

SAVIOUR OF THE WORLD

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MAN'S PERSONAL LIFE is a life with and for others. It is also a life with and in a world. The existence and presence of other persons is part of man's own self. Equally the existence and presence of the world is part of man's own self. It follows that man's salvation is both social and cosmological. It is a salvation with and for others; it is salvation in and with the world.

In seeking to regain the Church's true tradition on the question of human salvation, the Second Vatican Council and subsequent writings have sought to overcome an unhealthy pre-occupation with individual salvation, which may lead to an inward looking self-centredness, and have sought rather to open Christians to the love of God poured out upon the whole human race and upon the whole world.

The Church . . . will attain her full perfection only in the glory of heaven. Then will come the time of the restoration of all things (Acts 3,21). Then the human race as well as the entire world, which is intimately related to man and achieves its purpose through him, will be perfectly re-established in Christ (cf. Eph 1,10; Col 1, 20; 2 Pet 3, 10-13).¹

This does not place in doubt the moral seriousness of the individual life, but suggests that this must be directed outwards to other men, and to the whole of creation. There is an individual responsibility to work out one's salvation, but this is a responsibility in and for the whole human community. The Church is the 'universal sacrament of salvation',² and the salvation to which individuals are called is a corporate salvation, in which each has a responsibility for his fellow men. Likewise, there is no question of undervaluing the present world in view of the world that is to come. It is by fulfilling the task committed to us in this world by the Father that we 'work out our salvation' in the Spirit of Christ. Provided that the present world is seen in the light of its fulfilment in the eternal life

¹ *Lumen Gentium* 48.

² *Ibid.*, 48.

of God, the fullest value is to be placed upon man's constructive and creative work.

Underlying much of the recent development in theology, as reflected in the Council, has been a changing philosophical conception of man. When the human person was considered as an essentially self-contained being, whose relationships with other persons were accidental and extrinsic to his own self and to his relationship with God,³ this was reflected in an over-individualistic approach in theology, and especially with regard to questions of human destiny. Man stood by himself before God, and his destiny was his own individual responsibility. Although he might influence or be influenced by others in such a way as to affect his responsibility, nevertheless, the latter remained essentially private and individual. There was little sense of any co-responsibility, of any corporate achievement of salvation.

One of the main contributions of phenomenological and existentialist philosophy has been the recognition that the human person cannot be understood except in terms of his relationships with the world, with other human persons and with the divine mystery of God. These relationships are not accidental and added on to his personal self, but they reach to the very centre of his being, and are intrinsic to the constitution of himself as a person.⁴ The human spirit is by its very nature open to the Absolute Spirit of God, to the finite selves of other human persons and to the material world. Any human action affecting any one of these relationships must have some effect upon the other relationships also, since each reaches to the centre of man's being.⁵

³ This understanding was based on the aristotelian concept of 'nature' and led to such definitions of man as '*Naturae rationalis individua substantia*' (Boethius). The problem is then, starting with this definition, how to account for man's concrete relationships with God through revelation (this required the 'nature - supernature' construct), with other persons ('the self of the other is not known directly, but only inferred from bodily activity') and with the world (the host of 'mind-body' problems).

⁴ The starting-point for this understanding is not a pre-definition of man which is then applied to actual experience, but that actual experience itself in its full range of possibilities and characteristics. It is not a question of, given man, how is knowledge of the world, inter-personal communication and divine revelation possible. Rather it is a question of, given knowledge of the world, inter-personal communication and divine revelation, how do we understand the nature and reality of the human self. From this approach one may come to a definition of man which is both descriptive and ontological: the human person is one who, present to himself in consciousness, knows, loves and acts freely in a fundamental openness to the world, to other human persons and to the absolute being of God.

⁵ This is why a man's relationships with other human persons and with the world have a sacramental value.

But man's openness to God, to other human persons and to the world is only partial and limited. There remains in the human situation an element of selfishness and self-centredness, which restricts the degree to which man can go out to God and to other men in love and union. This is why man is in need of salvation. Christ is the saviour of the human race because he has overcome the selfishness in which we were enclosed, and has enabled us to go out of our false selves to the eternal life and love of God himself. But in drawing us to our true selves in the mystery of God's love, Christ has also broken down the barriers of selfishness which divide us from each other. A person cannot be open to the fulness of the divine life, and remain isolated from his fellow men.

There can be false relationships with other persons.⁶ These occur if within the relationship there is an effective denial of the further relationship of each person with God. In practice this happens if one seeks to impose oneself upon the other in such a way as to reduce his freedom, or if one so affirms the self of the other as to diminish one's own freedom and self-identity.

Each person has an eternal value, insofar as through love and self-giving he has come to participate in the eternal life of God. And every true relationship with other persons must be such as to affirm the eternal value both of oneself and of the other. In practice this is done where one respects the freedom and self-identity of the other, without foregoing one's own. Where this is the case the, relationship forms part of one's own true eternal self, and is inseparable from it.

But what forms part of one's true self enters into one's own participation in the eternal life of God, and consequently cannot be separated from the eternal destiny to which each individual is called. This means that man's eternal destiny – his salvation – is a destiny with and for others. There would be a contradiction if what is intrinsic to man's true eternal self were excluded from his final destiny. All those to whom we are united through love in this world must enter into our destiny, and equally we must enter into the destiny and salvation of others.

The individual and the community are not opposed but mutually affirm each other. The true individual is the man who is most open and self-giving to his fellow men; the true society is where

⁶ Some of the following ideas I have developed at greater length in my *The Theology of Death and Eternal Life* (Theology Today Series, Number 40, Mercier Press, due to be published in December 1970).

each individual lives up to his own freedom and responsibility. The true person is he who is concerned for and who lives for the community; the true community is where each person within it affirms his own true self before God.

In placing emphasis upon the communal element of salvation, one must not lessen the importance of personal freedom and responsibility. But this freedom and responsibility cannot be separated from the community of other persons. It is within the community that the Spirit of Christ reaches to man and draws him out towards the love of God; it is within the community that man attains his final destiny and salvation. The other person's destiny is part of my own, and mine is part of his. The individual cannot be complacent should he find one of his fellow men falling away from his true dignity and freedom. He has a responsibility for him and must help him to respond to the call of the divine Spirit in his life; he must help him to build up what is true and eternal in himself. This is the meaning of true christian service. Each one, in bearing witness to his own faith and love, helps to evoke and sustain that same faith and love in others. And conversely, each individual is sustained in his own efforts to respond to God's love by his awareness of the love and co-responsibility of his fellow-members of the community.

If another person fails to achieve the eternal destiny to which he is called, this may in part be my failing. I may not have shown him the love, sympathy and encouragement he needed to surmount the difficulties of his life in a courageous and constructive way. But likewise, the true response of another person to the love of God may in part have been supported by the love, sympathy and encouragement which I have given to him. Our lives, our salvation, our destiny are intimately bound together. It is within the community that the Spirit of Christ, which is the love of Christ with its saving and transforming power, is to be found.

This is, or should be, reflected in the actions by which the community gives expression to its own reality. Each of the particular sacramental actions is an act of the community, or of the individual in relation to the community. Many of the recent liturgical reforms have been made precisely in order to bring out more clearly this community aspect.

Baptism is the action of the community in admitting a new member into its midst, where the saving power of Christ's love can reach him. The forgiveness of sins is an action in which man's reconcilia-

tion with God and his reconciliation with the community are, while not simply identical, closely and intrinsically related, such that the one presupposes and leads to the other and vice-versa.⁷ Reconciliation demands an act of both sides to the reconciliation. Ideally, the whole community should be present at the reconciliation of penitents with itself, in order to show the love and acceptance which makes the reconciliation a genuine experience. It is through a true human reconciliation with the community, in which God's love is shown forth in a visible way, that this divine love and acceptance is mediated to the penitent. This is the value of public celebrations of penance, which make this reconciliation with the community a true experience. It is important that in the practice of private confession the priest should be recognized as the embodiment or representative – in the full sense of 'a making present' – of the community in order that the true nature of the sacramental action be preserved.

The forgiveness of sins and the eucharist are continuous stages of one process, in which man is drawn from his selfishness to go out to other men and to the transcendent mystery of God in love and self-giving. Whereas the forgiveness of sins emphasizes the negative aspect of the release from selfishness and isolation, the eucharist emphasizes the positive movement of love leading to union. The eucharist is above all the action in which the community expresses not only its union with the divine life through love and self-giving, but also its own unity and love as the one people of God. 'By your holy Spirit gather all who share this one bread and this one cup into the one Body of Christ, a living sacrifice of praise'.⁸ It is misleading to ask whether the eucharist is primarily a meal or a sacrifice. Both elements are intimately united. Through the love and union which the members of the community show for each other by sharing in a common meal, the barriers of selfishness which impede the love of God are also broken down. And through the expression of man's love for God, which is the innermost meaning of sacrifice, the barriers of selfishness which separate the members of the community from each other are also overcome.

I shall now turn to the cosmological element of salvation. Human life is life in and with a world, and the presence of his world is intrinsic to the constitution of the human self. Just as the co-

⁷ Cf the article 'Is private confession outdated?' in *The Month* (November, 1969), pp 233-42.

⁸ Eucharistic Prayer IV.

presence of other human persons cannot be separated from man's true eternal self, neither can his world be separated from that true self. It is in the world that man exercises his freedom and develops himself as a person. It is through his actions in the world that he comes to an awareness of the divine and eternal mystery of existence. Just as one comes to know other human selves in and through their bodily self-expression, so the divine Self is mediated to man in and through the various modes of his experience in the world. In drawing man to the mystery of God's love, Christ has also brought the world to its own fulfilment in man. In saving the human race, Christ has reconciled the whole universe with God.⁹

Just as there can be false relationships with other human persons, so there can be false relationships with the world which take various forms. The first of these is a practical atheism, which simply refuses to recognize that the world can mediate a divine and transcendent meaning. It is to place one's ultimate goal or desire in the world itself, or in part of the world, in a way that is closed to any eternal or transcendent value. Since the human spirit is by its nature open to the divine mystery of God and seeks God as its final end, such an attitude if consistently maintained must lead to a breakdown of the human personality. It is further a devaluation of the world itself, since this is not allowed to realize its true reality in mediating that divine mystery to man.

A second false attitude to the world also refuses to recognize that it can mediate a divine and transcendent meaning. This however is linked with a theistic belief, and leads to attitudes which seek salvation *from* the world. Here the world is recognized simply as the source of man's alienation from God, of his separation from the eternal ground of his being. This attitude, which is characteristic of manichaeism and certain eastern concepts of salvation, finds in life an eternal and transcendent meaning, but places this in an entirely 'other-worldly' realm. Salvation consists in a liberation from the material conditions of this life. In practice, this attitude renders meaningless all man's cultural activity and involvement in the world, since this is seen as entirely divorced from the eternal destiny to which he is called.

A final false attitude to the world is a pantheistic one, which seeks in some way to identify the divine Reality with the world under its present conditions. This is held in many subtle and refined forms,

Col 1, 20.

and it would be a mistake to characterize it in any too simple or general way. But the material world, whether in whole or in part, remains a conditioned, finite reality; and a pantheism which literally seeks to identify God with this finite reality leads in fact to the same results as a practical atheism.¹⁰

The christian experience of salvation is an experience in and through the material world. It is through his actions in the world that man builds up his own true and eternal self, and consequently each of those actions has an eternal value. It is in the world that man comes to recognize and to respond to the mystery of divine love. Man's salvation cannot be separated from his material nature, but is the fulfilment of that nature in its true openness to the eternal and transcendent mystery of God's love.

Man's true relationship with the world does not simply identify the finite world with the divine Reality, but recognizes that the world can serve to mediate to the human spirit an awareness of divine transcendence. Just as the world is not only that which separates human persons from one another, but is also the means of their communication and union, so the world is not only that which alienates man from God, but is also the means of man's growth in love and union with God.

Although the present spatio-temporal conditions of man's world come to an end for him at death, yet the eternal value and significance of his actions in the world transcend the destruction of those present conditions. This is why the world enters intrinsically into man's destiny. It is not simply a temporary condition of his achieving a purely spiritual salvation, but is the means through which he responds to the mystery of God's love, through which he builds up his true and eternal self. For the christian, all man's cultural and material activity, while not in its present conditions being an end in itself, has an eternal and transcendent value which endures beyond the destruction of those conditions.

All man's actions in the world, his transformation of the world for his own purposes, his creation of beauty, have a meaning for human salvation. They all help to create the eternal destiny of man in his world. They all bring him into a closer identity with the mystery of God's life and love, which is the ground and final end

¹⁰ Most beliefs which describe themselves as pantheistic interpret the world in some 'spiritual' or 'transcendent' sense. For this reason it is not always easy to distinguish these beliefs from the christian attitude to the world.

not only of man's existence but of that of the whole of material creation.

We cannot picture how the material world enters into man's eternal destiny in a way no longer subject to the spatio-temporal conditions of his present life. All we can do is to affirm symbolically with Paul, that 'creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God'.¹¹

In drawing man out of his selfishness to the love of God, Christ has brought the whole of creation to its true reality. The world is no longer the place of man's isolation, of his self-enclosure. It is no longer simply that which separates him from other men, which separates him from God. The world has become through Christ the means of communication, the place where man meets man and goes out to him in union and love. It has become the place where man can recognize the divine mystery of life and love and where he can go out to meet that mystery in self-giving union.

Man's hope for salvation is based upon the mystery of the risen Christ. It is here that man finds the assurance of an eternal destiny in which he will be taken up not simply as an individual, but as a member of the whole human community, and in which the whole of creation through man will find its fulfilment. His hope for salvation is a hope which takes up every aspect of man's life, his work and occupations, his knowledge of truth and beauty, his creative instinct, his love and friendship for other persons. It is a hope which responds to his deepest sense of responsibility, both for his fellow men and for the whole of material creation. It is the confident trust that the love of God, which is already experienced as the force and inspiration of the christian life, will come to its ultimate fulfilment. In drawing man to a free response to God's love, Christ has transformed the life of the community. He has truly become the saviour of the world.

¹¹ Rom 8, 21.