Jean Daniélou, sj
(1905–1974)

In an age filled with scientific discoveries and technological developments, Church historian Jean Daniélou dedicated the majority of his writings and teaching to the promotion of the Gospel’s message of joy and hope. For him, the rise and appeal of secular theories and political movements throughout the world revealed a short-sighted response to human fulfillment: They pointed to the triumph of the human person rather than to the victory of God.

Jean-Guénolé-Marie Daniélou was born in France on May 14, 1905, and educated at the Sorbonne, where he was recognized as a man with great literary talent. He entered the Jesuits in 1929 and was assigned to the education apostolate. His theological studies took place in Lyon-Fouvière, where he was mentored by Henri de Lubac, developing a passion for patristics. Daniélou was ordained to the priesthood on August 20, 1938.

Daniélou completed a doctorate in theology in 1942, defending a dissertation on the spiritual writings of St. Gregory of Nyssa. In 1944, Daniélou was named professor of early Church history at the Institut Catholique de Paris.

Daniélou feared Christianity was cutting itself off from the world and becoming a social enclave rather than a source of evangelization. Indeed, such was the response of many who shirked dialogue with the scientific advances and political rumblings of the late 1950s/early 1960s. Daniélou sought another approach, that of making the Church truly universal, while at the same time respecting plurality. As he would write: “There lies the duty of the Church: to work to ensure that civilization makes it possible for the masses to come to the Christian life” (“Marxist History and Sacred History,” 508–509).

Daniélou was not without critics. Some believed he grew too reactionary as he moved upward in the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Nevertheless, his writings made an undeniable contribution to the spirit of aggiornamento, as he demonstrated that the Church has grown throughout its history from a positive incorporation of cultural developments. “In every age,” he writes, “the problems rising from the development of science, culture or society are faced by the Church. They ought not to be seen as a threat to our faith but as a challenge to discover the means the Church will use to respond to the challenges of the contemporary world” (“The Church and the Modern World,” Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review, 60 [1971]: 117).

Unfortunately, Cardinal Daniélou did not have much of an opportunity to advocate the reforms of the Council, as he died unexpectedly on May 20, 1974.