LIVING FAITH IN CHRIST

By JEAN-MARIE LE BLOND

It is not enough for a christian to give a general blanket adherence to the faith of the Church. It is true that humble faith and unquestioning obedience to the Church are important preliminaries and safeguards of faith; but besides being obedience, faith also enlightens the mind, as St. John, for example, makes clear in his first epistle. If faith is to be fully lived, the christian must become aware, and explicitly aware, of what he believes; he must go beyond an over-all readiness to believe. This is all the more important since faith is not just the knowledge of a speculative truth and since its content should affect the sort of life we lead. The content of faith is the message of salvation, the gospel in its primitive sense of good news; it cannot be truly received without personal commitment; it involves both a way of understanding the world and an attitude to the world.

To believe in Christ means rather more than simply accepting what he said and receiving his teaching. It is not enough to believe in his words, one must believe in the Word which he is. The prophets were the spokesmen of God, but Christ is, as the theologians phrase it, the subsistent Word of God, God made flesh and blood in the unity of one person; a Word that may remain silent as at Bethlehem and Nazareth without ceasing to be the Word, present to the world and the effective saviour of the world.

We need of course to believe in what he said; but it is more fundamental to believe in what he is, to have a living and therefore personal relationship with him. Every christian is familiar with the phrase of the creed: *Et homo factus est;* but perhaps over-familiarity conceals the content of faith. It is likely that the faith of many christians is dormant on this point; they have never thought about it or they no longer think about it. They do not have the sense of surprise, even of scandal, which St. Paul said the cross should evoke. Both hard thinking and the help of grace are needed, inseparably needed, to give a real assent to what Christ is: Man-God.

To realise, first, that he is a man. The temptation of docetism – the error which regards the humanity of Christ as no more than a ghostly appearance – is never far removed from our midst. To re-

main in the fulness of faith, one must admit that Christ really suffered not only in his body in the scourging, but also that during the agony he suffered in soul; he knew fear, disgust, loneliness, however mysterious these interior sufferings may be. And one must admit that he took upon himself all the weaknesses of the human body, hunger, thirst, weariness, the need for sleep, and all human emotions – except those which involve sin; he sighed, he shed tears, he had close and privileged friends. One must also admit that, like all men, 'he advanced in wisdom with the years'[1] as the Gospel says, adding a phrase which theologians will continue to meditate: 'he advanced in favour both with God and with men'. 'With God': this expression makes it plain that his growth was real and not just apparent. He was always God, but first in the form of a child, then an adolescent and finally a mature man. The public life, indeed, contains hints of disappointment at his rejection by the mighty and the prudent, and at the difficulty of winning the humble to the gospel. There are so many attempts and they cannot be regarded as 'play-acting', to gather them together 'as a hen does her young'. Guardini has stressed this point with courage and prudence, 'After the defection of the mighty, the people ought to have come forward and replaced them. That would have been the hour for the judgement of the people, for a revolution willed by God. But the people, too, refused him. Deceived and misguided, it fell into apostasy. But Jesus does not give up the struggle. He waits till the last moment. Even in Jerusalem, in the days before his death, the struggle goes on. But their answer has already been given, and Redemption will now have to take a different form'.[2]

Only when the christian has given a real assent to the humanity of Christ, not as an abstraction, but as an historical and developing person, only then can he appreciate what it means to assert that Christ was God; only then does his faith become a living, concrete experience. Faith in the words which Christ speaks of himself and which he confirms by miracles; on a deeper level, faith in what he is as revealed in his actions and behaviour. Christ, it seems, only has recourse to miracles as a secondary confirmation, and then only with a certain reluctance. 'If you do not believe in me at least believe in my works'.[3] 'Unless you see signs and wonders, you will not believe'.[4] He wants to draw attention to himself as the object

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[1] Lk 2, 52.
[2] Cf Romano Guardini, *The Lord* (London 1956), p. 210.
[3] Jn 10, 38.
[4] Jn 4, 49.

and motive of faith. On some occasions the Jews show that they understood this well enough. After the Sermon on the Mount they do not comment on the content of the sermon but on the speaker and the authority he displays.[1]

His authority is that of a holy man: but whereas all the saints, in so far as they are saints, have a sense of sin which they express in ways which we often find exaggerated,[2] Christ, humble and meek of heart, calmly asserts, without any fear of contradiction: 'Which of you can convict me of sin'?[3] In recent years the Qumran manuscripts have revealed the impressive figure of the Master of Justice, and some scholars have claimed to discover in him a first sketch of Christ, thus detracting from his originality and compromising his transcendence. But the striking thing about the Master of Justice, and the guarantee of his holiness, is that he presents himself as a humble sinner. There is no trace of this kind of humility in Christ.

And on the other hand the one who blesses by his presence and power the marriage feast of Cana, the one who accuses the Pharisees of sheltering behind their interpretations of the law in order to neglect filial duties, demands a higher love than that of father, mother or wife: 'He who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me'. We are too familiar with these words to grasp their shocking, disturbing quality, their radicalism: they imply claims that would be intolerable if Christ were merely a man.

We are also used to hearing that he remits sins. This was not a custom among the Jews, and they knew that sin was an offence against God which concerns God and man alone. That is why they understood perfectly when they heard him say, authoritatively and without any 'deprecatory' formula, 'Your sins are forgiven you'. The miracle involved in saying 'Take up your bed and walk' was, all things considered, much less astonishing.[4] Nor did they misunderstand his attitude as Lord and Master of the Sabbath, for they thought that God himself was bound by the Sabbath.

Thus we encounter a man, obviously sane, who calmly proclaims his absolute innocence, love ableness and power to forgive. Not only does he say that he is these things, but his conduct is in accordance with these claims. Not that he is a sort of superman, but

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[1] Mt 7, 29.

[2] St. Philip Neri was surprised that the earth did not open up beneath him. St. Aloysius fainted in the confessional at the thought of his youthful peccadilloes. St. Augustine remembered with sadness 'the sin of his sixteenth year' – the theft of a few apples. St. Ignatius imagined himself as an open abscess.

[3] Jn 8, 46.

[4] Lk 5, 24.

he really is absolute: beyond him there is nothing. This is why, besides appealing to his miracles as a motive of faith – in the miracles, without appearing to attach much importance to them, he shows that he is the master of nature – he presents himself both as the object and motive of faith: 'My testimony is trustworthy, even when I testify on my own behalf'.[1] In the last analysis one believes in him because of who he is. The act of living faith in its fulness attains the divinity through a human nature like ours. St. John's prologue and his first epistle should be read in the light of this. One could paraphrase what he has to say thus: This man whom you have seen (and, St. John adds, whom we have listened to, whom we have touched) was truly a prophet and Word of God; he comes from eternity, he comes from God, he is God. Not only does he bring life-giving teaching but he is life itself (for 'life was manifested to us and we have seen it'). He is the true light coming into our world. Faith is concerned with this eternal and divine dimension of Christ. Historical studies can prove the existence of Jesus and the extent of his influence; they can show his execution under Pontius Pilate and can gather the evidences of his resurrection: but faith, through these facts, attains the divinity.

The act of faith in the divinity of Christ puts one in touch with him through the Gospels and the memories of the apostles. To believe in him, basically, means to assimilate the gospel, to be convinced that it concerns us directly, though we come 2,000 years afterwards: the first thing, then, is to make present what is past.

That is the meaning of the contemplation of gospel scenes, an exercise which has been widespread in christian piety from the pseudo-Bonaventure onwards; it is an attempt to make the gospel one's own, to penetrate the reality of a gospel scene, to 're-present' it. It is not a pious 'as if', still less any kind of sentimental or nostalgia – laden musing, with the secret sorrow of not having been really there; it is a true and profound reality. As Hans Urs von Balthasar put it, it is not an essentialist contemplation aimed chiefly at investigating, intellectually, the meaning of the text; it is rather an existential contemplation which strives to assimilate a reality and to correspond to it actively.[2] It involves the conviction that every action and attitude of Christ goes far beyond the circumstances

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[1] Jn 8, 13.

[2] 'Like the prayer of St. John the Evangelist which uses essentialist thinking as a first step towards an attitude of adoration, humility and wonder at the divine presence, the divine 'here'. Cf *Prayer* (London, 1961), p. 196.

they arise out of, and that Christ came for all men, for each generation, and so for us too. When a contemporary christian makes himself present to the gospel narrative, he can do this because he is answering a presence already there in the gospel. Thus, for example, the Holy Hour, during which christians are united across the centuries to Christ's agony, is not simply a convenient device for spending an hour in prayer; it corresponds to the truth. The same can be said of the anniversaries of Christ which the liturgical year puts before us; Christmas, Easter, Pentecost and the Sunday Gospels. By being present to the events recalled in the liturgical year, the contemporary christian declares not only that these are real, historical events (that could be established anyway as a conclusion to lengthy archeological, historical and linguistic studies), but also that by his act of faith he discerns how much Christ's existence concerns him and how much it affects the world today. He recognises that the life of Christ, though confined to a particular time and place, is not over and done with, not lost in an irrecoverable past. The contemporary christian makes the gospel his own, makes it personal to himself. He accepts the full dimensions of the incarnation with both its limited historical setting and its universal relevance. This is the first task of faith: to gain access, across the centuries, to the historical presence of Christ in the past.

But this presence of Christ is not really past. Although the christian can and should rejoin Christ in the past and become his contemporary through his meditation on the Gospels, it is even more important that he should realise the presence of Christ in his own modern world. We should not find it strange that people today should be inclined to look for Christ in the events and the men of today: many investigations in France have shown this to be in fact the dominant approach. The first Vatican Council had been reluctant to stress the doctrine of the mystical body, for fear of relying too much on metaphors; the second Vatican Council, on the other hand, is likely to stress precisely this doctrine.

Christian charity, it is worth noting, has never lost sight of the presence of Christ in the contemporary world; and nursing sisters, lay and religious, have always looked for Christ in the sick and wounded. That again is no artificial formula, any more than the return in prayer to the past events of the gospel. It is truth, taught by Christ: 'You gave that glass of water to me'. Indeed, Christ also put that doctrine into practice when Paul was on his way to Damascus: 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me'? Christ has

identified himself with all its members. It was more than a flight of eloquence when Lacordaire, the famous French Dominican, showed Christ present through the course of centuries in the fortitude of martyrs, the patience of holy widows, the fidelity of confessors; these virtues do not depend simply on the imitation of Christ but on his presence. He is present in all men and not just in the saints, present in all genuine love which breaks down selfishness, present in all those who bear suffering patiently, present in the race of men who, in St. Paul's astonishing phrase, 'grope their way towards him'.[1] It is well-known that the Fathers of the Church, unwilling ever to divide head from members, delight in the thought of the whole Christ who gradually grows towards full stature, gathering to himself all those who do not reject him.

The mystics have had this experience of the presence of Christ the Saviour in all men, and that indeed is the height of mystical experience. But ordinary faith, too, teaches the same lesson, and a living faith views the struggles and weaknesses of our own life and those about us with their successes and failures, world events and what is in the newspapers – all these living faith views in the light of the active, progressive presence of Christ.

We are thus led to consider not simply the remarkableness of the incarnation, but its meaning. The incarnation most certainly is a wonder that should arouse astonishment and even 'scandal' at the thought that he who created and sustains the world should be enclosed in the womb of the Virgin Mary, be born, and live for about thirty-three years without ever leaving his tiny little country, doing the humble work of a carpenter using the methods and tools of the time. But this wonder was not done just to astonish us, not even to overwhelm us with tender feelings at God's goodness and power; nor was its motive simply the divinisation of the individual humanity of Jesus and thus the salvation of human nature through one example of human nature. The Word was made flesh not just for the sake of human nature in the abstract, but *propter nos homines te propter nostram salutem*. Here we see the incarnation not as something to be marvelled at but as something with meaning. Christ is the man God, but he is man God because he is the redeeming Word and his action is salvific. His saving action is present to every generation because it is, through the ages, an effective presence. Creation is not a past event, completed and finished with 'in the beginning',

[1] Acts 17, 27.

but rather a continuous efficacious presence of God to the world, giving and sustaining the being of every creature. In a similar way, redemption was not only achieved on the cross in the supreme moment of Christ's death, but it continues and affects every instant of time. Christ saves us now: 'if we confess our sins, he is just and may be trusted to forgive our sins and cleanse us from every sort of wrong'.[1]

Such an emphasis on the meaning of faith in the incarnation also helps us to understand the surprisingly, perhaps disturbingly, laconic treatment of the life of Christ in the gospels. The evangelists have a characteristic reticence which disappoints natural curiosity. They only give about forty miracles, yet they speak of a 'virtue' which went out of Christ so that he healed those who drew near to him. They do not tell us what Christ looked like; scripture tells us that David was a handsome youth with reddish (or blond?) hair, but we know neither how tall Christ was nor the colour of his hair and eyes. Our Lady cannot have been taxed with questions, for us so significant, about the first words he spoke as a baby, remarks he made as a child, the games he played. Before very long, uncanonical, apocryphal gospels and legends abounded, which spelled out the supposed marvels of Christ's deliberately ordinary childhood. These detailed legends, even when based on ancient traditions, are misleading because they distract attention from the essential, that is, from the meaning of Christ's existence. If one confines oneself to them, one would be hindered in the search for the encounter with Christ in faith. The canonical gospels, in what they put in and what they leave out, convey both a sense of the true humanity of Christ and direct our attention to the meaning of his coming; and by that we are linked to him and invited to make a personal act of commitment and faith.

The double dimension of faith in Christ – making ourselves present to his past and meeting him here and now – finds its expression in the eucharistic presence of Christ, or rather in the sacrifice of the Mass; and this is the centre of the Church's life. The Mass is simultaneously a memorial and a presence, and in it the effort to rejoin Christ in the past and to discover him in the present are fused. 'Every time you eat this bread and drink this chalice, it will be the Lord's death you are heralding'.[2] The Lord himself said at the last supper: 'Do this in memory of me'; and the priest immediately

[1] 1 Jn 1, 9. [2] 1 Cor 11, 26.

after the words he pronounces on behalf of Christ, answers in his own name and that of the christian people, *Unde et memores*, 'Yes, we do remember'. But while christians rejoin Christ by recalling the memory of 'the offering for sins that is never repeated',[1] and although the recalling of the sacrifice dominates the whole of the Mass, the sacrifice is not merely represented; it is made present, it is placed within reach of every generation, so that all may be united to it, enter into it, or rather, be taken up into it. When Christ at the last supper took the bread into his hands, he knew that he was at the summit of man's quest for God, and he took into his hands all human prayer: all the prayer that had gone before, 'the sacrifices of nature and the Law', as Trent says, Hebrew prayer, pagan prayer, prayer that had sometimes been misdirected, gross or selfish: all this he took into his hands; for he knew that it reached out for him and came from him. And he took into his hands all the prayer that was to come after him, the prayer that would be expressed through his self-offering in the act of perfect adoration which fulfils and so transcends all other prayer. By the Mass, and through our faith in Christ, we are present to him and he present to us.

The christian, then, believes in the divinity of Christ and in his effective presence: that is living faith. Yet, to describe his faith in all its fulness, one more note must be added: to believe in Christ is to believe in the Son. 'Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God'.[2] This is the complete act of faith that the christian must make his own, saying, in the Holy Spirit, 'Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour'. Faith in Christ can indeed only be made explicit if it becomes an act of faith in the Trinity, and it is impossible to know the Son without calling upon the Father and the Holy Spirit. The mystery of the Trinity, so often recalled in every sign of the cross, so little pondered, abandoned, it would seem, to 'theologians', is intimately linked to the mystery of Christ and to belief in his divinity.

Of course there is no 'treatise on the Trinity', not even a sketch of one, to be extracted from the discourses of Christ. Yet it is perfectly clear in the Gospels that Christ, without explaining or developing a system, intimated to the disciples the secret of his trinitarian life and moreover lived it out among them. He speaks to a mysterious 'Father', prays to him, thanks him for the Spirit whom he himself announces, confident that the Spirit will indeed be sent and will

[1] Heb 10, 12. [2] Mt 16, 16.

make him known. He declares that all he has is from the Father, doctrine and mission; his 'food' is to do the will of the Father; he observes the 'times' of the Father. Christ's relation with him is unique: 'No one knows the Father except the Son'; and they together form a single reality: 'Who sees me, Philip, sees the Father'. He proposes, finally, the relationship he has with the Father as the exemplar of charity: 'That they may be one, Father, as thou in me and I in thee'.

The revelation of a God who is not solitary but rather a loving plurality of persons, shows that at the heart of reality there is an exchange, a communication deeper than mere kindness or goodwill. The importance of the revelation of the Son and the inseparable revelation of the Father is this: that God who draws close to us, the God made flesh, Christ, does not thrust into the background the invisible God who would thus become still more remote. Far from being an obstacle or a barrier, Christ is the way which leads to the Father, he is the mediator who draws all things to the Father. One cannot know him or believe in him fully without being caught up in his movement towards the Father, without entering into the 'circumincession' of the Trinity. *In Christo:* by faith and the sacrament of faith we belong to Christ. *Per Christum:* faith, living faith, the prayer which expresses this faith and sacramental sharing in his self-oblation, lead us with Christ and in Christ to the Father to whom he brings all things. In this movement towards the Father is found the fulness of faith in Christ and total commitment to what he is.

(Translated by Peter Hebblethwaite, S.J.)