

SOME THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE TITLE: "SOCIETY OF THE HOLY CHILD JESUS"

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This paper is an attempt to "place" theologically the implications of our title "Holy Child Jesus" and to examine devotion to the Holy Child in the light of this. It would seem that this attempt has not been made explicitly before, and as such it may indicate for others directions for thought, perhaps along the same lines, perhaps diverse lines, both of which would be welcome in the Society's common quest for deeper understanding of its mission.

The sections in the paper on devotion and on how we should externalise the conclusions have been very strictly limited, because they are a matter for discernment by each, albeit as a member of the Society. The argument for much of the paper rests very largely on a correct apprehension of the significance of charism, and on the two ancient doctrines of the Imitation of Christ and the Image of God, and I have used the idea of "models" to set out some of it.

CHARISM

Since Vatican II, and specifically since the Constitution on the Church, charismata must be included in ecclesiology not as something peripheral but as something very important in the life of the Church, and, to our immediate purpose, in the building up of religious institutes. That is, charism is conciliar doctrine. The Holy Spirit allots his gifts to everyone as he will, to make them ready

... to undertake the various tasks or offices advantageous for the up-building of the Church. ... Judgement as to their genuineness and proper use belongs to those who preside over the Church, and to whose special competence it belongs not indeed to extinguish the Spirit, but to test all things and hold fast to that which is good ... (*Lumen Gentium*, #12; and *Mystici Corporis*, #54-6).

Thus a charism is not primarily an extraordinary or sensational phenomenon, though it may be; and the Church is the body competent to discern its genuineness, if it appears to be given for the general good.

Some theologians distinguish between sanctifying grace, gift, and charism. Grace, the indwelling of the Blessed Trinity, is given to all at baptism: gift is an enabling power such as the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit or the twelve fruits, which give an insight into divine realities: charism is an invitation of the Holy Spirit calling a christian to perform a task in the Church for the common good. Hans Kung defines it as God's call to an individual to service for the community, plus the ability to perform that service.

This distinction is useful in making it possible to speak with precision about charism, which has a somewhat wider connotation in some popular writing; in what follows the word is always used in this sense. There is a close link between gift and charism. A charismatic is, one might say, one who is led by the Spirit to share his gift with the Church, and this sharing can be variously realised. St. Therese of Lisieux had an insight which was not shared by the Church till after her death; Charles de Foucauld and de Caussade both had insights which were accompanied by a teaching charism, but not, as de Foucauld would have wished in his own case, by a foundation charism. Others may possess this. It is a charism which calls others to join the charismatic in a way of life; those who follow the founder share the grace and insight of the founder by virtue of the shared way of life which they have undertaken at the call of the Holy Spirit to each. This shared experience of the Spirit in a particular call is at the heart of community. The particular way of life, and the Rule when freely formed by founders, embodies their charism, their particular gospel insight, and this is why any radical change—e.g., the re-organising of a religious congregation into a secular institute—involves loss of charism and loss of continuity. Of course, the charism can be fully possessed by members whose tasks are very different and whose gifts and temperament vary widely, for example, Robert Bellarmine, Robert Southwell and Francis Xavier were all equally, and one may say, recognisably, Jesuits.

Chapter VI of the Constitution on the Church sets forth at some length the role of the Holy Spirit in this kind of activity, and attributes the variety of religious forms to his action. *Perfectae Caritatis* repeats this:

... Under the influence of the Holy Spirit many ... pursued a solitary life or founded religious families to which the Church willingly gave the welcome and approval of her authority ... (#1.)

It explains that the variety of religious communities has contributed mightily to the experience, service and beautifying of the Church, and that because of the variety "... God's manifold wisdom could reveal itself." (*Ibid.*) Religious orders are founded on the gospel and on the charism of the founder. (*Ibid.*, #2).

It is important not to separate the spiritual and the juridical, which is always something of a temptation, but to recognise the role of law as embodied in the founder's Rule, as a support for and an embodiment of her particular charism, and as the means of ensuring that it does not become merely the private possession of each individual, but remains that for which it was given as a *foundation* charism, that is, held and exemplified in and by a community. I think there was an instinctive realisation by the early Society of the real significance of Rule in the matter of Dr. Danell's Rule.

Cornelia Connelly's gospel insight was expressed in the name she gave to her Society, "of the Holy Child Jesus", and that this was more than a pious title or mere description is abundantly clear from the first chapter of her Rule. This is her statement of what the Society is about, what distinguishes it from other religious groups, and what justified the erection of the Society as a new Congregation, even though it proposed to do as its external apostolic work nothing more than was already being done by the Society of the Sacred Heart, which she had hoped to join and which sheltered and cared for her so generously during the bleak months when she knew this was not God's will for her.

There are two main ways in which charismatic insight may be realised in community life. The first is the way of many active religious congregations which were founded in the nineteenth century to meet an immediate need, often in a limited locality, as for instance those which began as small groups of pious women directed by a village priest, who came together to care for orphans or the aged poor of a district. Those which survived the death of the original members often lived by a simple rule of life, which, as the group enlarged and sought episcopal recognition, eventually became codified as the religious Rule of a particular religious society. The gospel insight of these people is that what they do in Christ's name they do to him, and their work expresses their charism of Love in action. One could enlarge on this since it is somewhat over-simplified here, but as it is the second type which is of immediate concern it would be a red herring to stop on the first.

The second then is the way of a different type of charism. Any insight into the Gospel is, obviously, concerned with Christ in some way—what he did, or said, or what he is. Communities such as those mentioned above have picked up our Lord's words on loving our neighbour and serving him in them. But I think that the second type, to which we belong, is concerned somehow with what Christ *is*, with the absolutely basic bedrock fact of the Incarnation. Throughout his earthly life there was only the one same Christ, the second Person of the Blessed Trinity, who passed through all the processes of any human life from conception to death. All these made up the one human experience of the one, undivided, ever the same Jesus. But every experience of this life was part of the manifestation of God to men, that men might understand the invisible God by seeing the visible Christ. The second kind of charism is, I think, to continue visibly this manifestation, as a contribution to the life of Christ continued in the Church. But the Incarnate life of God made man is too vast and rich for any one group of people to manifest, so it is the task of congregations with this charism to manifest some particular phase or facet of it (Footnote? It is perhaps helpful to suggest that the first type of charism has a 'Synoptics'

basis and the second a Johannine one). Ours is that of the Lord's childhood. Our name, and the whole of Chapter One of the Rule, and the various draft sections of it discovered and circulated recently by the SHCJ Institute, make it abundantly clear that this was not merely a matter of title and patronage, but the wellspring of our entire religious living. The task given to us who have accepted to receive Cornelia Connelly's insight and the way of life in which she embodied it, is not to perpetuate an infantilism, but to share in the life of Christ as a child, which, in that condition, manifests by its willed constriction or limitation, its total engagement to the saving will of God. It is a task in which each individual must play a vital part, and it is to some extent realised in each one, but since it is given to us as a Society it is above all our united task—i.e., the Society as one community must reflect to the world the vision of the first years of the incarnate life of Christ with an adult comprehension that this self-emptying, even humanwise, is part and parcel of a life lived for the Passion and the Glory. This will be better left to the next section for expansion.

We have all from our noviceship days had a consciousness that devotion to the Holy Child is somehow essential to us but have not always found it easy to practice. What was perhaps lacking was the explicit effort to justify it theologically, and it seems opportune in the particular climate of the Church to-day to attempt this.

At present, in theology as in other disciplines such as anthropology and some of the sciences, there is considerable use being made of a notion which is not theological but which serves as a tool to theological understanding, and that is the notion of "model"—some idea or thing used as a medium of disclosure about something else. An idea or phrase is a "model" for our present purpose if it gives us theological insight or an understanding which is truly in harmony with theology as a whole, which has (as the phrase is) an "empirical fit." It is possible to have various kinds of "models," some quite near to metaphor, but what I propose to use as an explanation of our special task is the notion of "disclosure" models.

We find a "model" in a moment of insight, that is, in the context of this argument, in the moment of charismatic gift. It can then be passed on, and in the case of founders, passed on not only as teaching but as a way of life. The "model" helps to articulate theological understanding, and given the blessing of the Church (as with the approval of a religious foundation), that understanding is reliable and authentic.

In this sense then, our "model" is the Holy Child, not, for the moment, a model to be imitated, but a "model" from which we can learn and can express something about God himself, a "model" which illuminates what otherwise might remain obscure to us. By "contemplating the Eternal Wisdom" in this lowliest state of his lowly humanity, we can learn of God's mercy and God's love:

... mysteries of the most sublime teaching are to be found in the humble and hidden life of the Holy Child Jesus, in which God manifests in a most wonderful manner the treasures of His Mercy and of His boundless Love. . . .

To learn in this way is a particular gift and duty of our vocation.

But Cornelia Connelly understood the Holy Child not only as teaching us, but as a way of life, in the living of which we would come to know God and to manifest him. This we can understand in the light of two doctrines, the image of God and the imitation of Christ. Primarily and most properly, the image of God is Christ the firstborn. Man defaced the image in himself by sin and he is renewed in Christ, the primary image, according to the mysterious intention of God:

... We know that by turning everything to good, God co-operates with those who love him . . . they are the ones he chose specially long ago and intended to become true images of his Son, so that his Son might be the eldest of many brothers. (Rm 8:28-29)

The doctrine of the imitation of Christ has been developed variously at different times in the history of the Church. In apostolic times it meant martyrdom, and later by transference it meant consecrated virginity. St. Bernard of Clairvaux developed a sort of mysticism of the mass, seeing in each part of the liturgy some symbolic representation of the Passion, and in each vestment some garment of Christ in his Passion, using against Abelard the here and now presence of Christ in our sacramental justification. St. Francis of Assisi intended a literal imitation of the circumstances of the gospel life, St. Ignatius of Loyola a moral-mystical one. (Cf. *Spiritual Exercises*, #98). From early times such acts as night-vigils and works of mercy were seen as acts of this imitation. Luther found himself in some difficulties, because although it fitted theoretically with liberated religious groups (in some, old men bowled hoops by way of becoming as little children), yet it appeared suspect as likely to stress works against faith. Calvin was perhaps the first to develop at all systematically a doctrine of the imitation of Christ. To summarize it briefly: he said that it is discipleship that is the basis of imitation and this involves resignation to the will of God.

What is common to all these various concepts is the conviction that in some way Christians must follow, or imitate Christ in obedience to his command.

We are therefore to imitate Christ, and however different the actualisation of this implied in the ideas referred to above, it is clear that it requires the doctrine of his true humanity, and that there can be no imitation in any sense which is not an imitation of a human and free

Christ. But Christ is the image of God. "The Son is the radiant light of God's glory and the perfect copy of his nature" (Heb 1:3). If we look in Scripture we find that although Christ said "Follow me"—in self denial, and "learn of me"—in meekness and humility of heart, he said also, "Be ye perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." And if we examine the teaching of the New Testament it is constantly that we must act like *God*, that we must live theo-logically, and that the first and most compelling area in which we must do this is love.

The Jews accepted that they must forgive their fellow Jews seven times, but non-Jews were outside the scope of their obligation. The norm for Christians, however, is that we must forgive without limit because we have been forgiven by God. We are to love no longer just our neighbour, and no longer just as ourselves, but as God loves—in

the *measure* of God's love: "Just as I have loved you, you also must love one another." (1 Jn 13:34)

and *because* of God's love: "We are to love, then, because he first loved us" (1 Jn 4:19)

and *enabled* by God's love: "The love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit" (Rm 5:5)

And all this applies universally: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you; in this way you will be sons of your Father in heaven" (Mt 5:44-5), who while we were yet sinners gave up his only Son for our salvation.

But the "model" for this is Christ ("Love was his meaning" said Juliana of Norwich). Here I used the word "model" again in the sense of something which discloses, but also of something which so discloses as to evoke action, to evoke imitation. The son acts like the Father: "To have seen me is to have seen the Father" (1 Jn 14:9); and what Cornelia Connelly gave us was a way of life with the Divine Child as "model." This has three aspects. Firstly, our lives must be lived before God like that of the Child who was the beloved Son in whom the Father was well pleased. Secondly, our lives must in some way disclose, or be apt to disclose, to others, something of the insights about God which we have gained by contemplating the Child; therefore, thirdly, there must be in our lives an imitation of Christ. This is an individual task, but also a task of the Society as a whole, which is greater than the sum of its parts. The most vital aspect is the first, both for individuals and the Society, because it is our attitude before the Father directly, our 'odour of sweetness', whatever our circumstances, office or age.

We might now consider how to attain this likeness to Christ, and what should characterise a likeness precisely to the *Child* Christ.

Christians attain the likeness to God, commanded by Christ; "be ye perfect . . .", by contemplating Christ:

We with our unveiled faces reflecting like mirrors the brightness of the Lord, all grow brighter and brighter as we are turned into the image that we reflect: this is the work of the Lord who is Spirit (2 Co 3:18)

—those with “unveiled faces” are the baptised.

But it is a classic failing of man to fall into pelagianism. We are certainly free men contemplating the free Christ, for he made us free with his freedom, which is the only essential freedom, the ability to do what is right. But our imitation of and likeness to him are an effect of his atoning work and not our own effort to atone for ourselves. The Society has been helped in this regard by being given the Child Christ as model, model in both senses. His essential closeness to the Father, his holiness, and his role as Jesus, Saviour, were there, fully present, in his passivity to the will of God in his infant state, and in the subjection of his boyhood. The classic doctrine of the imitation of Christ, of striving for Christ-likeness, is liable to the criticism that it is a self-regarding love, tending to become eros instead of agape; but any authentic regarding of the Child has an inbuilt safeguard against this. One might say that Christ’s will and his love rise to the Father in their purest form from the crib.

So far, a theological argument has been built on the concepts of charism as the foundation for religious life, and of the doctrines of the imitation of Christ and the image of God elucidated by the notion of “model.” It remains next to apply this to our particular case and examine what should characterise our imitation and image.

We are the community that resulted from Cornelia Connelly’s fidelity to her charismatic gift, and since she set out her insight in some detail, there should be some indication there of characteristics which are common to the whole Society, whereby the living before God and the world can be realised. From her Rule, these seem to be four. Firstly, that we search the scriptures for the mysteries of the most sublime teaching which are to be found in the humble and hidden life of the Holy Child Jesus, particularly those related to God’s mercy and boundless love. Secondly, that we have a great openness to the Holy Spirit, particularly with regard to humility, charity and obedience as these are to be seen in the child “. . . enclosed for nine months in the womb of his virgin mother, born in a stable, fleeing into Egypt, hidden and labouring in a humble workshop,” because it is “from the living wells of His perfect humility, his divine charity, and His absolute obedience that we are to receive the Spirit of the Holy Child Jesus”—no mere *esprit de corps*. Thirdly, contemplating God “great not in mass but in might” we are to acquire self knowledge and cultivate mortification in order to be united with him. Fourthly, we are to learn from the hidden life that the basis of being perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect in prayer and the interior life. In every case the attitude is to be contemplative and receptive.

All this is to the end not of self improvement, however noble a twist be given to this idea, but that *together* by these four means which are our heritage, we may live before God in such wise that we are like the beloved Son in whom he was as well pleased in the crib as on the cross, continuing in the world the living of the first years of his incarnate life.

Further expansion of this theme would take the paper into more devotional channels which are outside its scope, but it seems appropriate to stop for a moment on some application of Philippians 2:5-8, since this has always been seen as one of our basic texts. In the situation of deprivation which is so clear in childhood and so in Christ’s childhood, there is nevertheless a divine manifestation which makes sense because the deprivation has its origin and its purpose in the unity of Christ’s love and will, with the saving will of God; and because childhood contains the promise of growth. Regarding the Child cannot stop there because we are in the adult comprehension that the Child, in the situation of child, yet lived his *whole* life in that situation. There is here a sort of “realised eschatology,” as when we speak of the kingdom of God not yet fulfilled but still realised here and now, or present within us, or in the Church.

The regarding of this quasi-kenotic condition of Christ requires not only time and thought and prayer, but a very great maturity in those who seek to take it into their own lives, a maturity which must begin in imitating Christ in his love for the Father, and the Father’s will. The beauty of the Son lay not exactly in the *submission* of his will to the Father’s, but in the growth and spontaneity of the love he manifested for the Father’s will whether in the crib or on the cross.

There is one last theological point with which I would like to deal, and that refers to our prayer. It can happen that a difficulty arises if the effort is made to address prayer to the Holy Child; or the infancy narratives may be hard to disentangle from memories of prep school nativity plays so that any meditation on them becomes difficult. And this raises a problem, but it is a false problem, arising from the idea that we should necessarily be particularised in prayer. This is a wrong idea. Contemplation of Christ in any of his mysteries may well lead to spontaneous prayer to Christ in that mystery. But it need not. Our prayer is to Christ living now; and living now he is the glorified Lord, eternally in the bosom of the Father and free from location, time and progression: not a baby, not a suffering man, not in the crib, not on the cross, but in his glorified humanity ever interceding for us at the right hand of the Father; and our prayer to him is in the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the Holy Child Jesus, inserted into the life of the Blessed Trinity, eternal, still and immutable.

The prayers of the Roman missal for the great feasts give the pointer to this. They are not addressed to Christ in a particular stage of his earthly life, but to the Father asking the grace of the mystery celebrated.

This does not invalidate our public prayers to the Holy Child, nor, for slightly different reasons, mean that such prayers should not be taught to children. The prayer "O most sweet Jesus . . ." has, for example, a strong scriptural and doctrinal basis. "Feed on thy sweetness" evokes scriptural references, e.g., the milk and honey of the Promised Land, the banquet of Wisdom (Pr 9:1), the eschatological banquet, or the Holy Eucharist. It recalls also the idea behind the practice of giving honey to the newly baptised in the early Church, or of the savour of Christ, the savour of Wisdom. "Burn with thy love" brings to mind the fire which the Lord came to cast on the earth and kindle by the gift of his love. "Grant us thine own Spirit of the Holy Child Jesus" asks not for a Society *esprit de corps*, but for the Spirit of the Lord which must be given and received or we cannot witness to him before God and men. "Unless you possessed the Spirit of Christ you would not belong to him" (Rm 8:9). The opening of the prayer asking that "by thy most sweet name" he would be our Saviour reminds us that "there is no other name under heaven whereby you may be saved."

Again, further consideration on these lines would lead into the field of devotion, but it is worth recalling that a lot of our traditional devotion is theologically well-based, and it may well be that it is a providential mark attached to the Society that it has avoided the worst aberrations of the nineteenth century in this matter. It is a superficial approach to discard it because of the language in which it is couched—a somewhat literal casting out of the baby with the bath water.

The common and earnest pursuit of our charismatic and theological task is the supreme means of developing community, though individual acts of course express and sustain it. If we search the scriptures humbly in the way indicated by Cornelia Connelly and with minds wide open at each new reading to the probability that we have never yet understood them; and if we seek to live what we find in the infancy narratives, God's Word and God's Spirit are then able to act as strong molding forces. We have provided the context, as it were. Perhaps I can make this point more clearly by an example. The cohesive force of Islam is the Qur'an, and it is never in question whether a Muslim boy should learn it. The task is onerous and the educational methods primitive, but Muslims are people of the Book which is their common heritage. Similarly, religious Jewry continues on the Old Testament scriptures, constantly studied. As a result, in both cases, distinctive ways of acting and thinking emerge, characteristic of Muslims or Jews, recognisable in even the most diverse types of each, and the Muslim community and the Jewish community are world forces to be reckoned with. Maybe the great christian insight into the value of each individual person has been articulated imperfectly, and maybe this has led

us to lose sight of the equally valid insight that christians are a community, constituted by the Living Word of God and the communication of the Spirit.

The real depths of the riches to be found in contemplating the Child are perhaps best summarized by St. John and St. Luke. "It is the only Son who is nearest to the Father's heart who has made him known" (Jn 1:18), and what he particularly made known was God's mercy and love. And: "You will find the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger". *This* is the sign that ". . . to-day . . . a saviour has been born to you, who is Christ the Lord" (Lk 2:11-12)

Addenda

1. The idea of 'models' is clearly and simply set forth in a little book of three essays by Ian Ramsey, *Models and Mystery* (Oxford, 1964).
2. Some ideas about the infancy narratives which can lead out a bit are to be found in the following easily accessible places:
The *Jerome Biblical Commentary* under "The Infancy Narrative" of Luke and the "Prologue" of St. John.
J. Mackenzie, *Biblical Dictionary*, under "Infancy," and "Image," sections 4-5.
The Index to the Jerusalem Bible and the cross references; this latter also for "Image" or "Likeness."