Knowing Christ through the Christian Experience

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As a Roman Catholic theologian I am grateful for having been invited to speak on the topic 'Knowing Christ through the Christian Experience'. This theme, a familiar one to Protestant theology, would have sounded somewhat novel to Catholic theologians not so long ago: is faith a matter of experience? do I experience Christ in faith? Without going back to the unhappy misunderstandings and controversies of the Reformation period on the certitude which a committed Christian can have of being saved through faith, it seems to me no exaggeration to say that there has existed till the recent past, in the mind of many, a dichotomy between the Churches of the Christian experience and the Church of faith; or, to put it more clearly: between faith conceived after the great reformers as consisting essentially in the experience of a self-surrender to the person of Christ and faith explained by Catholic theologians as primarily an intellectual assent to dogmatic propositions. There have been times and currents of thought in Protestantism, when the formulations of faith were suspected of lacking objective value; there exists today in some areas an apprehension that they may be meaningless and irrelevant. On the other hand, there have been—and there still are—currents of Catholic thought where the word 'experience' is under suspicion and has a bad press. In general, however, we are more and more, on both sides, coming to realize that faith is indeed an experience which needs to be interpreted, and that interpretation precisely brings about the knowledge of faith.

Speaking for my own Church, I think it can be said that a breakthrough has been made in recent years with a book by J. Mouroux, the title of which speaks for itself: *The Christian Experience. An Introduction to Theology*;[1] that is to say: from experience to knowledge. The book is already dated somewhat; it was written in 1952, and was concerned for a great part with the task of dispelling misunderstandings. Today however it has become clear, and it is the Church's professed doctrine, that faith is essentially a personal adherence to Christ that fills

[1] Sheed and Ward, London and New York, 1952.

us with understanding. The Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) of Vatican II speaks of looking up in faith to Jesus, the author of salvation (*L.G.*, n. 9); this attitude of surrender commands the penetration and interpretation of the message (*L.G.*, n. 12). Elaborating the same theme further, the Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*) explains that in faith man commits his own self freely (*D.V.*, n. 5) to God's gratuitous invitation to a personal communion with him in Christ, which is the core of divine revelation (*D.V.*, n. 2). Faith then is not first and primarily an intellectual assent to a set of truths with an added commitment of the will; it is an actual surrender to Christ that seeks self-understanding through reflection. The correct approach to our subject is thus made clear: we will not speak of the kind of knowledge of Christ which we can attain previous to our personal commitment to him in faith; such a knowledge would remain, to say the least, abstract. The knowledge which concerns us is that which is derived from the personal experience we make of Christ in our lives; this alone is concrete and truly meaningful.

Perhaps, I should make it clear that this approach is no disguised fideism, but only the clear admittance that, whatever may precede it, faith is always a risk that we run, a great leap that we take in the dark. To believe in Christ does not consist in resolving to arrange one's life in accordance with the intellectual conviction one has reached regarding a system called Christian. Christ is not a system whose task it is to square with reality. In fact he does not seem to do this: he is foolishness to the gentiles, a stumbling-block to the Jews. Faith however is an unconditional surrender to a person, which goes beyond reason under the impulse of grace, and finds its own justification only *a posteriori* in the light which it throws from within over-all things. In this sense it seems true to say that what hurts is faith, not disbelief. But the reverse is also true: faith provides new eyes with which to look upon reality. Rousselot spoke of the 'eyes of faith';[2] a recent study has shown that St. Augustine already did likewise.[3] 'Take it in and your eyes will be opened', 'Do it and see for yourself' such is the Christian risk but also the Christian beatitude.

Of course not all of us will be able to agree entirely on the content of the Christian experience; less still on the rules of its interpretation. Were we in a position to do this, we would not only profess with St. Paul that 'there is one body and one Spirit, just as (we) were called to the one hope that belongs to (our) call: one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of as all, who is above all and through all and in all' (Eph. 4:4–6); we

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[2] P. Rousselot, *Les yeux de la foi*, Paris: Recherches de Sciences Religieuses, 1910. Pp. 241–259; 444–475.

[3] M. Huftier, *Les yeux de la foi Chez Saint Augustin*, Lille: Mélanges de Science Religieuse, 1968. Pp. 57–66; 105–114.

would in fact be one Church and would share the conviction that the body of Christ subsists entirely in it and that his Spirit brings it to life. But it seems to me that a vast area of agreement is available to all those who take the attitude of true Christian believers. That common ground makes dialogue between Christians at once possible and meaningful as to what the Christian experience is and who is the Christ to whom they are committed.

To put ourselves on this level of relevant exchange, a certain sifting is needed, for there exists today, as there has always existed, painful, though often well-intentioned, reductions of the mystery that leave little room for self-commitment through faith, and consequently for exchange in interpretation and knowledge. I have in mind the movements to and fro of the theological pendulum to extreme opposite positions: Jesus is only a historical figure and then suddenly he is no longer historical at all; for some he is a master of ethical behaviour, for others the merely mythical Christ of faith; again he may be God under the cover of a human appearance or a man deified by apotheosis through the enthusiasm of his followers. Did he mean only to teach us that we must love each other, or is he a self-made prophet, whose sense of urgency is founded on the obsessing illusion of a proximate conclusion? . . . Such concepts of Christ may be called pre-Christian, in the sense that they do not spring from the commitment of faith, but rather dispense with it.

Today a subtle telescoping is sometimes practised between God, Christ and men: it is made up of two successive moments, each founded on a biblical text. Jesus says: 'Who sees me sees the Father' (John 14:9); thus the Father seems superfluous, since Jesus himself claims to replace him and to dispense with him. Again he says: 'As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me' (Matt. 25:40); by which—so the argument runs—is meant that the poor among us are the true presence of Christ. There is no need to look beyond. Having first disposed of the Father, Jesus now dispenses with himself. Or, to put it differently: while Jesus makes the Father vanish, man causes Jesus to disappear. The result is that man remains alone.

In short, two different ways of reducing *a priori* and horizontally the mystery of Christ may prevent us today from crossing the threshold of faith. Schematically these two reductions may be described as follows: In reality faith is in *Jesus the Christ*; some however would have a Jesus who is not the Christ, others a Christ who is not Jesus. I shall explain rapidly. A Jesus who is not the Christ would be the inspiring, yet finally harmless, teacher of a moral code; a genial Christian, one might feel inclined to say: a remarkably successful specimen of an integrated personality who nevertheless hides no mystery beyond the ineffable character of every human person. For to affirm more of him would be in effect to procure one's alienation. In this view Christ is relativized; he is made subservient to the success of our

earthly tasks. His Gospel becomes a useful recipe to hasten the promotion of man. To make the world a success: that is the kingdom. Conversely a Christ who is not Jesus would be but a mythical projection of an idea, equally harmless as its counterpart, because he—or it—has no grip on reality and does not come to terms with history. He is, in the last analysis, a subtle projection of man himself, who erects into a mythical figure his own ideal and disposes of the event of salvation by reducing it to a manifestation of human culture. His creed is intact, but an aprioristic mythical reading has rendered it innocuous. At the limit, this leads to some sort of atheism clothed with Christian symbols. God is the myth that reveals man to himself; Christ is men in intersubjective relationships, the Lord's Supper is their intercommunion, the cross their mutual forbearance . . . In short, the other man is the real person of whom Christ, the perfect 'man for others', is only the parable. The first commandment is absorbed in the second. Why even do so much as to ask the question of Christ's historical consistency? That precisely is what seems irrelevant.

I am not referring so much to sets of propositions stated explicitly; I am rather describing attitudes which, if deliberately adopted, would leave us on this side of the experience of Christ. That the danger of reductionism is no mere fiction is proved by the name 'post-Christian' given to our own times. The 'modern man' is in danger of bypassing Jesus without allowing himself to be confronted by him. He would rather disarm him than combat him. Reduction of Christ is a kind of non-violence towards Christ which is at the bottom not Christian. It has given rise to such movements as 'Christian Atheism', 'Religionless Christianity' . . . where the problem of Christ—leave alone the mystery—is disposed of for practical purposes. This loss of Christian identity within is more disturbing than is any atheism from without. It raises the most fundamental questions: What after all is a Christian? in what does he differ from the common man? God, Christ, faith: what for? Yet, to have lost the sense of one's Christian identity amounts finally to knowing no longer who Christ is, what place to give him in one's personal life. Where this loss of meaning prevails, the Christian experience has ceased to be; it has been replaced by what may be called the 'heresy of horizontalism'.

Let me not be misunderstood. Expressions like Christ 'the man for others' or 'Religionless Christianity' go back to Bonhoeffer who was by every standard a committed Christian, a true 'witness of Christ among his brothers'; indeed a genuine Christian prophet with deep insights. His deepest concern was to free us from the narrowness with which we too easily reduce God to our own proportions and the Christian life to the pursuit of egoistic purposes. It is in this sense that he asks: 'What is the significance of a Church . . . in a religionless world? . . . In what way are we in a religionless and secular sense Christians, in what

way are we the *Ekklesia,* those "who are called forth", not conceiving of ourselves religiously as specially favoured but as wholly belonging to the world?' Surely, in Bonhoeffer's mind, the identification of Jesus of Nazareth with the 'man for others' implies no denial of his divinity. The danger does not come from such men, but from the marketing of their phrases, truncated of their substance, by would-be disciples who sell a God-less theology for a world come of age! Thus, in talking about Jesus of Nazareth, modern man quite certainly cannot exclude his being God the way van Buren for instance does, and still be a Christian in the true sense. The primitive Christian confession 'Jesus is the Lord' forbids him to do so.

Let us then leave out of consideration the various ways of cheating that mask the real issue; let us face the Christian experience and the mystery of Christ disclosed to us in it. I shall first try to describe the Christian experience and then reflect rapidly on what seem to be its essential characteristics. I am well aware that there is room here for different emphasis, and therefore for dialogue. The experience involved in the Christian commitment can be expressed in the following terms:

Through the questions which this *world* raises to my mind
Through the *Church* which is for me a sign,
Through the *Spirit* who dwells in it and in me,
Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of Mary, dead and risen,
Reveals to me the loving-kindness of the *Father* who
created all things and will restore them all in his return.[4]

Let us analyse this statement. It starts from us and from our earthly preoccupations and problems to lead up to the Father. The world in which we live is not foreign to the Christian experience; the Christian experience is not other-worldly in this sense. Indeed it springs from an effort to provide a fully human understanding of the world of men. However, the human problems with which I find myself confronted and which concern me deeply are not experienced by me as an isolated monad, but within the fellowship of Christian community. This community is not its own centre of reference; it professes to be centred on Jesus (Acts 25:19). It does not preach or announce its own message, its own answers, but Jesus Christ the Lord (2 Cor. 4:5). It looks upon itself as 'a sign and sacrament' of Christ (*Lumen Gentium,* n. 1); a sign, it must not be forgotten, for its own members first and not exclusively for the nations and the heathen. Hence the communal dimension of the Christian experience: it is within a community that Christ speaks to us; it is at a community level that we must find in him the answer to all human problems. The vocation of the Church is to be at the service of the message of Christ, to signify the Lord efficaciously.

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[4] *See* A. Manaranche, Je crois en *Jesus-Christ aujourd'hui.* Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1968. Pp. 36-37.

In order to be effectively Christ-orientated, the Church receives the Spirit of Christ as its principle of life. Life in the Spirit centres us on him, for the Spirit leads to the truth that is Christ (John 16:13) and bears witness to him (John 15:26). Thus the Christian life is an experience of the Spirit: the individual person experiences the intimate movements of the soul which St. Paul calls the fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23); to the communities, too, the Spirit speaks (Rev. 2:7 . . .) to communicate to them the mind of the Lord (1 Cor. 2:16). For, and this is essential, the Spirit is the Spirit of Christ. He teaches Christ and leads to him. In a sense, he is Christ made present and available; better still: Christ sensible to the heart. To experience one's personal life and that of one's Christian community as a life in the Spirit implies finally experiencing Christ in a Christian fellowship. It means finding him in the mystic celebration of the Christian liturgy, in the signs of the times by which historical events *become* part of salvation-history, in the hidden *kairoi* of our own lives, with their concrete circumstances of time and place. All these things, if lived in the Spirit, force us to take a decisive stand before Christ: to centre all things and our own lives on him, to invest in him all we have and all we are. It means also to allow ourselves to ask the ultimate question: are you the Son of God? and to answer: yes, notwithstanding the stumbling-block of the cross and the appearances to the contrary. For, to believe is to be led by the Spirit of Jesus to confess him and to respond to the guidance of the Spirit. The decisive question is concerned with Jesus: not in the sense that he himself is the ultimate source, but because he leads those who have believed in him to the Father, from whom he came and to whom he returns.

This is how the Christian experience is lived and the faith received. When from experience faith passes over to the level of declaration in the 'profession of faith', it remains identical to itself; only it adopts the reversed perspective. The reversal is in fact only natural, for while the experience is lived by the Christian person in the midst of a Christian community, its origin is in God. The order of experience follows the upward movement that leads us through the five steps mentioned above from the world to the Church and the Spirit, through Christ to the Father. However, when it becomes recital, the faith adopts the downward order proper to salvation history: from the Father to the world. To substantiate this, I may remark that all the early creeds are made up of three articles; I believe in Father, Son and Spirit; I may also point out rapidly—though this would deserve to be elaborated in detail—that there exists in the mind of the early tradition the closest connection between the Spirit and the Church ('I believe also that the Church lives in the Spirit') and further between the Spirit and the world ('I believe that the resurrection of the dead will take place in the Spirit'). From baptism to the resurrection of the flesh we experience the action of the Spirit. The present era in the history of salvation

is the time of the Spirit. The Church and the world are, as it were, the two concentric circles to which his influence extends. Thus, the profession of faith verifies in the reverse order the five-fold structure of the experience of faith: Father, Son, Spirit, Church, World.

The touchstone of the experience of faith is undoubtedly life in the Spirit. He is the 'immediate link' of God's relations with us. Yet, his life-giving and creative influence does not place the Spirit at the centre, for he is the Spirit of Christ. Christ is the centre. 'This is why we can speak of Christocentrism. To speak of pneumatocentrism is not correct, for the Spirit is not the centre. He is the one who gathers up the Church and centres it on Christ. We do not belong to the Spirit in the same sense as we belong to Christ. We belong to Christ through the Holy Spirit.'[5]

More important, however, than the remarks of an academic nature on Pneumatology and Christocentrism is the verification of our Christian experience on that of the apostolic Church, which is at all times the rule of interpretation. It can easily be shown that the Christian experience of the apostolic Church is made up of the five components described above: World, Church, Spirit, Christ, Father. Certainly, the problems of the world and human problems are not foreign to the Christian commitment of the first generation. The tension between the building up of an earthly city and the hereafter, between spiritual freedom and obedience to the law, between self-realization and the commitment of oneself to another are only samples of the questions that beset the men of the New Testament and to which they seek and profess to find an answer in Christ. These questions are felt by a community and the answer to them is shared among its members. The pivot on which all seems to hinge is the keen awareness which the apostolic generation has of living in the Spirit and of being possessed by him. His life-giving power is not only a source of energy; it creates the community.

Let us not reduce the action of the Spirit in the apostolic Church to its charismatic manifestations. These are, as it were, the outward expression of an intimate life, the overflow of an inner abundance. Nor let us consider them as preposterous. For, if the charismatic gifts which St. Paul describes have been rightly called the 'wedding present' of Christ to his Church, this does not mean that they were destined to be short-lived but that the bride on the day of her wedding is adorned with special beauty. The Church remains charismatic even today. The Spirit, however, sends the apostolic Church back to its master: he is essentially the Spirit of Christ, the tangible presence of his (Christ's) spiritual state and of his Messianic power. Indeed the first generation of Christians have come to realize the bearing of

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[5] R. Laurentin, *L'Enjeu de Synode, Suite du Concile.* Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1967. Pp. 81-82.

the Christ-event and the mystery of the person of Christ in the light of the Pentecostal outpouring. O. Cullmann has described in a masterful way the sense of wonder that filled them as they awoke to the realization that the blessings awaited for the end of times had suddenly come upon them in the events of the past few days.[6] The straightforward eschatoligism of the O.T. burst under the pressure of the Paschal mystery; the tension between the already accomplished and the still to come, characteristic of Christian time, began with this experience. Thus the Spirit of Christ put Christ at the centre at once of the apostolic experience and of the history of salvation.

All has been accomplished in Christ and the Christian faith consists essentially in a personal commitment to him. In this light one understands why the authentic teachers of the Christian message were to be chosen from among the witnesses of Christ's resurrection (Acts 1:21-22). Not before he had been able to substantiate his claim to having seen Jesus as the risen Lord (1 Cor. 9:1) was St. Paul accepted as an Apostle nor was the value of his Gospel recognized (1 Cor. 1:12). And yet, if in the mind of the apostolic Church Christ is the centre, he never replaces the Father or is substituted for him. For Christ is the image of the invisible Father (Col. 1:15), the revealer of the God who dwells in inaccessible light and whose saving purpose to unite all things in his Son has already been accomplished in principle. The Christian experience of the apostolic Church may be summed up thus: 'Christianity is the appeal addressed to man by the Father, inviting him to share in the life of the Son through the gifts of the Spirit. This constitutes the very essence of Christianity.'[7] In St. Paul this Trinitarian theology takes on a technical form of expression: all things come from the Father through Christ in the Spirit; in the Spirit through Christ all things return to the Father (cf. 1 Cor. 8:6; Eph. 2:18). Fundamentally, our Christian experience and that of the apostolic Church coincide: we are called upon to live in the 'today of God' the saving design accomplished in Christ and experienced first by the apostolic veneration; this amounts to experiencing in the Christ of faith the Jesus of history.

It is time to ask what knowledge of Christ is derived from the Christian experience. 'Tell me what is your Christology', said K. Barth, 'and I will tell you who you are'; by which he meant: tell me who Christ is for you and I will not merely be able to evaluate your theological ideas but the authenticity of your Christian experience. For Christ will truly be the centre of our theological reflection if he is first the centre of our lives. He will then be the centre, not as a problem for discussion, or even as a

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[6] O. Cullmann, *Christ and Time....The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History.* London, S.C.M. Press, 1952. Pp. 121 ff.

[7] J. Danielou, *God and Us.* London, A. R. Mowbray & Co., 1957, p. 118.

mystery for theologizing, but very precisely as the person to whom our allegiance is given entirely. The real question then is not: what is our idea about Christ ? ; less still, how can the mystery of Christ be made intelligible ? Rather it is the straight question which Christ himself asked his Apostles: '*Who* do you say that I am ?' (Matt. 16:15). The Church must answer this question, as St. Peter did at Philippi: 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.' The apostolic generation gave that answer in the light of the Paschal and of the Pentecostal event. Their profession of faith in Jesus expresses itself in three phrases of liturgical character: 'Jesus is the Christ', 'Jesus is the Lord', 'Jesus is the Son of God.' Should we not in fact venture to say that today, after twenty centuries of Christian tradition, we ought to be able to answer the question even better than did the apostolic Church in the thrill of the Paschal event ? . . . This is indeed possible, for the knowledge of Christ refers now no longer to knowing him according to the flesh but to the Spirit and through the power of his resurrection. After half a century of Christian reflection St. John knew more and was able to say more about who Christ was then is contained in St. Peter's first apostolic preaching on Pentecost day. While revelation has ended long ago, the charism of interpreting the Christian experience remains with the Church always.

The answer to the question: who is Christ ? is communal, but it is also personal, for every Christian life is a personal adventure altogether inimitable. The encounter of each Christian with his Lord is a personal relationship, as diverse and unique in each case as is different and unique the person to whom it is addressed. While to all men who make the commitment of faith Christ is essentially one and the same, Lord and Son of God, yet he manifests to each different facets of his inexhaustible mystery. The discovery of the various facets of the face of the Lord is the precious fruit of dialogue between committed Christians. We learn to decipher the ineffable riches of Christ by encountering our brothers.

Reflection of the Christian experience gives us a deep insight into the mystery of Christ's person ; it directs us as by a sure instinct towards the correct answer to the question: who are you ? And the answer is this: Christ is God's-being-with-us and at the same time our-being-with-God. In a more elaborate way we may say: he is God turning to men in self-giving and mankind turned towards God in self-commitment ; or again: Christ is God passionately in love with men in a man who is passionately in love with God. These various formulas only echo the word of scripture: the one mediator of God and men ; that is to say: he in whom all distances are bridged and all obstacles lifted, because he unites God and men in his own person. Jesus the man is the sacrament of our encounter with God. In him guarantee is given to us of being able to meet God without having

to flee from the world of men. For, we encounter God personally in the human condition which Jesus shares with us, not beyond it. Christ is God entering the history of men, becoming personally the subject of a human story. A paradox, a mystery which we shall never comprehend fully, but which consists essentially in God's choice to meet us personally on our own level of existence.

I have no intention to minimize the problems raised recently by the God-talk theology, or—especially in India—the stumbling-block caused by 'Churchianity'. Nevertheless I think that the real hard fact is neither God nor the Church but Christ. About God, understanding can be reached, for the difficulties seem mostly concerned with ways of speaking; the Church, I dare say, finds its place in the logic of the faith in Christ, once it is correctly understood as the sign and the sacrament of men's encounter with the risen Lord. Christ, however, remains deeply scandalous. He is the sign of contradiction for our short-sighted intellects and even more so for our shrunken hearts. In itself the incarnation raises the scandal of God's becoming human, with the petty particularism in space and time which this entails. Yet, the modality of God's human becoming is even more forbidding: the kenosis of the Word incarnate, his stooping to the condition of fallen man, the madness of his cross are the real obstacles. What we are asked to admit in fact is that God is madly in love with men and that he acts according to the peculiar logic of love. To many, however, this is too beautiful to be true.

And in one way or another the reductions of the mystery come back on the scene. There is 'Yes' to Christ but 'No' to Jesus. This can take a very subtle form, almost imperceptible: does not a one-sided cult of the risen Lord at times hide the naked truth of the cross? Or there is 'Yes' to Jesus but 'No' to Christ. Let the man Jesus suffer while the God remains unconcerned. This, too, can be found in disguise: a theology of the incarnation according to which God does not become really related, personally concerned and vulnerable is more platonic than Christian. The fact of the death of God must be admitted in its bare realism lest the mystery evaporate in docetism.

To accept Jesus Christ without softening the mystery is to accept him as saviour. 'Jesus', 'Yahweh saves', is his name. The early Fathers threw all their energy in the Christological disputes because of their keen awareness that in the mystery of Christ the salvation of man was really at stake: 'he became man that we might be made gods'; 'what is not assumed is not redeemed'. Today, too, our picture of Christ depends much on whether we await from him a salvation and what kind of salvation. We need an uncompromising Christology, viz. one that does not reduce the mystery of the Son Incarnate, precisely in order to save man: to rescue him first as a person, for it is only in Christ, the image of God, that the image of the image can be truly understood; to rescue him moreover from the threatening danger of

his own sufficiency, which is man's greatest enemy. To accept the Word incarnate in the scandalous self-emptying of his cross is to admit that there is for man no other self-realization than in union with a God who has chosen to stoop in order to save and to unite.