

What Think You Of Christ?

Following in the Footsteps of Holiness

By Robert Nash, S.J.

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“And the Pharisees, being gathered together, Jesus asked them, saying, ‘What think you of Christ? Whose son is He’?” — SAINT MATTHEW 22:41-42.

CROWDS HAD GATHERED at the banks of the river Jordan, for rumour was busy concerning a strange man who had appeared in that place. People were talking about the austerity of his ways — recounting that he was clothed in camel’s hair and lived on locusts and wild honey. Others suggested that perhaps this man might be the long-promised Messiah, Whose appearance was indeed expected, if the prophets were right, round about this period. Whoever he was, curiosity was aroused, and so the multitudes had collected here on the Jordan bank to see the man for themselves and hear what he had to say.

But he was not the Messiah after all. He explained to them that he had come amongst them to make ready the way for One greater than himself, the latchet of Whose shoe he was not worthy to bend down and loose. This was a season of penance, he declared. They should gird themselves with the sword of self-sacrifice and prepare the way of the Lord, for the Kingdom of God was at hand. One day, as the Baptist stood there by the river with the listening crowds about him, he suddenly paused in the midst of his discourse. His attention had been attracted by a Stranger, Who was walking past, out there at the fringe of the crowd. So unobtrusive was this Stranger that He would have moved away unnoticed had not John’s keen eye fallen upon Him. “Look,” he cried to his audience, pointing straight in the Stranger’s direction. “Look well at this Man, for He is the Messiah Whom you have been seeking with such great eagerness. There has stood One in the midst of you Whom you know not. Behold the Lamb of God! Ecce Agnus Dei!”

The voice of the Baptist sends out an echo every morning when the priest is about to give Holy Communion. With the Sacred Species lifted reverently in his hands, he repeats the message given long ago at the Jordan. Behold the Lamb of God! “Ecce Agnus Dei!” Now in those three words you have a very convenient epitome of sanctity. Many men and women in our day, thank God, are very sincerely desirous of solid holiness. There is such a welter of immorality and crime of every sort in our world that people are being driven back, by the very excesses themselves, to seek happiness and peace where alone they can be found — in God. Now, these pages are written in order to stress, first of all, a truth, which makes the pursuit of sanctity at once definite and practicable. That truth is that Christ our Lord is the fountainhead of all sanctity, and that consequently the way to sanctity lies in the closest possible imitation of Him. Hence, the earnest searcher after holiness keeps the image of Jesus Christ always before his mind. Jesus Christ is the lodestar in his life. He is always “beholding the Lamb of God,” always “looking upon Jesus” for guidance and inspiration, in much the same way as the artist pauses over his sheet of canvas to look up at the model seated before him. “If Jesus were to find Himself in these circumstances, in which I now find myself, what would He answer?

How would He treat this person with whom I have to deal? What decision would He give if He were asked this question?" This imitation of Christ is the criterion of sanctity.

And, little by little, under the transforming influence of divine grace, the follower of Christ does indeed develop that beautiful trait which we may call 'Christly-ness'. He is, indeed, a reminder to others of the manner of man Jesus was. As John pointed out Christ at the Jordan, so that man's friends point him out, too, with the words: "Ecce Agnus Dei." The likeness between him and his great Model is striking. And is that to be wondered at, seeing that God is living in the man's soul as in a tabernacle? "Know you not," asks Saint Paul, "that you are the temple of the living God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?" But the man who follows Christ thus closely is not a tabernacle merely. Our Lord does not remain always under lock and key in the tabernacle. He comes forth at Benediction and in processions, and He is borne in triumph in the monstrance. So, sanctity makes man a living monstrance, too. Christ shines forth in his life, in his speech, in his manner of judging, in his dealings with others. He radiates Christ. From time to time, the doors of his soul, that living tabernacle, fly open, and men catch in him glimpses of Christ. This is sanctity — that he be a living tabernacle in which God dwells by grace, that he be a living monstrance manifesting Christ to the world. Saint John sums it all up, and Holy Church after him, in the three immortal words: Ecce Agnus Dei! Be a living tabernacle! Be a living monstrance. "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, all of you, and make not provision for the flesh in its concupiscences." This is all sanctity.

Now, a close study of the life of Our Lord, which the aspirant to holiness has thus to reproduce as well as he can, discloses for him the cheering truth that the task before him is one which is bound to make him happy. For it is abundantly clear from the Gospel story that there was in our divine Lord a wonderful attractiveness. By that, we mean that He had a power to draw folk to Him in quite an unprecedented way. Sanctity in men is always necessarily imperfect, and therefore in men, even in saintly men, there may be, and probably will be, traits that are unattractive. People who are holy, and undoubtedly sincere in their efforts to be like Christ, are often so angular, so strained, so stern or forbidding that they frighten us off and make us feel inclined to avow that, if sanctity means adopting a character like theirs, then we shall take very good care to steer clear of sanctity! But when we approach Jesus of Nazareth, in Whom resides a holiness that is perfect, in Him we need fear no such angularity. Everybody felt His attractiveness. Everybody of goodwill who came in contact with Him experienced a magnetism in His personality which made them love to be with Him and anxious to meet Him again. It cannot but encourage us in our feeble efforts after holiness to observe this trait in the character of our Model and try to find some explanation of its secret.

First, then, it will be in place to turn over the pages of the Gospel story, almost at random, and to see how many times we come upon proofs of the fact of His attractiveness. On that morning by the Jordan, after John had called attention to Him, two men followed after Him, down by the water's edge. When they were quite alone, Jesus looked around and saw them behind, and He asked them a very natural question: "Whom seek you?" The directness of the question disconcerts them somewhat: they are shy and awkward; for the fact is that they are just going wherever He is going. At last, by way of answering Him, they stammer out another question: "Master, where dwell You?" And He said: "Come and see." "They came, therefore," adds the evangelist, "and they saw the place where He abode and they stayed with Him all that day," wanting just this, just to be with Him. This, and nothing more. It is the first time they have met Him and they are drawn to Him, almost irresistibly, you would say. It is the attractiveness of Christ. "They stayed with Him all that day."

A little later, we find Our Lord seated at the well of Jacob. His disciples have gone into the town to buy food, and Jesus, weary of His journey and the heat of the summer day, is resting here and awaiting their return. Presently a poor outcast woman comes to draw water. She is alone, and it is the middle of the day, and these two facts are an indication of the woman's character. For the custom of the women was to come out together in the cool of the evening and fill their pitchers here. But she must come by herself and in the daytime, for with her no self-respecting woman would be seen walking. And the sinless Christ, Who loved sinners and hated sin, engages her in a wonderful conversation, with the result that she rushes back breathless to the city and spreads everywhere the news that she has found the Messiah out at the well of Jacob. Now it is to be well noted that the Samaritans were hostile to the Jews, so, ordinarily, Jesus might expect but scant courtesy at their hands. His reception in their city is, therefore, all the more significant. First, they come out themselves to see Him at the well. Then and there, the spell of Christ captivates them, and they press Him to accompany them back into the town. Finally, after He has come with them, it is only with the utmost difficulty that they permit Him to depart. They wanted to keep Him all for themselves. But there is other work for Him to do, and, reluctantly, He has to decline their invitation. He spends two full days with them, however, and these Samaritans, to whom the very mention of the Jews was an abomination, these hostile people are enthusiastic about this Man, this Jesus of Nazareth.

Merely to have seen Him and heard Him speak, is sufficient proof for them of His divinity. "We have heard Him ourselves now," they tell the woman, "and we know that this is indeed the Saviour of the world." Such a reception and from such a people! They wanted just this, these Samaritans, just to be with Him. This, and nothing more. The attractiveness of Christ!

On at least two occasions, vast multitudes followed Him for days on end. So fascinated were they by Jesus of Nazareth that they grew quite careless about even their most pressing needs. In their hunger for His words, they forgot all about food for their bodies, and He had to work a miracle to supply it.

Another day, at Lake Genesareth, they thronged about Him so closely that there was danger that He would be pushed into the water. So He asked Peter's permission for the use of his boat, and there, seated a little distance from the shore, He spoke to them out of the boat. We have it that "the whole country was stirred" (see Luke 4:14) when the news went forth that He was passing by. The people were all anxiety to see Him and hear Him. Farmers, out in the fields, threw the reins over their ploughs and came to Him with the clay on their hands. Fishermen dropped their nets at the shore and hurried to the place He was passing. Women and little children ran out of the cottages and gathered around Him. They loved this Man, this Jesus of Nazareth. Why, they could not tell you fully, but they did experience the attractiveness of the Man. There was something about Him that made Him different from any other they had ever met, and they wanted just this, just to be with Him. This, and nothing more. "The whole country was stirred."

We shall have to content ourselves with one more example only of this attractiveness of Christ. (The examples seem to multiply indefinitely as one scans these pages of the great Story). This time it is His enemies who come forward, all unwittingly, to give evidence in His favour. They had sent the soldiers after Him with instructions to seize upon Him and bring Him to them a prisoner. The soldiers, well used to tasks of this kind, set out to do as they were bid, but they returned without the Prisoner. The Pharisees and Scribes were enraged. "Why have you not brought Him?" they demand angrily. "Why," came the answer, "never did man speak like this Man." Even the coarse soldiers,

whose finer instincts had long since been blunted by the rough life they led, even they could not but realise the attractiveness of Christ. There was something about this Man, which elevated Him to a position that was quite unique. “Never did man speak like this Man.” And later still, even their masters themselves unconsciously endorsed this judgment. It was Palm Sunday, and the grand procession had just passed round the corner where they were huddled together, mad with jealousy. They looked at each other and whispered: “Do you see that we prevail nothing? We are out of the picture. The whole world is gone after Him.”

Sanctity forbidding? Observe well this Model of sanctity. See how His lovable ways draw to Him all sorts and conditions of people — little children, rough fishermen, sinners and saints — and then understand something at least of the attractiveness of Christ, and, by consequence, of the attractiveness of true holiness. From our reading of the Gospel, it is very easy to surmise what the answer would be if to them Jesus were to address the question: “What think you of Christ?”

And that same attractiveness of Christ persists in our own day, for Jesus does not change with the march of years. “Jesus Christ,” says Saint Paul, “yesterday, today, and the same forever.” Saint Teresa meant us to understand her quite literally, when she wrote: “Jesus Christ is my all; without Him all is nothing to me.” And on the scrolls of history the ink is never dry nor the hand of the scribe ever idle, as he places on record the life stories of men and women, thousands of them, who bear eloquent and indubitable testimony to the truth enunciated by the great saint of Avila. You will find those words stamped upon the heart of many a young girl, who, like Teresa, turns smilingly away from the glitter of the world’s tinsel because the warmth of the love of Jesus urges her to a life of immolation. They are written in large letters, those words, across the silent cell of many a recluse who has fled far from the make-believe of the world and buried himself thus in solitude, because there is a hunger in his soul for reality — for close union with Jesus Christ. “Jesus Christ is my all: without Him all is nothing to me” — the words have sped men and women to the ends of the earth, in a mighty campaign for Christ, devoured with longing to bring the Light of the world to nations sitting in darkness and the shadow of death.

They are emblazoned, those words, upon the banner followed by a whole army of martyrs and confessors in every age, who went to death with a smile on their faces, who braved exquisite tortures, who were hungry or cold or naked, or prostrate under exhausting heat, who were flung to wild beasts in the arena, or roasted over slow fires, or scourged and jeered at, or, like the great Model, done to death by crucifixion. On these, the world casts a condescending look, and with a shrug of the shoulders calls them fools. And the world is right. They are fools—“fools for Christ’s sake.” They suffered and toiled and sweated and died because within their breasts they carried a furnace of enthusiasm for Jesus Christ and His cause. Love of Him is the mightiest force, the most powerful motive, which in past ages has driven men and women to scale heights of sacrifice, which no other force or motive, could reach. Love of Him today is the secret of many a hidden life of silent endurance. Love of Him today surges up in many a generous heart, awakening a craving for opportunity to suffer for Him, to toil for Him, to be a “fool” for Him, to be walked on, trampled on and despised for Him, and for love of Him to give love’s supreme proof — to die for Him. “Fools” they are, indeed, but “the world will know their wisdom when the drums of doom are heard.” (A quote from Father “Benen” in the “Far East”)

High-sounding words, empty phraseology, the cynic will say. But these pages are not written for the cynic. They are written for those who know, by the testimony of their own lives and by their dealings with other faithful friends of Jesus, that the attractiveness of Christ is a fact, throbbing with

life, quivering with energy, today, in our twentieth century. [And so it is, too, in the twenty-first century!] Christ endures. Love of Christ endures in the very midst of a sin and a perversity, which, says Our Holy Father, has not been equalled since the time of Sodom. “Jesus Christ, yesterday, today, and the same forever.”

Having thus established the fact of Our Lord’s attractiveness, we have now to try to discover its secret. What marvellous power is this, wielded by Him in His lifetime? What is there in His character, which, still today, makes men’s hearts leap up with zeal for Him — a Man Who lived and died twenty hundred years ago? This is no new question. Down through the centuries whole libraries have been built up in the attempt to answer it, and the attempt is admittedly a failure.

The pens of saintly men and of learned men in every age have covered page after page, and have piled volume upon volume, in the effort to delineate the character of Jesus of Nazareth. And, after all this, the writers have laid their pens down, and, with a sigh of despair, have confessed that what they have written falls as far short of the reality as does a small child’s crude essay fall short of the polished diction of a Macaulay or a Newman. The beauty and perfection of that character are quite beyond the power of pen to write, be the scribe an Aquinas or a Bernard of Clairvaux. The spoken word, too, is a feeble and poor medium by which to translate into language the splendours shining in this Man, this Jesus of Nazareth, even though the preacher brings to his task weapons like the golden eloquence of a Chrysostom or the burning conviction ringing out in the rugged sentences of a Francis Xavier or a Curé of Ars. Christ’s panegyric will never be preached adequately: the story of Christ will never be compressed between the narrow pages of a book, albeit that book be so spacious that the whole world itself could not contain it.

So all we can attempt in a little sketch like this is to single out a few of the salient traits in Our Lord’s character. These, it is hoped, may throw at least a little light on the secret of His attractiveness, and, if we can develop these traits in ourselves and in our dealings with others, we shall go a good way towards realising our ideal of ‘Christly-ness’. What, then, do they find in Him, those crowds following Him everywhere He goes? More than once, He has almost to use force to free Himself from them, when the need for rest or food becomes imperative, or His hunger for converse with His Father in prayer will no longer be denied. What is there in Him that obsesses them like this? Why does Christ attract?

The first and most obvious answer leaps to our minds when we recall that in the soul of every man there is a craving for God. Man’s own experience bears him witness that there is a void in his heart and that he cannot rest satisfied as long as it remains unfilled. He reaches out continually for something outside of himself, something which he feels and knows to be necessary for his happiness. That vague “something” is the knowledge and the love of God. Give him perfect health; give him abundant wealth; let him have every facility for enjoyment, for travel, for sport, for sightseeing. All this will leave him unsatisfied. To be sure, he will play with these things for a while, and for a while, like a child playing with toys, he will extract from them some measure, even a large measure, of enjoyment. But the child will cast aside its playthings at last, and rich men will tell you that they surfeit of their money, and the poet will assure you that to sport will be as tedious as to work when a man has nothing to do but seek sport and amusement. Where, then, is he to find this happiness for which he is aching, if not in wealth or health, in travel or sport or learning? Ask the great Augustine of Hippo, who hungered as we do, and thought to stave off the pangs by plunging headlong into the wildest excesses. Taught by his own experience, he took up his pen and

wrote the undying sentence: “You have created us, O Lord, for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You.”

So the first reason why these men and women crowd about Our Lord is that He is God. In Him, they find a delight and a contentment that completely satisfies their craving for happiness. So they want just this, just to be with Him. This, and nothing more. It is true, indeed, that never did man speak like this Man, because Jesus of Nazareth is not Man only, but God also. Knowledge of God, love of God — only this can fill the void in man’s heart, and Jesus Christ is “the power of God and the wisdom of God.” That is why they cannot tear themselves away from Him. Sinners, many of them, long habituated to the gutter; blinded worldlings beginning at last to be disillusioned about the real worth of the world’s silvery tinsel; generous souls, too, who are stirred by a high ideal — all these flock to Jesus of Nazareth, for all share in common this hunger and this thirst for God; and Jesus is God.

But, even as Man, even as a member of the human family like ourselves, Our Lord’s character has certain most lovable elements which are quite sufficient to account for men’s sweeping enthusiasm for Him. We find in Him, first of all, an astonishing self-forgetfulness. In his dealings with others, He is always so approachable, ready at a moment’s notice to upset His own arrangements in order that He may be of use to others. People have come to take this for granted, and so you will find them making demands on Him at most unreasonable hours and for most unreasonable reasons.

Open Saint John’s third chapter for confirmation of this. All day long Our Lord had been at the beck and call of everybody who wanted Him. Without a thought of His own needs He had listened to their tales of sorrow, had poured comfort into hearts that were crushed down under a load of anxiety or worry. He had gone around doing good wherever opportunity offered. And now it is night, and He has retired into the house where He is lodging in Jerusalem. Nothing could be more reasonable than that a Man Who has toiled thus ceaselessly since early morning should be permitted to have these few hours for repose, or, perhaps, for prayer with the Father in secret. But what happens? Nicodemus, a “ruler of the Jews,” chooses just this most inconvenient hour to call. Perhaps he wants only a word or two with Jesus? Not at all. He wants to invite himself in, and speak without restraint, and ask a great many questions that are vexing his mind. And why could he not come some other time? Why not hold these questions over till tomorrow, or why did Nicodemus not ask them today while the Master was abroad and ready to receive anybody who came? Well, it must be remembered for Nicodemus that he was one of the great men of Jerusalem, and what would people say if they saw him conversing with the poor carpenter from Galilee. So he slips out under cover of night, because this is the hour best suited to his own convenience.

It was so inconsiderate, so very unreasonable — to obtrude himself in this way upon an exhausted Man, and with so flimsy an excuse for the disturbance. Who could have blamed Our Lord had He sent out word to the visitor to say that He was engaged, or in need of rest, or that He would see him on the morrow? But that is not Our Lord’s way at all. Nicodemus is admitted — as he expected. And it is no grudging reception. He is made to sit down at his ease and given every opportunity to ask all his questions. There is no bustling him out, no impatience shown, no fidgety vexation to let him see clearly that the sooner he goes the better. Our Lord at once lays His own plans on one side. His weariness is all forgotten. His rest or prayer is postponed. Here is a man who wants Him, and, without a thought for Himself, Jesus puts Himself absolutely at the man’s disposal. Such is the affability of Jesus, such His approachableness. He is not subject to “humours.” People need not be afraid of rebuff. There is no necessity to watch for a favourable opportunity of coming to Jesus of

Nazareth, for every opportunity is a favourable one. He is “all things to all men,” ready to receive them just when they want Him, to listen to what they have to say, to solve their doubts, to advise, to cure, to console, anybody at any time. No wonder He won their hearts. No wonder the whole country was stirred when He passed by. No wonder a Man so utterly selfless exercised over them an attractiveness without precedent or equal.

Saint Mark, in his second chapter, gives us another example of this same readiness to receive unreasonable people. Our Lord was preaching in a house at Capharnaum. As usual, no sooner did the word go out that He was there, than the multitudes began to gather in from everywhere. “It was heard that He was in the house, and many came together, so that there was no room — no, not even at the door. And He spoke to them the word.” It is very easy to fill in the picture. Our Lord standing or sitting there in the centre of the room and the crowds with eyes rivetted upon Him. He has their undivided attention, and it is well, for He has much to say to them that is of importance. A grand chance this for the Preacher to drive home, with all the forcefulness of His divine eloquence, the lessons He wants to teach.

But presently everything is upset: their attention wanders. Four men outside have brought on a stretcher a poor invalid sick of the palsy. “And when they could not offer him unto Him for the multitude, they uncovered the roof where He was. And, opening it, they let down the bed wherein the man sick of the palsy lay.” Such a place to bring a sick man and his bed! Why, already there was not a square inch to spare! What a commotion there must have been among the people trying to move back and make room! And as for Our Lord’s grand sermon — why, they cannot listen any more, of course. A moment ago, the Preacher had caught His audience. A moment ago, they were all ears to hear Him. But, now, here is a most ill-timed interruption, and everyone is upset.

Yet not everyone. Not He Who, of all others, had most reason to show displeasure. Our Lord seems to take it all for granted. It was all prearranged, you would say. There is not the faintest suggestion of annoyance at their utter lack of consideration. Instead, He forgives the poor man his sins, lifts him from his sick bed, and sends him home happy. That was what the man wanted, so Jesus did it for him. Jesus is always ready to help anybody at any time, quite regardless of His own arrangements. There is no necessity to watch for a favourable opportunity of coming to Jesus of Nazareth, for every opportunity is a favourable one. His unfailing readiness to be all things to all men, without a single thought of His own convenience — this is a trait which throws much light on the secret of Our Lord’s attractiveness.

Again and again, as we read the story of His life, we come upon examples of this approachableness. Before we pass on to another trait of His character, let us notice the same readiness to help told by Saint Matthew in his eighth chapter. After that long discourse on the mountain, “great multitudes followed Him.” Then the leper draws near with his plea: “Lord, if You will, You can make me clean.” The leper wanted Jesus, so Jesus cleansed the leper. Immediately after that, the centurion runs to Him to beseech a cure for his servant who is lying sick at home. The centurion’s servant wanted Jesus, so Jesus healed the centurion’s servant. Next, He goes into Peter’s house, and there finds Peter’s wife’s mother lying ill of a fever. This poor old woman wanted Jesus, so Jesus “touched her hand and the fever left her.” Evening closes in and “they brought to Him many that were possessed with devils; and He cast out the spirits with His word; and all that were sick He healed.” These sick folk wanted Jesus, so Jesus went to the sick folk and cured them. It is the same story every time. Never a thought for His own convenience: no consideration for His weariness after that long sermon on the mount. On all sides, He finds people who want Him, so He comes to

them. He does not know what it means to spare Himself. His invitation is universal: "Come to Me all you that labour and I will refresh you."

With all this approachableness, Our Lord is never merely one of the crowd. Side by side with His readiness to help others and accommodate Himself to their plans, He always preserves a quiet dignity of bearing, a care never to compromise Himself. Men have to respect Him even when they hate Him, for they are forced to recognise that His marvellous self-control marks this Man out as being their superior. With everybody, Jesus is easy and free, but with nobody is He 'free and easy'. This quiet reserve, balancing to a nicety His approachableness, is a second element in His character, which goes to account for the attractiveness of Christ.

His enemies are lynx-eyed: not a movement of the Man escapes them. They lay themselves out to ensnare Him in His speech, to beat Him in argument and confound Him before the people. They dub Him Friend of sinners, a winebibber, a Man possessed of an evil spirit. And Jesus, knowing the men He has to deal with, can yet, in His compliant, easy way, walk into the inns and sit down to meat with publicans and sinners. He can invite Himself to dinner with Zachaeus, the despised publican. He can allow Magdalene, the woman in the city, a sinner, to come to Him while He sits at table in the Pharisee's house. He can permit her to kneel down there at those feet of His and cover them with kisses. These things Jesus can do, and in the sight of such enemies can He do them, and then, in face of it all, He can throw down a challenge such as no one but He dare utter. "Which of you," He demands fearlessly, "can convince Me of sin? Open out the book of My life. Read every chapter with minute care. Scrutinise every line and every sentence and discover if you can a single instance of sin."

They do not accept the challenge. They did not dare accept it, for they knew His life was blameless. Gentle He always was. Ready to help anybody and at any time, yes. But His loveableness never degenerates into mere sentiment. He is the Son of God as well as the Son of Man, and His quiet reserve, His care always to maintain the dignity proper to His position, makes Him the most attractive of men. His approachableness wins men's love; His dignity, their esteem.

Especially does this dignity of Christ shine forth in the Sacred Passion. On the momentous night of Holy Thursday, He came forth from His prayer in the garden to meet His enemies. Watch the divine majesty shining in Him as He stands there before them under the olive trees. They see Him in the broken light of the moon's rays and they advance to arrest Him. He asks them what they want — an ordinary question enough, to be sure. But there was something in the Man that quite stunned them. They quailed before the steady look in those piercing eyes of the Christ, and "they went backward and fell to the ground," overawed by the dignity of His bearing. Look at His marvellous self-restraint before His corrupt judges. "They led Him away to Annas first," and there a boorish soldier, wishing to curry favour with the old man, strikes Him rudely across the face. How an outburst of anger on the part of Our Lord, however justifiable, would lower His dignity! But there is no such outburst. With perfect self-command, He turns on the man who has been guilty of the offence, and questions him: "If I have spoken ill, give testimony of the evil; but if well, why strike you Me?"

Contrast the strength of Christ when He stands before the weakly Pilate. Pilate vaunts his power: "Speak You not to me? Know You not that I have power to crucify You and that I have power to release You?" Did he expect Christ to cringe? If so, he was told with disconcerting directness: "You should have no power against Me unless it were given you from above." With Herod, perhaps, "that fox," does His strength and restraint shine out most luminously. Herod, the creature of the gutter,

and Jesus the immaculate Son of God! Herod the judge, and Jesus the prisoner! Herod, the flippant worshipper at the shrine of pleasure, permitted to question Jesus in many words and decide what His fate shall be. And Jesus stands motionless before Herod, stands and looks in that steady way of His straight into the eyes of the shifting, frivolous creature before Him and answers him never a word. It inspires one with awe to watch the strength of Christ, His self-possession, His dignity.

There is nothing vaguely suggestive of over-familiarity in His love. There is never a trace of subservience in His submission. With friends and foes there is ever maintained this quiet reserve. And this marvellous proportioning between kindness and firmness it is which captivates people's hearts when they come to know this Man, this perfect Man, this Jesus of Nazareth.

The third and last characteristic of Christ with which we propose to deal is His utter sincerity, for sincerity always attracts. Jesus is sincere with Himself. He gathered a school of disciples round about Him, and He taught them the theory of a new life. So sublime was His philosophy that many of them considered it was beyond the reach of human frailty, and they turned their backs upon Him. But Jesus asks nothing from His pupil in the school of sanctity that He does not first practise Himself. He is always consistent. It was this white-light sincerity, this transparent consistency, which gave Him such great influence with the people. They could not but make the contrast between this new Teacher and their Pharisees and Scribes, and the contrast was all in Christ's favour. "He taught as one having authority." They saw that He lived what He preached to them. His sermons were not culled from dusty folios: they were read from the living book of experience. There was unction in the words of this Man. It was clear that His Heart was on fire with the desire to convince. Conviction rang in His tone because He had reduced His lofty ideals to reality in His own life, and this sincerity with Himself is part of the secret of His power to attract.

Jesus taught that man is placed by God in this world. From God he comes and to God he returns. Therefore, man is God's property, and therefore His one and only business in this world is to do the Will of God. He warned the multitudes in His first public sermon: "Not everyone that says to Me: 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that does the will of My Father Who is in heaven; he shall enter into the kingdom of heaven." The unique privilege even of being His Mother is of no avail unless it is accompanied by obedience to God's Will. He was speaking to the crowd one evening, and at the end a woman, moved by the unction of His words cried out: "Blessed is the womb that bore You and the paps that gave You suck." His answer must have startled them: "Yea, rather, blessed are they who hear the word of God and keep it." That is His theory. And all through His life, He kept steadily before His eyes the Will of the Father as the guide of His every word and thought and action. "The things that are pleasing to My Father I always do," He said, and there was nobody to contradict. And at the close of His life, with His chosen few about Him at Supper, He could lift up His eyes and say to the Father: "Father, I have finished the work which You gave Me to do and I come to You." Jesus is consistent.

Our divine Lord was never weary of reminding men that, if they did God's Will, they would save their souls. The light of eternity was always shining across His path, and it influenced all His teaching. Witness the vivid parable of Dives and Lazarus — Lazarus, the penniless beggar, starved to death at the gate of the rich man's palace. But the contrast afterwards! Lazarus borne by angels to heaven, and Dives buried in hell! Lazarus remembered eternity. Dives was so concerned about a good time that he forgot all except this present life.

Or the parable of that other rich man whose barns were too small to hold his plenteous harvest. So he would pull down those barns and build up others, fine roomy barns. He would stuff them full of good grain, and then he would sit back and enjoy life. And the Lord said: "You fool, this night do they demand your soul of you. And whose shall these things be for which you have laboured?" He, too, forgot all about eternity. In this wise does Jesus preach. Is it necessary to show how here, too, He was the very embodiment of consistency? Every page of the gospel gives proof that in the practical working out of His life, Our Lord valued time only in so far as it was fraught with opportunities of preparing for eternity.

He inculcates humility. His disciples must not seek the first places at a banquet. If they would enter into the kingdom of heaven, let them become as little children. They must not do their good works for show, to gain praise from men. Indeed, they should not allow their left hand to know what their right hand does. Otherwise, they will not have a reward from God in heaven. Did he practise this Himself? He remained hidden for thirty years in despised Nazareth. At His Baptism, immediately after He was praised by the Father, He fled from the haunts of men into the wilderness. Time and again, He imposes silence on those who are the recipients of His charity — "see that you tell it to no man." When enthusiasm ran high and the multitudes would make Him King even by force, He disappeared from their midst. He did much good. He was lavish with acts of love towards everybody in need. But He sought no praise from men. It was enough that what He did met with the approval of the Father Who sees in secret. Jesus was consistent.

So, too, with His hard sayings about poverty. "Blessed are the poor in spirit..." "It is more easy for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven." This detachment He Himself was the first to put in practice. He was born in poverty in Bethlehem. He passed for the son of a poor artisan at Nazareth. In His public life, He had to work a miracle to pay the tribute. Once more, He can appeal to His practice in support of His theory: "The foxes have their lairs and the birds of the air their nests, but the Son of Man has not anywhere to lay His head." Jesus was consistent.

Prayer was His constant occupation, even in the midst of engrossing work. He prayed always, and so, when He spoke about prayer, He was telling people what He knew by experience. He never once rejected a truly repentant sinner. Magdalene, Peter, the thief on the Cross, even Judas, even His executioners — for all He had mercy. Who, then, better qualified than He to denounce wrangling and spleen? Men listening to Him knew how He had forgiven; was it much that they, too, should forgive? Finally, Jesus taught that self-sacrifice is absolutely indispensable if men are to be His disciples. "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily and follow Me." Was He consistent here? A glance at Calvary and all that preceded it, and the answer is plain to read. Jesus was consistent. Jesus was sincere with Himself. Ecce Agnus Dei!

Of a piece with this sincerity with Himself is the sincerity of Our Lord in dealing with His enemies. They were hypocrites, and He knew it, and without a semblance of fear or hesitancy, He proceeds to unmask their hypocrisy. "Generation of vipers, how can you speak good things whereas you are evil? I know you, that you have not the love of God in you... You will not come to Me that you may have life... Blind guides who strain at a gnat and swallow a camel... Woe to you, Scribes and Pharisees, because you make clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but within you are full of rapine and uncleanness. You blind Pharisee, first make clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, that the outside may become clean. Woe to you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you are like to whitened sepulchres which outwardly appear to men beautiful, but within are full of dead

men's bones and all filthiness. So you also appear outwardly to men just, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and iniquity... You serpents, generation of vipers, how will you flee from the judgment of hell?" Language like this from a mere working-man, and a workingman from Nazareth, to boot!

The carpenter's Son has the insolence to address the highly-respectable citizens of Jerusalem in this aggressive manner. It is not to be tolerated, and they determine upon His death. But strong men loved Him and admired Him, even if His enemies were enraged against Him. Somebody speaks well of the "manliness of Christ." His scathing denunciation of these Pharisees and Scribes illustrates it well. His sincerity with Himself and His loathing of hypocrisy lend fire to His words. They cannot stand up to His withering accusations, for they know He is speaking the truth. Jesus is ruthlessly sincere with His enemies.

Sincere with Himself and with His enemies, Jesus of Nazareth is sincere, too, as no one else ever was sincere, with His friends. He knew the horrible secret that was seething in the breast of Judas Iscariot that night at the Last Supper. But Judas is His friend, and how concerned He is to warn Judas, to plead with Judas, and at the same time to keep the others in ignorance of his treachery! "One of you will betray Me," He tells them. But it is clear that the traitor's identity was kept hidden. After the morsel, Satan entered into Judas. "And Jesus said to him: 'That which you do, do quickly.' Now, no man at the table knew to what purpose He had said this unto him." Our Lord's love for His friend has ensured that if He cannot turn him away from his evil purpose, at least He will save His reputation with the rest of the disciples. The same concern to save His friends meets us later that night. When the soldiers come to arrest Him, He asks them whom they want. "They answer: 'Jesus of Nazareth.' Jesus answers: 'I am He. If then you seek Me, let these go their way'." He will not compromise His friends when danger is lurking.

They bring Him up to Annas, and the old man questions Him of His disciples and His doctrine. But not a word escapes Him about His disciples. That part of the question He ignores, for just now they have all run away from Him. He can say nothing good of them, so, sincere friend that He is, He will pass over in silence the implied taunt in the question, and will answer only concerning His doctrine.

And when the shame of the Passion has passed by, He comes again to see His friends. In all His visits to them, there is evidence of His desire to console them for what they have suffered with Him and for Him. Not a word of blame if they have failed Him when most of all He needed them. Only concern to tell them about the Kingdom of God to which they will follow Him very soon. Only anxiety to assure them that He is no ghost, but a living Christ. Only a loving care to secure His infant Church, to transform His "little children," huddled together for fear of the Jews, into strong men who will rejoice to be counted worthy to suffer for the name of Christ. Only a yearning in His Sacred Heart to stun them into realising that Jesus is sincere with His friends.

It is not possible to find in any one, except Him, a sincerity so unshakeable. The saints succeed best in reproducing it. This is to be expected, for we saw that all sanctity looks to Our Divine Lord as to its model and inspiration. Moreover, Our Lord and a saintly man or woman both build up their love for others on the same motive. Merely human affection is fickle because it is based on sentiment. Our Divine Lord walked through this world, and in every human being upon whom His eye rested, He saw an immortal soul. That is why He loved them all. That vision which He had of the beauty, the destiny, the possibilities of an immortal soul, is the foundation of all His marvellous affability, His self-control, His forgivingness, His sincerity. Now, the love of the saints is modelled on His

love. “They have guessed the blinding value of a soul.” (Another quote from Father “Benen” in the “Far East”)

Hence, their impassioned appeals to sinners to repent. Hence, their ceaseless toil. Hence their journeys, their hunger and thirst. Hence, their readiness to brush aside breaches of friendship. They have no time to nurse grievances. The harvest is great. Souls are to be saved, and the time for the harvest is upon them.

Ignatius Loyola will stand in freezing cold water on a winter’s night — to win a soul. Jean Vianney, the Curé of Ars, will lock himself up in a Confessional for long hours every day, and for forty years will endure an existence of superhuman penance — for souls.

Peter Claver will make himself, in all literalness, the “slave of the slaves.” He will embrace this slavery for forty years, because even Negroes have immortal souls. Catherine of Siena would wish to give her life a hundred times over for souls, and, if she could do so without offence to God, she would be willing to stand even in the mouth of hell to prevent souls from entering there. Perfervid exaggerations? No. Their love is sincere because, like the love of Christ, it is based on a more solid foundation than mere sentiment. “They have guessed the blinding value of a soul.” “There is a far greater difference between the soul and all other created corporeal things than there is between the most pellucid water and the foulest mud.” (A quote from Saint John of the Cross.)

And everyone has such a soul. What more natural, then, than that for everyone their friendship should be sincere?

“Ecce Agnus Dei” epitomises sanctity, for all sanctity consists in reproducing Christ as perfectly as possible. The work of sanctity is therefore a gladsome task, for, when we look upon Jesus our Model, we find Him to be the most attractive of men. He draws men like this, because men are hungering for God, and He is God. Moreover, in His human character, we find Him to be always unfailingly easy of approach. But He never compromises Himself — even deadly enemies cannot convince Him of sin. He is the very embodiment of sincerity. With Himself He is sincere, consistent in theory and practice. With His enemies, He is sincere, taking them to task, in His manly way, for their hypocrisy. With His friends, He is sincere, forgiving, defending, consoling. That is the kind of person He is, “Jesus Christ, yesterday, today, and the same forever.” That summary is, perhaps, a flash of light on the secret of the attractiveness of Christ.

“What think you of Christ?” On two occasions, His friends thought He was a ghost, something unreal. One night they were out in their fishing smack and He came to them walking on the waters, and “they thought He was a ghost.” After the Resurrection, He appeared to them in the Upper Room at Jerusalem, and again they “supposed that they saw a spirit.” Each time Our Lord is at pains to remove their doubts and to assure them that He is no spirit, no ghost, but a living Man.

Now, often folk are to be found who are like these apostles. Our Lord is not a personal friend to them. All they read and hear about His loveableness seems to them as an idle tale. They would like to realise, not merely believe in, the attractiveness of Christ, but somehow they cannot, or they think they cannot. Somehow, their eyes are held. Can this be accounted for? That Christ, so lovable, so attractive, should leave them indifferent? That they can become interested in some hero of fiction and remain so callous about Him?

Christ attracts, indeed, but there is a counter-attraction. Sin and worldliness have wares to sell. And these wares are arrayed in a very attractive garb. That hunger for happiness in man’s heart reaches

out for sin and the world, under the delusion that in them contentment can be found. Sin and worldliness do, indeed, promise this contentment, and, be it admitted, they do give a measure of enjoyment to their votaries. But a spasm of violent excitement and thrill is not contentment, is not happiness. Our Holy Father, the Pope, complains of a spirit of restlessness that is abroad today — an apparent inability to settle down to any serious pursuit. Even good people, sincerely desirous of saving their souls, are tainted by this craze for pleasure. Pleasure, indeed, has its place in man's life, but what the Pope deplores, and with him every right-minded man, is setting up pleasure on a pedestal it was never meant to occupy. As long as pleasure, which should be a servant, is permitted to be a usurper, so long will the attractiveness of Christ remain something unreal, something outside the realm of experience.

Our Lord is inexorable in His teaching that friendship with Him can be purchased only at the price of sacrifice. We are too ready to give a quiescent assent to this "hard saying," and then go our way and forget all about it. If the counter-attraction is to be vanquished, we have to return to the Baptist. His voice must echo in our hearts. Do penance. Repent. His message must stir us to change our outlook on the cross. He must teach us contempt for what the world values, and love for what it hates.

When that stern lesson is learned and put in practice, we shall experience, not merely believe in, the attractiveness of Christ. Many men yield to the counter-attraction, and that is why they miss Him. True gold is not easily discerned when the eyes have long been dazzled with the glitter of tinsel. But who, that has once known the value of the gold, would be willing to throw it away and take the tinsel instead? Who, that has once sat down at a banquet in his Father's house, would ever again try to satisfy himself with the husks of swine?
