission.**

How has the Church fulfilled her mission? During the course of the nineteen centuries just elapsed, has she always grasped the many and changeable problems that have confronted her? Has she, like the father of the family spoken of in the Gospel, known how to draw from her treasure the eternal truths which admit of no compromise, together with the new applications which vary according to the diversity of time and place? Has she known how to speak their language to all the centuries she has traversed, and to familiarize herself with the genius of all the peoples she has met on her way? Has she been, has she truly remained, that universal and indefectible society that contains within itself all civilization, or would she be merely one of those fleeting forms, in which, at a given moment, the human race embodied its ever changing aspirations? This is the question which it behooves us to answer in the lectures that will follow.

It is a grand panorama that will be unrolled. I dare say, there is none grander in all history, nor is there any more instructive. It is not for me to deduce in advance its teachings; but from the very outset who could doubt of their bearing and eloquence? They will, I hope, speak loud enough to be understood without much mental effort. Our ambition will be more modest and at the same time more elevating than the wild fancy of the ancient Greek philosopher Pythagoras, who believed he heard the harmony produced by the eternal movement of the spheres. We will strive to understand the voice that issues forth from the great phenomena of history, and which is, in a certain measure, the voice of God.