

The Recognition of Jesus

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Doctrine and personal appeal: these were one thing and one force in Jesus Christ. The Person we call the *Word* was made flesh and spoke an intelligible and humanly expressed word. He communicated the truth and a way of life. We call it His doctrine. And this *same Word Incarnate* had a sheer, radiant power to attract men and women and to hold them in love. There was no divide between some dry, harsh, abstract set of propositions imposed by an external authority, and the personality of the Master Himself. There was no dichotomy between the Church, the Establishment, the Twelve, and this wonderful, lovable, merciful Jesus. It is His radiant personality whom we say we are seeking to love and to follow, and from whom we wish to learn our way of life; and from Him came just this sort of teaching, both about Himself, that is to say the doctrine of faith, and about the good and fulfilling life, that is to say the doctrine of morals. It was Jesus Himself who said that “out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.” (Matt 12:34) The doctrine spilled out from the very mind and heart of Christ. The inner truth of the doctrine which He saw and lived made Jesus the sort of Person He was. The sort of Person that He was made Jesus brimful of the doctrine He taught. There is no way we can separate the two—no way at all.

A Nostalgic Dream of Jesus?

We live in an age of nostalgia just now. If you have lived long enough to have been in on something when it first came out, whether it be classical jazz, rock or tap-dancing, you may be of the opinion that it was not at all as wonderful as it looks through pretty, rose tinted nostalgia glasses. When it comes to writing up the characters of very selfish, very lecherous, very drug rotted people as if they were saviours of mankind, and putting up monuments to them, you may want to be sick. Nostalgia can be a sigh for an imaginary golden age, the projection upon dead men and women of some inner desire, hope or ideal that you would like to see around now and don't see. As the book of Genesis puts it (a little out of context just here) “Giants were on the earth in those days.” (Gen 6:4) In the spiritual order, and even in the cultural order, they may in fact have been much smaller.

I think we are in danger of setting up a nostalgic dream of Jesus Christ as the real thing. Men and women today, especially the young, we are told, love and accept Jesus Christ, but they cannot stand that drab, authoritarian institution called the Church. When you peel the layers off their conscious mind and reach the subconscious, you will find most times that they mean they don't like the teaching this institution gives about poverty, prayer, attendance at the Eucharist, and their sexual life whether in or out of marriage. Do they really know anything at all about Jesus?

It is not only the modern world of non-doctrinal, vaguely emotional Christianity which needs to ask itself whether it really knows and loves Jesus. The modern intellectual establishment of the Roman Catholic Church needs to ask itself the same question. If it will not ask itself the question, then it must bear to be quizzed about the matter: who is this Jesus of yours? St Paul abruptly dismissed the thinkers of his own time as worthless and foolish before God (1 Cor 1:20) because they neither recognised Christ nor savoured the personality He radiated. He was not their sort of person, not their love, not their intimate friend. They certainly did not draw life from Him. Is it really different today with Küng and Schillebeeckx in doctrine of faith, or with writers and lecturers like Curran and Dominion in the right evaluation of sex, love and human fulfilment? One does not think so.

Knowing the Real Jesus of History

It is, first of all, a matter of knowing what the Jesus of history really said and taught. Are the Gospels and the letters of Paul and the other apostles direct, hotly written, and clearly sincere expressions of a living Master or are they remote, carefully written up studies of one who has long since left the scene? The spontaneity, the sheer human verve, and the naïveté at times of the apostolic writings is there for all to see. Jesus, lovable, magnetic and merciful as He was, managed to embroil Himself in an awful lot of contradiction in His day, even with the common people, the Temple crowds. He even managed to get Himself crucified; and except for the appalling claim of His bodily Resurrection from the dead, there is no intelligent manner of explaining how He and His disciples ever made a comeback.

The hard things in the doctrine of Jesus, including the hard things about marriage and sexual holiness, are already there in the Gospels. They are present even more bluntly in the writings of St Paul. They are found as part of the living evidence of history in the first documents and apologetics of the early Christian Church. These same realities of human nature and life, both the inspiring and the difficult, are found again, polished and refined in presentation, in the Fathers of the Church. Christian doctrine is a well worked out edifice of theology by 500 AD: a sophisticated but yet very unworldly synthesis of human and divine wisdom, presented by men who really and truly lived what they taught, and who had experienced the fulfilment and the liberation of the doctrine they wrote about.

There was for instance St Augustine of Hippo, who is very unpopular today with the New Theology establishment. He presented to the Church of his day, after much dialogue and discussion, a doctrine of original sin which the Church recognised as true in all essentials to what she did in fact believe (although the Church did not accept every philosophical speculation Augustine suggested, sometimes tentatively, to explain the ‘how’ of it). Similarly he gave to the Church a synthesis of divine and human reasoning against the Manichees in the matter of the goodness of sexual desire and function, and against the Pelagians in the matter of its perfection and the need of inner grace to attain that perfection. Again the Church in his day, and for a thousand years and more afterwards, recognised it as true to her doctrine and its consequences. The doctrine of Augustine is still enshrined in the solemn teaching of *Humanae Vitae*. In fact Augustine is still blamed for it. He is therefore very unpopular with the Currans and Dominians of our day, whose own doctrine of fulfilment in human love involves a constant confusion of the spiritual, the somatic,¹ and the specifically erotic aspects in human love as an experience. In fact many of the modern ‘Christian’ philosophers of our day have gone way back beyond the Pelagians and have linked up quite frankly with the ancient classical paganism of Greece and Rome. If they could manage a re-incarnation back in history, they would find themselves very much at home, so long as they happened to be born in the upper classes!

It is no use saying that we cannot know the Christ of history. He lives in the Gospels in explicit speech. He lives in the pastoral letters of the apostles in explicit speech. He lives in the witness of the primitive Church, the Fathers, and the teaching Church of Rome and, for that matter, of Constantinople, down the ages.

He is alive and dynamic in the consecrated host whenever it is lifted above the heads of the people at Mass. With all due respect to certain well-known liturgists, it is actually very convenient to have altar breads which are small, round, white, and coin-shaped. Even if you give people large craggy lumps of brown bread of the consistency of cardboard, it does nothing to add to devotion; and for senior citizens it does not increase fervour to be trying to lick it off your denture plates all the morning. Neither does it overcome the profoundly

¹ I.e. bodily.

philosophical objection of a fourteen year old from Dockland to whom it was my privilege to minister in the swinging liturgical late sixties: “A little bit of ’oly bread and a lick of ’oly wine ain’t no nosh up”. The shape, size and consistency of the bread is of no account at all. The Lord Himself said it a long time ago: “It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.” (John 6:63) When the Lord communicates Himself to us in the Eucharist in His physical reality as man, it is the spirit, the divinity that quickens; the flesh, the breadiness of the bread, profits nothing. When will some people accept the divine paradox, and by becoming little children grow up as adults in Christ? In the Eucharist moreover we have Christ in Person. And because He is the Lord of history He is also the historic Christ.

Through this centring of the Church in the Eucharist, which is the living Christ, He is also the Lord of the Magisterium, which is the true word of the Word Incarnate. This word speaks out first in the solemn doctrine preached to the people in the Liturgy of the Word, then through General Councils with the Pope, and finally through the solemn definition of Peter and his successors through the ages, for “Satan demanded to have you [plural], that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you [singular] that your faith may not fail.” (Luke 22:32-32) We really do know the mind and heart of the radiant Jesus that Schillebeeckx and others call on us to go out and meet. If, however, they describe Him in terms other than the doctrinal witness we have outlined above, they are either describing themselves writ large, or simply playing back a nostalgic feature and calling it ‘the Christ of faith’. Nostalgia is impossible for Jesus, because Jesus lives on, in His own physical reality and in the history of mankind.

Christian Maturity: Childlike Love

It is important to find, and to state, the link between the Jesus of history—the Jesus of the ‘essentialist’ Church that lives in doctrine of faith and morals—and the ‘existential’ Jesus—the ‘vibrant personality’ Jesus whom we are called upon to know and love and adore.

It is essential to know Jesus. It is essential to fill out the vision of the Gospels, and the even more explicit vision of the Pauline letters, with the vision of Christ as the Lord of creation. For in His very self, true God made true man, Christ fulfils that Unity-Law of Control and Direction to fulfilment, within which the universe is framed. It is essential through the Holy Spirit to proclaim the meaning of St John and St Paul against a larger canvas of truth, as modern knowledge has made it possible for us to do.

It is just as vital to possess Jesus in a humble and obedient love. Jesus was not made Incarnate to dazzle us but to make us conformable to the divine being, the divine reality and holiness. Knowledge alone can puff up (cf. 1 Cor 8:1), and men and women who are puffed up, even with a wisdom about God which is not false, may yet fall constantly and weakly into sin—sins of the flesh for instance—and into a lack of generosity of spirit in heeding the call of the Master. In saying this one has no desire to weaken any man’s or woman’s trust in the constant and repeated mercy of God. But it was Jesus Himself who said, “If you love Me, you will keep my commandments.” (John 14:15) Without the love that actually keeps the commandments, there is not the dynamic holiness that evangelises men. Is that not the reason why the Church herself groans and is in travail until saints arise and lift her, and all mankind with her, out of the morass of worldliness and little achievements? Is that not why we, being many, achieve so little, and why the real saints, being few, achieve so much? I once lived as a curate under an old Canon who was asked by an Irish colleague why it was that so many nuns were canonised, and so very, very few priests. The Canon, by the way, was Religious Superior to a large congregation of sisters, and of course the question was meant to take the mickey out of him. “Ah, Father”, said the Canon, “it is because the poor sisters read the

scriptures, and since they don't know any theology, they take it literally; whereas we priests know a lot of theology, and we know we don't have to take it just like it says. But, God! It makes saints out of the sisters!" It is the childlike who are the saints, and only the saints achieve.

We seek, then, union and communion of love and life with Jesus. But we don't seek just the love of friendship or the love of admiration. We are not content even with the love of discipleship, unless that word is given its specifically Christian meaning. People can be disciples of a saintly man or woman, disciples of a 'guru'. Our relationship to Christ transcends all that. Our love towards Christ is of the same order of life and being as a baby's is towards its mother. The baby loves and caresses the mother, but it also draws the milk of life from her. Christian maturity of being is that sort of relationship to Christ. It is a participation in the being of God; a maturity of spirit, of love and of emotion; a maturity of wisdom and love; a harmonious balance of every desire of spirit and of matter. The life of grace is the growth of *being* in beauty and real truth through this vital union and communion with Jesus Christ.

Seeing Yourself Imaged in Christ

So we come back again to the personality of Christ: to Jesus, the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6). We come back to Jesus the lovable, the merciful, the totally wise. This same Jesus could also be intransigent, demanding and, in modern language, a bit of a bully. He really hurt that poor, rich, nice young man who had always been such a good boy (Matt 19:16-22)! We come back to Jesus, the real and ultimate truth in doctrine and in fulfilment as a living experience of human joy. You take the package entire. Jesus cannot be parcelled out. It is vitally important *to get this relationship right*, both in the matter of the personality of Jesus as He beckons to us, and also regarding the doctrine that Jesus taught and still teaches alive in the Church. For Jesus is the mirror in which we see our own personality and find our own identity.

The personality of Jesus—and this again is a matter of confused teaching just now—is not merely a human personality, it is the radiation and the life giving power of a divine Person. This is the identity in whose image and likeness we are made. Christ, as Son of God and Son of Man, is *the mirror image of man*. In His being, as God and Man, is your identity and my identity; in Him is the identity of male and female without distinction. We draw life, joy, and likeness and conformity to God from Christ.

This identity of our own personality is not a likeness of the mind alone, a likeness of vision and of truth. It is not a likeness of obedience alone, nor of the pain of sacrifice; although undeniably obedience and the pain of sacrifice will be there for us, and will become part of our experience in conforming our being to Christ's being. There is also the joy and the happiness of Christ, which is the radiation through His human psyche of the joy which defines the being of God in Himself. Unless our conformation to Christ, the Mirror of Man, is perfect, we are not going to experience within ourselves the perfect fulfilment and joy of our manhood or our womanhood. Like all spiritual creations, whether man or angel, our specific identity is not in ourselves, or in the order of creation at all. It is in God, who is beyond our order of being and limitation, but to whose image alone we are fashioned, and in whose order of joy alone we find our bliss. That is why all Humanism, with the capital letter, is a mistake. The fulfilment of man is in God. In God made man we find our identity. That is really the meaning of the title, *Son of Man*: a title hardly found in the Old Testament except towards the end of the period of Messianic prophecy, but the title preferred above all others by Christ when He spoke of His mission to us and of our relationship to Himself.

In passing, may one make a speculative suggestion that is not going to be taken up here, but which the philosopher and theologian may care to ponder, in case there may be some new, at least partial truth in it? The human nature of Christ, the Son of Man, is the perfect image of our own identity and holiness, our wholeness in body and soul through God. So likewise, in the order of the spiritual soul, the divine Being itself, as pure and perfect spirit, is the mirror image of our spiritual perfection, now and unto the beatific vision. It makes sense of the appalling proposition that through Christ we become “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet 1:4). It also means that Christ, as God and man in the unity of His one divine Person, is the total manifestation of our human truth, our goodness, our wholeness and our beatitude: both in heaven *and now upon earth*. It was Jesus who said, “Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Matt 5:48)

Forming Christian Life

If teachers of status, whether priests or lay folk, do not themselves accept the doctrine of life and human goodness that Jesus taught on earth and still teaches in His Church, and if they do not teach it to others, they will not form within those others the true identity of the real, living Jesus. What you do not yourself believe, or rather what you yourself deny however regretfully and secretly, you cannot live in yourself as an experience of life and nobility of being. Nobody judges other people more nobly, more sincerely, or more chastely than he lives within his own life. It is a point worth remembering when someone passes judgment on another: how do you rate the speaker for wisdom and holiness of heart? Nobody judges better than he or she is.

This principle is important in the home, regarding the spiritual quality of parents. They are the natural, and in a sense the hierarchical, teachers of their children, for marriage is to be looked upon as a ministry in the Church as well as an office in creation. The principle is important in schools and in parishes. We priests form men and women, and even more manifestly and often much more successfully, we form children. It is important therefore in university chaplaincies and most of all in seminaries. It is a betrayal of good young men when bishops and seminary rectors allow men and women to lecture with authority on sex, love, and the meaning of sex in marriage, when they are manifestly in error over the doctrine of Christ, however distinguished academically they might be. If people make the Church, and therefore Christ teaching within her, to be wrong in the psychological evaluation and use of sex, whether in marriage or out of marriage or by the misuse of their own bodies, then it follows that they perceive and live a distorted experience of love within their own personalities, however much the world lauds them as ‘experts’. Nobody who teaches error can live the truth. Nobody who teaches error can form another in the truth. That of course is why we all suffer from the burden of original and actual sin at the hands of others, as well as within our own minds and hearts.

Even in these days, when there is so much talk of academic freedom, good and noble young men in seminaries are expected to accept the formation provided for them by their teachers with humility of heart and obedience of mind. When psychological error is proffered to them as part of their formation in this matter of human love, it not only makes for confused and faulty teaching later as priests, but makes for self-crucifixion in their own lives as men who have taken a vow of chastity for the kingdom of God’s sake. For this malformation of men, on whom the very future of the Church and the formation of Christ’s people depends, rectors and bishops will answer to Christ directly and very severely. For these know perfectly well that to bring in teachers of doctrinal dissent as honoured persons, whose opinions are very, very important to your pastoral understanding later on in your priestly lives, is a betrayal of their own personal mission to Christ as rectors or as diocesan bishops.

Knowing who you are is Knowing Christ

It is not only priests who talk about identity crisis. The expression is surely getting a bit dated now, but one finds it still very much an 'in thing' among the young. One has even found it in the youth club. This writer has lately been asked very earnestly by a teenager, "Do you know who you are, because I don't?" Knowing who you are is not a matter of being a priest or being married or being single. It is not a matter of vocation at all. Knowing who you are is a matter of knowing Christ as He really is, and of humbly loving Him and conforming your whole life to Him. Knowing who you are is a matter also of bearing anguish and pain and sacrifice and the sneers and contempt of others. It means bearing loneliness also, rather than betraying the truth and goodness revealed in Christ. If you don't know who you are, if you have an 'identity crisis', it means either that you have never found Christ and are still looking for Him, or else that you don't love Him enough or faithfully enough: you don't obey Him. Knowing who you are is first of all to find Jesus Christ in His real self; that is, to find doctrine of truth, love, and moral goodness in our relationship to others. It is to find God and one's neighbour in life, in love, and in prayer.

When you have this degree of union with Jesus Christ—especially in youth, though at all times in all ages of life, actually—then from a full heart you will say to the same Jesus, "Lord, what will you have me to do?" That may well be the application of your identity to life and to vocation, whether in religious life or in marriage or in the single state in the world. St Paul suffered an identity crisis as he set out breathing threats and slaughter along the road to Damascus. He had been taught error concerning the real Jesus, therefore he was in a mess, and was unfulfilled and confused inside himself. When Jesus struck him down on the road his identity crisis was cured. He knew who he was in the Person who both reproached him and invited him with love. He asked what he was to do. He applied his new identity, his Christlike identity, to Christ's work. He accepted the application of his new identity, to be the apostle to the nations.

Follow Him

It is the same for us today. Nobody loves God perfectly unless he knows God with full truth. Nobody knows God perfectly except through Jesus Christ. That is what the enfleshing of God as man is all about. Nobody will find all his yearnings, loves, emotions and drives fulfilled in harmony and truth, unless they are mirrored in that identity of truth which is the Person of Jesus. Live with Jesus your friend and teacher; love Jesus your friend and teacher; be conformed to Him. He alone really *knows* what is good for you, joyful for you, fulfilment for you. He ought to know: you were made by Him and through Him. Even as human, as *yourself*, you were modelled upon Him, for He was coming as the *Son of Man*. You cannot parcel out the truth of what He taught from the personality who breathed His teaching out with fire, saying "I came to cast fire upon the earth." (Luke 12:49)

Ignore all the rest. At best they are sophists, no matter how well intentioned. They themselves are damaged inwardly in their own persons by original sin, even if they deny its existence. There is only one teacher without any trace of sin, having therefore the clear eye of perfect truth and the clean heart of a totally perfect love. Follow Him. He Himself said, "Call no man teacher upon earth, for you have only one teacher, and He is the Christ." (Cf. Matt 23:8-10) Whoever stumbles upon that Rock of the Teacher will be badly bruised, while if the Rock should fall upon him, he will be ground to powder (cf. Luke 20:18).

Similarly you, oh son or daughter of man, you have only one identity to achieve. It is Christ's identity living in you, radiant in you. Do not try to divide the doctrine of Jesus Christ—which is to say His *Magisterium in the official, guaranteed Church*—from His fulfilling and loving self. You cannot separate a tree from its fruits or a man from his words.

Much less can you divide them in the Living God. Do not expect to find within *yourself* the power to live it, or the full will to live it. That is Humanism again: being me-centred and man-centred. You are made to be God-centred, and that by the law of nature as well as by the law of grace. “Apart from Me”, said the Son of God and Son of Man, upon whom you are centred, “you can do nothing.” (John 15:5) Make your communion with Him; feed on Him in your heart; feed on Him in the Holy Eucharist. Remember that in the last days, because affluence and power over nature has abounded, so will iniquity abound. It has been prophesied that many will fall away (Matt 24:10-12). How hard it shall be for those who have riches—entire affluent nations of them—to enter into the kingdom of God (Matt 19:23)! You however, son of God, daughter of God, “strive to enter by the narrow door.” (Luke 13:24) Never be scared by any scandal, no matter how grave, within the Church: it must needs be that scandals come; but woe to those by whom the scandal comes (Luke 17:1), and those who lay out the red carpet for them, right up to the front door. You will find Jesus easily enough if you look for Him. “Him who comes to Me”, said our Lord, “I will not cast out.” (John 6:37) He speaks in the Church, the real Church, in solemn doctrine, in the Pope and in Ecumenical Council. Forget the others. You cannot miss the voice of Peter in the Church; it is loud and clear.