

THE LIVING KNOWLEDGE OF CHRIST

W. RANDAG, C.S.S.R.

WE live in a time of speed, and there is a truly frightening flight from thought, reflection, depth and all things that lie below the surface. For this reason, among others, this time of speed has become a time of action, and a time of action becomes in matters spiritual a time in which particular stress is laid upon the apostolate.

The danger is that speed is valued more than rest, speech more than silence, action more than contemplation, and time more than eternity. For the layman especially the word 'apostolate' can lose all meaning unless it is the natural outcome of a full inner life. It is this inner life which still remains such a bewildering and unwieldy issue for him that the flight into social action may easily become a flight from one's own problems. Perhaps the main difficulty lies in a lack of knowledge where there is plenty of goodwill. The knowledge we have of Christ remains like the negative of a photograph, lightless. It is not often realized that *knowledge is a function of life*. That there is a living knowledge, a knowledge that struggles, grows and has its phases of growth like life in the physical sense. A mere outward memorizing of catechism answers is no foundation for a genuine apostolate.

The following lines are concerned, then, in trying to understand what a living knowledge of Christ entails. The Gospel is so simply written and its teaching is so concretely and economically expressed, that it is only too easy to glide through it and fail to observe the most obvious elements. For instance, there is no doubt that Christ is genuinely interested in what we think of him. Consider the passage of St Matthew 16, 13-20. We all know it and we all at once think of it as the scriptural basis of the Petrine claim. But we do not look at the beginning of the incident. As it were casually, Christ asks his disciples: 'What do people think of me?' 'Whom do they say I am?' And when it comes to relating gossip the Apostles—like most human beings—almost fall over their words in their eagerness to tell him what So-and-so said. The scene is a homely scene of very human life and locality. But Christ brings them back to the real point of the question: 'I see. But *you*, whom do *you* think I am?' It is as if he expects more and

better of them, his constant companions, not his servants but his friends. They have heard him, they have seen him, they have witnessed his actions and behaviour from day to day. Christ wants to know; he is genuinely interested, not only for himself but so that they may learn to question themselves and check on their own progress in a living, personal knowledge of his Person and his mission. Then Peter says those momentous words: 'Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God'. This personal knowledge, supplemented and transformed by the living knowledge of the living God himself, is the living faith.

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We have all repeated, in one way or another, the great words of St Peter. We have sung: 'I believe in one God . . . and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God . . . Who took on our flesh through the Holy Spirit from the Virgin Mary and became man.' This faith is the seed of the living knowledge. And as it is but a seed, it must be protected, nourished, and coaxed into growth. Therefore this beginning of knowledge must find a willing acceptance; it must allow itself to be drawn out; there must be no pretence of blindness, no barriers, no secret resistance.

Through this faith man adheres to Christ; man receives something of Christ's life. 'Approach, believe, be incorporated, and start life anew', says St Augustine. Christ himself declared: 'He who believes in the Son, has eternal life: but he who does not believe in the Son will not see life but the wrath of God remains upon him' (John 3, 36). And our Lady is accepted as the Bearer of Christ through her faith: 'Be it done unto me according to thy word'. As the first and greatest in her surrender to God's message, she became 'full of grace'. We have accepted that faith in our Baptism and have through our incorporation into the Mystical Body of Christ been dedicated to this life of faith, of living knowledge. But that faith must live, develop, bear fruit. And to bear fruit is the characteristic of love. Thus if our faith is to be a living faith, it must be penetrated by love. A faith, not penetrated by love, does not unite fully with God. Such knowledge remains a kind of dead, photographic knowledge, not a living reality. The living knowledge, then, or the knowledge which is a true function of life, must grow and 'develop in power' (2 Thess. 1, 3). What then are the phases of this growth in Christ-knowledge. One may perhaps distinguish four of these phases.

The first of these phases is an active adjustment. We must adjust ourselves to the surrounding world, to the things and persons which fix our place in this universe by their relationship with us. This adjustment must mould itself upon Christ's own adjustment, his perfect relationships, his outward behaviour towards the facts of this world and the next. Our knowledge comes to us first through things and persons, facts and actions which we observe outside ourselves. We judge men first by their outward actions.

It is therefore important to study the outward manifestations of Christ's adjustment if we wish later on to penetrate into his inner dispositions. We must try to understand and adjust ourselves first to his external behaviour, so as to increase our living and effective knowledge of Christ which we have received with our baptismal grace. This point is not difficult to illustrate. Take, for instance, Christ's attitude towards his Father's will. The attitude of man towards his Creator shows itself principally in his acceptance of God's will. As Christ is man as well as God, we should be able to see in his words and deeds that reverence, that submission and that acceptance towards God, the Lord of all. Now, nothing is more evident in the relation of Christ's behaviour on this point, as we find it in the narrative of the Gospels, than precisely this 'adjustment' of Christ's attitude towards God's will. From birth to death he is guided by the will of the Father. Whether it is suffering, or joy, or poverty, or a mission that this will entails, it shall be done. The very keynote of his worship was: 'Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven'. In these words the whole vast universe is contained in a truly 'universal' worship of which the will of God is the living inspiration.

This will of God contains for Christ all that is due to God: God's glory, God's salvation and God's zeal. The whole of Christ's teaching was inaugurated by a discreet appeal to God's will in his reply to his mother (Luke 2, 49). His fight against sin, his defence of the poor and the needy, his campaign against two-faced hypocrisy of spiritual overlords, against snobbery and corruption, all this is determined by Christ's attitude towards God. He is the perfect adjustment to God in all his deeds and in all his relationships.

A second set of outward relations concerns Christ's fellowmen. Love, understanding, gratitude, service are displayed for even the most simple observer in his miracles, his cures, his encouragement

of goodwill and his understanding support of weakness, his rejection of physical violence, his courtesy, his citizenship and collaboration with temporal authority where it does not conflict in deed or intention with God's rights.

If we study Christ in this way, if we take note of his actions, his words, his behaviour, we shall find in Christ's outward conduct a perfect example of his adjustment to the world around him. We shall then assist our incipient faith in growing into a living knowledge that bears fruit in a practical and sincere imitation of his example. Thus we shall pass through the first phase of growth in knowledge, that '*scientia*' which St Paul mentions so often and which is equally often forgotten.

Through this penetration of Christ's outward behaviour and the study of his reactions in so far as the Gospel-narrative reveals them to us, Christ begins to live for us as a Person. It becomes then natural that we begin to get interested in the whole Person. Our knowledge, which has grown from a willing acceptance of a fact to a studied acquaintance with a Person, will quite naturally want to know more. It will want to penetrate beyond the outward manifestations to the inward spring of his actions, the inspiration of his relations, the thoughts, feelings and motives that prompted his conduct. We shall want to know Christ's inner dispositions.

The full knowledge of Christ obviously entails both the outward and the inward knowledge, and both of these are contained in the important words of Christ himself: 'This is eternal life, that they may know thee, the one true God, and him whom thou hast sent, Jesus Christ' (John 17, 3). St Paul understood it in this way when he said: 'Feel in yourselves those things that were in Christ Jesus' (Phil. 2, 5). This 'feeling' is not a mere sentiment; it means 'go through', or 'experience', or 'imitate' in your own inner life those dispositions that were Christ's. We must then try to see clearly what Christ's motives were, his principles, his conception of a good life, of happiness and suffering, what love means, and that strong peace which is more powerful than all violence.

The difficulty arises here of how to achieve this inner knowledge. The answer here lies not in a scholastic research and academic examination, useful though their fruits may be. The knowledge we are speaking of is a living knowledge; it is a function of our very life. It must therefore grow as our life grows: from within, though with the help we can muster from outside sources. From

within we must look at Christ, keep our willing attention focussed on him. This is obviously the fruit of believing prayer, or prayerful faith. In our prayer we must come close to Christ; we must exploit, so to speak, that contact with Christ which is our prayer: an interior approach to, and union with, Christ. In such a prayer the soul becomes sensitive and Christ himself is active, and there, in that subtle contact, things are understood that are beyond words and beyond study. The main point is therefore a willing heart, an open attitude towards Christ. It is because of a failure in this willingness and openness that many who are outwardly zealous remain inwardly blind: 'Among you stands he whom you do not know' (John I, 26). No doubt: we can never be Christ, never penetrate the whole of his infinite beauty, but is that an excuse for remaining superficial? Should that encourage us not to make an effort, not to express in our trying—effectively trying—the longing for Christ which cannot grow without an increase in knowledge?

The full and living knowledge of Christ, even when it covers his outward conduct and his inner dispositions, demands still more. Christ, indeed, is more than an example. Because Christ united in his one Person two natures, he alone could bring together again the Creator and the persons who make up the human community. When man was created he lived in harmony and friendship with God. But when he sinned and set himself up in the place of God, this relationship was severed. Nor could it be restored without both sides approaching each other. It was Christ who, being God and man, was God's approach to the human race, and thus enabled the human race to approach God. But he did more. Not only did he restore the possibility of friendship and harmony, and so gave man's life again its former direction. He lifted it up on to a new level. He took man to himself and allowed him to become part of the divine family, as adopted children. His work, therefore, is not only a restoration of life but the giving of a new life, a new creation. And because of this his actions and dispositions not only set us an example, but they were the very sources of the new life which Christ came to give us. They therefore help to mould our actions and our dispositions, to transform them into things of beauty and light, to lend them that Christlike quality and effectiveness which make the Father look upon them as the actions of his own Son. These actions culminated in the

death and resurrection of our Lord. They are all bound together into one 'Work', one '*opus redemptionis*', and it is this *opus redemptionis* which is the object of the third phase of our growing knowledge. It becomes not only a living knowledge but begins already to be a life-giving knowledge through the greater intimacy with Christ. At this phase we begin, in a personal and effective way, to understand what Christ meant when he said: 'I am come that they may have life, and may have life in abundance' (John 10, 10).

The knowledge of this mystery of our redemption is so important for us for two main reasons.

Firstly, we cannot know the Person of Christ, particularly as the Son of God, unless we enter with our whole being into this mystery of redemption. Christ made himself entirely one with his work, to such a degree that, according to St Paul, he identified himself with his work: 'Who for us has become wisdom, righteousness, holiness and redemption' (1 Cor. 1, 30).

Secondly, it is important because the new life, the new love and the new knowledge are ours only and precisely through the power of this mystery in us. It is through this power in us that we can share in the great 'work' of Christ, share in his redemption, not only as receiving but as giving it to others, for the salvation of others as well as our own. It is through our participation in the climax of this work, Christ's death and resurrection, that we live, and live *knowingly*, in the very life of Christ.

That this third phase entails a new stage in our knowledge is obvious. We not only know Christ in his outward manifestations and inner dispositions, but we penetrate here to the root of those actions, words and dispositions. We penetrate into the 'why' of them. Our progress in depth of understanding goes to the very reason why the God-Man is there at all. And, as it is a living knowledge, we become more aware of our closeness to Christ. We begin to understand that when he came to dwell in the womb of the Virgin Mary, he was inserted in our genealogy, our life-tree, so that we might become inserted into his life-tree.

Thus he became the Mediator between God and man. In the light of this we understand better his attitude towards the Father. We understand better why he was consumed by zeal for God's justice: 'It behoves us to fulfil all justice' (Matt. 3, 15).

We grasp more fully what he meant when he said: 'I always do what is pleasing to the Father' (John 8, 29). We understand why he

fought those trespasses against love in sin and greed and hypocrisy. This same light clarifies his relation with man; why he stressed mercy, and gave his abundant goodness in word and in deed; why he did not come to condemn but to save (cf. John 3, 17).

Lastly the fulness of knowledge, the knowledge of the mystery of God's salvation (Col. 2, 2) makes us realize that since the broken relationship between God and man has not only been restored but renewed on a closer basis, the gates of life have been unlocked, and immense possibilities of inventive love, creative goodness and all happiness lie open before us in infinite profusion and variety. This is fulness of life indeed, and thus 'our joy will reach its completion' (John 17, 13).

And yet, with all this, there is still a fourth phase of growth in knowledge. Christ said: 'I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me. Because you have learned to know me, you will also know the Father, and from this moment you do know him and have seen him.' He reinforced it by answering the impatient Philip: 'So long I have been with you, Philip, and you do not know me? Who has seen me, has seen the Father. How can you say: show us the Father? Do you not believe, then, that I am in the Father and the Father in me?' (John 14, 1-10). St John's gospel starts with the noble words: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God'. It is this Word of God, this only-begotten Son of God, who is our Christ. Theology has indeed tried to clarify the mystery of the Blessed Trinity by considering that knowledge is life. God's knowledge is life. And because life is fruitful, knowledge is fruitful. Thus the fruitful life of God's knowledge brought forth the Son of God who is the Word of God; the Word is the Fruit of the Thought. So we find our theme of living knowledge in the very heart of the greatest of all mysteries, that of the Blessed Trinity. Having been given the knowledge of Christ's actions and words, the knowledge of his inner dispositions, the knowledge of his Person and his work, we have become receivers of Christ's own Self-knowledge, of Christ's own life. In this fulness lies the fulness of all beatitude that a creature can attain with the help of Christ's grace: we have become, through adoption, one with Christ, sons of the Father, and we have been received into that life of love-exchange which flows from the Father to the Son and from the Son to the Father. That consummation of all possibilities of love

and the highest climax of life is still wrapped in a veil which we cannot penetrate or grasp whilst we are still engulfed in matter, time and space. But the knowledge of the *fact* of this relationship has already put the key into our hands which will let us one day into the place where life and knowledge become one stream and where we are delivered from darkness with the Father of Light with whom there is no vicissitude.

Finally, as has been said before, the most important means of increasing our living knowledge lies in a willing and active faith coupled with frequent prayer. This should be understood properly. The best prayer is of course such prayer as keeps us directly and personally in touch with Christ. Such prayer comes naturally when we assist intelligently at Mass or meditate upon Christ. But such prayer must be fed, and be fed with the right kind of nourishment. One powerful means is what the old Fathers called '*lectio divina*', divine reading. That does not mean rushing through the Scriptures but picking out small passages and dwelling on them, repeating them, standing still to look at all the implications and meanings. Even if one limited oneself because of lack of leisure to the epistles and gospels of each Sunday, one would find a complete code or handbook of knowledge—if one knows how to read. Here again a certain intelligent perusal of good books on theology or the Scriptures, or the reading of good articles which explain points that might help us—all this will prevent an arbitrary and fanciful use of texts and prayer and so assist us in our progress. Moreover, if advice is asked of those more advanced in knowledge than ourselves, we shall easily and without much difficulty come to 'savour' that living knowledge, and we shall 'savour' it 'soberly', as the Apostle counsels: '*Sapere in sobrietate*'.



LOVE AND SUFFERING IN RELIGIOUS LIFE

A Conference

ADRIAN DOWLING, O.P.

WE are told that religious life is a striving after Perfection. That does not mean what many people 'in the world' think, and what perhaps we thought on entering the life. It does not mean that religious are perfect. You've heard