

No one could ever have suspected the mid-nineteenth century English historian, Thomas Babbington Macauley, of crypto-Catholic tendencies. His *History of England* records his staunchly anti-Catholic judgments on almost every event of English history since the Reformation. But on one occasion, almost against his will, Macauley described the Catholic church in terms which, if used by a Catholic, would have been stamped as the most blatant triumphalism.

Despite the triumphalism, there is something here which led the great German Catholic theologian of the twenties and thirties, Karl Adam, to cite it in the introduction to his most important work, *Das Wesen des Katholizismus* (translated as *The Spirit of Catholicism*). And although the church has changed much in the past quarter century, these lines can convey a sense of the continuity of the Catholic church over a vast span of time, which is worth reflecting on today (perhaps more than ever).

This excerpt is taken from Macauley's «Essay on Ludwig von Ranke's *History of the Popes.*»

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«There is not, and there never was on this earth, a work of human polity so well deserving of examination as the Roman Catholic Church. The history of that Church joins together the two great ages of human civilization. No other institution is left standing which carries the mind back to the time when the smoke of sacrifice rose from the Pantheon, and when camelpards and tigers bounded in the Flavian amphitheater. The proudest royal houses are but of yesterday, when compared with the line of Supreme Pontiffs. That line we trace back in an unbroken series, from the Pope who crowned Napoleon in the nineteenth century to the Pope who crowned Pepin in the eighth; and far beyond the time of Pepin, the August dynasty extends, til it is lost in the twilight of fable. The Republic of Venice came next in antiquity. But the Republic of Venice was modern when compared with the papacy; and the Republic of Venice is gone, and the papacy remains. The papacy remains, not in decay, not a mere antique, but full of life and youthful vigor. The Catholic Church is still sending forth to the farthest ends of the world missionaries as zealous as those who landed in Kent with Augustine, and still confronting hostile kings with the same spirit with which she confronted Attila . . . Nor do we see any sign which indicates that the term of her long dominion is approaching. She saw the commencement of all the governments and of all the ecclesiastical establishments that now exist in the world; and we feel no assurance that she is not destined to see the end of them all. She was great and respected before the Saxon had set foot on Britain, before the Frank had passed the Rhine, when Grecian eloquence still flourished at Antioch, when idols were still worshiped in the temple of Mecca. And she may still exist in undiminished vigor when some traveler from New Zealand shall, in the midst of a vast solitude, take his stand on a broken arch of London Bridge to sketch the ruins of St. Paul's.»