



The Virgin and the Angels

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"WHO IS CHRIST THE LORD"

Christmas is a unique festival, celebrated throughout the world with ceremonies and observances all its own. In regions where civilization is just at dawn, the knee is bent before the Crib and joyous hearts are transported from earth to heaven, just as in the stately and magnificent cathedral within whose walls the King is reborn amidst blaze of light, elaborate ritual and repetition of the celestial strain that once rang out over Judea's hills. The kings and mighty of the earth step down from their high places, the meek and lowly are exalted above their degree, all joining heart in a single purpose—the adoration of the King of kings becoming the humblest of servants. Sorrow, the unwelcome companion of all without exception, hides her face; joy, her counterpart, rules supreme for a day. On this day of days the better part of man's nature is in the ascendancy; he is radiant with a spirit of charity; he displays sentiments of peace and good-will towards all. And Christmas is what it is because it is the birthday of the Son of God.

And yet more and more the divinity of Christ is impugned. Outside the Catholic Church, belief that He is true God is becoming weaker and weaker day by day; there are even men who dare to stand in so-called Christian pulpits and preach a doctrine that is subversive of Christianity itself, namely, that Christ is but mere man. They tell us that He is the paragon of human nature, superman, the greatest of geniuses, the epitome of all that is good and elevated, the inexhaustible source of moral knowledge—tributes He justly deserves. But despite the prolific bestowal of high-sounding attributes and protestations of admiration, the fact remains that they see in Him only a mortal man like ourselves.

Now be Christ what He may, paragon, genius, superior of all mortals, if He is not very God as well as man, then Christmas loses its meaning, its joys and splendor fade into extravagant

display and it descends to the level of a merely human festival. If Christ is not God, then there are no angels hovering about the dank, deserted stable, filling the heavens with their ravishing melodies; there are no simple shepherd lads leaving their flocks unprotected upon the hillsides to come and adore the Babe clasped in Mary's arms; there is no star guiding the Magi to the crib of the new-born King. And if there are no angels, no shepherds, no Wise Men, then we have been deceived, and the deception leaves a void in our hearts.

"But fear not, for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy, that shall be to all the people. For this day is born to you a Saviour, who IS Christ the Lord."

It is not necessary to prove to a Catholic that Jesus Christ is true God. Belief in His divinity is a priceless heritage bequeathed to us by the provident mercy of an all-loving Father; we bow our heads before the God-man and say with St. Thomas, "My Lord and my God." It is merely our purpose to examine the foundation upon which rests this paramount truth of our religion.

Now, there are two fundamental, undeniable facts that stand forth with the unmovable firmness of the towering mountain and in a light as clear as the noon-day sun, namely, the testimony of the Catholic Church that Jesus Christ is in a unique and incommunicable sense the very Son of God, and that Christ in unmistakable terms claimed for Himself this prerogative. And we know with an infallible certainty born of God that the testimony of both is true.

The Catholic Church stands before the world today a reality which cannot be explained without recourse to the direct intervention of the miraculous power of God. By her nature, the same now as it was at the time of her birth, and by her history, she demonstrates and will continue to demonstrate that she is a divine institution, the accredited ambassador and legate of God, bearing a message to men from on high. With the calm serenity and unshakable assurance of a heavenly teacher, she proclaims to all that her founder, Jesus Christ, is true God, and being God's emissary, stamped with the seal of His approval, her testimony is the testimony of God Himself, in which there can be no error.

There is absolutely no other way to explain the Church's wonderful continuance and superhuman propagation, together with her unbroken unity and holiness, except by a special and direct providence of God. It can be attributed to no human

means. Over nineteen hundred years ago, fortified by the Holy Spirit, a handful of men under the leadership of a simple Galilean fisherman set out from Jerusalem to renew the face of the earth. Mind you, for the most part they were Jews, uneducated, according to the world's acceptance of the term, of low rank and without the aid of any secular power; indeed, to all not of their own nationality, they were objects of hatred and derision. Humanly speaking, they were confronted by insurmountable barriers. Yet they enkindled a fire that spread over the earth with the force and rapidity of an avalanche, encompassing everything with which it came in contact. So marvelous was the propagation of the Church that in the middle of the second century St. Justin could so beautifully say, "There is no class of men among whom there are not prayers and thanksgivings to the Father and Creator of all through Jesus Christ crucified." And, likewise, Tertullian, at the beginning of the third, "We are of yesterday, and we have filled every place that was yours, your cities, islands, fortresses, towns, councils, even the camps of your armies; the palace, the senate, the forum; we have left you only your temples." And so on throughout the ages the Church has continued to spread to the four corners of the earth, down to our own day, "Wherever there was a human sorrow to solace or a human soul to save."

Moreover, her triumphant march was made, and continues to be made, in the midst of conflicts and despite difficulties from within and without Rome, the mistress of the world, who tried to drown her in the blood of her children, she conquered and established there the seat of Peter. When the tide of barbarian invasion rolled down from the North, sweeping away everything by the irresistible force of its onrush, she made of these fierce and wild savages docile sons and molded them into the beginning of Christian civilization. Schisms there have been, and persecutors in the person of princes and emperors endowed with human might, whose sole purpose in life it was to demolish the old religion. All manner of calumny has been hurled against her, but with her Master she asks, "Which of you shall convince me of sin?" and likewise she receives her answer, "No man, Lord." Victor over arrogance and pride, this generation beholds her—as will all generations until time shall be no more—standing unshaken and unshakable upon the rock whereon her Founder placed her. And these same forces under new guises are at work

now as ever. But the story is always the same. Can any earthly power afford an explanation?

Fiercest has been the conflict from within, for from her own bosom there sprang forth children, traitors to the truth, who dared to rise up in revolt and strike their mother. Heresy, born of pride, succeeded heresy. An Arius, a Nestorius, a Luther and an inglorious host matched their strength against the vitality of Christ's bride, but they were as feeble ships battering upon the solid rock; the heretics are forgotten and the heresy is dead, or lives a dying life in a few deluded adherents. Protestantism, the successor and compound of earlier errors, from its inception entered upon a course of doctrinal dissolution, and once more the battle is on between the Church and an ever-recurring paganism. And conquer she will, as she has conquered in the past, for her power is the power of God, which no man can vanquish.

And still clearer becomes the impossibility of accounting for the Church's wonderful expansion and eternal existence by human means when we consider her nature and the method she uses in gathering men to her communion. She has won her way not by force of arms or by appealing to human nature, but by the strength of humility, the might of charity, and by urging a self-abnegation proper to the followers of the Crucified. Holiness is the object for which she labors with her own surpassing sanctity. Indeed, her demands run counter to the aspiration of the heart of man, for nothing of earth counts with her except in its relation to eternity; things material are of value only because of their spiritual worth, and money, place and power are esteemed as nought when they obstruct the way to heaven. And yet, withal, from the day of Pentecost millions of all stations and conditions of life have flocked to her standard and today she numbers as her own over one-half of the world that calls itself Christian. From the very beginning, to her cloisters, "hidden away with God," have come virile men and delicate women, as different in life as daylight from darkness; from no human motive they have followed her counsels, abandoning all that the world holds dear, crushing their very natures, and God has signified His approval by the miracles of nature and grace that have strewn their path through this valley of tears.

In a world of change, where all great achievement has a small beginning and where man contradicts man and they are forever wrangling, the Catholic Church, born with the fullness of

knowledge, has marched down the highways and byways of history, consistent with herself in submission to the same teaching authority. Embracing as she does among her members not one nation but all nations—men of the most divergent character and with temporal interests utterly different—that she has preserved a unity of doctrine and discipline as strong and as steady as when she began her colossal expansion—this is a moral miracle of which heaven alone is capable.

And mark well that throughout her life the Church has not merely clung to a faintly flickering spark of life; she lives and exults with the plentitude of strength; she is ever young in her majestic beauty. Time after time she has engaged in mortal conflict with the pride of man; her funeral rites have frequently been performed and men have rejoiced at her passing, but she has come forth from the battle—scarred, sometimes, it is true, to see her assailants buried and forgotten. Truly she is divine, else like "Rome that sat upon her seven hills and from her throne of beauty ruled the world," and like every other human institution, she would long since have become enfeebled and gone down before the triumphant march of modern progress.

And since man cannot have been her author, God must have been. And when she stands with the glorious aureola of divine approbation upon her brow and with the seal of God's approval stamped upon her words, her testimony is the testimony of God: what she speaks, she speaks with the authority of God.

Now, the very heart of her message is that Jesus Christ is the Second Person of the Most Blessed Trinity, consubstantial with the Father, equal to Him in all things, true God and true man. She proclaimed it with the thunderbolts of anathema at Ephesus, Chalcedon and the Vatican; it is her central doctrine and the soul of her teaching. And being the ambassador and herald of God to the world, we must respect her words as the command of God and bow our heads in submission.

Over and above this irrefragable testimony of the Church there are the Gospels, in which Christ unequivocally claims that He is God and wherein are recorded the events that substantiate His contention. Amid the splendors of Caesarea Philippi, where the tetrarch held court and where dwelt His most implacable enemies, on one occasion Jesus interrupted His prayer to ask of His Apostles, "Who do men say that the son of man is?" Many and varied were their answers, as have been the answers to this

all-important question since that day when Christ first put the query to His chosen followers. We know Peter's response, but that was revealed to him by the Father. So we turn to the Master Himself and inquire of Him, "But who do you say that you are?" and He gently tells us that He has left us a written account by the hands of the Evangelists of all that He said and did; we have only to read to learn His answer.

The reliability of the Gospels is a fact admitted by all. They have come down to us from the first generations of Christianity without any substantial alteration from the originals written by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, and are trustworthy records, serious history of authoritative character, to which all are obliged to submit or else bid farewell to all knowledge of the past. For if credence is refused the Gospel records, written by eye-witnesses of the events therein narrated, and whose authenticity and genuineness are attested to from the middle of the second century—scarcely a hundred years after the first was composed and less than five decades after the last—what shall we say of our so-called scientific profane history of today; composed as it is by men in nearly every case living centuries after the events narrated; by men who are of different nationality, different manner of life—different in every respect from the characters whom they revive for our education. Their testimony is accepted almost without reserve, and rightly so; otherwise, reason is vain and human faith an empty myth. The man who has the hardihood to deny that in centuries long past Caesar lived and ruled the greatest empire the world has ever seen, that Charlemagne was an historical personage, or that Columbus braved the perils of an unknown sea in search of new routes of aggrandizement for Spain's king, is laughed to scorn. Who, then, can deny what is contained in the Gospels, which conform perfectly to all the conditions required for serious and sober history? Explain it as they may, no one can deny that over nineteen hundred years ago, in an abandoned stable on the bleak, wind-swept hills of Judea, an Infant was born, wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger; that in maturer years He appeared as the champion of right, crossing and recrossing a land called holy because it gave Him birth, teaching a doctrine such as men had never heard before, going about doing good and working miracles upon them that were diseased. No one can deny that a blood-stained and mangled corpse suspended from a cross on the Mount

of Calvary marks the storm center and battleground of two of nature's greatest and almost irreconcilable forces—love and hatred?

Times without number, both in word and deed, Jesus Christ asserted that He was God. Speaking not in the name of God, as did the prophets, but in His own name and with complete assurance, He changed the Old Law, an action which meant to the Jews nothing less than that He made Himself Supreme Legislator, since that Law had become to them an object of worship that went to the extent of superstition and apotheosis and to which they subjected every one save God. "You have heard that it was said to them of old. . . . But I say to you thou shalt not be angry with thy brother," and so on until the former enactments are perfected. He forgives sin, reading the secrets of the heart and performing a miracle to prove that He possesses that power which belongs to God alone. "But that you may know that the Son of Man hath power on earth to forgive sins (then said He to the man sick of the palsy), arise, take up thy bed and go into thy house." Lord of the Sabbath is He, placing Himself above all that is of earth and demanding absolute faith of His followers; the sovereign Master of nature; the final Judge of mankind, meting out to each according to his deserts an eternity of bliss or woe. At the tender age of twelve He replied to His Blessed Mother, "Did you not know that I must be about my Father's business," most certainly not referring to Joseph, who for three days had sought Him sorrowing. "Our Father" He taught the multitude to say, but from His own lips it is always, My Father." "Before Abraham was, I am"; "I and the Father are one"; undoubtedly claims to the age and nature of the Deity which He refused to retract even when they took up stones to cast at Him.

And this claim which is the sum and substance of the entire Gospel narrative, Christ clung to tenaciously to the very end of His life and feared not to hurl it clearly and unequivocally in the very face of His judges. Standing before those who had an official right to question Him, He was solemnly addressed by the high priest of the Jews, "I adjure Thee by the living God that Thou tell us if Thou be the Christ, the Son of God." He knew that upon His answer would depend the sentence about to be pronounced against Him; yet with the unruffled majesty of the God He claimed to be, He answered, "Thou hast said it, I am."

And He goes down to the most ignominious of deaths with the words still warm on His lips when He might have saved Himself by a retraction. Can there be any doubt that at least Christ claimed to be God?

And throughout His whole life the Jews thus understood Him. Time after time they accused Him of blasphemy and took up stones to cast at Him; blasphemy was the crime for which He was condemned to death; a crime of which no pious Israelite could be accused for claiming a metaphorical sonship with God—for this was an honor and a privilege—any more than Christ would have conferred such promises and prerogatives upon Peter for making his immortal confession, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God."

And as the Jews understood Him, so must we. If we do not we come face to face with the two alternatives, both equally untenable—either that Christ was an imposter, the greatest fraud in history, or that He was a madman, the victim of His imagination.

Blasphemy! and not only blasphemy but absurdity! For to have put forth a claim to divinity, knowing Himself to be but man, would have been on the one hand to be false to God and on the other to be cruel to men even unto malice, because in such a case He was ruining forever countless millions of all generations. None but the most hardened and brazen of the haters of Christ have even hinted at such an implication.

A mere review of His life evidences the impossibility of such a position. Reverence for God and love for His fellowman was the very essence of His mission and the principle of His existence. "Thou shalt love the Lord with thy whole heart and with thy whole soul; this is the greatest and first commandment" and "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's" was the motto for the conduct of life which He Himself followed and bequeathed to His disciples. Long and frequent were His prayers; many the nights He spent in sweet communion with His Father, with whom He was ever intimately united by a bond of unspeakable confidence and devotion. Christ could not have been false to God!

Nor was He cruel to His fellow-man, for He loved him with a love unutterable. "He went about doing good," "working miracles upon them that were diseased" and soothing the sorrowful; the uncompromising opponent of sin, He ever loved the sinner;

He received them and ate with them and of Himself He made a meal that He might give an example; He suffered the little ones to come unto Him, promising to such the kingdom of heaven; all the proof of the enduring love which He expressed in the parables of the Prodigal Son and the Good Shepherd. From Calvary's cross He prayed for His executioners.

Madman He could not have been, as is evident from the sublimity of His doctrine and person. He reaffirmed the traditional teaching of faith concerning God; He supernaturalized the Law and sanctified marriage, raising woman to a place in the sky because she is of the same sex as His Blessed Mother. The brotherhood of man, so incoherently babbled about today, was a central point of His doctrine, "This is my precept that you love one another." In the sermon on the mount, He enunciated a moral code than which there has never been one holier; He taught man to be happy even in this life, and with a happiness born of goodness that should lead to eternal felicity. No madman, indeed, was Christ, but the teacher of life, the foe of vice and the fruitful model of virtue.

And He put forth His doctrine with a perfect equilibrium of mind that marks Him a man sane and of massive strength of character. In His life there is no wild exaggeration, no littleness of vanity, no trace of the egotistical or self-interested bitterness so common among tyrants and men in high places. Simplicity and complete mastery of self are qualities in striking evidence. He may speak of the most exalted truth or the sublimest of mysteries, yet He is ever at ease, the Master familiar with and dominating His subject. In the midst of envenomed attacks of hatred and vengeance, He preserves a silence that is divinely heroic. And broad as the truth itself is the extent of His kingdom; He has won to Himself men of all climes and times—the great, the small, the learned and the unlettered. Was ever madman thus?

There is no escape! Any one who does not wish to hold the contemptible distinction of asserting that Jesus Christ was a maniac, a victim of a supreme delusion, or that He was an imposter imposing His blasphemous claim upon a credulous world, is forced to admit that He is the God that He maintained He was.

The sublimity of Christ's person and doctrine, taken in conjunction with His claim to divinity, furnish us a convincing proof that He was really God. But accommodating Himself in all

things to our human limitations, and most reasonable in His demands upon us, He does not require, as He well might have, that we accept His assertions without leaving us even stronger motives of credibility to strengthen our faith in His divine Sonship, which motives are none other than the prophecies and miracles narrated in Holy Scripture.

From their nature it is evident that God alone can be the author of either prophecies or miracles, for prophecy in its strict sense is the assured, unequivocal and certain prediction of a future event, which cannot be known from natural causes, while a miracle is an extraordinary sensible fact that transcends all the powers of nature. And when God uses them to approve the mission of some agent, beyond cavilling or doubt they characterize that agent as a legate of heaven and prove absolutely that he is exactly what he claims to be; otherwise, God would be the cause of the resultant deception.

Now, Christ directly appealed to such divine approbation, not only to demonstrate that He was God's ambassador to man, but also to substantiate His claim to Sonship with the Eternal Father. Time and time again He said to the hard-hearted Jews, "If you will not believe Me, believe my works, they give testimony of Me." "Search the Scripture. . . . the same are they that give testimony of Me."

The prophecies of Scripture concerning Christ are twofold: those of the Old Testament, relative of His life, character and mission, and those of the New Testament, made by Himself and fulfilled by events that came afterwards.

The first promise of a Redeemer was made to Adam in Paradise, as he stood before God clothed in the shame and horror of his transgression; "the seed of the woman who shall crush the head of the serpent." After the deluge, when hope had given place of fear, God renews His pledge with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob, and "the scepter shall not be taken away from Juda. . . . till He come that is to be sent, and He shall be the Expected of Nations." And brighter grows the light as age succeeds age. David, of the race of Juda, sees the Messias amid the splendor of His kingdom as the "appointed King over Sion" the Only-Begotten of the Father, possessing the Gentiles as His inheritance, suffering and dying, but arising glorious and immortal over sin and hell. Isaias describes Him as "the Prince of Peace," and Jeremias foretells that He will be of the family of

David. Wearied and discouraged by the rigors and hardships of captivity, Daniel is consoled by the heavenly intelligence that the time of the "Expected of Nations" is near, that seventy weeks of years will bring the Saviour, whose life and mission Gabriel delineates for him with a precision and accuracy that could have had their origin only in heaven. He is to be born of a virgin, is to be preceeded by His precursor, and the Temple shall not be destroyed until He shall have entered its portals. And as Daniel pronounced the time of the birth of Christ, so, too, is foretold the place of His nativity, "And, thou, Bethlehem Ephrata, art a little one among the thousands of Juda: out of thee shall He come forth unto me that is to be the Ruler in Israel." Thus is completed the Messias' picture, begun by God in Paradise and finished four thousand years before His coming.

The probative value of a prophecy, of course, depends upon its fulfillment. As a matter of concrete fact, all the Messianic prophecies were fulfilled in Christ, as we learn from the Gospels. He came of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Juda, of the family of David and was born of a virgin; He entered the Temple shortly before its final destruction, and John the Baptist was His Precursor. He was a king, though His kingdom was not of this world, and His heritage is the Gentiles; He saved His people from their sins and showed them the way to heaven, thus meriting the title of Saviour in all its glorious significance. And St. Matthew points out for us many other Old Testament prophecies which were most accurately fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth. As a necessary consequence, the divine seal of prophecy is stamped upon what He said; He is God as He said He was.

Then, too, Christ Himself prophesied. He foretold the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, the denial and repentance of Peter and the treason and despair of Judas; His passion and resurrection; His ascension into heaven and the great event of Pentecost. To Mary Magdalen He promised a memorial wherever His Gospel should be preached, and the manner of His death He foretold to Peter. And many other prophecies there were, as is evident from Holy Scripture—all made in His own name and without any appeal to heaven; all intended by Him as proof of His divine character. "I tell you before it come to pass," said He, "that when it shall come to pass you may believe that I am HE."

And so, too, these have been fulfilled, just as the prophecies of the Old Testament. Titus Vespasian encompassed Jerusalem

and beat her to the ground, and of her Temple he left not a stone upon a stone, while a hideous corpse, suspended from a tree in Gethsemane, but too well shows the culmination of the prediction concerning the son of perdition. The furrows in Peter's cheeks were caused by the tears he shed on account of his denial of the Master, and Magdalen's memory is as green today as it was when she broke her alabaster box of precious ointment. Christ's passion, death, resurrection and ascension are facts of history; Peter died upon a wayside cross and Pentecost is the Church's birthday.

Besides prophecy, among the works of Christ are reckoned His miracles also. It is not necessary to enumerate in particular the forty-one miracles, or groups of miracles, related in the Gospels, for one such event properly attested to proves Christ to be God, the Only Begotten of the Father.

Veritably the wonder-worker of Galilee merited the title of sovereign Master of nature. He heals the Centurion's servant, He gives sight to the blind men of Jericho and thrice He forces the grave to give up its dead—the daughter of Jairus, the son of the widow of Naim and the brother of Martha and Mary. The raging wind and waves of the sea He calms by a word; water He changes into wine, and twice He multiplies the loaves to feed the hungry who have followed Him into the desert. Sick and infirm are brought to Him from Judea and the neighboring country; He cures them all and is absolute victor over the devils. Many other signs also did Jesus, the narration of which would be superfluous.

And Christ did appeal to these signs as demonstrative of His Sonship with the Father. To the question of the disciples of John, "Art Thou He that art to come, or look we for another?" He replied, "Go and relate to John what you have seen and heard. The blind see, the lame walk, lepers are made clean, the deaf hear, the dead rise again." And at the grave of Lazarus He said, "Father . . . I said it; that they may believe that Thou hast sent Me. It was as God, the searcher of hearts, that He cured the man sick of the palsy.

That these miracles are facts the chief priests and Pharisees themselves, inimical and bitter as they were, could not deny; they said among themselves, "What do we, for this Man doth many miracles." Nor is the possibility of discountenancing them any greater now than it was in their day, since the Gospels are

real history. The hidden forces of nature and other theories as puerile are appealed to, but always with the same result; there is nothing, save God, that can account for these prodigies. Can any force of nature, or any conceivable force except God, calm the sea with a word, multiply the loaves and make wine of water? Can mental suggestion or faith-healing remove the plague spots from the leper, restore withered tissue, give back vision, and this with the rapidity of a lightning flash and a completeness that astonishes even the sufferer? No, and as badly fares any other explanation that has not God as the author of miracles.

Since, therefore, they are beyond the power of nature, and God is their author, they are the undeniable authorization of the claim of Jesus of Nazareth. And He claimed to be God. If He had been mere man without the power of God, He could not have worked miracles. But He did work them. And having the power of God, He could not have said that He was divine if He was not, else God Himself is a deceiver. And since God cannot deceive, nothing remains but to say with the apostle, "My Lord and my God!"

And there, too, is the resurrection, an occurrence that combines the elements of both prophecy and miracle. Christ prophesied His passion, death and resurrection. He suffered, He died and He was buried. Three days later He showed Himself to His disciples and afterwards, as St. Paul testifies, to the five hundred. If God be God, the human intellect a reality and heaven not a myth, can any one sincerely believe that Jesus Christ was not God consubstantial with the Father?

—Bro. Bonaventure Neitzey, O. P.

