

THE SUPREME RULE

By DAVID STANLEY

*A Letter written not in ink
but by the Spirit of a living God.¹*

THE ABOVE citation has been chosen as the comprehensive title for this study with deliberation, because it occurs in a paragraph by Paul that may well serve as a paradigm for the kind of documents the Church desires to be produced by religious communities, engaged after Vatican II in revising their Constitutions. The purpose of the present study itself is to set forth the basis in the gospel, particularly the New Testament, for leading a life of consecrated commitment in the religious life within the Church.

When he dictated the passage in 2 Corinthians 3, 1-6, Paul found himself in a difficult dilemma. Certain itinerant preachers, arriving in Corinth with the intent of undermining his apostolic authority, came provided with impressive credentials, introducing them to the community. Paul for his part had no 'letters of accreditation': he could only appeal to his own manifest sincerity in proclaiming the orthodox gospel, and to his commissioning by God himself as apostle, in whose divine presence he habitually comported himself.² To assert these qualifications as he had just done, however, might appear to be tantamount to self-commendation. Still, how else could Paul defend, as was his duty, his God-given apostolic authority? Moreover, having been empowered by God in Christ, and thus answerable for his responsibilities only before the divine tribunal, he knew any merely human commendation to be irrelevant.

'Am I beginning once more to provide my own recommendation? Surely, I do not (like some other people) need letters of accreditation either to you or from you! You yourselves constitute just such a letter for me, one written in your very hearts, accessible to everyone's knowledge and perusal'.³ In contrast with those confidential documents commending Paul's opponents to but a select few, it is the entire membership of the community that provides a living accredita-

¹ 2 Cor 3, 3.

² 2 Cor 2, 17b.

³ 2 Cor 3, 1-2.

tion for Paul: and this in the truest part of themselves, their 'very hearts'.

In biblical language, 'heart' is a symbol of the person, the most intimate part of the self. Here, however, 'heart' is a precious clue to the direction in which Paul's mind moves. Accordingly, its significance as an allusion to 'the Scriptures' must not be lost sight of. In the face of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Neo-Babylonians, Jeremiah had uttered what is aptly called 'the gospel before the gospel'. In the name of God he announced, 'days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah . . . I will place my law within them, and write it upon their hearts: I will be their God and they will be my people . . .'.⁴ And Ezekiel, first of the prophets of the babylonian exile, had reported God's consoling promise, 'I will give them a new heart and put a new spirit within them; I will take away that heart of stone from their bodies, and replace it with a human heart'.⁵ 'I will give you a new heart and place a new spirit within you, removing from your bodies your hearts of stone and giving you human hearts. I will put my spirit within you and make you live by my statutes, careful to observe my decrees'.⁶ These texts, as the sequel will indicate, were evoked in Paul's thought by the term 'heart'. The symbol 'stone', appearing in conjunction with the divine ordinances, will shortly conjure up that first pact with God, engraved upon stone by Moses,⁷ that stands in striking contrast with 'the new covenant' predicted by Jeremiah, of which God's own Spirit was the artificer.

Paul continues by explaining how the community is a living letter of accreditation for himself: 'because you are revealed as a letter from Christ', manifesting his saving designs for the whole of humanity. Paul now states expressly what he had already implied, that he, as the founder of the corinthian community, had written this 'letter of accreditation' himself; and here one suspects that his metaphor is running away with itself. 'You are', he said, 'a letter from Christ, supplied by me' (literally, 'of which I was the minister').

And now Paul's mind is manifestly moving towards the ensuing development of the superiority of the new ministry and covenant over the outmoded mosaic covenant and its service.

⁴ Jer 31, 31-34.

⁵ Ezek 11, 10.

⁶ Ezek 36, 26-27.

⁷ Exod 31, 18.

You yourselves are . . . a letter written not in ink, but by the Spirit of a living God, not engraved upon stone tablets, but upon tablets of the human heart. I am emboldened [to make this claim] through Christ in the presence of God. Not that it is sufficient to think of this process as in any way coming from myself — my sufficiency stems simply from God. He it is who has furnished me this sufficiency as minister of a new covenant based upon Spirit, not upon letter; for the letter is death-dealing, it is the Spirit who is life-giver.⁸

Three features of this overcharged paragraph make it appropriate as a model for those engaged in the task of rewriting constitutions.

(1) The seminal allusion to the prophetic texts quoted above stands as a salutary admonition that reverence for sacred Scripture demands that it not be degraded by being used as decoration for such texts. This trivializing of holy writ would seem to betray ignorance of its sacred, inspired character and its power to produce an intimate experience of the word of God which it reveals.

(2) Paul's delicate sensitivity to the paramount value of 'the heart', once it is awakened by the Spirit to new life through faith, is a reminder that the active involvement of the entire religious congregation is indeed crucial for the successful production of a basic charter that will be an effective instrument for its government.⁹ Actually, this second of Paul's surviving letters to Corinth is a precious monument to that mode of governing Christians demanded by Jesus himself and faithfully adhered to by the apostle.¹⁰ Moreover, I venture to suggest that the vital way, at once reverent and creative, in which Paul incorporates the traditions he had received regarding the teaching of Jesus, provides the classical example for any religious community in discerning and assessing what is of enduring value in the (so often) elusive 'spirit of the founder'.¹¹ For surely it is chiefly through continuing dialogue between the founder's extant writings and that living witness of religious whose lives have been guided by it over many years, that this heritage of any community can be adjusted with loving fidelity to contemporary needs and concerns.

(3) And finally there is Paul's radical challenge to all Christians, but particularly to religious, whose profession it is to attest to the dynamic presence of the Spirit in the Church.¹² This paragraph

⁸ 2 Cor 3, 3-7.

⁹ *Ecclesiae Sanctae*, 18.

¹⁰ Cf *The Way*, vol 16 (July 1976), pp 176-88.

¹¹ *Perfectae Caritatis*, 2b.

¹² *Lumen Gentium*, 44.

presents in lapidary fashion the perilous predicament of which any author of a religious rule must always be aware, 'The letter is death-dealing: it is the Spirit who is life-giver!' To gauge the urgency as well as the sweeping, revolutionary character of Paul's words of warning, it may be helpful to recall the construction put upon them by St Thomas Aquinas. Indeed, it is almost amusing to note how fully the great medieval theologian realizes the inflammatory nature of his own comments, for he feels the need to invoke the patronage of St Augustine in making them:

By 'the letter' is to be understood any piece of writing that exists outside a person, even that of the moral precepts such as are exhibited by the [written] Gospel. As a consequence, even the letter of the Gospel would be death-dealing, were it not for the presence within [a person] of the healing grace of faith.¹³

That this is Aquinas's considered conviction and not a slip of his pen is attested by his comment on a deutero-pauline text, 'we all know law is an excellent thing, provided we use it in a legitimate way' (1 Tim 1, 8). After observing that the author is here thinking of the decalogue, St Thomas observes that its legitimate use demands that one does not attribute to the ten commandments what they do not contain: 'there is no hope of justification in them; that lies in faith alone (*in sola fide*)'.

This profound insight of Aquinas recalls the warning issued by St Benedict in the final chapter of his *Regula Monachorum*, which remains the *chef d'oeuvre* of all religious rules. This seventy-third chapter bears the cautionary caption, 'that not the whole of righteousness is constituted by this rule (*non omnis justitiae observantia*)'. In his turn, St Ignatius Loyola prefixes to his Constitutions a similar reminder that exhibits his quintessential spirit:

It is the sovereign wisdom and kindness of God our creator and Lord that will guard, govern, and carry forward this tiny Society of Jesus in his holy service . . . and it is that interior law of charity and love which the Holy Spirit is ever writing and engraving upon hearts that will assist us, in our turn, rather than any external constitutions. . . .¹⁴

¹³ *Summa Theologica*, I-II, q. 106, a. 2, c.

¹⁴ Cf *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, ed. George Ganss (St Louis, 1970), Preamble, pp 119-20. Cf 1 Tim 1, 8.

One further *caveat* by Aquinas deserves attention here, because it defines with great precision that authority which any religious document can be considered to possess, including those issued by the councils of the Church. The ultimate criterion for discerning faith is the faithfulness with which they mirror the teaching of Scripture. St Thomas asserts unequivocally, 'we put no faith in the successors [of the prophets and the apostles] except in so far as they proclaim what these latter have left in their writings'.¹⁵ The thirteenth-century Dominican appears once again to have stolen the thunder of sixteenth-century reformers!

Papal directives for revising religious constitutions

The apostolic brief, *Ecclesiae Sanctae* (6 August, 1966), set out the directives for renewal and adaptation of religious life in the Church, with the hope that 'religious families may allow the harvest from the Council to grow to maturity'.¹⁶ Pope Paul assumes that the revised Constitutions to be produced by each congregation will reflect that reform and *aggiornamento* which they, in solidarity with the entire Church, will effect in their Institute as a whole, as well as in their membership. 'The laws and spirit of any institute . . . should reflect that renewal best suited to our times'.¹⁷ The pope suggests that considerable aid for this project will be found in *Perfectae Caritatis*, which in turn derives from the sixth (and fifth) chapters of *Lumen Gentium*, with its inspired vision of the privileged role to be played by religious men and women in the call to holiness of all Christians.

An ecumenical council may truly be considered as a special moment of self-conscious reflection by the Church upon her own identity at a given period of history. The principal conciliar documents give expression to this historically-conditioned 'consciousness-taking'. The same is to be expected of the revised constitutions to be created by religious fraternities, which are, however, to take cognizance only of those foundational realities from which flows the life of its membership. Hence, such a charter must be accorded a place of privilege *vis-à-vis* more specific norms; it will be relatively brief, in order to allow for discernment by those competent to apply its principles to concrete situations, and to avoid the suffocation of the religious spirit

¹⁵ *De Veritate*, q. 14, a. 10 ad 11.

¹⁶ *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 58 (1966), p 775.

¹⁷ *Ecclesiae Sanctae*, 15. Cf *Supplement to The Way*, 4 (November 1967), p 15.

by a tangle of juridical undergrowth. The envisaged document is enlighteningly characterized as a *testimonial* on the part of a religious group to its particular function within the Church.¹⁸

One important consequence of this 'confessional' character of the document is the wedding of the juridical with the spiritual; for each of these expresses an essential aspect of the underlying reality, the religious *life* of a congregation.¹⁹ What, from the canonical point of view, are termed 'vows', legally constituting a person a religious, are in fact the response by the individual to a set of particular graces bestowed on him by God in Christ.²⁰ It is the responsibility of the authors of new constitutions to see that these 'charismatic' realities are not impaled, like mounted butterflies, upon what Paul called the 'death-dealing letter'.

To achieve that delicate balance which will ensure the primacy of spirit over letter is assuredly not easy. And here the Fourth Gospel may be suggested as a luminous model of the successful fusion of the juridical and the spiritual. For this 'spiritual Gospel', as Clement of Alexandria aptly called it, exhibits a surprising predilection for juridical language (testimony, witness, judgment, paraclete, and so on), in order to pin down with stark realism those symbols and abstractions (truth, falsehood, light, darkness, peace, and so on), that might otherwise evanesce in some sort of gnostic mythology. This effective combination of forensic terminology with loftier, more 'mystical', yet ambivalent symbolic expressions should be recognized as a salient feature of this writer's innovative redaction of the evangelical traditions he has incorporated into his book. For it is central to John's image of Jesus that he is the *Logos*, the Word of God (that is, intelligibility, *structure*), in contrast with the free-ranging Spirit, who, like the wind, 'blows where he likes'.²¹

The profession of the evangelical counsels

It may not be otiose, even at this late date, to attempt to clarify, in three particular instances, the usage in conciliar documents of terminology, which, if traditional, may still give occasion for a certain misunderstanding. These are 'evangelical counsels' of 'perfection', 'the gospel', and 'the supreme rule' of religious life.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 12, p 12; 17, p 17.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 13, p 13.

²⁰ Cf *Lumen Gentium*, 43-44.

²¹ Jn 3, 8.

The evangelical counsels, chastity consecrated to God, poverty, and obedience, inasmuch as they are based upon the words and example of the Lord and praised by the apostles . . . are a gift from God which the Church has received from her Lord and constantly safeguards through his favour.²²

It must be confessed that no evangelist presents Jesus as making the distinction in his teaching, between 'command' and 'counsel', or between an 'ordinary' following of the gospel and a 'life of perfection'. Nor, from what is known of their practice of the gospel, did the earliest christian communities interpret the ethical precepts of Jesus as containing some kind of 'double-decker' morality, that would imply first-class and second-class followers.

Let us take the marcan version of Jesus's call of the rich man. He, having successfully passed an examination of conscience regarding the precepts of the decalogue governing his relationships with the neighbour, is invited to become a disciple. Yet in this particular instance, Jesus, who has already divined the man's most vulnerable point, adds a specific injunction. 'One thing you lack! Go away, sell whatever you have and give it away to the poor . . . and then come back here and follow me'.²³ Mark's intention, in setting this story at the head of a series of disparate materials collected from tradition, is to teach the community for which he wrote his Gospel the christian attitude to wealth and poverty, especially in the light of the call to the faith. Such an attitude in Mark's eyes is a touchstone to the whole-heartedness of the believer's response to the gospel. Rudolf Schnackenburg, a priest and a distinguished commentator on the Gospels of John and Mark, observes that it is 'false exegesis' to ask whether this passage has any application to 'ordinary' Christians, who live in 'the world' and hence cannot renounce their possessions. He rightly points out that the call of the rich man is a specific individual summons by Jesus, who imperiously demands a response which must include the sacrifice of one's entire self. It may only be considered typical inasmuch as it is a tragic example of the dangers of wealth.²⁴

Matthew's redaction of the story is perhaps more directly responsible for the later theology of religious poverty and its relation to a 'state of perfection' acquired in a religious community. One

²² *Lumen Gentium*, 43.

²³ Mk 10, 21.

²⁴ *Das Evangelium nach Markus*, 2. Teil (Düsseldorf, 1970), p 89.

recalls that, in Athanasius's *Life of St Anthony*, the great egyptian hermit's conversion to life in the desert was inspired by his hearing the matthean version of this story read in church. For Matthew has Jesus say to the young man, 'if you desire to be perfect . . .'.²⁵ Once again it is important to understand that this phrase does not imply that the invitation by Jesus is left to the young man's generosity as a 'counsel of perfection'. Rather, it expresses for this individual, in his concrete historical circumstances, the same imperative enunciated a few verses earlier, 'if you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments'.²⁶ Matthew simply intends his reader to realize that this would-be seeker after eternal life is not yet 'perfect', because he has a divided heart.²⁷ Matthew has already attached his own special meaning to the term 'perfection' in the Sermon on the Mount, where he expounds the novelty of Jesus's ethical teaching as 'the new justice'. Thus the word does not in this Gospel connote a prerogative belonging to some élitist group within the christian community, but a goal that is of obligation for all who respond to the summons by Jesus to become his disciples. For the matthean Jesus as the new Moses categorically demands from every follower, 'you must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect'.²⁸ 'The saying epitomizes what was stated as a programme and then concretely illustrated by six examples'.²⁹ Here Matthew represents Jesus as saying, 'unless your justice far outstrips that of the scribes and pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven'.³⁰ Far then from being a 'counsel', the 'perfection' called for by Jesus is an injunction demanded from all.

Quite possibly a better case can be made for deriving the biblical basis for 'chastity consecrated to God' from the matthean text which reports Jesus as declaring:

That is something which not everyone can accept, but only those for whom God has appointed it. For while some are incapable of marriage . . . there are others who have themselves renounced marriage for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let those accept it, who can.³¹

The disciples' shocked reaction to Jesus's insistence upon the indissolubility of marriage appears to be due to their horror

²⁵ Mt 19, 21.

²⁶ Mt 19, 17b.

²⁷ Cf Trilling, Wolfgang: *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus*, 2. Teil (Düsseldorf, 1965), pp 166-67.

²⁸ Mt 5, 48.

²⁹ Trilling, *ibid.*, 1. Teil (Düsseldorf, 1963), p 138.

³⁰ Mt 5, 20.

³¹ Mt 19, 11-12 (*New English Bible*).

at such an intolerable restriction of the man's freedom to divorce his wife such as had been enjoyed under the mosaic legislation. In his reply, Jesus reminds his own that his teaching on marriage is one of those 'mysteries of the kingdom of heaven' imparted by God to the disciples, but not 'given to those others'.³² This insistence that continued fidelity in marriage is a gracious gift of God, which otherwise might well be beyond human powers, is equally true of another form of christian response to the gospel, where renunciation of marriage forms part of the divine call. For the person whom God summons to a life of chastity by giving the supernatural capacity to sacrifice the natural human drive towards sexual fulfilment, the call to follow Jesus in a way of life, in which his Lord has personally preceded him, is meant by Matthew not merely to be apprehended intellectually but embraced with total generosity through the gift of the entire self. Such appears to be the force of this evangelist's presentation of Jesus's final command: an open-ended one to those favoured with such a call. 'He who is capable of accepting it must accept it!' As Wolfgang Trilling remarks, 'in the life of the Church itself, testimony has been borne through the centuries that this magnanimous enterprise has been undertaken perseveringly, and moreover, that a great harvest for God's kingdom has been gathered thereby'.³³

Does this enthusiastic observation by an eminent east german catholic exegete imply that the criticism of the phrase, 'evangelical counsels' is irrelevant? Trilling's comments cited above on the texts of Matthew are proof that such a conclusion can scarcely be justified. What it does indicate is that a life of christian celibacy, like the religious life itself, is in truth grounded upon the gospel. Yet to attempt to ground the religious vocation upon the *letter* of the gospel texts is really no compliment to the originality and creativeness of this response to the gospel. I may be permitted to cite here what I have written elsewhere.

So far as concerns her hierarchical structuring, the Church emerges in history integral and complete without this particular modality of christian life. The invention of religious life was not the result, then, of any necessity springing from the nature of the Church; rather, it was the imaginative achievement of christian magnanimity. Religious life was born of a response to the gospel pushed to its human limits by the

³² Mt 13, 11.

³³ *Loc. cit.* (2. Teil), pp 161-62.

Spirit of God. It should cause no surprise that most attempts to justify this free creation of the christian spirit by invoking texts of Scripture is destined to encounter refractory difficulties, if not outright failure.³⁴

A simplistic, insidious approach to Scripture

This somewhat flamboyant heading may be taken to reflect accurately the writer's conviction that biblical fundamentalism is a virulent form of anti-intellectualism that continues even in our day to mar the approach to the Bible for many Christians. Biblical fundamentalism is a superficial (because over-literalistic) interpretation of the scriptural text, which reads into it a meaning that was never in the mind of its author. It is simplistic, because it ignores the vast distance in history, culture, language, separating us from the inspired authors. It is insidious, because, beneath a mask of piety and reverence for God's scriptural word, it springs from the false presupposition that the human language in which God's self-revelation is couched is to be totally identified with that revelation. Hence to question the biblical word in order to grasp its meaning, to apply the scientific techniques of modern literary criticism to it, is deemed tantamount to a denial of faith. A more nuanced view has been presented by my colleague, Fr R.A.F. MacKenzie, in his reflections on *Dei Verbum*, Vatican II's Constitution on divine revelation:

More precisely, scripture *contains* revelation, namely, in the form of a written record; but not all of scripture *is* revelation. Much of it is the record of revelation's effects, of the human reactions to it, of men's faith or lack of it. All of scripture is inspired, but not all is revealed.³⁵

Actually, the fundamentalist approach to the Bible was proscribed for Catholics by Pius XII in 1943 in an encyclical dealing with the study of the Bible in the Church. He declared categorically, 'it is evident that the chief law of interpretation is that which enables us to discover and determine what the writer meant to say'.³⁶ Earlier in this document, the pope had urged that 'interpreters should bear in mind that their chief aim must be to discern and determine what is known as the literal sense of the words of the Bible'.³⁷

It may be stated fairly that fundamentalism owes its origins to the very human desire to avoid all risk in ascertaining the will of God:

³⁴ In *Faith and Religious Life: A New Testament Perspective* (New York/Toronto, 1971), p 88.

³⁵ Cf *Documents of Vatican II* (ed. Abbott, New York, 1966), p 108.

³⁶ *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 39.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.

The central doctrine of Catholic Christianity . . . is the belief that Jesus Christ, the divine Son, became truly and fully human. When one reflects on the reaction to Loisy and on some of the anxieties of modern people in the Church, one has to agree that quite . . . understandably the Church had for a long time allowed itself to yearn for a situation in which God . . . would provide revelation . . . exempt from the laws and the limitations of human discourse . . . there must be somewhere some words of God that are immune to the interpretive processes that we of necessity have to exercise when we try to understand one another. But in that yearning the Church sought a privilege that was not granted even to the Son of God. In the incarnation, God entrusted his Son to humanity in its fullest sense . . . God can be portrayed as taking the risk of revealing himself in the human. . . . The Church should not shy away from accepting that same risk which God may be said to have taken in the greatest mystery of our faith.³⁸

'The Supreme Rule': the following of Christ proposed in the gospel

After this lengthy, if necessary digression, we must fulfil an earlier promise of clarifying a statement in the conciliar document 'on the Appropriate Renewal of the Religious Life'. It appears that some instances of ineffectual use of biblical texts in revised constitutions are the result of misunderstanding a remark in *Perfectae Caritatis*. One suspects that this may have been caused by a widespread, but unfortunately not always accurate english version of the decrees from Vatican II. The text in question is cited after this translation, which has obscured its meaning. 'Since the fundamental norm of the religious life is a following of Christ as proposed by the gospel, such is to be regarded by all communities as their supreme law'.³⁹ Two points should be noted: (1) 'the gospel' should not be taken in the narrow sense of some gospel-text (or texts), which might be transcribed in the revised constitutions as 'the supreme rule'. (2) A glance at the latin text from the council puts beyond any doubt that 'the supreme law' for all religious families is 'the following of Christ as proposed by the Gospel'.⁴⁰

³⁸ MacRae, George W. S.J.: 'The Gospel and the Church', in *Theology Digest* 24 (1976), p 348. This brilliant lecture by a Harvard professor deserves to be read and re-read in its entirety.

³⁹ *Perfectae Caritatis*, 2a.

⁴⁰ This was made abundantly clear in the translation (by the Editor) published in *Supplement to The Way*, 2 (May 1966): 'Since the final criterion of the religious life is the call to follow Christ enunciated in the Gospel, all institutes must consider this following of Christ as their first and highest rule' (p 16).

Firstly, what did Vatican II understand by 'the gospel'? In speaking of the transmission of divine revelation, *Dei Verbum* describes the various stages of its historical manifestation:

Christ the Lord . . . commissioned the apostles to preach to all mankind that gospel that is the source of all saving truth and moral teaching. . . . This gospel had been promised in former times through the prophets; and Christ himself fulfilled it and promulgated it with his own lips. This commission was faithfully fulfilled by the apostles, who by their oral teaching . . . and ordinances handed on what they had received from the lips of Christ, from living with him, and from what he did, or what they had learned through the prompting of the Holy Spirit. The commission was fulfilled also by those apostles and apostolic men, who under the inspiration of the same Holy Spirit committed the message of salvation to writing.⁴¹

From this it is clear that 'the Gospel' means in the conciliar decrees the entire New Testament as well as 'the books of the Old Testament with all their parts, caught up into the proclamation of the Gospel'.⁴²

This same document from Vatican II, it should be noted, established a certain priority among the books of the New Testament, which is not without significance for that 'following of Christ' which is to constitute for religious 'their supreme rule'. 'The Gospels have a special pre-eminence, and rightly so, for they are the principal witness of the life and teaching of the incarnate Word, our Saviour'.⁴³ The other New Testament books derive their importance for the spiritual life from their confirmatory relationship to the four Gospels. These writings 'confirm what concerns Christ as Lord: his authentic teaching is more fully stated; the saving power of the divine work of Christ is proclaimed . . .'.⁴⁴ The Council singled out in the first place the letters of St Paul as possessing a special value in aiding the believer to experience what the Gospels were intended to effect through prayerful, meditative reading. The chapter on the Old Testament had already reminded us that no christian spirituality is really complete without attention to Israel's sacred literature, whose books 'give expression to a lively sense of God, contain a wealth of sublime teachings concerning God, sound wisdom about human life, and a marvellous treasury of prayers. In them the mystery of our salvation is present in a hidden manner'.⁴⁵

⁴¹ *Dei Verbum*, 8.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

In the second place, when the passage in *Perfectae Caritatis* speaks of 'the following of Christ', it uses the expression in a transferred sense, equivalent to the pauline phrase 'imitation of Christ': an insight that held a privileged place in the spirituality of St Paul.⁴⁶ A re-reading of these passages will bring to mind the very significant fact that the 'imitation of Christ' Paul proposes to those communities he has founded is a *mediated* imitation. It is by imitating himself, the living means of communicating the image of Christ, that these Christians are to become followers of Christ. For Paul always remained extremely sensitive to the truth that they were disciples, not of his, but only of his Lord. At the same time Paul was equally aware that, as human beings, these Christians needed a living example for imitation. The point is of interest to the present discussion, since, in addition to 'the gospel', a religious family is to find the image of Christ it is to follow in 'the spirit of the founder'.⁴⁷ It is this latter which specifies 'the following of Christ' for a particular community.

To return to Paul, it will be helpful to recall that rarely, if ever, is Jesus's earthly career proposed in his letters as a model for christian behaviour. Paul is too keenly aware of the utter impossibility for human nature of any literal 'imitation' of the divine Redeemer. Rather, Jesus's earthly history has, in Paul's eyes, created a *pattern* for genuine christian living. By his personal experience of the dynamic power of the gospel,⁴⁸ the follower of Jesus is gradually assimilated to the 'image' of the glorified Lord. 'All of us, as with unveiled face we contemplate as in a mirror [that is, Christ] the glory of the Lord, are being remoulded into the same image from glory to glory by the Lord, the Spirit'.⁴⁹ Paul can think of the entire process of our salvation in terms of this transformation: 'Those he knew beforehand, he also destined to be remoulded into the image of his Son, in order that he [the Son] might be the eldest of a large family of brothers'.⁵⁰

It is important to remember that this process, to be consummated only by the glorious resurrection of the body,⁵¹ has been ritually inaugurated through the baptismal experience of the Christian. 'You must realize', Paul wrote to the Roman Church, 'that each of us who

⁴⁶ Cf 1 Thess 1, 6; 2 Thess 2, 7, 9; Phil 3, 17; 1 Cor 4, 16; 11, 1; Gal 4, 12.

⁴⁷ *Ecclesiae Sanctae*, *ibid.*, 12a, p 12.

⁴⁸ Cf Rom 1, 16.

⁴⁹ 2 Cor 3, 18.

⁵⁰ Rom 3, 29.

⁵¹ Cf 1 Cor 15, 49.

has been baptized into Christ Jesus, has been baptized into his death. We have been buried together with him through baptism into his death in order that, just as Christ was raised from death through the glory of the Father, so we in turn might begin to live a totally new kind of life'.⁵²

Thus the first and fundamental 'following of Christ' is that experienced sacramentally through baptism, the sacrament of christian faith. Without this transforming dynamism, 'the following of Christ' would be simply the imitation of a noble, human model. This aspect ought to be particularly meaningful for religious, since (unlike matrimony and the priesthood) the religious life has no special sacrament. Its distinguishing mark is the gift of a special set of charisms, poverty, chastity, obedience, community, which assist the religious in achieving the fullest possible exploitation of the baptismal grace.

A second important aspect of 'the following of Christ' is its character as the effect of the continued operation within us by the risen Lord through his Spirit. Paul's consciousness of this has been already seen in one citation.⁵³ It appears also in his letter to the Galatians. 'It is no longer I that live; no! Christ lives in me. My present historical existence is the life I lead by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and handed himself over for me'.⁵⁴ If the religious is to become a disciple of Jesus and 'follow' him or 'imitate' him, this must flow from a deep religious experience of the risen Lord arising from the contemplation of his earthly history 'proposed in the gospel'. We shall have occasion presently to discuss the importance of this last phrase at some length. For the moment it is sufficient to observe that the slavish copying of Jesus as a model for behaviour, frequently the result of pious, yet ill-informed imagining of his reactions in a situation in which one finds oneself, is doomed to failure because of its superficiality. St Ignatius Loyola indicates his awareness of this danger by his suggestion for the prayer characteristic of the Second Week, where the over-arching purpose is 'the following of Christ'. The exercitant is 'to ask for an *interior* knowledge of our Lord, who has become man for me, that I may love him more and follow him more closely'.⁵⁵

⁵² Rom 6, 3-4.

⁵³ Cf 2 Cor 3, 18.

⁵⁴ Gal 2, 20.

⁵⁵ Exx 104.

Finally, this 'following of Christ proposed in the gospel', if genuine, imparts to the religious a deep sense of orientation to community, exemplified concretely both in his own religious fraternity and especially in the Church. The Bible testifies continually to the creative quality of God's revealed Word in forming and maintaining the living milieu, where alone through faith the dynamism of that Word can be adequately experienced. The author of Deuteronomy addresses his contemporaries, probably of the mid-sixth century B.C., and hence some seven or eight hundred years after Moses' lifetime, by putting these words in the mouth of Moses: 'The Lord our God made a covenant *with us at Horeb*. It was not with our forefathers that the Lord made this covenant, but with *ourselves*, who are *all here alive today!*'⁵⁶ Throughout the course of Israel's history in fact, the authors of her sacred books bear testimony continuously to the power of the divine Word in constituting, re-forming, re-uniting God's people. Moses had read the covenant to the people at the foot of Sinai, giving them a sense of their new identity. Later religious leaders at critical moments in history (the reform under King Josiah, or the re-establishing by Ezra of a sense of national solidarity at the return from the babylonian exile) read out 'the Law of the Lord' to the people, thus instilling in them a sense of community.

A re-reading of the conciliar documents relevant to religious communities will reveal the concern of the Church that these acquire a deeper sense of their identity by perceiving more sharply their role within the Church. This is the reason for the insistence on 'the following of Christ as proposed in the gospel'. For the privilege and responsibility of preserving, in its authenticity and integrity, that living image of our Lord to which each Christian is to be assimilated, belongs to the Church. The Church does this by her teaching function, which 'is not above the Word of God, but serves it',⁵⁷ since 'she has always regarded the Scriptures along with sacred tradition as the supreme rule of faith'.⁵⁸ The Church continually 're-presents', proposes for imitation, this image of Christ through the sacraments and preaching, and the cycle of the liturgical year.⁵⁹

To conclude our reflections on the meaning of *Perfectae Caritatis* (2a), the phrase 'the supreme rule' is of course to be understood in a transferred, and not in a literal sense. It is obviously *not* a suggestion

⁵⁶ Deut 5, 2-3.

⁵⁷ *Dei Verbum*, 10.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁵⁹ See the article 'Imitation du Christ', in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, VII (Paris, 1971), cols 1536-1601; especially the section by Pierre Adnès, 'Reflexions théologiques' (cols 1587-97).

that the revisers of religious constitutions should simply make rules from scriptural citations. Paul may be observed to employ 'the law' in a similar way of analogy, when he contrasts the liberating power of the Spirit, dwelling in the Christian, with the impotence of the Mosaic Law that can give no help towards its observance:

There is then no condemnation for those who remain in union with Christ Jesus. For 'the law' of the life-giving Spirit has by that union with Christ Jesus liberated me from the Law of sin and death. What was an impossibility for the Law, robbed of its potency by our lower nature, God has achieved by sending his own Son. . . .⁶⁰

Contemporary gospel criticism as an aid to the following of Christ

Our reflection upon the conciliar directives for the revision of religious constitutions has brought into sharp focus the paramount importance of 'the following of Christ proposed in the gospel'. The rest of this study will be concerned with indicating, from certain assured results of contemporary New Testament scholarship, some new approaches to the sacred text, which will prove helpful to an adequate understanding of it and deepen our appreciation of the values to be discovered in it for any spirituality. Limitations of space here demand that we confine our attention chiefly to the Gospels; yet this procedure possesses the advantage of making the discussion more concrete through the use of familiar materials.

We may begin by recalling that the literary form, Gospel, is unique. There is no real parallel in any religious literature to the four books so designated in the New Testament. Neither the recently discovered gnostic Gospel of Thomas nor the apocryphal Gospels can be accurately placed in the same category as the canonical Gospels. These latter are not biographies of Jesus, since they make no pretence of recounting his 'life' or display any interest in his 'development'. While they are mostly concerned with reporting Jesus's public ministry (including his death and resurrection), they are not properly a 'history' of these events. The historian is preoccupied with the past and its effects upon subsequent events. The evangelists are preponderantly involved with the present (the christian life of the specific community for which they wrote) and with the future (the christian hope for history and the beyond-history). What distinguishes these writers most emphatically from the historian, however, is that

⁶⁰ Rom 8, 1-3.

they wrote out of a profound experience of christian faith; hence what they produced were 'confessional documents': testimonies by believers, intended for believing Christians, to Jesus Christ as the central mystery of the post-resurrectional belief of the earliest Church. The author of the Fourth Gospel makes this purpose explicit:

Actually Jesus performed many other signs also in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. These have been written down, however, in order that you may deepen your faith that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and in order that you may, by believing, possess life in his name.⁶¹

The Evangelist as transmitter of evangelical tradition

The first point to be mentioned concerns the consensus among modern New Testament scholars that not one of the four evangelists was personally involved as an 'eyewitness' in Jesus's earthly history. However one wishes to explain the relation of two members of the Twelve, Matthew and John, to the Gospels that bear their names, there is general agreement that these 'apostles' did not write them. Without delaying here to justify this conclusion, I wish to reflect upon its significance for our understanding of these books.

The evangelist emerges as a collector and transmitter of traditions regarding Jesus's deeds and sayings, that had been already selected, preserved, interpreted, reformulated, indeed lived upon, by Christians of the generation or two preceding him. The contributions by these anonymous Christians, who had experienced the power through the Spirit of the words and example of the Lord Jesus and had applied them to their own living of the gospel, assisted in the development of a *vital* christian tradition and passed it on, orally or through some pre-Gospel writings. It is highly important to see an evangelist, not merely as a gatherer of historical data, but as playing a specially significant role in the evolution of the Jesus-tradition, by his personal experience of receiving the earlier tradition. However, before reflecting on the meaningful experience of any of the evangelists, we may pause to consider the creative character of the earliest Christians' reflections upon Jesus's life and teachings in the post-resurrection period. 'This they did', Vatican II teaches, 'with that clearer understanding they enjoyed after being instructed through the events of Christ's risen life and taught by the light of the Spirit of truth'.⁶² The fourth evangelist

⁶¹ Jn 21, 30-31.

⁶² *Dei Verbum*, 19.

denominates this formative experience 'remembering'. 'When therefore he had been raised from the dead, his disciples remembered what he had said, and they believed the Scriptures and the word Jesus had spoken'.⁶³ 'At the time his disciples did not understand, but after Jesus had been glorified, they remembered this had been written about him and that this had happened to him'.⁶⁴ In his discourse after the Last Supper, this writer reveals the source of this experience, which distinguishes it from any mere human, historical recollection. 'I have told you all this while I am still here with you', Jesus tells his disciples, 'but the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and make you remember all that I have told you'.⁶⁵

We are given an insight into the nature of the privileged experience enjoyed by our evangelists by Paul, who, like them, was not an eyewitness of Jesus's public ministry. Paul regards the tradition he had received concerning Jesus's words and actions in instituting the Eucharist as coming from the risen Christ. 'For I received *from the Lord* that which I in turn handed on to you, how the Lord Jesus on the night he was handed over, took bread . . .'.⁶⁶ An even more pointed remark appears in his letter to the galatian communities: 'The gospel proclaimed by me is not of human origin; nor did I receive it from any human being, nor was I taught it except through a revelation by Jesus Christ'.⁶⁷ It has been suggested by not a few commentators that Paul, who had no personal experience of Jesus during his mortal life, learned what he knew of Jesus's earthly history through visions. That would mean that Paul, contrary to his own assertions about the superlative value of the evangelical tradition for himself and for his churches, actually substituted his own visions for the tradition of the Church. Rather than accept such a fanciful hypothesis, it seems more reasonable to explain the vehemence of this assertion from Paul's appreciation of the fact that 'to receive through tradition' was for him no natural process of data-gathering, but an intense experience of the action of the risen Lord himself as the communicator to the apostle of the gospel acknowledged by Paul to be 'God's dynamic force leading to salvation'.⁶⁸ In addition to this

⁶³ Jn 2, 22.

⁶⁴ Jn 12, 16.

⁶⁵ Jn 14, 25-26.

⁶⁶ 1 Cor 11, 23-25.

⁶⁷ Gal 1, 11-12.

⁶⁸ Rom 1, 16.

awareness of being acted on by the glorified Jesus, Paul gained a deep personal knowledge, by the frustrations and triumphs of his apostolic career, of Jesus's sufferings and victories throughout his life on earth. We learn this from Paul's reflections on his own career as apostle:

Yet I carry this treasure in what is no stronger than earthenware jars (which shows such transcendent power to be God's: it does not come from me). Constantly I bear about in my own person the dying of Jesus, in order that Jesus's life may in turn be manifested in my person. For as long as I live, I am being handed over to death for Jesus's sake, that the life of Jesus may be manifested in my mortal flesh.⁶⁹

We are greatly in Paul's debt for these disclosures: they help us, by extrapolating from his evaluation of receiving the living traditions concerning Jesus, to appreciate the similar experience of the creators and transmitters of these traditions.

The Evangelist's creative activity as literary author

Our evangelists, however, possess a more significant function than their transmission in writing of the christian tradition: they are rightly to be acknowledged as real authors, not simply compilers, in producing our Gospels. The observation may strike some as strange, and so requires some explanation. In the first flush of their enthusiasm over the discovery of a new technique, which has enhanced immeasurably our understanding of the Synoptic Gospels, the creators of Form Criticism tended to deny any real creativity to these evangelists. The aim of this methodological approach to the Gospels was to study the evolution that had occurred in the formulation of Jesus's sayings and the narratives about him during the pre-Gospel, oral period of their transmission. Scholars like Rudolf Bultmann and Martin Dibelius, who published the rich results of their form-critical investigations at the close of World War I, saw the evangelists as mere collectors of these earlier and hitherto largely oral traditions.

During the past two decades or more, however, a new approach to the study of the Gospels, building on Form Criticism, has succeeded in modifying some of the exaggerations exhibited in it, by coming to realize that our evangelists were not passive recipients of the earlier traditions. This more nuanced method is called redaction (that is, editorial) criticism. Through it, scholarly attention has been orientated to the innovative way in which the evangelists have

⁶⁹ 2 Cor 4, 7-11.

re-worked and re-formulated the traditions concerning Jesus's public ministry. Two principles mainly have been seen to be operative in effecting a change of perspective that has enabled Mark (generally admitted to have been the first evangelist), for example, to produce his book: his concern for the needs of a particular christian community for which he wrote, and his own image of Jesus.

Assuming (as we do here) that Mark was the originator of the unique type of literature called a Gospel, it is of prime importance to appreciate his creative genius, the profundity of his spirituality, and his sensitivity to the sufferings of the Church for which he wrote his book. It was a community confronted with the prospect of persecution, that was soon to test cruelly the genuineness of its faith in the risen Jesus. A notable part of this evangelist's concern was to correct any tendency by Christians, who had been attracted to the gospel by the accounts of Jesus's miracles, to confuse him with those 'divine men', the hellenistic wonder-workers. Jesus had truly, Mark knew, performed 'acts of power': but not to excite wonder, admiration of himself, or to achieve publicity. His purpose, as Mark saw it, was to teach 'with authority', in order to excite faith in the God, the advent of whose 'Kingdom' on earth Jesus announced to be imminent. Moreover, this Jesus, whom Christians acknowledged as the Son of God, had chosen to carry out his divine mission in a humble, obscure manner by following the divinely chosen path of suffering and death. This too was part of Jesus's role as teacher: to become a follower of Jesus, his entire career had attested, one must 'say No to the self, take up one's cross, and follow me'.⁷⁰

This marcan image of Jesus, so strikingly different from that of the hellenist Luke, for whom Jesus is the answer to the highest aspirations for 'salvation' of a noble greek culture, and also discernibly distinct from the jewish-christian portrait in Matthew of Jesus the new Moses and Emmanuel ('with us in God'), presides over Mark's entire Gospel. Thus, this first evangelist has re-focused christologically certain traditions, garnered from christian circles, intrigued (as were many contemporary jewish groups) by apocalyptic expectations. The result is the marcan creation (ch 13) of a discourse, which, holding high the christian hope of Jesus's coming in glory, carefully rejects any disrupting influences on the part of frenzied 'enthusiasts' or apocalyptic 'seers', that might turn Christians from facing the grim realities of life in this world.

⁷⁰ Mk 8, 34.

What does all this teach us about this remarkable Gospel? Mark has indubitably received various christian traditions and has transmitted them faithfully to his readers, but only after transforming them by his own image of Jesus, and (in view of the persecuted Church which was his principal concern) after reformulating many sayings of Jesus, reconstructing the narratives he had received. To appreciate Mark's book, it is crucial to realize that the dynamic factor in its composition was the evangelist's personal experience through the Spirit of the risen Jesus. Accordingly, it is necessary for a fruitful reading of this (or any other) Gospel to see that the marcan narratives, the marcan formulation of Jesus's teaching, present *primarily* this evangelist's own reactions to Jesus, the Son of God, as delivered to himself by earlier tradition. They are, in the first place, accounts of Mark's experience through faith (a privileged experience, since, as we believe, Mark was an inspired author) of what his christian forebears had bequeathed to him concerning Jesus's earthly history.

Our four Gospels do indeed tell us faithfully what Jesus did and taught. That they are firmly anchored in history is beyond cavil. Yet their normative value for 'the following of Christ' does not stem from the perceptiveness of the 'original eyewitnesses',⁷¹ the accuracy of the first disciples' memories, or from their fidelity in passing along exact information. What gave the tradition its authoritative, sacral character was the personal, christian experience of the risen Lord through his Spirit. The evangelists do not present a coldly objective, scientifically detached portrait of Jesus. Each gives us *his* picture of the Son of God, to whom through faith he has related with love. If I am to appreciate these sacred books and allow these authors to assist me in 'the following of Christ', I should note and cherish the distinctive lineaments of the marcan, or the johannine Jesus. To attempt by some ingenious method of harmonization to flatten out these portraits, to make Luke conform to Matthew, Mark to John, is in truth to display no reverence for the creative work of the Holy Spirit in these inspired authors.

On the positive side, a realization that Mark is not Matthew's Jesus, or Luke's either, will bring home to the believer the truth that, for a 'following of Christ' which is genuine and personal to oneself, a truly 'interior knowledge' of Jesus is essential. I must accept the fact that 'my Jesus' is not quite 'your Jesus': nor is the medieval Jesus, the post-Vatican II Jesus. We thus begin to see one

⁷¹ Lk 1, 2.

profound reason for the 'renewal' and the 'adaptation to the changed conditions of the times'.

The relevance of the evangelist's message to the contemporary Church

One notable feature of all four Gospels appears to be paradoxical. While each of these books is devoted almost entirely to Jesus's earthly history, none of their authors gives the least hint of the desirability of returning to this dearly loved period of history, as to a vanished golden age. Indeed, the fourth evangelist, towards the end of his book, puts a final beatitude into the mouth of Jesus, which sharply reveals his own attitude to the past of Jesus. 'Happy those who have come to believe without having seen!'⁷² Privileged as was the association enjoyed by the Twelve with Jesus during his mortal life, essential as it indeed is for our christian faith received from these disciples, we who live after Jesus's resurrection and have been endowed with christian faith are to regard ourselves as 'blessed'. This evangelist has been at pains to show his reader that, as late as the Last Supper, even the most intimate disciples (Peter and Thomas, Philip and Jude) guilelessly displayed their ignorance of Jesus, his message, the mystery surrounding his person. And Mark's little book has made its fortune through what Wilhelm Wrede (at the beginning of the twentieth century) has called 'the messianic secret'. Luke, after describing Jesus's departure from this world from the mount of Olives, represents the orphaned disciples as 'returning to Jerusalem with great joy'.⁷³

It should be clear that the attention and concern of these Gospel-writers is not turned upon the past. What prompted Mark to create a completely new form of literature, unparalleled since (except by his colleagues, the other evangelists), is his concern to communicate the contemporary message of the risen Jesus through the structure of his past public ministry. The inspired author is not so much concerned to record precisely what Jesus *said* in the past, as what he *is saying* in the present to a group of Christians under stress. In addition, Mark is also solicitous about the future—the future of history, in which yet unborn Christians will hear Jesus's gospel and find it relevant to their 'following of Christ', and the future beyond history, with its promise of Jesus's glorious presence to destroy those power-structures no human power can annihilate. Norman Perrin has accurately described

⁷² Jn 20, 29.

⁷³ Lk 24, 52.

the situation in which Mark found himself, one that made possible his innovative achievement in creating the Gospel-form:

It might be described as a situation in which distinctions between past, present, and future tended to be lost as the present experience of Jesus as risen led to a new understanding of the future and of the past. The key was the present experience, without which the future would have appeared barren and the past would have been soon forgotten.⁷⁴

There remains one problem here that, as yet, goes unsolved: why, if Mark (and his colleagues) wished to transmit a message of the contemporary Christ, exalted in power at God's right hand, did he choose to wrap it in the winding-sheet of Jesus's past? Why not write letters like Paul? Why not, as did the seer of Patmos, compose from the stuff of his own visions, a message of consolation for the seven Churches embattled by the blasphemous might of imperial Rome? To answer this question, central to a christian understanding of the Gospel as a form of literature, we must recall a final function of our evangelists, that of witnessing to the meaning for faith of Jesus's resurrection.

The evangelist's testimony to Jesus's resurrection

If it is imperative, as has been asserted, that the Christian must read Mark not as a record of the past, but as an attestation to a present experience, and not as history, but as a good news, what has actually transpired to make this possible? The answer is simple, though its meaning is elusive, except to christian faith: the resurrection of Jesus! To acquire whatever grasp one can of this basic mystery, it is necessary to put oneself to school to Paul and the Gospel-writers.

Firstly, the resurrection of Jesus is set forth by these christian authors as a unique event, unparalleled in history. For this reason, no attempt is made anywhere in the New Testament to depict the actual resurrection itself: it is not to be imagined as the resuscitation of a corpse. For that sort of happening is in fact described by the evangelists: the raising of Jairus's daughter,⁷⁵ of the widow of Naim's son,⁷⁶ of Lazarus of Bethany.⁷⁷ Through these stupendous acts of divine power, Jesus brought these people back to this present, earthly

⁷⁴ *What is Redaction Criticism?* (Philadelphia, 1969), pp 76-77.

⁷⁵ Cf Mk 5, 35-42, and parallels.

⁷⁶ Cf Lk 7, 1-17.

⁷⁷ Cf Jn 11, 8-44.

existence. Yet even these beneficiaries of such an extraordinary favour did not escape the inevitable necessity of facing death again. Jesus, as Paul declares, has been raised by God to a completely new, unprecedented existence. 'You know that Christ raised from death can no longer die: death has no more power over him. The death he died was a death once for all to sin: the life he now leads is one lived unto God'.⁷⁸

It is important to observe how well aware are all the evangelists of the dangers inherent in describing Jesus's post-resurrection appearances to the disciples. On the one hand, they must make the reader realize the reality of Jesus's bodily presence; on the other, they must avoid any impression that the risen Lord has simply returned to his former existence. Indeed, Mark appears to have felt it to be beyond his powers to construct such a narrative at all, contenting himself with relating the dramatic visit of some women to the empty tomb (Mk 16, 1-8), and forthwith terminating his Gospel. The other evangelists, each in his own manner, draw their reader's attention to the significant fact that the old familiarity with Jesus, a striking feature of the disciples' life with him during his public ministry, is never exhibited in these scenes of their meetings with the risen Christ. Indeed, the disciples are prey to doubts and fears; they remain silent in embarrassment, too inhibited to ask, 'Who are you?'⁷⁹ 'They doubt for joy', remarks Luke by way of extenuation.⁸⁰ 'Some doubted', notes Matthew in recounting the reunion upon a mountain in Galilee.⁸¹ By way of contrast with these reactions, the risen Jesus is depicted as the one totally liberated human being. No writer ever attempts to explain how the risen One came to his disciples, or how he took leave of them. Luke makes the eerie observation, 'he vanished into thin air!'⁸²

Indeed Luke and John imply that, until they were gifted with paschal faith through the power of the glorified Lord, it was impossible to recognize him: Magdalene mistakes him for a gardener,⁸³ while two of his disciples take him for an ignorant stranger.⁸⁴ The shrewd observation of St Thomas Aquinas deserves to be cited: 'After his

⁷⁸ Rom 6, 9-10.

⁷⁹ Jn 21, 12.

⁸⁰ Lk 24, 41.

⁸¹ Mt 28, 17b.

⁸² Lk 24, 31.

⁸³ Jn 20, 15.

⁸⁴ Lk 24, 16.

resurrection the disciples saw the living Christ with the eyes of faith (*oculata fide*).⁸⁵ It is not sufficient to have one's eyes open to see the glorified Jesus. And, in fact, as Jesus warns Magdalene, any desire to return to the dead past is a barrier to this insight of faith: 'Do not go on clinging to me!'⁸⁶

In the second place, the evangelists emphasize the truth that Jesus is indeed risen *bodily*, as Paul had done.⁸⁷ The living One is no ghost, even if his bodily aspect has undergone a transformation. Luke insists most realistically upon the bodily presence of Jesus, where he is pictured as taking food.⁸⁸ John notes: 'He showed them his hands and his side; and the disciples rejoiced at seeing the Lord'.⁸⁹ In contrast with the greek philosophical viewpoint, for these authors the person *is* body, one aspect of his personality which expresses both his individual distinctiveness and serves as basis of his communion with others. This latter aspect provides the basis for Paul's highly original presentation of the Church as *the body* of the risen Christ,⁹⁰ which would make little sense, except as a remote analogy, unless Paul was convinced that Jesus's bodily glorification was an essential feature of the christian faith. This same belief is also crucial for an orthodox grasp of meaning of the scriptural words of Eucharistic institution, since the realism with which these are to be understood has been defined by a magisterial pronouncement of the Council of Trent. A cogent indication that belief in Jesus's bodily resurrection is inseparable from faith in his real presence and action in the Eucharist (the sacrament of his risen body) is to be perceived in our times, when questioning or even denial of the material aspect of Jesus's resurrection by some Catholic theologians has gone hand-in-hand with doubts about the real presence.

In the third place, to accept completely all the scriptural data regarding Jesus's resurrection means to believe that the Son of God has chosen, in his glorification, to remain human for ever. We have already noted that it is the unprecedented nature of the post-Easter faith as a 'new creation', which made possible Mark's production of a unique, new form of literature, a Gospel. An inalienable

⁸⁵ *Summa Theologica* III, q. 55, a. 2, *ad* 1.

⁸⁶ Jn 20, 17.

⁸⁷ Cf 1 Cor 15.

⁸⁸ Cf Lk 24, 37-45.

⁸⁹ Jn 20, 20.

⁹⁰ Cf 1 Cor 12, 12-27.

characteristic of that faith is the firm conviction of a very real continuity between the Jesus of history and the exalted Christ, more dynamically present to his Church than ever he was to his disciples in his mortal existence. One aspect of this unswerving belief that the Jesus who cured the sick, banished demons, consorted with tax-gatherers and 'sinners', announced God's ultimate offer of salvation for all, is the same who is actively present in the Sacraments and in the teaching 'with authority' by the Church, her preaching, and her understanding of 'the Scriptures'. Paul displays his conviction that the Lord who speaks is one with the Lord who spoke. One can see this by the apostle's habitual reference in his letters to the words of the earthly Jesus as 'sayings of the Lord'.⁹¹ Indeed, what is probably the earliest credal formula from palestinian Christianity evinces this same firm grasp of the continuity between 'Jesus' (the name designates him in his earthly condition) and 'Lord' (the customary post-resurrection title). 'Jesus is Lord' appears in an early hymn cited by Paul;⁹² and Paul himself never tires of repeating it.⁹³ It was 'the Lord of glory' who was crucified;⁹⁴ and, in common with the earliest Church, Paul believes it was 'Jesus' who 'rose'.⁹⁵

This same New Testament belief can be described by saying that by being raised by God to this new (and for us unimaginable) existence, Jesus has gone forward to life with God, carrying with him his humanness in its totality: hence he has taken into glory his very 'historicity'. Not only has Jesus been transformed in the material aspect of his personality; this transformation has also affected all those human experiences that went into making what we call the life of Jesus. His earthly history then no longer belongs merely to the past, as, for instance, does the life of Socrates. Socrates is dead; and if he 'lives' to exert influence upon men of today, that is due to the genius of Plato through his Dialogues. 'I *was* dead; but remember, I am alive for evermore'!⁹⁶ 'Jesus Christ, yesterday and today the same—and so forever!'⁹⁷

The author of the book of Revelation presents this truth by a dramatic vision of the court of heaven. Through tears of frustration

⁹¹ Cf 1 Thess 4, 2, 15; 1 Cor 7, 10; 9, 14; Rom 14, 14.

⁹² Cf Phil 2, 11.

⁹³ Cf 1 Cor 8, 6; 12, 3; 2 Cor 4, 5; Rom 10, 9.

⁹⁴ Cf 1 Cor 2, 8; 1 Thess 2, 15.

⁹⁵ Cf 1 Thess 4, 14.

⁹⁶ Apoc 1, 18.

⁹⁷ Heb 13, 8.

at his failure to find one 'worthy to open the scroll and read it', the seer beholds 'in the centre of the throne and of the four living creatures and of the ancients, One standing like a lamb with the marks of his slaying still upon him'.⁹⁸ It is the risen Jesus, become Lord of history, who still bears in glory the sacred badges of his Passion. The author of the Fourth Gospel, too, depicts the risen Lord as revealing himself to his disciples by the wounds in hands and side.⁹⁹ It will be recalled that the effectiveness of Paul's polemic against the gnostic 'enthusiasts' in christian Corinth, who no longer hoped in a future resurrection, because they mistakenly thought they had already experienced it, was to remind them that the theme of his preaching had ever been, 'Jesus Christ, and him as having been [and so remaining] crucified'.¹⁰⁰

Space has been devoted here to this final point, because it is of first-rate significance in any authentic, christian spirituality. An appreciation of the values it contains for the contemplation of Jesus's earthly history is imperative. For if *to believe* means to enter a deeply personal relationship of love and hope with the risen Jesus, the only sure (in fact, the only possible) means of approaching him, who in his glorified existence transcends even our imagination, is through the mysteries of his earthly career. And here it is to be noted that it is through those mysteries 'as proposed in the gospel', that is, by *lectio divina* of the inspired texts, that such a personal relationship can be acquired and secured, nourished and developed. Finally, it is (as St Thomas Aquinas has been seen to observe) through this faith that the otherwise 'death-dealing letter', even of Scripture, becomes the instrument of the 'life-giving Spirit'. It remains for those entrusted with the revision of their religious constitutions to employ 'the gospel', the scriptural text, in such a manner that it may prove an efficacious aid to 'the following of Christ', which Vatican II has called 'the supreme rule' for all who have consecrated their lives to this commitment.

⁹⁸ Apoc 5, 1-6.

⁹⁹ Cf Jn 20, 29.

¹⁰⁰ 1 Cor 2, 2. This is the force of the perfect participle of Paul's Greek: it indicates a past experience, whose effects endure into the present.