

THE CHARITY OF CHRIST

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WE were a group of eight seated at a dinner table, seven close friends and myself. The scene was a beautiful home in the white section of a typical northern American city. Eventually conversation turned to the mushroom growth of negro housing, that inevitable theme of conversation wherever white people gather together. This time, as almost always, views and judgments were sharpened by personal experience of displacement from old homes and flight to new safe areas. Every word threw sparks and spread fire. The heat of hatred was oppressive.

All my companions were well-trained, practising Catholics, people who had always counted charity a duty, who had given regularly to worthy causes, and who had probably regretted and confessed words and deeds against charity. The new negro problem, however, seemed to them completely outside the ambit of charity as they understood it.

For them, as for many modern Catholics, charity is a practice, one virtue of many which a christian must exercise. Too many have forgotten that charity is the whole meaning of christian life, 'the fulfilment of the law'¹. Since Christ's words required love for one another as a sign of discipleship, we need to study again the meaning of his charity, and to see how completely it inspired his whole earthly life. Only then will we understand that the love which he requires of his disciples is the very spirit in which he himself lived, the life which his chosen must share.

Christ, Brother of all Men

Perhaps the root of misunderstanding lies in the catechism answer to the question: Who is Christ? The ordinary Catholic answers immediately with the timeless response, He is God, the second person of the Trinity, who became man to save us from our sins and to lead us to heaven. This answer is correct; but it is still far from the whole truth. Christ became man, it is true, but not a person with a vague, general and abstract manhood. Rather he became

¹ Rom 13, 8.

a very definite man like ourselves, so truly one of us that the complete definition of the incarnate Word must present him as God who became the man Jesus, our brother.

It is always in this way that he appears in the living language of sacred scripture. One of the most revealing words he ever uttered was his command to Mary Magdalen after his resurrection: 'Go to my brothers and say to them'.¹ Paul, on the way to Damascus, heard Christ identify himself with every christian, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? . . . I am Jesus whom you are persecuting'.² For the apostle, Jesus is the elder brother of the whole christian family, 'the firstborn among many brothers'.³ It is, above all, the author of the epistle to the Hebrews who loves to linger over the bond of flesh and blood which makes the God-man a real member of the whole human family.⁴ Pondering the intimate union of Christ with all men, the sacred author thrills with love and pride as he cries out, 'He is not ashamed to call them brothers'.⁵ All the love and solicitude and compassion which an elder brother feels for the younger children of the family are but a faint image of the charity which Christ feels toward us.

His whole being reflected as perfectly as a human heart can the boundless expanse of the heavenly Father's love for us. The tender yearning and infinite care which God manifested for his people in the days of the old covenant found its perfect human expression in the heart of Christ, the God-man, our brother. In him, St. Paul writes, 'the goodness and kindness of God our Saviour appeared'.⁶ Because 'God is love',⁷ his Son, on entering the human family as our brother, pledged his whole existence to the fulfilment of that simple will which governs all God's dealings with us: love. For the first word of Jesus in becoming incarnate was the heartfelt cry, 'Behold, I come . . . to do thy will, O God'.⁸

At that moment the Son of God became a brother to every human being; and from that moment he carried them all in his human heart. He would fulfil God's promise in a way surpassing all Isaiah had dreamed of: 'Even to your old age I am the same, even when your hair is grey I will bear you'.⁹

The conviction of what incarnation meant for him was with him from the beginning of his earthly life. He who was God assumed flesh

¹ Jn 20, 17.

² Acts 9, 4-5.

³ Rom 8, 29.

⁴ Heb 2, 9-18; 3, 6; 4, 14-16; 5, 1-3.

⁵ Heb 2, 11.

⁶ Tit 3, 4.

⁷ 1 Jn 4, 8.

⁸ Heb 10, 7.

⁹ Isai 46, 4.

and blood to live as a brother to all men, and to die that he might take them with himself to the bosom of the heavenly Father. This Father was the very one who sent his divine Word into the world to reveal by word and deed the height and depth of God's love. 'By sending his Son in the likeness of sinful flesh',¹ God made Jesus like a prodigal son, living in the 'far country' of wayward men, that in and through him, all prodigals might one day return to the Father's house.

The Inaugural Vision

Christ's intuitive knowledge of his mission was transformed into a totally human experience on the day when baptism inaugurated his public ministry. Coming up out of the waters of the Jordan, he received a vision which fired his whole human consciousness with an awareness of all that life upon earth involved. 'The Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form as a dove, and a voice came down from heaven, Thou art my beloved Son, in thee I am well pleased'.²

For those who know the Old Testament, every word of this description is alight with revelation. Men of the old covenant looked forward to the messianic days when the creative Spirit of God would pour out his best gifts to form a new Israel, beloved of God. Those days had now come; the Spirit, 'descending and abiding' upon Jesus, would enable him to bestow the best of all God's gifts, to baptize all men with the Holy Spirit.³

Even more, he himself would be the new Israel, incorporating in his humanity and enfolding in his love all those who, through faith in him, would become true Israelites. Though a distinct person like every man, Jesus was also, in some way, one person with all men; scholars call this rich mystery of his being 'corporate personality'. Through his God-given love for men and his divine power to save them, he embodies every man in himself, and is bound to them with a tie which no power in heaven or on earth can sever: 'Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?'⁴ At the Jordan, then, God speaks to his Son in the very words which he once addressed to the ideal Israel, his perfect servant: 'Thou art my beloved Son, in thee I am well pleased'.⁵

This inaugural vision pervades the whole earthly life of Jesus.

¹ Rom 8, 3.

⁴ Rom 8, 35.

² Lk 3, 22.

⁵ Lk 3, 22; cf Isai 42, 1.

³ Jn 1, 33.

Isaiah's vision of the all-holy Yahweh in the temple dominated every prophecy he uttered; Jeremiah's first contact with a merciful God intimately touching his lips fills the whole message of his prophecy with tenderness; Catherine of Siena's early vision of Christ the high priest inspired her with lifelong love of the pope, '*il dolce Cristo in terra*', the sweet Christ on earth. So, too, the first vision of Jesus struck the keynote of his whole ministry. Ever after he would move among men with full awareness of his intimate bond with them. As brother with brother, he would make them the new Israel by sharing the fullness of his own beloved sonship: 'To as many as received him, he gave the power of becoming sons of God'.¹ For this he had come: to love all men as brothers and to unite them to himself, that in him and through him, the new Israel, they too might live as beloved sons of the Father.

Later, at the time of his transfiguration, the vision was repeated. Here, however, a new emphasis was added. There was to be no limit to his love, no bounds to his labour and efforts for men. Having loved his own who were in the world, he must love them even to the end.² Therefore, when the baptismal vision came again, a new note appears. Now Moses and Elias were with him; and they 'spoke of his death, which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem'.³ Jesus, as the perfect servant of Yahweh, must fulfil the prophecy of Isaiah that the one who represents and embodies all Israel shall himself die, in order that his brothers may live. Only in this way will God's saving love find fulfilment: 'The will of the Lord shall be accomplished through him . . . Through his sufferings, my servant shall justify many, and their guilt he shall bear.'⁴

The Spontaneity of Christ's Charity

Brotherly love: strong, solicitous, selfless; this was truly the inspiration of all that Christ did and said. This charity was vitally active, always taking the initiative to enter intimately the lives of all whom he met. Constantly aware of the bond between himself and every man, this loving brother forged new friendships with spontaneous interest and affection. In our own day, Mother Marie Thérèse de Lescure, who died as Superior General of the Society of the Sacred Heart, surprised the religious whose houses she visited by her overflowing joy in meeting people whom she had never seen before.

¹ Jn 1, 12.

² Cf Jn 13, 1.

³ Lk 9, 31.

⁴ Isai 53, 10-11.

Asked for an explanation of this instant reaction, she smiled and answered, 'Do we not bear within us the love which the Sacred Heart has for them?' These words were but a modern translation of the cry of St. Paul, 'The love of Christ impels us'.¹

Christ's charity, the very source of his followers' zeal, was alive with this spontaneity of love. He it was who took the initiative in calling his first disciples. The opening chapter of St. John's gospel² describes his first meeting with John and Andrew, Peter, Philip and Nathanael. His bearing and his smile and his seemingly artless question, 'What is it you seek?', prompted in John and Andrew the query which Jesus knew would lead to lifelong friendship, 'Rabbi, where do you live?'³ With Peter the forthright, Christ's initiative was more direct. Here Jesus spoke the first word to master instantly the strong fisherman, 'You are Simon, the son of John; you shall be called Cephas'.⁴ He takes the same initiative with reluctant Nathanael, breaking down all reserve by revealing his deep insight into the young man's whole soul: 'Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you'.⁵

All during the days of his public ministry, Christ's charity led him constantly to take the first step in winning new loyalties. The widow of Naim was not even aware of his presence. Knowing that grief and gratitude would prepare both mother and son to love God in fellowship with him, he came out of the shadows and spoke a single word. At once hearts were opened to the light of a new faith in God and in himself. To the mother he spoke kindly: 'Do not weep', and to the son, commandingly: 'Young man, I say to thee, arise'.⁶ Their lives would never be the same again. This abrupt encounter with the spontaneous charity of the God-man brought them to know him and his Father in a new way, to anticipate with living awareness the definition of God which John would formulate later: 'God is love'.⁷

This spontaneity of Christ's charity is the whole meaning of the recurring *cliché*, 'Jesus, having compassion'. Especially in the gospel of Mark this phrase is frequently inserted as the single reason for his deeds of mercy. Before men were even aware of his presence, he saw their need and, moved by pity, came forward to help them. His initiative is shaped to the character of each person he meets. When men like Zaccheus felt stirrings of desire for his friendship, he acted instantly to speak the word of invitation: 'Zaccheus, make haste and

¹ 2 Cor 5, 14.

⁵ Jn 1, 48.

² Jn 1, 35-51.

⁶ Lk 7, 13-14.

³ Jn 1, 38.

⁷ 1 Jn 4, 8.

⁴ Jn 1, 42.

come down; for I must stay in thy house today'.¹ At other times he would check his spontaneity in order to achieve his loving purpose. His conversation with the woman at the well of Samaria² reads like a stanza from Thompson's *Hound of Heaven*, with the hunter patiently pacing his quarry, until at last she is ready for true love.

The charity of Christ is always vital and spontaneous. He had entered the human family as a brother, to turn the hearts of his brethren to their heavenly Father. On every occasion and in every way, openly or secretly, he launched the initiative and took the first steps. For he had come to spread the fire of God's love upon earth, and his whole desire was to enkindle it.

The Completeness of Christ's Charity

In this lifetime task he never lost sight of the fact that he was living on earth among men of flesh and blood. 'For, of course, it is not angels that He is succouring; but He is succouring the offspring of Abraham'.³ When he dealt with men, therefore, he knew that his charity must deal with the whole man, a composite of body and spirit. There were occasions, it is true, when his work of charity was on the purely spiritual level. But preaching and instructing and forgiving sin were only part of his ministry. Quite as much of his time was taken up in feeding the hungry, in curing ills, and in ministering to bodily needs.

For Jesus, all this activity was an exercise of messianic mercy. He was a brother to human beings and loved each one in his wholeness. Christ, who is the God-creator of man, could never think of benefiting him with a cure which would touch only the body. Whatever he did for man physically was bound to change the whole man, bringing health to the body and new life to the soul. When he gave sight to the blind, he enabled them not only to see trees and men, but also to glimpse the goodness of God with new understanding. When he gave strength to withered limbs, he empowered men not only to walk upon earth but also to take new giant strides in serving God. When he raised men from the dead, he not only brought them back to life upon earth, but also vivified them with the life of a new love for the Father.

Jesus was not one to distinguish between spiritual and corporal works of mercy. The miraculous deeds of the divine Word were themselves words proclaiming to men that love of God which en-

¹ Lk 19, 5.

² Jn 4, 1-42.

³ Heb 2, 16.

folds their whole being. In our own day devoted doctors and solicitous nurses, in bringing health to tired and wasted bodies, invigorate the whole man with new joy and peace. They are truly carrying on the messianic mission of Christ; and in their ministrations we can see how his miraculous activity was not merely a proof of who he was, but also a full manifestation of the messianic love with which he desired to fill the hearts of all his brothers. This is why St. Matthew sees in the cures of Jesus the perfect fulfilment of the salvation which the Messiah was to bring to the whole world. Having alluded to the miracles of the Master who 'cured all who were sick', Matthew declares that Jesus worked these wonders 'that there might be fulfilled what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet, who said, He himself took up our infirmities, and bore the burden of our ills'.¹

The Realism of Christ's Charity

The 'burden of our ills', however, was heavier than a merely physical weight. The burden of sin pressed down on every human life. The presence of the Son of God upon earth did not instantly lighten the burden; for, even after his coming, men would still subscribe to the words of St. John, 'If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us'.² Christ, therefore, found himself in the midst of prodigal sons; his was the superhuman task of bringing them back to his Father.

He took it for granted that the law of his life would be struggle, that his charity would often be thwarted and misunderstood. The failings of his brothers often wrung from the heart of Christ a cry of anguish, 'O, you of little faith'. But never did human failing or human sin surprise or shock him. Men of his own day could not understand the freedom with which he moved among publicans and sinners. Even in our own time men marvel that Christ, the all-holy, never registered shock in the presence of moral ugliness. He is constantly serene in the presence of men and women whose behaviour repels an ordinary good man. The simple truth is that he was the God of whom the psalmist wrote, 'He knows how we are formed; he remembers that we are dust'.³ He dealt with men just as he found them. 'As a father has compassion on his children', so this Lord had compassion on those he had come to save.⁴

This unruffled peace of true love made him free to use all the devices of charity which prudence put at his command. With a mind

¹ Mt 8, 16-17.

² 1 Jn 1, 8.

³ Ps 102, 14.

⁴ Cf Ps 102, 13.

clear of prejudice and a soul untrammelled by the unruly emotions of human weakness, he was ingenious in all the exercises of charity. If kindness and encouragement would win the wayward, he would be kindness itself. No intemperate zeal ever led him to break a bruised reed or to extinguish a smoking wick.¹ If, on the other hand, a situation called for remonstrance and rebuke, Christ could lash the offender with words which laid bare faults that otherwise would fester in their hiddenness. No wrath could be so fearful as that of the gentle Lamb of God when sham and hypocrisy had to be unmasked. Even the evangelist whom Dante has called 'the scribe of the meekness of Christ', like all the other evangelists, has reported in his narrative the vitriolic words which Christ spoke to the Pharisees.²

Christ, was truly 'all things to all men'. His love for them was the strong and realistic love of a devoted older brother. He worked with them just as he found them, shaping his every act of charity to suit their immediate needs.

The Hopefulness of Christ's Charity

In his dealing with men, however, Christ always looked beyond what they were to what they could and should be. True love always has double vision. It sees the loved brother in his present condition; but it sees too all the good that life holds for him. Hence 'charity believes all things, hopes all things',³ and works constantly to achieve perfect fulfilment.

He had unshakeable confidence in the task of love which had been given to him. He had just as much confidence in the power of man, his brother and God's son, to respond to the Father's love. In the heart of everyone of them Christ knew that 'hope springs eternal'. Like Nicodemus, they might not see clearly what life could be; Christ would illumine them, tempering the light to their present weakness in order to strengthen it for new insights. Like Zaccheus, they might seem outside the pale of God's acceptance; Christ would enter into the very intimacy of their lives to convince them how fully God could live there. Like the apostles they might walk the treadmill of their own half-heartedness; Christ would rebuke and encourage and constantly urge them on to the future which he knew was theirs for the asking. No matter how often he failed to make men advance, he ever remained confident that just around the corner in every man's life are those 'good works which

¹ Cf Mt 12, 20.

² Lk 11, 37-52.

³ 1 Cor 13, 7.

God has made ready beforehand that we may walk in them'.¹

No one ever had so much confidence in what man could be, because no one has known so well the riches of God's mercy which alone makes man all he should be. He who dwells in the bosom of the Father is always aware of that love without limit which can turn stones into children of Abraham.² Christ, as God and man, shared this love, so that he himself was all love, and all hope for every man whose simple 'Yes, Father', would open his heart to the powerful love of God' with whom all things are possible'.

Charity Unto the End

There were, then, no limits to the charity of Christ. Because he was so sure of his Father's love for men and because, as a devoted brother, he shared this love in the most perfect way a human being can, he was ready to do everything to bring them all, in and through himself, to their Father in heaven.

In a sense he failed; no matter how hard he tried, some men refused to say 'yes'. 'He came unto his own, and his own received him not'.³ But love knows no thwarting; even death cannot quench it. His death, in fact, would spell love's ultimate triumph. He was so much one of us, so truly our brother, that in his return to the Father he must bring all men with him. No matter what terrors death held for him, he saw clearly the certainty of this final triumph; 'And I, if I be lifted up, will draw all things to myself'.⁴ Once safe in the bosom of the Father, our brother would be powerful to send into the world the very Spirit of God, thereby filling men's hearts with the love which he had laboured to put there. And so, 'having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them unto the end',⁵ not merely to the end of his human life but to the perfect fulfilment of love's ingenuity.

The story of his final sufferings, written in letters of blood, provide the world's most eloquent commentary on St. Paul's description of perfect love: 'Charity is patient; . . . bears with all things . . . endures all things'.⁶ Love sealed his lips against recrimination; love prompted him to speak words of gratitude to the women of Jerusalem, words of pardon to the penitent thief, words of prayerful pleading for his brothers: 'Father, forgive them for they know not what they do'.⁷ But it was in death itself that he accomplished his greatest act of love.

¹ Eph 2, 10.

⁵ Jn 13, 1.

² Cf Mt 3, 9.

⁶ 1 Cor 13, 4-7.

³ Jn 1, 11.

⁷ Lk 23, 34.

⁴ Jn 12, 32.

At that moment, like the true Israel returning to the promised land, he left the desert of our world, bearing all men within himself to the heavenly country where his Father waited. Ever after, through the gift of his Holy Spirit, he would fill the heart of each prodigal son with his own love; and would lead him, as a beloved brother, through the experience of his own death and resurrection. 'In this we have come to know his love, that he has laid down his life for us.'¹

The Impelling Charity of Christ

'And we likewise ought to lay down our life for the brethren'.² This is the only possible conclusion for one who knows the charity of Christ, not merely as a series of practices to be imitated, but as the very life which each christian receives through the gift of Christ's Spirit at baptism. Charity is a whole state of mind; it is a connatural movement expressive of Christ's life in us; it is the very fruit of the Holy Spirit dwelling in our souls as he dwells in the soul of Christ.

It is well to end where we began: in the dining room with friends and in the discussion of the negro problem. Problems like this one, problems with people and situations, problems with superiors and subjects, problems with persons poor in gifts and poor in virtue: all these have their only answer in the charity of Christ. His love for all men is a light which enables us to see each one as a brother. His love is a power which strengthens us to deal with each as someone who belongs to the family of God; who therefore has a right to love which is 'patient and kind, thinks no evil, bears with all things, hopes all things, endures all things'.³

The spontaneity, realism and completeness of Christ's charity in us makes life not only liveable but lovable. It turns every meeting into a family gathering; it makes every service and every deed of kindness the helping hand of a brother assisting a brother along the way to God. Christian life thus becomes a warm and beautiful experience. The fervour of the first days of the Church lives again as men cry out, 'See how these Christians love one another'. Those who seek God spread peace and joy around them, for they know only one rule of life: 'The Charity of Christ impels us'.⁴

¹ 1 Jn 3, 16.

² 1 Jn 3, 16.

³ 1 Cor 13, 4-7.

⁴ 2 Cor 5, 14.