

Christian Humanism

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'Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come' (2 Cor. 5. 17). 'Neither circumcision or lack of circumcision means anything, but a new creation' (Gal. 6. 15). Such is St Paul's clear teaching.

The life of a Christian is a new life, a new life in Christ and in the Spirit. We find this divine promise of a newness of life even in the Old Testament, in prophecies which can be said to have announced the mysteries of God's grace in a unique way. In Ezekiel God tells us about the last times, the days of Yahweh, the days in which he will manifest his glory, that is, his living presence among us in this world of ours, the days of the redemption in Christ. 'Cast away from you all your transgressions, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit' (Ez. 18. 31). But at the end of his prophecies Ezekiel again repeats the solemn promises of God, and connects them with the gift of the promised Spirit of the Lord in the days of the Messiah: 'And I will give you a new heart, and put a new spirit within you; and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you: and I will cause you to walk in my statutes, and to keep my ordinances, and do them.' (Ez. 36. 26-27).

St Paul tells us how this new life is born in the sacrament of baptism. 'We were buried therefore with him by baptism unto death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united to him in a death like this, we shall certainly be united to him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin'. (Rom. 6. 4-6).

It is probable that the first Epistle of St Peter contains various themes which in the apostolic Church were presented to the catechumens on the day of their baptism. To them St Peter writes: 'Like newborn babes, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up to salvation; for you have tasted the kindness of the Lord'. He then explains to them how this new life in the Lord is also life in the New Covenant, as members of the new and final people of God: 'You are

a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people; that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who has called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. Once you were no people but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy' (1 Pet. 2. 3-10). In his second Epistle he proposes the most daring definition of this new life we received in baptism: 'He has granted to us his precious and very great promises, that through these you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of passion, and become partakers of the divine nature'. (2 Pet. 1. 4).

This newness of life is first of all, St Peter tells us Christians, the new heaven and the new earth we are expecting from God: 'According to his promise we wait for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells' (2 Pet. 3. 13). But it is St John who in the Apocalypse gives us the full description of this our Christian hope: 'Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. The old heaven, the old earth had vanished and there was no more sea. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. I heard a great voice from the throne saying, Behold the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and he will be among them. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death, or mourning, or crying, or pain any more, for the former things have passed away'. (Apoc. 21. 2-4).

St Paul sees how the whole earth, the world in which we live, is now expecting the glory of the children of God: 'If creation is full of expectancy, that is because it is waiting for the sons of God to be made known. The creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; because the creature itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the glorious freedom of God's sons. We know that the whole of creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies' (Rom. 8. 19-23).

But on this earth, in our present life, newness of life has begun; we have to live according to this newness. That is the message of Easter which the Church in her liturgy took over from St Paul. 'Rid yourselves of the leaven which remains over, so that you may be a new mixture, as you really are unleavened. Has not Christ been sacrificed

for us, our paschal lamb? Let us keep the feast then, not with the leaven of yesterday, that was all malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth' (Cor. I. 5. 7-8). In this paschal text St Paul is only applying the old Jewish ritual symbols for the liturgy of the Passover: the whole house had to be completely cleansed, especially from any remnant of leavened bread which might be left over. This symbolic ritual suggested purity and newness of life. As is common in the New Testament, St Paul had only to centre this old liturgical symbolism on Christ.

To the Ephesians he restated the fundamental principle of our life: 'You did not so learn Christ; assuming that you have heard about him and were in him, as the truth is in Jesus. Put off your old nature which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness' (Eph. 4. 20-24).

This newness of life was given us as an image of the new man, Christ Jesus: 'Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old nature with its practices and have put on the new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator' (Col. 3. 9-10). This newness of life stays under the new law which was given us by the Spirit of truth: 'Now we have received not the spirit of this world, but the Spirit that is of God; that we may know the things that are given us from God' (I Cor. 2. 12). He is, according to St John, the Spirit of truth, spirit of the new life we have contemplated and seen in Christ Jesus, who is our Truth, our Way and our Life.

This is the glorious and joyful message the apostles announced to the pagans of their time. It is the same message, the same gospel we have to preach and to witness to in our modern world, which in so many aspects resembles the world Paul, Peter and John were confronted with.

Are we still faithful to this heritage? Are we the children of joy, of hope, of happiness, the servants and witnesses of salvation and redemption, or have we turned the Christian religion into a new legalism, into a kind of rabbinic Christianity, in which our perfect conformism with the laws of the Church, and even more with the peculiar customs and uses of our own parish or community gives us a comfortable feeling of security and distinction, a sense of personal accomplishment, which no longer looks for the consolation of God's mercy, for the love of Christ and the presence in our hearts of their Spirit, but for a smug complacency in our own personal respectability and the easy security of our external observance?

To witness faithfully and truthfully to our authentic heritage of the gospel, we have to think it correctly. How do we understand this newness of life, which we now more commonly, if not always so happily, call our supernatural life of grace?

There is a certain tradition of spirituality according to which our normal human daily activities, which are so simple and so limited in their outlook and their content, have no immediate and real significance for God, except for the fact that they could acquire some importance and value in his eyes should we form and add a special 'supernatural' intention, should we offer them to him with an explicit and deeply religious motive. I have nothing against the importance of 'purity of intention' which in so far as the saints were always preoccupied with it, belongs to a very old and sure tradition of holiness and devotion. But how many cruelties and injustices have been performed in the name of charity? How many dishonesties in the name of the Kingdom of God? An Englishman once wrote: 'A man has many reasons for what he does, the good ones and the real one'. It is not enough to form a good intention; it has to be the real one. There is no better intention for that matter than the direction of our whole life towards the service of God and of our brethren.

There is another tradition in spiritual life according to which the supernatural value of our life has to be founded on special works, on extraordinary exertions, on tense agitations and scrupulous observances of a special kind. The common human duties are in this tradition despised and suspected, because they are only human and natural. A mother cares the whole day for her children; but this is only natural. A doctor works in a hospital; but that is his own choice. A worker toils in a factory or on a farm; but our national economy needs them. A man is merely polite to his neighbour; but that is how it should be. There is no special 'supernatural' value in this, so people think, as it is only human to be honest, polite, civil, to work for a living and to suffer from the various illnesses our human existence is plagued with.

There can be found religious men or women, who think that only the life of dedication in a religious order leads us to sanctity, and belongs alone therefore to the true newness of life the apostles spoke of. The ordinary duties of parents with their children, of a lawyer in his office, a haberdasher in his shop, a politician in his department, a policeman in his radiocar, a scientist in his laboratory can only lead towards God in a very limited and lessened way, because such activities are only too human, profane and base, and therefore of no importance in God's eyes.

Does the evangelical message of our newness of life in Christ imply

that we should turn away from common and simple duties, that we should despise the joys of men and the merited pride of a man who has completed his work, who enjoys the splendour of nature or is fascinated by the discoveries of science, and instead crave for higher, more sublime and noble activities?

You know that this is not true. We are called to follow Christ in this world, in this human situation, as real human beings, brothers and sisters of every man. There is a French proverb which says very aptly: 'By trying to live as angels so many live as beasts.'

It is to this world of ours that Christ descended from heaven. It is for this world that he became man, he died on the cross and that he was raised from the dead. It is for this world that he became man, man in the fullest sense of the word, with all its normal limitations, and, we may say, with its miserable pettyness and mediocrity. He belonged to a particular nation, a very small one, he spoke only a few languages, Aramaic, Hebrew and probably a few words of Greek, he travelled over a very small area, visited a few unknown villages, preached to humble audiences, to fishermen, farmers and shepherds. He never visited the famous and glorious cities of learning and human wisdom, neither Athens nor Alexandria, he was never in Rome, the political and military centre of the world, never in the palaces of kings or the emperor Augustus. Nevertheless he saved the world.

But we might consider the deeper mysteries of his divine and human existence. His humanity was the humanity of God's Son, and existed by the power of the divine existence; it was fully united in the unity of one Person with the eternal fulness of God himself, and in this he prefigured in perfection what grace would in measure make all of us.

Has this deep and intimate union of Christ's humanity with God himself made him foreign and alien to our human destiny? On the contrary. Precisely because he was so fully united with God, because his existence was pervaded and penetrated with the eternal presence of the Son of God, he became more human than we ever have been and ever shall be.

The only thing which is truly and fundamentally foreign to humanity, although it is so common, is sin, precisely because in sinning we wound and destroy the image of God in us, which is the core and the centre of our human personality. This is why sin is so tedious, and although every sinner thinks his case is a special one, the confessor knows by experience how uninteresting and monotonous the endless repetition of the same sins can be - precisely because sin is not human, but only a deformation

of humanity. Only the lives of the saints are truly interesting and fascinating, because in them the creative power of grace and of our freedom expresses itself.

If this is true, our newness of life, far from separating us from human kind, intensifies our common human solidarity. Supernatural life is, according to Christ's image of it, the more human as it is the more divine. Every form of spirituality which estranges us from the common simple duties of humanity is an illusion, an act of dishonesty and insincerity, a very dangerous source of spiritual pride and phariseism.

Do we remember the significant parable of our Lord about the Pharisee and the Publican? The reason proposed for this parable by Luke is typical: 'There were some who trusted in themselves, thinking they were righteous and despised others. To them Christ told this parable: Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself: I thank thee, God, that I am not like other men, who steal and cheat and commit adultery, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get. But the tax collector stood far off; he would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast and said: God, be merciful to me a sinner. I tell you, this man went back home justified rather than the other; everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and the man who humbles himself will be exalted' (Luke 18. 9-14).

This is our vocation and calling: to find God in our human life. As Christ did, we have to change it from within, through our full and sincere dedication to all men, in whom we shall then meet the face of the living God. The decisive words of Christ in the last judgment are 'Truly, as you did it to one of the least of my brethren, you did it to me', or: 'Truly, as you did it not to one of the least of my brethren, you did it not to me' (Matt. 25. 40, 45).

The value of our life in the eyes of God does not therefore depend on special 'supernatural' intentions we may add to everything we do - they might be illusions, although they are of course normally useful to foster a real spirit of dedication and devotion. Nor does it depend on special, more spiritual and noble activities we choose for ourselves - they also could be an illusion. Fundamentally it depends on the real and deep sense of obedience and love in which we accept our actual human destiny, whatever it may be - as the English Ritual for marriage so beautifully says, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health.

The objection may be made that there is a spiritual tradition which seems to disagree with the doctrine just explained. The saints in general

stressed the necessity of penance, of mortification, of suffering for the sake of God. This preference for mortification originates, it seems, from a profound suspicion and mistrust of normal human values.

This is true, but in this matter as in everything else we have, as the apostle says, to prove the spirits who might lead us into such practices.

If we mistrust ourselves, thinking according to the old illusion that our bodies are the real source of sin, we are wrong. It is not primarily our body which entices us to sin, but the deep tendency towards self-pride and self-love, which original sin and our personal sins have left in us, as the spiritual wound of our human nature. There lies the real source of wickedness.

There is also the view which gives suffering in itself a special and almost exclusive redemptive value in the eyes of God. This too is wrong, at least in so far as we frequently think it in a materialistic way. Sufferings by themselves are neutral: they can lead us to holiness and sanctity, but also bring us down to bitterness and rebellion. It is the spirit in which we suffer which make the whole difference. Only this has value in the eyes of God.

This curious misconception has its origin in a rather crude and primitive doctrine of redemption in the early Middle Ages. Because the cross is the symbol of Christianity, because we believe that Christ redeemed us by his holy passion and death, we think that sufferings have a special value in God's eyes. But how could God by any means be appeased by mere sufferings, how could his wrath and anger be conciliated by the mere amount of pain and grief? What do we think God's heart is like? He hates pain, sorrow and distress more than we do, because they leave a dark shadow on the splendour of his creation.

The doctrine of the New Testament is quite other. Christ never loved pain and grief. He prayed to his Father on Mount Olivet: 'Father, if it pleases thee, take away this chalice from me; only not my will but thine be done'. (Luke 22. 42). Christ redeemed us not so much by his passion as by the spirit of obedience and love in which he accepted his whole life, especially his passion and death. He accepted it from the hands of God. We have to understand this not in the sense that God personally and positively sent him to death. That was done only by the Jews who wanted to free themselves from a person they hated and persecuted. But the will of God is that we accept our life in this world of sin, in this world of hate and murder, in this darkness, and that in a spirit of love.

In the Epistle to the Philippians St Paul stated the fundamental

principle of all salvation when he described the 'spirit of Jesus Christ'. 'Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped.' This is an allusion to the sin of our first parents who did on the contrary grasp at equality with God. 'He emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name' (Phil. 2. 5-9).

This name means that Christ is the Lord, the Lord exalted on the cross and in the Resurrection, the living cause of our salvation. He became the cause of our salvation in that by what he did he merited for us that we should have the same grace of accepting our life, whatever it is and shall be, in the same spirit of obedience and love, with him, through him and by him in the power of the Holy Ghost. This is the doctrine of the Bible, the doctrine which the Church took over as a central theme in the liturgy of Holy Week and Easter when these words of St Paul are repeated over and over again in the mass and the office. There is no other redemption than the inner conversion of hearts.

We could, however, if we want to hold before our eyes all the aspects of the truth Christ has revealed to us, say something more about the mysterious value of pain and suffering, about the deeper sense of Christian penance and mortification. When we consider the history of humanity, we could discover among men of a noble character and a great heart a mysterious preference for pain and suffering, which we like to exalt in our human literature, in our dramas and poems, in old myths and modern novels. It is as if love has the intuition that it expresses itself more surely, more deeply, more fully, more intensely through harshness and pain. And we think it is true. We all know from a long personal experience of life how real our tendency is towards self-love and egoism. Amid hardness and pain we think, and rightly, that we are more able to prove to ourselves and to the person we love the sincerity, the truth and the depth of our love.

We might find this also confirmed by the teaching of the New Testament. Christ himself confessed that there is no greater love than that of the man who gives his life for his friends (Jn 15. 13-15). He accepted for himself our highest symbol of love and devotion: to endure pain and suffering for one's friends. Is it not true that if he had lived among us in riches and comfort, we would never completely have believed in the

depth and the divine sincerity of his love for us? Now we are sure, we can doubt no more when we contemplate the cross. His passion and death became for us the deepest symbol of his love for us, the very symbol of our redemption, the deepest symbol too of the love of his Father.

'You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ', St Paul told his beloved Corinthians, 'that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich' (2 Cor. 8. 9).

And St John writes in his first Epistle: 'In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his son to be the expiation for our sins.' (1 Jn. 4. 9-10). If this is true the law of Christ's life became our law of life too. 'By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.' (1 Jn 3. 16).

This shows us the real Christian view about newness of life. We have to find God through the common and very humble duties and obligations of our common humanity in this world, in a spirit of obedience and love. And because of our tendency towards self-love, we rejoice with Christ and the saints whenever we suffer for the sake of our brethren, and so for the sake of God. And if this is true, there is no aspect of human life and brotherhood which might seem indifferent to God, who accepted it as the means of our own salvation.

There is in the epistle to the Philippians a moving and splendid exhortation of St Paul which will aptly conclude these reflections. We might call it the Magna Carta of Christian humanism: 'Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, Rejoice. Let all men know your forbearance. The Lord is at hand. Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is precious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, do; and the God of peace will be with you.' (Phil. 4. 6-9).