

# The Way, the Truth, and the Life

SISTER CATHERINE, O.P.

Theology, bible and liturgy are coming together at last. The modern renewal is a glorious new manifestation of the risen Christ in and through his Church. Nevertheless, there is still much to be done in bringing about a really vital Christ-centred orientation in the lives of all. We need to find Christ not only at mass and in the sacraments but in every condition and circumstance of our daily living. We must learn to give every aspect of our lives a sacramental character, an act of worship in Christ to God. What is important is not so much that we say our prayers, but that we become ourselves a living prayer. 'Present your bodies as a sacrifice, living, holy, pleasing to God—your spiritual service. And be not conformed to this world, but be transformed in the newness of your mind, that you may discern what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God' (Rom. 12. 1-2). The spiritual life is Christ living on in us, and he does this not only at mass but in our daily work and activities and in all our human contacts and relationships. When Christ said: 'By this will all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another' (Jn 13. 35), he was telling us something about the sacramental system, how we could be signs of his presence to the world, and love by giving our love to others.

All this requires a renewed simplicity of outlook, the restoring of the splendour to the face of the Church of Christ as in its primitive simplicity and purity, which Pope John declared to be the whole purpose of the ecumenical council. Old forms and methods of religion and spirituality are dying out, losing their vitality. Christianity is not the one all-absorbing preoccupation of our whole being which all other lesser ones are made to serve. Nevertheless, 'Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday and today, yes, and forever' (Heb. 13. 8). We need to find again that Christianity is more than a set of regulations and negative commands, it is vibrating with the Spirit of Christ, with his power and love living on in his mystical body. In his last will and testament to his apostles Christ said 'I am the way and the truth and the life' (Jn 14. 6). While formal theological studies have worked out this triple definition

systematically and in detail, perhaps it might be useful to consider it afresh unsystematically and by simply entering into the heart of the scriptures as a 'sacrament' of Christ.

*The Way.* Christ is primarily the way for us in the gospel. All of us are seeking a path through life in both a natural and a supernatural way. The trouble is that we too often separate the two. We think about our future and after weighing our talents and opportunities we finally settle on a vocation which both interests us and seems able to provide at least a reasonable material security. Unfortunately, of course, many are not satisfied with the reasonable and moderate, but set wealth and power before them as an end in itself. Then, completely outside all this, we have another compartment in our life for religion, or our religious duties as we call them; the practice of the faith, and so on. All through life, the natural and the supernatural run along together but never seem to meet anywhere. This shows we have never taken the gospel really seriously, finding our pattern of life in and through it. We may, at times, be struck by a particular passage here and there which seems to suit a particular need of the moment, but it always maintains a fragmentary aspect. More often still we pass over the gospel entirely and take up some modern private devotion as the means of expressing our religion. The gospel is, of course, a part of the mass, and the mass is an obligatory duty every Sunday, so we stand respectfully while the gospel is being read by the priest. But it is just part of the ritual.

What we actually need, here and now, is to find in the gospel the real Christian world. It does not do to choose passages just here and there and fit them into our life on various occasions, even though they be regular—daily meditation, for instance—but rather we must fit ourselves and the whole of our life with all its complex compartments into the gospel. If we try to do this sincerely it will probably give our spiritual 'system' a jolt. We will not find there any neatly worked out methods or a scale of degrees in which we proceed systematically from one step to the next. We will only find the spiritual atmosphere which is the Christ-life, a penetrating and all-pervasive atmosphere. Christ in his human life was the perfect incarnation of God; and what he taught and brought to us was the perfect deification of man. Consequently, in living the Christ-life human nature finds its fulfilment. We hear a lot about personality fulfilment these days, but no one ever thinks of finding it in the gospel. Christ was the most perfectly integrated personality. He knew his purpose in life and set all the powers of his being to attaining it. Death itself was no obstacle. In the gospel we go to the

heart of reality and we must expect to face hard facts. Personality fulfilment does not mean just natural pleasure or the freedom of licence. That is not fulfilment but chaos. True human dignity transcends material and social power and prestige in a way that admits of no comparison. The beatitudes alone teach us this. The dignity and perfect self-possession of our Lord during his passion was a cause of admiration even to the Roman governor. Those who find in the gospel a too great simplicity, a sort of naivete, are prejudiced by an intellectual sophistication which fails to penetrate to the depth of reality. The gospel is our world of the Christ-life, our means of becoming, in and through Christ, a glorified humanity. The space age will bring us no closer to this; only God's grace will.

If we want to live in the supernatural world of the gospel, the one hard fact which we are bound to face from beginning to end is the cross. Our Lord was very plain about that. 'If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me' (Matt. 16. 24). That is a message opposed to all worldly standards. Even Peter who had so boldly confessed Christ's messiahship (Matt. 16. 16) was utterly scandalized at our Lord's prediction of the passion. It was completely out of tune with his short-sighted views of a worldly messiah. It took the fire of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost to lift his vision to the realms of eternal glory. But with this vision the cross lost its indignity and became the power of God. 'For the doctrine of the cross is foolishness to those who perish, but to those who are saved, that is, to us, it is the power of God' (I Cor. 1. 18). If we take the gospel and its commentary in the epistles literally—and we are too often afraid to do just that—it turns our world of material values upside down. But for all that there is nothing negative about it. The power of God in the cross and in Christianity is a very positive thing. Our Lord called the hour of his passion the hour of his glory. He told all his followers they would share in that glory. 'In the world you will have affliction. But take courage, I have overcome the world' (Jn 16. 33). The note of triumph is the final note. Christian joy and Christian victory are in the overcoming of the world, renouncing worldly standards not for the sake of renouncement, a negative thing in itself, but for the sake of something greater and more glorious. We are not engrossed enough with that for which we are renouncing or exchanging our worldly standards. The zeal and complete self-dedication of many communists should often put us to shame. They sacrifice their time, their convenience, their very lives for the goal they have set for themselves. Christians

are less dedicated because Christianity is no longer positive, seeing something desirable for which all else counts as nothing.

We are working from the wrong end: denying this and that instead of simply seeking the glory of God in Christ. And his glory is ours. The gospel is the Christian 'manifesto'. It is not a set of rules, methods, limitations or barriers. It is the world of 'the freedom of the glory of the sons of God' (Rom. 8. 21). 'You have not received a spirit of bondage so as to be again in fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons' (Rom. 8. 15). There is nothing negative or repressing about this sort of language. With such a spirit as this we will joyfully overcome the world with Christ. An older Jansenistic type of spirituality has all but killed the spirit of gospel joy and Christ-centredness. It has urged us to keep examining ourselves, to keep looking at all our human shortcomings, imperfections, sins of all types and degrees and to brood over them, continually bewailing our unworthiness and misery. It is a morbid preoccupation. Then, on the other hand, we start measuring our spiritual status, collecting all the statistics: how far we have advanced in this or that virtue, what degree of prayer we are probably in. We drag ourselves along, always on the defensive, wondering about our salvation, if we are free from mortal sin, etc. And all the while we should have started with the conviction that we are already saved in Christ. Such a conviction rightly understood is not rash presumption, it is keeping God's grace in proper perspective and not becoming spiritual hypochondriacs.

'You are the light of the world. . . . Let your light shine before men that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven' (Matt. 5. 14, 16). 'He who believes in the Son has everlasting life' (Jn 3. 36). These are not words inspiring fear, self-depreciation, introspection. We are given a message of light, joy, triumph. We are commanded to go forth into the world and let the world see the light and the joy and the true freedom of the sons of God. We must recondition our minds, become saturated with the world of the gospel. If we are unconvinced or only half-convinced, how can we be the leaven of Christ in the world spreading abroad his message of hope by the power of the Spirit in our lives? 'Only let your lives be worthy of the gospel of Christ' (Phil. 1. 27).

*The Truth.* If Christ is our way to the Father through his life, teaching, death and glorification, he is also the truth. This is a point which needs new emphasis at present when the world is involved in so many material, atheistic and philosophical systems. A narrow and sentimental

type of Christianity will never stand up before all these systems, or attract those outside as it should. Indeed, just the opposite is happening. Too many 'cradle Catholics' are losing their faith simply because the type of instruction they have always received or which they have acquired for themselves is no match for the realities of modern life and high intellectual standards which they are meeting with in the world and in higher education. The answer is certainly not to crawl farther into a protective shell and try to live within our own narrow world of deluding inner experience. The Church exists to be a sign and a witness to the world. 'Go into the whole world and preach the gospel to every creature' (Mark 16. 15) is Christ's commission to his Church. It is a commission to the hierarchy, but not to the hierarchy alone. It belongs to every Christian in virtue of his baptism and confirmation to bear witness to Christ in the world in a positive and militant way (cf. 1 Pet. 3. 15).

Superficial customs and conventions of routine religion and an emphasis on subjective religious experience have actually done much damage to the fundamentals of true religion. In order to correct all this we must emphasize the objective fact of Christ as God's final and personal intervention in saving history. Christ is the complete revelation of God in human form. 'In him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily' (Col. 2. 9). In Christ 'are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge' (Col. 2. 3). Therefore truth is not an abstract science but a living Person. It is by our knowledge of the mystery of Christ, wonderfully set forth in the epistle to the Colossians, that we come to understand the purpose of all that exists. The Christian of today must not blindly close himself off from a knowledge of the modern world and cling to a narrow conventional religion. He must enter more deeply into the breadth and depth of the mystery of Christ and, where possible, bring the leaven of Christian life into the modern world with its intellectual and technological advances. If St Thomas had closed himself off in horror from the philosophy of the pagan Aristotle how many might have been lost to the Catholic faith among those who had found a new interest in the works of Aristotle. This is not to say that the best thing for us to do is to delve curiously into any and every work of atheistic philosophy. It only means that God the creator is the same God as God the redeemer and all things in creation as he made them are good. 'For all things are yours, whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas; or the world, or life, or death; or things present, or things to come—all are yours, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's' (1 Cor. 3. 22-23).

It is the task of the Christian to 're-establish all things in Christ, both those in the heavens and those on the earth' (Eph. 1. 10).

Catholics have been inclined to think that it is somehow not proper to want to understand their faith, that it is rather a set of rules and doctrines one must accept blindly and simply follow, something which has all been worked out beforehand. This attitude can have its dangers, and shows a lack of really deep conviction about the truth of Christ. It breeds an unconscious fear to look into things too much, or at all, because they might not come up to our expectations or provide the whole answer to the problem of human existence of man's relationship with God. So we settle for a routine and inferior type of knowledge when God gave us a mind to search into that 'mystery which has been hidden for ages and generations but now is clearly shown to his saints. To them God willed to make known how rich in glory is this mystery among the Gentiles—Christ in you, your hope of glory' (Col. 1. 26-27). St Paul often prayed that the first Christians would grow in true knowledge—'that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may grant you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in deep knowledge of him: the eyes of your mind being enlightened so that you may know what is the hope of his calling, what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints' (Eph. 1. 17-18). There are several such passages in the epistles which show that St Paul wanted his converts well instructed in the truth.

Truth to him was no show of worldly wisdom, however, nor a knowledge of statistics and abstract refinements. Truth for St Paul is always Christ 'in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge' (Col. 2. 3). This is a living truth which nourishes the spirit of faith. And by faith, here, is not meant simply an 'act of faith', an intellectual assent to truth. It is rather a wholly integrated faith. 'Rather are we to practice the truth in love, and so grow up in all things in him who is the head, Christ' (Eph. 4. 15). There is something superficial about all the controversy over faith and works. If we really stop and think about it, how could a person have faith in Christ, really believe him to be the incarnate revelation of God, and not live in accordance with his doctrine? How could a man commit his mind to Christ and not his heart and his whole being, body and soul? How could he believe he was saved without works, when 'being saved' means being penetrated with the life and likeness of God in Christ? Faith, hope and love cannot be absolutely distinct, exclusive of one another, except in theory. When they become 'incarnate' in a human person they must exist together.

There is another aspect to this idea of truth. The scriptural meaning of 'to know' someone is much deeper and richer than our ordinary, popular meaning of the word. When God speaks in the bible of 'knowing' one of his servants, he means that he has made a special choice of him, communicated his spirit to him, so that he is somehow made like to God, and God is revealed through him (cf. Jer. 1. 5). St Paul sums up the Christian election as God's 'knowing' Christ as his perfect image and of 'knowing' us in him; that is, making us like to him. 'For those whom he has foreknown he has also predestined to become conformed to the image of his Son, that he should be the firstborn among many brethren' (Rom. 8. 29). St John gives us the same idea from a slightly different point of view. 'Beloved, now we are the children of God, and it has not yet appeared what we shall be. We know that, when he appears, we shall be like to him, for we shall see him just as he is' (I Jn 3. 2). This is the eschatological point of view in which God's 'knowing' us and our 'knowing' him in vision when the veil of faith has been torn away will make us an unmarred reflection of him for we will see him, that is know him, just as he is.

This is the whole point even of the moral law given through Moses on Mount Sinai. It was a primitive theophany. God revealed and communicated himself, his life to his chosen people. He promised them his power and presence. They were to enter more deeply into that presence, into his own life and likeness through the law. And by this likeness they were to reveal him to the world. Such is the scriptural meaning of truth, an entering into the reality of God. When the Christian dispensation came, St Paul expressed the idea this way: 'that I may *know* him and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings: become like to him in death, in the hope that somehow I may attain to the resurrection from the dead' (Phil. 3. 10-11). This is the truth found in Christ and it does not differ essentially from the theophany of Sinai. God is revealed in Christ and the divine reality is communicated through the power of his resurrection in the sacraments. We share in the fellowship of his sufferings through the new law of Christian renunciation and charity. Our knowing Christ means our becoming like to him, sharing in the divine reality and life by sharing in his 'passover', going from death to life. We, in turn, must reveal and communicate the Christ-life to the world, bringing it into every facet of our daily lives, showing the world that Christianity makes sense, that Christians know what they are about and where they are going—not just in their prayers but in all their daily work, social contacts and



all that goes into the business of daily living.

*The Life.* Any discussion along these lines is necessarily incomplete until Christ is also seen as the life. For the whole problem of religion at present is that it is not equated with life, only with a mechanism of law. Those who cling to a superficial religion take refuge in a false security, in some sort of 'rightness' and happiness to be attained through it in this life. However, when routine ways and methods are suddenly torn away by some crisis, such a religion becomes an empty shell. Law is good and necessary. Nevertheless, in recent centuries minds have become so conditioned by preoccupation with law and its complexities that the end has given place to the means.

The psychology of the early Church was different. For the first Christians Christ was life. The choice they made at baptism was literally a choice between life and death. They knew they might well come up from the waters of baptism only to lay their head on the executioner's block. Death was simply a means to the fullness of life initiated in baptism. Hence all the minutiae, all the elements that made up their daily living on this earth, were geared towards the one great day of victory with Christ. With St Paul they said very realistically 'for to me to live is Christ and to die is gain' (Phil. 2. 21). Everything on this earth was measured from that viewpoint. Suffering and persecution bring out the true Christian perspective.

Preoccupation with death in some way and at some time is inescapable. Let us suppose even that the communist state was the ideal, the perfect blueprint of successful life on this earth, that through it every man would have perfect material comfort and human achievement. Death would still be the big question mark on the otherwise perfect blueprint. All the security and happiness grasped at would have an end sooner or later; and this in itself would considerably lessen the security and happiness of the present. The communist manifesto and the Christian message are at opposite poles. The first is concerned solely with this life, the second with eternal life. Our Lord explained this very clearly: 'He who would save his life will lose it; but he who loses his life for my sake will find it. For what does it profit a man if he gain the whole world but suffer the loss of his own soul?' (Matt. 16. 25-26). Unless we understand the world of the gospel as the world of eternal life we will never fully comprehend or enter into it. Christ as the way in the gospel is the way to eternal life. He promised no material prosperity or purely human achievement in this life. On the contrary, he promised persecution and affliction.



In true Christian thought, death is not a morbid or terrifying pre-occupation, though it is sometimes presented so in the literature of recent centuries. That is a great misfortune for it encourages that negative, pessimistic outlook which makes people see death as an end rather than a beginning, or in terms of the terrors of hell to be avoided rather than the joys of heaven to be sought. We must regain the spirit of early Christianity and make the life of eternal glory a more positive aspect of our religious thinking, set our hearts on the end instead of getting tangled up in the means. Christians must stop saying to themselves: 'I must act in such and such a way in order to avoid committing sin, or to keep the law of the Church, or to advance in virtue.' Rather he must learn to say: 'I count everything loss because of the excelling knowledge of Jesus Christ, my Lord . . . I press on towards the goal, to the prize of God's heavenly call in Christ Jesus' (Phil. 3. 8, 14). Christ did not say 'I have been sent to be your disciplinarian and taskmaster.' He said: 'I am the resurrection and the life' (Jn 11. 25). 'I came that they may have life, and have it more abundantly' (Jn 10. 10). We must not think of Sunday as the day on which Church law obliges us to attend mass under pain of mortal sin. It is the day on which we have the joyful privilege of commemorating the Lord's resurrection and entering more fully into resurrection life sacramentally, anticipating our own resurrection.

If we wish to see the difference in emphasis between early Christianity and more recent times we need only read the sermons of the early Fathers of the Church, St Leo for instance, and then compare them with collections of more modern sermons. In St Leo the body of the sermon is centred on the mystery of Christ or on an aspect of it in the day's feast, but always maintaining the wholeness of the Christian scheme. At the conclusion of the sermon there is a brief general moral exhortation to conform oneself to the mind of Christ and Christian living. The sermons and literature of recent centuries seem to reverse the method completely. The body of the sermon is a moral exhortation on some vice or virtue explained in detail and quoting some particular passage from the life or teaching of Christ as an example. How much more effective is the method of the early Fathers in giving Christianity a positive character, a depth and wholeness which draw men into Christ by spontaneous faith and desire. It is no wonder that Christianity has lost its attractiveness for many since it is often built on law and formalism instead of on the living unifying Spirit. Grace has become a sort of mathematical problem. We add up so many acts, or so many receptions

of the sacraments and the result is a certain sum of graces, when we should be thinking of the glorified Christ gradually penetrating more and more into our minds and hearts, absorbing all our thoughts and desires and activity into his. We are receiving life by his power. We think of baptism as the sacrament which takes away original sin and gives us grace, that quantity we add up all through life.

In the early Church where all Christians were converts there was a definite advantage, a conscious exchange of one life for another. The trouble with us 'cradle Catholics' is that we are not really 'sold' on Christianity, we are only rather mechanically brought up in it. For the neophyte of the first centuries the white robe of baptism was the symbol of a whole new glorious life for the sake of which he was prepared to struggle mightily against the world and its allurements; a life which meant Christ for whom all else counted as nothing. The all-absorbing vision of the early Christian, the dream which penetrated his whole being and every thought and action is the Christian ideal of life given us by St Paul: 'If you have risen with Christ, seek the things that are above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Mind the things that are above, not the things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ your life shall appear, then you too will appear with him in glory' (Col. 3. 1-4). The theme of the parousia must once again come to the fore in Christian thinking. We must learn to fix our inward gaze on the great day of the Lord's coming and so long for that day, always 'looking for the blessed hope and glorious coming of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ' (Titus 3. 13).

This is not being, in an idle sense, a 'visionary'. It is being very realistic. It gives a sense of purpose and strength to life. It unifies all the scattered fragments of our complex existence. We must be channels of the Christ-life, a living 'epiphany' to an unbelieving world. Man is out of tune with his own destiny and can only find himself again by entering into the orbit of God's will in Christ and finding his unity and peace in the struggle against his fallen nature and restoration in the unity of the Trinity. Christ must mean so much to us that we cannot rest until the whole world has shared in the good news of his coming, the gospel of joy and hope. Often by the indifference of our attitude the world could easily think that Christ is not worth knowing; and often enough, shocking as it may seem to our everyday routine piety, we are not convinced enough ourselves that he is worth knowing, and we cannot truly say 'the love of Christ impels us' (2 Cor. 5. 14). We go

along in an unthinking sort of way with our departmentalized way of life: this section for mass, that one for private prayer, another for the sacraments, still others for the duties of state, for organized charity, for recreation, etc. And all the while it should be only one great manifestation of the Christ-life: 'Whatever you do in word or in work, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him' (Col. 3. 17).

## Letter to a Young Girl

MARGARETE ZIMMERER

*A Catholic is writing to a girl who was a Calvinist and has now become a member of the Church of England.*

Dear Susanne,

You wrote to me of your overwhelming joy, and asked me to give you my thoughts about it.

First of all I want to thank you for letting me share in it. My last letter, which crossed with yours, has already given you my essential answer: The Holy Ghost is guiding us, and is acting according to his loving wisdom in each soul that is humbly seeking truth. How could I not rejoice with you over this great new encounter with our Lord within the Communion that you have chosen? We have not yet reached Easter in the cycle of the Christian year, but for you the joy of the Resurrection has already come, and therefore I send you this happy Easter card (The risen Lord with Mary Magdalen in the garden).

Yet it cannot be otherwise that, even amidst the cry of joy, there mingle the deeper tones of sorrow, for we have not yet attained to the visible unity of the faith. It cannot be otherwise . . .

Christ has left behind him as his will that 'all may be one' (John 17). At this particular moment of our history we are called, I think, in a special way to keep this testament of our redeemer before our eyes and in our praying heart. But for each one of us this means, to begin with,