

THE DUTIES OF A CHRISTIAN (5): Theocentric or Anthropocentric?

In the history of spirituality and catechesis the terms "theocentric" and "anthropocentric" are often presented as opposites. In this respect what was the formula adopted by St. John Baptist de La Salle?

From a careful examination of the pages of De La Salle's treatise we can state categorically: neither theocentric nor anthropocentric but christocentric because God and man meet in the Person of Jesus Christ. With St. Paul we can express it thus: "God in Christ, the salvation of the world" and again, "Christ the Saviour who makes sharers in his life all those who believe in him".

Considering the important place given in the "Duties" to the Person and Spirit of Jesus Christ I shall limit myself in this article to the instances where Christ is presented as Head and Soul of the Mystical Body. I would like, at the beginning, to point out some illuminating facts in relation to this matter.

THE NAMES GIVEN TO THE SON OF GOD IN THE "DUTIES"

The name Jesus Christ is the one that flows most readily from the pen of the saint — no less than 352 times. Then, but less frequently, comes the name Jesus — in 82 passages. We find the expression "Our Lord, Jesus Christ" 39 times and "Our Lord" 36 times. The expression "Son of God" is used 26 times. The fact that the word "Christ" is used in 4 passages only deserves our attention. Was it because the preceding appellations had a greater anthropocentric signification?

Though these 546 repetitions do not, of themselves, prove the christocentricity of the "Duties", they, nevertheless, give a revealing indication of the author's thinking. Other expressions such as "Spouse", "Redeemer", "Mediator", "Saviour" etc., frequently found in the "Duties", point in the same direction.

JESUS CHRIST IN THE MYSTICAL BODY

1. The mystic reality

According to De La Salle we must seek the ultimate and existential meaning of the Mystical Body in the saving will of Jesus Christ who, having come to save all men... unites them in one single body "because he has established a new religion and has given to men a new Law". (1).

This body, mystical and real at the same time, is the prolongation of his "divine-human" Person. Consequently, "to disobey the Church is to disobey God and Jesus Christ" (2) because the Church has received from Christ what properly and exclusively belongs to the Son (3): his power and authority as well as his doctrine.

2. Jesus Christ: Head and Heart of the Mystical Body

Just as in a living body it is the head that directs the whole body, so "Jesus Christ... is the Head... who leads and governs invisibly" the Mystical Body of the Church (5). Since the Church militant requires visible leaders, the Church's pastors, who represent Christ, govern it in his name and with his authority (6).

(1) "Les Devoirs d'un Chrétien envers Dieu", I, p. 62.

(2) *Ibid.*, p. 151.

(3) Mt. 28,18; Col. 2,10; Eph. 1,21.

(4) *Devoirs*, pp. 69, 241, 339, 366, etc.

(5) *Ibid.*, p. 73.

(6) *Ibid.*, p. 129.

In the Mystical Body the grace of Jesus Christ is not only a directive force, it is also an animating and life-giving force through the action of the Holy Spirit whom he communicates to its members who are united with him in charity. A leitmotiv of the "Duties" is that the faithful are *Members of Jesus Christ* and that to be considered as such they must be *united with Christ* in charity. These two aspects respond to each other as do the chords which form a melody.

3. From Baptism to Extreme Unction through the Eucharist

In Baptism Jesus Christ takes possession of the Christian, incorporating him into his human nature and through the intermediary of his sacred humanity putting him in relation with the divine Person of the Word Incarnate. He communicates to him "the Spirit of Jesus Christ" by which he unites him to himself so intimately that God considers him from that moment as a "Member of His Son made Man" (7).

The personal union of the baptized person with the Head attains "community" dimensions which extend to all members of the Mystical Body of the Church. It is on this union that the "Duties" base the love we owe to Christians more than to other men (8). Furthermore, this loving intercommunication extends beyond time and space and makes the Church, militant, suffering and triumphant, a single Body in Christ Jesus (9).

The union within the Body of the Church has its own sacrament: the Eucharist. It makes the unity of the Body real because it contains really and substantially Him in whom the Church is One: *Unus panis, unum Corpus*. De La Salle writes that this sacrament is called Communion because it unites closely to Jesus Christ those who receive it, and that those who communicate are united by a sincere and visible love (10). It is the union of the members with the Head, and of the members among themselves in the love of Christ; in a word, the communion of the whole Mystical Body.

When he speaks of the effects of Holy Communion, De La Salle stresses that it unites us so closely with Our Lord that we form but one and the same Spirit with Him (11). These mystic effects extend even to the bodies of the communicants which become, in effect, Members of Jesus Christ... living Tabernacles of the Most Blessed Sacrament (12).

4. The Christian becomes one with his brothers through Jesus Christ

Sanctifying grace flows in a constant stream from the Head to the "Members" as long as these remain "united" to the Head by charity as the branch is united to the vine (13), that is to say, as long as they remain living members, because Jesus Christ does not communicate the effects of his merits to dead members" (14). Consequently, the sufferings of a Christian have a redemptive value and are a complement of his Passion if the member is animated by charity (15).

In conclusion, the whole life of a Christian should be that of a branch united to the vine because if one is content to be a Catholic without being "united interiorly with Jesus Christ it is of no avail to salvation" (16). This union must, however, be habitual to the Christian so that, at the end of his life, he may be able to say, "that he wishes to remain to death in union with Jesus Christ", symbolized by the lighted candle placed in his hand by the priest who administers the sacrament of the sick (17).

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(7) *Ibid.*, pp. 211, 212, 213.
(8) *Ibid.*, pp. 98 & 99.
(9) *Ibid.*, pp. 342 et 350.
(10) *Ibid.*, p. 243.
(11) *Ibid.*, p. 260.
(12) *Ibid.*, pp. 260 et 418.
(13) John 15.2.
(14) *Devoirs*, p. 336.
(15) *Ibid.*, p. 332.
(16) *Ibid.*, p. 74.
(17) *Ibid.*, p. 364.