TEXTS, PRACTICES, AND GROUPS
Judaïsme ancien etorigines du christianisme

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TEXTS, PRACTICES, AND GROUPS

MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES
TO THE HISTORY OF JESUS’ FOLLOWERS
IN THE FIRST TWO CENTURIES

First Annual Meeting of Bertinoro
(2-5 October 2014)

Edited by
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BREPOLS
2017
A TALE OF HISTORY, DOGMA, AND TRADITION. JESUS IN CAESAR BARONIUS’ ANNALES ECCLESIASTICI (C. 1560-1588)

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I. Jesus in the Annales Ecclesiastici

The first volume of Caesar Baronius’ Annales ecclesiastici – a true landmark in Tridentine sacred historiography – stretches exactly over the century running from the advent of Christ to the year 100, the first year of reign of the emperor Trajan and the eighth of pope Clement of Rome. The first half of the book is devoted to the historia evangelica, the gospels narrative of the life of Jesus, corresponding to the early stage of the history of the Church: 206 pages out of a total of slightly more than 700, from the Annunciation to his Ascension in heaven.

Actually, even by quickly browsing the text, one can realize that Baronius’ account is all but a narrative. Rather, his way of describing the events and the characters of Jesus’ life – the Virgin Mary, John the Baptist, Herod, Peter and the other apostles – resembles much more a scenic apparatus: a detailed reconstruction of sceneries on whose background the concordance between the canonical writings of the New Testament, the non-christian sources of the antiquity and the Church Fathers is displayed.

Indeed, Baronius’ aim is not any historical contextualization of the development of the body of doctrines and apostolic traditions, since for him – as for his contemporaries – the christian doctrine springs not from any kind of evolution, but rather from revelation. The overall meaning of the Annales ecclesiastici can be more readily understood in terms of a huge collection of evidences – supplied by history, antiquarianism, philology and geography of the ancient world – designed to persuade the reader about the uninterrupted continuity of the catholic tradition from the ancient to the modern Church. Its outcome, as testified by the amazing publishing success of the work, would be the establishing of the Tridentine canon of the history of christianity.

II. The historia evangelica as archetypal of the Church

There is no need to remind that the Annales ecclesiastici were printed in Rome to counteract the offensive moved by protestant erudition on the front of Church history. As Albano Biondi stated, “Baronio wanted to […]"
fashion a combat text, analogous, in the field of history, to the Controver-
sies of Robert Bellarmine."

The direct adversary was the Ecclesiastica historia, or, as it is better
known, the Centuriae Magdeburgenses, the huge work on Church history
published in thirteenth volumes between 1559 and 1574 by the militant
scholars gathered in Magdeburg around Matthias Flacius, or Flacius Illyri-
cus, a leader of the radical Lutheran wing that in 1548 had opposed the
Augsburg Interim of Charles V and the moderate stance of Melanchthon.

The Centuriae were an absolute novelty for the historical culture of
the time, since they did not sketch a history of peoples and events, but
rather for the first time what today would be labeled as a history of ideas.
Their aim – on the ground of Luther’s hermeneutic principle of veritas
abscondita, the concealment of the true faith by the lies and the false rites
of the Roman Antichrist – was to attest how the papacy, in the course of
the centuries, had increasingly corrupted the doctrines of Christ and the
apostles.

Flacius Illyricus had first provided this concept with a historical foun-
dation with his Catalogus testium veritatis (1556), an inventory of anti-
papist authors and martyrs outlined as an ideal genealogy of the Reforma-
tion rooting up to the times of Christ. In comparison to this work, the
Centuriae widened the scope of the research to the whole sacred history,
on the premises of a theology of history centered around the idea of a
ceaseless, centuries-long struggle for the preservation of true doctrine.

From this viewpoint, the Centuriae Magdeburgenses can be viewed as
the specular model of Baronius’ Annales and Bellarmine’s Disputationes de
controversiis (1586-1593), since the same metahistorical force that in these
two latter works is represented by the flourishing of heresy, for Illyricus
and his fellow scholars has the meaning of the persistence of the Gos-

1. A. Biondi, “La storiografia apologetica e controversistica”, in I.d., Umanisti,
eretici, streghe. Saggi di storia moderna, ed. M. Donattini (Modena, 2008) 555-574:
564. The most complete monograph on Baronius, although old and apologetically
biased, is still G. Calenzio, La vita e gli scritti del cardinale Cesare Baronio bibli-
tecario di Santa romana Chiesa, 2 vols (Roma, 1907). On Baronius’ historiography
see S. Zen, Baronio storico. Controriforma e crisi del metodo umanistico (Napoli,
1994), and the miscellaneous books R. De Maio – L. Giua – A. Mazzacane, ed.,
Baronio storico e la Controriforma (Sora, 1982); L. Giua, ed., Baronio e le sue fonti
(Sora, 2009); G.A. GuazZelli – R. Michetti – F. Scorza Barcellona, ed., Cesare
Baronio tra santità e scrittura storica (Roma, 2012). Synthetic profiles are H. Jedin’s
“classic” Kardinal Caesar Baroniuss. Der Anfang der katholischen Kirchengeschichts-
schreibung im 16. Jahrhundert (Münster, 1978), and C.K. Pullapilly, Caesar
attention is devoted to the Oratorian in I. Backus, Historical Method and Confes-
375 ff., and S. Tutino, Shadows of Doubt. Language and Truth in Post-Reformation
Catholic Culture (New York, 2014) 74 ff.
pel under the centuries-old accumulation of deceptions orchestrated by the Devil.²

The first book of both the Centuriae and the Annales ecclesiastici runs along the first century AD. According to Illyricus and his fellow authors, this century enjoys a privileged rank, being the age containing the “pure” teaching of Christ and the apostles, that is the touchstone of what has to be considered as truth or falsehood in the following centuries. In the Centuriators’ conception of sacred history, the first century of Christianity stands as the archetype on which all the deviations and variations inspired by the Devil must be evaluated. So, due to its status of exemplarity, the historia evangelica plays in confessional historiography the same role the biblical canon does in controversialist theology, that of a basic standard of truth.³ As Enrico Norelli points out, the first century AD “is qualitatively different from the following ones, when the process of corruption of doctrine and Church progressively unfolds, peaking with the full supremacy of the Antichrist from the seventh century onward.”⁴

Moving to Baronius, and reading his preface to the first volume of the Annales – both a manifesto of intellectual struggle and a general methodological premise –, we find a viewpoint that can be considered specular to the Centuriators’ one:


3. The controversialist theologians of the Counter-reformation generally deal with the Scripture – its canon, the clarity of the text, the hermeneutical function – in the preliminary sections of their books; a renowned case is that of Robert Bellarmine’s Disputationes, whose first treatise is the controversy De Verbo Dei. See F. Motta, Bellarmino. Una teologia politia della Controriforma (Brescia, 2005) 197 ff.

With the utmost diligence we must apply to this, that is to make sure [...]
that the original portrait of the Church be restored in its primal beauty,
in order that She may dissolve darkness and disperse fog with her bright-
ness, and the eyes of whoever contemplates her may relish in full joy of the
clearest appearance of truth.\(^5\)

Both Baronius and the Centuriators – i.e. those who gave birth, on oppo-
site fronts, to modern ecclesiastical historiography – share the idea of a
genuine and original condition of the Church that has been veiled by the
gathering of errors through time. For the catholic historian, the customs
of Christ and the apostles are the archetype of the shape and the rule of
the Church, “the foundations of christian religion, the divine laws, the
pious services, the sacred councils, the published canons.”\(^6\) The difference
between the catholic stance and the reformed one lies in the way each one
grasps the primitive doctrine and praxis: in the Centuryae, as in the Cata-
logus testium veritatis, by patiently recovering the fragments of truth still
scattered in the mare magnum of papist deception; in the Annales ecclesi-
astici, on the opposite, by defending the continuity between the original
apostolic community and the Church of the later ages.

In other words, for the Centuriators only a few people have grasped
the truth in the course of history, while, for Baronius, truth has always
been visible and perceptible in the body of the hierarchical Church. Not
for chance, Baronius’ vocabulary is strongly marked by a semantics of
continuity and tradition: the “visible monarchy of the catholic Church,
established by Christ the Lord and founded on Peter” has been “entirely
preserved, religiously guarded, never interrupted or suspended, but rather
perpetually respected” by the Roman pontiffs. In proving this all lies the
peculiar duty that Baronius as historian is setting to.\(^7\)

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5. “Fuere namque e recentioribus nonnulli, qui antiquorum res gestas se col-
lecturos professi, nihil aliud conati sunt, nisi ut mendacia coacervantes, aditum
hunc nobis apertum obstruerent, et patentem viam regiam impedirent [...]. Sed ad
horum conatus infringendos, commenta detegenda, ac imposturas aperiendas, non
multa opus est consultatione, vel facto. Satis superque puto, si germana illa, ac sin-
cera Ecclesiae vultus imago ex antiquo proposito demonstretur [...]. In hoc igitur
nobilis omni diligentia incumbendum, ut in primum illud exemplar semper mentis
oculos intendentes, Ecclesiae effigies illa pristina, pristino decori formaque redda-
tur, quae suo splendore sic tenebras disiiciat, caliginem dispellat, ut oculi intuen-
tium, maxima cum iucunditate clarissimo veritatis aspectu perfruantur”: Annales
ecclesiastici I (Romae, 1588), Praefatio, 1-2.

6. “Nos operae pretium facturos existimamus, si una cum nascentis Ecclesiae
primordiis, ipsa christianae religionis fundamenta a primitus iacta, divinas leges,
pias functions, sacra concilia, editos canones, ut instituti ratio postulabit, sigilla-
tim recensuerimus”: ibidem, 4.

7. “Ad haec catholicae Ecclesiae visibilem monarchiam a Christo Domino insti-
tutam, super Petrum fundatam, ac per eius legitimos, verosque successores, Romanos
nimirum pontifices, inviolate conservatam, religioso custoditam, neque umquam
Jesus, as portrayed in the *Annales*, is a diaphanous image. Lost in a *continuum* of doctrines and traditions that deprives him of his messianic features, he can be essentially identified as a figure of the passage from the Old to the New Covenant. Hence I fully agree with Mauro Pesce as he relates Baronius’ Jesus to the broader methodological program of the *Loci theologici* of Melchor Cano (1563), the major theorist of the use of demonstrative method in theology, the cornerstone of Counter-Reformation controversialist theology. “Jesus falls into the second ‘theological place’, *De traditionibus apostolicis*. Catholic theologians in the modern age always had trouble in recognizing the historical figure of Jesus as a ‘theological place’, i.e. a landmark for the change in the Church. The main points of reference for catholic theology are Scripture, Tradition, dogmas, but not the figure of Jesus.”

The *historia evangelica* in the *Annales* revolves around two poles: the advent, birth and childhood of Jesus on the one hand, his public life, up to his ascension, on the other. These two sides of the narrative are divided by the episode of the baptism in the Jordan, with a long digression on John the Baptist and the early assembling of the apostles. The volume is prefaced by a lengthy *Apparatus ad annales ecclesiaticos* (49 pages in folio in the first edition of Rome), a general historical preface to the account of the New Testament, ranging from the description of the sects in the Second Temple judaism and the pagan philosophical schools to the ancestry of Jesus and the wonders that had foretold his incarnation. In this preface some meaningful cases of the topic of Tradition can be found.

The *Apparatus*, for instance, opens up with the theme of the extinguishing of the kinghood and priesthood in the tribe of Judah shortly before the advent. It is a standard ecclesiological theme emphasizing the convergence of both these highest functions in Christ according to the figural exegesis of Gen 49:10, an interpretation that had already played a prominent role in Eusebius’ *Historia ecclesiastica* and Augustine’s *Civitas Dei*, and thereafter was handed down to the Middle Ages as the accomplishment of the promise of the universal kingdom of Christ.

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9. Gen 49:10, “Non auferetur sceptrum de Iuda et baculus ducis de pedibus eius, donec veniat ille, cuius est, et cui erit oboedientia gentium.” Cf. *Ecclesiastica historia*, ch. 6; *De civitate Dei*, 17,4. This notion finds space also in Tolomeo da
Baronius, leaning on Josephus’ *Antiquitates*, asseverates the historical truthfulness of this statement:

Indeed, in the fullness of time, as it had been written in the holy prophecies, the scepter and rule had extinguished from the tribe of Judah and the house of David, not on behalf of Zedekiah, as Julian held, but on behalf of the Hasmoneans, after which the supreme power among the Jews was consigned to Herod. [...] At any rate, in those times [sc. shortly before the birth of Jesus] not only the kinghood, but also the office of high priest had extinguished, having been handed over from the family of the Hasmoneans to others, since the high pontiff Hircanus had been killed by Herod himself, who thereafter commanded to kill also Aristobulus, of the same family, with whom he had replaced the former.10

In other passages, this apology of Tradition by means of historical evidence is applied to the customs of the Church. The sacred vestments of the high priest, for instance, stored in the Antonia Fortress in Jerusalem, are described as prefiguring the model of the papal robes, while the dress woven with camel bristles and the belt on the hips were worn by John the Baptist show the old-time use of the hair shirt. Indeed, because of his hermitic life, John the Baptist is openly designated as *monachorum princeps*, founder of the monastic rule, according to a definition attributed to John Chrysostom (although actually apocryphal).11

The description of Jesus’ mission in the *Annales* focuses around two main doctrinal places: the primacy of Peter and the establishment of the sacrifice of the mass.

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Lucca’s *Historia ecclesiastica* (1314-1316), 1,2, *De primo pontifice et Domino nostro Iesu Christo.*


11. *Ibidem*, ad ann. 17, 92; ad ann. 31, 101-102: “Porro ciusmodi vitae genere Ioannem iesisse vitae monasticae fundamenta [...] catholici omnes fatentur: cauce de causa Chrysostomus eundem Ioannem monachorum principem nominat.” Baronius refers to two homilies attributed to Chrysostom, quoting them in the Latin translation of Gentian Hervet, in *Divi Ioannis Chrysostomi divinae operae*, here in the ed. Venetiis, 1574 (orig. 1549): *In Marcum Homilia I*, II, 417r, and *De divo Ioanne Baptistae*, in Ioan. I, III, 143v. Actually Sixtus of Siena, in his *Bibliotheca sancta* (1566), had already argued that the two homilies were apocryphal, being lately followed in Antonio Possevino’s canonical *Apparatus sacri* (Venetiis, 1606) II, 157-158.
The apology of Peter's ministry evolves first as a commentary to the episode of Andrew and Simon Peter approaching Jesus along the road (John 1:35 ff.); here Baronius emphasizes Christ's choice of Peter *merito confessionis*, “by reason of his faith,” despite Andrew’s older age and higher perfection of life:

Simon Peter was preferred by Christ to Andrew by reason of his faith: we know indeed that Simon excelled not only in the announcement, but in the profession of the supreme faith as well over Andrew and all the other apostles. [...] From this it appears how shamefully err all those deeming that the primacy was credited to Peter because he was the eldest.  

The debated matter of the apostolic primacy further occurs in the account of the pontifical investiture of Peter, described in the renowned pericope of Mt 16:18 (“You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church”), the most standard evangelical place of Roman catholic apologetics. Baronius’ text is worth to be read as a meaningful example of that biblical and, more broadly, historical continuism I mentioned before:

Since [Jesus Christ], in his infinite wisdom, foresaw that it would happen very often that controversies and quarrels pertaining faith would arise, he rightfully solved to clarify who has the charge to judge what is correct, at any occurrence. In order that the divine sacraments, gathered in the Church, did not decline because of the faith scattered among each one’s opinion, He wanted one and the same head to be established, to whom all the others would subdue and obey. After all, there is no doubt that it happened everytime and everywhere, according to the right divine and human. Nobody ignores indeed that among the Jews a highest priest, ranking above all other priests, had been established by God [...]. And when has ever been found a republic, also among the gentiles, in which a high priest didn’t legitimately stand above the others priests in right and authority? I won’t hang around in demonstrating it for every single case: be enough, as an example, the Roman republic, where the high priest laid claim on the supreme power over both the priests and the other magistrates, as well as the Athenian republic, where a higher priest did exist, urging and collecting the others’ opinions in the Areopagus.

The pontifical office, bestowed upon Peter, becomes the full and conclusive expression of an invariant element in the history of peoples, i.e. the hierarchy of the functions as a principle of order, rooted in the lex aeterna handed down to man with his creation. After all, Jesus Christ didn’t incarnate to abrogate the law, neither the human nor the natural one:

Jesus, who came not to destroy the written law nor the natural right that God has instilled in everyone’s mind, but rather to bring everything to perfection in each part, after having instituted the college of the apostles in the Church, chose one of them as supreme head and prince to lead all the others.\(^1\)

It needs not to be underscored that these assumptions mirror the properly Thomist motif of the concordance between human and natural laws, both emanating from divine reason, and their conformity with the ius divinum of Revelation. This is a persistent topic in the whole catholic apologetics of the confessional age, radically opposed the the protestant separation between the sphere of faith and that of reason.

A meaningful example of how this topic was used in Counter-Reformation Roman apologetics can be found in the works of Jesuit controversialist theologians, as they proclaimed the sovereignty of the pope as iudex controversiarum (judge of the controversies) by appealing to the natural character of hierarchy, both in the Church and the political realm. I just

\(^{13}\). “Quoniam [Christus] divina illa sapientia praevidebat fore, ut in Ecclesia saepius eiusmodi quae ad fidem pertinent, orientur controversiae ac disceptationes, iure consuluit, ut a quo quod, quolibet tempore decernendum esset, in comperto esset; et ne ex cuiusque animi sententia fide in diversa distracta, divina in Ecclesiam collata sacramenta vilescerent, unum idemque visible omnibus caput statuendum putavit, cui ceteri subissent ac parerent. Quod quidem iure divino, humanoque semper ubique gentium factitatum esse, comptissimum est. Apud Hebraeos enim summum pontificem, qui ceteris praeset sacerdotibus, a Deo institutum esse, non est qui nesciat [...]. Sed et quanam apud gentes optimis legibus reperitur instituta respublica in qua non unus esset summus sacerdos, qui iure et auctoritate ceteros antecelleret sacerdotes? Non morabimus haec in singulis demonstrare: satis ad exemplum ipsa in primis Romana respublica in qua pontifex maximus maximum omnium tum in ceteros sacerdotes, tum in alios magistratus sibi vindicaret imperium. In Atheniensium quoque respublica summis etiam sacerdos erat, qui in Areopago rogabat singulorum sententias, ac colligebat. [...] Jesus, qui non legem scriptam, iusve naturale a Deo menti cuiusque insitum labefactare venisset, sed numeris omnibus omnia absolvissima reddebat, instituim iam in Ecclesia collegio apostolorum, ex illis unum omnium maximum ac principem, qui ceteris praeset, elegit’:

Annales ecclesiastici, ad ann. 33, 137. Typical of the Counter-Reformation culture, this continuism, showing christianity and its institutions as the refinement of previous revealed religions, is shared with Baronius by prominent scholars like Matteo Ricci and other Jesuit fathers of the mission in China, or Athanasius Kircher, with their interpretation of confucianism or the ancient Egyptian religion as forerunners of christian thought.
mention this passage from Martin Becanus, among the most skilful and prolific controversialists of the first quarter of the seventeenth century:

A multiple analysis can be observed between matters of faith and religion on the one side, and civil and political ones on the other. 1. As in political and civil matters often rise quarrels and controversies requiring that a judge pass a sentence between the litigants, so it is the same in faith and religion. 2. As in civil controversies these three things remain distinguished, judge, written law, and custom, so in controversies of faith there are the judge, the Scripture of both Testaments, and the Tradition. 14

A similar perspective, even if not related to the correspondence between faith and reason, but rather to the concordance between the Old and the New Testament, can be found in Baronius’ description of the eucharistic liturgy and the establishment of the sacrifice of the mass (the most extensively treated argument in the book).

After a lengthy preliminary analysis of the computation of the date of Passover and the feasting ceremonies among Jews and gentiles, Baronius explains in detail the Passover Seder and the Lord’s Supper, underscoring its function in instituting christian priesthood and accomplishing the Mosaic order of rituals and blessings:

The Supper of the Lord [...] was distinct from the supper of the Easter lamb, and it was administered after this one. That first ineffable sacrament by which the transubstantiation of bread and wine to flesh and blood of Christ occurs [...] was established in it. Then also the apostles, prescribed by the Lord to do the same in His memory, became priests, and the sacrifice itself that they would offer was disposed. 15


15. "Constat autem ex praedictis cenam Domini [...] fuisse distinctam a cena agni paschalis, ac post illam fuisse administratam. In qua primum illud sacramentum ineffabile est institutum quo transsubstantiatio fit panis et vini in carnum et sanguinem Christi, in ipsum Christi corpus sub utraque specie integrum. Tunc et apostoli, quibus Dominus praecepit id ipsum facere in sui memoriam, sacerdotes sunt facti, atque ipsum sacrificium, quod offerent, est ordinatum. Id apostoli ipsi, id Patres omnes, id traditio ecclesiastica, ac ipsa catholica fides ab ipso exordio nascitentis Ecclesiae praedicavit, ac hactenus profiteri non desinit": Annales ecclesiastici, ad ann. 34, 159-160.
The comparison between these few words dedicated to the sacrifice celebrated by Jesus and the whole pages preceding and following them, establishing the continuity from the sacrifice prescribed by God to Israel to the eucharistic ritual, is noteworthy. It is a fully doctrinal and ecclesiological reading focused on the apology of the priestly function, based on the figural interpretation of Melchizedek, the king-priest of Salem mentioned in Gen 14:18-19: “That Melchizedek bore in himself the figure of Christ is declared by the Holy Spirit in the Psalms” [Ps 110].

IV. An apology of Tradition

It appears evident enough, I would argue, that the Jesus of Caesar Baronius is steadily included in a historical and religious continuum in which the pagan and Jewish traditions do prefigure and foretell the following nature of the Church, serving as partial and fragmentary images of one divine design that would have reached its full revelation only with the Christian universalism. Not for chance, Baronius borrows from Paulus Orosius’ Historiae (early fifth century) the idea that the achievement of Augustus’ monocratic sovereignty and the peace he had given the empire were a praeparatio of the advent, as well as the legend of this emperor refusing the title of Dominus after having foreseen the next birth of Christ. In this imposing apparatus of evidences the subjectiveness and individuality of Jesus are naturally blurred in the cumulative process that preserves Tradition. Christ is caput and founder of the Church inasmuch as he is a figure of Tradition, guaranteeing the transition from the Old to the New Covenant, a transition envisaged as the “completion” and “perfection” of laws and customs springing from the eternal law instilled in human nature and scattered among the ancient peoples.

The kerygmatic separation of the Kingdom from this world, and the refusal of the conventions and the priorities ruling this latter, leave very few traces of them in the pages of the Annales. The Gospel verses emphasizing Jesus’ antinomic preaching as a sign of his messianicity are mentioned by Baronius in a very hurried way. Here are three examples.

The episode of the Cleansing of the Temple: “As Easter approached, Jesus ascended to Jerusalem, and, after having forged a sort of scourge out


17. Annales ecclesiastici, ad ann., 1, 59-60. Cf. Orosius, Historiarum adversus paganos libri VII, VI,20, CSEL 5, 419. The whole sixth book of the work accounts for the instauration of the empire as the preparation to the advent of God and the propagation of its word.
of ropes, he expelled those buying and selling in the temple.” Baronius follows John’s narrative (2:13 ff.) placing the episode at the beginning of Jesus’ preaching, but he pays no attention at all to the symbolic meaning of the action, expatiating instead on the exactitude of John’s calculation of the fourty-six years requested by the enlargement of the Temple ordered by Herod.

Then, the Beatitudes: “While teaching his disciples, he made a sermon on beatitude, showing to the many where it was located.” Again, the absence of any exegesis of a passage so salient in Jesus’ preaching is astonishing.

Finally, the episode of the adulteress: “Back in the Temple, he sat down and taught the people; then they brought a woman in front of him, who had been caught in adultery, but, in the lack of evidence [deficientibus accusatoribus], he absolved her.” The expression deficientibus accusatoribus, specifying the absence of sufficient evidence for a conviction, belongs to the vocabulary of the ius commune, and can be often found in canon law, once again pointing out the peculiar legalistic feature of Baronius’ portrait of Jesus.

Such an insistency on Tradition, coupling the “expulsion” of Jesus’ subjectivity from the evangelical account, can be probably considered among the reasons that pushed Baronius to choose the word annales, instead of historia (as the Centuriators did), for the title of his book.

The ancients – Baronius explains in the preface – used to distinguish annals from history, since in this latter the author treats the events of his own time, those he saw or he may have seen, pointing out not only what has happened, but also why and for which purpose, while in the annals he relies on documents for the knowledge of old events, remote from his age, placing them, one by one, in the years they happened.

21. “In primis igitur, quod ad titulum spectat: cur potius Annales ecclesiasticos, quam historiae huicuscumque lucubrationes nostras, maluerimus nuncupare, hanc asserimus ratione: eo nempe discrimine veteres ab historia annales distinxerunt, quod illa proprie res suorum temporum gestas, quas auctor vel vidit, vel potuit videre, pertractet, neque tantum quid gestum sit, sed et qua ratione, quove consilio,
Baronius’ lexical choice is quite unique with respect to a long-lasting tradition of *historiae ecclesiasticae* – from Eusebius to Orosius up to Ptolemy of Lucca, Platina, Carlo Sigonio and Girolamo Muzio. Personally, I consider this as a form of self-censorship that must be framed in the cultural, and, even more, mental sphere of the Counter-reformation.

I explain better: the classical idea of *historia* entails the account of a process marked by evolution and change, a process directly witnessed by the historian; the *annales*, on the opposite, according to Tacitus (a master of style and ideology for Tridentine writers), are the record of events already fixed in the past, and therefore no more subject to change. The annalistic genre is linked to a concept of persistence, or repetition of events, with little or no room for transformation.

In this perspective, Baronius’ work is conceptually linked to this second model. His view of history revolves around the vision of a perennial struggle between orthodoxy and heresy, i.e. between preservation and adulteration of doctrine and Tradition. It is a meta-historical vision, since it is rooted not in historical, rather in theological method.

As he states in the preface, “if we look towards the ancient authors who published on this matter [the history of the Church], it is difficult to find one having followed completely the truth.”

Eusebius was infected by Arianism, Socrates Scholasticus and Sozomen by Novatianism, Orosius wrote with an obscure and convolute style, and the former historians, starting with Josephus, were not Christian. They did not lie altogether, but each of them mixed truth with falsehood, leaving the catholic historian with the task of separating the one from the other.

In other terms, nothing arises anew. Baronius’ outlook on history turns around the consideration of the errors in faith, matching with the program expressed by Bellarmine in the preface to his contemporaneous *Disputationes de controversiis* of 1586, which is the printed version of a speech given by him ten years earlier at the Roman College, introducing his lectures in controversialist theology. Here Bellarmine had indeed depicted a theology of history understood as a perpetual war between orthodoxy and heresy, linking the errors of Luther and Calvin to an ancient chain of heresies dating back to the first heretic in the history of the Church, Simon Magus.

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22. “Ut de antiquioribus loquar, qui eisdem argumenti commentarios ediderunt, invenire difficile est, qui veritatem in omnibus fuerit assecutus”: *ibidem*, 2.

V. The *Annales ecclesiastici* in their historical context

I have tried to expound earlier the basic difference between the *Annales ecclesiastici* and the *Centuriae Magdeburgenses*: to resume, for the Magdeburg Centuriators it is a matter of recovering the pure doctrine of Christ from a history that is mastered by mystification, while Baronius’ task lies in the endorsement of a tradition that established the authority of the Roman Church all along her history, protecting her from the siege brought by heresy.

This opposition must be understood within two wider cultural systems, the Roman catholic and the Lutheran one (better: the Gnesio-Lutheran one, as Illyricus’ purism was labeled), both of which crystallized as a rigid doctrinal system in the central decades of the sixteenth century. But it must not be understood in the terms of a strict cause and effect relation, as could be suggested by the fact that the *Annales* are the official catholic answer to the challenge of the *Magdeburgenses*.

The texts printed in the first volume of the *Annales* are ready indeed before the need of a reply to Illyricus is perceived in Rome. In other terms, we can almost certainly affirm that the original function of Baronius’ *historia evangelica* was different from what it became after.

The shaping of the *Annales ecclesiastici* as a huge historical synthesis doesn’t originate in the Oratorian circle (where father Antonio Galloni, assistant to Filippo Neri and an hagiographer himself, sharply criticizes Baronius’ work), rather in the Roman curia. 24

The project of a refutation of the *Centuriae Magdeburgenses* is first conceived in Rome around 1565, as this work has already reached its eighth volume. In the field of ecclesiastical history the catholic culture is poorly prepared for the battle: apart from ancient authors like Eusebius (mainly appreciated by protestants for his insistence on the imperial sovereignty over the Church), the only available texts are the useless *Historia ecclesiastica nova* of Ptolemy of Lucca – which is 250 years old –, the quite heterodox *Liber de vita Christi ac omnium pontificum* of Platina (1479), and Onofrio Panvinio’s slight catalogues of popes.

The Society of Jesus – then leading the catholic confessional counteroffensive in Germany under the generalate of Francisco de Borja – is charged with the task of producing an answer to the *Centuriae*: two works by Peter Canisius on John the Baptist and the Virgin (1571 and 1572), and an apology of the Apostolic Canons by Francisco de Torres are

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recorded. But none of these books has an adequate standard. Outside the Jesuit order, Girolamo Muzio’s *Historia sacra*, printed in Venice in 1570, reaches only its first book, while Carlo Sigionio’s one is not even printed.25

In 1571 a commission of cardinals is entrusted with the matter by pope Pius V, under the responsibility of the librarian of the *Vaticana* Guglielmo Sirleto. The first contacts of Baronius with the commission date around 1576-1577; in May 1577 he submits to Sirleto a request for a reading permit of the *Centuriae*, and this is probably the moment when he is entrusted with the writing of the *Annales ecclesiastici*.

Two years later, in April 1579, Baronius informs his father that the first volume has been completed. It will be printed by the Vatican Typography only nine years later, in 1588, probably due to the enormous amount of work that the printing press (officially established only in 1587) is then handling. In fact, the list of sources and apparatuses published by the Tipografia vaticana in less than a decade is impressive: the works of Basilius (1587-1588), Gregory the Great (1588-1593) and Bonaventure (1588-1596), the Sixto-Clementine Bible (1590-1593) and Antonio Possevino’s *Biblootheca selecta* (1593). The large amount of typographical errors in the first edition of the *Annales* is a strong clue in favor of this reason of the delay, as well as the fact that, in the same years, Baronius is busy editing the *Martyrologium Romanum*, printed first in 1584 and, in a second revised edition, five years later.26

So, when did Baronius compose his first book of the *Annales*, including his life of Jesus? And why was he appointed with this task by the Roman curia? Actually, this second question is absorbed by the first one: cardinal Sirleto – probably through Filippo Neri – turned to Baronius in 1576 since this latter had already at hand a history of the Church in the apostolic age.

According to Carlo Bascapè, Charles Borromeo’s biographer, in 1584 Baronius was at work on his ecclesiastical history since no less than twenty-five years; it follows that the beginning of the enterprise must be dated back to c. 1560, slightly after he had joined the first circle of the disciples of Filippo Neri in San Girolamo della Carità in Rome. Baronius himself recalls this events in his deposition at the canonization process of Neri: “[He] commanded me to speak of the ecclesiastical history.”27

In other terms, Baronius historiographical activity does not arise from a controversialist need, but rather from a commitment internal to the pious

circle of the Oratorio – which acted as a driving force in the religious reform of the Roman Church. In his *Vita di San Filippo Neri* Galloni gives some details of this:

Each day of the week [...] four priests, one after the other, held speeches at the Oratory [...]. The sermons turned around matters useful and necessary to the salvation of the listeners [...], and they always ended with examples taken from the lives of the saints, through which they wonderfully extirpated the vices, sew the virtues, and gathered fruits of eternal life by preaching and serving [...]. Ordinarily father Baronius spoke about the ecclesiastical histories, while others [spoke about] the lives of the saints, since this was what the blessed father [Philip] wanted. 28

Baronius’ biographer, Generoso Calenzio, provides further details about the sources and the method of these lectures: they gathered reports of the jesuit missionaries in the Indies, hagiographical legends, the *Imitation of Christ*. Then each one, in turn, was asked to comment the readings:

One of these latter preachers [i.e. Baronius] proceeds with the account of the ecclesiastical history, and, starting from the beginning of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ Our Lord, from time to time keeps telling all the edifying things that happened in different parts of the world and show the glory of God, and the succession of the Holy Church, and the virtue and grace of the Holy Spirit that rules her, and makes sure that this ship, among the many storms of persecution by emperors, and the heretics who tried to subvert it with different noxious and false doctrines, has always overcome, and always has made kingdoms and empires bow before her, and has rejected and refuted every heresy, as can be read from time to time in the [acts of] the holy councils, where it is revealed that the errors of the modern heretics are one with the faeces they absorbed, which had already been proved wrong, and anathemized, and condemned by the Holy Fathers in ancient times. 29

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They were not just the priests of the Oratory who took part to these meetings: we know that, after the official recognition of the congregation in 1575, they saw the presence of intellectuals such as Federico Borromeo, Robert Bellarmine, Gabriele Paleotti (the reformer of the Tridentine canon of sacred arts), Silvio Antoniano (a founder of catholic schooling), Antonio Bosio (a pioneer in christian antiquity), and the appreciated preachers Agostino Valier and Marc-Antoine Muret. It is hard to imagine that the manuscript of the Annales was not read and commented by those top thinkers of late sixteenth century papacy. In other words, Baronius’ Jesus sees the light in this community of theologians, scholars and preachers sitting at the highest level of the Church.

VI. SACRED HISTORIOGRAPHY, CONVERSION, AND REFORM OF THE CHURCH

In the cultural paradigm of Counter-reformation, disciplines such as controversial theology, pedagogy, sacred rhetorics, and even philology and antiquity share the same persuasive and penegetic end. The apologetic historiography introduced by Baronius is doubtlessly a part of this program.

The ideology of the comeback to the purity of the apostolic Church lies at the heart of the strategy of religious renewal embodied by the forces that, since Hubert Jedin, it is customary to label as “catholic reformation.”\(^30\) Within the congregations of secular priests that lead to the detachment from the religious practice of the mediaeval orders, as the Oratorians, the Barnabites, and the Jesuits, this program of institutional regeneration passes first through the inner reformation, the conversion of the religious self of the individual. This is why history gains an intrinsically moral dimension: as for the Oratory, the shaping of a new model of imperadori, et d’heretici, che con diverse pestifere et false dottrine hanno cercato di sovvertirla, sia stata sempre superiore, et habbia fatto inchinare a sé imperii et regni, et convinte et confutate tutte le eresie, come ne’ concilii santi si legge di tempo in tempo, ove si scuopre che gli errori di moderni hereticis sono le fecci assorbite da loro, che anticamente sono state da padri santi dimostrate false, anathematizzate, et condannate”: G. Calenzio, La vita e gli scritti del cardinale Cesare Baronio bibliotecario di Santa romana Chiesa, 2 vols (Roma, 1907) 1, 136.

\(^30\) At present, there seems to be no univocity of terms among historians to indicate the movement of catholic renewal that preceded and prepared the reformation of the Roman Church after the Council of Trent: the expressions “catholic reformation,” “Tridentine reformation” and “catholic renewal” are de facto equivalent. See, among others, R. Po-Chia Hsiia, The World of Catholic Renewal, 1540-1770 (Cambridge, 1998) (lacking the term “Counter-Reformation”); J. O’Malley, Trent and All That. Renaming Catholicism in the Early Modern Era (Cambridge, MA, 2000); R. Bireley, The Refashioning of Catholicism, 1450-1700. A Reassessment of the Counterreformation (Washington, 1999).
Christian life springs from the knowledge of the past exempla of the martyrs and saints of the heroic age of the ancient Church.31 This is, in my opinion, the direction we should follow to grasp the deep cultural function of Baronius’ historia evangelica. “To understand Baronius as a historian – as Simon Ditchfield notes – we need to bear in mind the concept of historia sacra, and, at the same time, to remind that, for the Oratorian, the historiographical production was no different from the liturgical one, with the inevitable consequence that its fruition and its reading were, in short, a form of prayer.”32 Two conversions are recorded as a consequence of the reading of the Annales ecclesiastici: those of Justus Calvinus, a German Calvinist theologian who was baptized in Rome in 1602 acquiring the second name “Baronius,” and Caspar Schoppe, a prominent polemist at the imperial court of Ferdinand II, who converted in Ingolstadt in 1600.33

After the decline of the confessional age, since the mid-seventeenth century – and, a fortiori, today – the cyclopean learned machinery of the Annales could no longer convert anyone: but in the earlier decades the process of conversion also underwent the persuasion of reason, that is the consent given to a clear system of certainties, fueled by biblical, theological and historical evidences. This was an immediate consequence of the confessional uncertainty, urging the subject to distinguish what was to be believed as the true faith in order to reach redemption.34

In late sixteenth-century Rome, this process finds fertile ground in the fashioning of the ideology of the Catholic capital city as a “sacred landscape,” an ideology shared by Baronius’ Annales, his notes to the Martyrologium Romanum and Antonio Bosio’s Roma sotterranea, the huge work on early Christian catacombs posthumously printed in 1632. These


texts were the literary version of the cult for Christian antiquities that had pushed Filippo Neri, after years of solitary prayer in the catacombs of San Sebastiano on the Appian Way, to establish the devotional walk of the Seven-Churches.35

Baronius’ historical notes to the *Martyrologium* abound with the description of instruments of martyrdom and burial places, as well as Bosio’s itinerary through the ancient Roman cemeteries helps the reader in the contemplation on burial grounds and the miraculous conservation of the bodies of the martyrs. It is not just a matter of a baroque taste for the glorification of the carnal substance of sanctity: it is a strategy of persuasion conferring a highly doctrinal value to archaeology and history with their theological repercussions. As Giovanni Severani, then editor of the *Roma sotterranea*, underlined with reference to the exegesis of the burial symbols, “it appeared necessary to us […] to prove with efficacious reasons, and with the authority of the Holy Fathers and sacred councils, that our cemeteries have always kept virgin for their use by Christians, and never polluted by Gentiles, or heretics, or schismatics.”36

The outstanding success of the *Annales ecclesiastici*, and therefore of the account of Jesus’ life they advance, must be read on the background of this double function they play, the external and dialectical one, on the one side, and the internal, devotional and parrenetic one, on the other.

The achievement of the book is indeed beyond dispute. Just to list the versions printed during the author’s life or short after his death, after the first edition we have a corrected one, printed three times in the celebrated Plantin shop in Antwerp (1589 and ff., 1597 and ff., 1612 and ff.); then a Roman reprint of the first four volumes (1591 and ff.); and a further revised edition in Mainz (1601 and ff.), then reprinted in Venice (1601 and ff.) and Cologne (1609 and 1624).37

To fully explain this editorial success we must consider, along with the theological interest for the question of Church history, the functional use the work may have fulfilled.

As for their structure, the *Annales ecclesiastici* resemble much more a collation of sources and quotations than a narration with its own narra-

tive consistency. This is one of the criticisms – together with his poor, or nonexistent knowledge of Greek and of the languages of the Near East – moved to Baronius by eighteenth-century Catholic scholars, like Ludovico Antonio Muratori, Giovanni Lami, Juan Andrés and Giuseppe Agostino Orsi. But this doxographical and descriptive texture of the work should be probably considered with respect to the end that had originally been thought by the author.

Above all, the *Annales ecclesiastici* are an inventory of theological commonplaces, a catalogue of sources and evidences devised to boost the activity of preachers, confessors, and controversialists. In this sense, they are a brilliant embodiment of the argumentative method advanced in Melchor Cano’s *Loci theologici* (1563), with their theory about the ten commonplaces, or classes of arguments, the theologian should draw from in his work. The tenth, and last, of these classes is profane history. And it cannot be denied that the *Annales*, in their essence, can be viewed as a refined interweaving of doctrinal places (the New Testament, the Fathers of the Church) and subsidiary historical places (*subsidia fidei*) whose purpose is to frame correctly the meaning of certain expressions and events into an overall orthodox interpretation. From this viewpoint, the role Baronius attributes to history is fully instrumental to the confirmation of doctrine.

This kind of operation was unthinkable for catholic historiography before the *Annales*, since the works of Platina and Sigonio restricted to concise accounts the life of Jesus according to the Gospels, while Muzio’s *Historia sacra* began with the death of Judas, neglecting all the previous events since “it appeared excessive to speak of the nativity, life, miracles, death and resurrection of the Lord [...], which are not contended [with the Centuriators].”

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40. “La intention nostra veramente essendo stata di scriver questa historia à popoli fedeli in rimedio delle heresie, [...] et ispargendo coloro, che nel tempo degli apostoli, et nella primitiva Chiesa si usava la dottrina, che da loro si semina, a me è paruto soverchio il parlar della natività, della vita, de’ miracoli, della morte, et della resurrettion del Signore (secondo che si è fatto da loro) [scil. i centuriatori] che di questo non è la nostra contesa. Ma habbiamo tolto il principio della ascesa del Salvator nostro in cielo, per essere incontanente dapoi succedute cose che ributtano le coloro opinioni; et dalla dottrina de’ santi vangeli parleremo, quando pervenuti saremo al loro luogo, che anche dopo la salita di Christo in cielo furono scritti i santi vangeli”: Della historia sacra libro primo (Venetia, 1570) 4r-v, n.n. Cf. Platynaec historici liber de vita Christi ac omnium pontificum qui hactenus ducenti fuere et
With the *Annales*, on the opposite, a boundless arsenal of proofs is made available to the variegated intermediaries of Counter-reformation discourse – on the pulpits, in the public squares, and at the courtly ceremonies. I deem this can be testified by the multitude of summaries and compendiums of the work following the publishing of each volume: to name only a few, those of Francesco Panigarola, published two years after the first book of the *Annales*, of Gabriele Bisciola, of 1601, and of Henri de Sponde (Spondanus), the most widespread one, of 1613.\(^{41}\)

It is on the ground of this subsidiary literature, and above all of the likely mediated use it served – mostly oral, we can assume –, that the Counter-reformation Jesus depicted by Baronius affirmed itself and took root in the catholic collective imagery.

**VII. Baronius’ methodology**

According to Jedin, notwithstanding the apologetic structure of the *Annales* and the repeated mistakes in his use of sources, Baronius is to be praised as the first catholic historian to have dealt with the Church as an object of study in herself, distinguished from the overall history of mankind.\(^{42}\)

Although this judgment can be largely shared, we should not overestimate the originality of Baronius, at least with regard to the history of Jesus’ times and life.

First, his choice of making the history of the Church begin with the advent follows Eusebius’ traditional scheme, and is shared by Ptolemy of Lucca, Platina and Sigonio. Nor the contextualization of the evangelical narrative within the historical frame of the Second Temple Judaism and the reign of Augustus can be considered as a truly innovative operation, since this approach had been adopted earlier by Platina and finds its ultimate origin in Orosius’ *Historiae*.\(^{43}\)

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\(^{43}\) *Liber de vita Christi ac omnium pontificum*, 4-8.
The real difference between Baronius and his predecessors lies in the enormous amount of evidences displayed by the Oratorian, compared with the few pages devoted to Jesus by the mentioned authors, and, above all, in his thick texture of references crossing biblical, patristic and historical passages. This is obviously a consequence of his long-standing commitment to the enterprise, as well as of his consciousness of the issue at stake.

What are the premises of Baronius’ use of the sources? Already at the time of the publication of the Annales, his methodologic integrity had been highlighted as an undisputed virtue, depicting him as a model of the new catholic militant intellectual, whose historical effort becomes a form of askesis. This is what is testified by one of the earlier biographer of the cardinal, Girolamo Barnabei, in 1651:

He was ready to confirm without hesitation all that he found defended by incontrovertible reasons and testimonies, and, in the same way, he frankly refused all that appeared less likely and less congruent with truth, even though it came from authoritative sources; therefore, before affirming something he attentively considered it, and inquired with due diligence who the author was, and what the ground, the end, the place, the time of it – in a word, everything.⁴⁴

These considerations essentially reproduce what Baronius himself had written in the preface to the first book of the Annales:

We will treat everything so as to assert nothing with carelessness and inadvertently: nothing without cause, nothing that is not confirmed by the most certain evidence, or not demonstrable by reason, conjecturally probable, and, as far as it is possible, grounded on a clear and solid truth. We can affirm with certainty that, when writing, we have followed no ignorant’s tale, but only the most reliable witnesses.⁴⁵

Now, it is obviously necessary to understand what Baronius really meant when claiming the soundess of his analysis of the sources and the exclu-

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⁴⁴. “Quemadmodum quaecumque optimis rationibus ac testimoniiis subnixa comperiebat, facile, prompteque affirmabat, ita etiam siquid minus probabile, minusque consentaneum veritati videretur, quantumvis graves alioqui authores haberet, libere atque aperte reiciebat; quamobrem antequam certi quidquam statueret, singula suis momentis expendere, qui rerum scriptores, quae causae, quae consilia, loca, tempora, uno verbo omnia explorare diligenter, ac recognoscere”: G. Barnabei, Vita Caesaris Baronii (Romae, 1651) 50.
sive acceptance of “the most certain evidence” (probatissimi testes). What is the criterion he relies on when considering his sources as certain? Is it a philological and historical criterion, as it had been for Valla and Erasmus, or one of another kind?

As for the historia evangelica, the sources of the Annales are to be found in the first place in the canonical writings of the New Testament read in Jerome’s Vulgate (at the time of the composition of the first volume the Sixto-Clementine version, published in 1592, was not yet available). After all, it couldn’t have been otherwise, given that Baronius fully recognizes the biblical canon approved by the Council of Trent in the decree touching the sources of faith, including those texts whose authenticity had been questioned by Luther, Erasmus, and, earlier, cardinal Cajetan: Paul’s Epistle to the Hebrews, the Epistle of James, the Second Epistle of Peter, the Second and Third Epistles of John, the Epistle of Jude, and the Apocalypse. All these texts, excluding the Epistles of John (undoubtedly for their lower importance in the New Testament canon), are listed in the index locorum of the first volume of the Annales, although summing up just a few references.

Along with the biblical apparatus, Baronius relies on the Fathers of the earlier centuries and the further ancient christian authors – Ignatius of Antioch, Justin, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Irenaeus, Ambrose, Augustine, Eusebius, Epiphanius, Gregory of Tours and others –, as well as Josephus and Philo as Hebrew testimonies, and Pliny the Elder, Suetonius, Ammianus, Tacitus, Plutarch, and Cassius Dio among the pagans. In the description of the geography of the holy places – a key instrument in the inventory of evidences displayed in the Annales – a chief rank is held by Bede’s De locis sanctis and Burchard of Mount Sion’s Descriptio Terrae sanctae. However, Josephus is by far the most used author among the non christian sources.

Within this ocean of authorities, Baronius declares to have discerned three kinds of informations: the true, the verisimilar, and the false ones: “We lean on the true ones, we don’t contradict the verisimilar, and we refuse those that are alien to truth.” Now, what does Baronius exactly mean with “true” informations?


A simple examination of the text makes clear that the author applies a standard of assessment which is entirely based on doctrinal evaluation. By reading the *Annales*, the general rule we can presume has been adopted by the author is that everything coming from the canonical writings is fully accepted, always respecting the ideal of the *concordia evangelica*, i.e. the settlement of the divergences among the gospels.

The other ancient sources are assessed on the basis of their adherence to the literal text of the New Testament canon, as is, for instance, the case of the Census of Quirinius governor of Syria, which is dated by Josephus nine years after the death of Herod, in contrast to what is affirmed by Luke (2:2): here Baronius dwells on the confutation of Josephus’ passage in the *Jewish Antiquities*, compiling a list of Roman prefects and legates in Judea, to prove the exactness of Luke’s dating.\(^{49}\)

The same procedure is applied to the episodes that, although originally reported in New Testament apocryphals, have been later adopted by the larger tradition: if openly contradicting the canonical Gospels, they are refused without hesitation (one example among the many is the legend of the midwife whose hand dried out when witnessing Mary’s virginal childbirth, an episode of the Protoevangelium of James that had been included in Jacopo de Voragine’s *Golden Legend*); if instead they can coexist with the canonical accounts, Baronius simply records their existence, without detailing neither confuting them (as in the case of the traditions about the statues of the idols crumbling before the passage of the holy family during the flight into Egypt, deriving from the Arabic gospel of the infancy and that can be found also in Ptolemy of Lucca).\(^ {50}\)

The ancient Christian writers are generally held in high esteem. In case of discordance between them, the principle of the consistency with the Scripture prevails. We find an example of this in the question of the ethnic origin of the Magi, who were Chaldaic according to Jerome and Basil, Persian according to Clemens of Alexandria, Chrysostom and Cyril of Alexandria, Arabian according to Justin, Cyprian and Tertullian. Baronius supports this latter statement, accepting the figural reading of the Psalm 71 (“The kings of Sheba and Seba shall offer gifts”), mentioning the tribes of Midian and Ephah cited in Is 60:6, and showing, on the ground of Gen 25:6, that they had colonized Arabia.\(^ {51}\)

Essentially, Baronius applies a truly historical method, independent from any assessment of religious authority, only when evaluating later traditions. I’ll mention two examples. The first one touches the prodigies that would have anticipated and accompanied the time of the advent and

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49. Ibidem, ad ann. 1, 38 ff.


the nativity – like the Sibylline oracles on the next birth of the Saviour, the arc of light circling the sun, the spring of oil suddenly flowing near the Tiber –, widely adopted by mediaeval hagiography and initially dating back to Orosius. Baronius resolutely accepts them, while he rejects the legend of the crumbling of the temple of the Peace in Rome at the birth of Jesus – a temple erected only under Vespasian, according to Josephus, Suetonius and Pliny – since it is a later one, attributed to Peter Damian. As it can be seen, the difference between the concepts of true and verisimilar does not depend from the factual likelihood of an event, rather from its proximity to the canonical sources of faith.

The second example touches the event of the presentation of Mary to the Temple and her following marriage, a tale that was firmly rooted in tradition although not recorded in the canonical corpus. In order to date the event with accuracy, Baronius relies on Nicephorus Callistus’ Historia ecclesiastica (fourteenth century), where a fragment of Evodius of Antioch is quoted, fixing at eleven the age of the Virgin at her marriage and at fifteen the age of her childbirth. The reference is unique, but, since its antiquity (Evodius immediately follows the apostles), Baronius accepts it as unquestionably true.

VIII. Truth of faith and historical truth

From what has been exposed, I deem that the historia evangelica of Baronius – and, more generally, the Annales ecclesiastici – can be viewed as a result of the applying to sacred history of the strategy of cultural disciplining pursued by Tridentine Church: that is, to confirm the biblical canon and the centrality of Tradition as a source of the faith, to strenghthen the importance of patristic literature, hence of positive theology – against the weight of dialectics in mediaeval theology –, to prune the devotion inherited from the Middle Ages of those cults and legends that had questionable origins, to shape a persuasive religious discourse capable of using historical sources without escaping the primacy of theology.

52. Ibidem, Apparatus ad annales ecclesiasticos, 8, and ad ann. 1, 60. Cf. Orosio, Historiarum adversus paganos libri VII, VI,20,5-8, 419 ff.

Probably this is one of the reasons why the history of Jesus’ life remained unmatched in the genre of Catholic Church historiography after the decline of the age of confessional controversies.

Most of the catholic historiographers of the eighteenth century, like Claude Fleury and Augustin Calmet, opened their Church histories with the episode of the affiliation of Matthias to the Apostles, described in Acts 1:15 ff., hence after Christ’s ascension: “I suppose my reader – Fleury remarks in the preface to his *Histoire ecclésiastique* – to be instructed enough about the mystery of Jesus Christ [...]. Anyone who will make the effort to read my history will undoubtedly also have enough devotion to read the holy Gospels.”

At that time, the history of the advent, the incarnation and the passion of Christ, as accounted in the gospels and commented by the Fathers of the Church, with its miracles and prodigies, its genealogies and prophetic foresights was no more plausible as an historical account facing the development of a method whose persuasiveness was grounded on the rules of philology and the other profane sciences instead on doctrine. Jesus’ life, in other words, was increasingly confined to the sphere of faith. It was probably since then, also as a reaction to dogmatic stances such as the one expressed by Baronius’ *Annales ecclesiastici*, that the premises for the research on the historical Jesus took shape.

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