

CHURCH HISTORY AND THE NEW CANADIANS

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As I look eastward through the Church History class-room window in the direction of the Old World I see the ocean, across which have come recently so many multitudes from the communions of ancient Christendom. The smoke of an approaching liner is again visible. Volksdeutsche and Neo-Refugees from underneath the Iron Curtain have followed the war brides, Polish Veterans and Displaced Persons. For four years these groups have sought the shores of Canada, our post-war immigration. Each of them bears some religious designation. What shall we say of their arrival and of our own great national venture in receiving them?

There is a certain propriety in writing from Halifax this latest chapter in the history of the Canadian Church. Rarely is it given to read about Orthodox, Mennonite, Gregorian Armenian, Uniate, Redemptorist, Moravian, Old Catholic—if one is a student of such matters—and even the Free Russian Church of Belgium, and then to put on one's coat and, within three minutes or so, find real live examples of these communions. This comes with the privilege of standing on Canada's front door step, of residence at the main portal of our land. We at Halifax are the first to be introduced to Churches of which in some instances we have not known the name; the first to mention new forms of the Church in Canada, of which the new-comers have most certainly never heard before. Ecclesiastical history has of course no monopoly in this interest. Arts and science draw their inspiration still in large measure from royal feudal Europe and venerable priestly Asia. But for Church history especially the New Canadians have proved a most enlivening influence. The Canadian scene itself is now not only the best introduction to the history of the Continent; but, in the form of the "New Canadians," Church history has pursued the graduate, exulting in his freedom from theological halls, to his very parish.

First in importance in Canada's genuine welcome to the Europeans stands Halifax itself. An old civic tradition of voluntary work still rules its residents, who have taken their part quietly in philanthropic waterfront interests for generations—one of the most expensive personal hobbies in the world. These

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recent years have brought again the call to such an occupation. At no other spot on the soil of Canada during the past two winters of the labour placement scheme might there have been found so many able bodied men without a cent to their name as on the Halifax Pier. They have their few belongings and their tags, but nothing more. This man, destined for the mines of the Yukon, will pass no nearer to his fiancee immured in a garment workers' establishment in Montreal than the railway yards of St. Charles. Who will lend him the dollar for his telegram? That man's wife in Holland has taken ill and he must return, and he seeks a ship. Who will pay his bill at the Salvation Army hostel? "What can I do for you?" a common place of ordinary conversation, continues on the Pier to be a dangerous inquiry. But Halifax citizens, who have known for decades such calls upon their generosity, continue to take the risk.

A Christian welcome is manifest in the government scheme itself and in the unremitting kindness with which officials have carried it out. Anyone who had the opportunity to see at first hand in Halifax the courtesy and efficiency with which Immigration and Labour, Police and Customs handled their complicated task, would be deeply impressed. Some of these public servants have spent many years at the Port, and one represents the third generation of unrecorded helpfulness toward the stranger within our gates. This personal interest is of lasting value for the new citizenship.

When St. Paul wrote: "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ" he was not necessarily thinking of the C.P.R. Nevertheless, on the long journey westward from the Port to the plains and the mountains, and on arrival, many a kindness has been rendered, by lay hands, and on parish level. We see these central Europeans, craftsmen, artistic, society-loving, accustomed to rich interiors of stained glass and ornament over which their eyes have wandered wonderingly in childhood, set down in the Canadian bush and invited to share our wilderness places of worship, to which three generations have sometimes brought little embellishment, and often with no ritual to help the understanding groping with a foreign tongue. We see the routine of living often equally bare: the hamlet, to which his ancestors walked only a kilometre down the road when the day's work was done and where the human spirit could unburden itself in conversation, replaced by a vast chain of mountains. Here, Christian hospitality has redressed the balance; National

Employment Service agents and Citizenship Branch representatives have voluntarily added to their duties by listening to hopes and fears and answering a multitude of questions relating to home, family and the future.

The plight of the Displaced Person is old in human history; his care was once something quite new in this world. In 253 A.D., St. Cyprian wrote to those who had lost home and fortune under the Decian persecution:

We thank you for summoning us to share your trouble. We trust that nothing like this will occur in future, but that, guarded by the power of God, our brethren may henceforth be quit of all such perils. Still, should the like occur again, for a test of love and faith, do not hesitate to write of it to us. You have offered us a rich harvest field in which to scatter the seeds of our hope.

Let us step forward across the centuries from that classic time to our work-a-day Canadian world. When we contemplate in imagination the Canadian National railway station at Orangedale, C. B., as it would appear on an early Sunday morning in February, 1948, and speculate on the condition of affairs there at 4.00 a.m., what do we expect to find? Milk cans undoubtedly, but no station operator and no fire. But a Latvian family of three, five years before when, in their flight, they looked back and saw their homes go up in flames, did not think of Orangedale station platform at all; or if they did, they never saw themselves among the milk cans in the dark of this other winter's morning, surrounded by the balsam fir forest of a Cape Breton destination. But the railway conductor was one in whose heart the principle we have just connected with Cyprian's name had received full expression; and, before the train left, he assured the couple with their sick boy that the day coach would be comfortable and warm and not crowded; since the ten dollars, all the family had in the world, was not sufficient to step up the colonist tickets for a bed for the child; and he handed on the information to his colleagues in railway affairs, so that the strange event of their arrival was robbed of much of its distress. Though the conductors did not speak the ancient tongue of Cyprian, did they not in their own way accept "a rich harvest field in which to scatter the seeds of our hope?"

When, therefore, the ship with the green life-buoy on the flag, symbol of IRO, enters the longed-for mouth of Halifax harbour, a great Christian principle receives expression. That

which was a new thing in 253 A. D., has become our normal way. Often unnoticed, it is a truth worth reflecting upon, especially in these days of gloomy talk about "man's disorder." When the Prime Minister in a speech to the House of Commons said: "Canada . . . is perfectly within her rights in selecting the persons whom we regard as desirable future citizens. It is not a fundamental right of any alien to enter Canada . . . nevertheless, we have a moral obligation," he may not have been using the full language of the New Testament, but he was not speaking the language of Decius.

And what of the future? Much Original Sin, is being unloaded from S.S. *Samaria*, *Scythia*, and *Beaverbrae*. That commodity—as the old Catechism puts it, "consisting in the guilt of Adam's first sin, the want of original righteousness and the corruption of his whole nature, together with all actual transgressions which proceed from it"—is not the exclusive possession of persons from Scotland and the British Isles. This is to be acknowledged. There are also those who say our newcomers seek only a Babylon whose streets are paved with gold and that they will meet here those whose main interest is to exploit them. I prefer a different description. A few evenings ago, returning from the pageant of disembarkation, with all its hurried yet fascinating turmoil of arrival and entrainment, I read a few pages from the *Pilgrim's Progress*. You will remember that when Christian and Hopeful had left the City of Destruction they came in due course to the Enchanted Ground. Perhaps the most understanding words of that ageless and compassionate story are these: "This was beyond the Valley of the Shadow and out of reach of Giant Despair, neither could they from this place so much as see Doubting Castle. Also here met them some of the inhabitants thereof, for in this land the Shining Ones commonly walked, because it was upon the borders of heaven."

Halifax is the border of a new dwelling which the refugees receive, the hardiest of them, with tremulous excitement. They play the part of the pilgrims in the old allegory. The world of Bunyan's day was rough, but not too rough for that inspired author to see in ordinary men and women the desire for the highest destination and, in his everyday contemporaries, the actual representatives of heaven. We old Canadians are thus the "Shining Ones", in the application of the story, with all the advantages of residence in a land richly blessed. We, and all who welcome our new friends at this cross-road point of time as well as place, will be stamped upon their minds as ambassadors of a new life. What a privilege, then; and what at trust!