

BOASTERS IN CHRIST

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BOASTERS are unpleasant persons; their constant parading of their own virtues before the public's eye irks even their intimates. Hence, a boast spread broadcast reaps a harvest of slurs. That is why the opprobrious title of "empty barrels" is assigned to braggarts. St. Paul was a real boaster; as a matter of fact, he boasted of his boasting, and the passions of men were aroused at what he had to say. Indeed, they even tried to kill him in order to silence him. St. Paul, however, refused to boast of his own virtues: "Of myself I will not boast, save of my infirmities." (II *Corinthians* 11, 30). Rather he boasted of Christ, Christ crucified.

When he used this expression, St. Paul intended us to understand that he was constantly shouting his wares in public; that he never ceased peddling Christ from door to door, as he sought an entrance for Him into the minds and hearts of men. Certainly, he knew that his merchandise did not have a ready market—Christ crucified is not a popular brand of Saviour. The Apostle readily confessed that the spectacle of a bruised and battered King on a cross did not interest everyone: "All in Asia turned against me," (II *Timothy* 1, 15) and was He not a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles?

Nevertheless, this wholesale rejection of Christ did not silence Paul; his voice resounded throughout the world. Paul's message was urgent: the death of Christ was the sole source of salvation for all men, not only for the Jews but also for the Gentiles: "The law of the commandments expressed in decrees he has made void, that of the two he might create in himself one new man . . . and reconcile both in one body to God by the Cross." (*Ephesians* 2, 15) This message was vital; nothing must stand in its way: "yea, we overthrow reasonings and every lofty thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God; we bring every mind into captivity to the obedience of Christ." (II *Corinthians* 10, 3) St. Paul's faith gave him confidence in the message he preached; hence, he boasted, "We preach Christ crucified." (I *Corinthians* 1, 23)

This apostolic spirit was by no means peculiar to St. Paul. The

desire to spread the Cross of Christ totally possessed the souls of the Master's flock dispersing to the far-flung corners of the world to preach the Gospel of salvation. According to the dictates of human prudence this little band should have remained together in order to consolidate itself and to organize its resources; but convinced that the Son of God had traced the sign of the Cross on everything, these dauntless missionaries were resolved to plant that Cross on the summits of men's hearts. St. Jerome tells us that, since the Blood of Christ still flowed swift and warm in the veins of those who had seen Him in the Flesh, they were ready to attempt anything for Him, even the conquest of a world. Christ crucified was their message of hope for the world.

For the Apostles themselves, the King on the Cross was more than a message. He was the sole source of their strength, their life, and their mission. Gazing back on the broad scenes of Christendom's first triumphs, Pope Pius XII disengaged the element of unity, the cause of it all: "That he completed His work on the gibbet of the Cross is the unanimous teaching of the Holy Fathers, who assert that the Church was born from the side of the Saviour on the Cross like a new Eve, mother of all the living. 'And it is now,' says the great Ambrose, speaking of the pierced side of Christ, 'that is built, it is now that is formed . . . it is now that is created, a spiritual house for a holy priesthood!'"¹ The water and blood flowing from Christ's side are the symbols of the graces establishing, energizing, consecrating, and conserving His Church and Her missionaries.

At the end of the Apostolic era, the Cross of Christ had cast its all-embracing shadow over the known civilized world. "The Apostles undoubtedly carried the faith of Christ to the most distant lands, and it would be difficult to find any important city of the Roman empire, and particularly along the Mediterranean Sea, whose Church does not trace her origin back to Apostolic times."²

The end of his long career was at hand, when St. Paul, in chains, looked back for a moment over the road he had travelled and then passed on the fruits of his varied experience. He had but one command: "I charge thee, in the sight of God and Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead by His coming and His kingdom, preach the word, be urgent in season, out of season; reprove, entreat, rebuke with all patience and teaching. . . . Work as a preacher of the

¹ Pius XII, Encyclical on *The Mystical Body*.

² Alzog, *Manual of Universal Church History*, translated by Pabisch and Byrne, Robert Clarke & Co., Cincinnati, Ohio. 1874. Vol. I, p. 182.

Gospel, fulfill thy ministry." (II *Timothy* 4, 1-6) Earlier in his life St. Paul had given a similar command: "Let him who boasteth, boast in the Lord." (I *Corinthians* 1, 26)

How well the terms of this mandate were fulfilled by the early Christian missionaries is attested to by St. Justin Martyr: "There is no people, whether Greek or Barbarian, among whom prayers and thanksgiving are not offered to the Father and Creator of the world in the name of Christ crucified."³ Towards the end of the Post-Apostolic period⁴ Tertulian confirmed and elaborated this testimony: "Everywhere are to be found the disciples of the Crucified—among the Parthians and the Medes, the Elamites and the Mesopotamians, in Armenia and Phrygia, Cappadocia and Pontus, Asia Minor, Egypt, and Cyrene; mingled with the various tribes of the Getuli and Moors, in Gaul and Spain, Britain and Germany."⁵

The Cross of Christ, however, did not spread unmolested; nor did the early Christians expect it to do so, for Christ had prophesied: "If they have persecuted Me, they will persecute you also." (*John*, 15, 22) On Calvary Christ had suffered death at the hands of brutal men, and violence and passion were permitted a fleeting moment of triumph. The same forces of destruction which killed the Physical Body of Christ were aligned against His Mystical Body, the Church. The Jews, who had clamored for the death of Christ in Pilate's outer court, now sought to stifle the life of His infant Church. From the very beginning old Pagan Rome failed to understand the mind and to sound the heart of the new Christian Rome, and for three centuries the growing challenge of Christianity was met with brute strength, armed might, and the mailed fist. Swords were unsheathed, and the blood of martyrs hallowed the soil of the empire. The Mistress of the ancient world sowed the fertile seed of Christian blood; through God's mercy she reaped an abundant harvest of her own salvation. Then the Church, like Her risen Head, emerged from the bowels of the earth, glorious and triumphant.

Out of persecution came triumph; out of death, new life. Such is the familiar and holy theme of the life of the early Church. However, the story of Christianity entombed in the bowels of the earth is only one phase of that life; the catacombs were emergency factors—they were not the scene of the Church's usual activities. Christianity was very much alive on the surface of the world; it had to

³ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue Against Tryphon*, ch. 117.

⁴ From the death of the last Apostle to the Edict of Milan.

⁵ Tertullian, *Against the Jews*, ch. 7.

be, otherwise it could not boast: "We are but of yesterday, and we have filled every place among you—cities, towns, marketplaces, tribes, companies, palace, senate, forum—we have left to you nothing but the temples of your gods."⁶ This is the story of the Cross of Christ in the marketplaces, the history of the early missions.

POST-APOSTOLIC MISSION THEORY

Patristic literature does not contain a single work devoted primarily and exclusively to mission theory, but this silence of the early Fathers was not due to ignorance of the Church's universal mission. In fact, some of the Fathers debated, as a purely academic question, whether Christ's command to preach the Gospel to every creature extended to the legendary creatures of the Antipodes, who were supposed to be half-animal, half-human. This failure to elaborate a complete theory of missions is to be attributed not to ignorance but rather to an erroneous conception of the geographical extent of the world. The Apostles had established the Church throughout the Roman Empire and Asia Minor, the boundaries of which were considered to be practically co-terminus with those of the civilized world. Hence, for the Fathers the universality of the Church was an accomplished fact, and there was no need to elaborate or to enumerate methods of its extensive propagation.

Nevertheless, the Fathers were deeply concerned with the intensive growth of the Church, that is, with the building up of the Body of Christ by founding particular churches in regions where the Cross of Christ had already been raised. At a very early date this interest was manifested in the many declarations of the necessity of pagan missions and in the regulations governing the instructions of catechumens. Christ's command to preach the Gospel to every nation appears frequently in the literature of the period; and an examination of texts indicates that the catholicity and the necessity of the Church were treated as two aspects of the same truth derived from Christ's command: catholicity demanding that the Church be joined to all men; necessity requiring that all men join themselves to the Church.

The Doctrine of the Apostles supposes that the Church has been generally diffused and maintains: "Even as the broken bread was scattered over the hills and was gathered together and became one so let Thy Church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into

⁶ Tertullian, *Apologetics*, ch. 37; see also Tertullian, *Against The Jews*, ch. 7.

Thy Kingdom.”⁷ St. Clement in his *Epistle to the Corinthians* indicates the fulfillment of Christ’s command: “The Apostles have preached the Gospel to us from the Lord, Jesus Christ; Jesus Christ has done so from God. Christ therefore was sent forth by God, and the Apostles by Christ. Having therefore received their orders and . . . established in the word of God . . . they went preaching through countries and cities, and they appointed their first fruits to be bishops and deacons of those who should afterwards believe.”⁸ Concluding his account St. Clement lays down a mission precept: “All pagans must recognize that Thou art the one and only God, that Jesus Christ is Thy Son, and that we are Thy people, the sheep of Thy pasture.”⁹

The name “Catholic” Church appears for the first time in the *Epistle of St. Ignatius To The Smyrneans*: “Wherever the bishop shall appear, there let the multitude also be; even as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church.”¹⁰ St. Ignatius insists that Christ really suffered for all men, and not in appearance only, as was held “by some of the unbelievers who are ashamed of the Cross. . . . The Word, when His Flesh was lifted up, after the manner of the brazen serpent in the wilderness, drew all men to Himself for their eternal salvation.”¹¹ Barnabas in his epistle to the Judaizing Christians reminds them too of the brazen serpent, “which even though dead is able to give life. Thou hast in this an indication of the glory of Jesus; for in Him and to Him are all things.”¹² In a special way Ignatius and Barnabas may be singled out as fulfilling Paul’s command to boast in Christ crucified.

A new note runs through the pages of the Apologetes. Since the Cross of Christ has been planted far and wide in a miraculous manner, they boast of the rapid growth of the Church despite all obstacles as proof of the divine nature and origin of the Christian religion. The *Divine Institutes* of Lactantius offers us a second kind of argument exploited frequently by the Apologetes, one based on the marvellous life of the Church, in itself a moral miracle: “Since our number is constantly increased but is never lessened, not even in persecution itself, who is there, I pray, so foolish and so blind as not to see on whose side wisdom is? Since the divine law has been re-

⁷ *The Doctrine of the Apostles* (Didache), 9, 4.

⁸ St. Clement, *Epistle To The Corinthians*, ch. 42.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ St. Ignatius, *To The Smyrneans*, ch. 8.

¹¹ *Ibid.* ch. 2.

¹² *Epistle of Barnabas*, ch. 10 and ffff.

ceived from the rising even to the setting of the sun, and each sex, every age, with one and the same mind obeys God; since there is everywhere the same patient endurance, the same contempt of death—they (Pagans) ought to have understood that there is some reason in the matter, and that it is not without a cause that it is defended unto death, that there is some foundation and solidity, which not only frees that religion from injuries and molestations, but always increases and makes it stronger.”¹³ The author of the *Epistle To Diognetus* points to the martyrdom of Christians and discerns in their fortitude an evident sign of divinity: “Do you not see them exposed to wild beasts, that they may be persuaded to deny the Lord, and yet not overcome? Do you not see that the more of them that are punished, the greater becomes the number of the rest? This does not seem to be the work of men; this is the power of God; these are the evidences of His manifestation.”¹⁴

The belief that in the Church Christ was reliving for all times and for all men His human life constituted the solid, massive bulwark of these arguments. This intimate presence of Christ provided the Fathers with a second motive for missions, one distinct from the desire to fulfill the command of Christ and one which was based on the very nature of the Church. The vital analogy of the Church to an organized body had been consecrated by St. Paul, who spoke of Christ as the “head of the Body, the Church, Who is the beginning and first born from the dead.” (*Colossians*, 1, 18) Due to its organic nature the Church bore in its essential constitution the laws governing its own growth, the building up of the Body of Christ. In this process a vital character is to be found, the urge of Christ to unite all men to Himself: “If I be lifted up, I shall draw all things to Myself.” (*John*, 12, 32) Throughout the period this text resounded again and again, and with each repetition the minds of men were more and more conformed to the mind of Christ, a mind that looked beyond the expanding horizons for more, ever more, human souls. In a later period St. Augustine was to meditate on this inner groaning of the Spirit and express it thus:

Who is this that cries from the end of the earth? Who is this one man who reaches to the extremities of the universe?^{15a} He is one, but that one is unity. He is not in a single place,

¹³ Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, Bk. V, ch. 13.

¹⁴ *Epistle To Diognetus*, ch. 7.

^{15a} St. Augustine, *In Psalm*, 122 (P. L. 37); see also *In Psalm*, 54 (P. L. 36, 640.)

but the cry of this one man comes from the remotest ends of the earth. But how can this one man cry out from the ends of the earth, unless he be one in all?^{15b} The body of Christ ceases not to cry out all the day, one member replacing another whose voice is hushed. Thus there is but one man who reaches unto the end of time, and those that cry are his members.^{15c}

On several occasions St. Ignatius employed this analogy in defending the unity of the Church against Judaizing Christians: "Lay aside, therefore, the evil, the old, the corrupt leaven, and be ye changed into the new leaven of grace. Abide in Christ, that the stranger may not have dominion over you. It is absurd to speak of Jesus Christ with the tongue, and to cherish in the mind a Judaism which has now come to an end. For where there is Christianity, there cannot be Judaism. *For Christ is one, in whom every nation that believes, and every tongue that confesses, is gathered unto God.*"¹⁶

The Pastor of Hermas emphasizes this organic nature of the Church by comparing the Church to a willow tree, given to the whole world as God's law, which casts its shadow over the universe and permits the converted nations to dwell in its shade.¹⁷

Another expression of this vital law of growth is found in the Father's insistence that all Christians, without exception, are bound to be missionaries, each meeting the demands of the growing Body in accordance with his state in life. In this regard Ignatius urged upon the Ephesians the imitation of Christ: "For he who shall both do and teach, the same shall be great in the Kingdom. Our Lord and God, Jesus Christ, first did and then taught, as Luke testifies. . . . Let us do all things as those who have Him dwelling in us, that we may be His Temples, and He may be in us as God. Let Christ speak in us, even as He did in Paul. Let the Holy Spirit teach us to speak the things of Christ Himself did."¹⁸ Thus, according to Ignatius, even the laity were to boast in Christ crucified under the direction of the Holy Ghost.

To the exhortation of St. John that all Christians are to help the missions by co-operation and support (St. John, *III Epistle*, 5, 9), the following injunctions of the Fathers were added: Every Chris-

^{15b} *Ibid.*

^{15c} St. Augustine, *In Psalm*, 85 (P. L. 37, 1085).

¹⁶ St. Ignatius, *Epistle To The Magnesians*, ch. 10.

¹⁷ *The Pastor of Hermas*, Similitude 8.

¹⁸ St. Ignatius, *Epistle To The Ephesians*, ch. 15.

tian must confess Christ "by doing what He says, and not transgressing His commandments, and by honoring Him not only with our lips, but with all our hearts and minds"¹⁹; Cyprian insists on prayer²⁰; Origen urges the fulfillment of the mission obligation especially by the promotion of Christian ideas and by bringing all men to the Christian life.²¹

(To be Continued.)

¹⁹ *The Second Epistle of St. Clement*, ch. 3.

²⁰ Cyprian, *De Oracione Dominicana* 17.

²¹ Origen, *Against Celsus*, 8, 52.