

GOD REVEALED

The purpose of faith is to be able to move gradually from being able to say truthfully that I believe in God, to saying with utter conviction, that God believes in me. Moreover, we are affirming also that the world in which we live is not devoid of helps and hints, to foster this process, and to make us aware that the world also belongs within this relationship, along with everyone else in it.

This same God was once totally unknown, and whose presence was greatly feared; but is now totally revealed in Jesus the Christ, as the one and only God, who is nothing else but love. This God is not a reality existing alongside us and our world, in the sense of someone we ought to take into consideration. Everything that exists, the whole cosmos and everyone in it, happens within God.

There is no way we can ever get outside God, not even in hell! The purpose of faith is to make us more and more aware, more and more sensitive to the presence of God-with-us and in whom we exist and move and have our being. To be faithful, therefore, means to believe 1) that God loves me; and 2) because what God does is who God is, in loving me I am lovely! To be faithful is to believe that I am lovely.

This reality is something we find outrageous. Yet it is true. It is also true that we have not inhabited our own loveliness worthily, and we have made it increasingly difficult for others to be the lovely people they are also, just as they have helped impede us. The heart of the Christian reality is not just that we are loved by God, nor simply that we are sinners in need of God, but that *we are forgiven sinners*.

Because everything happens within God, there is nothing outside God, there is no justification whatsoever for making distinctions between sacred and secular, or holy and profane. Everything which comes from God is, in origin, holy. It does not have to be made holy, but to be recognised as being holy in its origin, and related to and lived-in accordingly.

All this we know with certainty, but not with certainty of a scientific kind, one which yields itself to historical research. It is certain solely because it comes from the self-revelation of God, given to us in a manner which allows us to receive it, to accept it and to change because of it. All this happens through the self-expression of God, the Word, becoming flesh in Jesus from Nazareth.

Prior to the Incarnation we have the history of the Hebrew nation given to us, the account of their own experience of growing in awareness of the one God who was walking with them through their own personal history and stories. This collection we refer to as the Old Testament.

We ought to keep in mind that "Revelation" is not confined solely to what are called "religious" experiences. We can all point to occasions which have affected us enough for us to say things like: *I never knew that before!* Something reaches us out of the blue, unlooked for, unearned, maybe even unwanted at times. It is a kind of new knowledge which is very different from extra information.

In the religious sphere Revelation "happens" in much the same way, a break-through, through insight, conscience, relationships [*like falling in love*]. Its basic form is through nature itself: wonder, harmony, awesomeness and any and every way which suggests the presence of an agenda in life other than our own. This is particularly evident in OT when the writers go on to show how this "other" is something personal and not just an anonymous power. It is evidence of the presence of someone who intends to be involved with us and wants us to know it.

A more precise form of Revelation takes place within us through our conscience and our self-awareness. By conscience I mean that awareness of being responsible for my own life, that at the end of the day it is me who has to make the decision and to accept the consequences of it. This often takes the form of the priority good wants to have over evil within me, whether it actually happens or not.

In more intense moments it will be a challenge from within two different aspects of goodness, always the more difficult, and an area in which we are going to need the help of wise counsel and challenge, yet, at the end of the day, the decision has to be ours. It can take the form of a dis-ease at what is in "possession" in

my life, but which I am becoming aware of as being either decidedly inappropriate or patently dishonest. It is searching after that tranquillity which is the fruit of genuine order.

In the behaviour area this is a challenge to step beyond what we are perceiving more and more to be unacceptable limits, impediments [not necessarily something wrong] to achieving self-worth and heightened sensitivity. This happens most often through relationships: affection, love, friendship, cooperation, interest, compassion and simple good-will towards others: ways in which self-worth is appreciated, reaching out to want to assist this same growth in others, without ever presuming to impose it. Perhaps the most intense of all is parenthood, within which a new life can result precisely as a result of the total giving of one person to another.

Revelation is also the story of a people as a whole, within which God revealed himself in a most precise and specific way: The Exodus. God came towards this people to set them free and to claim them. *"I will be your God and you will be my people"* Ex.6.7. This presence of God with his people continued through their history: the burning bush, ablaze with inextinguishable fire, yet the bush remained unconsumed by fire. This and many other instances constituted what can be called the *"getting to know you"* process involved in accepting *"I will be your God and you will be my people"*. For Christians the "burning bush" experience par excellence is the Resurrection, not just Jesus' personal triumph over death, but a reality on offer: *"to all who believed in him he gave power to become"* Jn.1.

Is it possible to know this new experience, to feel what it is like? There is only one God, and all the varied forms that revelation takes are simply ways of trying to convince us that God is Holy and full of Compassion.

Because Christianity arose out of the Hebrew faith, and the central role in that faith occupied by Moses. There was a crisis among the early believers about the relative places of Moses and Jesus. The Church concluded that there is only one God, and that as God began the Revelation of who God is to a people led by Moses, now and definitively is God revealed in the person Jesus, who is properly the Christ: the one in whom all the promises made by God have been kept:

"When in times past God spoke to our ancestors, he spoke in many and varied ways through the prophets. But in this final age he has spoken to us in his Son, whom he has appointed heir of all things; and through him he created the universe. He is the radiance of God's glory, the stamp of God's very being, and he sustains the universe by his word of power" Heb.1.1-3.

Having said all this, who really has the authority to say such things? Who is entitled to decide what is Revelation and what is not?

The Gnostics claimed this as a privilege all their own, a knowledge given without the mediation of the Church. Revelation is handed down within the Church, and the Church has proclaimed that God is totally revealed in Jesus. It is only through the Church that access to the fullness of Revelation is possible. Unlike the claim of exclusivity of the Gnostics, this "knowledge" is mission given to the few for the sake of the many: "of whose fullness we have all received".

There was a group which claimed to have been given extra information, which would effectively alter the whole content of the Gospel, they were the Montanists. The Church responded by recognising a proper distinction between what is properly called public revelation and purely private revelation.

Public revelation is that God is totally revealed in Jesus, a revelation received by the Apostles and handed down through the Church, not a corpus of doctrine but *an experience of community* in which the Lord is experienced as being really and truly present with us. Private revelation, is a specific insight, which adds nothing to the content of public revelation, but intended to foster and nourish faith: e.g. Lourdes.

How does revelation sit with reason?

Faith can be described as the willing and knowing assent of the mind to the self-revelation of God, and not just the mind assenting to doctrine. Theology tries to articulate what this means more precisely, attempting

to fit knowledge, which does not originate in the mind, into human understanding. Reason needs to test grounds of credibility since everything that has claimed to be Revelation is not so. There have been many false prophets and erroneous messages.

Life constantly faces us with credibility issues. St. Anselm of Canterbury said [C.11.] that it is possible to reach a "reasonable" understanding of faith, since Truth is one and all genuine expressions of truth and the searching after it cannot, ultimately, be in conflict. The apparent differences between faith and reason, and there appear to be many [*think only of the Resurrection and the Eucharist*], result from the incomplete, inadequate application and understanding.

Within Revelation itself there are different degrees of truth. This is not to suggest some things are more true than others but that some things could only be known through Revelation; some things we could have discovered if reason had remained unimpaired through sin. We know what God has revealed in ways that are beyond, whatever reason could achieve unaided.

CREATION IN GOD'S IMAGE:

The bible is not a book of answers for questions like: "*How did everything begin?*". How everything began is not really a religious issue, this is more a question for the scientist. The religious question is more concerned with the "why" of everything rather than with the "how" of it. When religion reflects on creation, it is concerned with purpose and meaning, not with astronomy or physics.

Our questioning comes from our living. We are surrounded by obvious parameters and limits: we do not need to be told that we are growing older; and we see things decaying all about us, and yet we seem to have longings and hopes for a life that will not disappear. It is precisely the coming together of these extremes which gives rise to sorrow, grief and bereavement. We are simply feeling that there should not be an "end" of life, we would prefer the quality of life with those we love to progress and deepen. Alongside this it is also a fact that there is no earthly reason why we should exist in the first place: why me, why not somebody else? There is nothing which actually demands that we should exist.

Granted that we do exist, we do not carry within ourselves our ability to survive. We need things other than ourselves: oxygen, water, sunshine, food. This is why there is such concern about the "greenhouse effect". We need nourishment and protection if we are to survive. If we do not have to exist, why do we exist?

The bible provides stories for us in the folklore of Hebrew myth, since they are to do with areas where precise information is not available: the biblical account of creation. Provided this perspective is respected, several interesting facts emerge: 1. Life is a free gift. 2. The imagery of the garden suggests that the proper context for this gift of life is one of goodness and fullness. 3. It is obviously no idle gift since it carries task with it: to name creation. 4. It exists within freedom which, in its turn, has an appropriate context [*knowledge of good and evil*]. 5. Dignified living obviously requires quality companionship.

In the second account of creation in Genesis [*which is regarded as the first*] the impression given is of value present through light, harmony, order, fertility and what it means to be male and female. All this is said to be "*made in the image of God.*"

The singling out of the "Seventh Day" for special mention tells us that these values need to be appreciated, and that when we do spend time in such appreciation we are actually able to move beyond creation itself to the Creator. The fruits of such experiences are also recorded: the Psalms tells us that we exist because this is what God directly wills, and that we are not in the dark about this: "*The heavens tell out the glory of God, heaven's vault makes known his handiwork. One day speaks to another, night to night imparts knowledge, and this without speech or language or sound of any voice. Their sign shines forth for all the earth, their message to the ends of the world.*" Psalm 19.1.

We exist because God wills it, and the reason why God wills it is so that we can explore and enjoy the very life of God. This "reason" for existence which is within us, emerges as longing for fullness within all the very obvious limitations. The difference faith makes is to show us that these opposites have been perfectly reconciled and that all manner of things shall be well.

This is not all we have, a few stark facts. We have not just been told that we are destined to be with God forever. We have been shown how everything that is created actually fits together to make this more and more obvious, and how everything really does belong together, not just here but hereafter also. We are able to know, through experience, the attractiveness of harmony, as well as the unhappiness of discord; how much more desirable are peace and harmony over suspicion, hostility and aggression. We are able to know in which direction our best interests lie.

We have even been told the parameters, not because we must not trespass beyond boundaries, but because there some things too big for us to handle; and that if we do venture in that direction we will cause chaos; we have, and we did! This is the truth contained in the prohibition against eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. It is not for us to decide what is good. When we take to ourselves to decide what is good, we do so as partial people; for the sake of self-interest we readily resort to calling evil good. This has been the message of the prophets: *when will you stop calling evil good?* The God-given gift of our preference for goodness, we have prostituted.

Jesus tells us that only God is good, and that the goodness which only God is has been totally revealed in Jesus. We actually have it words too, in Matt. Chapters 5 and 25, when Jesus on the one hand shares his own values with us, the Beatitudes; and, on the other, tells us what the proper norms for genuine self-assessment are. The purpose of life is: to make the experience of living better for those for whom it is less so; to feed the hungry, to give drink to the thirsty, to comfort the lonely and to heed the cry of the poor. All of which is only attainable through real presence, getting involved, the quality of relationships.

The first chapter of John's Gospel identifies Jesus from Nazareth totally with the Word of God, one Person, two natures: truly God, truly man. Paul describes Jesus: "*He is the image of God we cannot see; his is the primacy over all creation*" Col.1.15. There is an important issue at stake here, we miss so much if we simply regard Jesus as Saviour, which he truly is, but also much more. Jesus is not just the Redeemer but the Revealer of God, not simply the way we get back to God but the way we came out from God in the first place, since everything is created in the Word, and Jesus is that Word made flesh.

There is nothing else to be revealed about God; everything that God is, is totally revealed in him. We are going to need not just now, not just tomorrow, but forever to appreciate what this means, and even then there will always be more to know. We will not know all there is to know about God not even in the next life, though our being intimately within this unknowable God, removes all anxiety and fear, unlike having to see, as we do now, in the darkened glass of faith. There will always be more to know. What does change is the manner of knowing. Now we can only know through faith, then we will know as we are known; but God will remain unchangingly always new.

It was assumed that worship meant going down on our knees in the presence of the awesome God, in this we tended to overlook what St. John was at great pains to tell us, and which St. Irenaeus articulated as: "*God is worshipped when we are fully alive*". Understand the word worship as a corruption of *worthship* and we get closer to the real meaning.

Certainly such ideas were revolutionary, and Christians could not be expected simply to nod their heads obediently and then pass the message on. All this has implications, it called for a change in long established priorities. What does this say about how we live in a society that is not particularly bothered about these things? Why have we been singled out to know all this, and not others?

We have already referred to C2 Group called Gnostics. They taught that the world had two origins which are in opposition, and that this responsible for the confusion and tensions we feel. Life in the Spirit comes from the "good" principle, whilst the "evil" is responsible for the material and bodily realities. This has returned again and again to haunt Christian Spirituality: C2. the Gnostics, C4. the Manichaeans [and Augustine], C12. the Albigensians, C17. the Jansenists; and the relics of all of them are still with us.

The reason why these views caught on, was because it appeared to provide some ready answers. There is obviously evil in the world, but God is good and God is spirit, therefore evil must be all that is not spirit. This, inevitably, led to a denial of the true humanity of Christ.

Christianity has always responded vigorously, starting with St. John and St. Irenaeus and then a whole host of eminent mystics and scholars. All insisted, along with Jewry, that creation is by one God "*ex nihilo*", Lateran IV. Christian life issues from divine life, a Trinity in Unity within which there are Three Persons who are all equal, but not the same. A unity which comes about solely in diversity.

The question of unity in God is much more than a theological nicety, since this affects us. We are made in the image of the God who is One in Three Persons. Who we are, what we are to become, who we will associate with and why, all of these necessities find their validation and fulfilment through diversity seeking unity.

The Gnostics would have none of this. For them the spirit will return from its exile eventually, and the body will disappear forever. We might smile at this today, but we would be rash to do so, since there are still many traces of the body being seen as something despicable.

We confess through our Creed that everything that is visible and invisible comes from God, and since Revelation makes it clear that we have been given the task of ordering creation as our life's mission, then all things will serve us well in as much as all things are well respected within their own dignity. It is possible to discern the proper unity in creation, provided we are prepared to live within it differently. The complete disregard of this priority is what we mean by sin.

For the Gnostic there is an unbridgeable gap e.g. between the well-being of the soul and our sexual identity, as there is also between spiritual vigour and the need to be a politically and economically active person. Unity, harmony and peace can only have a chance when e.g. marital relationships are crucial for establishing an environment well suited to care and compassion. Nothing is more important than the way we experience quality directly through relationships.

The evil that exists between us, results not from living physical, sexual, emotional lives but from abusing these sacred gifts, given to us in trust, in order to help us set others free. Notice how parents, no matter how well they have been brought up themselves, always desire "*something more*" for their children. This is what it "feels" like to be made in the image of God. It is our commitment to a particular way of living [*which we call Church*] that helps us see how best to realise all the good things we are genuinely searching after.

One interesting aspect of this is the relationship between science and revelation, with regard to the universe and its history, what we call Evolution. This became an issue in C16. [*the time of Copernicus*] when it was accepted that our planet is not the centre of creation. This intensified throughout CC19-20. with the controversy about the origin of living species.

Initially there appeared to be a contradiction between science and revelation. This was because, incredible as it might seem, many theologians and Church leaders interpreted Genesis quasi literally, in which case there really would be a problem! Biblical scholarship cleared up all this, but not without a degree of anguish and resentment within fundamentalist camps.

Pius XII, *Humani Generis* -1950 - stated that Christian doctrine leaves the issue of evolution entirely open, but insists on three points: 1. the individual creation of a personal soul. 2. the proper authority of revelation. 3. the basic unity of the human race. The first statement underlines the need for a stand on issues like abortion and the rights of the elderly and handicapped. The second emphasises the need to avoid accepting the findings of philosophy and psychology uncritically. The third proclaims forthrightly that racial discrimination is evil.

The doctrine of creation does not canonise the present order of things, but offers a helpful critique of what "is" in the light of what "ought" to be, and how we can move effectively and creatively from one to the other. The world is sharply divided between rich and poor, and many economic and political programmes seem intent not just on perpetuating the system but of aggravating it further. It is from within the living experience of such injustices that Christians are called upon to urge change, in the light of the need for peace with justice.

This cannot happen without a willingness for personal change, and an enthusiasm big enough to have us set about such changes, a freedom not to be deterred by the massive presence of a hostile status quo. The doctrine of creation calls for an acceptance of grace, which God offers and which enables us to be positively critical in changing what "is" to what "ought".

Sin: The doctrine of creation does not answer all our questions. What we must ask is: recognising the centrality of the Resurrection, why is the cross such an important part of Christianity? To recognise Jesus as Saviour is to accept the need for salvation. Putting the story of creation alongside Calvary we have to ask: what happened?

For an answer we need to go one step back beyond the creation story, to what is called the angelic creation. This unfolds as the giving of the ability to know love, to receive love, to become lovely oneself and loving towards others, which has a very precise meaning: to be active in promoting the well-being of the other.

To some this was not acceptable, they wanted to acquire, to own, to get, to possess, to dominate. The story in the Apocalypse speaks of a battle raging between the good and the bad. The bad were vanquished, but the spirit of rebellion against goodness persisted, and creation as we know it, is set between the heavenly and the infernal. As free beings we are committed neither to one nor to the other, but we are going to be!

The Judaeo-Christian tradition sees humankind not simply helped by God, but also by agents of God - which is how the angelic is presented in the Bible. There is also an evil force seeking to alienate; and life consists of coping with these two realities. Everyone has a desire for goodness, yet it is equally true e.g. that with the whole world actually desiring peace, we seem unable to achieve it, there appears to be something greater than us influencing things.

This story is part of the Hebrew answer to the question: "*What went wrong?*" Whatever the "wrong" is, it is bigger than we are, and we are affected by it. It shifts the appearance in the world of evil one step further back than any human failure. They found themselves unable to assign the problem of evil to any human cause, since the damage was far greater than anything we could manage.

They did not want to assign the blame to God, neither would they accept that there are two Principles in creation, one good and one evil. What they actually did was to write, in graphic terms, their experience that freedom cannot exist without risk. Intelligent and free human beings can search after destiny with integrity, but they can also do the opposite [*the stories of Cain and Abel, the Flood, the Tower of Babel - all at the beginning of the Bible!*].

The consequences: aware of their vulnerability [*nakedness*] they cover-up, become frightened and embarrassed. They lose awareness of love, not by having it taken away, but *through the intrusion of fear, suspicion and aggression*, since everything appears to be more and more hostile. What should be kept clearly in mind is that in the confrontation with God, the focal point is not God pointing the finger, but God promising a love greater than all this fear. The contemporary nature of this story is not lost on us. Is there anyone of us who can say clearly without any ambiguity, "*I can see that I am the person God rejoices to see?*" It is obvious that our insistence on living on this planet as owner-occupiers is actually making it uninhabitable.

When the Church reflected on the cross it saw there the healing of this malaise, not just getting rid of our personal sins, but actually getting rid of this pervading evil which is greater than we are. This is why when St. Paul talks about this he calls Christ the Second Adam - Romans 5.12. The New Testament shows how we become aware of sin and sinfulness in two stages: 1) through the Law of Moses. 2) Through the Cross of Jesus.

With regard to the Law, St. Paul stresses that Law itself cannot save, it can only convince us that we need saving. The Law identifies evil through what it forbids, but in doing so, does not make it any easier to do good. Which of us does not feel a sense of apprehension when we see a blue, flashing light in our rear-view mirror? Which is why St. Paul insists that the Law can only convince us of sin. Whilst being law-

abiding citizens can keep evil at bay, it carries the risk of identifying being good with keeping the law. Or, and what is much more dangerous, having us conclude that *where there is law and order there is no sin!*

This is why the Cross of Jesus is so shattering, because it was Law and Order that caused it. As the Scriptures say, it is the one who is "beyond" the law who is vindicated by God. Is this saying that we should ignore the law? We need the law, because we need to be convinced that we need saving. But we must not ask of the law what it cannot give. When the Apocalypse speaks of the new heaven and the new earth it says that we will not need moonlight or sunlight, we will not need laws either, since we will be directed solely by the Spirit of God.

But that has not happened yet, and if we did not have laws we would destroy each other. But law cannot save us, it can only convince us that we need saving. The Cross is the evidence that our ways and God's ways were on a collision course, the way we assess what is good and what is not, is not God's way of doing so.

God's way of seeing and understanding is called the way of grace, since it is *freely given* to us, it is not naturally ours. However, it is not only a way of seeing, because it is of God, not only does it come to us to show us what is good, it actually carries with it the energy to make us able to live this new way. St. Paul shared the benefit of his own experience of grace with us.

He experienced the tension between keeping the law and living by grace. His former tendency was to live by having recourse to ritual observances [*the Law of Moses*], and carrying them out as faithfully as possible. He was faithful to the point of fanaticism in keeping the rules, and he says: "*where did this get me?*" It brought to the point where Truth actually confronted him with: "*I am Jesus, and you are persecuting me*".

In the Fifth Century Pelagius, a British monk, formulated a morality of self-sufficiency. He believed [*sincerely*] that to avoid sin, human effort is all that is required. What he overlooked was that sin had already distorted human freedom itself. St. Augustine replied vigorously to this [*some would say too vigorously*]. Out of this what we now know as the Catholic Doctrine of Original Sin and Grace came to be formulated at the Council of Trent – 1545.

The trigger for this formulation was Martin Luther's accusation that the Church was semi-Pelagian. There is no doubt that abuse was rampant in the Church, which did not help, but Luther was also wrong. The Church teaches that Original Sin affects the human race and each individual in it, and this from the beginning of our existence, before we have the chance to make a "free" choice.

Many react to this as being blatantly unfair. When we are confronted with a given reality, the fairness of the situation does not affect that reality. It might cry-out for change and redress, but as a reality it is there. An innocent baby inheriting a disabling genetic disorder is a case in point. The unquestionable unfairness of it will not take it away.

We are very much influenced by what we learn from our relationships, and this is happening before ever the words "*ought*" and "*ought not*" form part of our living agenda. We have been, are still very much influenced by, and dependent on what others make us. What Christian teaching says of this is that the orientation towards sin is a consequence of what is called "*the Sin of Adam*", "Original Sin" or "*the Sin of the World*" [the last one being more Scriptural]. We are off course, and to be wrong by but one degree at source results in an ever widening divergence, unless it is corrected. Whether this is fair or not is not the issue. Being aware of the unfairness of it may well prompt us to seek for renewal, but as a fact Original Sin is there.

One relevant aspect of this is to reflect on the responsibility we ought to have for the ways in which we are actually exercising our freedom, since it will affect how others experience life while we are around. Once again we face facts. The facts are that we are living within value-systems, personal as well as social, which unashamedly put self first.

The Christian message seeks to put this into perspective, identifying this self-centred tendency as evidence of the *"loss of grace"*. It is important to stress that grace is not lost, as we would lose an object or a possession. What has happened is that *we have lost our sensitivity to grace*, becoming unaware and even uninterested in the life which grace offers.

This loss, this coarsening, has a ripple effect moving into every aspect of human living: our understanding, our judgements, our valuing, our decision-making, our affectivity, our relationships, our sexuality have all been affected and distorted. We need only recall how St. Paul spoke of this when he wrote to the Roman Church. He complained that there were many good things he wanted to do, and many evil things he would like to avoid, but he ended up in a confusion of the two: *"who will rescue me from this wretched condition?"*-Rom.7.24. Prior to his conversion he would have said "the Law". But now he says with conviction: *"Thanks be to God, Jesus Christ"*.

Because of this universal invasion of sin, we cannot assume that our reason is untouched by it. We must expect fear and the distortions of sin and self-interest to be present here also. This distortion is not eliminated at a stroke by Baptism. The elimination process is a life-time's work of active cooperation with grace, believing in the ability to live each day differently: *"To all those who believe in him he gave power to become"*, writes St. John in the first chapter of his Gospel.

Putting all this together we have a phenomenon called *"concupiscence"*, it's a long word which simply means disorder in the areas of desire and the setting of priorities. Simply recognising that our commitment to God and our wants and desires are not always in step. Our unwillingness to be dependent on God is attested to by our resistance to each other. We see others as threats rather than assets. We are disposed to setbacks through concupiscence, which [*the Franciscan school has always maintained*] is basically something good. It is the basic energy by which every aspect of a human being strives to realise itself in the most intensely, passionate way.

At the dawn of humanity, we possessed original justice, this energy was harmonised totally towards good, even though there were tensions. We felt we belonged to God and to each other. Sin destroyed this harmony, ensuring that every human passion now seeks its own fulfilment irrespective of all else. It is only with effort now that we can allow passionate expression to be consonant with the human project. What is something originally good and powerful, is now experienced as disruptive, with Trent referring to concupiscence as *"fomes peccati"* [*dis-ease of sin*]. Sin did not produce concupiscence, but destroyed our ability to handle it properly.

This is where mortality is significant as a cause of fear, able to throw judgements awry, with the insistence that death as we know it, and as we experience its impact, is not of God's planning. Jesus brings a new perspective, since he did not simply redeem life, but also death. As beings who are essentially mortal it is part of our nature to die, *it is not a defect for a mortal being to die*. Consequently, if death is now experienced as the ultimate in separation from God, then our death more than any other aspect of ourselves is in need of redemption.

"Since the children share in flesh and blood, he too shared with them, so that by dying he might break the power of him who had death at his command, that is, the devil, and might liberate those who all their life had been in servitude through fear of death" Heb.2.14-15.

Because of this servitude, death made sure that life was always experienced under a shadow, even when life is full and happy, there is always the possibility that death is lurking in the wings, to spoil everything. It is far from uncommon to hear of a couple working hard all their lives, building their dream home in retirement and then have the whole thing shattered by the ugly arrival of death. Jesus lived an integrated life and died an integrated death, and both of these factors are crucial for what we believe by the Resurrection:

"Though he was in the form of God Jesus laid no claim to equality with God, but made himself nothing, assuming the form of a slave. Bearing the human likeness, sharing the human lot, he humbled himself, and was obedient, even to the point of death, death on a cross! Therefore, God raised him to the heights" Phil.2.6.

JESUS - SAVIOUR

Jesus makes a difference in both how we live life and how we live death. Coming into contact with this new way usually happens through the local Church, and then getting to know more about it for oneself; something like the villagers who thanked the woman who told them about Jesus: "*thank you for telling us, but now we believe because we have met him for ourselves*" – Jn.4.3.

The Gospel confronts us with the fact of Jesus, his life and mission, the injustice of his trial and death, and then that great demand for faith, his Resurrection. But the original, first experience of Jesus was different. Groups of ordinary folk were attracted by a wandering preacher, there was no Church, there were no Gospel texts. The motivating force was the impact of his personality and the way he suffused their religious traditions with hope.

In spite of this we have no portrait of him; we do not know how he looked, what he wore, what he liked to eat, his mannerisms, how he liked to relax. The Gospels tell us only two things: that he really existed, and why he existed.

In those days the religious connotation of things was important, and was interpreted accordingly: business-life, social and political affairs, ordinary everyday happenings, all these things were understood as happening within the providence of the God. God recognised them as his own people, and made promises to them. Today, within a world with very different priorities, interpreting the Gospel is not as easy as it first appears.

The whole purpose of Jesus' mission was to become fully himself, the embodiment of the love that God has for everything created, and to make it abundantly clear how faithful God is to this love. His was an oppressed nation, whose land was occupied by a hostile power. Within this context Jesus offers himself as the saving power of God. His credentials for this: totally committed to the Father, this meant that he was totally available to whomsoever he met, since everyone is seen as gifts of the Father; and it is in the nature of the Son to be in receipt of everything from the Father.

Jesus is, at one and the same time, the complete revelation of God and, *as truly man, the perfect acceptance and response to what God is offering.*

It was inevitable that those who heard him and watched him, but who would not accept him [*remembering that for the majority he was irrelevant, they probably never met him or heard him*], either through hardness of heart or through determination to cling to the privileges he was denouncing, would grow to despise him, to criticise him and, ultimately, demand his removal.

Such is still the way of humankind when generosity has been ousted by self-centred living. Wherever vested interest is under threat, even God is not safe. The Church reflected on all this, and gradually realised that he "had to" die, *not at the behest of God but at the behest of his fellows*. All this began to fit together, but only through the indescribable experience of his presence really among them and within them, and this after they had seen him brutalised to death. What effectively happened was that the "*I will not serve*" of Lucifer has been reversed:

"It is in this sense that Scripture says, the first man, Adam, became a living creature, whereas the last Adam has become life-giving spirit... flesh and blood can never possess the kingdom, the perishable cannot possess the imperishable... The perishable body must be clothed with the imperishable, and what is mortal with immortality" 1Cor.15.45-54.

Jesus did not simply achieve all this in his own person, he brought with him the ability for others to live the same way, to anyone willing to receive the gift "*he gave power to become*". St. Mark describes how Jesus lived and shows how this actually led to his arrest and execution, and how he challenged his friends to accept this gift and to continue his mission. Matthew and Luke follow a similar line, but preface it with the infancy narratives. At first glance these might appear to be simply a concern for family history, a more careful study will show a theological statement about who Jesus is, in a style quite different from what we employ today.

They identify Jesus by using story, linking him to creation and human history, along with the history of sin and the promise of Redemption. At first the genealogies make dull reading, but if we fill in the faces behind the names another dimension appears. We actually meet people who have a part in bringing about the promises of God, a line which culminates in Jesus and one which is made up of people, many of whom are by no means seen as "worthy". Jesus is presented as a fulfilment, not a predictable or fated outcome. Jesus is a gift beyond the merits of ancestors, not bound by the constraints of law, since his nature is to bring compassion where it is neither earned nor imagined.

These stories remain stories, the Evangelists do not offer any interpretations of them, but scholars familiar with this Hebrew custom, offer possibilities and Christian piety has invested in some of them. The Christmas story carries much more interpretation than is readily obvious. It is set within a situation of bitter oppression of the poor set within an unjust tax system which even demanded unreasonable journeys, resulting in a lack of accommodation and adequate provision for those who have no power and who are simply herded from one place to another like refugees.

The message is clear. It is from within this background that Jesus appears, it is from such a preparation that he steps into the world. Alongside this story of impoverishment, there is the account of the star and the angels, the quest of the Magi whilst the wise of the land remain at home. What is being emphasised is the *unconcern of the world at the arrival of its redeemer*, set alongside the humble homage of the outcast shepherds. Jesus is clearly presented as the paradox in human valuing, the Saviour is unwanted and will be despised and rejected. Almighty God appears to be powerless in an almighty world.

This is an important insight as to the impact of Jesus' values in a world intent on going its own way. It is not just something located in Palestine 2,000 years ago, it is how the unredeemed world reacts to its Maker all the time. Jesus is vulnerable in his humanity, yet there is the aura of divinity. In accepting these narratives, the Church is saying clearly that Jesus is the Christ. He is the self-expression of God among us as a man.

St. John develops this telling us, in the Prologue to his Gospel, that the Word existed before Jesus was born, before the world was created. But this revelation could not remain solely in poetic language, and questions came piling in about the meaning of all this imagery, and they were hard questions to answer, creating a tension between the language which faith recognises and that required for philosophic and scientific clarity: On the one hand assent given precisely because it is revealed, and on the other, assent given as the inevitable fruit of logical reasoning.

Bonaventure and Aquinas wrestled with this, as do theologians in our own times. Aquinas insists that the language of faith and philosophy cannot be separated, since both are concerned with Truth which is one. He urges humility as a necessary quality for such undertakings, realising that no matter how imperative the urge to know with demonstrable certitude, the truth of God and God's ways is far greater than we can ever understand. We can know some things from reason, from observing creation and from history, but they can only take us towards the notion of a God.

We have been offered a new way of knowing [*Revelation*], which is of two kinds: knowledge we might have arrived at had not reason been distorted by sin, and knowledge we could in no way have discovered for ourselves. We could have arrived at some idea of the Creator God, and gained some insights as to the good intentions of such a God; but in no way could we know that God is a Trinity of Persons. Because this knowledge is given through faith, it is always easy to ridicule what is believed about Jesus. The personal reality of faith in no way yields to academic scrutiny.

Seeing Jesus as somewhat unreal and remote is by no means new. In C2. Ignatius of Antioch wrote to Christians who had no knowledge of the historical Jesus, insisting on the straightforward humanity of Christ, born of Mary, subject to suffering and death, who came to us as "*a loud scream out of the silence of God*".

By the end of that same century Irenaeus of Lyons was squaring up to the Gnostics, formulating the theme of "Recapitulation": we lost our likeness to God through sin [*disobedience*], and in so doing our ability to belong to each other and to creation is also disrupted. Jesus is the new head, restoring our likeness to

God, integrating all the dimensions of creation, undoing the destruction of sin. *In Jesus God became as we are so that we might become as God is.*

The discussions then moved on to discover just how Jesus and the Word are one Person. In C3Tertullian wrote that this relationship was like that of the ray to the sun. The Son is to the Father as shining is to light, as the outreach is to the source. This we still retain in our Nicene Creed: "light from light". The comparison implies unity as well as difference, and there never was a "before" when the Word was not.

Tertullian described the unity of the divine and human in Jesus as a double manner of being in which the divine and the human remain intact, they are not blended into a third reality, but are joined so that Jesus does things that are proper to the divinity: miracles and signs, and things that are proper to humanity: being born, suffering and dying, but all this is done by one Person.

It was unfortunate that he appeared to be assigning a passive role to the humanity rather than a cooperative one, with plenty of room and need for human initiative and creativity. He seemed to want to portray a Jesus who could be made to suffer and to die [*some of our own contemporary piety is not a million miles from this!*].

By contrast Clement of Alexandria, a contemporary, was convinced that the Incarnation is evidence of the totality of the love of God given to us, as one like us, so that we may come alive within a love that has become "ours" through the total self-emptying of God. Insightful and helpful as they were when they were written, these writings can be confusing because there was no "agreed" or "recognised" language for expressing such profound truths.

The Council of Nicea [325] and those to follow up to mid C5. were to set about this task. What they achieved has been called a triumph of the Spirit in the Church, which is a little surprising when you remember that these Councils were actually convened by rulers and emperors, more intent on personal prestige than on the search for truth. The Councils established ground rules for Christology.

Nicea gave us the formula [streamlined at Constantinople], which we now use as our "Sunday" Creed. There was an urgency about this formulation since Arius appeared to be denying the divinity of Christ. It is possible that Arius was misunderstood, though he did, in his enthusiasm, go somewhat astray. This is something which is always likely to recur when we use our ordinary ways of thought and communication to express what properly belongs to the realm of mystery, and for which there are no perennially appropriate words.

After Nicea Arius' following appeared to increase! Athanasius helped tackle this by going back to Irenaeus, and there was a period of calm. However, Apollinaris arrived, trying to resolve the problem, but made matters worse when he appeared to be suggesting that Jesus was *not quite human*, that the Word was animating a body. This is not as remote as one might think. There are many today who have difficulty in accepting that Jesus had to learn, had to be taught, discovered by trial and error, had to struggle to come to a decision. This suggests that the thinking, knowing, deciding activities were divine, only the purely physical ones were human. Constantinople [381] pointed out the errors in Apollinaris' thinking.

C5. saw the appearance of Nestorius: Mary is not the Mother of God, simply the mother of Jesus: which Ephesus [431] responded to with: "Mary is Mother of God". And so it went on, the continual search and research to understand Jesus. Throughout, the problem appears to have centred not so much on the divinity of Christ as on his humanity - the Monophysite [one nature] controversy, leading to Chalcedon [451].

This appears to be a wearisome journey, but it is extremely relevant when we realise that Chalcedon was able to proclaim and insist on the *true, full, complete, tangible, sensitive, intelligent, responsible humanity of Jesus*. That is why it appears paradoxical to hear Chalcedon more often cited to defend the divinity of Christ. What is of concern to ordinary mortals who believe, is that in Jesus we have one who is Saviour, a man as human as we are, who is without sin, who is truly God.

THE DEATH OF JESUS

The extraordinary belief of Christians is that Jesus is not simply God-made-man, but that the very rejection of him, his unjust condemnation and appalling execution actually sets us free, hence the pride of place of the crucifix [*in contrast to the cross, since it is not the cross that sets us free but the one who died on the cross*]. The Gospels, St. Paul, the writer of Hebrews all home-in on this, and show how the Eucharist is the central activity of the Christian community, allowing believers access [Mysterium Fidei] to the mystery of the death of Jesus:

"For the tradition I handed on to you came to me from the Lord himself: that on the night of his arrest the Lord Jesus took bread, and after giving thanks to God broke it and said: This is my body, which is for you; do this in memory of me. In the same way he took the cup after supper, and said: This cup is the new covenant sealed by my blood. Whenever you drink it, do this in memory of me. For every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes" 1Cor.11.25-27.

The redemptive character of the suffering and dying of Jesus is by no means self-evident, and the early Church had to struggle with this for some time, believing at first that the cross was an unfortunate blunder. We do have some Christian formulations of attempts to describe what all this is about: *Jesus dies in obedience to the Father's will, putting to rights the original disobedience of humanity. Jesus ransomed us from death; and so on.*

The problem with statements like these is that whilst the ones who wrote them might understand them very well, they can be misleading if not off-putting, when offered as the explanation of what actually happened. The questions we should be asking are of a different kind: Who killed him and why? Could he have avoided such a death? Can such outrageous injustice be termed the will of God?

The knee-jerk reaction to the first question: "who killed Jesus?" was: "the perfidious Jews", an expression that remained within our Good Friday Liturgy for centuries. The Gospels show Jesus gradually being polarised. On the one hand an enthusiasm among the poor and marginalised for his message and the hope he engendered; there is a considered reaction from the rich, and ill-disguised hostility from the privileged powerful. But this is in no way confined to Jewry, it is verifiable in fallen humanity.

The proper answer to the question as to who is responsible for Jesus' death is that "we" are, given the circumstances as described. What we must keep in mind is that it is not sufficient, nor is it accurate to say what we would have done if we had been there, we are still doing it, as Jesus reminded us: *"as long as you do this to the least of my brethren, you do it to me"*. The God of our need disappears with our increasing self-sufficiency. The rejection of Jesus is how unredeemed humanity reacts to Christ all the time.

Behind the familiar story of the passion and death of Jesus there is an obvious influence of local theologies. The Passion appears to "begin" with Jesus realising that he is being rejected: *"he learned obedience through his suffering"* Heb.5.8. "Obedience" in this context is most precise: the realising of what it is going to cost if he is to carry on with his mission.

Jesus was not programmed to die; his message was abundant life; but now untimely death is becoming more than a possibility. The Last Supper and Gethsemane, the appearances before the authorities as recorded in the Gospels, are attempts to represent what this meant for Jesus.

All is within the context of Passover. He is betrayed by a friend, arrested by the Jewish police and arraigned before the Jewish authorities: *"those who were his own gave him no welcome"*. Neither Pilate nor Herod could find any reason for execution; but it was authorised by the Romans, and the reason why was nailed above his head. They were ruthless with anyone challenging their right to rule.

John's Gospel is more theological in its reflections. John would be addressing the second and third questions we posed: "Could he have avoided this death and if so why did he not?" and "How could such barbarism be called the will of God?"

Jesus' recorded temptations happened when he was fasting in the desert; as well as the obvious allusion to the 40 years in the wilderness, there is also reference to Moses and Elijah, both of whom fasted for 40 days. Jesus' fast is recorded to show his total dependence on the Father. The first temptation was an offer

to alleviate hunger: Jesus' answer shows that his mission involves much more than altering bad physical conditions, since the deeper need in us is not for bread [the need for which is real] but for the transforming Word [the Word that transforms attitudes].

This answer would have little appeal if it did not come from a hungry man, he had been fasting for 40 days. The second temptation was for him to win a following through the spectacular, to which Jesus responds by reminding us to check our priorities. Whose anxieties are we coping with? Salvation [prosperity] by bread, technology and every kind of investment other than self-donation [*which always requires appropriate detachment*] is still being fostered. This is "salvation" by deception and, consequently, does not require conversion.

This is a crucial element in the process of Revelation, showing that in God the only power there is, and it is truly almighty, is the power of persuasion, the power to be totally with the other, with no concern for self. To live with such a priority requires much more than bland passivity or simply and uncritically filling ones allotted place in history. Jesus was not condemned because he was a carpenter. He was killed for being dangerous, a political subversive.

His life was prophetic in character, speaking what he believed and becoming what he spoke. Inevitably, this makes the prophet the conscience of the people, even though a prophet does not threaten anything. A prophet warns through unambiguous living. It is not the role of the prophet to issue warnings on God's behalf, but to warn of the consequences of decisions we actually make: if I insist on eating the wrong things, I cannot complain if I become ill! The people in OT were not punished by God for being unfaithful, their infidelity actually fostered fragmentation and loss of identity, making them easy prey for any passing invader.

Jesus spoke persuasively *because he lived convincingly*. How is this salvific?

It is one man who is our Saviour, but this one man shares a common humanity with us, a human life lived by one becomes possible for everyone, because he not only lived well, but he brought with him the power for others who were willing to live by the same Spirit. The ransom theory about the death of Jesus does not sit easily with the fact that God is nothing else but love. Just as original Sin is about much more than a legal apportioning of guilt, but is distortion in every area of our lives; so too the meaning of redemption is far more than the legal attributions of justice and righteousness.

Turning from the self-centred habits of a life-time has its price, as we discover from realising how willing we are to compromise truth. But tough as it is individually, it is compounded socially through structures put in place precisely to protect and foster such distorted living. There is no way one individual can pay what it costs to change all this; and Society itself is hopelessly compromised through obvious self-interest and self-protection.

The Christian claim, therefore, is that Jesus has turned the world upside down, and was willing to pay the price of it. He was able to do it because he is sinless and not trapped within compromise. His death is much more than good example, and far wider than simply evidence of God's compassion. *It is the complete restructuring of human freedom*, providing an infinity of possibilities for changing the human situation.

THE RESURRECTION - OUR HOPE

St. Paul is crystal clear that if there is no Resurrection, anything else to do with Christianity is a waste of time: "*If Christ is not raised, then our Gospel is null and void and so too is your faith*" 1Cor.15.14. He makes the point that the Resurrection is inevitably bound up with human destiny. Jesus defined himself as the self-evident love God has for everything created. This is so intimately part of himself that when he was arrested and executed the disciples, reasonably, believed that since he was gone so was everything he promised.

What they could not yet appreciate is that what they were assuming as life, that period between being born and dying, was simply a part of something far greater. The full meaning of life was not disclosed by what had happened between Jesus' birth and his death.

The Resurrection is much more than an isolated event, breaking the laws of nature to guarantee the message of Jesus. The Resurrection is not a proof of anything, if it were it was very badly organised, since no one saw it happen. The Resurrection is the full flowering of the life and death of Jesus.

The writers seem to be concerned with gathering the evidence of the early community with regard to their experience of the Resurrection. The oral preaching, which preceded the written accounts by decades, used several images to present what happened to Jesus after his death and burial. One such was the image of Jesus being lifted up into the divine realm - Phil.2.6; 1Tim.3.16. Another, that he was woken from the sleep of death and released from the tomb - Acts.2.23.

When the biblical writers do not have the precise words to describe anything, they resort to varieties of image and symbol. They are letting the reader know that the texts are not intended to be interpreted literally, but to hint at something which defies expression in the normal way. Far from saying that the reality is less than is being said, it is asserting that the reality is far too big for our normal ways of expression. Imagery is used because there is nothing else.

In Messianic times, rising from the dead was already an expressed hope. The Gospel records a disagreement between Jesus and the Sadducees: "*The same day Sadducees, who maintain there is no resurrection, came to him and asked... As for the Resurrection [Jesus said], have you not read that God himself said to you: I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? God is not God of the dead but of the living*" Matt.22.23-31.

Paul too sides with the Pharisees against the Sadducees over the same issue, Acts.23.6. The belief in some form of resurrection was necessarily vague, and there began to emerge a realisation that the promise that the virtuous would enjoy long life and prosperity was patently not happening this side of death. Jesus endorses the Rabbinic teaching that such hope is well-founded.

The NT texts do not tell us what Jesus experienced after he died, simply the impact on his followers experiencing his Resurrection. They were perplexed, shattered and bewildered by the events of Thursday and Friday. Their first faith had gone [*as Jesus said it would: "the time will come when you will all lose faith in me"*] and they were without direction or hope. Then, in various ways, they tell of a happening which changed all this.

They tried to put it into words in three ways: the actual change it caused within the community living; they proclaimed who Jesus now was for them, and they for him; they told stories of what had happened to certain individuals and groups, how they had met the Lord.

These events and stories were brought together in ways that writers and preachers thought would best explain the Good News about Jesus. They are not carried in NT in chronological order, simply in their cumulative effect, telling us that they know from their own experience that Jesus is risen from the dead, they are witnesses to the Resurrection:

"To this end I am toiling strenuously with all the energy and power of Christ at work in me" Col.1.29. "Were you not raised to life with Christ? Then aspire to that place where Christ is at God's right hand" Col.3.1. "He is the head of the body, the Church, the first to return from the dead" Col.1.18. "Let all Israel accept as certain that God has made this same Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah" Acts 2.36.

The Patristic age, which followed dwelt long on these and other writings, and they insist that the Resurrection of Jesus is not only the first fruits of a harvest yet to be reaped, but, in a seminal way, is already the Resurrection of all humankind. It has happened, it can happen again and again. We are already affected by it.

Since the Resurrection is known by faith and not by scientific research, or through our normal ways of knowing, its reality must be a matter of personal experience, the impact of which constitutes powerful mission, reaching out to others through lives transformed into compassion, forgiveness and enthusiasm for life. Gathered together, this community called Church *mediates the presence of the Risen Lord precisely through the quality of its own presence, individually and collectively.*

Some apologists, attempting to respond to objections, have provided answers which have robbed this faith experience of its proper sense of mystery [*not that we can know nothing about it, but that we cannot know everything: there will always be more*].

Focussing on the empty tomb, on the Shroud and the like, simply diverts attention from the real issue: the real, live impact the Resurrection has on the community, this is the tangible evidence of the real presence of Jesus Christ today.

THE CHURCH - COMMUNION AND INSTITUTION

For those who feel no need to belong to the Church, the Church's self-description must appear somewhat arrogant. Especially when the Church invokes Mary and the Pope to further her claim: Mary, the model of the Church: *Mary is what God would be in all of us*. The Pope, the successor of Peter, the Vicar of Christ on earth.

These two figures convey something very real, what it means to be Church in the World.

What the Church teaches about herself arose in answer to questions being asked after the death and Resurrection of Jesus. What happens now? The story might have appeared to be complete for them with the vindication of Jesus in the Resurrection. The NT does not leave it there. We are presented with something which puts us on the spot. Acts 1.6-11. narrates the drama of the Ascension, the setting up of the Church as we know it, with a sense of urgency. Those who are "witnesses to the Resurrection" are sent out to "realise" [*make real*] as best they can the Kingdom of God.

As might be expected, their initial understanding is restricted: "are you ready to set up the kingdom?", implies that they thought that Jesus had done everything and that all that was needed was this final touch. Jesus warns them that there are some surprises on the way, with the coming of the Spirit they will find themselves uprooted in all kinds of ways, not least in order to be sent beyond the confines of Palestine. Acts.1.13-14. names those present to hear all this: the 11, some women, including his mother, and some unnamed relatives. These are the people gathered in the Upper Room awaiting Pentecost.

The significance of the Ascension is not that Jesus was lifted up, but that those he left behind were given the task of witnessing to the Resurrection, everywhere. They had problems with this. They knew they had a task, but they did not understand what this meant. Everything points to the need for clarification, and, as Jesus promised, it is *the Spirit who will make things clear*.

The Spirit appears in the Creation story, the one who brings order out of chaos. The Spirit of God is breathed into the life-less Adam. The symbolism of this should not be lost on us: we live with the life of God. With sin comes death as we know it, though *there is nothing wrong with something mortal actually dying*.

Because of sin the free blowing of the Spirit in the world can no longer be presumed. There are moments when the Spirit is present: like the burning bush, the drying up of the Red Sea, the conception of Jesus, the temptations in the desert, hovering over Christ in the Jordan. The Last Supper Discourse contains references to the Spirit of Truth, and in recounting Jesus' death John speaks of it as Jesus yielding up his spirit - Jn.19.30.

The meaning of Pentecost is the actual giving of the Spirit which, energised and inspired Jesus, to anyone who would accept it: "*to all who believed in him he gave power to become children of God*". Two elements are involved: the availability of the Spirit [*the mission of Jesus*] and the accepting of the Spirit on our part, working with grace.

Neither element is automatic, both require personal involvement. The ability to establish the kingdom is now with us, the unknown task for the disciples is identified: *go out and live totally prompted by this Spirit*. When a human life, totally at the disposal of the Spirit of God, confronts the signs of the times, then the kingdom becomes visible.

The task that Jesus could not do for his disciples was to make their own personal response to this offer. He made the "yes" possible, he laid the foundations, set up direct access to the Spirit, but the welcome and free response is yet to come.

They heard the sound of the wind, they saw tongues of flame, and in welcoming what was happening actually found themselves now able to communicate with people they could never have communicated with before, either through inability or through fear. *What was scattered and shattered at Babel is gathered together at Pentecost.*

What is actually happening? What does all this feel like as an experience? Within themselves they felt a presence, similar to the warmth which is felt between two people who are growing in intimacy and friendship, an experience much deeper than simply meeting and being with the other person. The presence of God is not simply an idea, or a concept, but a living and personal experience, and like all such experiences it has consequences.

When a friendship ripens into intimacy between two people, they live their lives differently. They make plans now with the other in mind. They make room for the other in their priorities; they try to arrange times to meet, to make contact by phone or letter [*this is what praying really is all about*]. So too with a growing sense of the presence of God, we feel the desire to make more and more room for meeting and intensifying the experience.

The immediate impact on the disciples of this experience was the need they felt to go out and shout about it. When someone is in love, it cannot be hidden. It shows in the face. It brings an attitude of optimism. The one important difference is that this experience really is infectious, and is meant to be. *We do not learn about the presence of God, we catch it*, and we cannot catch it without contact. This is only purpose of mission.

What is involved in being Baptised, being Forgiven, coming Alive in the Spirit? The answer is given in Acts 2.42-47.

"They met constantly to listen to the Apostles, to share the common life, to break bread and to pray. A sense of awe was felt by everyone, and many portents and signs were brought about through the Apostles. They agreed to hold everything in common, they began to sell their property and possessions, so that no one went without. One and all they kept up daily attendance at the temple, and breaking bread in their homes, they shared their meals with each other. They praised God and were welcomed by the people"

There is an interim period between the death, resurrection and glorification of Jesus and the implementing of its consequences. This means that the Church is movement, reaching out to wherever the experience of the Spirit is absent, for whatever reason. In some instances, it will be a matter of ordinary communication, bringing awareness which was not there before, in other instances it will call for confrontation where opposition to the Spirit is causing some [*the oppressed*] to experience life as less than full.

The role of the Church is not just to be instrumental in bringing about the kingdom [*living in the world as it is meant to be lived in*], there is also an inward movement. The only way the kingdom will happen is when individuals are personally convinced of the need for it; there has to be a conversion experience, a transformation of vision and behaviour and, most especially, of motivation. There is no point in talking about the proper quality of life if it is not on offer to be shared.

The only way to change the world is to be changed ourselves. This is why Jesus' work was bound to be unfinished, since *real presence is required in every age* and everywhere. Likewise, with mission, there is no point in simply handing a book on central heating to someone dying of cold. Get involved, bring them into the warmth - and then they will probably ask about the heating!

We must not hand out tracts or simply preach sermons about the love of God, we must get out there and bring people in by our obvious care for them, and let them ask where does all this come from?

Throughout this process, which has also suffered from aberration and infidelity, there is the guarantee: "*do not worry, I am with you always*". The Church is to face up to the need for ongoing redemption of itself, both in personnel and structure, due to the constant invasion of the destructive effects of sin and selfishness, and most especially the temptation to become power hungry and to live by privilege.

Original Sin was a declaration of independence from God, and means that conversion is all about recognising our need for God. Jesus began the redemptive process for us, precisely by showing that to be a fully alive human being - which is especially evident in the Resurrection, when death was unable to contain him - means to be on intimate terms with God.

In one sense the Church has to be a community of the redeemed, since it is meant to witness to the reality of what is not yet, but will be: the life of Resurrection. Such a witness can only be given by a community centred on God, living through faith - i.e. by the vision another has of us: every love relationship requires this. The more we are with one who loves us the more we discover that our lover sees far more in us than we do; and we begin, slowly [*and sometimes painfully*] to believe in the vision the other has of us rather than the limited vision we have of ourselves.

Another aspect of this same experience is what we mean by living in Hope: i.e. that the other has the power to convince me of the truth of this vision of me, by the quality of presence through love and affection. Put both together, the gentle challenge and openness to it and we have the beginnings of the life of Charity.

In such a community the leaders and those in authority must truly be servants, people who desire neither status nor power for themselves, humble in the quest for truth, but strong in support of those who cannot keep up.

The Church in which all this happens is also a Church of sinners, forgiven sinners, but still sinners. The Church is always trying to give evidence of the presence of God through the medium of people who are only partially converted.

Is this asking the impossible? Christ promised the Church that in the thick of all this, she will not fail. Trying to answer questions like that is what gave rise to such popular devotions as the Immaculate Conception. Jesus Christ has brought about a new way of being human. This is why *Lumen Gentium* proclaims Mary the model of the Church [*Mary is what God would be in all of us*], the Church's greatest member.

There is an obvious sense in which those who have gone before us can be of help to us. What they have discovered, lived through and shared with others can be of tremendous help. What appears to cause problems today, is that people are uneasy about speaking with the saints, feeling it to be more akin to fantasy than to reality, that we are doing no more than talking to ourselves.

Maybe this is a result of a too literal understanding of "talking with God" in prayer. When we pray, we might well be speaking silent words in our minds, but this is how human beings project themselves towards others. How God actually picks this up and gets back to us is mysterious, but not unreal.

This is also relevant when we think about praying for the dead. Scripture assures us that it is holy and wholesome to pray for the dead. When people die they leave all sorts of unfinished business behind: family, friends, work. It is part of the task of compassion to pick up on this. The question is: does this "reach" the person who has died? Christian tradition says "yes", but does not say how.

All this has been brought together by what we call "the communion of saints". The original term was much more precise; it spoke about "communion in holy things". These "holy things" are: Sacramental celebration, hearing the Scriptures proclaimed in the Liturgy, gathering in the Lord's name. The strength of the bond in "communion in holy things" is not just praying for and supporting those who have been bereaved, but also in affirming each other.

To undertake to pray for another implies being active in promoting an environment in which the other can flourish, being active in promoting the well-being of the other. Letting others know that their good name is safe with us, even when they are absent.

Because most of us, most of the time do not live up to all this, an elaborate teaching developed around what is called the "evangelical [Gospel] counsels". They are the sayings of Jesus, through which he recommended a way of living, it was not mandatory in its entirety for everyone. Such values are: meekness to the point of non-violent reactions; the importance of regular prayer; radical renunciation in order to be fully in charge of oneself.

St. Francis is renowned for the severity of his personal discipline [*which he never imposed on his brethren*], but this was not to punish himself. He knew that he was a passionate man, and wanted to be passionately for God. He also knew that he was at the mercy of his passions, so that if he was going to give himself passionately to God, he had to be able to give what he was intending. That is why he was a disciplined man, not to deny his passion, but make sure that he was in charge of himself when he was living passionately.

There arose an institutional way of living these values: virginity - the foregoing of giving oneself totally to one person in love *in order to go out lovingly to everyone*. Poverty - the renunciation of ownership, refusing to settle for anything less than everything. To be poor in this sense means to rejoice in all the good things God has made, but to realise that they can get in the way of our search not just for the gifts, but, and most especially, for the Giver of the gifts.

As time went on it became obvious that there was need for guidance and direction, when they gathered in groups there had to be room for order and this required some kind of ministry of authority. They recalled how Jesus was motivated by "*not my will but yours*". Obedience was introduced to help change self-will and self-assertiveness into self-emptying intimacy.

This is now known to us as Religious Life, which has the specific mission of witnessing both to the Church and to the World about the proper connection between this life and the life to come. They are part and parcel of each other, and in renouncing certain aspects of life in order to witness to the wholesomeness of life in its entirety.

It is crucial that the renunciation proper to Religious Consecration should never become denunciation, since this would be the complete antithesis of its purpose. This is not to imply two levels of membership of the Church: one a passive role fulfilled by observance, and the other an active role calling for something more than passive observance.

Everyone is called to live by the Spirit of the Counsels. For the vast majority this will mean trying to do this within the need to live and prosper within today's world and all that this demands; so difficult is this that they need the help of others who have freely detached themselves from such pressures precisely in order to offer help and support to others. At the same time Religious too need the help of the others *to remind them what the real world is all about*.

We are bodily beings, we need space and time, we are dependent on each other in all kinds of ways; just let a power cut or a water shortage be prolonged to see the havoc. We are also inserted within a world that needs redemption. Sin is a fact. For whatever reasons people are still killing and abusing each other. The need to relate is beset with difficulties of all kinds. We need to recognise that the unwillingness to serve is as strong as ever, whilst our need to serve and to be served is never diminished.

What causes hostility is our refusal to accept limitations on what we understand as our freedom. We need only think of the instant resistance that wells up in us at the thought of some outsider telling us what we have to do. This is where the heart of conversion is really highlighted: the will of God, the Gospel, is communicated to us through other people.

To resist, to exclude, other people on principle is to be closed to the Gospel. To be selective about who we will listen to can make us equally deaf. But we do need to be selective, since all people are not trustworthy. This is the mess sin has left us with. We need to listen and to believe, yet we know from painful experience [*and even from our own bad example*] that you cannot believe everything you hear. Who could doubt that we do need redemption?

REDEMPTION AND AUTHORITY IN THE CHURCH

But how does Jesus dying on the cross have anything to do with this, since we claim that we are redeemed by his death and resurrection? How does this affect the way you tell me things, and the difficulty I may have in believing you?

Without doubt we do need to be able to hear freely, and to trust totally. If I am to be the person who is going to be listened to and trusted, then I need to speak and relate from other motives than my own self-interest. This is just as important for structures as for individuals. You could be forgiven for believing that Institutions, including the Church, often appear to be much more concerned with self-preservation than with promoting the well-being of people. The witness of those vowed to obedience is meant to show that speaking the truth in love is crucial for anyone who would hear the truth lovingly.

The Catholic ideal of obedience to authority must never be to have the individual remain a child forever, when "*those who know best*" make decisions for us. Rather, and this is so often overlooked, but we should listen, judge and decide with the well-being of others uppermost in our lives. Obedience is not serving the Institution, but *recognising our need for its service of us*. Unfortunately, this has been turned on its head by flagrant abuse of authority. In many ways it has not the slightest connection with the ministry of service, which is its only justification; but has become a tool for control and domination.

There is need for a personal, intellectual, informed and critical effort to appreciate the purpose, ideal and goals of community. It calls for the ability to appreciate and affirm the strengths of its traditions, and to be vigilant about unhelpful accretions. Obedience in the Church is about creative collaboration, since the Church is evolving, and this means the ever presence of differences and a variety of emphases, within a vast range of individual experiences.

Within this ideal various patterns of leadership have emerged. In the early days there was the authority of the Apostles, the actual witnesses of the Resurrection. With the spreading out from Jerusalem it became necessary to have local leaders, *appointed by popular consent*. The spread continued and the need arose for the growing numbers of local Churches to be under the direction of a specified overseer, a bishop.

Important matters for decisions were referred to meetings of bishops. We have an example of such a meeting of bishops in Jerusalem when people were bothered about the arrival of non-Jews in the Church, and what customs they should follow. It was recognised that in such meetings, when there was a consensus reached, that this was the way the Spirit was acting in the Church, and what had been decided was binding on believers.

After the Schism between East and West C11., the Western Church came more and more to regard the incumbent of the See of Rome as the legitimate successor to Peter and Paul. This was not simply a ceremonial leadership, like today's monarchy, but a leader with authority to act on his own initiative.

This did not happen without great struggles about the whole issue of the centralisation of power. This became a major issue at the time of the Reformation in C16. It became an issue again with the question of papal infallibility at Vatican 1, in C19. Vatican 1 proclaimed: that when acting within clearly and narrowly prescribed limits, solemnly and officially on behalf of the whole Church defining doctrine [specifying teaching] on faith or morals [interpreting the Gospel], the bishop of Rome possesses the infallibility Christ intended the Church to have for its guidance and well-being.

The practical effect: such declarations became unchangeable, *which is not what was intended*. The truth contained in the statements is unchanging, but the manner of expressing it needs to evolve with succeeding generations. This power, to date, has only been invoked on two occasions [*if we discount Canonisations*], both concerned with Marian Doctrine: The Immaculate Conception, at Vatican I., and the Assumption in 1950.

Surprisingly, considering the sweeping scope of such a claim to authority, the difficulties people have experienced with the Church have not been with the exercise of this power ["Extraordinary Magisterium"], but with the way *ordinary authority* is being exercised ["Ordinary Magisterium"], with decisions made by the

Pope, Bishops, Congregations etc. Sadly, there was a seismic change: "*freedom of the children of God*" came to mean to "*freedom to obey*".

In such matters the guiding principle must always be: that it is a matter of responsibility for each one to form one's conscience responsibly: [*conscience = the habit of making practical moral decisions in given cases*], by acquainting oneself with the Church's teaching and the reasoning behind it, by seeking authoritative and sound advice, and through prayerful reflection to seek to become as objective as possible [*recognising whatever might impede objectivity - involvement, prejudice, preference... not with a view to removing them, that is not possible. But having them in mind when reaching a conclusion*].

This having been done, the Catholic tradition holds that in the final step the individual must follow conscience and make a proper and informed judgement about what to do in this particular instance, recognising always that no one can lay claim to complete objectivity. My conscience is *my* highest norm – but not *the* highest norm.

THE SACRAMENTS

The Sacraments are of the essence of the Christian faith. The value enshrined in the word "Sacrament" was around a long time before ever the word was used. "Sacrament" means an external sign of a hidden yet real value. We cannot see God face to face, nor can we hear God speak with a voice like ours. We can only know God because God has made himself known, coming towards us in an embodied form.

The Old Testament tells us that the Hebrew nation with its rules and customs, with its Sabbath observance was such a specific embodiment. But for us, the prime and comprehensive Sacrament is Jesus from Nazareth.

A human being is made in the image of God. The story of sin is the account of how we actually lost this likeness to God, though we can never lose the fact that we are in the image of God - i.e. no matter how hard I try, I cannot disconnect where I come from, or where I am going. I come from God and I go back to God.

Whether that going back to God will be heaven or hell, it is up to me. But that is where I am going. Both heaven and hell [*as we have already noted*] are the ways we experience the love God has for us, forever. Openness to it and eagerness for it will be my heaven; attempting to shut it out by remaining locked into my self-centredness and sinfulness will be my hell. Because the love of God will never leave me.

The opening verses of Ephesians are taken from a hymn celebrating the primacy of Christ. In Jesus God is present tangibly in the world, the compassion and love of God is able to be met, able to be seen and touched. People were attracted by the personality of Jesus, they liked what they saw, they enjoyed his company and began to appreciate his values.

It came as revelation to them to realise that the more they were prepared to become genuine human beings, living-out all that was best in humanity, the closer they seemed to get to God. But such has been the drastic effects of sin, that such integrity is not possible without help. Jesus claims to be that help, and direct access to it he has provided for us through the Sacraments.

He emphasises certain aspects of life as being crucial. Many of his sayings contain references to the paradox that it is only in losing life that we will find it: it is only in giving oneself generously and lovingly that we discover who we really are. But before I can give myself to others I have to possess myself fully. The work involved in such personal conversion is beyond us, we need a Saviour. What makes salvation attractive is that it is precisely through these very same human values, which Jesus lived fully, that we are set free.

Jesus is the first and prime Sacrament, the real presence of God with us; but those who openly and willingly gather in his name become another level of this same Sacrament for others: "*where two or three gather in my name I am there in their midst*".

Gathering in his name is easily said, but requires complete involvement of self, and is useless if it cannot be met and touched and seen and be experienced as welcome. This is meant to be given a sharp focus in the way we gather to celebrate the Eucharist.

The Eucharistic celebration is yet another level of Sacrament, the centre and focus of all the Sacraments. In celebrating the Eucharist, we [1] gather to celebrate; we [2] listen to the Word proclaimed; we [3] witness that same Word becomes flesh and blood through bread and wine; we [4] are made able to become what we receive for others.

We are meant to be the Eucharist in the world precisely through the quality of the way we are Eucharist within the Church. Jesus becomes body given and blood poured out for us, we are made able to become body given, blood poured out for others, we too can serve. This is how all that is best in us is reached by Christ, healed and allowed to become the means of our conversion.

The actual notion of a Eucharistic celebration was around before Jesus came. The Hebrews gathered annually to make the reality of the Exodus present by the way they celebrated the Passover. It was not just a memorial service, like we have at the Cenotaph every November, it was a celebration of the real presence of God setting them free; a forerunner of Christ, who, when he came makes all the symbols no longer necessary. He has made sure that all those who were not present in his own days will lose nothing, by giving us this same and continuing experience in the Eucharist.

This is why Law and Observances were so important. Ritual elements were set out on the table, and the food was eaten accompanied by readings, followed by reflection on the Word, questions were asked for enlightenment, and answers were given. The Passover was celebrated in the households of families, but because it was to be celebrated by everyone, it was the binding principle of their lives. It both constituted and celebrated their identity as the People of God.

This is the setting Jesus deliberately uses, now bestowing on it a new purpose and meaning, one which properly and intentionally fulfils the old celebration. The setting free from death is now achieved through communion in him [1Cor.11.17; Mk.14.22; Matt.26.26; Lk.22.7.]

The Eucharist is a community celebration, it is not the place for private Eucharistic devotions: Paul gets exceedingly angry with the Corinthian Church because they had reduced the Eucharist to something individual "*not recognising the body*" and "*embarrassing the poor*". They were eating and drinking to excess whilst others went hungry.

A healthy reminder to us that our wonderful masses are pointless if we too ignore those who do not know the Lord, we too are doing no more than embarrassing the poor. What Paul meant when he said that they did not recognise the body of the Lord, was that the only valid presence to Christ in the Eucharist is that of unique individuals called together to belong in communion.

The core of the Eucharist is that the death of Jesus, or rather the reason why Jesus accepted death, is in order to become the energy and life source of this new way of communion for others: 1Cor.11.26. Paul is indignant because any sense of individualism is an affront to what the Eucharist is meant to be.

The ancient C2 Hymn - the Didache - prays that all may be gathered from the four winds to celebrate in order to become one body. LG.9 reminds us that even though the Church does not embrace all people, and is a genuine minority [*and meant to be*], it is the seed of unity and hope for everyone. This can only happen if the Eucharist is allowed to become more than simply a ritual act [*"going to Mass"*], much more than an hour given on a Sunday morning. We are to become what we have received for other people; this is how the Eucharist belongs in the world - SC.10.

Obviously, through the way the Eucharist has been celebrated throughout the centuries, it has picked up many traditions and customs. It was preceded by a confession of sin, a series of readings from Scripture and words of instruction. The whole purpose of this was to make the Eucharist relevant and to avoid it becoming merely ritual gesture. The readings became an integral part of the celebration along with the songs and the instruction.

But with the migration North and West much originality was lost, not least because of the over clericalisation of the Church which led to unworthy clerics being appointed, who simply became functional people. They had an inflated sense of their importance and all sense of service was gone. The tragedy is that much damage is inflicted on people who have to live with the consequences long after the individual clerics have moved on. It is little wonder that going through the motions became rife, and the way was open to the intrusion of all kinds of superstitions and even magical practices.

Much of the controversy - though not all - could have been avoided if attention had been paid to the proper formation and training of clerics. There was unfamiliarity with the teachings of Christ and the Church, leading to many interpreting the real presence in merely symbolic ways.

The Fourth Lateran Council approved "Transubstantiation" in 1215. This was a deliberately chosen word, it was trying to express the conviction that the bread and wine that are shared become the real presence of Christ and effect communion with him. Sadly, the word soon became technical and the thinkers [!] wasted much time and energy asking questions like "what does the word mean?" instead of asking what did the Lord say? In *Mysterium Fidei* Paul VI insisted on the continuing use of the word since so much Catholic piety is tied in with it.

The sad situation was that in focussing on such arguments the whole sense of a community celebration became of secondary importance and was badly neglected. The Second Vatican Council [*Sacrosanctum Concilium*] reinstated the community character of the Eucharist, and what is meant to happen as a consequence of such a priority.

St. Augustine taught that the Sacraments are actions of the Church, not of particular individuals, not even of individual communities, but of the community of the Church. They are actions of Jesus Christ, making their outcome independent of the worthiness of the minister; though any kind of scandalous situation is obviously going to raise credibility problems. The Sacraments are not magic; they cannot establish a person in grace who is unwilling to be graced. Grace works on nature - meaning that conversion involves the whole person at every level of being.

Precisely because it is an all-embracing experience, there is need for the other Sacraments to help us in this process. Only two Sacraments are clearly mentioned in NT - Baptism and Eucharist - through the activity of the apostles and the elders included other activities of a Sacramental nature.

Since the C16. the Protestant tradition has challenged the tradition of the Seven Sacraments. The Sacramental tradition grew slowly. The Patristic era left us the "Mysteries", without numbering them. The numbers issue arose in the Scholastic era, and there seemed to be more agreement about the number seven than what the seven were [presumably because 7 is a mystic number]. The number offered by Peter Lombard, C12., became official at the Council of Florence in 1439., and was defined as doctrine by Trent in its seventh session in 1547.

What makes it important to distinguish the sacraments, is the claim made for them. They are direct actions of Jesus Christ and are effective as such. In enumerating the seven the Church made a statement: in these celebrations grace is dispensed in two ways, establishment or restoration of life in the Spirit [*habitual or sanctifying grace*] and a specific sacramental grace, the outcome symbolised by the sacrament itself.

Initiation: is in three stages: - Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist. Baptism symbolises going down into the waters of the death of Jesus and emerging from them into new life. Originally this was adult Baptism and involved a long period of the catechumenate [up to 4 years]. The actual Baptism celebrated mutual commitment of the individual and the welcoming Church. "Confirmation" of this Baptism through the imposition of the bishop's hand followed immediately. From here they were led [literally in procession] into full participation through the celebration of the Eucharist.

Infant Baptism became general practice, and the ordering of things was changed. When the infant is baptised the child, obviously, makes no commitment, but the community makes its commitment to the child, to provide an appropriate human environment within which it can grow and flourish.

In this case the catechumenate follows Baptism, during which time the child is invited gradually, to make an assent to faith. The separation of Baptism and Confirmation thus makes sense for the infant, since personal involvement and commitment is required.

Traditionally, Confirmation has been regarded as the Sacrament of maturity, recognition by the Bishop that the individual is ready to take a responsible part in the community life. Confirmation is also a prayer and an effective blessing, the outpouring of the gifts and fruits of the Spirit. This is the reality which the ritual is meant to symbolise.

Ordained ministry: through which individuals are chosen, trained and commissioned to celebrate the Sacraments and to undertake pastoral ministry and mission. There is a hierarchy within this ministry which is meant to serve the affairs of the community through leadership, example and teaching as to matters of faith and behaviour.

Jesus instituted a ministry to continue part of his work. The tension between the ordained and the charismatic ministries is as old as the Church itself. There is certainly a plea in the Didache, C2, for communities to welcome the ordained ministers with the same cordiality as the other ministries. Already there was a preference for the charismatic leadership over the hierarchic. By the end of C2. there was the general rule that only those designated by the Bishop may preside over the Eucharist.

The division into Bishops, Presbyters and Deacons happened along with the greater geographical spread. Their functions gradually came to include more and more administrative work, even to the extent of the Pope exercising territorial sovereignty. Territorial power was gradually stripped away, until with the re-emergence of the ministries in our own times, the era of exaggerated clericalism is fading.

Although Orders is a single Sacrament, it has different phases. The Permanent Deacon, in the Western Church, involves: baptising, celebrating marriage and burying the dead, teaching, preaching, visiting the sick and the poor. The presbyter was concerned with preaching and celebrating the Sacraments, especially Eucharist, Reconciliation and Anointing of the sick.

The Bishop is both the symbol and the means of unity; he is the pontifex, not a title but a humble builder of bridges. This is why tradition has assigned to the Bishop the administration of Confirmation and Orders, along with the overseeing of the ministries.

Since C5. the Sacrament of Orders, like Baptism and Confirmation, has been recognised as carrying a specific character which is permanent, even though the individual either forsake or be relieved of these ministries. We cannot become non-baptised, non-confirmed, non-ordained after receiving the ministries through the appropriate commitment.

Marriage: Sacrament mediating the love of Christ right into the very heart of where life actually happens. Marriage is a Sacrament because it is concerned with communion through love and intimacy, the very reason why the Word became flesh.

We know well enough that conversion is not a once only happening. There is need for an ongoing process of conversion. Reconciliation emerged in various forms, which happened before the Eucharistic celebration. Reconciliation of an individual with the Church in an official ceremony was rare, and a once only event. The history of what we know as "confession" is complex, and owes a great deal more to culture than to religion.

Reconciliation, along with the Eucharist, is the means whereby *"the fragrance of the Spirit"* [Cyril of Jerusalem] is constantly being released into the Church. It is a meeting with Jesus the healer, not just to obtain forgiveness but to be made able to forgive. It has both an interior and an exterior aspect: the turning of self away from self-centredness, and the change of attitude and relationships towards others.

The observance of Lent is bound up with this, and, in a lesser way, also Advent, along with the time between Ascension and Pentecost. This is why Services of Reconciliation are most appropriate during

these times. Such serious searching should be both individual and communal, since the structures of the local Church, if they are not regularly renewed, also carry injustices.

In principle, General Absolution is accepted by the Church, though the hierarchy is reluctant to use it and has attached stringent conditions to its use. The practice of individual confession dates only from C12. Which means that General Absolution [*in use prior to C12.*] has been practised for a longer time. One to one confession grew up out of the need for individuals to reflect upon their own Christian experiences and to share this, with a view to obtaining help, correction and direction.

Hazarding a guess at the reluctance of the Church to allow more easy access to General Absolution: to be serious about change and genuine conversion requires individual focussing in the presence of another [*we are seldom good judges in our own court*]. The relevant discernment about self, temperament, character, prejudices, gifts, dispositions... is best undertaken through the guidance of trained help. Conversion starts with recognising the need for forgiveness, and whilst this is proper to the realm of conscience, it tends to remain unowned *unless articulated in the presence of another*.

But why confession of sin to an ordained minister? Why not confess to a suitable lay-person? Lay confession was and is again being practised, though without approval. The element added when confession is made to a priest approved by the Bishop ["faculties"], is that there is submission to the Institutional authority of the Church ["Jurisdiction"]. To make full confession and to express sorrow, to seek absolution and to accept an imposed penance is the practice still of the Church.

This makes a serious assumption [presumption]. That all confessors are adequately prepared for this ministry, and are willing to celebrate the Sacrament in the fullest possible way. All too often such an assumption proves not to be justified, and the celebration degenerates into little more than ritual action.

Closely allied to this Sacrament is the Anointing of the Sick, which mediates the grace [*the experience of the love of God*] of what the death and Resurrection of Jesus really mean at a time when it is urgently needed. It does this by calling upon the local Church to support the sick through this ministry, since such times are beset with anxiety, fear and not a little despair.

The purpose of this Sacrament is not to take these away, that would be supremely unnatural, but to make of them real occasions of grace [*experiences of the loving presence of God - even in absence*], enabling us to live with them differently.

LIFE IN THE SPIRIT

We have frequently used the word "grace", which is shorthand for talking about the relationship God would have with us. Throughout the Old Testament God is constantly showing love for his people and is in direct communication with them collectively and individually. In Genesis we read that God breathed the Spirit into human beings. God walks with them in the cool of the evening.

The implication is that here there is something over and above what would be the natural expectation for them, there is some kind of "excess", what the Letter to the Hebrews refers to as "something more". The story about Moses praying - Exodus 33.- tells us how Moses is able to know when God has "passed by", especially so in situations of compassion and undeserved mercy. God is the faithful parent of the wayward child, the loving husband of the unfaithful wife. If the parent is stern, it is out of love for the well-being of the child, and if the lover is demanding, it is in order to rescue the beloved from disaster [Hosea].

In the New Testament Jesus is the unearned gracious gift of God, who brings the Spirit to those who would become, through grace, what Jesus is by nature, a child of God. For St. Paul this experience is χάρις, which we translate as "grace", describing the gratuitous nature of what God has done, first of all in giving us to ourselves in creation; in giving himself to us in redemption; and in giving us to himself through life in the Spirit - making us holy [whole].

Paul is at pains to point out that this experience cannot be earned simply by observing the Law. We cannot get at this relationship on our own. We cannot reach God. God is utterly beyond us. But we can be reached by God, and we have been reached by God in Jesus through the power of the Spirit: "*The holy Spirit will overshadow you... and the child will be called Son of God*", says St. Luke. Elsewhere, referring to the same gift, Paul describes it as "justification", which means actually accepting the gift God offers and living appropriately through it, becoming a whole person [holy].

Tradition picked up these themes from Scripture, and soon grace came to mean both of these experiences, together: the gift of God and the quality of a changed life. In fact, the "gift" is nothing else than the changed self of the receiver; grace does not float around waiting to be "used"! Gradually, grace came to be appreciated for what it truly is - *the self-communication of God*.

Thomas Aquinas [C13.] distinguished between the activity of God within us and the activity of God within the whole of creation, though he stresses that he is speaking of the same God and the same reality. In concrete terms this means that it is only within the human heart that the presence of God is experienced as intimacy.

Within creation God's presence is evident as wonder, awe, majesty, serenity, order, power, wisdom... But nowhere else than within the human being is this experience intimate. St. Thomas is insisting that what we mean when we use the word "grace" is described very well in Genesis when God breathed the Spirit of life into us, the Spirit of God's own life.

Nowhere is it more important for us to use language which speaks of real things than when we are dealing with Grace. The stories about the activity of the Spirit in the Old and New Testaments secure this for us: "*The harvest of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness and self-control*" Gal.5.19.

In Chapters 12-14 of 1st Corinthians Paul takes time to reflect on the activity of the Holy Spirit, and Tradition picked up his listing [though Paul never suggested his list was exhaustive]. This list made the gifts into 7: *wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety and reverential regard [fear] of the Lord*. These gifts received technical interpretations, but Tradition stayed with Paul, claiming that the central qualities of life in the Spirit [the life of grace] are: faith, hope and charity, the theological virtues and that the crucial test is charity [1Cor.13.1.].

Paul refers to charity as the most perfect way of all. People of the Spirit are patient, kind, not devious, nor boastful; they are not conceited nor rude, neither are they easily offended. They do not carry grudges, nor hold themselves to be superior to others, they seek the truth in love and are trustworthy in whatever they promise.

Be aware that the way the notion of "faith" has developed in Theology is somewhat narrower than the understanding provided by the NT. This has led to quite serious problems. When Protestants speak of salvation by faith alone, they mean something different from the use made of the word faith by Catholics.

For the Protestant it signifies the acceptance of Jesus as Saviour and a response of full self-disclosure to God. This acceptance is a total and personal response. Catholics usually refer to faith as signifying what is involved in that total and personal response. Living faithfully in this sense means that one's perception, understanding and imagination are sensitised to Revelation, allowing this to give shape and form to the vision of reality.

Hope is less problematic. It has never been used in as wide sense as faith. It involves the will, the striving capacity of a person reaching towards God now seen as the future fulfilment of the human being, both individually and communally. It implies confidence in God and a willingness to seek to invest self totally in this. In the earliest days the virtue of hope centred more around the community understanding, with obvious emphasis on the quality of relationships and the need for structures to serve and not to enslave.

With the passage of time, taking structures for granted, the practice of hope became more individual, concerned with something that would happen to us after death. Since the time of the Enlightenment

[*originating in Holland and England mid C17.*] Christian hope for the world seemed to disappear, becoming [like religion itself] a purely private matter, something very firmly removed from and kept out of public affairs.

Today the need for communal hope is overwhelming, but there is considerable tension involved, since many Christians want to believe that "religion" has no place in politics.

Charity is the heart of life in the Spirit, and has two dimensions, neither of which is present without the other: total surrender of self to the providence of God, and commitment to universal and unselective service of others. They are inseparable, because to love God is to love all that God loves. Because the order of history is very much an order of sin and redemption from sin, this involves a great deal of self-sacrifice, given the selfish structures we have been nurtured within, both personal and cultural [and even religious].

The so-called moral virtue of shared self-interest is far from Christian. Society gathered what was "best" in the moral virtues: sobriety, courage, industry, modesty, fair play... and came up with the sufficiently "safe" sounding: prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance. But they constitute little more than good neighbourliness, unless they are firmly rooted in faith, hope and charity.

Christianity acquired, from time to time, delusions of self-sufficiency, something for which the Church was ready to condemn Luther. Back in C5 there was the confrontation between Augustine and Pelagius. Augustine was overwhelmed at the seeming hopelessness of the human situation. He was actually focussing on the decadence and corruption of the disintegrating Roman Empire.

Looking at the only world he knew, and over his own past dissolute life, he did not hesitate to speak of the human race as a doomed mass of human misery. No self-starting effort, no matter how heroic, could rescue the individual from this morass. Only the special intervention of healing grace could rescue us.

Pelagius was not impressed by Augustine's view, believing it to be a recipe for despair. He thought that Augustine was denying human freedom and moral responsibility. However, he went too far, denying the general state of corruption, which Tradition saw as Original Sin. He claimed that we could save ourselves, with maximum effort.

The sincerity of both of them is obvious. There are people who will relate to God and to each other affectively, impulsively, spontaneously. Others follow a more rational path, through disciplined effort. The major issue here is the relationship between grace and human freedom.

The Church teaches that God always acts first [evident throughout OT and 1Jn.]. God loved us first, and this love has taken root - 1Jn.4.7-12. But this gift is received freely, since love requires maximum human effort. The effect of grace is to intensify what is within and actually bring forth from inside more than is there by nature.

How do we cooperate in our own conversion? This crystallised into the controversy over faith v good works. The Church understood Luther to say that there could not be a total and personal conversion in Christ, only the gesture of throwing oneself on the mercy of Christ, through faith, in response to which human sinfulness would be "covered over" and forgiven, but would still be there. The Church insists that vigorous effort and appropriate asceticism is not a denial, but a total acceptance of grace.

The Church has consistently rejected the notion of people being able to say that they know they are saved because they can "feel" it. At the same time the opposite view is also problematic, to say that grace could not be experienced knowingly. The life of grace appeared to be floating in some kind of ethereal and undefined zone, untouched by nature and having no impact on everyday living.

Clearly this is not what St. Paul would say. While grace is not directly related to feelings, it is indirectly accessible to experience by the changes in attitude and behaviour it prompts: "*by their fruits you will know them*". Grace works within nature, not alongside it.

THE KINGDOM

Jesus said things about the yesterday, today and tomorrow, but his emphasis was always on the future, he was continuously stressing the need for change. This change was not just to be an external discipline, simply at the level of good manners, but a change in motivation and attitude which would inevitably lead to such changes. It is more than possible to have all the externals proper to good neighbourliness but with no heart in it.

Salvation [Redemption] means being set free with a total freedom, one which affects every aspect of life and not simply having privileged information. Our destiny is never to escape from the body into the realm of pure spirit. To insist on this is to locate salvation firmly in the present, by making appropriate renunciations now to escape from bodily living, and to abandon the world to its fate.

Salvation is a future event, because it is the salvation of everything. It is a setting free *for* the world, not *from* the world. The kingdom happens when everything is brought within the proper ordering of God, when the world is lived in as it is meant to be inhabited. This involves accepting responsibilities and making decisions, and honouring them. Salvation needs to "get at" structures too, but can only do so through people who are sensitive to the consequences of destructive relationships and insensitivities.

Salvation requires from us a healthy sense of sin. A world of self-centred motivation and personal aggrandisement is off centre, and is spinning madly into confusion and aggression. It is a world in which suspicion becomes necessary since words no longer mean anything. There is no longer the ability to relate with trust and transparency, without ambiguity.

Life is becoming increasingly underscored by fear at all levels. Salvation means being set free from this fear-dominated state. Oppressions and defence mechanisms have to be dismantled and structures equal to the task of liberation must be set in place.

Jesus insists that such salvation happens through love, through the quality of relationships, and not simply through polishing the structures and the scaffolding. If the cause of unfreedom is the destructive pattern of human ways, then salvation can never be found in running away from the issue, neither by abandoning the world nor indulging in self-contempt. Neither are other people the problem!

The plan for creation requires inter-dependence, there is need for community of service and of being served. The Creation narrative is clear that life is meant to be enjoyable, and this constituted Jesus' own description of his mission: "*I have come that you may live well*". This demands a *true* love of self, which is the direct result of discovering oneself made in the image and likeness of the God, who is nothing else but love, and thus makes us able to become lovely.

The kingdom is all about the recovery of this original simplicity and letting it show. We can certainly begin to experience the fruits of salvation now, though we will never be entirely free from the fetters of sin on this side of death. Paul insists that our salvation is not assured, meaning that there is much more to be lived - especially our dying - before that can happen. All our tomorrows can only be redeemed by the way we live them; they cannot be redeemed beforehand. There are no advance bookings!

Since we do not yet know the good things God has prepared for us, we can only use figurative language and speculate. Such imagery has abounded throughout history, but the most persistent in OT has been that of kingdom. Israel's hope was firmly rooted in two historical events: Exodus and Covenant [*events which established them as a People*]. In both these events what is yet to come is foreshadowed. Setting them free involved finding somewhere special for them to live, the Promised Land.

Yet it is equally clear that actually moving into the land of Canaan did not itself free them, since they were not yet at peace. They had to grow slowly into realising that the full promise was not consequent simply on land tenure. There was also the need for a quality of life, the rich and the powerful were still oppressing the poor. Deep down there was very little change.

Experiencing the Promised Land, and yet not having freedom, prompted them to remember the "good old days". We all know how disastrously selective such remembering can be: listen to people talking about all

the good things of the past, without any of the bad things! Walk through a cemetery and read the inscriptions. You may well wonder where all the bad people are buried!

God's people hankered after the power and glory of the kingdoms around them, they desired to dominate. They also began to see how such living took them away from Yahweh [1Sam.8.] When God's values are uppermost, circumstances change radically. The law of God does not need the power of sanction, it carries its own authentication and intrinsic wisdom through the fruit it produces. It is the gracious gift of compassion which eagerly allows everyone to have meaning, to be purpose-filled and to be cherished within all of this.

But this law of God was always being experienced as something for the future - Jer.31.31. Meanwhile the actual history of this special people was rapidly degenerating, until the question arose: how can God possibly do anything about this mess?

In the time between the last of the OT and the first of the NT, the Scribes spoke about the Kingdom yet to come. The language was apocalyptic, it would happen with great drama, tremendous cosmic events would herald the Kingdom. It was an attempt to unveil the future from within an unacceptable present. They taught that the right attitude was for everyone to live and behave as if these future times were already here. Jesus picked up this imagery and did not redefine it, since this teaching was not a hope in another world, but in this one which was being changed radically.

He explicitly rejects the notion that it will happen through military conquest, or by clever administration, or by miracles. He said the kingdom is very near, it is not something reserved for a future generation. Matthew's Gospel abounds with Kingdom imagery and stories, but none of them claim to offer a description of it. Jesus was obviously presenting the Kingdom from the fact that he was already "within" it himself, living, as he was, by the priorities of the Father. To be with him was to have the sense of the presence of God.

As the Church reflected on the life of Jesus, and especially on the significance of his death and resurrection, she began to acquire new perspectives on salvation. Jesus used the imagery of resurrection to illustrate the full sharing in the kingdom. The atmosphere of Kingdom is one of celebration - the symbolism of the wedding feast spread over eight days. There is a sense of being specially invited, our presence is genuinely desired.

But imagery can only serve us so far. The Sadducees made a nonsense out of it with their questioning about the widow who was seven times married. But such imagery, very much at home to Jewish Christians, meant nothing to the Gentile world. Paul sets about explaining it - 1Cor.15. - and his words are still valid, since the same questions are still being asked, and literal interpretations are still being applied: HOW will it happen? WHAT will we look like? Paul suggests that these are foolish questions. What matters is that from a perishable life we are to be raised up into an imperishable state, it is a victory over the destructive powers of death.

When Jewish Christians spoke of bodily resurrection there was an intended emphasis on the personal involvement of the individual. This got lost within the thinking of the Gentile converts who were very much conditioned by the Greek notion of immortality of the soul.

The Church found it necessary to reassert the unity of the human person - body, soul and spirit, within the resurrection process. The Church insists strongly on the resurrection of the body. Later writings began to speak about the judgement and reward of a disembodied soul after death, which involved either the immediate vision of God, or the pain of eternal loss and torment. The Gehenna, which Jesus referred to as the ultimate human frustration, came to be written up in graphic language.

Church Tradition has always had room for more than heaven or hell. Though no explicit warrant can be found in Scripture for it, Tradition remembers the prayers of the Macabees for the dead: that those who die with the project of transformation incomplete will not lose out. It is unacceptable that God should be less compassionate than human beings and abandon such people.

Many today wonder what to make of all this. Like the apocalyptic teaching, it is only helpful when we remember that we do not know literally the how of everything. But comparisons do help. In everyday experience when we know we have been forgiven after betraying love, when we recognise all too well the pain and hurt we have inflicted on another, we need time and space to accept being forgiven. We need to go away and live with this new experience, and to recover our self-respect. As we have seen, this is what Purgatory means, God gently allowing us this space and this room to accept being forgiven, with no strings attached - room to cry a little, before we can smile.

What about the Judgement? Jesus reminded us that the world is already judged; it has been found worthy of the Incarnation. The General Judgement, celebrated graphically in Tradition, is that everything stands or falls within the context of Jesus Christ. The Particular Judgement is, in effect, a self-judgement, seeing oneself in the context of who Jesus Christ claims to be for me.

Language about life after death has to be figurative, though the truth of it is very real. This requires that faith, hope and charity must be allowed to replace my own way of coping with God. The completion of conversion will be not accepting the simple statement that I believe in God, but that God really does believe in me.

ONE GOD - THREE PERSONS

The theme which is the same for Jesus as for Israel is the Shema: "*Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One*". This forbade idolatry of any kind among God's chosen people. Jesus responds to his own tempter using these words affirming the Oneness of God.

Likewise, to assert that God alone is to be worshipped is to forbid any other kind of worship, be it of politics, economics, national interests. Confessing that God is One is also the foundation of morality. If reality is not rooted in one source, maintained by one power, given meaning by one authority, then there is nothing capable of commanding allegiance for universal harmony.

Only where there is monotheism can there be unconditional claims made that go beyond the level of sanction, appealing to the internal value of conscience. This indicates that freedom is much more than random choice, it is purposeful movement towards the attainment of fulfilment.

Only if creation is from one God, to whom all things relate back as to their origin, can one expect to find harmony within seemingly disparate forces in nature and human affairs. Only within monotheism can there be covenant between Creator and created. Monotheism speaks of inter-dependence and of responsibility, one for another. There is no freedom other than mutual freedom.

This is the One God of the OT and the NT. However, the Christian experience of God takes its origin in Jesus' own awareness of God, and is expressed through the prayer Jesus gave to us. It is to a God who is both the totally transcendent and uniquely immanent Abba.

Between Jesus and the Father there is intimacy, this intimacy as well as being the atmosphere between the Father and the Son, is another Person in the conversation, their own mutual love. It is the role of the Spirit to continue this conversation into creation, transforming it into order from its original chaos. The Spirit does what the Spirit is, breathes life into creation.

Such was the growing awareness of the Spirit in the early Church that it soon prompted a change from the binitarian expressions, which always linked Jesus with the Father, to the Trinitarian inclusion of the Spirit. They were by no means abandoning their belief in One God, simply expressing it more fully in the light of the revelation brought by Jesus. But this could not be left in the poetic language of prayer, which best expresses it. In the light of the need to refute error, greater clarification was needed if this belief was not to degenerate into Tritheism.

The theological language we now possess to describe three Persons in One God dates back to C4, and was official teaching certainly by C6. The language conveys the truth that human relationships are created within the image of a God, who is One in Three Persons. The notion of "person" was not to be understood in its normal sense, since this would imply three Gods. To apply this term to God is by analogy, since we

have only the two categories of personal and impersonal in our experience to fall back on. Of these two experiences God is unquestionably more personal than impersonal.

"*We worship One God in trinity and trinity in unity*" says the Athanasian Creed. This Mystery of the Triune God is the very heart of our faith, which begins with the self-revealing of God and ends with the God who is thus revealed. But have we any possible experience of what we mean when we confess such faith?

The fact that in one God there are three Persons most certainly does make a difference. Through revelation, God has shown an incredible sympathy towards human beings, to such an extent as to be really present to us through love, understanding and hope.

The one God who abides within you *as source* of all else is what we understand by Father. As the one who *makes self known through truth* in communication with us, establishing a covenant, becoming flesh in Jesus is what we understand as Son. As the one within you *calling everyone and everything back* to himself in love and harmony, is what we mean by Spirit!

But what is this saying about us? To say that "Father" is God as source of everything, without having any origin himself - does this find an echo? Doesn't this correspond to your own mystery? Do you not communicate yourself in truth and love, through an intelligence that sees and a will that cherishes? But even this does not exhaust your possibilities, you remain open to an unlimited future, available always for something more?

The Son, the Word, is that which exists as knowable and intelligible in the Father. Doesn't this correspond to human truth and understanding in so far as this is how you know everything that is not you? Likewise, with the Spirit, the mutual love of two different persons, doesn't this correspond to your own love which inserts someone different from yourself within you, creating intimacy and unity?

[However we should properly note: we cannot deduce the mystery of the Trinity simply from an analysis of our experience!]

For someone who lives lovingly, reality is transfigured, with everything appreciated within the context of God. In so far as we are led to penetrate the mystery of ourselves, we are being led towards an encounter with the Trinity. The presence of truth within us reflects the eternal truth within the Father - the Son. Our love, through which we communicate, reflects the eternal flow of the mutual love between Father and Son - the Holy Spirit.

Here and now you are already inserted into the Trinitarian process, we are sharers of the very nature of God as Trinity of Persons. The Trinity is community. The mystery of the Trinity is reflected in human community also, which lives by truth and is nourished by love. Remember the Good News is not that everything is all right, but that everything is not all right, but that is all right!

There was a man sitting by the bank of a river and he saw a scorpion entangled in a thorn bush, the more it tried to get free the weaker it got, so he reached out to free it. The scorpion reacted predictably, and stung him repeatedly. A passer-by said: don't be so foolish, risking your health for a scorpion. The man replied: because it is in the nature of the scorpion to sting, why should it deter me from what is in my nature - to set free?