

# CHRIST TODAY

By GERALD O'COLLINS

**N**O ONE — and, specifically, no theologian — has ever managed to describe fully, let alone explain comprehensively, the personal identity and saving 'work' of Jesus Christ: for the simple reason that it cannot be done. In his recent encyclical *Redemptor Hominis*, Pope John Paul II applies the term 'mystery' to Christ about fifty times: a forceful reminder that in our pilgrimage of faith we must be content with glimpses, parables and partial insights. We can never dare to claim, 'Now I really know who Jesus Christ is and what he has done for us'. The fascinating and awesome mystery of the One who is Son of God and Saviour will remain with us all the days of our life.

Nevertheless, there are ways of giving more adequate shape to what we do experience and know of Jesus. Ultimately it is a matter of remembering, observing and cherishing the 'whole Christ', the one whom we will find not only throughout christian tradition and at the origins of Christianity, but also in every human being, at the heart of the material cosmos, through all our senses, and in all the Christological mysteries — from the creation to the *eschaton*. This article can do no more than outline what is entailed in such attention to the 'whole Christ', 'the First and the Last' (Apoc 1, 17) and 'the same yesterday, today and forever' (Heb 13, 8).

## *The total christian tradition*

No other traditional document on Christ has ever enjoyed the status and success which the Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451) won for its teaching on his two natures and one person. At the climax of two centuries of controversy about the right way to interpret and express who (that is, the person) and what (that is, the natures) Jesus Christ was and is, this Council declared:

Therefore, following the holy fathers, we all with one accord teach men to acknowledge one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man, consisting also of a rational soul and body; of one substance with the Father as regards his Godhead, and at the same

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time of one substance with us as regards his manhood; like us in all respects, apart from sin; as regards his Godhead, begotten of the Father before the ages, but yet as regards his manhood, begotten for us men and for our salvation, of Mary the Virgin, the God-bearer; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, recognized in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence, not as parted or separated into two persons, but one and the same Son and Only-begotten God the Word, Lord Jesus Christ; even as the prophets from earliest times spoke of him, and our Lord Jesus Christ himself taught us, and the creed of the Fathers has handed down to us.

I have quoted this classic text at length, because — despite its being probably the most important piece of official Church teaching in post-apostolic times — it indicates how we dare not at this point take a reduced view of the Church's past and sell short the 'whole Christ' of the christian tradition.

Certain limitations show up at once in the definition of Chalcedon. First, the text is a piece of teaching ('we all with one accord teach'), and is not as such a creed to be used in christian worship. It records the teaching, not the praying, Church of the past. Secondly, the definition says nothing about Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection, while his ministry gets the merest nod ('our Lord Jesus Christ himself taught us'). To put the matter in an extreme form: everything that Chalcedon affirms could still be valid if Jesus had been miraculously snatched away from this world and never died on Calvary. At best, his death is only hinted at in phrases like 'truly man' and 'like us in all respects, apart from sin'. Thirdly, the Council acknowledges his divine and human characteristics in a variety of ways ('complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man' and so forth) *before* it introduces its own special contribution ('recognized in two natures, without confusion' and so on). In other words, the definition notes the way in which earlier christian tradition had already elaborated diverse expressions for the being human and the being divine in Christ. Presumably, later Church teachers and writers would produce further ways of speaking about him. Nowhere does Chalcedon impose its 'two-natures' terminology as the *only* language to be used henceforth by all Christians of all times.

Further, we would absurdly limit what we can learn of Jesus Christ from christian tradition if we ignored the rich range of ways in which his followers have transmitted their experiences of him. To begin with, they have left us hymns, poems, sermons, liturgical texts, scripture commentaries and other writings that centre on him. For example, many who today sing the very personal and deeply-felt prayer 'Godhead here in hiding whom I do adore' — the Hopkins' translation of the hymn to the Eucharistic Lord, *Adoro te devote* commonly attributed to St Thomas Aquinas — will never have read a page of the latter's theology, nor probably even have heard of the chalcedonian definition. Yet the christian tradition continues to speak to them from other, more devotional sources such as the moving chapter from the *Imitation of Christ* (II, 8) on familiar friendship with Jesus: 'To be without Jesus is a grievous hell; to be with Jesus is a sweet paradise'.

Again, there are figures from the christian past, like Francis of Assisi, Teresa of Avila or Charles de Foucauld, who were driven by their experience of Jesus to found, reform or inspire religious families and movements which are still with us today; so that when we encounter a Franciscan, a Carmelite or a Little Brother or Sister of Jesus, we can expect to learn something of the special ways in which the Lord was active and experienced by those great Christians in the past whom their modern descendants recall.

Very soon after the foundation of Christianity, other believers began to express their faith and feelings through art: from the simple, tender frescoes in roman catacombs to the vast bronze statue of the risen Christ in the main audience hall at the Vatican, from the carvings on Chartres cathedral to Rembrandt's treatments of the Emmaus scene, and from the mosaics in Ravenna to Georges Rouault's 'The Holy Face'. As the novelist Iris Murdoch has written in *The Black Prince*: 'Art . . . is the telling of truth, and is the only available method for the telling of certain truths'. Admittedly, art has not been the only available method for telling the truth about Christ. Otherwise the gospel writers, for example, would never have been inspired by the Holy Spirit to set down in writing what Jesus's followers had 'heard with their ears, seen with their eyes, looked upon and touched with their hands' (1 Jn 1, 1). Nevertheless, christian art has consistently mirrored with a peculiar intensity the essence of faith in the Word made flesh. It has attempted to represent the whole person of Jesus Christ, his character and universal significance as Son of God and Saviour. Of course, this art

has varied and continues to vary from sublime masterpieces to the much-criticized mass-productions in oleograph, plaster or even modern-day plastic. Yet the fact remains that in all these ways it has told the truth about Jesus with stunning power. I have never heard of anyone, even the most brilliant theologian, wanting to hold a copy of the chalcedonian definition on his death-bed. But I do know many people who wish to hold a crucifix when dying. And I also know an old ex-prison chaplain who, during thirty years of service, attended fifty-eight hangings. The condemned men found great comfort from the conventional picture of the Sacred Heart which he gave them to kiss and then to grasp in their hand, as the noose went round their neck and the trap-door was sprung open. That picture, with the devotion it expresses, is yet another item which has come to us from our total christian tradition about Jesus Christ. It, too, has told us something of the truth about him.

### *The Origins of Christianity*

Later Christians have always looked back through their traditions to find Jesus there at the origins of Christianity. Through the incarnation, ministry, crucifixion, resurrection and sending of the Holy Spirit, he did not communicate to the founding fathers and founding mothers of the Church some organized body of revealed truths. Rather he left them wrestling with the mystery of his person and his saving function. Some of them encountered the risen Christ in the period following the first Easter; all of them knew themselves to be permanently incorporated into him through baptism, and all of them had received his Holy Spirit. Their total experience of Christ generated richly varied ways of expressing and proclaiming him. Thus when they thought of his unique relationship with the Father for the salvation of the world, they called him 'Son of God' (Rom 1, 3ff; Gal 4, 4-7). When they spoke of him as they experienced him in the worshipping community, they named him 'Lord' (1 Cor 12, 3).

If we wish to trace the whole story of New Testament faith, both chronologically and in order of importance, *the end* is where we start — with Christ's saving death and resurrection. Christian faith in Jesus of Nazareth began with his resurrection and the Easter appearances, which brought the disciples to know and believe that the crucified Jesus had been raised and exalted as 'the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord' (Rom 1, 4).

The paschal mystery was the centre for Paul, who wrote his letters during the period between 48 or 49 and the early sixties of the first century. When he composed his gospel around A.D. 65, St Mark took matters back to Christ's baptism, and left us a work which has often been described as a passion story with a long introduction. In a thoroughly pauline way, Good Friday and Easter Sunday brood over this gospel, which includes neither nativity nor incarnation narratives. When they wrote later with Mark's gospel in front of them, Matthew and Luke decided to begin with accounts of Jesus's birth and childhood. Finally, towards the close of the first century, St John began his gospel with the sublime announcement: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us'. The movement from Paul through the first three gospels to John represented an increasing concern to clarify and express Jesus's origins. This movement continued beyond the age of the apostles to culminate in Chalcedon's confession that Christ was one person in two natures.

We could decide that our own pondering on the Christ presented by the New Testament should follow the same direction which christian faith and writing originally took. We would begin then with the Easter Jesus, not with the Christmas Jesus. Well and good, provided we do two things. First, the whole range of the New Testament's confession of Christ should be respected in its entirety. Here what comes later chronologically, remains no less valuable than what took place earlier. Secondly, those first Christians who stood behind and wrote our scriptures were driven to praise their Lord and Saviour in rich and varied ways. I know no better way to evoke and to enter this full chorus of worship than the following 'Hymn to God Incarnate':

You are the radiant light of God's glory; you are the perfect copy of his nature (Heb 1, 3).

You are the revelation of a mystery kept secret for endless ages (Rom 16, 25); you are the power and the wisdom of God (1 Cor 1, 25).

You are the head by whom the whole body is fitted and joined together (Eph 4, 16); you are the peace between us (Eph 2, 13).

You are Lord to the glory of the Father (Phil 1, 11); you are the Son that he loves (Col 1, 14).

You are the fulness of him who fills the whole of creation (Eph 1, 23); you are our wisdom and our virtue and our holiness and our freedom (1 Cor 1, 30).

You are the beginning, the first-born from the dead (Col 1, 8); you are the mystery among us, our hope of glory (Col 1, 27).

You are God's secret in whom all the jewels of wisdom and knowledge are hidden (Col 2, 2); you are head of every sovereignty and power (Col 2, 10).

You are the word who is life (1 Jn 1, 1); you are the word made flesh (Jn 1, 14).

You are the mediator who brings a new covenant (Heb 12, 24); you are a consuming fire (Heb 12, 29).

You are the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth (Jn 1, 1).

You are the light of the world (Jn 8, 12).

You are the Saviour we are waiting for, the Lord Jesus Christ (Phil 3, 20); you are the Holy One of God (Jn 6, 69).

You are a light to enlighten the gentiles (Lk 2, 32); you are the glory of your people Israel (Lk 2, 32).

You are the way, the truth, and the life (Jn 14, 6); yes, you are a king (Jn 18, 37).

You are the living bread which has come down from heaven (Jn 6, 51); you are the only Son who is nearest to the Father's heart, who has made him known (Jn 1, 18).

You are God's Son, the Beloved; his favour rests on you (Lk 3, 22); you are the Lamb of God (Jn 1, 29).

You are the kindness and love of God our Saviour (Tit 3, 4); you are Emmanuel, God-with-us (Isai 7, 14).<sup>1</sup>

### *Present Experience*

The Christ of our christian origins and our Church tradition is also the Christ of our present experience. To begin with, that means his presence in worship. In a now classic passage, the Second Vatican Council spelled out the various liturgical presences of Christ:

Christ is always present in his Church, especially in her liturgical celebrations. He is present in the Sacrifice of the Mass not only in the person of his minister . . . but especially in the Eucharistic species. By his power he is present in the sacraments, so that when anyone baptizes it is really Christ himself who baptizes. He is present in his word, since it is he himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in the Church. Lastly, he is present when the Church prays and sings, for he has promised, 'where two or three are gathered together in my name there am I in the midst of them' (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 7).

Here, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy spoke affirmatively of

Christ's presence in worship, without any intention of denying or discarding his 'extra-liturgical' presences. We would not do justice to the 'whole Christ' of present experience if we passed over those other presences.

In 'Our Lady of the Dunes', a church on the coast of Belgium, the tabernacle is covered with images of human faces, male and female, young and old, serene and suffering: images that display the whole range of human emotions. That tabernacle brilliantly conveys the sense that we must look for Christ in *all* our brothers and sisters: in the gunman who did the killing as well as in Archbishop Oscar Romero lying bloodstained in his vestments, in the selfish rich as well as in the angry poor, in the awkward curate in a suburban parish as well as in the recklessly generous sister on mission on the Amazon.

Jesus's words about the last judgment (Mt 25, 31-46) can always be carried further. They remain beautifully open-ended:

I was an Arab putting up the oil prices, and you recognized that I was questioning your selfish life-style.

I was a Soviet pilot bombing an Afghan village, and you prayed for me as well as for my victims.

I was a Vietnamese refugee, and you gave me a chance.

I was an illegitimate and handicapped child, and you opened to me your home.

I was a terrorist occupying an embassy, and you wondered what pain had driven me to that end.

I was an underpaid and badly-housed worker, and you tried to get me justice.

I mattered to no one and was about to take my life, when I felt the power of your concern and compassion.

I ran an abortion clinic, and you did not condemn me as beyond redemption.

I was simply the cantankerous neighbour, and you showed me much love.

He identifies with all those who in their various needs have a claim on our practical love. Through all their different needs, our brothers and sisters bring us Christ's presence. In *Redemptor Hominis*, John Paul II wrote of the mystery of Jesus Christ, 'in which each one of the four thousand million human beings living on our planet has become a sharer from the moment he is conceived beneath the heart of his mother' (13). The Lord comes to us now behind those four

thousand million faces; they are all signs and sacraments of his presence.

Living in Rome now for six years, I am sadly conscious of the senseless and cruel killings that have been carried out by members of the Red Brigade, the First Line and other terrorist organizations. At the same time, the funeral services of their victims have over and over again revealed the presence of the risen Lord, who through his Holy Spirit gives to grief-stricken men and women the power to believe, to forgive and to hope in ways profoundly Christian.

On 30 May of last year, at the funeral of Walter Tobagi, a young journalist assassinated by the Red Brigade in revenge for what he had written about them, Archbishop Carlo Martini of Milan spoke of a 'mystery of meaninglessness and madness'. But then he reminded the congregation of that great 'certainty' to be found in the New Testament: 'What is meaningless can gain a meaning'. The prayers of the faithful which followed Archbishop Martini's homily showed most movingly how the crucified and risen Lord can bring those in terrible sorrow to see and affirm meaning in what they experience. Stella Tobagi, left widowed with her two little children, had written this first prayer, and sat with her arms around her son and daughter whilst her sister read it:

Lord, we pray for those who killed Walter, and for all people who wrongly hold that violence is the only right way for resolving problems. May the power of your Spirit change the hearts of men, and out of Walter's death may there be born a hope which the force of arms will never be able to defeat.

Further, we find the 'whole Christ' of present experience both in the macrocosm of the material world which surrounds us, and in the microcosm of our own personal existence. He is the one in whom 'all things hold together' (Col 1, 17); but he is also the one whom we too can 'see with our eyes and look upon and touch with our hands' (1 Jn, 1, 1). The Christ present in all the people we meet and in the world we inhabit is the One who reaches us through all our senses. Each of us in our own circumstances can echo St Augustine:

You called to me; you cried aloud to me; you broke my barrier of deafness. You shone upon me; your radiance enveloped me; you put my blindness to flight. You shed your fragrance about me; I drew breath and I gasp for your sweet odour. I tasted you, and now I hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am inflamed with love of your peace (*Confessions*, X, 27).



In his *Summa Theologica* (1, 54, 5, *ad* 2) St Thomas Aquinas includes a lapidary phrase which suggests happily what can come about through repeatedly meeting Christ within ourselves, in the world of nature, in worship and through the people around us. Aquinas observes that 'experience results from many memories' (*experientia fit ex multis memoriis*). He is thinking here of the difference between experience understood as a single, once and for all event, and that experience which comes about through many particular experiences (or 'memories'): in other words, that stable familiarity with something, someone or some activity which we recognize in a devoted couple, a great conductor or an experienced liturgist. The sum total of innumerable concrete experiences has made them truly know with whom they relate or how they are to act. What Aquinas says about such enduring knowledge and lasting familiarity can be properly applied to the sphere of spiritual experience: 'Our experience of Christ results from our many memories of him'.

### *The Christ of the Future*

In seeking the 'whole Christ' we must not stop short of the future. He is not only the one whom we remember and experience but also the one whom we expect. Our Eucharist means 'proclaiming the death of the Lord until he comes' (1 Cor 11, 26). We live with the bridegroom still absent (Mk 2, 18ff) and the master of the household still away (Mk 13, 33-37). His profoundly real presence in the Eucharist reminds us, paradoxically, that he is not yet fully with us.

Of course, the future coming of Christ will be much more than the return of one who seemed to be absent. It will be the full realization of his position and power as God's Son. He will then complete the process inaugurated by his resurrection, which was and is the beginning of the end. To be sure, his risen existence has let something of that future already appear in anticipation. Elements of the future are with us now and give life its present meaning. Nevertheless, Christ will be truly and fully Christ for us only at the final stage:

Then comes the end, when he delivers up the kingdom to God the Father, after abolishing every kind of domination, authority, and power. For he is destined to reign until God has put all enemies under his feet; and the last enemy to be abolished is death . . . when all things are thus subject to him, then the Son himself will also be made subordinate to God who made all things subject to him, and thus God will be all in all (1 Cor 15, 24-28).

These words of St Paul vigorously challenge all those approaches to Jesus Christ which remain exclusively oriented to the past and the present but ignore the future. It is not enough to ask, 'Who are you, Jesus?' and 'Who were you, Jesus?' Respect for the 'whole Christ' demands that we also ask: 'Who will you be, Jesus?' We shall never rightly understand and interpret Christ if we leave aside the future end of all things.

About this point the Apocalypse is strikingly instructive. The work opens with an ecstatic vision experienced one Sunday by 'John, your brother' on the island of Patmos. He sees the radiant, risen Christ who reassures him: 'Fear not, I am the first and the last and the living one: I died, and behold I am alive for evermore' (1, 9-18). The Apocalypse begins with this encounter between John and the risen Lord, who recalls his death and resurrection before delivering messages to seven churches of Asia Minor (2, 1-3. 22). But then the whole perspective of the book widens so as to include all heaven and earth, a series of cosmic struggles between good and evil, and finally the vision of the new heaven, the new earth and the new Jerusalem. With this promise of a divine future, when all present conflicts will be resolved, the Apocalypse ends by praying, 'Come, Lord Jesus' (22, 20). In sum, the Christ of that final end shapes and determines everything.

All in all, the Apocalypse vigorously reminds us that the risen Jesus who encounters us now does so as the light of the future (20, 23; 22, 16) and the Lord of the coming world. He is the 'Ad-vent' Christ, who comes to us out of the future. If you like, it is more a matter of experiencing now the presence of the coming Christ rather than acknowledging now the future of the present Christ.

### *Christ and the Trinity*

In conclusion, I would like to relate the 'whole Christ' of christian life and worship to the Trinity. Any total approach to Jesus Christ which omits the Trinity cannot claim to be fully christian. And yet, as we know only too well, it is fatally easy for people to dismiss the doctrine of the Trinity as a kind of theological mathematics for specialists. Ultimately, however, it seems to me that the triune God of christian faith can be seen to be present in all human suffering and activity: that unknown Trinity which men and women everywhere seek and experience.

What I have in mind here is a contemporary version of the *vestigia Trinitatis* or 'hints of the Trinity', which some Fathers of the Church

and medieval theologians delightedly recognized in the world. In the created universe they expected to find traces of the triune God who made it. Our more psychological and 'anthropological' age pushes me towards observing the triadic nature of human experience and action. Men and women spend their time avoiding three things and seeking three things. First, they want to escape *death* in all its forms. Death is not merely irreversibly there at the end of their biological existence; it also invades their lives in all the many deaths through which they suffer the loss of people, places, opportunities and personal powers. Everyone wishes to avoid death (understood in that complete sense) and live life to the full (however different individuals interpret what such a full life entails). Secondly, men and women look for *meaning* in what they do, and constantly flee from absurdity. Where situations appear meaningful, even awful difficulties can be cheerfully faced. But if a sense of hollow meaninglessness dogs people, they can find existence to be intolerable. Finally, as one of my sisters long ago pointed out to me, the human being is like a sponge with an unlimited desire and capacity to be affirmed and loved. We instinctively avoid hatred and indifference, and long to receive appreciation and *love*.

Granted that such a triadic account of human existence matches our experience, we can recognize this radical quest for life, meaning and love to be in fact a quest for the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ we acknowledge the 'God of the living' (Mk 12, 27), the ultimate source of all life. Christ himself comes to us as the wisdom of God, the one who gives point and meaning to our existence. Here we might very well adapt the prologue of John's gospel and make it read: 'In the beginning was the Meaning and the Meaning was with God, and the Meaning was God'. Lastly, the Holy Spirit is the divine love poured into our hearts (Rom 5, 5): both to show how God deeply loves and affirms us, and to enable our loving response to take place. In sum, the human search for life, meaning and love can be properly identified as our profound quest for the Father, Son and Spirit.

At the heart of every human being is a deep orientation towards the mystery of Christ. And this orientation towards Christ is nothing more or less than part of a total quest for the only God there is: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>1</sup> Composed by Sister Elizabeth Mary Strub, Superior General of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, and her Community at the *Casa Cornelia* in Rome, as a greeting for Christmastide 1979-80, and cited here with her permission.