

# THE GRACE OF CHRIST

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**I**N WHATEVER TERMS we talk of God, we cannot affirm him as a remote reality. He is at the depths of every creature – as the ground of being, if you like – giving it existence and activity, making it what it is, both in its separateness and in the relationships which so largely define it. Yet even when this has been said, God is still remote in actual fact, though not in theory. Philosophical terms or even ones transposed from science are too rarefied and abstract to be assimilated by most of us in any living way which could be called religion. They may well convey some true idea about God but they have little resonance for us. And even if they had, they could still be considerably misleading and a particular source of trouble to a christian. The points of contact between the christian God and the God of the philosophers seem few and very puzzling. At times it seems that what reason says about God is opposed to what we find in revelation.

As Catholics we hold that man's mind is not so twisted that it is fundamentally powerless to reach some truth about God, even leaving revelation aside. But we hold too that none of the insights so gained can come up to what is revealed; that the validity of such ideas won by reason is judged, and their sense and value modified, by what we know through revelation, which has a sureness all its own and is the primary source of the knowledge which man can have of God. So, on the point we are now considering, we find that revelation tells us that God will come to us, if we are true to Christ's word:<sup>2</sup> we must hold fast to that. Yet, without revelation, we can say that God – and it must be the same God, who is revealed to be Father, Son and holy Spirit – is present to all. How can he come, if he is there all the time?

*From physical presence to personal presence*

Perhaps we can best face this difficulty by looking at our every day experience. A thing is not present to me merely by 'being there'. It needs me to be present to it, to advert to it, if it is to be more

<sup>1</sup> The author would like to acknowledge the extent of his dependence on the writings of Fr Piet Fransen S.J. on grace.

<sup>2</sup> Cf Jn 14, 23.

than theoretically present; if it is to come out of the realm of abstract philosophical thought into the reality of human life. This is clearer still for persons. It is not just by being herded together that human beings are present to each other. One has only to think of a vast factory and the workers among themselves and in relation to their managers. Even if one man were, for his part, open to all others in the works, he would still be outside their lives until a corresponding openness started to exist in them. True personal presence in its full reality is mutual presence; both parties need to open their minds and hearts, if each is to know and be present to the other as he is. Only through such openness do they 'come into' each other's human and hence personal life.

Philosophy can tell us God is always 'there', that he must be personal being. But it is only revelation which informs us that he is in fact three Persons and it is only through the redemptive work of Christ that we can open to these Persons so that they come into our lives. Only through free cooperation with, response to, the act of God in Christ do we let them be present to us in any human sense; and by continuing cooperation make this 'coming' ever more of a reality. The passage into the realm of revelation is one from merely physical to living personal presence. In this passage, chill terms are changed for ones with human warmth. The 'supreme Being' is opened to us in terms like Father; he is known to us in a human life – Christ's – so that we can respond in a fully human way. This means that personal terms and responses are the ones which give us the deepest living knowledge of and openness to God. This is the guaranteed approach to him, when lived in the line of scripture and of the faith-experience of the Church throughout the centuries.

But in the New Testament revelation of God, we meet a salutary corrective to our tendency to cut God down in size. We are told of the holy Spirit whom the Church has clearly seen is Person, but whom it is impossible to make practically a first-class or large-sized human person. We realize forcibly that, though personal terms are the best expression for a human mind of the reality of God and give access to him in a uniquely valuable way, they issue for us in adoration of a God we can never fully grasp and whom we radically falsify if we think he fits into the measure of our mind and concepts. This realization affects our understanding of a term like Father. The Father is above all Father of the Son and, however personal our relationship with him, it will never be just a relationship between the Father and ourself. We are children of God, related personally

to the Father, only as members of a race created and redeemed in and through the Son of God. Only as one with and related to that Son, and to all men who are linked with him and called to live their ties more fully by accepting in faith the Spirit of the Son, can we truly go to God who is our Father.

*For man, perfect personal presence includes and is centred on a physical presence and union*

Probably the best expression of human presence which we have in normal experience is that of a happily married couple. There we see a mutual presence which is growing towards completeness, towards the fullest understanding and love possible to the two persons. This presence or union has its centre in their closest physical union which expresses and crowns their wider union as persons; it strengthens their personal union even during times when they are physically distant from each other. So marriage – as the bridal language in Old and New Testament indicates – points a way to understanding the presence of God and man to each other by grace. For this, too, must be a human presence insofar as it is man's and for man.

We see that on God's side his personal presence and self-giving to us in their fulness imply, and are centred on, a material reality. It is in Christ as man that the three Persons are most present in a human way: the Son, while remaining totally united with an absolute closeness to the Father and the Spirit, becomes man and takes a human nature into his eternal relationships. His humanity expresses, shows forth those relationships, as well as is possible in this world. In Christ, the Jews had the three divine Persons more humanly present to them than ever man had before. This tangible presence of Christ, implying that of all three Persons, continues in the Church. It is in physical things: the gospel, sacraments, the members of his body, that Christ is present and God's self-giving has its centre in the world today.

On man's side this means that his presence to God also finds its centre in just those physical things. He is to belong to the Church, receive the gospel and the sacraments, be united with Christ's members and within all that give himself to the triune God. Knowingly to opt out of acceptance of God's presence at its centre, in its richest human form, is to opt out of real union with him.

Perhaps for us who accept quite easily the idea that in the sacraments and gospel, in the Church as an organization with a

human form, we meet Christ and hence the Trinity, it is most important to stress Christ's presence in all his members. The gospel is preached to call people to faith and grace; the sacraments exist so that Christ's life may be rooted and grow in men; the hierarchy rules so that human beings may live that life to the full. So, it is our presence to real, limited, defective people which is the basic, though incomplete, access to personal relationship with, and presence to, the divine Persons. Love of God is mere talk without that. This presence to people is meant, in the normal run of vocations, to be a real, humanly recognizable one; not just physical proximity. It is a presence above all to fellow-Christians, to those fully in Christ with us; but it must also be real with regard to all men, who were created in Christ and are called to be fully present to God in him.

This presence to men is a thing which grows in a human way, as our ties and contacts become wider and deeper. All that needs to be said of it here is that the gospel message gives norms for its reality: the crucial points are the people somehow closest to us, especially those in need and enemies; and the expression of presence to them is something real and recognizable. The actual widening is governed by these facts and our individual circumstances, as we slowly learn the exigencies of God's love, and as people, directly or indirectly, come into contact with us.

All this brings it home to us once more that neither Christ nor the other divine Persons are limited human persons; and we can also realize that the materialization of their presence does not totally express their self-giving or limit it. As the marriage act is not the totality of the mutual presence of a couple, even more so God's presence is not limited to the material centres so far mentioned: he is greater than, other than, the Church, the sacraments and all mankind. His giving is to all men and he can effect it outside the Church, outside the sacraments, just as he gave himself in the first century to people who could have no contact with Christ in Israel.

So God's self-giving to man and man's personal response in virtue of it are not necessarily simultaneous with their material expression, though that expression is called for as the crown and focus of the deeper reality by the actual order of things and by man's nature as it is. A person can be drawn to God before receiving the physical sacrament of baptism; or he can be baptized and yet not make in response to God's self-giving that personal gift of self to God and others at which the sacrament is aimed in its full reality.

*Christ is the high-point and absolute centre of God's personal presence and self-giving to man and of man's response to these*

All the material centres of God's presence which have been mentioned are obviously dependent on Christ as man. He is the Son who took on a human nature which now lives for and from the Father, to whom he is united by that Spirit in whom his love also goes out to men. His passage through this world, his life as man is the taking up of a human nature in a unique way – which is yet a paradigm – into the personal reality of God.

At the incarnation God gives himself to humanity absolutely. The Son becomes a man so that this human body, mind and heart which are being formed are those of the Son alone. This means that Christ's whole human reality is, at each stage of its development, fitted to, shaped by the existence of the eternal Son who receives all from the Father and lives for him in the Spirit. Now a mind and body which are being formed by environment, by links to the material world and people, have at their centre a Person who is divine. Growing human experiences are being taken up into the very reality of God, and the Son is expressing in human modes of a particular time and place his eternal existence and being. So his living for and expression of his Father in the Spirit are extrapolated in a human development, human ties and devotion centred on a human openness to the Father and dedication to a mission – all this accomplished in the Spirit of outgoing and uniting love. His human life is the working out of this existence of love of his Father and men in a concrete situation where people are selfish, where sin and its effects abound. This total loyalty is possible for a human mind and will, for a humanity afflicted by weakness, only because the Son is its stable centre continually united to it and giving himself to it. Such human loyalty means cost in the real world; and for Christ with his special mission it meant execution as a criminal. But the resurrection and ascension manifest the fact that God's 'seizure' of human reality and the loyalty it raises up are not defeated by man's sin. Christ's earthly lot is the one which is common to all men, who must pass through difficulties and death; but that lot is transformed when Christ in his full reality, body and soul, is taken into God's own sphere and life more perfectly as a result of his dedicated human response to God's gift of himself to man.

The human life of Christ gives us the two basic, complementary senses of grace: God's primary, independent initiative by which

he unites himself with man; and the change in man, the shaping of man, which corresponds to this – an empowering to live really and personally for God and men in the real world, which flowers in a fuller union after death. All grace which we possess is a share in and has analogy to the reality of the Son uniting himself to one particular human nature while remaining totally united to the Father and the Spirit, and to the reality of the expanding response which this free gift of God raises up in the one to whom he gives himself. By grace we enter into union with Christ as man; we share in his life and relationships by the Spirit which is his, and so we share in his way and in his end.

*We find God's giving and the power to respond to it by being taken into union with Christ (in his Church)*

It is in Christ that the reality of God's self-giving to man is most apparent to a human being. By his human life and words Christ expresses the love of God for man in the terms to which we are most fully open. By those same life and words he expresses the perfect response of man as well.

The whole order of the incarnation is one in which we are drawn by the Father to this Son made man, united through him to the Father by the Spirit. We meet him in the gospel, given us with ever deeper understanding by the Church; in the sacraments by which he acts on us and gives us of his Spirit; in the community which shares in his life by that same Spirit. By these encounters we are gradually enabled to meet the triune God outside these centres too; in his action through the whole of creation and in his very reality which transcends the material arena of its activity.

The Son made man, through whom God gives himself to us fully, in whom all his gifts of creation and redemption find their peak, is – in the line of human response – both Son and servant. As Son, his human nature – mind and body – were opened to a life centred absolutely on personal love of his Father which flowed into a formative love of men to which he set no limits; a love of men as they are actually are. As servant, he lived as perfect creature, fulfilling his Father's will.

Our entry into the life of Christ means entry into these two aspects of his human existence. Entry into his particular relationships with the Father and the Spirit, so that we are raised to respond personally, that is with love and knowledge, to the three divine Persons. The technical term for this is elevating grace. And also

entry into his life as servant, so that we are put right as creatures by fulfilling God's will for us – and this is called healing grace. Of these two aspects, the more fundamental is that of sonship: because we are called to a relationship with God beyond our human capacities, our life as human beings finds its genuine reality in transcending any closed human ends and in widening to total love of God and of men as united to him, whether in a fully accepted way or not.

In thinking of this share in Christ's life, it must be remembered clearly that we are not absolutely identical with Christ; that his unique relationship to the Father cannot be totally given to a human person who retains his own personality and is a sinner, even though forgiven. Each of us, by our entry into Christ, is enabled to break out of a life with self as the centre, to know and live for God as one of the family, so to say, in love and not through fear, by God's gift of himself in Christ.

#### *Life in Christ – its development*

As in Christ on earth, so in us, this new life develops – always bearing in mind that we have a fully personal centre (existing of course in relationship to God) which can be modified or transformed but not replaced. With us each step of modification can grow out through our lives, and it is here that we are like to Christ. For, although his personal centre was divine and could suffer no modification, its reality could express itself more fully with the widening of Christ's human life. We can conceive human life as a gradual process of humanizing relationships with things and persons which are forced on us by the mere fact of existing. This means imbuing these relationships with knowledge and love; establishing an order among them; accepting as our own those which we cannot or should not grow out of; developing some among them particularly. In this process our personality is defined and formed.

By grace we are enabled through God's approach to us in Christ to affirm in a real way that the relationship with him, the revealed God, is the absolutely basic and fulfilling one; and to set others gradually in some order (in which all persons will be placed above the merely material) in function of that deepest relationship. This recognition in faith and hope leads to a living committal of oneself to this God in love by way of response to him; a committal of personality at its depths, choosing God instead of self as the centre of reality. This is what is meant by sanctifying grace.

Yet no human choice is total, since no human is perfectly inte-

grated. Living in time, man finds that new relationships arise, and they must be related to this deep choice once made. So the christian life will consist in freely choosing to bring all our various activities, our new experiences under the influence of that fundamental choice of centre made by the gift of God. This is the way in which that choice itself is made a deep reality and without this it is in fact unmade. The christian life provides no easy automatic growth, but through thought and labour, coupled with attention to deepening our relationship with God in prayer and the sacraments, a slow unification of our lives round a centre; and this process is once more based on the gift of God. Our life becomes a hard-won, ever more stable whole of outgoing and uniting love in the Spirit of the Father and the Son.

This growth is a responsible one. Man still shapes his life and environment, though he does it under God. It is by giving himself to a problem or a person that he develops his power both to give and to receive. This remains true, though by the continuing gift of God his self-giving has as its central aim the revealed tri-personal God. Man earns or merits under God to give more fully and receive more perfectly and personally from all reality, whose foundation is the God he is devoted to. It is an ever more inclusive realism which the life of grace is working towards. More inclusive too of the whole man, so that finally, fed by the risen Christ whom he receives in the eucharist, he is transformed body and soul. Living a full life of love of God and others in a world marked by selfishness, he passes through death and comes to be with Christ in perfect union of the whole man with those he has strived to live for more and more.