

CHRIST AND CHRISTIANS

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HE history of mankind from the fall of Adam to the Incarnation is the history of the gradual extinction of the light which was given to the world by the primitive revelation. Christ came to restore this light, to reawaken in the minds of men the truths of the spiritual character, immortality and eternal destiny of the soul. More than this, He added to the old revelation the light of new teaching. The ultimate end of Christ's mission on earth was to lead men back to God. In order to do this He had first to teach them the Truth by which this end was to be accomplished. St. Matthew has constructed a lasting monument to the teaching of Christ, in his account of the Sermon on the Mount. The doctrine which Christ here lays down embraces, almost in their entirety, the duties of man towards God and towards his neighbor. To help men fulfill this twofold obligation, He spoke to them of the Fatherhood of God. He told them of the nature and glories of the Kingdom of Heaven, and promised it as the eternal reward of His faithful followers.

The true teacher is also a model. He not only proposes doctrines, but also leads his followers in living them. The Divine Teacher became man, that by His example He might the better impress His doctrines upon the minds and hearts of men. Christians of all ages merit their title when they model their lives upon the life of Him, Who is "the way, the truth and the life." The example of Christ is in a manner identified with His teaching. Consequently it is impossible to follow His teaching without a knowledge both of the reason *why* He lived on earth and of *how* His life was spent.

The sublime teaching of Christ would have had little appeal to men had not the Teacher lived His life in perfect conformity to it and in a manner best adapted to man's acceptance of it. When Christ chose to live among men in poverty and obedience, it was because, seeing these two virtues in their Teacher, men

could not fail to understand the real source of His teaching and its entire identification with Truth. Poverty and Obedience were assumed by Christ that He might teach the better, and were endured until His personal work on earth was finished that His example might be perfect.

It is manifest that poverty considered in itself and apart from the motive of its acceptance, can be nothing but a handicap and can no more confer spiritual than temporal benefits on anyone. The poverty of Christ was spiritually benificent to mankind because in Him it was a sacrifice which He accepted for just that purpose. By it, Christ stored up in Himself untold merit and it is from the treasure house of His meritorious actions that the faithful of all times have drawn and must draw their spiritual strength. Under this aspect however, this virtue was but one of the many which Christ used to gain merit for mankind. Moreover, by a life of poverty, Christ taught men how they might gain for themselves the merits which His entire mission on earth offered to them. Consequently, if we consider it as it affected the human beings with whom He came in contact it attains an added importance. By depriving Himself of earthly wealth, He was able to extend His teaching to all classes. The poor could approach Him as readily as the rich. He offered riches to all, but they were of a nature absolutely foreign to the standards of the world. All might partake of them on the simple condition of becoming poor in spirit.

Finally, by living a life of poverty on earth, Christ clearly proved His Divinity. This man who claimed to be God, who commanded all men to adore, love and serve him as God, lived a life of poverty,—“the foxes have holes and the birds of the air nests; but the Son of Man hath not where to lay his head.” The poverty which he suffered was entirely voluntary. When the multitude sought to make him King he fled into the desert. Nevertheless the teaching of this man supplants the Jewish Religion and it demolishes paganism, idolatry and infidelity in all ages. Certainly a man who could accomplish such a marvelous transformation of thought not only in his own time but also in all succeeding ages, and yet who himself experienced the most abject poverty, must have been more than a man. He could be none other than, “the Christ, the Son of the Living God.”

Equally as important as Poverty for the success of His mission was the Obedience of Christ. This virtue in Christ might be considered under many aspects. He was obedient to

His Father, to His earthly parents, to the Law of the Jews and finally to the Roman Law. Here, it may be sufficient to examine His obedience to that law which most intimately affected those among whom He lived and which consequently should have been most significant to them, i.e., to the Mosaic Law of the Jews. As with all His virtues, this obedience of Christ was first of all an example. This example was twofold and yet singular. To the Jews of His time it exemplified a perfect observance of the Old Law, to Christians it is the model for their submission to Ecclesiastical Authority, while to both Jew and Christian it is their inspiration when they accept the Divine Will as revealed through the representatives of God upon earth.

Though Christ observed the Mosaic Law in order to give men an example, this was not the sole purpose of His obedience. He was obedient to the Old Law that He might deliver men from its servitude. He could have accomplished this without first being obedient to the Mosaic Precepts, principally because He was not subject to them. But, by assuming in Himself the obligation of all mankind, He fulfilled their debt to the Old Covenant. Thus they were made free to forsake the Old Law of bondage for His New Law of Love.

If Christ came upon earth to teach men the truth by which they are saved, He certainly intended that they not only accept this truth but also that they lead lives which would show forth to their fellowmen the marvelous effects of much a sublime doctrine. The fundamental reason for man's living in society is because it is instinctive to him. Following this natural inclination, his companionship with others will be of benefit to himself. But it requires something more than following mere natural inclination in order that a man contribute his share to the commonweal. The part which some play in the drama of community life is greater than that intrusted to others. But the part which anyone plays is ennobled and made perfect if performed in the light which Christ has shed. On the other hand seemingly great works no matter what their nature, fail miserably when they are not guided and inspired by the principles of Christ. They may contribute to personal gain and even confer transitory physical and intellectual gifts on others, but ultimately they will degrade the souls of their sponsors and leave a blight upon the spiritual lives of their fellowmen.

No man can begin to conform his own life to Christ's before he accepts the means which his exemplar used. This was the

intention Christ had in selecting the means which He did. This is why Christian Teachers have always recommended as essential to the spiritual life, a spirit of poverty and of obedience. Christ does not expect that all men deprive themselves of earthly wealth, but His Law does require that they be detached from it. Without this poverty of spirit it is impossible for the Christian to turn his attention to the true purpose of his life, viz., love of God and of neighbor. Possessing this virtue he easily recognizes that all benefits are from God and learns to place his reliance upon Divine Providence. At the same time he will measure the qualities of his neighbor not by material but by spiritual standards.

No virtue of Christ is more difficult of imitation and none is more typical of the true Christian, than the virtue of obedience. There is no form of obedience, save that which belongs to God, more Christ-like than obedience to Ecclesiastical Authority. This authority can claim obedience because it is the representative of God upon earth. Because it represents revealed truth it must be One, and because it is One all men are bound to seek it out and obey it. This is the nature of the authority which true Christians obey because they know that in doing so they are fulfilling the Will of God. Just as all law draws its sanction from the Divine Will, so also all obedience to law must be inspired by a reverence for the Divine Law. A law expresses the will of the legislator; it is not always in complete conformity with the will of the subject. This fact however, does not liberate the subject from observance. He is still obliged to fulfill it in accordance with the Divine Will.

The flourishing condition of the Catholic Church to-day bears witness to two facts, namely, that the life of Christ is the example of the true spiritual life and that this example has been accepted. When Christ came into the world, Greek Culture was rancid at the core, while the Roman Eagle, spreading its wings in a most triumphal flight, little dreamed that its very self-sufficiency would be the cause of its fall. The reason is not far to seek. Both societies were failing because both forgot to give tribute to the God who made them possible. They burned incense before all the creatures of God and before all the works of man, but never before the One True God of all. Judaism could not counteract their inevitable destruction, because it too was becoming dry and sterile. The world could only be saved by Christ, and Christian Catholic Society was His solution then, as

it is now, and as it must remain. Others have been tried, might be tried again; but no other will endure, because no other has its sanction in the life of Christ. The Catholic Church has its sanction in the life of Christ, from whose poverty it draws its life-giving power. It was this virtue which enabled the Apostles to overcome the opulence and vice of Rome. The perseverance of this virtue is at once the proof from the past and the prophecy for the future, that this is the Church with which Christ has promised to remain, "—even to the consummation of the world."

Finally, the Catholic Church is united and made One with its founder by that Founder's spirit of obedience which pervades it. Following the example of Christ it has ever pointed the way to a greater respect for authority and obedience to law among men, be that law and that authority Divine, Ecclesiastical or Civil. Thus the life of Christ continues and must continue in the society which His Church represents and directs, because He has promised this as the inheritance of mankind. This then is the legacy of Christ to the world. A Church which can never be equalled and which can be but poorly imitated; a Church imbued with His spirit of poverty and self-sacrifice; a Church refreshed with the wholesome breath of obedience; a Church which leads men to salvation. In a word, a Church of freemen.

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