

# **A Spirituality of Christian Realism**

*Paul Philibert, O.P.*

The Christian is always slightly uneasy about his spiritual condition. We know that in the spirituality of the Church that followed the Council of Trent there was a great preoccupation with the question of whether one was or was not in the state of grace. And we know too that the Council of Trent indicated that, aside from the normal signs (living the Christian life, keeping the Commandments, feeling at home, we might say, in the Church and in the duties of a Christian), aside from these indications we do not really know whether or not we are in the state of grace. Sadly, we are in a nervous age, we are in an insecure age, we are in the age of anxiety. And we ourselves, without necessarily giving in to the urge to dash off to a psychiatrist, are constantly looking for a test of our condition, even our spiritual condition.

## ***The Test of Our Spiritual Condition***

It was not exactly in this precise context that St. John gave it to us, but in his first epistle he speaks to us of this question of a test of the spiritual, religious life of man. He says: "Here is the test, whoever claims to be dwelling in Jesus binds himself to live as Christ Himself lived. This is an old commandment and yet it is new. New in the sense that the darkness is passing, and the real light already shines." So, this is the test of the religious life: "to bind ourselves to live as Christ Himself lived."

But what indeed, in the practical order, does this mean? What precisely of the actions and the words of Jesus manifest to us His manner of life? The tests that we are so familiar with are such things as giving blood, putting it into a centrifuge, counting cells, taking blood pressure, physiological change, analysis, statistics. These tests simply do not apply in this case, and yet we do not have simply to give up. We do not merely have to say it is impossible for us to gauge ourselves after the pattern of Christ's own human living. Because, in fact, Christ summed up for us His attitude toward life, toward His humanity, and I think He summed it up in these words, "Whatever I have, I have received from the Father, and whatever I have received from the Father, I have given to you." Jesus is the authentic divine Son of God. He came to earth to establish a kingdom which is a kingdom of grace. A kingdom of communion, a kingdom of communitarian love expressed not just from person to person, but expressed in the Church, in the communion of believers. He is the authentic Son, come to live among us to give us in the flesh the pattern, the authentic pattern of Sonship. We are invited to become Sons after that pattern, after His understanding, His penetration of the meaning of being a Son of God.

### **God's Gift**

"Whatever I have, I have received from the Father." Jesus points out to us that it belongs to the Son to receive. This theologically is the definition of Sonship: to be open, to be receptive. But how do we receive, in what manner? Is it simply a question of material goods? Is it simply a question of our capacity to make ourselves secure and comfortable in our human life, or is it something more? Whatever I have received, whatever I have, I have received from the Father. My Sonship is expressed in my openness to the Father's giving of everything that I am. My personality, my talents, my circumstances, my situation, my desires and my instincts, my training, my relationships to other men, my capacity to influence and to be influenced—it is all there; it is all me; it is all the Father's gift. Here is the test: do we indeed bind ourselves to live as Christ lived? Do we indeed, ourselves, have this attitude of openness, of receptivity; are we Sons?

But St. John also said: "This is the old commandment, and yet it is new. New in the sense that the darkness is passing and the real light already shines." What does he mean? He means, I think, that we are already Sons. We are already open to the mystery of the Father's self-

giving. This command is something old because we have already received our personality; and in our faith in and our love for Jesus, we have already comprehended the mystery that He wills to communicate His own life to us. And yet this is new. This is a new doctrine, a new commandment in the sense that the darkness is passing and the real light already shines. It is old in the sense that we have already received life, personality, talents, what we are. It is new in the sense that, gradually living in Jesus, learning to live with His instincts in faith, we come to realize that this indeed is one of the implications of having as our pattern of Sonship the divine Word translated into human experience; that He, in fact, has taken our human condition upon Himself entirely, completely.

Yes, we may test ourselves against the pattern of Sonship. Are we willing to receive exactly what the Father gives us? Personality, talents, circumstances, vocation, friends, tasks? Are we ready to understand that it is in terms of these human conditions that He commits to us the gift of divine life? Are we prepared to understand that it is also part of the mystery of Sonship that He communicates in the ordinary manner of our human experiences the gift of spiritual growth? That He communicates to us the richness of the virtues, the powers, of Jesus Christ Himself? God communicates our growth in faith, our growth in obedience, our growth in fidelity to His will along with and enfolded in our experience of human growth. This is an outstanding, an almost overwhelming consequence of the Incarnation. The classical formulation of this has always been: grace perfects nature, it does not destroy nature; and yet in fact we can carry this so far as to say that, normally, God will give us an increase in spiritual growth, in grace, in virtue, in a way that manifests this growth through ordinary natural, human experiences—through human loves, through human tasks, through human fidelity to the human circumstances and human conditions in which we live our lives. There is tremendous mercy in this, because for someone who really is living in Jesus, for someone who really through faith and love has committed himself to be the living presence of the Lord, to be His body, it is true that to become oneself, to become human, to become mature according to our understanding of our natural needs and of our human condition, is to open ourselves up to God's self-giving in grace. Because of the Incarnation we become Sons of God by becoming most perfectly ourselves. Because of the Incarnation we open ourselves up to present a mature human nature

to become divinized in Jesus Christ; we do this by being faithful to our personalities, our talents, and our instincts.

This is a surprising doctrine, surprising and disturbing perhaps, and yet to deny it or to neglect it would be a great heresy, a great danger, for we must safeguard above all else the tremendous gift that God has given us: His own Son made available to us in human flesh and blood, in human experiences and emotions, in human circumstances. It is the basis of a divine exchange: we give ourselves in our human nature and He gives His life.

### ***Man's Response***

It is a curious thing the way we men respond to the mercy of Jesus. Remember the lesson Jesus taught us right before His Passion at the Last Supper? He wrapped a towel around Him and took a basin of water and went around to wash the Apostle's feet. This was the time when He was going to ordain them priests. When He was going to put in their custodianship His Body and Blood, His life. This was the time when He was going to give them the Eucharist in which the divine economy, the divine exchange of His divinity for our humanity, is perpetuated. And in order to establish a context in which to make this gift, Jesus performed this ministry of service—this very humble, almost unpleasant task of washing the Apostles' feet. When Jesus came to St. Peter, his response was so human. "Lord," he said, "Lord, you washing my feet? I will never let you wash my feet." And Jesus said, "Peter, if I don't wash your feet, you won't have any business with me at all. You will have nothing more to do with me." And then Peter said, "Lord, wash then, not just my feet, but my face and my hands and my whole body."

We ourselves are like Peter. The response we make to the economy of the Incarnation is like Peter's response to the Lord when He wished to wash his feet. Jesus is saying to us that all of our humanity, everything we are and everything we do, is caught up in the divine exchange. In accepting our ordinary tasks, our life in all its tediousness and all its monotonous, maybe even boring tasks, we are opening up ourselves to the gift of divine life. Our response to this is that our life is too ordinary. Jesus is telling us He wants to make Himself present in us; He wants us to be His body in the world. He has no other hands with which to bless, no other feet with which to carry the Gospel than our hands and our feet. He wants us to know that the ordinary things

we do, from getting up in the morning to making a cup of coffee, sitting at a desk, driving a car—all of these things are Jesus living in the world now. Not because they are secular actions, not because Jesus needs to make cups of coffee or drive cars, but because He needs to be incarnated in humanity according to the human condition exactly as it is. This is why the second Vatican Council in the *Constitution on the Church* said: "All the ordinary works, prayers and endeavors of the laymen, their ordinary married and family life, their daily occupations, their physical and mental relaxations, if carried out in the Spirit, and even the hardships of life, if patiently borne—all these become spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. Together with the offering of the Lord's body, they are most fittingly offered in the celebration of the Eucharist."

It is an overwhelming proposal. Our response is like Peter's. Lord Jesus, we say, our life is too ordinary. We want to see You as our Lord. We want to see You with us in our humanity, but we want to see You doing great noble deeds in which we can be proud of You. But our ordinary tasks at the office, at the sink, at the steering wheel, are too humble. We do not want You to be present in us in this way. And what does Jesus say to us? Just what He said to Peter: "My brothers, if you will not let Me be present in your ordinary life, in your ordinary tasks, then I cannot be present to you at all, because then you obviously do not understand My gift of divine life in human flesh."

Peter wanted Christ, he wanted Jesus to be near him and with him and friendly to him. He wanted Jesus to penetrate all his experiences, but he wanted to make himself *acceptable* to Jesus. His feet were dirty and Jesus came to wash his feet. Because his feet were dirty, Peter wondered how could he possibly let the Lord wash them. And Jesus performed an action which has great sign value for us; for in washing his feet, in cleaning the man, in *making him acceptable*, Jesus indicated how impossible it is for us to make ourselves acceptable to Him.

All we can present to the Lord, to the economy of the Incarnation, all we can present to the divine exchange, is ourselves, exactly as we are, with dirty feet, with all our weaknesses, all our bad inclinations, with our inferiority complexes, with our bad estimations of ourselves; and Jesus indicates through His action of accepting Peter just as he is that this is all that is necessary. All that we must do is to offer this great bundle of untidy humanity to Jesus and let Him make of it what He will.

This, I believe, is what St. John means when he speaks of a test. "Whoever claims to be dwelling in Jesus binds himself to live as Jesus himself lived." And how was that? "Whatever I have received, I have received from the Father." Whatever we are, exactly as we are, it is the gift of God. And God communicates this gift through His creative love.

In an age where the obsession of the anxious and the nervous and the neurotic is to want to be told again and again that one is loved, we can rest in this mystery of divine love. God accomplished the creation through His love, and He accomplishes our re-creation, our being made new, our being made Sons, through His love. We do an injustice to God by often thinking of His love as our own. We are conscious that we love something most of the time, because we are in need. Our love is a need-love which goes out, because of its emptiness, to something which will fill us up with good. But God has no needs aside from the manifestation of His own goodness (which is sufficiently taken care of in the interior glory of the Trinity). He has no need of us. His love is different. His love is not a need-love but a creative love. And so, measuring the gifts of personality and talents and grace that make up the complex of our humanity (and our divinity), we can see that we are loved exactly as we are. How else did God accomplish the communication, the creation, of this unique personality that is me, except through His love? How did he make the donation of grace and virtue except through His love? How did He re-create in us the maturity, the human, social, spiritual, supernatural levels that make us today what we are, except through His love?

This is why the Lord says to us that He wants us in all our actions, all our endeavors, even in our self-consciousness, to know that we are the making-present of the divine Son to man in the world. We are the continuation of the Incarnation because we are, as Jesus was, the manifestation of the saving deeds of God in humanity. Jesus was first of all the obedient servant of His Father. He was first of all the manifestation of the love of God in human flesh. Because of the economy of the Incarnation, because of the mystery of a divine person accepting the whole human condition, we in our humanity can be the sacrament of Jesus: a holy sign of the presence of Jesus in His Church, made visible in the Christian. It is a sign which sanctifies both the Christian himself and those to whom he is the sacrament of the real presence of Jesus, since it is the *realization* of the availability of the Son's creative love in a human way to men in the world exactly where they are.

In that same passage St. John continues: "To you my children, I have written, because you know the Father." The test was "whoever claims to be dwelling in Him, binds himself to live as Christ Himself lived." But how can we forget in this context the words of Jesus in St. Luke's Gospel: "Do not be afraid, for it has pleased your Father to give you the kingdom." Jesus will teach us to love His Father, and one another, but first of all we must really be confident in His Father's gifts. We must learn to be content, we must learn to accept the gift as it is now, knowing that in all its untidiness, in all of its difficulty, it is none the less the gift of God. "It has pleased your Father to give you the kingdom." You are already Sons! In this sense, then, the test of a true Christian spirituality can be: "Do I live after the pattern of the authentic Son?"

And the correct answer is, "Yes, Lord. This humanity, these talents, this love for the world and the things You have given me in it—all this I accept as Your Fatherly gift. You have not asked me to receive divine life in spite of my humanity, but *in* my humanity so that Your Son's Lordship in His Mystical Body of humanity may be complete. Give me simply the courage to believe this good news and the humility to know you. Love me exactly as I am: *in* Christ Jesus, our Lord."

## PICTURE CREDITS

Pages 101, 125, 165 Photos — *The Washington Post*

Center-Fold Ed Lettau

Pages 118, 124 National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C.;  
Rosenwald Collection