

# SHARERS OF THE DIVINE NATURE

By WILLIAM YEOMANS

THE Israelite boasted with true pride that no other people had a God so near to them as the God of Israel was to his people. The christian boasts that his God is not merely present to him from without, but present within him. God is not only with us, he is with us as one of us. The Word of God spoken by the mouths of the prophets and written in the scrolls of the Torah has become human flesh in Christ; the message of God comes to us now from within our human nature and existence. For the Saviour of the World did not come as a *deus ex machina* suddenly intruding into the midst of a tangled history in order to solve the intricate problems of humanity with swift aloof justice, only to retire again into his celestial isolation. Salvation is not an imposed solution from above; it is worked out, as the Fathers of the Church repeat, *in medio terrae*, in the inmost depths of the earth. Christ is born, not as a stranger to human history, not as one absent from it. All things were created in him, and his birth revealed his hidden presence. He came to his own, whither he belonged by right. The history of Israel had blossomed in the Virgin Mary in whom Christ took to himself the fruit of sacred history, a human body and a human nature. The *Fiat* of God which brought creation out of nothing, echoes in the *Fiat* of Mary whose humility gave Christ his humanity; and the *Fiat* of Christ in his passion and death opens the way for the return of mankind to its glorious source in the Father.

The Son of God emptied himself when he took our human nature, to become bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh. But his coming was not the degradation of a god, it was rather the glorification of God through his creature, whose soul magnified the Lord. The eternal light came graciously to shine in this world. Shining it was not diminished. Like the sun it illumined what it touched, so that men might see and glorify God in his works. God was not lessened by the Incarnation nor was man obliterated. Our faith obliges us to distinguish the divine and human natures in Christ, but we must distinguish them within the unity of the one divine

person; distinction without separation, unity without confusion. The humanity is not less human, nor the divinity less divine; there is but one Christ, true God and true man. Christ is fully man – because God saves man not by destroying human nature but by bringing it to perfection. Christ is fully God – the work of redemption is divine and can be accomplished by God alone. Christ is true God and true man – in him we see that God is capable of becoming man and of working like a man; we see too, that man is capable of becoming godlike and of working with God. As we contemplate God made man we can recognise in the fullness of his humanity the way towards the fullness of his divinity: he and the Father are one, he who knows Christ knows the Father. We recognise too, in the fullness of his divinity, the value God sets upon our human nature and the possibilities he offers to those who accept in love, hope and belief the Son of God: a possibility which is nothing less than the power of becoming sons of God.

On the feast of the commemoration of Our Lord's birth the Church directs our attention beyond the historic events at Bethlehem to the mystery which they enclose. We celebrate not only the temporal birth of Christ, an event in the past which cannot be repeated, but also the mystery of God made man, the union of the divine and the human, into which we are caught up by our baptism. The birth of Christ is the inauguration of effective redemption. His humble and gentle entrance into this world, 'like rain falling on a fleece', is the beginnings of the christian people to whom we belong. Hence we contemplate the Nativity not as spectators exterior to the scene. Christian contemplation can never be exterior to its object. Christ is born for us; he came *propter nos homines et propter nostram salutem*, not for his benefit. We are the cause of his earthly itinerary and each one can say in truth *sum causa tuae viae*. Hence we cannot stand back from the mystery which enfolds us. In the liturgy of glory which the Church offers us at Christmas we must learn to recognise our own glorious vocation and renew our efforts to move steadfastly towards the fulfilment God promises us in his Son.

The mere external belief that Christ is true God and true man is not sufficient to constitute christian faith. Belief is an act which must fructify in activity. It is not enough to confess Christ with our lips unless we transform our interior attitudes and external behaviour so that they conform to our belief. We must re-live with Christ in his Church the mystery which he lived for us. With Peter we

fall on our knees before Christ in wonder, aware of our utter unworthiness; but we must also rise and follow him. The Incarnation is the beginning of the road towards glorification. It is not enough to contemplate that road from afar and admire its course. The trail blazed by Christ is intended for our use. Every step of his way is so identified with the mystery of our redemption that Christ can say of himself 'I am the way'. The measure in which we fail to make his way our own is the measure of our rejection of him. Failure to see Christ beckoning to us in every word and incident of the gospel story is tantamount to thrusting God back into his heaven, out of the world of human affairs. We make of Christ's life a divine *tour de force*, a display to be admired, not a way which we must tread. In the desert Christ rejected the temptation to cast himself down from the temple so that men would gaze on him in awe. He refused to capitalize on his miracles and fled the hero-worship which would have raised him on a pedestal above the heads of the rest of men. He had not come to assert his divine transcendence over man but to be a man among men, the Son of Man, through whom man was to reach God by being moulded into the pattern of the humanity of Jesus Christ God and man, our Mediator.

We belittle the divinity of Christ when we try to make Christ some sort of religious superman. The unity of the divine person gives us the unshakeable confidence that by penetrating into his humanity we shall inevitably come face to face with his divinity. The plenitude of his human nature is guaranteed by the plenitude of his divinity. The more we understand his humanity the closer we shall come to his Godhead. This is, surely, the whole meaning of devotion to the sacred humanity of Christ, sacred because it is sanctified and sanctifying. Such devotion is not an easier, because a more sentimental, way of following Christ. It is the way chosen by Christ himself, who was crucified in his humanity. And those who attach themselves to him will find with him their own crucifixion. The Fathers of the Church saw in the lives of the Apostles the pattern or the normal spiritual progress of the follower of Christ. Their human attachment to Christ the man was refined and transformed in the mystery of his death, resurrection and ascension. Before the risen Christ they understood how insufficient their love had been. Genuine though it was, its spark had been quenched by the flood waters of apparent failure. It was only rekindled and fanned with apostolic fire by the Spirit of divine

love which many waters can never quench. Their human love of Christ which had fed its loyalty on present success and future promises was not suppressed but transformed. Results were no longer the measure of success for these men who rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer and die for Christ. The future on which their hearts were set was no longer the restoration of a material kingdom to Israel, but the coming again of the Lord in his glory, the establishment of the Kingdom of God. They had glimpsed the glory of the Only-Begotten. Henceforward they were unable to take the human life of Christ merely on its face value. Now they saw the divine in his every word and action. This did not lead them to depreciate the humanity of Christ; instead they prized it all the more because it was transparent to his divinity.

The Apostles' lives reveal the fundamental tension of the christian life, the passionate love of God's creation crowned by the humanity of Christ and the yearning to see and share in his uncreated glory. Like St. Paul's athlete, their hearts were set on the spiritual prize; but to reach it they took their purchase from the solid earth beneath their flying feet. Their activity was not a rejection of their human condition but a re-appraisal of it. The christian does not give up being human, but he refuses to believe that it is possible to be fully human apart from Christ. In other words it is impossible to be fully a member of the human race without being united in love and belief with the head of the human race. No man can be a member unless he belongs to the body. Man had sinned originally by attempting to become divine apart from God's help. Adam and Eve had tried to take a short cut towards becoming like God. That attempt was a refusal to follow the way of human history and progress which God had given them. The result was that not only did they sever themselves from the friendship of God, but they also became incapable of transmitting to their descendants the integral humanity God had given them. The Incarnate Christ came to restore what had been lost and assure its permanence. In him we find our sanctity, in the plenitude of his divinity and the perfection of his humanity.

God incarnate re-affirms before our eyes in word and deed that the whole of creation is permeated with the divine presence. All things came from God and all things return to him. By our faith we enter into that movement and so doing we become like to God as we work with him. But this means that we must act with the conviction that every genuinely human aspect of our lives is

permeated with God's presence. For no zone of our being and activity is impervious to his active presence. We must not allow ourselves to be seduced by the serpent of Eden who speaks of God as if he were absent from his creation. When we disregard God's presence in creation, we inevitably disregard his presence in ourselves. In this attitude of absence towards God we are easily persuaded to put all our yearning for fulfilment into some single material reality – 'if you eat of this fruit you shall be as Gods'. Thus we surrender the power and eminence God has given man over creation, for we make a particular material reality an absolute necessity for ourselves. In that moment we become separated from God, the Lord of all creation, in whose image we are created. We become slaves when we should be free.

God, it is true, is to be found everywhere, and for that reason we may only go out towards created things with him. We are free, not to choose what we like, but to choose freely with God what he has chosen for us. God gives us a definite rendezvous in creation and unless we go to meet him there we shall miss him. In Christ God is drawing us to himself, and we attain perfection only when we listen first for his call before we act. We must first of all seek the kingdom of God through Christ, not in a general, abstract way, but here and now in the day-to-day realities of worship, work, personal relationships, relaxation. In Christ we realise that God is not extrinsic to anything which is part of human living.

We live so often on the margin of history and creation when Christ is in its very core and the principle of its being and the bond of its coherent course. Christ is not absent from our lives, it is we who are absent from his presence even in the most material aspects of our lives. We tend to regard our material activity and environment as sanctified and sanctifying only when there is a deliberate intention on our part – 'My God I offer this to you'. But we must remember that it is only God who can give a divine value to anything. He is not extrinsic to his creation. He transcends it, true enough, but he also permeates it. The truly christian task is to seek Christ not so much by intention, but by *attention*, which penetrates into the human realities of life and seeks Christ in them. Martha was busy about many things which she intended for Christ, but Mary chose the better part of first of all paying attention to him. Working for Christ means working with him. The intention in our lives must spring from the certainty that in this particular reality of life, this work, this joy, this sorrow, Christ is beckoning me to

his side – ‘Come follow me’, here and now in this experience. We do not perform a good work and then offer it to God; the work is good because from its very inception it is done with Christ. Sanctification is not merely the reward, but also the actual process of moving towards that reward. In order to reach the end of the road we must walk along it.

All things were made in Christ and apart from him nothing was made. Christ’s earthly human life assures us of his divine presence in the whole of human living. In his birth we see the glory of our human birth. In his work at Nazareth we see that the glory of God is hidden, crying out to be made manifest in every human task, even those we rashly consider to be beneath us. Finally, Christ penetrated into the ultimate human reality, death, in order to make of it a gateway into life.

But this discovery of Christ is only made through detachment, through refusing to cling to immediate satisfactions even though they be apparently pious, as for example our attachment to the humanity of Christ. Just as Christ himself freely detached himself on the cross from the human realities he loved so deeply, the Mother whose womb had borne him, his beloved disciples, the city he had wept over, so those who would live with him must be ready for this death with him. The ultimate crown of our works which makes their worth eternal can come from God alone. For this we must put them entirely in his hands, keeping nothing for ourselves: ‘Father into thy hands I commend my spirit’. True detachment is not merely relinquishing our grasp on what we have gained, but returning our talents and the interest gained into the same hands from which we have received them. Detachment is nothing but barren stoicism if it is not a surrender into the hands of the Father.

‘For the perfection of this life is nothing other than, by means of faith, hope and charity, to forget entirely what is in the past and to reach out towards what lies ahead’.<sup>1</sup> Man’s search for God, his quest for sanctity, is never terminated by one brief contact. Christian living is a continual process of search and discovery, each leading perpetually to the other. It is not given to man to be satisfied with the brief glimpse of glory on Thabor; he must pursue his search deeper into those human realities of suffering and death where God seems to be absent. Between the seeking and the

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<sup>1</sup> William of St. Thierry P.L. 180, 367.

finding he must wait. But that waiting is not inertia, it is a vital activity of watchful expectancy which gives him full possession of himself, so that when the hour comes he goes out to meet the Master. Fulfilment lies ahead and the christian is false to his vocation when he attempts to live by looking back over his shoulder. The pagan yearning for the return to a lost paradise has been transformed in Christ to the longing for the discovery of the kingdom of God, the unity of God in all things: a unity which was, is, and shall be. In the present moment the christian uses the past to reach out towards a future of glory in Christ.

The christian strives towards his Father who is in heaven. But he does not fulfil his vocation alone. The very term christian vocation means a vocation in Christ, in the Church. Nor is the christian vocation a rejection of his human nature and human environment. Again it is a vocation in Christ, God and man, in a Church which is at once glorious and militant. Hence the christian belongs in the world and belongs to God; that is, he belongs to both in Christ. For it is only in Christ that earth and heaven cease to be contraries and come to belong to each other. In Christ we see that we go to God and fulfil our destiny through our human nature and our material environment, and not in spite of these. But we do this only in Christ: in so far, that is, as we live out our human lives according to the divine values which Christ reveals. Christ shows us that all the authentic human values are the fruitful soil of the seed of grace, which does not destroy nature but which perfects it as it cannot perfect itself.

To accept the limitations inherent in our human nature does not restrict or lessen our spiritual ideals, any more than the work of Christ was limited by his becoming man. He who was sent only to the chosen people of Israel was he who saved mankind. He who passed through the narrow door of death gave life to the world. The follower of Christ can never rebel against his material conditioning, he can never see in material creation, in which he shares by his body, a mere potentiality for evil. He can neither capitulate to materiality and see it as an impassible obstacle to sanctity, nor can he believe that it is the unqualified means to the sanctification which is the fulfilment of his destiny. The christian lives with Christ when he seeks his salvation *in medio terrae*, in the depths of material creation, by reconciling in himself the material and the spiritual, by seeking to reveal the glory of God in his creation. This is properly the christian task in which man finds his sanctification,

his union with God. For God is at work in the world with his Son, reconciling the world to himself.<sup>1</sup> Christ came 'to bring together into one all God's children scattered far and wide'.<sup>2</sup> Newly-born, he is a rallying-point. Raised up on the cross he is the focal-point of all creation, drawing all men to himself. Risen and ascended to his Father he sends the Spirit, the bond of love and truth who works within his Church that all may be one, within the oneness of the Trinity. The christian follows his master when his attitudes and efforts synchronise with this divine work of reconciliation and unification.

In this work we can be absolutely sure of one thing: Christ, who alone knows what is in the hearts of men, alone knows our potentialities. His ambitions for us are the single factor which should determine our ambitions for him. It is he who sets the pace for us. We do not control his grace though we are free to accept or refuse it. But we can be certain that his infinite love and mercy are ever at work, leading us to break down, one after another, the finite barriers which we erect to limit our spiritual activity. We cannot live with Christ still at work and not progress. The very fact of not wanting to go forward can constitute sin, just the desire to progress too quickly will inevitably lead to sin. We must learn to see the material framework of our lives not as the limiting factor in our spiritual lives but as the *mise en scène* of our living with Christ. God can the better guide and direct us when we take his viewpoint of the world, and that is a positive one. He sees creation as good and as material for redemption and glorification; he works *in* history, not outside of it. Christ saw sinners as scattered sheep who needed to be sought out and brought back to safety, he saw sickness as something to be healed; he saw death as the beginning of life. The starting-point of christian work is the adoption of such a positive outlook when we begin to seek within creation the divine value waiting to be revealed. We prepare for the coming again of Christ when we strive to make what is opaque, transparent to his promise. He came to illuminate creation not merely from above as God, but from within as he grew out of Israel's history in his human nature. Only in him do the events of the Old Testament, and indeed of all human history, become luminous with eternal truth.

Before Christ at Bethlehem we need never fear that being holy

<sup>1</sup> Col 1, 20.

<sup>2</sup> Jn 11, 52.



means becoming less human. We need never look upon our humanity as an obstacle to sanctification; indeed it would be a lack of faith to adopt such an attitude. When we contemplate God made man we can only conclude that union with God brings out all that is best in human nature. We are all aware of our weakness: we realise that the warp of original sins reaches deep into our being. But Christ came to strengthen with divine power what had been weakened by human frailty. The power that flowed from him and healed all bodily infirmities reaches deeper to the diseases of the soul. Weakness is a prayer for contact with the strengthener, the Lord who fights for us. Such contact Christ offers us in the sacraments of his Church. The sacraments are our means towards becoming holy; by living them, (not merely receiving them), we live with Christ. Our baptism is a vocation to holiness, our entrance into the fellowship of a holy Church, which gives us access to the way of holiness by giving us Christ. God's gift of himself is our capacity to become sons of God, sharers in his work, and, since God's nature is never separated from his work, to become sharers in his nature through our work.

Perhaps we fear that too intense a christian life will disrupt our lives and destroy our privacy. We may think of intense christianity in terms of a multiplication of good works, an intensification of christian activity. We forget the lesson of the widow's mite, indeed the lesson of Christ's years at Nazareth. But the fact that there exists in the world a multitude of urgent necessities does not necessarily mean that I am the one who must do something about them. The truth is that God saves the world and fulfils its needs through my co-operation in what he wants of me, not through my working away at what I imagine he ought to want of me. The call of God is always a gentle drawing of us to himself to which we must respond. We shall become sensitive to that call by searching for him here and now in our actual circumstances. The Spirit will lead us from our own Nazareth in due time if such is the will of God; but for the moment we all have enough material for sanctification within our grasp. If we are to find the treasure we must first of all make the field our own, by convincing ourselves that our material lives are rich with hidden holiness. Such conviction is given us in Jesus Christ true God and true man. But to attain this we must begin to live deeper lives, we must dig beneath the surface of routine. Material creation is not in itself superficial; how could it be when the presence of God pervades it? The trouble is that we

so often treat it superficially, we take it at its face value and cheapen it for ourselves, or take it for granted and never reflect on its wonder.

When the christian approaches his human task with the object of seeking Christ therein and so revealing to men the glory of his Father, he begins to live the Eucharist. Through Christ, the christian offers the Father the fruits of his own labour, the product of his own life, asking him to perfect any insufficiency. In this offering we are to find our detachment. We hand over our lives to be completed. Obviously this does not mean loss of interest, but rejection of self-complacency and self-gratification, for we leave the achievement of our endeavours to him. The christian sanctifies himself within a holy Church whose mission is identified with the mission of Christ. Christ came on our account. The Church is, because there is a world to be saved. The christian fulfils his personal mission by living for others. Christ came for our sakes and we offer ourselves with him for everyone. We work so that we may give. We lose ourselves with Christ so that we may live with Christ in God. The light of the world shines upon us that our faces may reflect his glory before mankind and lead them to adore him<sup>1</sup> to whom the heavens and the earth belong, who is the founder of the world and all it contains.

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<sup>1</sup> Ps 88, 12.