

IMITATION OR COUNTERFEIT

By WILLIAM LAWSON

To every man his own opinion' – the proverb applies to versions of the christian way of life.

It would be insufferable were any christian to condemn all versions of the christian living but his own. Religion, however much it is amplified and directed by revelation, is personal in its core, and therefore individual. There will be as many valid interpretations of the christian ideal as there are genuine christians.

Private judgement, however, is fallible: and it has, in fact, made countless errors in morals as in faith. Doctrinal misunderstanding breeds mistaken behaviour, and almost every heresy has a corresponding false asceticism. Self-sufficiency belongs to pelagianism, and a ruthless exclusiveness to Calvin's doctrine of predestination. Jansenism produces an unloving mistrust of God and a fierce concentration on self. Presumption rises easily from Luther's fiduciary faith, and can reach the extreme of *pecca fortiter, sed magis crede*.

Catholics have the comfortable assurance that their doctrines are guaranteed by the infallibility of the Church; and they might be inclined to put down the unchristian conduct of Catholics to culpable departure from the known truth. But heresies arise inside the Church, and have a career there before they are detected and expelled. They are thought out and propounded because they seem to answer an inevitable human question or meet some persistent human need. Traces of them are bound to remain. They can start up again at any time as Catholics ask the inevitable questions and find the wrong answers, or experience a human need and meet it the wrong way. Or they can seep back again from the surrounding atmosphere and be adopted unconsciously by osmosis.

The rules for human behaviour are framed to suit human nature – or what human nature is supposed to be. A false estimate of human nature leads to the presentation of a false ideal of human conduct. Within christianity there are many such false estimates which result from the theological difficulty of understanding and formulating the conjunction of nature and grace.

One of the first of the heresies had a british origin, (and it seems still to suit the british notion of their national characteristics – not to say virtues). The monk Pelagius and his disciples taught that man is autonomous after he has been given his start by God. He is naturally good, unaffected by original sin except in so far as it gives him bad example, and capable by his natural powers of leading a good life and achieving salvation. Christ's redemption is not the raising of man once more to a share in the divine life but only the provision of a good example and good teaching. Man is in full control of his destiny. If man exerts himself, he can overcome. Failure and success are his responsibility alone. St Paul's exhortation is senseless:

Take the whole armour of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand . . . the breastplate of righteousness . . . the shield of faith . . . the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Pray at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication.¹

Such a heresy would need to be invented by someone very conscious of his own strength, sure that there were no flaws in his character, and that he could will himself into eternal life. It is a doctrine for the Captain Marvels and the supermen of ascetics, not for those who have to say: 'Out of the depth I have cried to thee, O Lord'! The danger for them is that they stay on the crest of their self-sufficiency and never reach the depths where they could know themselves and cry out to God. Their disciples who think they and others should be supermen tend to presumption and harshness when they are naturally endowed with strength of will, and to despair and laxity when they are infirm of purpose. The incurably healthy, who have never had a day's illness in their lives not only take pride in their physical well-being, as though they had made it themselves, but also blame the weak as though only an act of will is needed for perfect health. It is true that the determination to be well has a beneficial effect, just as a mental collapse under suffering makes recovery more difficult; but some part of health and sickness is independent of the will, and that fact must be allowed for.

In christian living the freedom of the christian has to be engaged: but it works with and on God's gifts, which are always available but

¹ Eph 6, 13-18.

are measured by God to each individual – the Spirit breathes where he wills – and differ naturally and supernaturally from one another. Pelagianism is manifestly false even at the level of nature to which it would confine man. No two minds or characters are exactly alike; no two wills are equal in power or persistence. Spiritual faculties can be trained, but there is no single standard of performance which all can be expected to reach. Even if natures were all the same, they all alike depend on God's help in the initiation, continuance and conclusion of action, and that help is given as God judges each one to need it. From what he reckons to be his height of self-government and success, the pelagian looks down on the weak and the wicked and blames them for failing to achieve the possible. The self-made man reckons that what he has done others can do.

But christians are not self-made, and they should neither glory in what they have nor accuse others of ill-will. When we see, we should know that Christ has enlightened us and we should not think that our truths must be obvious to all others if only they would try to see. If we have any virtue, it comes from God not from ourselves; and it is not for us to suppose that a firm exercise of will would bring all others to our degree of goodness, in courage, regular observance, kindness, patience – and humility. What have you that you have not received?¹ A right insistence on self-help must be balanced with a conviction that God gives the increase.² We must want and work to reach the Father, knowing all the time that no man comes to the Father but by Christ,³ and that the progress of others to the Father is Christ's business and beyond our judgement.

The heresy at the other extreme from pelagianism is jansenism which held (and still holds) that human nature is thoroughly bad and can do no good, and that the mass of mankind are damned though they have no freedom to avoid evil. But these heretics are not humbled by the nature they considered corrupt. They could hardly have thought up and propagated their doctrine had they considered themselves part of the *massa damnata*. They are the elect predestined to salvation without their will having to intervene.

Jansenism chills ordinary humanity by abandoning it to misery, unmerited but endless. It is frightening in its stubborn conviction that it was right, against the contrary doctrine of the Church. In its grosser forms it disappeared from the Church in the early eighteenth century, but its spirit plagues mankind yet, because it answers a

¹ 1 Cor 4, 7.

² 1 Cor 3, 6.

³ Jn 14, 6.

perpetual fear or mistrust of unredeemed human nature. It is not surprising that man should have a sense of sinfulness, and should blame his nature for his proneness to evil. The manicheans taught that matter was evil in itself and that the spirit should be as independent as possible of the body. That doctrine runs through the history of the Church, reappearing with the albigensians, the calvinists and the jansenists. Some orthodox christians have more than a touch of it, in a widespread idea that the divine life bestowed on man as sanctifying grace or supernatural life does not penetrate the very being of man, transforming his nature, redeeming it and making it sound and healthy, but stays on top of it like icing on a cake, or oil floating on water. The ideal behaviour is supernatural, abstracting from the natural.

Christians, certainly, can abstract from the supernatural, withdrawing themselves from the transformation which the divine life would work in them; but though nature can act on its own, independently, supernature cannot. The supernatural in man is not a substantial reality, as the natural is; it is an attribute or quality of the natural – grace presupposes nature, enters into it and sanctifies it, body and soul, mind, will, emotions and passions. The more human beings are supernaturalized, the more they possess and enjoy their nature. It is wrong to despise and depreciate nature. To do so smacks of jansenism.

An incident in the life of Mère Agnès (Arnauld), then abbess of the jansenist convent of Port Royal, reveals this cold contempt for human nature. Her nephew Antoine de Maistre confided to her that he was thinking of getting married. She received the news with cutting disdain: 'You will now be as negligable for me as before you were dear. I shall love you with charity, christian but universal; and as your state will be most ordinary any affection for you will be ordinary too'. 'Christian charity' is understood to be anonymous and cold. Intensity and warmth in love are natural and suspect. Opposition of natural and supernatural is manifest in the very idea of redemption, and it can continue in anybody's life if 'the Old Man' is reluctant to put on 'the New Man' fully. But the opposition should not be maintained deliberately, as though virtue required it. To describe human virtues as 'angelic', as Mère Agnès did, is false and misleading. Celibacy, for example, is not an angelic state. It is peculiarly human, and it calls for the full participation of human nature, sex and all. The married state is said to take second place to the celibate state, not because it is more 'natural' and

therefore less supernatural – it can and should be a completely supernatural state – but because, though it can, and often does, produce as intense a charity as can be reached in celibacy, its charity has a more limited range.

The false separation of nature and supernature appears also in the exaltation of what are taken to be the more supernatural activities. There is supposed to be more of the supernatural in going to benediction than in, say, preparing a concert. ‘Religious’ exercises such as set prayers have a higher supernatural content than doing a professional job. Yet St Paul says: Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.¹ Love of God and love of man are primary, and pious practices which abandon them are empty of value.

Suspicion of nature has led to a general unrealism in the teaching of christian behaviour. One reason why so much instruction on christian morals is negative is that the idea of natural happiness and fulfilment has been lost sight of. The purpose of living is to live, and to live fully. Nature was made to progress towards perfection, and the supernatural transformation of nature not only does not remove that purpose but puts it within man’s reach. He should have a full life in time and not live like a skeleton at a feast waiting for pie in the sky. As it is taught, christian morality is a preparation for confession and for death, not an instruction about the rich life, supernatural throughout, which gives fulfilment now as a pledge of eternal completeness. The tendency to depreciate marriage is one example. Another like the first is the failure to show sex as an essential goodness in human self-possession and human relations, so that fear and frustration take the place in minds and hearts which belongs to zest and enrichment. Christianity is all about life, the good life. Christians more than others should enjoy the life here. They should know how to make the most of time and space, food and drink, friendship, marriage, work, holidays – and also hunger, bereavement, frustration and all the hardships which no human being can escape but which the christian, enabled by the divine life to possess himself fully, can make part of his satisfaction in living.

About the power of speech, the essential teaching is of good news and God’s word that the christian can learn – ‘the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God’ – for his own enlightenment and so that he may proclaim it to enlighten and comfort

¹ 1 Cor 10, 31.

others. The eighth commandment is about truth, not about lies. The commandment about the name of God should mean to christians God's infinite goodness, power, providence, mercy. We narrow its meaning to 'bad language'. It should make christians the proud guardians of God's creation and all the natures contained in it – their justice, as Guardini says, should consist in recognizing and respecting all natures and the order they constitute. Are christians brought up to confuse that goodness of natures with 'the world', and to be suspicious of it? It is time we taught that christians are those who get the best of both worlds – family life, friends, a satisfying purpose, joy in God's creation, and all of them guaranteed beyond time into eternity. We have even the beginnings of eternal life – 'this is eternal life, that they know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent'.¹ For all its uncertainties and dangers, for all its likeness to a vale of tears, it is companionship with Christ living, dying and rising from the dead, and we should be brought up to say 'Lord, it is good for us to be here'.²

The insensitivity of many Catholics to the demands of the christianity they profess is strongly redolent of the heresy of faith without works. The observant mass-goer for whom the social encounters outside church are the occasion for a debauch of calumny and detraction is a stock figure for the caricaturist. The performance of an external duty, with more or less of active participation, seems to be counted as adequate religion in itself, without concern for Christ's injunction to make peace with people on the way to the altar, or for the universal commands of justice and charity. Something of that undue satisfaction with orthodox observance appears here and there in any age, although the Church's record of charity and mercy is admirable and beyond compare. Grosser examples have become legends, like that of the bishop of Bingen cornering wheat to the deprivation of his flock; but it is the everyday appearances of such loveless faith that are the more shocking. Would it be true to say that the anticlericalism of the masses is not theological but social; that their bitterness is not against the *credo* of the clergy but against a worship of God which is comfortably remote from their hopeless penury?

'Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world'.³ True christianity is not just to

¹ Jn 17, 3.

² Mt 17, 4.

³ Jas 1, 27.

endorse the right confession of faith and to keep from being involved with the sordid misery, moral and material, of others. Worldliness is always somewhere in view but it does not admit that the poor are ours, and we theirs. Worldliness accepts poverty as a providential arrangement for others, who must learn to keep their proper stations. The legates travelling with long baggage trains in the south of France on their mission to eradicate albigensianism were no doubt good theologians and perhaps zealous for a sound social order, but St Dominic judged that their display of wealth was no recommendation of orthodoxy to heretics, one of whose healthier aims was a return to apostolic simplicity. The friars were the answer in that age to the separation of faith from works. They lived with the people, carrying truth with them. But the problem they solved for a time is always recurring, and we have it now. It is under consideration by the present Council, either officially or in private communications and encounters. Doctrines such as that of the collegiality of the episcopate are balanced and completed by the pronouncements of a social conscience in the spirit of *Mater et Magistra* and *Pacem in Terris*, which should lead to a genuine presence of the Church, clergy and laity, to the everyday world.

The notion of the christian church as a refuge from the world contradicts our Lord's commission to the apostles to go into the whole world and preach the gospel to every creature. The faith by itself, cultivated within a *cordon sanitaire*, is not the purifying truth which is to work in the mass until it all becomes alive. The cult of remoteness is a denial of that participation by which man is to be saved. Whatever makes professing christians absent from those who need them rather than present should be compelled to justify itself by apostolic standards. Faith in a vacuum, unable to work, is dead. Christ's commission still runs, and it is taken up in every generation by countless followers who are all things to all men, that they may gain all to Christ;¹ but many seem not to know that, being christians, they have a mission – they are sent to find the lost sheep and to bring them home. The Church has its exclusive brethren, the little elites trying to keep themselves warm in faith, without charity. Here and there, in the fields white for the harvest, are ghettos and enclaves, beleaguered castles and ivory towers – not, of their nature, the monasteries of contemplatives, which can be fully engaged in passing on Christ's good news, but rather the christian individuals

¹ 1 Cor 9, 19–23.

and associations deaf to the call to be 'ministers and stewards of the manifold grace of God'.¹

A start has been made – to break the clergy's near monopoly in liturgical action, to enable religious in the professions to fulfil their professional obligations while leading a religious life, to ensure that uniforms meant to show where apostolic help is available (like a policeman's uniform for the law-abiding) shall not be repellant, signs of apartheid, and barriers to christian communication. (There has been quite a movement in favour of improvements in the uniform of nuns. Similar support for the benefit of the be-uniformed clergy could help them not only to be but also to seem to be coadjutors of Christ in his mediation between man and God).

If it is true, as Pius XII said,² that the Church has no intention of abandoning the field to her enemies, then we must be in the world, without being worldly. We fail if we make an exclusive world of our own: but that is what we are making. Clerical education is a world of its own, largely cut off from the influence of other minds and other approaches to truth, fogging its own statement of truth in a jargon worse than that of physicians or lawyers, and preventing christian minds from exerting influence where influence is most needed. Truth, like goodness, is to be found everywhere, not just in some dross-less lode in a private mine. Like the water of life it should be fed from all sources and not only from the one spring reputed to be crystal clear. Like goodness it should diffuse itself and should flow into the deserts and not be just an ornamental fountain playing in a castellated cloister. When the Church Militant is in the field, there is danger, as history continually shows, of infiltration by enemy forces, of the suborning of the faithful, and of defections. But a far greater danger to morale appears when the world is put out of bounds for fighting men and women, and they are set to garrison duty or retired to a pensioners' haven.

I have desired to go
 Where springs not fail,
 To fields where flies no sharp and sided hail,
 And a few lilies blow.
 And I have asked to be
 Where no storms come,
 Where the green swell is in the havens dumb
 And out of the swing of the sea.³

¹ 1 Pet 4, 10.

² Second Lay Apostolate Congress, 1957.

³ Gerard Manley Hopkins: *Heaven-Haven, A nun takes the veil*.

Apostles must reach those to whom they are sent, or suffer decay. They need encounters with the world to preserve the missionary spirit of christianity, and to learn what the doctrines are that they ought to propagate, and how to present them.

The futilities into which scholasticism was allowed to degenerate, the technicalities, meaningless except to specialists, in which doctrine is still often expressed, the cherished archaisms in worship which hide the essentials of tradition – these defects in christian living could hardly have arisen and would not be perpetuated if christians were sharing the life of the world and trying always to communicate truth and goodness. In many ways Catholic christianity has become a private existence, and in that privacy Catholics have tended to cultivate hobbies and fashions which give the Church an alien appearance when she shows herself to the world. Western culture imposed north, south and east: italian style (and even names – *Quarant' Ore*) used in english churches: foreignness made an extra 'mark' of the Church – these are signs of a look directed inward and not outward. There are sound excuses for some part of our foreignness: but, had Catholics been intent always on preaching Christ, not only would they have found many languages ancient and modern in which to proclaim his revelation, but they would also have had neither time nor interest for the non-essentials with which the Church is cluttered, and which, though there is a healthy doctrine at their base, are so often extravagant and so easily tempt the fraudulent. Apparitions (sometimes with details reminiscent of Joanna Southcott and her box), relics venerated with more enthusiasm and display than are accorded to the Real Presence, private revelations eagerly recalled in times of crisis, shrines of our Lady where the altar and the offering of mass are incidental to the central 'devotion', and then the long catalogue of rank superstitions, mixtures of the ludicrous and the puerile, like the surreptitious casting of 'miraculous medals' into other people's property so that they may be the more easily dispossessed – that is all recognizably Catholic, but is it the living of a genuine christianity?

As a divine institution the Church is without blemish. All the more reason for self criticism, for openness in the world to fraternal correction, for appraisal of ourselves before God in prayer, so that our way of life may not darken the Church's splendour by failing to be an acknowledgement of Christ before men.