

SON OF MAN

MARK BARRON, O.P.

I



IN spite of, or, more properly, because of the dogmatic definition of the Person of Christ, it is possible to abstract from the Divine nature, and, from time to time, to consider "the Son of Man" as man. Not only is it possible but it is of positive spiritual help and encouragement thus to think of Him Who is like to ourselves in all things, sin excepted.¹ Indeed, it was the great Saint Theresa who at one time regretted her unwarranted neglect of the Sacred Humanity of Christ.

That Man should forget the human in the contemplation of the Divine is not difficult of explanation. In the first rapt study of a painting, the beholder is conscious only of what hangs before him. Only if it should happen to be extinguished is he made aware of the light that illumines the picture. Similarly, the prospective purchaser of a diamond necklace devotes little or no attention to the lining of the jewel-case. Yet it is that very interior of the case which serves as a background and helps the better to set forth the beauty of the jewels. Lost in wonder at the thought of Who Jesus Christ is and what He did, men sometimes forget His *so* human human nature. Yet it is this very Humanity that makes colorful and attractive the Person of Christ.

That the Son of Man Himself sensed this tendency in human nature seems evident from the very construction of the Gospel story. As Archbishop Goodier, S.J., has pointed out: "He (Christ) has gone out of his way, if we may put it so, to make us feel and know that He is one with ourselves. He preferred always to call Himself the 'Son of Man' and as the writers of the Gospels chose the material for their work He inspired them to choose just such details as emphasized His feeble, human side."²

Upon the solid framework of God's own word, reënforced by all that the human mind can hope to know and understand about the In-

¹ Heb., iv., 15.

² Goodier, Alban, S.J., *The Meaning Of Life* (New York, 1914), p. 93.

finite, theologian and exegete have compacted the figure of Emmanuel, God with us. The various types of knowledge in Christ, His human and Divine Wills, His domination over human passions: all these and many other considerations that go to make up the Person have been the object of speculation and of ecclesiastical definition. For a true understanding of the God-Man these more abstruse questions are of fundamental importance. However, it is Jesus Christ, a Man among men, Who will excite the curiosity and inflame the loyalty of the "man in the street." Christ's own question: "Whom do men say that the Son of man is?"³ is echoed by the curiosity of men themselves. What sort of person is this Jesus Christ, anyway? Do you suppose that His system can be made to work? I just wonder what He would do in my case?

In the sense that He recognized and perfectly reconciled in Himself the reality of both the ideal and material orders of being, Jesus Christ may be called a Realist. This Realism of the God-Man has best been expressed by him who was His chosen friend, the Apostle, Saint John. In the second chapter of his Gospel, the disciple whom Jesus loved says of Christ that "He needed not that any should give testimony of man; for He knew what was in man."⁴ To this statement the late Father Bede Jarrett, O.P., has added: "for He was Man."⁵ From this it follows that Christ fulfilled within Himself and as Exemplar all the perfections of which human nature is capable. His is the most completely rounded character ever known to Man. There have been great saints and leaders, scientists, philosophers and artists, but always they have exemplified some part of which He alone is the whole.

II

In an examination into the character of the Son of Man there are certain aspects which especially command attention. There was in Him no disproportion between intellect, will and emotions. He possessed a kind of supernatural—but not superhuman—poise, beside which all the merely natural strivings of man must pale. His soul and the body which was its habitation together functioned for a single purpose.

It is of common human experience that after surrender there follows a measure of peace. In their own personal lives men have

³ *Matth.* xvi, 13.

⁴ *John* ii, 25.

⁵ Jarrett, Bede, O.P., *Meditations for Layfolk* (London, 1930), p. 31.

recognized and appreciated this fact. Great sinners, harassed by the futility of seeking happiness in their own exaltation, have discovered peace beneath the protecting wings of an understanding God. During His life, Christ knew and manifested that peace which can come only from submission of one's will to that of another and higher Being. "My meat is to do the will of Him that sent Me, that I may perfect His work."⁶ Before His death Christ confided this peace to His Apostles with the significant remark: "not as the world giveth, do I give unto you."⁷

There is a popular fallacy according to which Christ is conceived of by the practical-minded as a kind of an idealistic individual Whose theory is impossible of translation into everyday fact. His thought and action cannot possibly appeal to those who constantly rant about "the facts of life." According to them, Christ had no personal strength, and so He could not hope to be a leader of men. Quite the contrary is true. There is no more powerful condemnation of weakness and hypocrisy than that contained in the twenty-third chapter of Saint Matthew's Gospel. Nor was there a more stirring manifestation of righteous human anger than that of His driving the money-changers from the temple. His very silence in the presence of false accusation was dictated by His strength. He spoke only when silence would have been cowardice or a denial of His identity and mission.

The twentieth-century model of the super-man of Friedrich Nietzsche has the strength of a kind of semi-refined brute. To a certain extent he may also be said to have acquired poise in that he has learned to direct all things, including the State and the proletariat to the greater glory of himself and his own personal ambitions. However, it can hardly be said that he possesses yet another characteristic of the God-Man—natural grace.

Defined as "the unconstrained expression of the self-forgetting and kindly mind," grace "is a beautiful way of doing the right thing, in the right way, at the right time, and therefore opens all hearts to its possessor."⁸ Sympathy, graciousness and the form of His teaching were the exterior manifestations of this interior and natural quality of grace in Christ.

The power of sympathy in Jesus Christ is best expressed in the simple statement, "And Jesus wept."⁹ Although His miracles were evident signs of His Divinity, they were occasioned to no small ex-

⁶ *John* iv, 34.

⁷ *John* xiv, 27.

⁸ *Cath. Encyclopaedia*, "Jesus Christ," viii., 385.

⁹ *John* xi, 35.

tent by His very human sympathy for the needs and desires of others. At Cana He understood the probable embarrassment of the young bridegroom over the failure of his wine. The widow of Naim, the ten lepers, the man blind from his birth, and the cripple at the pool of Bethesda: all these and countless other incidents aroused His sympathy and inspired Him to manifest His Divine power. His description of the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son is that of an eagerly sympathetic patriarch who is willing to forgive "seventy times seven times." As the most perfect translation of the Godhead in human form,¹⁰ Jesus Christ has given the supreme example of infinite sympathy.

Graciousness is best measured by adversity. Often enough it is easy and convenient for men to be gracious in their dealing with one another. The rub comes in the real or apparent infidelity of a friend, in harsh rebuke or unfeeling neglect. The awful scenes of Christ's Passion were almost diabolically calculated to test His graciousness. He stood the test and succeeded, especially on that night before His death and in the darkness of Gethsemane. To the traitorous kiss of Judas His only response was the gentle rebuke: "Friend, whereto art thou come?"¹¹

Jesus Christ was the true man for the ages. The salvation that He wrought and the example that He manifested were for all men. His teaching had a universal application. In the new Law of Love there was to be no system of caste. It was for this reason that there is something truly unique in the form of Christ's teaching. Being possessed of a like human nature, He knew and appreciated the mental capacity of his listeners. His doctrine was from God but He couched it in terms that could be understood by all men. From the wheat and the cockle, the barren fig-tree, the sower and his seed, and the vine He drew lessons of spiritual import for the instruction, not only of the multitudes but also of His Apostles.

IV

It is not unlikely that a thoughtful consideration of the personality, thought and action of Jesus Christ will be dismissed with the summary remark, "Well, He was always God." That is very true, but Faith teaches that He was also Man. In all that He does God has a purpose. If He allowed His Only Begotten Son to become Man and to live among men there must have been a reason. Recog-

¹⁰ Steuart, R. H. J., S.J., *The Inward Vision* (London, 1934), p. 55.

¹¹ *Matth.* xxvi, 50.

nizing that fact and correlating it with the human nature of Christ, man should pass on to a consideration of his own human nature and its capabilities.

In writing of Mary and her rôle in the redemption of mankind, various Doctors of the Church have compared her to Eve. Through Eve's temptation of Adam, sin entered into the world. Through Mary's conception of Christ, the way was cleared for man's reconciliation to his God. From this there follows a parity between Adam and Christ. Indeed, there exists a tradition to the effect that Adam's body lay buried beneath the cross on Golgotha. More certain, however, is the term *the second Adam* which has been used to designate the Redeemer. Adam and Christ are alike in this, that they shared a common human nature.

May it not be said, then, that in the Sacred Humanity of the Son of God, man can see and understand the beauty of human nature, fresh from the creative Hand of God? Men can never hope entirely to achieve the stature of Christ, even as Man. But, in contemplating and imitating Him they can begin to know their own high vocation.