

CHRIST AND THE CHRISTIAN

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CARITAS - VERITAS

PART ONE:

INTRODUCTION

Christ wishes to enter into a personal relationship with the Christian. . . . "Look, I am standing at the door knocking. If one of you hears Me knocking and opens the door, I will come in to share his meal, side by side with him." (Revelation 3:20)

He is really present within the Christian community "Where two or three meet in My Name, I shall be there with them." (Matthew 18:20)

The proof that we are Christians is that the Spirit of Christ lives in us

"The proof that you are sons is that God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts; the Spirit that cries, 'Abba, Father', and it is this that makes you a son . . ." (Galatians 4:6-7)

Christians are closely united with Christ and with each other . . . "I am the vine, you are branches. Whoever remains in Me, with Me in him, bears fruit in plenty; for cut off from Me you can do nothing." (John 15:5)

FAITH

There is a distinction between Christian belief and Christian faith. It is possible to reach a belief in God through reason. It is possible to believe that Christ existed from the historical evidence. It is possible to demonstrate, from Scripture and history, that Christ founded the Catholic Church, and it is possible to demonstrate many Catholic doctrines in various ways. Someone could do all this and end up with belief, but not faith. Faith includes everything covered by belief, but it goes a crucial step further. Christian faith is essentially faith in a person -- Jesus Christ. All love relationships require an act of faith. Two people may say they love each other. They may do many things that seem to prove they do. But they still cannot read each other's mind and heart.

Finally, it is by an act of faith that each completely surrenders himself to the loving care of the other. It takes real faith to open yourself to another, to trust that person to accept you as you really are, and to continue to love you as they come to know you as well as you know yourself. It is only when the Christian enters into such a relationship with Jesus that he moves from belief to faith. Belief and faith are both gifts, or graces, from God. For His own loving purposes, He chooses to give them to different people at different times.

Children usually easily enter into a loving relationship with Jesus. Sometimes as the child becomes a youth, the loving relationship seems to weaken. Their relationship with Christianity may seem to become more one of belief than of faith. When this happens it is often because Christ is asking them to commit themselves to Him as free, responsible, adults. Often, when they do so, Jesus becomes a very real and vital person to them. This experience is often called 'the grace of second conversion'.

THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

The spiritual life is the term used to cover the relationship between a Christian and Christ. Like all relationships, the spiritual life usually has its ups and downs. It usually goes through many changes as the years pass. God gives different graces at different times. Sometimes we are in tune with Him, and sometimes not. At times, it may seem that Christ is very near to us. At other times, He may seem like a friend who has gone overseas and who only writes from time to time. Sometimes we may even lose all feeling of contact. Whatever happens, if we have committed ourselves to Christ without reserve, we have very little to fear. He has provided us with many helps and if we use these faithfully, He will be leading us, even if the path seems dark and difficult. Because we can easily deceive ourselves, the guidance of a holy and learned priest is always an invaluable help.

The spiritual life allows for a great deal of variation from one person to the next. Some people never seem to need a 'second conversion'. Other people need not only a second conversion, but a fourth, fifth, and sixth one as well. Some people find one form of prayer a great help, others another form, and so on. It is not these things that are important. That we do have a real relationship with Christ is vital. It is beyond the scope of this article to cover the many different ways a person may come to faith in Jesus, or the many ways a relationship with Jesus can be nourished. One thing that is certain, is that the better you know Jesus, the more you will love Him. For a Christian, knowing, loving and serving Jesus, better each day, is what life is all about.

(For an account of a particularly rich and beautiful spiritual life see: '*Autobiography of a Saint*' by St. Therese of Lisieux, available in Image Paperbacks and elsewhere.)

PART TWO:

THE CHRIST OF THE SCRIPTURES

He came from Nazareth, a village in Galilee, which was one of the most backward and despised districts of Palestine (John 1:45-46).

He was a carpenter's son (Mark 6:3).

He was not considered learned or important by his fellow townsmen (Mark 6:1-2). People were even surprised he could read (John 7:15).

Yet this poor tradesman had great power over the human heart. He called men and they came, leaving everything to follow him (Matthew 4:18-20; Matthew 9:9 etc.).

He was a great teacher who used simple language and illustrations (e.g. Matthew 13:24-30; Matthew 13:44-46; Matthew 18:23-35, etc.)

By parables, such as the good Samaritan and the prodigal son, he fixed his doctrine of love in the hearts of the most uneducated of his hearers (Luke. 10:29-37, Luke. 15:11-32). His teaching made such an impression on many that they followed him for several days at a time with little or no food (Matthew 15:32-39). He taught with authority (Matthew 7:28-29). Even his enemies were surprised at the power of his personality (John 7:40-48). Often his enemies tried to trick him into saying something that would be used against him but he was able to baffle them with his wisdom (Matthew 12:22-28; Luke 13:10-17). He was courageous and prepared to suffer for the truth of his teaching. Even though he was only a poor tradesman he was not afraid to oppose the proud and powerful Pharisees and to expose their hypocrisy, avarice, and hardness of heart in powerful language (Matthew 23:1-36; 16:1-4). Yet he knew what it was to suffer from terror at the knowledge of what it would cost him to follow God's will. He even knew what it was to pray that God's will might be changed (Matthew 26:38-44; Luke 22:41-44).

Even when confronted with death as a result of his teaching he made no attempt to lie to save himself – in fact he claimed that the whole purpose of his life had been to bear witness to the truth (John 18:33-38). He made no appeal, no apology, no retraction of his doctrine. When scourged he made no plea for mercy. When confronted with false witnesses he did not compromise his dignity by arguing with them about their obviously false testimony. Yet when asked to condemn himself by making a statement of his teaching that would obviously be used against him he did so out of respect for the truth (Matthew 26:57-66).

He was no self-seeker or lover of money. He associated with the poor and despised even though this made him many enemies among the rich (Matthew 9:10-13; Matthew 19:23-26). He did not even have enough money to support himself and his disciples without help (Luke 8:1-3). Yet the Gospels make it clear that his poverty was not due to laziness but to a matter of principle.

He was firm but not obstinate. He refused to sacrifice principle to please the rich young ruler (Matthew 19:16-22), yet he granted the request of the Syro-Phoenician woman, because of her humility and perseverance, even though he was not at first disposed to do so (Mark 7:24-30).

He was gentle, courteous and humble.

A man of loving heart and attractive personality, He was courteous to the Pharisee, Nicodemus, because he came to him with the right intention (John 3:1-21). He taught his followers to be humble and gentle (Matthew 5:1-10; Matthew 20: 24-28). He practised these virtues himself (John 13: 1-16; 8:1-11; Luke 7: 11-17). He taught love of God and neighbour as the highest duties of men (Mark 12: 29-3 1).

Yet he was not weak. He had a majesty about him that sometimes filled his followers with awe (Luke 9:43-45). He had miraculous powers (Mark. 3:7-12). At times he could do things that appeared unnecessarily cruel (Luke 2: 41-50). He could even be angry enough to be violent when he felt that it was justified (John 2:13-22).

Yet he could weep at the death of a friend (John 11:32-35). In fact he was a man like us in all things, sin alone excepted (Hebrews 4:14-16).

He was a man of prayer and all that he achieved was founded on prayer (Hebrews 5:7). Even though he experienced many sorrows and great suffering, he was a man whose thought was primarily for God and others. Even on the cross he prayed that God would forgive his murderers (Luke 23:33-34). He found time to give his mother into John's keeping and to assure the thief, who repented, of God's mercy (John 19:25-27; Luke 23:39-43). Finally, he is a man who demands total dedication from his followers (Revelation 3:14-22).

(All references are to: THE JERUSALEM BIBLE, Standard Edition. Published by: Darton, Longman and Todd, London.)

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