

THE CATHOLIC HOUR

CHRIST AND THE CHRISTIANS: AN EARLY PORTRAIT

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AN EARLY PORTRAIT

Advent has come again. This sacred season recalls the first thing of Christianity and predicts the last things of Christianity. It looks backward to the Infant Christ, and forward to the infinite Christ; backward to divinity in a cave, and forward to divinity on the clouds of heaven. The Advent liturgy is a recollection of Bethlehem, and a reminder of Armagedon. It is the souvenir of Christ's first coming and the promise of His second coming. I see incentive in the sacred season and incentive in the troubled times to take stock of the things you and I live by—Christ and Christianity.

Christianity is a philosophy of life that has been around for a long time. Any system of thought that has been around for a long time inevitably undergoes a shift of emphasis. The reason is obvious. When an ideology passes from the master to the masses new pressures strike it, the pressures of the crowd. When a philosophy passes from the ivory tower of its birth and takes to the streets, it runs up against the pressure of the street, love and lust, greed and hate. There the philosophy

is tested. If its lifeblood is truth, it will survive, but even the strongest philosophy may bend under the pressures of the street. There may be a shift of emphasis.

As illustration of my point, take our democratic way of life. Behind its operation there is a philosophy of self-government. Two ingredients are of the essence of that philosophy, and were so conceived by the minds that gave it birth. These ingredients are the rights of individuals and the obligations of individuals. When this ideology runs up against the pressures of the American street today, there is a shift of emphasis. Every man cries out his rights in a democracy, and no man whispers his obligations to the democracy. That shift of emphasis can be perilous to the idea, for when men who govern themselves remember only their rights, and forget their obligations, they may awake suddenly to find they have lost their rights. When the root withers the plant will die, and every right is rooted in an obligation. The wild thing that has no root in obligation is not right but **anarchy**.

To come now to Christianity: we might expect that in two thousand years there would be a shift of emphasis. Humanly speaking this shift of emphasis might alter the idea essentially, and endanger its survival. After two thousand years we might expect that many who bear the family name no longer hold the family heritage. Now no one questions the service that Christianity has rendered society in the past, but people anxiously ask: Can it do it again? They ask: Can Christianity ride through the hideous strength of this present storm, and again renew the face of the earth? Can the Faith lift the fallen world? Observe I am not asking if the Church will survive. I believe it will, for I believe the promise of Christ, ". . . the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (*Matthew 16:18*). My question is: Will there be a Christian world tomorrow? I regret it is a question I cannot answer, but I do say that if Christianity is to renew the face of the earth, it is not an imitation of the original that will do it; it is not a watered-down Christianity that can do it.

I do not think that a Christianity with shifted emphasis can change the world any more

than a democracy with shifted emphasis can survive in the world. In the name of history and logic I contend that the Christianity that worked in the past is the thing that will work again. It is not ideologies that are labeled Christian that will do this tremendous task, but Christianity that is stamped authentic. If your hammer has a broken head, you will find it difficult, or even impossible to drive the nail. If a shift of emphasis has broken the head of Christianity, it will lack point and power.

It is my purpose, therefore, to view Christianity as it was at first, that if there be a false accent on my own, I may, with the help of God, detect it. I come then to the examination.

When you first encounter the Christian movement in the streets of Jerusalem and on the high roads of the Roman Empire one thing is immediately clear: Christianity is belief in a person. The emphasis is on the pronoun. On the lips of Christ the emphasis is on the first person. Jesus said, "I have come a light into the world" (*John 12:46*). Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (*John 14:6*). To his disciples Jesus said, "Come, follow me" (*Matt-*

new 4:19). On the lips of Peter the emphasis was on the third person. Peter said, "Him God exalted with his right hand to be Prince and Savior . . ." (*Acts* 5:31). Peter said, "God raised him on the third day . . ." (*Acts* 10:40). On the lips of John the emphasis is on the third person. John said, "All things were made through him . . . in him was life" (*John* 1:3-4). On the lips of Paul the emphasis is on the third person. Paul said, "He is the image of the invisible God . . . for in him were created all things in the heavens and on the earth . . . All things have been created through and unto him" (*Colossians* 1:15ff). The whole Gospel is summed up in Paul's magnificent accent on the personal: ". . . we . . . preach a crucified Christ . . ." (*1 Corinthians* 1:23).

When you first encounter the Christians in Jerusalem's streets or the Empire's high roads a second thing is clear: they believed this person to be divine. There is no doubt about this in the words of St. John: ". . . the Life Eternal which was with the Father . . . has appeared to us" (*1 John* 1:2). There is no doubt about it in the words of St. Paul to the Philippians: ". . . though he was by nature God . . . (he)

emptied himself, taking the nature of a slave and being made like to men" (2:6f).

Where did the Christians get this idea? The New Testament leaves no doubt as to that. The idea came from the Master himself, from the Master who said, ". . . I am from above . . . I am not of this world" (*John* 8:23); from the Master who said, ". . . I have come down from heaven . . ." (*John* 6:38); from the Master who said, "I and the Father are one" (*John* 10:30).

Christianity then was an ideology that was summed up in a person. Christ was the philosophy. He did not say to His followers: "I teach you truth"; He said, "I am the truth." As a consequence the believers held that there was an inviolable fixity to His doctrine; no one could add to it or subtract from it; it was divine revelation from above and no man could change its content or its spirit. This astounding idea so gripped the heart of Paul that he wrote: "Even if . . . an angel from heaven should preach a gospel to you other than that which we have preached to you, let him be anathema" (*Galatians* 1:8).

Christianity was also a program of behavior that was summed up in a person. Christ was

the program. It was a hard program that could be compared to a yoke or a burden or a cross; a program that demanded men to prefer Christ to father and mother, wife and property, and self. True, there was a great natural enthusiasm for the maker of the program, but enthusiasm is a fragile foundation on which to build high morality. True, there was a natural loyalty to this great teacher, but the demands of the program dug deep and hard into natural loves and hates—His stern divorce law for example.

Was the enthusiasm of nature and loyalty of nature enough to make men live the superhuman program of the Cross? For the Christians that question was purely theoretical, for they believed that they were given an energy from above. Christ did not fear to give them a program above themselves, because He gave them a power above themselves. He could give them a superhuman program because He would give them a supernatural energy. They could live His program by virtue of the energy of God. The death and resurrection of Christ brought that energy within reach. Through Christ they were “. . . partakers of divine nature . . .” (2 *Peter* 1:4).

Through Christ they were the “. . . temple of God . . .” (1 *Corinthians* 3:16). The program was possible and the victory certain because Christ was not only the light; He was the life, and Paul could say, “It is now no longer I that live, but Christ lives in me” (*Galatians* 2:20).

Now picture the primitive Christian. Behold his consciousness absorbed in the awareness of intimacy with God in Christ. Catch the accent of his speech. The emphasis is on the words grace and peace; grace, the real power from God in his mind and will; and peace, the inward rest that is its fruit. See the outward signs of this inward life. Note the accent on altruism. Mark how people say of him: See how these Christians love one another. Note where the pivot of importance lies; it is beyond — in another world. Heaven is not a vague, distant, unreal never-never land of shadowy existence, doubtful location and more doubtful shape and size. It is substance eternal, for Christ is there and there He will meet the good Christian. Because his treasure is there, so is his heart. But that very thing and its magnificence makes him a good citizen of the earth for he knows that

the only way to heaven is to serve Christ in men. He knows that if he is the brother of Christ, so are the poor, the hungry and the naked. He knows that Christ will say to him on Judgment Day, ". . . as long as you did it for one of these, the least of my brethren, you did it for me" (*Matthew 25:40*).

It follows then that Christianity was not set in motion merely as a program of social reform or a pattern for political Utopia. Neither John the Baptist, nor Jesus of Nazareth, described the Kingdom of God as a collective farm, or a five-day week, or a balance of power in Europe. Both the forerunner and the Master preached a personal reform. Their first cry was: Repent. Repentance is a highly personal operation involving the human heart which no one can get at but yourself and God. It was a personal plea that went out from the banks of the Jordan and the hills of Galilee. We cannot de-emphasize that ever. The Gospel is a personal program first. It is the plan for personal salvation, and thereby

the foundation of social salvation. It was a personal appeal to the commoner and the king, and when kings and commoners lived it they had the good society. In the personal character of the Gospel lay its social worth, for the good society is nothing more than the community of good individuals. The body politic, like the physical body, is healthy when the cells are healthy.

Individual Christians once renewed the face of the earth. One by one they joined "The Underground" of God and then one day shot from the catacombs to make the Western World. Men like that can do it again, men like that writing, men like that governing, men like that hiring, men like that organizing, men coveting Heaven more than gold, coveting peace more than profit, coveting grace more than neighbor's wife. It is my persuasion that without men like that it cannot be done. This is, I believe, the sober fact: Before the sun of social justice rise there must come the dawn—the dawn of personal justice.

THE CATHOLIC HOUR

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The nationwide Catholic Hour was inaugurated on March 2, 1930, by the National Council of Catholic Men in cooperation with the National Broadcasting Company and its associated stations. Radio facilities are provided by NBC and the stations associated with it; the program is arranged and produced by NCCM.

The Catholic Hour was begun on a network of 22 stations, and now carries its message of Catholic truth on each Sunday of the year through a number of stations varying from 90 to 110, situated in 40 states, the District of Columbia, and Hawaii. Consisting usually of an address, mainly expository, by one or another of America's leading Catholic preachers—though sometimes of talks by laymen, sometimes of dramatizations—and of sacred music provided by a volunteer choir, the Catholic Hour has distinguished itself as one of the most popular and extensive religious broadcasts in the world. An average of 100,000 audience letters a year, about twenty per cent of which come from listeners of other faiths, gives some indication of its popularity and influence.

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