

CHRIST TRIUMPHS THROUGH HUMILITY *

“This day shall light shine upon us; for the Lord is born to us.”¹ This is the great announcement which moves Christians today. Through them it is addressed to all mankind. God is here. This truth should fill our lives, and every Christmas should be for us a new and special meeting with God, when we allow his light and grace to enter deep into our soul.

We stop in front of Mary, Joseph and the Child, looking at the Son of God who has taken on our flesh. I remember now I made a visit—for a very special reason—to the holy house of Loreto, Italy, on August 15, 1951. I said Mass there. I wanted to say it calmly and reverently, but I hadn’t counted on the crowd’s fervour. I had forgotten that the faith of the people of the region and their love for the Madonna meant there would be a huge crowd for the feast of the Assumption.

Their piety was not always entirely correct in its expression, at least from the point of view of the Church’s liturgical regulations. When I would kiss the altar in accordance with the rubrics, three or four local women would accompany me. It was distracting, but certainly moving. I also noticed that above the altar in that holy house, which tradition says was the home of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, these words were written: “Here the Word was made flesh.” Here, on a bit of the earth on which we live, in a house built by men, God dwelt.

Perfect God and perfect Man

The Son of God became man, and he is *perfectus Deus, perfectus homo*: “perfect God and perfect man.”² There is something in this mystery which should stir Christians. I was and am moved. I should like to go back to Loreto. I go there now in thought and desire, to relive those years of Jesus’ childhood and consider once more those words: “Here the Word was made flesh.”

Iesus Christus, Deus homo: Jesus Christ, God-man. This is one of “the mighty works of God,”³ which we should reflect upon and thank him for. He has come to bring “peace on earth to men of good Will,”⁴ to all men who want to unite their wills to the holy will of God—not just the rich, not just the poor, but everyone: all the brethren. We are all brothers and sisters in Jesus, children of God, brothers and sisters of Christ. His Mother is our mother.

There is only one race in the world: the race of the children of God. We should all speak the same language, taught us by our Father in heaven—the language Jesus spoke with his Father. It is the language of heart and mind, which you are using now, in your prayer—the language of contemplation, used by men who are spiritual, because they realize they are children of God. This language is expressed in a thousand motions of our will, in the clear insights of our minds, in the affections of our heart, in our commitment to lead a virtuous life, in goodness, happiness and peace.

You must look at the Child in the manger. He is our Love. Look at him, realizing that the whole thing is a mystery. We need to accept this mystery on faith and use our faith to explore it very deeply. To do this, we must have the humble attitude of a Christian soul. Let us not try to

* A homily given on 24 December 1963

¹ Is 9:2 (Second Mass of Christmas Day, entrance antiphon): *Lux fulgebit hodie super nos, quia natus est Dominus*

² Athanasian Creed

³ Acts 2:11

⁴ Luke 2:14

reduce the greatness of God to our own poor ideas and human explanations. Let us try to understand that this mystery, for all its darkness, is a light to guide men's lives.

As St John Chrysostom said: "We see that Jesus has come from us, from our human substance, and has been born of a virgin mother; but we don't know how this wonder came about. Let us not waste our energies trying to understand it; rather, accept humbly what God has revealed to us. Don't try to probe what God has kept hidden."⁵ If we have this reverence, we will be able to understand and to love. The mystery will be a splendid lesson for us, much more convincing than any human reasoning.

Why Jesus came to live with us

Whenever I preach beside the crib, I try to see Christ our Lord as a child wrapped in swaddling clothes lying on straw in a manger. Even though he is only a child, unable to speak, I see him as a master and a teacher. I need to look at him in this way, because I must learn from him. And to learn from him, you must try to know his life—reading the Gospel and meditating on the scenes of the New Testament—in order to understand the divine meaning of his life on earth.

In our own life we must reproduce Christ's life. We need to come to know him by reading and meditating on Scripture, and by praying, as we are doing now in front of the crib. We must learn the lessons which Jesus teaches us, even when he is just a newly born child, from the very moment he opens his eyes on this blessed land of men.

The fact that Jesus grew up and lived just like us shows us that human existence and all the ordinary activity of men have a divine meaning. No matter how much we may have reflected on all this, we should always be surprised when we think of the thirty years of obscurity which made up the greater part of Jesus' life among men. He lived in obscurity, but, for us, that period is full of light. It illuminates our days and fills them with meaning, for we are ordinary Christians who lead an ordinary life, just like millions of other people all over the world.

That was the way Jesus lived for thirty years, as "the son of the carpenter."⁶ There followed three years of public life, spent among the crowds. People were surprised: "Who is this?" they asked. "Where has he learned these things?" For he was just like them: he had shared the life of ordinary people. He was "the carpenter, the son of Mary."⁷ And he was God; he was achieving the redemption of mankind and "drawing all things to himself."⁸

As with other events in his life, we should never contemplate Jesus' hidden years without feeling moved. We should realize that they are in themselves a call to shake off our selfishness and easy-going ways. Our Lord knows our limitations, our individualism and our ambition. He knows it is difficult for us to forget ourselves and give ourselves to others. He knows very well what it feels like not to find love and to discover that those who say they follow him only do so in a half-hearted way. Just think of those striking scenes, described to us by the evangelists, in which we see the Apostles full of worldly ambitions and merely human plans. Yet Jesus has chosen them; he keeps them close to him and entrusts them with the mission he has received from his Father.

⁵ *In Matthaëum homiliae*, 4,3 (PG 57,43)

⁶ Matt 13:55: *filius fabri*

⁷ Mark 6:3: *faber, filius Mariae*

⁸ John 12:32

He has called us too and asks us, as he asked James and John: “Are you ready to drink the cup”—that cup which means giving yourself fully to the will of the Father—”which I am going to drink?” *Possumus!*: “Yes! We are ready!”⁹ Is the reply of John and James. Are you and I really ready to carry out, in everything, the will of our Father God? Have we given our Lord our whole heart, or are we attached to ourselves and our interests and comfort and self-love? Is there anything in our lives out of keeping with our Christianity, something which makes us unwilling to mend our ways? Today we are given a chance to set things straight.

But first of all, we must be convinced that Jesus is putting these questions to us personally. He is the one who asks them, not I. I wouldn’t dare even put them to myself. I am praying aloud, and each of you, silently, is admitting to our Lord: “Lord, how useless I am, what a coward I have been! How many mistakes I’ve made, over and over again.” And we can go further and say: “It’s good, Lord, you have kept me up with your hand; for, left to myself, I am capable of the most disgraceful things. Don’t let me go; keep on treating me as a little child. I want to be strong and brave and manly. But you must help me. I am a clumsy creature. Take me by the hand, Lord, and make sure your Mother is also by my side to guard me. And so, *possumus!* We can; we will be able to have you as our model.”

It is not presumptuous for us to say *possumus*. Jesus Christ teaches us this divine way and wants us to follow it, for he has made it human and accessible to our weakness. That is why he lowered himself so. “Here is the reason why he brought himself so low, taking the nature of a slave; he, the Lord, who as God was equal to the Father; he lowered himself in majesty and power—but not in goodness or mercy.”¹⁰

The goodness of God wants to make the way easy for us. Let us not reject Jesus’ invitation; let’s not say “no” to him, turning a deaf ear to his voice. There is no excuse, we can no longer think we aren’t able. He has shown us by his example. “Therefore, I ask you with all my heart, brothers, not to let this precious example go unheeded: rather, follow him and renew your soul in the spirit.”¹¹

He went about doing good

Do you see how necessary it is to know Jesus and lovingly observe his life? I have often gone to look for a definition or a biography of Jesus in Scripture. And I have found it written by the Holy Spirit: “He went about doing good.”¹² Every single day of Jesus Christ’s life on earth, from his birth until his death, can be summed up like that: he filled them all doing good. And in another place Scripture says, “He has done all things well,”¹³ he finished everything well, he did nothing that wasn’t good.

What about you and me, then? Let’s take a look to see if we have to put anything right. I certainly can find plenty to improve. I know that by myself I am incapable of doing good. And, since Jesus has said that without him we can do nothing,¹⁴ let us, you and me, go to our Lord and ask for his help, through his Mother, in one of those intimate conversations natural to souls who

⁹ Matt 20:22: *Potestis bibere calicem quem ego bibiturus sum? Possumus!*

¹⁰ St Bernard, *Sermo in die nativitatis*, 1,1-2 (PL 183,115)

¹¹ St Bernard, *ibid*, 1,1

¹² Acts 10:38: *Pertransiit benefaciendo*

¹³ Mark 7:37: *bene omnia fecit*

¹⁴ Cf John 15:5

love God. I will say no more, for it's up to each of you to speak to him personally, about your own needs. Do it interiorly, without the noise of words, now—while I for my part apply these counsels to my own sorry state.

What did Christ do to pour out so much good, and only good, wherever he went? The Gospels give us the answer with another biography of Jesus: “He was obedient to them.”¹⁵ We must especially value obedience in the current environment of disobedience, rebellion and disunity.

Freedom is very close to my heart—that is precisely why I so love the Christian virtue of obedience. We should all realize that we are children of God, and should want to fulfil the will of our Father. We should do things as God wants them done, *because we feel like it*, which is the most supernatural of reasons.

The spirit of Opus Dei, which I have tried to practice and to teach for more than thirty-five years now, has made me understand and love personal freedom. When God our Lord gives us his grace, when he calls us by a specific vocation, it is as if he were stretching out his hand to us, in a fatherly way. A strong hand, full of love, because he seeks us out individually, as his own sons and daughters, knowing our weakness. The Lord expects us to make the effort to take his hand, his helping hand. He asks us to make an effort and show we are free. To be able to do this, we must be humble and realize we are little children of God. We must love the blessed obedience with which we respond to God's marvellous fatherhood.

We should let our Lord get involved in our lives, admitting him confidently, removing from his way any obstacles or complications. We tend to be on the defensive, to be attached to our selfishness. We always want to be top dog, even if it's only to be on top of our wretchedness. That is why we must go to Jesus, so that he will make us truly free. Only then will we be able to serve God and all men. This is the only way to realize the truth of St Paul's words: “But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the return you get is sanctification and its end, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”¹⁶

Let us be forewarned, then, for we will always tend to be selfish, and this temptation can occur in many ways. God wants us to show our faith when we obey, for he doesn't express his will with drums and trumpets. Sometimes he suggests his wishes in a whisper, deep in our conscience; and we must listen carefully to recognize his voice and be faithful.

He often speaks to us through other people. But when we see their defects or doubt whether they are well informed—whether they have grasped all the aspects of the problem—we feel inclined to disobey. All this may have a divine meaning, for God does not impose a blind obedience on us. He wants us to obey intelligently, and we have to feel responsible for helping others with the intelligence we do have. But let's be sincere with ourselves: let's examine, in every case, whether it is love for the truth which moves us or selfishness and attachment to our own judgment. When our ideas separate us from other people, when they weaken our communion, our unity with our brothers, it is a sure sign that we are not doing what God wants.

Let's not forget: we need humility if we are to obey. Look again at the example Christ gives us: he obeys Joseph and Mary. God has come to the world to obey, and to obey creatures. Admittedly they are two very perfect creatures: Holy Mary, our mother, greater than whom God

¹⁵ Luke 2:31: *erat subditus illis*

¹⁶ Rom 6:22-23

alone; and that most chaste man Joseph. But they are only creatures, and yet Jesus, who is God, obeyed them. We have to love God so as to love his will and desire to respond to his calls. They come to us through the duties of our ordinary life: duties of state, profession, work, family, social life, our own and other people's difficulties, friendship, eagerness to do what is right and just.

Every time Christmas comes around, I love to look at representations of the child Jesus. Statues and pictures which show a God who lowered himself remind me that God is calling us. The Almighty wants us to know that he is defenceless, that he needs men's help. From the cradle at Bethlehem, Christ tells you and me that he needs us. He urges us to live a Christian life to the full—a life of self-sacrifice, work and joy.

We will never have genuine joy if we do not really try to imitate Jesus. Like him we must be humble. I repeat: do you see where God's greatness is hidden? In a manger, in swaddling clothes, in a stable. The redemptive power of our lives can only work through humility. We must stop thinking about ourselves and feel the responsibility to help others.

It can sometimes happen that even well-intentioned people create personal problems—really serious worries—which have no objective basis whatsoever. These problems arise in persons whose lack of self-knowledge leads to pride and a desire to be the centre of attention, to be favoured by everyone. They want to appear always in a good light, to be personally secure. They are not content simply to do good and disappear. And so, many who could enjoy a wonderful peace of soul and great happiness become, through pride and presumption, unhappy and unfruitful. Christ was humble of heart.¹⁷ Throughout his life he looked for no special consideration or privilege. He began by spending nine months in his Mother's womb, like the rest of men, following the natural course of events. He knew that mankind needed him greatly. He was longing to come into the world to save all souls, but he took his time. He came in due course, just as every other child is born. From conception to birth, no one—except our Lady, St Joseph and St Elizabeth—realized the marvellous truth that God was coming to live among men.

There is a great simplicity also about his birth. Our Lord comes without any fanfare. No one knows about him. On earth only Mary and Joseph share in the divine adventure. And then the shepherds who received the message from the angels. And later on, the wise men from the East. They were the only witnesses of this transcendental event which unites heaven and earth, God and man.

How can our hearts be so hard that we can get used to these scenes? God humbled himself to allow us to get near him, so that we could give our love in exchange for his, so that our freedom might bow, not only at the sight of his power, but also before the wonder of his humility.

The greatness of this Child who is God! His Father is the God who has made heaven and earth and there he is, in a manger, "because there was no room at the inn"¹⁸—there was nowhere else for the Lord of all creation.

He did the will of God his Father

I am not at all stretching the truth when I tell you that Jesus is still looking for a resting-place in our heart. We have to ask him to forgive our personal blindness and ingratitude. We must ask him to give us the grace never to close the door of our soul on him again.

¹⁷ Cf Matt 11:29

¹⁸ Luke 2:7: *quia non erat eis locus in diversorio*

Our Lord does not disguise the fact that his wholehearted obedience to God's will calls for renunciation and self-sacrifice. Love does not claim rights, it seeks to serve. Jesus has led the way. How did he obey? "Unto death, death on a cross."¹⁹ You have to get out of yourself; you have to complicate your life, losing it for love of God and souls. "So you wanted to live a quiet life. But God wanted otherwise. Two wills exist: your will should be corrected to become identified with God's will: you must not bend God's will to suit yours."²⁰

It has made me very happy to see so many souls spend their lives—like you, Lord, "even unto death"—fulfilling what God was asking of them. They have dedicated all their yearnings and their professional work to the service of the Church, for the good of all men.

Let us learn to obey, let us learn to serve. There is no better leadership than wanting to give yourself freely, to be useful to others. When we feel pride swell up within us, making us think we are supermen, the time has come to say "no." Our only triumph will be the triumph of humility. In this way we will identify ourselves with Christ on the cross—not unwillingly or restlessly or sullenly, but joyfully. For the joy which comes from forgetting ourselves is the best proof of love.

Let me go back again to the openness and simplicity of Jesus' life, which I have brought to your attention so many times. His hidden years are not without significance, nor were they simply a preparation for the years which were to come after—those of his public life. Since 1928 I have understood clearly that God wants our Lord's whole life to be an example for Christians. I saw this with special reference to his hidden life, the years he spent working side by side with ordinary men. Our Lord wants many people to ratify their vocation during years of quiet, unspectacular living. Obeying God's will always means leaving our selfishness behind, but there is no reason why it should entail cutting ourselves off from the normal life of ordinary men who share the same status, work and social position as we.

I dream—and the dream has come true—of multitudes of God's children, sanctifying themselves as ordinary citizens, sharing the ambitions and endeavours of their colleagues and friends. I want to shout to them about this divine truth: if you are there in the middle of ordinary life, it doesn't mean Christ has forgotten about you or hasn't called you. He has invited you to stay among the activities and concerns of the world. He wants you to know that your human vocation, your profession, your talents, are not omitted from his divine plans. He has sanctified them and made them a most acceptable offering to his Father.

To remind a Christian that his life is meaningless unless he obeys God's will does not mean separating him from other men. On the contrary, the commandment God gives us is to love others as he has loved us,²¹ which in most cases means living alongside the rest of men and being their equals, giving ourselves to the service of our Lord in the world so as to make everyone know better the love of God, telling them that *the divine paths of the world have been opened up*.

God has not just said that he loves us. He has proved it with facts. Let's not forget that Jesus Christ became man in order to teach us to live as children of God. Do you remember the introduction to the Acts of the Apostles, where St Luke says: "I have spoken of all the most

¹⁹ Phil 2:8 *usque ad mortem, mortem autem crucis*

²⁰ St Augustine, *Enarrationes in psalmos*, Ps 31:2, 26 (PL 36,274)

²¹ Cf John 13:34-35

significant things Jesus did and taught”²² He came to teach us, but he taught us by doing things. In teaching us, he was the model, being our teacher and setting us an example with his conduct.

Now, in front of the infant Jesus, we can continue our personal examination of conscience. Are we ready to try to make our life a model and an example to our brothers, the rest of men, our equals? Are we ready to be other Christs? It’s not enough to *say* that we are. I am asking you now—as I ask myself: Can it be said also of you, you who have been called to be another Christ, that you have come to do and to teach, to do things as a son of God would? Are you attentive to the Father’s will, so as to be able to encourage everyone else to share the good, noble, divine and human values of the redemption? Are you living the life of Christ, in your everyday life in the middle of the world?

Doing God’s work is not just a pretty phrase. It is an invitation to spend ourselves for Love’s sake. We have to die to ourselves and be born again to a new life. Jesus Christ obeyed in this way, even unto death on a cross; that is why God exalted him.²³ If we obey God’s will, the cross will mean our own resurrection and exaltation. Christ’s life will be fulfilled step by step in our own lives. It will be said of us that we have tried to be good children of God, who went about doing good in spite of our weakness and personal shortcomings, no matter how many.

And when death comes as it undoubtedly will, we will greet it with joy, as I have seen so many people greet it in the ordinary circumstances of their life. With joy: for if we have imitated Christ in doing good—in obeying and carrying the cross in spite of our personal deficiencies—we will rise like Christ: “for he has truly risen.”²⁴

Jesus, who became a child, overcame death. Just think of it. Through his annihilation, through his simplicity and obedience, by divinizing the everyday, common life of men, the Son of God conquered.

That is the triumph of Jesus Christ. He has raised us to his level, the level of children of God, by coming down to our level, the level of the children of men.

²² Acts 1:1: *Primum quidem sermonem feci de omnibus, o Theophile, quae coepit Iesus facere et docere*

²³ Phil 2:8: *Propter quod et Deus exaltavit illum*

²⁴ Luke 24:34: *Surrexit Dominus vere*