

THE COMMON LIFE AMONG EARLY CHRISTIANS¹

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THIS is simply an attempt to suggest some of the main ideas inspiring the common life of early Christians. There are several difficulties in the way of such an attempt. There is, for example, the common temptation to paint a sharp contrast between a golden age of the primitive Church and a cold and dismal present. Such a contrast is unreal. The virtues found in primitive Christian communities can be found in any of our modern parishes. The faults which appear in the modern community have their parallel in our Lord's own days. There were pride and jealousy, lying and treachery, among the Apostles; schism and heresy were a problem before the New Testament was all written. A romantic view is, therefore, unfounded, although we may recognise that pressure of hostile forces probably eliminated from the earliest Christian communities considerable numbers of people who would have existed in more peaceful times as a large body of lukewarm, conventional Christians. Certain virtues would be more in evidence than they are now, more emphasised; to discover what they were, and why they were emphasised, we may direct our minds to elements in Christian life which need to be better appreciated in our own day.

The limits of such an investigation must be rather arbitrary. It seems best, for the present purpose, to exclude the New Testament, and to concentrate on the period of roughly a century which includes SS. Clement, Ignatius, and Polycarp, and the lesser writers who are usually grouped with them under the title of Apostolic Fathers. From their writings we can gather something at least of the ideals which Christian communities were trying to follow in practice.

A few lines in St Ignatius of Antioch's letter to the Ephesians suggest a starting point for our discussion. He wrote: 'Only persevere to the end in your faith in, and your love for, Jesus Christ. Here is the beginning and the end of

¹ The substance of a paper read at 'The Life of the Spirit' Conference, September, 1952.

life: faith is the beginning, the end is love.² The Christian was admitted by Baptism to the life of faith, not to a 'mere profession of faith' but to a living faith which shaped all his conduct to the end. He believed in the Trinity, and the doctrine of the Trinity was central to his life, for he was keenly aware that Christ had brought him to 'a share in God'.

Our Lord was seen as, above all, the Way to the Father. It is not inaccurate to say that the devotion of second-century Christians was Christocentric, but it can be misleading. In more recent centuries there has been a kind of Christocentric devotion which delights in contemplating not so much the divinity of our blessed Lord as his humanity. With deep feeling it dwells on his bodily suffering until it is in danger of making the Man Christ its end. This attitude can develop a possessiveness towards our Lord, which uses him as the centre of a private world of one's own ideas and feelings. Our Lord himself emphasised that he came from the Father; he made the Father known in a world that knew him not. 'Just Father, the world hath not known thee; but I have known thee: and these have known that thou hast sent me. And I have made known thy name to them, and will make it known; that the love wherewith thou hast loved me, may be in them, and I in them.' (John 17, 25-6.) In his whole life, in his Passion and death, our Lord is the Way by which we go to the Father whose erring children we are.

In the letter of St Clement to the Corinthians the Fatherhood of God is wonderfully set forth. It is significant that he uses the titles 'Lord' and 'Master' when speaking of the Father, rather than of the Son. Clement had a vision of Creation in all its ordered beauty, each part fulfilling the work ordained for it by the Creator and none 'interfering in the least with the other'. Our need is to learn to be subject to the will of the Creator and Master of the universe, 'the all-merciful and beneficent Father'. Beneficence is stressed repeatedly, and forbearance, and the unimpassioned attitude of the Father to his creatures. Through our Lord

² Quotations are taken from the translation of *The Epistles of St Clement of Rome and St Ignatius of Antioch*, by J. A. Kleist, S.J. (Ancient Christian Writers. Vol. 1.)

we enter into the peace and concord which the Father has ordained, and so Clement urges the Corinthians. 'Let us fix our gaze on the Father and Creator of the whole world and hold fast to his magnificent and superabundant gifts, and blessings of peace'.

A sense of the brotherhood of man is the corollary of so strong a sense of the Fatherhood of God. All receive life from God; for all Christians our Lord prepares a mansion with the Father. The appreciation of brotherhood was strengthened above all by the Eucharist. Here again there was a difference of emphasis compared with modern times. The early Christians went to Mass because they were going to receive life, in receiving Christ. Mass and Communion went together. The Eucharist was a sacrifice but also a meal which nourished their life of faith. They received the Bread of Life in a ritual whose external ceremonies were important as an expression of their inner unity. So Ignatius wrote to the Magnesians: 'At your meetings there must be one prayer, one supplication, one mind, one hope in love, in joy that is flawless, that is Jesus Christ, who stands supreme. Come together all of you, as to one temple and one altar, to one Jesus Christ—to him who came forth from one Father and yet remained with, and returned to, one.' Earlier in the same letter he told them how ardently he prayed for unity among the churches, 'a union based on the flesh and spirit of Jesus Christ, our enduring life; a union based on faith and love—the greatest blessing; and, most especially, a union with Jesus and the Father'.

A common creation, a common redemption, a common life in faith and charity, a common sacramental birth and life—all that must have social consequences. As was often pointed out, there should be no prejudice in favour of rank or station among the members of a Christian community; there should be no selfish use of property; there should be generosity towards one another, and forbearance and compassion, in grateful imitation of the generous mercy and infinite compassion of God.

The common meal expressed awareness of those principles. It extended the Eucharistic spirit to everyday life; it was itself a symbol of the common life, a ceremonial

exercise of the virtue of hospitality. Emphasis on the importance of hospitality is found to an extent perhaps strange to modern readers. Clement couples faith and hospitality in a review of those great Old Testament figures who were God's ministers. 'Because of his faith and hospitality' a son was granted to Abraham in his old age; 'hospitality and piety were the reasons for Lot's delivery from Sodom'. In his eyes faith without hospitality is impossible, if it is to be living faith. We share God's gifts to us with each other, as truly brothers. We must 'be kind to one another in imitation of the compassion and goodness of our Maker'.

Hospitality is not only to be given in imitation of God's goodness. It is offered because of what our fellow-Christians are. They are, in St Ignatius's words, all 'God-bearers and temple-bearers, Christ-bearers and bearers of holiness'. In receiving them we receive our Lord himself. Love of him will inspire that untiring charity which is the inspiration of true hospitality. Through hospitality love is most shown, the love of our brother in Christ who comes to share our life, perhaps in great need. So, in his letter to the Romans, Ignatius speaks of 'the affection of the churches that offered their hospitality to me, not as to a chance visitor, but in deference to Jesus Christ'.

Obedience was the other virtue greatly stressed by the early Fathers. It is such a constant theme, especially in the letters of St Ignatius, that it may appear almost unnecessary to mention it. It must be noticed, however, because it was for these early communities an expression of their faith in the rule of the Trinity in the Church, and a sign of their unity in faith and love. The visible centre of their common life was the Bishop, with whom they were in closer contact than modern Christians can be with Spiritual Fathers whose flocks number tens of thousands. The Bishop was at the centre, presiding, counselling, the father and shepherd of his flock, through whom God the Father and Christ the Shepherd acted. Life was received from the hands of the Bishop dispensing the sacraments. The divine teaching came from the lips of the Bishop, who 'embodies the authority of God the Father', as Ignatius reminded the Magnesians. To the Smyrneans he said: Let no one do anything touching

the Church, apart from the Bishop. . . . Where the Bishop appears, there let the people be: just as where Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church.' To the Trallians he wrote: 'When you submit to the Bishop as representing Jesus Christ, it is clear to me that you are not living the life of men, but that of Jesus Christ, who died for us, that through faith in his death you might escape dying'.

Everything reduced to that—to what was proper to those living the life of Christ, our Lord. The Christian community by its shared life, shared at every level, was a witness to the restoring grace of Christ which had brought peace and concord where before there had been only jealousy, hatred, ignorance. God's truth and God's love, experienced by the Christian community through Christ who restored us to the Father's mercy, would shine through that community to the world. There was that burning sense of the apostolic mission of the Church which we so much need. Through the Church men are drawn to Christ, through Christ to the Father. It was of his Apostles that our Lord said: 'As thou hast sent me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. . . . And not for them only do I pray, but for them also who through their word shall believe in me; that they all may be one, as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee; that they also may be one in us; that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.' (John 17 : 18, 20, 21.)