



Christ's Presence in Christians¹

“Christ is alive.” This is the great truth which fills our faith with meaning. Jesus, who died on the cross, has risen. He has triumphed over death; he has overcome sorrow, anguish and the power of darkness. “Do not be terrified” was how the angels greeted the women who came to the tomb. “Do not be terrified. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here.”² “This is the day which the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.”³

Easter is a time of joy — a joy not confined to this period of the liturgical year, but to be found really and fully in the Christian's heart. For Christ is alive. He is not someone who has gone, someone who existed for a time and then passed on, leaving us a wonderful example and a great memory.

No, Christ is alive. Jesus is the Emmanuel: God with us. His resurrection shows us that God does not abandon his own. He promised he would not: “Can a woman forget her baby that is still unweaned, pity no longer the son she bore in her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.”⁴ And he has kept his promise. His delight is still to be with the sons of men.⁵

Christ is alive in his Church. “I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counsellor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.”⁶ That was what God planned: Jesus, dying on the cross, gave us the Spirit of truth and life. Christ stays in his Church, its sacraments, its liturgy, its preaching — in all that it does.

In a special way Christ stays with us in the daily offering of the holy Eucharist. That is why the Mass is the centre and source of christian life. In each and every Mass the complete Christ, head and body, is present. *Per Ipsum et cum Ipso et in Ipso*. For Christ is the way; he is the mediator; in him we find everything. Outside of him our life is empty. In Jesus Christ, and taught by him, “we dare to say: Our Father.” We dare to call the Lord of heaven and earth our Father. The presence of the living Christ in the host is the guarantee, the source and the culmination of his presence in the world.

Christ is alive in Christians. Our faith teaches us that man, in the state of grace, is divinized — filled with God. We are men and women, not angels. We are flesh and blood, people with sentiments and passions, with sorrows and joys. And this divinization affects everything human; it is a sort of foretaste of the final resurrection. “Christ has risen from the dead, the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since by a man came death, by a man also comes resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made to live.”⁷

¹ A homily given on 26 March 1967, Easter Sunday

² Mark 16:6 (gospel of Easter Sunday Mass)

³ Ps 117:24 (gradual of the Mass): *Haec est dies quam fecit Dominus, exultemus et laetemur in ea*

⁴ Is 49:14-15

⁵ Cf Prov 8:31

⁶ John 16:7

⁷ 1 Cor 15:20-21

Christ's life is our life, just as he promised his Apostles at the last supper: "If anyone love me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him."⁸ That is why a Christian should live as Christ lived, making the affections of Christ his own, so that he can exclaim with St Paul: "It is now no longer I that live, but Christ lives in me."⁹

Jesus, the source of christian living

I wanted to review with you, briefly, some of the ways in which Christ is alive today — "Jesus Christ, yesterday and today, yes and forever"¹⁰ — because this is the basis of all christian living. If we take a look at the course of human history, we will see progress and advances. Science has made man more aware of his power. Technology today controls the world much more than in the past, helping men to reach their dream of a greater level of culture, unity and material well-being.

Some people are perhaps inclined to tone down this optimism, reminding us that men still suffer from injustice and wars, at times worse than those of the past. They may well be right. But, above and beyond these considerations, I prefer to remember that in the religious sphere man is still man and God is still God. In this sphere the peak of progress has already been reached. And that peak is Christ, alpha and omega, the beginning of all things and their end.¹¹

In the spiritual life, there is no new era to come. Everything is already there, in Christ who died and rose again, who lives and stays with us always. But we have to join him through faith, letting his life show forth in ours to such an extent that each Christian is not simply alter Christus: another Christ, but ipse Christus: Christ himself!

St Paul gave a motto to the Christians at Ephesus: *Instaurare omnia in Christo*:¹² to fill everything with the spirit of Jesus, placing Christ at the centre of everything. "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all things to myself."¹³ Through his incarnation, through his work at Nazareth and his preaching and miracles in the land of Judea and Galilee, through his death on the cross, and through his resurrection, Christ is the centre of the universe, the firstborn and Lord of all creation.

Our task as Christians is to proclaim this kingship of Christ, announcing it through what we say and do. Our Lord wants men and women of his own in all walks of life. Some he calls away from society, asking them to give up involvement in the world, so that they remind the rest of us by their example that God exists. To others he entrusts the priestly ministry. But he wants the vast majority to stay right where they are, in all earthly occupations in which they work: the factory, the laboratory, the farm, the trades, the streets of the big cities and the trails of the mountains.

In this connection I like to think of Christ's conversation with the disciples going to Emmaus. As he is walking along, he meets two men who have nearly lost all hope. They are beginning to feel that life has no meaning for them. Christ understands their sorrow; he sees into their heart and communicates to them some of the life he carries within himself.

⁸ John 14:23

⁹ Gal 2:20: Non vivo ego, vivit vero in me Christus

¹⁰ Heb 13:8: Iesus Christus heri et hodie; ipse et in saecula

¹¹ Rev 21:6

¹² Eph 1:10

¹³ John 12:32: Si exaltatus fuero a terra, omnia traham ad meipsum

When they draw near the village, he makes as if he is going on, but the two disciples stop him and practically force him to stay with them. They recognize him later when he breaks the bread. The Lord, they exclaimed, has been with us! “And they said to each other: Was not our heart burning within us while he was speaking on the road and explaining to us the Scripture?”¹⁴ Every Christian should make Christ present among men. He ought to act in such a way that those who know him sense “the fragrance of Christ.”¹⁵ Men should be able to recognize the Master in his disciples.

A Christian knows that he is grafted onto Christ through baptism. He is empowered to fight for Christ through confirmation, called to act in the world sharing the royal, prophetic and priestly role of Christ. He has become one and the same thing with Christ through the Eucharist, the sacrament of unity and love. And so, like Christ, he has to live for other men, loving each and every one around him and indeed all humanity.

Faith helps us recognize that Christ is God; it shows that he is our saviour; it brings us to identify ourselves with him and to act as he acted. When the risen Christ frees the apostle Thomas from his doubts, showing him his wounds, Jesus exclaims: “Blessed are they who have not seen, and yet have believed.”¹⁶ And St Gregory the Great comments that “he is referring in particular to us, for we possess spiritually him whom we have not seen in the body. He is referring to us, provided our behaviour agrees with our faith. A person does not truly believe unless he puts into practice what he believes. That is why St Paul says of those whose faith is limited to words: They profess recognition of God, but in their behaviour they deny him.”¹⁷

You cannot separate the fact that Christ is God from his role as redeemer. The Word became flesh and came into the world “to save all men.”¹⁸ With all our personal defects and limitations, we are other Christs, Christ himself, and we too are called to serve all men. We must hear and hear again his command which remains new throughout the centuries. “Beloved,” writes St John, “I am writing you no new commandment. but an old commandment which you had from the beginning; the old commandment is the word which you have heard. Yet I am writing you a new commandment, which is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. He who says he is in the light and hates his brother is in the darkness still. He who loves his brother abides in the light, and in it there is no cause for stumbling.”¹⁹

Our Lord has come to bring peace, good news and life to all men. Not only to the rich, nor only to the poor. Not only to the wise nor only to the simple. To everyone, to the brothers, for brothers we are, children of the same Father, God. So there is only one race, the race of the children of God. There is only one colour, the colour of the children of God. And there is only one language, the language which speaks to the heart and to the mind, without the noise of words, making us know God and love one another.

Contemplating Christ's life

This is the love of Christ which each of us should try to practice in his own life. But to be Christ himself, we must see ourselves in him. It's not enough to have a general idea of the

¹⁴ Luke 24:32

¹⁵ Cf 2 Cor 2:15: bonus odor Christi

¹⁶ John 20:29

¹⁷ In Evangelia homiliae, 26,9 (PL 76,1202)

¹⁸ Cf 1 Tim 2:4: Ut omnes homines salvi fiant

¹⁹ 1 John 2:7-10

spirit of Jesus' life; we have to learn the details of his life and, through them, his attitudes. And, especially, we must contemplate his life, to derive from it strength, light, serenity, peace.

When you love someone, you want to know all about his life and character, so as to become like him. That is why we have to meditate on the life of Jesus, from his birth in a stable right up to his death and resurrection. In the early years of my life as a priest, I used to give people presents of copies of the Gospel and books about the life of Jesus. For we do need to know it well, to have it in our heart and mind, so that at any time, without any book, we can close our eyes and contemplate his life, watching it like a movie. In this way the words and actions of our Lord will come to mind in all the different circumstances of our life.

In this way we become involved in his life. It is not a matter of just thinking about Jesus, of recalling some scenes of his life. We must be completely involved and play a part in his life. We should follow him as closely as Mary his Mother did, as closely as the first twelve, the holy women, the crowds that pressed about him. If we do this without holding back, Christ's words will enter deep into our soul and will really change us. For "the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of the soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart."²⁰

If we want to bring other men and women to our Lord, we must first go to the Gospel and contemplate Christ's love. We could take the central events of his passion, for, as he himself said: "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."²¹ But we can also look at the rest of his life, his everyday dealings with the people he met.

In order to bring men his message of salvation and show them God's love, Christ, who was perfect God and perfect man, acted in a human and a divine way. God comes down to man's level. He takes on our nature completely, except for sin.

It makes me very happy to realize that Christ wanted to be fully a man, with flesh like our own. I am moved when I contemplate how wonderful it is for God to love with a man's heart. Let us choose some events from the Gospel, beginning with Jesus' relationships with the twelve. St John the Apostle, who pours into his narrative so much that is first-hand, tells of his first unforgettable conversation with Christ. "Master, where are you staying? He said to them, Come and see. They went and saw where he was staying; and they stayed with him that day, for it was about the tenth hour."²²

This divine and human dialogue completely changed the life of John and Andrew, and Peter and James and so many others. It prepared their hearts to listen to the authoritative teaching which Jesus gave them beside the Sea of Galilee. "As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. And he said to them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men. Immediately they left their nets and followed him."²³

During the next three years, Jesus shared his life with his disciples; he came to know them; he answered their questions and resolved their doubts. He is indeed the rabbi, the Master who speaks with authority, the Messiah sent by God. But he is also accessible; he is close to them. One day Jesus went off to pray and the disciples were near him, perhaps staring at him and trying to make out what he was saying. When Jesus came back, one of them said: "Lord,

²⁰ Heb 4:12

²¹ John 15:13

²² John 1:38-39

²³ Matt 4:18-20

teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples. And he told them, When you pray, say, Father, hallowed be thy name...²⁴In the same way, with the authority of God and the affection of a human heart, our Lord meets the Apostles who were amazed at the fruits of their first mission and eager to tell him about the immediate results of their apostolate: “Come away by yourselves to a lonely place, and rest a while.”²⁵

There is a similar scene toward the end of Jesus’ life on earth, just before his ascension: “Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the beach; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Young men, have you any fish? Jesus asked them.” He asks the question as any man would, and then he speaks as God: “Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some. So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in, for the quantity of fish. The disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter: It is the Lord.”

And God is waiting for them on the shore. “When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish lying on it, and bread. Bring some of the fish that you have just caught, Jesus said to them. So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three of them; and although there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them: Come and have breakfast. Now none of the disciples dared ask him, Who are you? They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish.”²⁶

Jesus shows this refinement and affection not only to a small group of disciples, but to everyone: to the holy women, to representatives of the Sanhedrin, like Nicodemus, to tax collectors like Zachaeus; he shows it to sick and healthy people, to teachers of the law and pagans, to individuals and crowds.

The Gospels tell us that Jesus had no place to rest his head, but they also tell us that he had many good, close friends, eager to have him stay in their homes when he was in the vicinity. They tell us of his compassion for the sick, of his sorrow for those who were ignorant or in error, his anger at the money changers who profaned the temple; his heart was touched by the sorrow of the widow at Naim.

All this human behaviour is the behaviour of God. “For in him dwells all the fullness of the godhead bodily.”²⁷ Christ is God become man: a complete, perfect man. And through his human nature, he shows us what his divine nature is.

Recalling this human refinement of Christ, who spent his life in the service of others, we are doing much more than describing a pattern of human behaviour; we are discovering God. Everything Christ did has a transcendental value. It shows us the nature of God and beckons us to believe in the love of God who created us and wants us to share his intimate life. “I have manifested your name to the men whom you gave me out of the world; yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you.”²⁸

Jesus’ dealings with men go much further than words or superficial attitudes. Jesus takes them seriously and wants to make known to them the divine meaning of their life. Jesus knows how to be demanding, how to direct men to face up to their duties. If we listen to him, he weans us from comfort and conformity, and brings us to know the thrice-holy God. For Jesus is moved by hunger and sorrow, but what moves him most is ignorance. “As he landed he saw a great

²⁴ Luke 11:1-2: Domine, doce nos orare, sicut docuit et Ioannes discipulos suos

²⁵ Mark 6:31

²⁶ John 21:5-13

²⁷ Col 2:9

²⁸ John 17:6-7

throng, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.”²⁹

Turning to our everyday life

We have gone to the Gospel to contemplate Jesus’ dealings with men and to learn to bring him to our fellow men, being ourselves other Christs. Let’s apply this lesson to everyday life, to our own life. For the ordinary life of a man among his fellows is not something dull and uninteresting. It is there that the Lord wants the vast majority of his children to achieve sanctity.

It is important to keep reminding ourselves that Jesus did not address himself to a privileged set of people; he came to reveal the universal love of God to us. God loves all men, and he wants all to love him — everyone, whatever his personal situation, his social position, his work. Ordinary life is something of great value. All the ways of the earth can be an opportunity to meet Christ, who calls us to identify ourselves with him and carry out his divine mission — right where he finds us.

God calls us through what happens during our day: through the suffering and happiness of the people we live with, through the human interests of our colleagues and the things that make up our family life. He also calls us through the great problems, conflicts and challenges of each period of history, which attract the effort and idealism of a large part of mankind.

It is easy to understand the impatience, anxiety and uneasiness of people whose naturally christian soul³⁰ stimulates them to fight the personal and social injustice which the human heart can create. So many centuries of men living side by side and still so much hate, so much destruction, so much fanaticism stored up in eyes that do not want to see and in hearts that do not want to love!

The good things of the earth, monopolized by a handful of people; the culture of the world, confined to cliques. And, on the outside, hunger for bread and education. Human lives — holy, because they come from God — treated as mere things, as statistics. I understand and share this impatience. It stirs me to look at Christ, who is continually inviting us to put his new commandment of love into practice.

All the circumstances in which life places us bring a divine message, asking us to respond with love and service to others. “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left.

“Then the King will say to those at his right hand, Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me. Then the righteous will answer him, Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you? And the King will answer them, Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.”³¹

²⁹ Mark 6:34

³⁰ Cf Tertullian, *Apologeticus*, 17 (PL 1,375)

³¹ Matt 25:31-40

We must learn to recognize Christ when he comes out to meet us in our brothers, the people around us. No human life is ever isolated. It is bound up with other lives. No man or woman is a single verse; we all make up one divine poem which God writes with the cooperation of our freedom.

Nothing can be foreign to Christ's care. If we enter into the theology of it instead of limiting ourselves to functional categories, we cannot say that there are things — good, noble or indifferent — which are exclusively worldly. This cannot be after the Word of God has lived among the children of men, felt hunger and thirst, worked with his hands, experienced friendship and obedience and suffering and death. "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross."³²

We must love the world and work and all human things. For the world is good. Adam's sin destroyed the divine balance of creation; but God the Father sent his only Son to re-establish peace, so that we, his children by adoption, might free creation from disorder and reconcile all things to God.

Each human situation is unique; it is the result of a unique vocation which should be lived intensely, giving expression to the spirit of Christ. And so, living among our equals in a christian way, we will be Christ present among men. And we will do this in a natural way consistent with our faith.

When we consider the dignity of the vocation God calls us to, we might become proud and presumptuous. If that happens, we have a wrong idea of the christian mission. Our error prevents us from realizing that we are made of clay, that we are dust and wretchedness. We forget that there is evil not only around us, but right inside ourselves, nestled deep in our hearts, which makes us capable of vileness and selfishness. Only the grace of God is sure ground, we are sand, quicksand.

If we look at the history of mankind or at the present situation of the world, it makes us sad to see that after twenty centuries there are so few who claim to be Christians and fewer still who are faithful to their calling. Many years ago, a man with a good heart but who had no faith, said to me, pointing to a map of the world: "Look how Christ has failed! So many centuries trying to give his teaching to men, and there you have the result: there are no Christians."

There are many people nowadays who still think that way. But Christ has not failed. His word and his life continue to enrich the world. Christ's work, which his Father entrusted to him, is being carried out. His power runs right through history, bringing true life with it, and "when all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things under him, that God may be everything to every one."³³

God wants us to cooperate with him in this task which he is carrying out in the world. He takes a risk with our freedom. I am deeply moved by the Jesus born in Bethlehem: a defenceless, powerless child, incapable of offering any resistance. God gives himself up to men; he comes close to us, down to our level.

"Though he was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant."³⁴ God respects and bows down to our freedom, our imperfection and wretchedness. He agrees to have his divine treasures carried

³² Col 1:19-20

³³ 1 Cor 15:28

³⁴ Phil 2:6-7

in vessels of clay; he lets us make them known; God is not afraid of mixing his strength with our weaknesses.

Experience of sin, then, should not make us doubt our mission. True, our sins can make it difficult to recognize Christ. That is why we must face up to our personal miseries and seek to purify ourselves. But in doing this, we must realize that God has not promised us a complete victory over evil in this life. Instead he asks us to fight. “My grace is sufficient for you,”³⁵ our Lord replied to St Paul, when he wanted to be freed of the “thorn in his flesh” which humiliated him.

The power of God is made manifest in our weakness and it spurs us on to fight, to battle against our defects, although we know that we will never achieve total victory during our pilgrimage on earth. The christian life is a continuous beginning again each day. It renews itself over and over.

Christ gives us his risen life, he rises in us, if we become sharers in his cross and his death. We should love the cross, self-sacrifice and mortification. Christian optimism is not something sugary, nor is it a human optimism that things will “work out well.” No, its deep roots are awareness of freedom and faith in grace. It is an optimism which makes us be demanding with ourselves. It gets us to make a real effort to respond to God’s call.

Not so much despite our wretchedness but in some way through it, through our life as men of flesh and blood and dust, Christ is shown forth: in our effort to be better, to have a love which wants to be pure, to overcome our selfishness, to give ourselves fully to others — to turn our existence into a continuous service.

I don’t want to finish without another consideration. When a Christian makes Christ present among men by being Christ himself, it is not only a matter of being a considerate, loving person, but of making the Love of God known through his human love. Jesus saw all his life as a revelation of this love. As he said to one of his disciples, “He who has seen me has seen the Father.”³⁶

St John applies this teaching when he tells Christians that, since they have come to know the love of God, they should show it in their deeds: “Beloved, let us love one another since love comes from God, and everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God.

“He who does not love does not know God; for God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we love God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.”³⁷

So, our faith must be living — a faith which makes us really believe in God and keep up a continuous conversation with him. A christian life should be one of constant prayer, trying to live in the presence of God from morning to night and from night to morning. A Christian can never be a lonely man, since he lives in continual contact with God, who is both near us and in heaven.

“Pray constantly,” the Apostle tells us.³⁸ And Clement of Alexandria reminds us of this commandment: “He tells us to praise and honour the Word whom we know to be saviour and

³⁵ 2 Cor 12:9: sufficit tibi gratia mea

³⁶ John 14:9

³⁷ 1 John 4:7-11

³⁸ 1 Thess 5:17: Sine intermissione orate

king; and, through him, the Father, not on special days as some people do, but continually, right through all our life and in every kind of way.”³⁹

In the middle of his daily work, when he has to overcome his selfishness, when he enjoys the cheerful friendship of other people, a Christian should rediscover God. Through Christ and in the Holy Spirit, a Christian has access to the intimacy of God the Father, and he spends his life looking for the Kingdom which is not of this world, but which is initiated and prepared in this world.

We must seek Christ in the word and in the bread, in the Eucharist and in prayer. And we must treat him as a friend, as the real, living person he is — for he is risen. Christ, we read in the Epistle to the Hebrews, “holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently he is able for all time to save those who draw near to God, since he always lives to make intercession for them.”⁴⁰

Christ, the risen Christ, is our companion and friend. He is a companion whom we can see only in the shadows — but the fact that he is really there fills our whole life and makes us yearn to be with him forever. “The Spirit and the Bride say, Come. And let him who hears say, Come. And let him who is thirsty come, let him who desires take the water of life without price... He who testifies to these things says, Surely I am coming soon. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.”⁴¹

³⁹ Stromata, 7,7,35 (PG 9,450)

⁴⁰ Heb 7:24-25

⁴¹ Rev 22:17,20