

IN OUR IMAGE AND LIKENESS

By THOMAS G. HAND

THE starting point in the spiritual life of man is found in the simple questions, What am I? and Who am I? Growth in the spiritual life consists in answering these questions more and more consciously and more and more perfectly. Growth further consists in integrating our whole personality and daily life around our answer to these questions. The goal of the spiritual life is profoundly to understand, accept and express the great pauline enlightenment: 'I live now not I but Christ lives in me'. 'I in them and thou in me, that they be perfectly one'. The first obstacle to all this is the terrible ease with which we build up a false image of ourselves. The self identification we have is always mixed with error and leads to evil. It is this false self we must destroy through faith. Through faith alone can we validly identify ourselves – as the image and likeness of God. We must begin from the actual situation, with the present, here and now, I. But since the now is rooted in the past and ordered to the future, our brief outline of human self identification will begin with creation, go on to anti-creation – the fall, and end with the wonders of our re-creation in Christ, with a glimpse at what this implies.

Creation in our image

In the priestly account of our origins we read:

God (*Elohim*) said: Let us make mankind in our image and likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the cattle, over all the wild animals and every creature that crawls on the earth. God created man in his image. In the image of God he created him. Male and female he created them.¹

When *Elohim* is used to indicate the one true God, the verb is almost without exception singular – even though the word itself is

¹ Gen 1, 26–27.

a plural form. But here plural forms, 'let us make' and 'our image', are used. For this and other reasons scripture scholars are more and more inclined to accept this plural as a generic plural, referring to God as one of the heavenly beings. God and his angels, who are also called *elohim*, make up a class: the heavenly beings. These beings are invisible and powerful. Also, they speak with one another: 'let us make . . .' They are persons. God, precisely as an invisible, powerful person, created man like himself and the angels. He creates man as a composite being whose principal element is an invisible element – a spiritual soul – that makes him a person and a power. Man has been given power to rule: ' . . . in our image . . . and let them have dominion . . .' He is to be the lord of all visible, non-personal being. He is to use material creation.

As a person, man is made for personal relations. This is especially clear from the yahwist account of the first blissful state of mankind.¹ Adam was made for fellowship; and Eve was created so that this fellowship might be achieved and continued. From the way God walks and talks with Adam, it is clear that man was made for very special personal relations with the supreme heavenly Being.

All this tells us a great deal about our actual present situation. When man asks, What am I? and responds: I am an image of God made in the likeness of a heavenly being, basically he has said everything. He has identified himself as a person, and from this all else follows. A person is one term of a relationship. A term of a relationship is an 'I' or a 'you' in the basic personal relationship. To find oneself is simply to become conscious of the actual relationships one has with other persons. Therefore, to speak of our human situation is to speak of the actual relationships that every human person has. Varied and complex as these are, they can all be reduced to three: of myself to God, to man, to non-personal beings.²

Man – God

God is absolute. He simply exists and cannot be otherwise. But I also exist. So my relationship to God is, in a sense, absolute. I cannot be indifferent to it. It is absolute in that any other relationship contrary to it is false and evil. Also, it is a person to Person(s) relationship. It is important to notice that there are different kinds

¹ Gen 2, 4 ff.

² The man-to-(good or bad) angel relationship is also a basic one, but is still full of mystery for us. That we do not treat of it here in no way denies either its reality or importance.

of persons, even essentially. The type of person depends on the type of nature; and, since man's nature is totally received, he is entirely a 'receiver person'. That we are receiver persons is basic truth; any self-identification that contradicts it is a tragic mistake: a false image and a step towards self destruction. Any progress we make in a deeper understanding of this wonderfully rich truth is a step toward personal fulfilment and joy. Later we shall see that this reality is the basis of our entry, through the incarnation, into the very personal relations of the three divine Persons. Here it is sufficient to say that to be an image of God is to be a person. For man, to be a person is to receive, to respond. This receiver response is one of total and utter submission. Our basic personal responsibility before God is willingness to receive, a totally submissive openness.

Man – man

God made man with an intrinsic relationship to other men, a relationship which has a quasi-absolute character of this relationship. We are all sons of the divine Father. If we deny our brotherhood to any other human being, we are implicitly denying our own sonship to the divine Father. Just as the inner necessity and exterior command we have to love God as our Father is absolute, so also the necessity and command to love our neighbour as a brother is absolute. The two commandments are one. We cannot be indifferent to our fellow man. It also follows that to use other persons would be to treat them as non-personal beings. But the man-God relationship is primary; any union with neighbour that would be against it would be false and destructive.

Further, the basic characteristic of this relationship is fellowship. We are to join together in submitting to the Father. Together we are to use non-personal beings in the service of God. The superior-subject relationship is not the primary characteristic of our relations with our fellow men. Rather, because we are made to live and work together, and because co-operation can only be achieved through a hierarchical structure of society, therefore we are called upon to submit to our fellow men. Obedience is for the sake of co-operation. Co-operation is the foundation of love, because love is the personal union arising out of co-existence and/or co-operation. To grow in deep consciousness that I and every other human person that I meet in any way are created to go together with the divine Son as sons to the Father is to grow in love. We are created to receive, in utterly submissive openness, all our being from the divine

Father together with all other receiver persons. The personal union arising from consciously receiving all things together is the fulfilment of ourselves as human persons. In this lies perfect joy.

Man – non-personal being

It is clear, too, that our self identification must include the basic relationship to visible, material, non-personal being. The special characteristic of this relationship is that man is made to be the lord of the visible world: that is, to use it. At the same time, any use of creatures that would interfere with our relations to God or man is false and destructive. This relationship also is both quasi-absolute and to some extent personal. It is absolute because we must use material beings as we go to God with our fellow men. As composite beings we are made to receive this being from God, with our neighbours, through material beings. To be indifferent to material creation is a false image of man, a manichean self identification. In this life especially, even our approach to God and other human persons is made through material creatures. Our human situation is dust and the breath of life, matter and spirit.

This third basic relation is personal; it is as persons that we are to use material creatures: the very material elements in our own composite and, through them, material being outside us. In fact, I must consider myself as a centre through which material being can enter into personal relationship with God. All creatures beneath the human intellect and will, including the material elements in the human composite, are brought into the personal world if I use them as a person. They all become part of my personal response to God.

So the basic elements in our self identification are all given in the very first chapters of sacred scripture. I am a receiver person, made in order to enter into a perfectly submissive relationship to God together with all my fellow human beings. Together with them I am to use material creatures. All visible creation subject to a united mankind and all mankind subject to God: this was the primordial plan. This subjection was the condition upon which the evolution of all being to personal union with God depended. Although we know little about it, this personal union of man with God was at a level above man's nature from the very beginning. God treated Adam as his friend. But when Adam refused the subjection, the whole order of things was temporarily destroyed. This is the tragic element in the actual human situation: the terrible forces driving towards disunity, struggling to cause the breakdown of the

three basic relationships and the disintegration of the personal universe.

Anti-creation

It is clear from revelation that sin first happened in the world of heavenly beings. It was here that God's divine plan of personal union was first smashed by the free rejection of him by purely spiritual creatures. It was one of these rebellious persons who tempted Adam and Eve to rebel against God. He told them that they would become like *elohim*, heavenly beings knowing good and evil. After the fall God admits, 'Indeed! The man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil!'¹ Thus the man-God world has become like the angel-God world; a world in which there is both good and evil, grace and sin. This is the irreducible duality that is present in our human situation. To identify this duality with the spirit-matter duality is a false identification.

The spirit-matter duality is reducible to a oneness through the human person. When the human person is in the state of grace, all is moving towards oneness with God. When that person is in the state of sin, all is headed toward the eternally fragmented world called hell.

As was said above, man's primordial relationship to God was supernatural. But person and nature always go together. Adam and Eve had a super-human personal relationship not only with God but also with all their possible descendants. It was in the strength of this relationship that Adam was the representative of us all; but he failed to maintain his 'receiver person' relationship to God under the stress of temptation by the evil person. Rather, he entered into personal union with this evil person, whose evil power came to infect man's nature. Satan gained power over man and thus through man came to rule the world. The power of darkness and disunity shattered the original design of truth and union in the visible world just as it had in the angelic world.

In our present situation we are tragically conscious of this evil infection within us. Our minds are dark and easily form a distorted and destructive self identification. Our wills are weak and inclined to follow this evil distortion. Thus our very process of becoming persons is plagued with evil forces. Though we are still powers, the process of coming to rule the material world would be hopeless except that the incarnation has happened and made all things new.

¹ Gen 3, 22.

Even now our powers are badly wounded. Even when the spirit is willing the flesh is weak. Flesh is the biblical term for human nature precisely as weak. To begin with, I am no longer lord of the material elements of my own composite. My emotions, imagination, physical powers and appetites, all the complex human apparatus below my intellect and will, is infected with this same drive towards chaos. And since it is through this apparatus that I should extend my control to material beings outside me, my whole domination of external creatures is drastically weakened. As the destined lord of visible creation, I can no longer bring all into subjection and personal union with his Majesty, the supreme Lord. In fact, this chain of dominion is so broken down that my spiritual element is destined to be separated from the very material elements through which I make contact with and rule this world. I am to die. Sin, the drive toward disunity, has brought death into this world. I am to enter into a state in which I am utterly helpless to be what I am made to be: the image of the Lord ruling the visible world.

We are only too well aware that the other basic relationship, of man to man, is infected with the same anti-creative drive. It remains only to consider how God has taken all the dire consequences of sin and made them the means by which he re-creates us in his own image and likeness.

Re-creation

In the holy Trinity the Father is the giver, the Son is the receiver, the holy Spirit is the mutual possessor of the one unique divine Nature. God, inasmuch as he is the source of his own being, is the Father; inasmuch as he receives his own being, he is the Son. The personal union of the Father and the Son arising from their possession of the one unique divine Being together – as a we – is the holy Spirit. It is in the context of this theology of the holy Trinity that we must place the astounding truth that the Son took into his own possession a human nature. This human nature he possesses from the Father in the holy Spirit just as he possesses the divine Nature. This human nature exists with the very existence of the divine Son; so that this Man exists as God, the Son of the divine Father. Such an existence on the part of a human nature demands some mysterious elevation, which makes it possible for it to exist in this way but does not destroy it as human. This elevation is what we call the sanctifying gift (grace).

The Person who has become man is the receiver Person: the Son

totally and utterly open to receive from the Father. We can even speak of him as being subject or submissive to the Father inasmuch as he receives: but this without any sense of derogation from his equal dignity, power or glory. To receive or to give – neither concept is necessarily joined to dignity. Either a king or a subject can either give or receive. It is what is possessed that determines dignity, etc.: not whether it is given or received.

Before going on to see how all this happened historically, we may immediately suggest the consequences for our self identification. We have received with the Son an elevated nature from the Father in the holy Spirit. Having received such a nature from the Father places us somehow on an equality with the divine Son. Since person follows nature I can stand together with him before the Father. I am an image of the Father with the Son. The three great basic relationships have been elevated to become a share in the very trinitarian relationships. All men are made to receive with the Son from the Father their being as sons. Thus we can all say with the Father, 'we possess the divine Being'. This 'we', this group-spirit, is the third Person, the holy Spirit. This is why even now we are temples of the holy Spirit and the soul of the Church is the holy Spirit himself. Here of course we are confronted with the great mystery, which tells us that in some sense we possess the divine Being. Consider again the centre of all creation, our Lord. He does in the strictest sense possess both the divine Nature and an elevated human nature. Because we also in the strictest sense possess an elevated human nature with him, we meet him in the closest personal union. In this Person we possess all. From this personal union we possess what he possesses, even the divine Nature.

All this sounds too rarified to be a description of our actual human situation. Faith tells us it is so; but our ordinary human consciousness tells us a drastically different kind of story: that we have a fallen nature. Can I, this weak, fallen, selfish closed human person identify myself with this powerful, perfectly open divine Son become man? It is St Paul who most clearly teaches us that, although the Son of God took up into his world our human nature, he did it so that he did not destroy his solidarity with us in any way except with regard to sin.

For the divine Nature was his from the first: yet he did not think to snatch at equality with God, but made himself nothing, assuming the nature of a slave, he humbled himself: and in obedience accepted even death – death on a

cross. Therefore God raised him to the heights and bestowed on him the name above all names, that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow – in heaven, on earth, and in the depths – and every tongue confess, 'Jesus Christ is Lord', to the glory of God the Father.¹

For ours is not a high priest unable to sympathize with our weaknesses but one who, because of his likeness to us, has been tested every way, only without sin . . . In the days of his earthly life he offered up prayers and petitions, with loud cries and tears, to God who was able to deliver him from the grave. Because of this humble submission his prayer was heard: Son though he was, he learned obedience in the school of suffering, and, once perfected, became the source of eternal salvation for all who obeyed him.²

The elevation of Jesus' human nature to the world of trinitarian unity took place in two phases. The first phase began with the incarnation and was one of humiliation, suffering and death. The second phase began with the resurrection and is one of glory and beatitude. Jesus took human nature with all its dimensions of time and place. To be a man is a process. This process of growth takes place in the world still partially dominated by sin. The anti-creative drive is still very much a part of our actual situation. Our Lord came into this situation. He met and felt all these evil forces. He suffered them: that is, he received and experienced the pull they exert, as they draw the human mind from the truth and the will from open obedience. But throughout it all he was the Son, perfectly open and perfectly submissive. He maintained himself as the perfect human image of the Father. He was always the Son, but the Son in the actual state of fallen nature.

Even during his life on earth Christ's inmost being was caught up in the holiness of God. But this secret glory was locked in the depths of his being: his life as Son of God remained isolated in mystery. This pauline picture is based on the gospel story. Not only his body, but all the faculties – even intellectual – by which our Lord was in contact with the world, and in which he carried out the redemption, were so incompletely possessed by the Divine Life that he was able to experience in them the need of being comforted by God.³

¹ Phil 2, 6–11.

² Heb 4, 15; 5, 7–9.

³ *The Resurrection*, Durwell, F. X., (London, 1960), p 48.

Jesus learned obedience. He experienced the forces of evil and remained perfectly submissive. He felt the same forces that we feel pulling our will away from the great basic relationship to the Father. These evil forces attacked him in his relationships to the angels, to men, and to material creation. As Lord of visible creation, he suffered even to his death. As the new Adam personally united to all men, he suffered even betrayal to death. Our Lord felt deeply the terrible opposition of the closed hearts of men, but he remained perfectly open, perfectly related to them from his side. To do otherwise would have been to deny his very relationship to the Father. It is probable that this suffering of our Lord reached its climax in the agony in the garden.

In Gethsemani, our Lord was profoundly conscious of his union with all mankind. This is a kind of personal union that is far above the union of which we are usually conscious. Here we have come to the great central truth of the christian enlightenment. Person is determined by nature. The degree of personal union is determined by the degree of the union of natures. The elevation of human nature to some share in the one unique divine Nature clearly implies the possibility of a supernatural personal union. I say possibility only because we must freely accept this union. When our Lord said: 'What you do to the least of one of these my brethren, you do to me', he meant it in a far more real and profound way than we could dream of. It is only by faith that we can enter somehow into consciousness of this union. When we identify ourselves in this way through faith, we are forced to cry, 'Now not I but Christ lives in me'. In the garden our Lord felt terribly all refusal to accept this relationship to him. It was his consciousness of this union with all human beings and of his consequent position as the new Adam that made him suffer. He took upon himself our sins as his own. 'Christ was innocent of sin, and yet for our sake God made him one with the sinfulness of men'.¹

The very suffering caused by non-personal beings because of our lack of dominion over them can and often does turn human wills from their openness to God and man. Jesus suffered from this relationship, too: but always in a manner perfectly consonant with his reality as the divine Son. Therefore the very punishment of sin that we all experience, the forces of disunity and evil, became the means of releasing us from sin. After having experienced all that

¹ 2 Cor 5, 21.

could turn fallen nature away from the Father, Jesus conquered all by his perfect obedience; and at the moment of death died in the perfect attitude of the divine Son, totally open to the Father. This is the eternal disposition of his Sacred Heart. With this interior disposition he rose from the dead. He rose in power as the Son and Lord, the perfect human image of the Father. Creation was of man as the image of God, a person with dignity and power. Re-creation is of the New Man, the very Son of the Father, glorious and powerful Lord of Creation. Mighty and glorious though he is, we must remember that this is the same Jesus of his earthly phase. The life and power that was at work in him all during his time of suffering, humiliation and death now rise to full tide and glory. And we share, now, in this new life and power. We can and must identify ourselves with this Jesus both in his death and in his resurrection.

Wherever we go we carry death with us in our body, the death that Jesus died, that in this body also life may reveal itself, the life that Jesus lives. For continually, while still alive, we are being surrendered into the hands of death, for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be revealed in this mortal body of ours.¹

Virtues and growth

This new life we have in Christ brings with it certain powers (virtues) that make it possible for this life to grow. The first great power, faith, is the beginning. Through faith we come to some consciousness of ourselves and God and of all our relationships in terms of this great basic relationship. Faith needs to be bolstered by hope, a power that helps us to have confidence in the actuality of these marvellous personal relationships for us, both now and in the future. Love is the power that surges up from faith and hope. It is the union of person with person in a fulfilling *we*. Love is the power of which scripture speaks, when it says that a brother helped by a brother is like a strong city.

The theological virtues are the great powers of the new creation which bring us, and with us all creation, back into personal union with God. But along with these we need special powers to help us to re-integrate all non-personal being. To be truly lords of creation again, even to some extent during this earthly phase of our life, we

¹ 2 Cor 4, 10-11.

need a whole complex set of powers that are grouped around the four hinge powers: the moral virtues are all based on the four cardinal virtues. These help us in extending the great uniting powers of faith, hope and charity into all visible creation. The moral virtues extend the reign of love, down through all the non-spiritual elements of our human composite and out to all the material beings with which we have contact. To go from faith to hope, to love and then to moral living is the basic pattern of spiritual growth: from consciousness of our relationships, to total affirmation and acceptance of these relationships, to the incarnation of the same.

Prayer, in great part, may be said to be the exercise of the theological virtues, and, as it progresses in depth, a fuller infusion of these virtues along with the gifts of the Holy Ghost. In prayer we do what we can with the grace of God to make ourselves conscious of our true relationships; and then affirm, accept, and enter into these relationships and all they entail with a totally open heart. Prayer is difficult for one reason because it means that we must break through all the false images we have of ourselves. We must reject this false self, and find ourselves, affirm ourselves, accept ourselves as the image of the Father with Christ. Filled with such knowledge and such love, the moral powers are bound to surge up and help us to follow Christ through suffering and death with perfectly open and obedient hearts. It all begins with true self-knowledge. But such knowledge ends in the knowledge of God: the identification of oneself with the Son before the Father in the holy Spirit. As St Paul exhorts us:

Stop lying to one another [and to yourselves], now that you have discarded the old nature with its deeds and have put on the new nature, which is being constantly renewed in the image of its creator and brought to know God . . . Christ is all, and is in all.¹

¹ Col 3, 9-11.