



## The Cost of Ongoing Christian Conversion

John Navone

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## THE COST OF ONGOING CHRISTIAN CONVERSION

John NAVONE

*RÉSUMÉ.* — *L'authenticité humaine est toujours une réalisation onéreuse qui demande un effort constant d'auto-transcendance théocentrique. La prise de décision nécessaire pour l'accomplissement humain implique une limitation de soi toujours coûteuse. Jésus Christ, le paradigme chrétien de l'authenticité et de l'accomplissement humains, n'a jamais cherché à être exempté des limites, des décisions, ou de la mort. La foi chrétienne accepte en Jésus Christ le Dieu dont l'amour rend possible notre propre auto-transcendance théocentrique grâce au don de son Esprit.*

*SUMMARY.* — *Human authenticity is always a costly achievement that entails a lifelong struggle of theocentric self-transcendence. The serious decision-making indispensable for achieving human fulfilment implies the costly self-sacrifice of self-limitation. Jesus Christ, the Christian paradigm of human authenticity and fulfilment, never sought exemption from limits, decisions, or death. Christian faith accepts in Christ the God whose self-expending love enables our theocentric self-transcendence/authenticity through the gift of his Spirit.*

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### HUMAN AUTHENTICITY DEMANDS STRUGGLE

Life stories, the search for our true story, involve a struggle from their very beginning. We have to work out the complex relationships with the members of our family. These paradigmatic relationships are foundational for our future relationships. The critical question is whether we can face and cope with our propensity to recreate the problems and conflicts of early childhood. Furthermore, there are the critical experiences in our maturation process during the adolescent and youth periods of our life story. We are marked by our early experiences for the rest of our lives. These experiences have predisposed us to sets of responses which can be changed only with the greatest difficulty as life goes on; nevertheless, breakthroughs occur in the way we perceive events, imagine ourselves, understand others, grasp the world, and act.

An authentic life story is one of growth in sensitivity and responsiveness to true values; however, such growth is not inevitable. There are human failures and mediocrities. Life stories of continuing growth and development vary according to their initial background, their opportunities, their good fortune in avoiding setbacks, and the pace of their advance. The direction of their development may change for the better when we come to recognize harmful, dangerous, and misleading satisfactions for what they are and drop them; when fears of discomfort, pain, and privation have less power to obstruct our pursuit of true value; when we apprehend values that we had previously overlooked; when our motivation shifts from satisfactions to the conscientious pursuit of values; when we move beyond mere personal tastes and interests to become a principle of beneficence and benevolence towards others; when we become disabused of errors, rationalizations, ideologies and open to things as they are and to ourselves and others as we should be.

Life stories involve a creative tension in the struggle for personal integration. We enclose within ourselves certain antinomies, a war of instincts. There is a diversity of conflicting claims and urgencies that divide us; these are conflicting values with authentic claims that create tensions and stress. We can be upset by them and even seriously undermined by intense, disruptive experiences; however, our sense of identity can be enhanced by a healthy attitude toward their challenge and demand. Our human relationships cannot always be free of all constraint, demand or ambiguity. Tension is an inevitable accompaniment of every life story and not a punishment for them. It is creative to the extent that our authentic personal development needs questions and problems no less than answers and solutions. In fact, every answer and solution prepares us for the creative tension of further questions and problems. We develop when we are steadily oriented toward goals which strain our personal resources and are truly worthwhile.

#### TENSION BETWEEN DESIRE AND LIMITS

We experience a tension between our desires and our limits<sup>1</sup>. Desire, imagination, and inquiry would seem to have no fixed limits; and a corollary of the absence of limits is the absence of the need to choose. We learn from experience which desires are feasible and can be turned into a definite course of action, and which desires are impractical and are to be dismissed. We deliberate concerning which ideas, plans, or desires can be concretized. We settle on one of the possible courses of action and proceed to execute it. We recognize that some of our wishes, desires, ideas, and plans cannot be introduced into the world of the definite, the limited, the concrete. If the good is always concrete, ideals and plans are of doubtful value if they are in no way able to be concretized. False and exaggerated ideals, desires, and plans obviously can lead to negative consequences.

Every decision implies the acceptance of limits:

Every act of will is an act of self-limitation. To desire action is to desire limitation. In that sense every act is an act of self-sacrifice. When you choose anything, you

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1. I am indebted to Bartholomew Kiely, S.J., for his views on this subject.

reject everything else... If you become King of England, you give up the post of Beadle in Brompton<sup>2</sup>.

Goods chosen imply goods renounced. Our decisions ratify and increase our limitation. Our decisions and commitments are lived out concretely; they imply our acceptance of our basic limitation. Our desires, hopes, dreams, and ideals strain against our limitations, but limits continue to exist even when our desires are fulfilled. Jesus Christ, the paradigm of Christian faith, never sought an exemption from limits, decisions, or death. Christian faith is anchored in the concrete realities of finitude and resists the flight into illusion; it is always summoned to concrete decisions and actions by the grace and demand of God. It offers no escape from finitude.

Our actions are sustained by desire of some kind. We seek to attain something we deem as good, straining against limits, in the search for something better. Changing ourselves or our situation implies that we hold some ideal which differs from our present reality or from that of our present situation. There prevails a certain tension between the ideal and the reality. We impose limits on ourselves through our decisions; consequently, our ideals or desires must come to terms with limits, if we are ever to obtain concrete results. Plans and ideals that do not come to terms with limits remain empty dreams. Christian faith does not believe that the tension between desire and limits should be resolved by eliminating desire.

For Buddhism, the supreme perfection is "to kill desire". How distant the men of the Bible, even those closest to God, seem from this ideal! The Bible is, on the contrary, filled with the tumult and conflict of every form of desire... Desire is essential and ineradicable<sup>3</sup>.

#### THE CHALLENGE OF SERIOUS DECISION-MAKING

Often our reluctance to make serious decisions and choices is less a fear of suffering than a secret dread of irreversible results that permit few illusions or certainties about what will follow. We share with Hamlet the human tendency to indefinite postponement, to drift; we might, with Heyst in Joseph Conrad's *Victory*, choose drift. Conrad shows that even that fails. Heyst elects something that is not there to elect: security by withdrawal and passivity. The person who chooses to ignore the demands of his context becomes irrelevant through a decision that is itself a form of death. Our needs are manifested as inner tensions, and the way in which we strive to fulfill them requires choice. A particular form of tension is resolved when a specific need is satisfied through the appropriate choice. We enjoy a quiescence of desire when we are entirely satisfied with the realization of a given possibility, when we do not attend for the moment to other needs and possibilities.

If our inner tensions imply our need for new decisions, our decisions demand strength and awareness. The inability to make choices signifies a weakness that cannot

2. G.K. CHESTERTON, *Orthodoxy*, 4th ed., London, 1912, pp. 68f.

3. Xavier LÉON-DUFOUR, ed., *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 2nd ed., New York, Seabury, 1973, pp. 123f.

produce a person of stature. The lack of such strength makes us pathetic. On the other hand, strength is meaningless if we are not aware of the alternatives. If decision is to be fully free and human, there inevitably comes to play all that one knows, one's vision of ends to be sought and of what may be done, one's responsiveness to imperatives for attentiveness, understanding, reasonableness, responsibility, truthfulness; the inspection of alternatives and of one's resources and hardiness; the willingness to detect self-deception. The Second Vatican Council gives expression to the context of inner tension within which our decision-making takes place:

The truth is that the imbalances under which the modern world labors are in line with that more basic imbalance rooted in the heart of man. For in man himself, many elements wrestle with one another. Thus, on the one hand, as a creature he experiences his limitations in a multitude of ways. On the other, he feels himself to be boundless in his desires and summoned to a higher life. Pulled by manifold attractions, he is constantly forced to choose among them and to renounce some<sup>4</sup>.

#### FEAR OF INSIGNIFICANCE

There is a tension at the heart of every life story, which Ernest Becker describes as the fear of insignificance<sup>5</sup>. This tension reflects the structure of human nature at the heart of the life story. It is paradoxical: "Man has a symbolic identity that brings him sharply out of nature. He is a symbolic self, a creature with a name, a life history. He is a creator with a mind that soars out to speculate about atoms and infinity..."<sup>6</sup> At the same time, "... man is a worm and food for worms"<sup>7</sup>. He lives in the tension of his duality. His inner self enjoys freedom of thought, imagination, and the endless reach of symbolism; however, his body limits, determines and binds him. This tension is aggravated by the fact that we are not living among ideal persons in an ideal world. Following from the aggravation of our basic predicament, we often tend to seek pseudo-solutions to insure ourselves from having to face the tragic aspect of life. Rousseau had taught the French Revolution that people were good, institutions evil; therefore, reorganize the institutions, and people will be allowed to be good. Rousseau assumed that the ultimate goodness possible for human attainment was that created by our own unaided efforts, that we could resolve all our tensions and conflicts with the creation of the appropriate institutions.

#### DEVELOPMENT WITHIN LIMITS

Some lives are more integrated than others; some are more full of conflict. We can only search for our true story within certain limits of possibility and probability.

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4. *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 10 (*Documents of Vatican II*, ed. W.M. Abbott, J. Gallagher, London-Dublin, Geoffrey Chapman, 1966).

5. Ernest BECKER, *Escape from Evil*, New York, The Free Press, 1975, pp. 1-5.

6. *Id.*, *The Denial of Death*, New York, The Free Press, 1973, p. 26.

7. *Ibid.*

The recognition and acceptance of these limits is, in fact, the only way to the realization of our true story, the story most appropriate to our authentic possibilities. Tensions are aggravated when we try to be what we cannot be, when we pretend to be other than we are. They are aggravated at the social level when a political ideology succeeds in engendering in the masses a passionate hopefulness that encourages expectations of utopia without supplying the means to attain it. Both individuals and societies can miss their true stories through self-deception with regard to their true and limited possibilities<sup>8</sup>. Detachment from self-interest and bias is most difficult to achieve in the area of self-knowledge. We sense the gap between our possibilities and our actual moral achievements. Our awareness of moral inadequacy creates a tension which we often attempt to resolve through a rationalization, a "cover story" that is out of joint with our experience. Guilt, rationalizations, and self-deceit imply the painful experience of moral finitude in our aspiration toward values and our true possibilities.

#### CREATIVE CRISES

The personal crises of a life story are often turbulent; however, they do not necessarily have the disintegrating effect upon one's life that one encounters in cases of severe mental illness<sup>9</sup>. The powerful emotions which erupt from a personal crisis can often have a shattering effect upon one's personal world; nevertheless, these experiences can signify a personal liberation from false beliefs. A personal crisis may usher in a new meaning with which to lead a more productive life. Intense personality crises may have a creative aspect, so that we can emerge from them stronger and better persons.

Hardships, suffering, mental anguish, and personal crises are the lot of most persons at some time of their lives. They are potentially creative and developmental situations whereby the individual determines the quality of his inner self. It is not evident that outstanding persons are more numerous among those who have been less exposed to suffering<sup>10</sup>. Economic prosperity and a good educational system are no guarantee of personal morality, character, and maturity. The suffering of crises periods is characteristic of personal growth. Developing individuals pass through such critical periods as the coming of age, getting married, the birth of children, the advent of old age, bereavement, and death. Frustration may also be a condition for personal development; for character and personality are achieved through the overcoming of difficulties with patience, intelligence, and work. Getting everything we want when we want it requires little of us in terms of personal development; in fact, it seems to preclude personal growth among many of the "privileged".

The psychiatrist Kazimierz Dabrowsky has developed a theory of mental growth through positive disintegration<sup>11</sup>. He holds that to reach a high level of dynamic

8. See Herbert FINGARETTE, *Self-Deception*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969.

9. See Anton BOISEN, "Crises in Personality Development", in *Personality and Religion*, William A Sadler Jr. ed., New York & Evanston, Harper & Row, 1970, p. 191.

10. M.B. MARTIN, S.J., *Christianity and its Cultural Bondage*, St. Louis, Robert Bleile & Assoc., 1972, p. 157.

11. Kazimierz DABROWSKY, *Mental Growth through Positive Disintegration*, London, Gryf Publications, 1970.

integration of the cognitive, moral/social, aesthetic and other mental functions in accordance with one's own authentic ideal of personality, one must undergo a disintegration of a more primitive integration which previously had been achieved. The positive disintegration of the lower-level primitive integration characterized by biological determinism, automatism, rigidity, stereotypy and a lack or low degree of consciousness, is effected through the psychic dynamism of growing insight into oneself and understanding of oneself and others and a conscious and deliberate choice based on multi-level, multi-sided, highly integrating insights.

#### THE CORRELATIVE NOTIONS OF SELF AND GOD

Our personal history in the use of the word "God" may reflect a maturation process characterized by critical turning points and creative suffering. Inasmuch as our notions of self and God are correlatives, we may uncover something about our own identity by exploring our resistances and attractions to the ways we have encountered the uses of the word "God" in our personal crises<sup>12</sup>. If "Christ" means "he who saves us from a self-centered existence", the experience of shattering personal crises may be a prerequisite for our grasping his true value for our lives. Primary concentration of self-preservation and self-satisfaction, on all that apparently preserves and insures the self against harm, turns love in on itself and blocks it from going out to God and others. Personal crises may be therapeutic in counteracting our fatal tendency to be focused inward. If hell is to be blocked within the self and thus to be unable to go out to others without first demanding that their attention be focused on our self, our personal crises may be liberating events prompting us to live in society with God and neighbor. Never to be free from self-concern and attention to our slightest needs, to be a slave to the self's demands upon itself and others, is the condition of alienation from God and neighbor; for only in our God-given ability to respond to the self-surrendering love of God in the community-creating power of the Holy Spirit of Jesus can the self be free to live and love anything other than its own self in a self-defeating manner<sup>13</sup>.

Personal maturation entails suffering in confronting crises at various stages of our lives. The need to carry one's cross daily implies the Christian conviction that scriptural truth is made intelligible when it is experienced in our lives. The man who can freely lay down his life for his ideals and values is authentically disciplined by his Master's mission, meaning, and purpose of communicating God's boundless love. Such freedom points to the ultimate transformation and completion of persons in God's kingdom, where salvation is experienced in participating with others in God's life of self-giving love.

If our notions of the self and God are correlatives, they mature as the self overcomes its narcissism, through a compassionate response to the suffering of others.

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12. See Michael NOVAK, *Ascent of the Mountain, Flight of the Dove*, New York, Evanston, San Francisco, London, Harper & Row, 1971, p. 48.

13. Frederick SONTAG, *How Philosophy Shapes Theology*, New York, Evanston, San Francisco, London, Harper & Row, 1971, p. 410.

Our notions of self and God become realistic to the extent that we become awakened to the reality of those to whom we are related, to the reality of their condition : we are related (actually or potentially) to all persons and to their Creator. The quality of our self's relatedness to the world — if our notions of the self and God are correlative — qualifies our understanding of the relationship of the world to God. The *Genesis* author affirms the goodness of the world when he has God affirming the goodness of it. The compassion that Jesus felt for the afflicted is the compassion for the world's afflicted which he predicates of his Father. Not only our notion, but also our feelings about the self and God are correlative. A reasonable love for oneself betokens a reasonable love for others, and for God himself. Its reasonableness includes a profound awareness of the self as gift, as dependent for its existence on the love of the Giver. Our personal crises should help us to mature in our understanding of the love which the Giver expresses in His gift of the self and other selves ; they remind us that we are not autonomous monads, that our existence and happiness depend on others.

Adrian Hastings affirms that cruel people want a cruel God and cruelty has been one of the most decisive characteristics of human society ; the sadism and masochism of the human race time after time create a face of God as cruel as itself<sup>14</sup>. Old Testament theology could not be unaffected by the cruel divinities all around and the cruelty of Israelites themselves : still, Hastings believes that the most heart rending struggle of the Old Testament was to show that such was a false face of God : Yahweh is not merciless but merciful<sup>15</sup>. Our behavior implies the face of God that we see. What we do and do not do reflects the meaning of our God-talk ; our behavior reflects the health (or unhealthiness) of our vision.

#### THE FACE OF GOD IN THE SELF-EXPENDING CHRIST CRUCIFIED

The face of God is revealed in personal crises. The crucified Lord of Christians reveals the compassionate face of God ; consequently, for Christians the cruelty of the cruel cannot express the nature of God ; rather, it is the most outrageous denial of it. Anyone who has understood the meaning of Jesus has seen the face of God : "Anyone who has seen me, has seen the Father" (Jn. 14 : 8). A personal face, the face of Jesus, the suffering and crucified messiah, is the face of the God of love and compassion ; it is seen in suffering and glory, for only the crucified is glorified. This is the reality which the apostolic Church communicates in its preaching : "We preach Christ crucified" (1 Cor. 1 : 23). Only those who die with Christ rise with him ; hence, the Cross is the security of Christians. The evangelists tell the story of the Cross with all the detail that they can muster ; for this is the story of Jesus' ministry making available the way to God. To preach the Cross is to preach the resurrection ; for it is the message of the cross that sets men free, and the life that is marked by the Cross that is free : "as dying, and behold we live" (2 Cor. 6 : 9)<sup>16</sup>. The Cross reveals the truth about man in the Son

14. Adrian HASTINGS, *The Faces of God*, London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1975, p. 4.

15. *Ibid.*

16. C.K. BARRETT, *The Signs of an Apostle*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1972, p. 112.



of man who recovered man's lordship in and over creation through the obedience for which man was created. The perfect image of God (the true face of God) is revealed in the Crucified; the perfect obedience and love of Christ reveals the perfect self to Christian faith. What Christ has done at Calvary creates and shapes our notion of God, the correlative of our notion of the self that is Christ. Calvary reveals a God who serves his creatures with a compassionate, healing and community-creating love; it reveals a God who gives His life for his people in the High Priest who is also victim, according to the imagery of Hebrews. The crisis of Calvary is accepted willingly that God's face may be recognized and his life may be shared in Christ and his ministry. Calvary expresses the loving servanthood of God in Christ which gives direction to Christian faith and action<sup>17</sup>.

The story of Jesus is the story of God's waiting on man: "The blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them" (Mt. 11: 5). It is the story of a costly, committed, and reliable love whose meaning is defined by the Cross and affirmed as the love which prevails over death and meaninglessness in the resurrection. Jesus' life is a parable of God's rule, the embodiment of God's *diakonia*. Paul appeals to this dimension of God's very being in Christ, when he says: "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ" (Gal. 6: 2). The way of the Cross is the way of Christian maturation; it is the way of meeting personal and social crises, as opposed to a way of escaping them.

#### COMMUNION: THE PURPOSE OF GOD FOR ALL

The suffering of Calvary transformed the Jewish concept of Messiah among the first Christians. At the Last Supper, Jesus waits on his disciples. The servant who waited at table in Jesus' day was the *diakonos*. Now Jesus, the master, in washing the feet of his disciples, performs the new diakonic deed, the embodiment of *agape*: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another even as I have loved you" (Jn. 13: 34). The "as I have loved you" points to God's kind of love, the love of costly self-giving, directed to the Cross and the Resurrection. The radical diakonic deed of the Last Supper expresses this saving, community-creating love of service and fellowship. It is related to Jesus' going to the Father as the explanation of what going to the Father means, manifesting the life of God in that of the Son of Man (see Jn. 13: 31). According to John's Gospel, Jesus thought of his disciples as sharing in his diakonic work of cosmic redemption: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (3: 16); "In the world you have tribulations; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (16: 33); "He who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I go to the Father" (14: 12)<sup>18</sup>.

17. Frederick HERZOG, *Understanding God*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966, p. 125.

18. C.K. BARRETT (*The Signs of an Apostle*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1972, p. 27) notes the crisis-oriented character of the Church in the eschatological names of the Apostles: Peter is the rock that will resist the storms of the last days, over which the gates of Hades, the power of death, will not prevail; James and John (Boanerges, the Sons of Thunder) are the claps of thunder that herald the coming storm.

COMMUNION THROUGH SELF-EXPENDING LOVE

Acts of self-expending love for others, rather than out-of-the-body experiences, are the Christian's anticipatory confirmation of that life after death expressed by the post-resurrectional appearances of the Risen Christ: "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren" (1 Jn. 3: 14). Paul relates to love the Christian belief in a life after physical death: "I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rm. 8: 38f.).

The completion of God's purposes for his entire creation and our individual destiny are indivisible; for our lives occur and develop in community. Our lives are incomplete without a depth of fellowship with God and with others; they are meant to be lived and to reach their completion with others. Our fellowship with God and with others is only a foretaste of the joyful participation of God's liberated creatures in the deep and rich communion of God's glorious life which is the ultimate object of Christian hope. The Christian vision of God is, therefore, incompatible with indifference to the suffering of others and social injustice. Its trinitarian vision is one of a God whose being is in community, and of a God whose self-expending love creates community. In the light of this vision, salvation is participation with others in God's life of self-giving love, the gift of the Father who raised his crucified Son, opening to the world the power of a new life. God's love in Christ continues its work in the liberating and community-creating activity of the Holy Spirit. Eternal life, the gift of God to man in Christ, is that of persons-in-community participating in the self-giving community-creating love of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit<sup>19</sup>.

THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF LIFE  
AND DEATH IN THE PASCHAL MYSTERY

The fact of the Risen Christ constitutes the specificity of a Christian reflection upon the fundamental themes common to all religions. In the light of this fact, the Christian theologian examines his conviction about the ultimate nature of reality. The Risen Christ is the key to the Christian's interpretative scheme, his meaning system, for a meaningful human life in a numinous and as yet incomplete world. This terrifying and fascinating event is at the heart of that experience calling the Christian community out of death into life in the love of the brethren (see 1 Jn. 3: 14). It is the key to understanding the ultimate liberation and fulfilment of our life stories in perfect community as well as for understanding the mission of the Church in solidarity with all humankind.

The community of faith interprets the life story of Jesus Christ as a divine summons to a personal and social transformation that is complex, requiring a constant and prayerful analysis of dispositions, motives, intentions, purposes, desires,

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19. See Daniel L. MIGLIORE, "Life Beyond Death", *Theology Today*, 34 (1977), p. 186f.

actions, and outcomes. Paul is the community's spokesman both when he preaches what God has done for us in Jesus Christ and in his recognition that the old man lives on. The self-centered will of the old man does not die a sudden death; its negative influences must be detected and extirpated through prayerful analysis and discipline.

There is a phenomenology of life and a phenomenology of death at every level of our consciousness. There are incontrovertible signs of physical death and there are incontrovertible signs of physical life. There are similar signs at the psychic, affective, intellectual and spiritual levels of our existence which are perhaps not as immediately discerned.

We use metaphors to describe both our life-enhancing and our life-diminishing experiences at all these levels. Through metaphor we imply an analogy which imaginatively identifies one object with another and ascribes to the first one or more of the qualities of the second, or invests the first with emotional or imaginative qualities associated with the second. The whole nature of our language is highly metaphorical. Our abstract terms are borrowed from physical objects. Natural objects and actions have passed over into abstractions because of some inherent metaphorical significance. Metaphor is a way of grasping the unknown through the known, of relating our former experience to our new experience. Our metaphors say a great deal about what we are, or are like, and about what we are becoming. They provide expressions of the self or life story in its relation to itself, others, society, the world, and God. They are a clue to our feelings about our relationships and about the Mystery which is their ultimate context and foundation. Feelings have a cognitive and affective dimension; they are the way that the total person appropriated the Mystery defining its life story; they perceive by participation in the historical particularities that the Storyteller has given us as the context for our life story.

#### TITLES FOR THE LIFE-ENHANCING JESUS

Many titles which are used to express the meaning of Jesus and his life story involve metaphors. The titles are generally applied to Jesus in terms of a particular effect that he has had upon our life stories within the community of faith. A particular dimension of his impact upon our lives calls for a particular title. Jesus' life story is defined in terms of what he has done for us and continues to do for us at every level of our consciousness, in his work of redeeming the whole person in body and psyche as well as spirit.

Jesus defines himself in terms of the life-enhancing impact that he has had on others, an impact which creates a community. He identifies himself in terms of the community where his saving presence is felt: "Go back and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind see again, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, the good news is proclaimed to the poor and happy is the man who does not lose faith in me" (Lk. 7: 29). Jesus *is* what he does. He is the light to the blind, power to the lame, purity to lepers, the word to the deaf, the resurrection for the dead, the good news to the poor and the happiness of the believer.

The existence of the community of faith manifests the new consciousness created by Jesus Christ. The titles that we attribute to Jesus, expressing the impact of his life story upon our own, imply a prior state of human affairs which he has reversed and continues to reverse. The impact of Jesus' life unveils that prior negative state at every level of our individual and communal existence. To understand a person in need, we must understand who is a person fulfilled. We find the right diagnosis of illness from a consideration of health. The faith community's experience of Jesus Christ as the promise of its fulfilment implies its awareness of the prior negative state from which he delivers it. Satan, death, and sin, and their associated metaphors, describe the condition which Jesus reverses in our life stories. The Old Testament is the cultural and religious matrix for the New Testament's names and titles of Jesus. Against its background of symbolism for the human experience of evil, the names and titles of Jesus take on a deeper meaning, implying a new experience that is the reversal of everything that this symbolism represented<sup>20</sup>.

#### HUMAN TRANSFORMATION THROUGH THE RISEN CHRIST

"Almost twenty centuries have elapsed since the Christ-event took place, and yet no completely satisfying over-all explanation of that fact has been proposed", states Joseph Mitros<sup>21</sup>. The development of theological studies and the progress of sciences and philosophy have opened new vistas concerning the origin of man and his physical and moral state, and concerning the problem of evil and liberation from it. In the light of these achievements the new data must be evaluated, the old data revised, and all of them integrated before more satisfying answers can be found.

Despite the failure to provide a completely satisfying over-all explanation for the Christ-event, there has been no doubt among Christians about the real experience of the Risen Christ which transformed the apostles and created the community of faith. The apostolic, evangelical, patristic, and contemporary theological attempts to explain the Christ-event originate in the reality of Jesus Christ's unique resurrection experience, the effects of which are shared in varying degrees by the members of his community of faith.

The various orthodox interpretations of Jesus Christ's life story derive from particular dimensions of the Risen Christ's impact upon human experience. For example, the new vision of and feeling for reality, created by the experience of the Risen Christ, is the basis for an attempt to explain his life story in terms of enlightenment. Clement of Alexandria taught that the incarnate Logos illuminates the believer with his own incomparable light. Athanasius and Cyril of Alexandria wrote eloquently of Christ as the light of the world and as the giver of the Spirit of truth, transforming humankind through enlightenment.

20. Vincent TAYLOR discusses all the names and titles applied to Jesus in the New Testament, some fifty-five in number, in his book, *The Names of Jesus*, London, Macmillan and Co., 1954. See also John NAVONE, *A Theology of Failure*, New York, Paulist Press, 1974. The second chapter treats of this subject.

21. Joseph MITROS, "Patristic Views of Christ's Salvific Work", *Thought* (1967), p. 444.

There was no single formulation of the doctrine of the Christ-event in the patristic period. The exemplarist tradition tends to describe the impact of the Risen Christ primarily in terms of moral regeneration, a redirection of the human spirit. The Western liturgical tradition tends to view it in terms of what Christ's self-sacrificing love has achieved for others. The Eastern liturgies express the impact of the event as a *rescue* and a *healing*. Christ the victor has enabled us to experience a deliverance from evil, whereas Christ the illuminator explains our entry into an awareness of a life-giving reality. Humankind is brought from darkness to light, from the power of evil to the peace of God. Our experience of his life story is explained not only as a rescue by a saviour, but also as a healing of the effects of sin through the agency of a healer. The experience of the *lex orandi*, of communion with the Risen Christ in prayer, stimulates theological reflection on his life story throughout the centuries. It bears witness to the resurrection as both the act of God on behalf of humankind and to the transformation of humankind in relation to God.

#### CHRISTIAN HOPE TRANSCENDS ALL IMAGES

For every doctrine which seeks to express the impact on human lives of Jesus Christ's life story, the elements of act and process, divine and human, once-for-allness and human fulfilment are essential. The multiple dimensions of the ongoing process of human fulfillment introduced by his life story find expression in both the traditional and new theologies of salvation. The saving impact of the Risen Christ on our life stories is interpreted according to different models of various cultures throughout the centuries. Every model that serves to explain how we may enjoy life more fully illuminates the experienced meaning of the Risen Christ among his people.

The community of faith lives in a state of tension, aware of its limitations, on its way to the final Kingdom. There is a tension between the incompleteness and precariousness of our present salvation and the remoteness of the future Kingdom. The tension witnesses the continuity between the future same Kingdom as already active in the community of faith and as drawing near at successive stages in the life story of the individual Christians. Our Christian hope is one dimension of the way the Christ story is becoming our story. There is a continuity between this hope and our present condition. The pull of the future Kingdom is dynamically at work within our life stories. There is, however, an obscurity surrounding the future Kingdom as revealed in the Christ story. The reason for this obscurity, according to Kevin McNamara, is that the true object of our hope is nothing less than God himself<sup>22</sup>. The same obscurity stamps the Christian hope for man; it implies that any clear and definite plan held out as man's true future can only be provisional. The Christian cannot, therefore, commit himself absolutely to any blueprint for human happiness; he is always aware that something is missing, that his true hope eludes all human definition and planning<sup>23</sup>. Josef Pieper affirms this: "What marks the true hope is that

22. Sean FREYNE, ed., *Jesus Christ Our Lord: Papers delivered at the Maynooth Union Summer School, 1971*, Dublin, Talbot Press, 1974, pp. 61f. Kevin McNamara's paper is entitled, "Christ Present and to Come: Pilgrim Church and Final Kingdom".

23. *Ibid.*

he holds himself in readiness for a fulfilment which goes beyond every imaginable human postulate.”<sup>24</sup> Hope, nevertheless, experiences the goodness and promise of the Mystery encompassing its life story. Christian hope, defined by the Christ story, is not without some positive knowledge of what the future Kingdom will be like. The titles and names of Christ, the doctrines and models which the Church employs to explain his impact upon our lives, are all attempts to express this positive knowledge of and hope for the Kingdom.

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24. Josef PIEPER, *Hope and History*, London, Faber & Faber, 1954, p. 91.