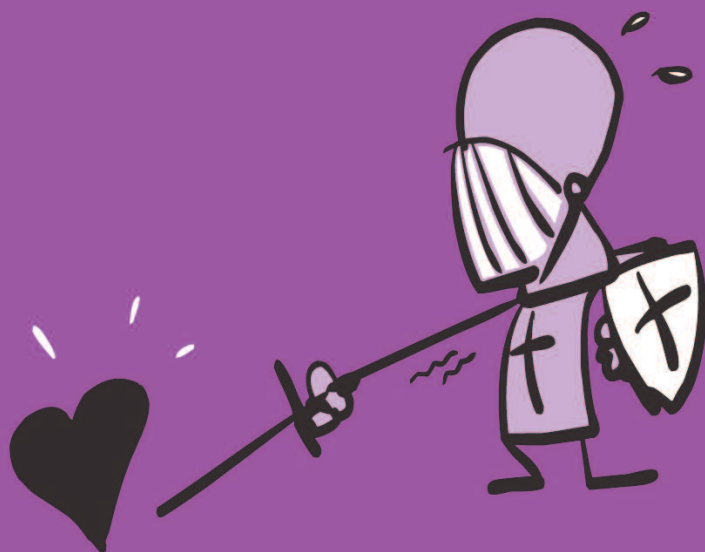


## **Fear to Jesus: a diagnosis**





# FEAR OF JESUS: A DIAGNOSIS

José I. González Faus, sj.

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...An authoritative preacher proclaiming the presence of the kingly rule of God, teaching and exemplifying a selfless love of others, catching the human imagination through parables which haunt the mind with their insistent questioning of conventional priorities, welcoming the outcasts of society into his company without compromising his own integrity, extending healing and compassion to those in need who cross his path. ... A person who displays anger at the stubbornness of heart of those who turn away from the truth, someone who denounces hypocrisy and warns of judgment to come upon the city of Jerusalem, a man of hard sayings ('Let the dead bury their own dead', Matthew 8,22). ... But what is unique about Jesus is not his life but his death. All the other great religious founder-figures die in old age, surrounded by respectful disciples who will carry on the work and message of the Master. Jesus, on the other hand, is executed in middle life, deserted by his disciples, an apparent total failure."

John POLKINGHORNE, *Science and Theology*, Minneapolis MN  
USA, 1998, pp. 103-104.

Behold, he has been set as a sign of contradiction,  
... that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed.  
(Luke 2, 34-35).

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Speaking of prayer, Teresa de Jesús speaks several times of the temptation to «abandon Christ's humanity», with the idea that going directly to God would be more perfect. Teresa responds with a splendid vindication of Jesus' humaneness: «It is through this door that we must enter if we want the sovereign Majesty to show us great secrets». Thus, if someone believes that «separating oneself from what is corporal must be good», then let such a person know that «the most sacred humanity of Christ should not be included therein». She warns that that is like «having the soul walking on air, ... which provides no support» and she points out the hidden danger of a lack of humility, arguing that «the donkeys pulling the waterwheel, ... even with their eyes closed and not understanding what they're doing, will draw more water than the cultivator with all his industry»<sup>1</sup>.

So then: if such can be the temptation of one who believes in Jesus, no one should be surprised if we express our suspicion that a great temptation of present-day Catholicism might be very similar to the one denounced by Teresa. Today, though, it would not be so much a matter of abandoning Jesus' humanity to progress more perfectly toward God, but of abandoning it *in order to hold on to divinity* –which is no doubt more important and decisive, but such divinity would be *faceless*. It would lack the human shape of Jesus of Nazareth; it would be a divinity onto which we

could then project a human image, deduced from our rational ideas about the divine.

Shortly after arriving at the Christian faith some sixty years ago, Simone Weil, with her remarkable intuitive ability, perceived something of the same sort when she wrote: “Nowadays who thinks of Christ as someone who was legally condemned as a criminal, except his enemies? The Church certainly does not think of Jesus Christ in those terms, and that leads to a falsification of his cross and of God’s revelation in the cross.” The divinity of Jesus thus ceases

to be the scandal of a “criminal” God and becomes instead a pedestal onto which the Church climbs in order not to repent for its historical sins. For that reason, concludes Simone, “What is adored (in Christ) is the historical greatness of the Church.”<sup>2</sup>

It is easy to understand the psychological basis of this fear of Jesus if we remember that he was—as I titled an earlier booklet dedicated to him—a seductive, “captivating” figure, but that he was also “subversive.”<sup>3</sup> In Jesus we find something of what Rudolph Otto wrote about “the Holy”: it is both “fearful and fascinating.” That is why the evangelist Luke, with much insight, wrote that “he is called to be a sign of contradiction” (2,34).

All this can, I believe, be shown from historical research that adheres to what we know most certainly about Jesus. And that is the reason for the present booklet. We will not try to present a biography or a complete portrait of Jesus (a pretension recognized as impossible nowadays), but *just some minimal traces, based on historical re-*

*search, that are more than sufficient to provide a sketch of the dialectic between the attractive and the daunting aspects that are an undeniable part of the figure of Jesus,* apart from the debatable or debated historicity of many concrete words and passages. We should not forget that this dialect coincides with another irreducible duality of the God who reveals himself as Love, but at the same time exceeds our grasp in every way. As Jon Sobrino loves to repeat: “God, yes, is Father. But the Father is still always ... God!”.

This bipolarity will in the end help us to outline a more complete vision of the life of belief, which is summed up in the dialectic of death and Life, that dynamic dialectic that proposes to arrive at Life through death (or in the words of Juan de Yepes: “to have nothing in order to have All”). From there we will move on to try to offer a rapid diagnosis for today’s Church.

These then are the three parts of the present booklet: the two aspects of Jesus, the dialectic of death and Life, and a diagnosis.

# 1. WHY JESUS IS SO SEDUCTIVE AND SO DAUNTING

---

In the life and history of Jesus we find a number of pairings (of attitudes, words, provoked reactions, etc.) that historical research today considers scientifically verifiable, apart from the concrete historicity of the passages that contain them. I will reduce the pairings to seven, without pretending to exhaust them.

## 1.1. Two words: *Abba*-Kingdom

This first pairing is the best known of all, two words that historical criticism assures us were not only spoken by Jesus but were constant themes of his discourse. They help us achieve a twofold correction in our religious vision of God: before being Judge or Power or Distance, God is the source of life, of trust, of human dignity, and of liberty. That is what is suggested by Jesus' metaphorical allusion to the fatherhood of God, especially by using an Aramaic word that was not at all the customary one for addressing him: *Abba*.

The fatherhood of God has been a topic much discussed recently in feminist theology, which seeks to avoid having it understood in terms of a masculine God and thus used to justify the patriarchal theology that we have had to endure for centuries. However, once we overcome that obstacle and understand that God is not father or mother in the usual sense of masculine or feminine, there is still something more important to be learned. God's "parenthood"<sup>4</sup> means the same as what the New Testament says in one of its final writings: God is Love. Love is practically the opposite of power, and

for that reason defining God (the “omnipotent one,” as we like to say) as parent means that God has no other power than that of love.

There is good news in this, but a good news that is frightening. It is frightening especially for those persons who hold power. Given our diversity and our social nature, power is an indispensable necessity, which can be justified only by the greater good of society. In no way, however, is it a revelation of God. Nevertheless, the constant temptation of those who have the difficult task of wielding power is to justify themselves, not in terms of the their subjects’ well-being (which they seldom achieve), but in terms of their pretending to be “a little like God,” whom they like to define as Power. Unfortunately, there is no need to explain that in the history of the Church (and of all societies) authority has constantly yielded to this temptation: it has seized onto the definition of God as Power “as its prize” (Philippians 2,6) and has obscured the revelation of God through Jesus. For that reason Jesus frightens them.

But that is not the only thing: the parenthood of God, in the sense we understand it, cannot be separated –and Jesus never separated it– from the essence of his proclamation, what Jesus called the “reign of God” (the reign of Love). This reign is precisely what gives a social, communitarian, universal, and “earthly”<sup>5</sup> dimension to the divine childhood of every human being. That’s the reason why Matthew adds the term “our” to the invocation of God as “Father”: we cannot be children of God

without being brothers and sisters of *everybody*. In order to be truly “children of the Father” we must love everybody, even our enemies (personal ones, but also and especially “tribal” enemies, because the Father makes the rain fall and the sun shine on both the good and the bad, the just and the unjust (Matthew 5,45). Any religious devotion that heeds only the first part of the pairing and neglects the second is not truly Christian, as much it may claim Christ is God: it is not possible to make an individualistic claim to God’s parenthood.

This teaching runs through all the gospels: there is no “first commandment” (to love God) without the second (to love others). The second commandment thus acquires dimensions that are not just ethical, but also theological. Historical Christianity, however, has found it more convenient to reduce this second commandment to the level of ethical deductions; worse, it has made the accusation of “ethical reductionism” and neglect of the religious against anyone attempting to restore the theological dimension of love of neighbor.<sup>6</sup> There has been a tendency to forget that anecdote about the apostle John that is recorded ancient tradition: when he was asked to speak of Jesus and his experience of him, he always just kept repeating: “Love one another”; when his listeners complained that he was forever saying the same thing over and over, he responded: “But it’s all right there.”

The parenthood of God thus becomes magnificent news, but it also demands a great deal of us. We need only take a look around us to become



aware of how anti-fraternal our world is, despite all the appeals to love and solidarity that we make in our eloquent speeches. And if we go on to say that such fraternity was for Jesus something truly possible (for “the Kingdom is *close at hand*”), then we feel obligated to admit that in our world the parental “name” of God is not at all glorified (or “hallowed”) when our worship of him is carried out without regard to fraternity.

That’s why Jesus is so daunting and frightening, and perhaps more so for those who say they believe in God...

It might be good to add that only in the context of the Kingdom that struggles to come close to us can we understand well how the Church can be called the people of God, the title reclaimed by Vatican II. The people of God should be understood in close relation with the Kingdom of God. Such a people comes into being because the delay in the definitive coming of the Kingdom (expected after the Resurrection of Jesus) requires the presence in history of a community that knows how to detect the pulse of that Kingdom in the world and that lives to promote the cause of the Kingdom. For the Promise has still not been definitively fulfilled (both Jew and Christian can agree in that regard), but it has been universalized.

## **1.2. Two protagonists: the sick and the excluded poor**

The gospels are full of sick people, many of whom were social outcasts, precisely because of their sickness: the

blind, the lame, the deaf, the paralyzed, the lepers –all sicknesses quite typical of the time and the social setting. The gospels are also full of a series of figures of despised people: prostitutes, tax collectors, women, poor people ... and an endless parade of people that we would today tend to call “nobodies” (*nepios* was the usual Greek term).<sup>7</sup> These two groups, the sick and the despised, are both quite prominent in the gospels, even though Jesus also had dealings and personal friendships with people who belonged to the so-called “polite society.”

Regardless of the historical accuracy of each concrete scene, this portrayal of the key figures in the gospels stands up perfectly to historical criticism. Furthermore, it is undeniable that Jesus, according to Jewish religious rules, often made himself “impure” by dealing with those people. He let himself be touched by them, he decided to go into the house of a pagan... And that impurity didn’t seem to affect him too much.

Jesus’ radical partiality toward those excluded from proper society is another undeniable trait of his that both attracts us and frightens us. It suffices to cite just one example, perhaps the most significant one that proceeds from the lips of Jesus himself: the beatitudes. Historians tell us that the beatitudes of Luke have a stronger historical ring than those of Matthew. When Jesus says “blessed,” he does not mean that those named are prosperous or that they are happy according to more material measures of well-being. Jesus is only too aware that the poor, the hungry, the persecuted, and the afflicted are not happy in that sense,

but for Jesus the essence of happiness is being in God's good favor. The beatitudes of Luke mean simply this: Blessed are the poor because God is theirs. That's why they are followed by those four frightful censures: Woe to you who are rich, etc. The reason for such harsh words is that for Jesus "it is impossible to serve God and private wealth" —*mammon* is the Aramaic word Jesus uses. What is extremely interesting is to study the thousands of shields, suits of armor, and other defenses that we Christians have donned in the course of history to protect ourselves from Jesus in this regard.

To return, then, to our main point: God is not only a maternal (or paternal) figure, but is also "asymmetric love."<sup>8</sup> According to one of the finest prayers of our Catholic liturgy, his love is manifest for all, but most intensely for the poor and the oppressed. This is not so easy to accept for those of us who tend to think we are his privileged ones.

### 1.3. Two ways of acting: healings and meals

It is possible to debate the historical character of almost every narrative of Jesus' miracles, but even the most exacting Bible scholars consider it certain that Jesus performed frequent healings, prescinding from the question of how much of a "supernatural" dimension was involved in those acts.<sup>9</sup>

We might think it strange that the healings of Jesus provoked fear or caused conflict among people, though we need to take into account the complete context: aside from the fact

that Jesus did not charge for the healings, as did other healers of the time, many of his cures "directly violated Jewish norms ... of segregation." Furthermore, he cured on the Sabbath, thus defying the ancient law prohibiting labor on the day of "God's rest," and he allowed the sick person to take center stage instead of the miracle-worker. In this way "he declared pardoned the sins that could have caused the sickness that he himself cured (cf. Mark 2,1-2)." Without need, and as if devaluing the healings, the evangelists repeat that Jesus "cured persons who were at the outer limits of the norms of Jewish piety due to their occupations, their race, their place of residence, or their ritual circumstances;"<sup>10</sup> such persons include the son of the centurion, the daughter of the Canaanite woman, the demoniac of Gerasa, the hemorrhaging woman, etc.

Historical criticism seems to confirm that the most primitive gospel stories of healing do not present "a proof to validate their author," but rather demonstrate "an acceptance that makes a teaching visible" (the acceptance of God). The later stories gradually move away from this latter conception toward the former, but of course the two conceptions are not contradictory, and in the long run the latter may become more worthy of belief than the former. Apart from the question of its historicity, it seems certain that the phrase at the end of the story of the Gerasene demoniac, "They began to ask him to leave their territory" (Mark 5,17), has a symbolic meaning, implying a discrete expulsion of Jesus. This adverse reac-

tion would be even more significant if the possessed man symbolized the Romans, as is suggested by the reply that his demon's name was "legion." Liberation at such a price might have been attractive, but it also caused fear.

In marked contrast with the practice of the quasi-public banquets of the Jewish society of his time, the meals of Jesus were shared with people "of ill repute." When Jesus was dubbed "a glutton and a drunkard," it was not because of his eating or drinking, but because he ate and drank with "publicans and sinners."<sup>11</sup> The fury that this generated was precisely what gave rise to the so-called "parables of mercy" (cf. Luke 15,1). And on top of everything, Jesus made his healings a "sign that the Kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matthew 12,28), and he spoke of that Kingdom as a banquet at which many of those now excluded would find a place (Matthew 22,1 ff.)

#### **1.4. Two attitudes: demanding of the insider, understanding of the outsider**

Historical criticism has debated extensively about the Judaism of Jesus. The so-called "third quest" for the historical Jesus has rightly insisted on the profoundly Jewish character of the Nazarene, refuting some of the claims of earlier "quests" that stressed much more the distance between Jesus and Judaism.<sup>12</sup>

Possibly the key for harmonizing these two postures will be found in the dual attitude of this section's title: Jesus was profoundly Jewish, and he still is

the greatest marvel and principal wealth of Judaism. But at the same time he turned out to be extremely confrontational, at least for the Judaism of his time. And the reason was that for him being Jewish was not a condition that bestowed privileges, but one that made great demands. Let us take a quick look at some examples of conflict that appear to be unquestionable by reason of their constant appearance, apart from what might be thought of each concrete scene: As I have commented already, Jesus required much faith of those who heard him, and he criticized, often quite harshly, the lack of faith (*oligopistis* in Greek) of his own disciples, especially those closest to him. Indeed, there are only two passages in the gospels where Jesus expresses amazement at someone's faith, and in both instances the persons praised are non-Jewish (the Roman centurion and the Canaanite woman).

And as if that weren't enough, we find relatively frequent in the gospels the statement that many will come from the east and the west, and they will sit at the table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, while the children of the Kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. How could such teaching be anything but controversial? But at the same time, by adopting such an attitude Jesus was doing no more than applying to those outside Israel the same norm that he applied among his own people, such as when he said that "the tax-collectors and prostitutes will go before you into the kingdom of heaven." If there were two groups of people truly despised in Palestine, it was those two

(and our modern society still preserves remnants of that judgment). What is more, Jesus speaks in general terms, without making an exception in any particular case. We should not be surprised, then, when his hearers sometimes react by asking: Then what's the use of being good?

We find another example in the synagogue scene which Luke 4 presents as the inaugural event of Jesus' public life. It is not difficult to imagine the expectation that the scene presupposes: somebody from this tiny, unknown village has suddenly won fame, and now he returns home, where everybody expects to see firsthand the marvels they have heard told of him. Jesus takes the roll of Isaiah, he applies to himself the anointing by the Spirit of which the prophet speaks, and he goes on to declare solemnly that he has not come to inflate the egos of anybody, but to cure the sick, free the oppressed, and give good news to the poor. The people are at first disappointed, but still expectant. Then Jesus drives the nail in deeper: all this will be done, not by proclaiming a "day of vengeance," but by declaring a true "year of grace." This is another provocation, and now the people begin to shout their discontent.<sup>13</sup>

Jesus does not let up, but goes on to comment on how, according to the Jewish tradition itself, when there were many widows and lepers in Israel, the healing word of God was not sent to any of them, but to people from outside. The people's decision to stone him is only too understandable.<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, Jesus was profoundly Jewish. In the words of his that the

gospels transmit to us, it is not difficult to find allusions (some explicit, but many more implicit) to sentiments and viewpoints found in the First Testament, especially to the psalms and the prophets.

The passage about the Canaanite woman, already mentioned, also suggests clearly Jesus' Jewish roots: the strange statements Jesus makes seem very likely to have been historical: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 15,24) and "it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." A church that was preaching precisely to the pagans would not have presumed to put such scandalous words on Jesus' lips, because they contradict what the church itself was doing. What is surprising, however, is that Jesus has learned from that same Judaism how it is faith that gives life to the just person and how God is a Father for all human beings. For that reason he acknowledges that the woman is right and allows himself to be corrected by her.

Furthermore, only a profoundly Jewish man would cry over Jerusalem, as we are told Jesus cried. Again, what is surprising is that his tears are shed not because the empires have conquered the people of God, as was the case so often in the First Testament. Rather, Jesus weeps because of the infidelities of that same people who killed the prophets and stoned those were sent by God. Only the lips of someone profoundly Jewish could have uttered the double invocation of the prophet Hosea that Matthew attributes to Jesus: "Go and learn what it means when it says 'I

desire mercy and not sacrifice.”<sup>15</sup> Only of a profoundly Jewish man could it be written today that he “undeniably reacted to the Temple and the priestly hierarchy with a combined feeling of pain and protest.”<sup>16</sup>

The plain fact is that that controversial side of Jesus arose out of something that was profoundly and unmistakably Jewish: *the idea of “being chosen by God,”* which, understood biblically, is never a question of the chosen one’s being privileged or having a “manifest destiny”, but is rather a call for the chosen one to be generous in serving all the world.<sup>17</sup> This goes beyond all the debate about the Jewishness of Jesus and his conflict with the Israel of his day: *the question is really about a religious and human attitude* that upsets all our initial posturings: it is about rejoicing in the welfare of others and not closing our eyes to what needs correcting in ourselves, as opposed to that self-satisfaction and disdain for others which afflicts all of us suffer from the very start. Again: Jesus was humanly very attractive, but also very daunting, and almost irritating –and especially irritating for the ecclesiastical institutions. That’s why Jesus seduces and at the same time frightens us.

### **1.5. Two words with their meanings interchanged: Samaritan and Pharisee**

This helps us to understand an unexpected effect that Jesus has had on history and, more concretely, on human language. In the Judaism of his time the

two words with the most positive (Pharisee) and the most negative (Samaritan) connotations have acquired a different meaning for us as a result of Jesus. The term “Pharisee” has become one of the worst epithets that can be used in the religious world, whereas the term “Samaritan” has become a title of praise throughout the human realm.

The semantic inversion of the word “Samaritan” seems to derive from the parable of Jesus (Luke 10), whose authenticity is hardly to be doubted. There has even been talk these days of a “Samaritan church,” in reference not to the rupture between Israel and Christianity, but to a Church that would give true embodiment to the figure represented in Jesus’ parable. At that time, though, the “Samaritans” were heretics that symbolized everything that the Jewish people and their religion found most outrageous. That is why I said that if Jesus were to continue telling that parable over a long period of time, he would keep changing the protagonists: in childhood years, when Franco was in power, the characters might have been a bishop, a priest, and a “protestant.” Thirty years later he might have spoken of a priest, a theologian, and a “communist.” And nowadays it would be no surprise if he were to come up with some parable about “the good Muslim.”

The matter of the Pharisees is a little more complicated. Historical criticism nowadays suspects that often in the gospels, when the Pharisees appear in confrontation with Jesus, the evangelists are using that term as a synonym for Jewish. The reason is that, after the

destruction of Jerusalem, the Pharisees were the strongest surviving group among the Jews. In reality, though, the true enemies of Jesus were not so much the Pharisees as the Sadducees.<sup>18</sup>

The Pharisees were one of the most highly esteemed and respected groups in Israel in Jesus' time. This may have been the reason for their decline, for nobody can long remain "in high regard" without ending up "taking themselves too seriously" and putting more stock in the esteem than in the behavior that produced it. In fact, in many passages of the gospel the harshest criticism includes the word "hypocrites," which appears only on the lips of Jesus and seems to have originated from him. The word "hypocrite" in Greek comes from the world of the theater and designates the person who "takes on a role."<sup>19</sup> The life and the mission of such actors consists in portraying externally the character that they embody, apart from what they may be interiorly. Many of the accusations placed on Jesus' lips (cleaning only the outside of the cup, being like whitened sepulchers, etc.) are in that same vein. The word "Pharisee" thus came to represent everything that could be said against a decrepit religiosity.<sup>20</sup>

For that reason, the criticism of the Pharisees is not simply a discrediting of a single faction of that time, but is a general critique of human religiosity because of the enormous danger that always hangs over it: making God and the Absolute a private possession in order to absolutize oneself while despising others. For that reason Luke takes care to note that Jesus told the

parable of the Pharisee and the publican against those "who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others" (Luke 18,9).

## **1.6. Two reactions: following and opposing**

To all the aforementioned pairings there seem to have been only two reactions. And something of the same sort, though with more complexity, seems to be what has happened historically.

Jesus generated a movement of followers who ended up giving their lives for him as they implanted in the world a revolution that at first hardly seemed destined to succeed, given the low social and educational level of those first disciples. But Jesus also aroused great hostility, which expanded rapidly, until it did away with him in the most humiliating and violent way possible. We will address briefly each of these reactions.

a) It seems historically undeniable that the second reaction was led by the religious powers of his time (the high priests and the Sanhedrin), along with the uppermost social class. They did not hesitate to seek out the assistance of the political power of the Roman empire. It also seems historically certain that the first people whom Jesus called were mostly humble folk: fishermen who lived from what they caught in their boats, perhaps some Essene, perhaps a publican, perhaps a Zealot or someone close to the movement, ...plus a number of women, some from the same lower classes and others of higher status



(although the “social indignity” of being women balanced out any such provenance).

This matter does not need greater analysis. I have mentioned it simply because at a later time the best theology (no longer Jesuology) has made it an established principle that the indispensable element for knowing Jesus is following him. And history seems to insist that one condition of following him is becoming poor: apart from their concrete historicity, there is some significance in the accumulation of phrases such as these: “Sell what you have, give it to the poor, and then come, follow me.” “The birds of the air have their nests, and the foxes have their dens, but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head.” These sayings and other like them depict precisely the meaning of following Jesus.

b) With regards to the conflicts, however historically comprehensible they may be, if we place Jesus firmly within his time and refrain from trying to get close to him by removing him from his historical setting, then we find a very instructive detail that helps us understand the theme of this booklet: Jesus frightens people, no matter how charming he may be. He frightens the rich (Mark 10), he frightens many “decent folk,” and he especially frightens the religious authorities, *not because they are Jewish, but because they are religious*.

We can therefore understand that a large part of the anti-Semitism in the Church’s history has actually been a clever device for shifting onto a certain people, who lived only in small, dis-

persed groups and without established power, the demand that Jesus made of his own followers and of every type of religious power.<sup>21</sup> Such a maneuver was facilitated by the evangelists’ desire to obscure the guilt of the Roman empire, since the budding Christianity was being preached within its borders. Historical criticism considers this thesis to be almost certain, and it can be easily verified by simply comparing Matthew’s passion (written for the Jewish community) with that of the Greek writer Luke.

### **1.7. Two possibilities: God is like that, or Jesus is a blasphemer**

All the pairings we have seen so far lead us to believe that, in the wake of Jesus’ passage through our history, there are two postures that can be taken toward him in the sphere of *believers*. Apart from belief, people might conclude, along with Herod and Pilate, that Jesus was simply crazy or politically dangerous, or perhaps just one of the many well-intentioned failures of human history. But in the sphere of *believers*, the question or dilemma posed by Jesus is different: was he an unpardonable blasphemer or was he the very revelation of God? And if he was the latter, then it was because he was revealing God, and he was revealing that God is a God of the poor, a God who defies every attempt at religious codification.

The fact is that all revelation of God is a kind of wrestling with human beings so that they accept God’s revelation at the very place where God wants to

reveal himself: in what is last and what is hidden, from out of what is least esteemed, and among the least and the last. A precious phrase from the Ignatian tradition explains *what is proper to God*: “God cannot be contained in what is greatest, but he fits in what is smallest.”<sup>22</sup> This phrase translates precisely and accurately what is most disturbing about God’s revelation in Jesus. A thousand details of the gospel narratives, from the manger to the cross, point us in this direction, as we will see in the following pages.

Despite that disturbing revelation, however, human beings continue to seek God in whatever seems to be the greatest, the foremost, the most spectacular and overwhelming. God reveals himself in love, but people are determined to seek him in power. Renewing our faith must begin by accepting this very difficult task, which is “folly for some and a scandal for others” (cf. 1 Cor 1,18-25). If we confess Jesus as the greatest revelation (“the Word”) of God, what do the gospels tell us about the Word of God made flesh? We need only trace a few rapid sketches.

– *He had no “immaculate” lineage* (in his genealogy, as related by Matthew, there are two prostitutes and one case of adultery). *He was born in suspicious circumstances*: “of unknown father,” we would say today. This would later, out of faith in Jesus, be understood as the “virginal birth.” For those without faith, however, it would be understood differently: his adversaries once cast aspersions on him, saying, “*We are not bastard children*” (John 8,41). And Mark comments candidly in his sixth

chapter about how Jesus was called “the son of Mary,” even though among the Jews a man was designated by his mother’s name only when his father was not known. But let us continue with Jesus.

– *He came to the world in a stable* because there was no other place for him. *He was welcomed by the people with the most despised lines of work*: the shepherds were not those sugary little figurines of our manger scenes, but had the most humiliating of jobs in those days. And the “magi,” besides being foreigners and pagans, had a profession that the law of Israel punished, even by death. We call them “kings” in order to dissemble that reality, but the gospel says otherwise. By evading the reality, we are unintentionally saying that we will receive God if he comes to us as an Arab sheik or as Colonel Gaddafi with his retinue, but not if he comes as a refugee in a boat...

– *He lived most of his life in a bleak, unknown village*, out of which, according to the people who lived in the environs, nothing good could come (John 1,46). He began his active life *standing in a line with sinners*, one more in a crowd waiting to be baptized by John. Early on in his gospel Mark tells us that people reacted to Jesus in three ways: the humble folk followed him and flocked to his house; “his relatives” came to take him home because they thought he was crazy; and the wise and the learned declared that the success he was beginning to have was due to his being possessed by a demon (Mark 3, 21-22). Later on even many poor folk



would stop following him because actually they were not looking for him, but for immediate benefits they could get from him (John 6,26). Also, he would be discredited as “the friend of sinners and prostitutes” (cf. Matthew 11,9).

– In the end, the very “representatives of God,” those seated on the chair of Moses, declared him a *blasphemer*, and the representatives of Roman civilization and pacification declared him a *terrorist*. The official representative of the law of God called Jesus “that impostor” before the tribunal of political power (Matthew 27,63). And for that reason he died violently at the hands of the religious and political authorities, suffering the most humiliating of deaths known at that time, “outside the city.”<sup>23</sup>

There are too many details, but they all trace an unmistakable profile. That is why it is so strange that just a short while after that disgraceful execution people were believing in him as the revelation of God! And not only that, but they were following him in such radical fashion that they were able to stand up against the hostility of the three great powers of that epoch: the political power of the Roman empire, the religious power of the Jewish Sanhedrin, and the cultural power of Greek wisdom. It is indeed strange that people believed in those days, and it is stranger still that many continue to believe, even today. The only thing that is “comprehensible,” in any case, is the scandalous way we try to adulterate Jesus by dressing him up as a king and projecting onto him our false ideas of God, instead

of letting that God whom we were not at all expecting be revealed in him. Because otherwise, where might such a revelation of God take us?

### **Conclusion: the revolution in our idea of God**

Indeed, where does it take us? Well, it takes us to the definite conclusion that God “is not one of our own.” Recall what was said in section 3 about the beatitudes of Luke. Matthew, at the beginning of the sermon on the mount, tells us that those of us who are not outcasts in society have only one way of drawing close to God: by mercy, a hunger for justice, and a radical option for the poor, all of which can also bring persecution upon us. This is the meaning of Matthew’s beatitudes, as I have explained elsewhere. But we prefer to refute Jesus with the rational argument that “God belongs to everybody.” This is a conclusion of abstract reason that Jesus himself would not deny, but it fails to recognize the truth of our concrete situation.

We think that the problem of the denial of God is just a matter of communists, atheists, and the like. We don’t realize that perhaps those of us who presume to “let him preach in our houses and sit at our tables” (Luke 13,26) are actually rejecting him as much as those who don’t believe in him. Saint John could hardly say it more clearly: it was not only the world that did not know him, but even “his own” did not receive him (1,10-11).

Indeed, God is not one of our own, for a reason expressed quite graphically

by the first believers as they beheld Jesus: he did not use his divinity as a prop for his dignity, as a basis for his power, or as a resource for his own benefit. To the contrary, he renounced that divinity, preferring to assume the form of a slave and be just another man (Philippians 2,7 ff.). For that reason, even though he was the Son, he learned from the starkness of peasant life what was most difficult in the human condition (Hebrews 5,8). But it was precisely there, in the way the Communication of God became human fragility (“flesh” in the Semitic terms of the epoch) –it was *precisely there* that “we have seen the Glory” of God (John 1,14.) There indeed is the glory of God: not in our incense, our silks, our pontifical ermine capes, or our musical works (as beautiful as they may be), and even less in the fancy wardrobes of the so-called “princes of the Church.” Rather it is in God’s incredible solidarity with what is least appreciated and most despised in the human condition.

From all this the first witnesses of the faith drew two conclusions that we also manage to forget so often.

a) The first was that “no one has ever seen God.” Neither seen nor known. The only way to approach God is by “being told” (John 1,18), and by attempting to have our lives reflect what we are told. And what we are told about is the life of Jesus, the same trajectory of anonymity, obscurity, and derision which we evoked as we began writing these pages. We Christians have forgotten that frequently a good story makes us think a lot more than does a splendidly conceived piece of architecture.

b) The second conclusion was that, because no one has ever seen God, all who pretend to love and know him, all who speak of him apart from that story, are lying. And that the only thing we can do to understand him a little better and draw a little closer to him is to give food to the hungry and drink to the thirsty, to clothe the naked, to visit and comfort the sick and the imprisoned, to welcome the foreigner ... (Matthew 25,31 ff.). Of course, we do all these things, not to feel somehow better than or superior to others. Rather we do them so that, as we draw close to those poor of the earth, a smile might form on their lips and a way might found to have the fullness of their beauty burst forth. We do them for that reason, but also because that is the only way we can savor a bit what the first witnesses say has been revealed to us: “the tenderness of God and his love of human beings” (Titus 3.4).

“You are a God of the poor,” goes the refrain in the Nicaraguan mass, and the Sanctus of the Salvadoran mass proclaims: “Lord of all history, who accompanies our people and joins in our struggle.” But still we manage to ignore all that and practice another kind of worship: we offer him incense and gold and embroidered robes and glorious cathedrals ... and all the things that will be useful only if they help us understand the former, but which turn out to be ridiculous if we try to use them to win over God. Because then God will repeat to us what he has not tired of repeating throughout the whole of biblical revelation: “I do not need those offerings you bring, and I laugh at them. The only thing I ask of you is a heart that is poor

enough to shudder before my Word and to try to put it into practice in the modest stories of your lives.”

And all that can be proclaimed in a couple of pages. But it can be really learned only through long and patient accompaniment of those whom the earliest tradition called “Vicars of Christ”—long before the title was given to popes. The process of accompaniment is an obscure and tiresome one, like the night of the mystics, but like those nights, it is “more lovely than the dawn” of our cultic splendors. At the end of the process one finally begins to understand that business of “the poor evangelizing us.” It is not because they are holier or better, but because they are the only ones who have the right to be foul-smelling and ill-mannered. But they evangelize us because almost the only thing that can change our heart of stone into a heart of flesh is our serving them, and evangelization in large part consists the announcement that such a change is possible.

Many are those who believe that they are with God precisely because they are not with the last and the least, but whether they like it or not, these last and least are the greatest theological resource they have. And if the Church of God needs something urgently these days, it is not doctors of canon law (who are not much needed) nor doctors of theology (as needed as these may be), but those whom we might call “doctors in pauperology.” This is a doctorate that is not awarded by universities, Roman or otherwise. However, in my modest opinion, we have been gifted by God in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with a

veritable legion of doctors who earned their diplomas in the school of the victims and the last in line. Most of them were Catholics, but many were from outside the Church as well (Maria Skobstov in the Orthodox Church, or the Jewish women Etty Hillesum and Simone Weil). Several of them were martyrs besides: perhaps not “canonical” martyrs, but without a doubt “christological” martyrs —and, like Jesus, little acknowledged up till this time. But all of them, like Jesus, are reflected in these words of another saint, Vincent de Paul, already accepted and canonized by the Church, but only after a life of continual conflict with her:

Soon you will realize how hard it is to be charitable. It’s much more than carrying a pot of soup or a filled basket ... But you will keep your smile and your sweet manner. It’s not all a matter of giving out soup and bread. That’s something the rich can also do. You are the insignificant servant of the poor, the “daughter” of charity who is always smiling and cheerful. They are your masters. And they are terribly susceptible and demanding, as you will see. But the more repugnant and filthy they are, the more unjust and vulgar they are, all the more should you give them your love. Only because of your love, your love alone, will the poor forgive you the bread you give them.

These are not naïve words. And we should add, once they are accepted, that in the house of the Father that is the house of the poor “there are many dwellings” and many charisms. What is decisive is not that everybody actually

be there and work there, but that everybody always work *out of there*. Then will those words of Vincent de Paul be supplemented by these others from one of the last century's great theologians: "If I fail in justice and in love, I unfailingly separate myself from you, my God, and my worship is mere idolatry. To believe in you, I must believe in justice and love. It is a thousand times better to believe in them than to pronounce your name with my lips. Without them it is impossible to

find you, and those who practice them walk on the path that leads to you" (H. de Lubac). This is true because a world without justice and love, whatever dazzling achievements it may boast of, always ends up being a world filled with poor and excluded victims, those who sustain the greatness of all the rest.

How easy it is, then, in the light of what has been said, simply to pray sincerely that refrain: "Lord, have mercy on us, because we have sinned against you"!

## 2. THE CALL TO AN UNUSUAL WAY OF LIFE

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Chapter 16 of Matthew's gospel presents us with a surprising scene that makes visible what we have just stated. Jesus congratulates Peter for having been inspired by the Heavenly Father in his profession of faith, and five minutes (or five verses) later he literally censures Peter as Satan. Nowadays it is considered quite likely (contrary to what was taught in the old Catholic apologetic) that Matthew's redaction is secondary with respect to Mark's, which makes no mention either of Peter's express profession of Jesus' divine sonship or of Jesus' subsequent reproach of Peter.

### The orthodoxy of Satan

However, Matthew the evangelist wants to give his readers a very important lesson about the orthodoxy of belief, namely, that it is possible to use very orthodox formulations to falsify God because “you think as men think, not as God thinks” (Matthew 16,23). What is really at stake in the divinity of Jesus Christ (and in the identity of God so revealed) is a conception of the Divinity either as triumph or as donation. Peter, with irreproachable verbal orthodoxy, continues to be imprisoned within those exceedingly human interests. And that is the very same thing that can happen

today with a way of speaking of Christ that avoids express reference to Jesus of Nazareth. For that reason, as I have done on other occasions, I would like to insist on understanding *orthodoxy* in its most inclusive sense, which does not refer only to a correct *opinion* about God, but to the true *glory* of God.<sup>24</sup>

### 2.1. The true glory of God

Fine then: if that man Jesus was really the presence and the revelation of God, as the Church confesses, if in him God wanted to sum up (“recapitulate,” in biblical language) the whole of the

reality he had created, then there follows from that a vision of our reality which I have already developed in detail elsewhere and will only sketch out here. It is a vision of reality which in turn continues and brings to its culmination a schema that we already found as a way of preparation in the whole of the First Testament.

I will point out only a few of the moments of that preparation.

## **2.2. The schema exodus–promised land**

The first experiences that gave rise to faith in the biblical God were not extra-historical experiences of that numinous aura that surrounds Nature (which is sometimes fascinating and other times frightening). Rather, they were historical experiences of “leaving,” setting forth, and patiently searching for an obscure goal. The first two patriarchs of the Christian faith are Abraham and Moses.

Abraham thought he heard a voice that said simply, “Go forth”: dare to leave your native place (“your country and your kindred”) in search of something greater that takes the form of promise. Centuries later, in the impressive setting of Sinai, Moses was startled to hear a voice, which did not call him to admire the greatness and splendor of those immense masses of pink granite, but rather summoned him to hear “the cry of an oppressed people,” whose tears were reaching up to God himself. As undeniably magnificent as were the landscapes of Sinai, no voices of exploited slaves were to be heard there,

only the voice of God’s concern for them. Moses felt overwhelmed and impotent before that crazy promise of God: “I am going to free my people.” But the fact is that a few decades later (without going now into the historical details of the events) the people of Moses found themselves settled in a new land, called to establish in it a society of equality and justice, where all “should open wide their hand to the needy and the poor” (Deuteronomy 15,11) and where conflicts would be resolved by charismatic judges rather than by the established totalitarian powers.

On the basis of that fulfilled promise, the people would later compose the narratives and the myths or legends in the first chapters of the Bible. This they did in fidelity to the chronology of our history, but the logical order of reading was far from the chronological order of composition.

The road to that point was not an easy one: the passage from the exodus to the promised land was marked by the harsh sojourn in the desert, where the people were constantly tempted by despair and disloyalty and perversely longed for the lost comforts of slavery. And as unruly as they were during the journey, even more rebellious were they against God’s project once they were settled in the promised land. Besides the rampant internal corruption, the Israelites envied the greatness of other peoples, they looked for God in their military victories, and they distorted for their own benefit the meaning of being “God’s chosen people,” which was really a call to be “light for the nations,” and not a position of privilege.

All this history would take too long to tell, and we do not have enough space to do so here. But in the end the people were brought to ruin. And the people of God themselves did not recognize their sin until after they had become hopelessly enveloped in the calamities brought on by their envy of empires and their ambition for superiority. At this moment there appears in the First Testament the matter of distinguishing the true and the false prophets: the false prophets flatter and oblige the established religious powers, while the true prophets criticize their infidelities in the name of the Lord and are consequently punished for doing so.

With that, we proceed to the second moment of preparation.

### **2.3. The schema exile–return**

The exile was for Israel a devastating drama and a temptation that nearly left the people feeling abandoned by God and viewing their faith as a failure. Nevertheless, seen in hindsight, the exile was a great fountain of experience of God: the prophets who before had preached against depending on foreign powers and had urged the people to be faithful to God's project for Israel, now taught the people to accept their banishment, opposing those "prophets of Babylon" (Jeremiah 29,15) who were announcing an immediate, triumphal return to Judah.

Accepting their exiled helped the people learn from their long trajectory of infidelity. But they also learned that God is a God of all peoples and that his creation is good, even though infected

with evil (that's why the first chapter of Genesis was composed, as well as the ten that followed it). The Jewish people learned that among non-believers there might be many "whose head is not baptized, but whose heart is."<sup>25</sup> Likewise, they learned that God is a God of history and that those who appeared to be great enemies of God (such as Nebuchadnezzar<sup>26</sup> or Cyrus) might be seen as servants of God sent by him, and not simply as enemies to be eliminated.<sup>27</sup> As a result of the exile, the Jewish people learned a lot about other peoples and their religions.

And finally, during the exile Israel learned about its historic mission, as spelled out in the "Servant of Yahweh" poems of Isaiah: Israel was called to work for the establishment of justice in all nations, without violence, without breaking a bruised reed, and without getting discouraged, despite all the difficulties. In the end, the Servant was to assume the form of that figure who took on himself all the sins of the world, to the point of losing his life because of them, but who thus became the salvation of all.<sup>28</sup>

Israel's faith was purified and enormously enriched during the exile, something that the new people of God today should not forget when they sometimes feel themselves on the verge of a new exile, at least in our western societies. The Church of Jesus has committed a historical sin similar to the sin of Israel with its monarchy: it is the Church's alliance (and then identification) with the powers of this world, first in a gentler way with Constantine and then more radically with Charle-



magne and the temporal power of the popes. The consequences of that sin have also resembled those of the monarchy in Israel: a moment of splendor (world and Church practically coincided) and then a series of disasters: corruption, division among churches similar to Israel's division into the two kingdoms, and then only timid reforms that tried to change persons but left structures unaltered. For that reason the lessons of Israel's exile can be very instructive for the exile that possibly confronts the Church today, at least in the west, as a result of its own sins and its deafness to the voices of many prophets. But let us continue with the First Covenant.

With their faith purified, the people were prepared for the return to their homeland, which took place in the midst of great joy and a renewed desire to be faithful to God. All this is reflected in the "maneuver" of Ezra and Nehemiah, who staged a rediscovery of the Law and had people make a new pledge of fidelity to it. Of course, we know that even after the return the people did not remain faithful to God; once again Jeremiah's prophecy rings true: "The human heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt; who can understand it?" (17,9). Once again the promise is renewed, and the Israelites turn again to the Only One who can save such a stubborn people and change their hearts: "I will give them a heart so that they know me," and so that finally "God will be our justice" (Jeremiah 23,6).

That new fidelity sets the scene in Israel as we approach the time of the

appearance of Jesus, whom the New Testament will confess to be the "justice of God," in continuity with that prophecy of Jeremiah. And with that, we proceed to the third biblical schema.

## 2.4. The schema death–resurrection

Indeed, it is within this tremendous historical context that Jesus finally appeared. And in him will be repeated the same dialectical schema that we have been examining, and on a large scale. Historical studies have shown us how necessary this whole (historical, but also theological) framework is for understanding the Nazarene, and they have pointed out that the major failing of all the early research on the life of Jesus (despite its many contributions) was its prescinding from that context and looking at the gospels as if they had been written in some 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany university, and not in the Palestine of the first century.

Jesus (the "justice of God," as we just cited) is actually presented by the most Jewish of all the gospels as a *new Moses, an authentic Prophet, and the true Servant of Yahweh*.

a) As the new Moses, Jesus incarnates the schema of the Exodus: the commandment to go forth across the desert toward the promised land is now replaced by the commandment to follow Jesus –with all the difficulties that such following implies– and to become "fishers of men". This expression seems to be meant not so much in a quantitative as in a qualitative



sense: what God hopes to do, as I have said in other places, is to draw as much humanity as possible out of the turbulent sea of inhumanity in which we human beings are drowning. Jesus reveals that God want to make a true “poem of God” (Ephesians 2,9) out of each human being and that he calls all of us to collaborate in this task of divine creation.

b) Besides that, however, the most Jewish of the evangelists situates Jesus in the line of the true prophets, those opposed to the “false prophecy” of the priests and the Sadducees (or in another sense, that of the Zealots or Essenians). Jesus prophesied fearlessly, thus aligning himself with Hosea, Jeremiah, Second-Isaiah, Jonah, and the other prophets of the exile.<sup>29</sup> And he ended up denouncing the Vatican officials of his time as being the ones responsible for “murdering the prophets” and others sent by God; he accused the religious leaders of staining their history with the blood of the prophets and then hypocritically rendering them homage and adorning their tombs (Matthew 23, 29-32.37).

c) Finally, Jesus incarnates that Old Testament figure of the Servant of Yahweh (who from that point on ceases to represent Israel and becomes a prefiguring of Jesus): he comes to serve and not to be served. And he serves by carrying on his shoulders all the miseries and pains of a suffering humanity, to the point of giving his life, if necessary, for the liberation of his people. All the evangelists, but above all Matthew, have taken note of the resemblances between the Suffering

Servant and Jesus. But it is only through that serving, which serves with the greatest of loves, that God makes Jesus into the fount of new life for all: as Matthew says (8,17) with clear reference to Isaiah 53, he took upon himself our suffering and our anguish. And that will allow the evangelist to put on Jesus’ lips that well-known invitation: “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (11,28) –an undeniably troublesome invitation for those who want to call themselves followers and imitators of Jesus.

The double schema of exodus–promised land and exile–return is now transfigured into the supremely Christian pairing of death and resurrection. And it is important to point out that that is what the NT texts are referring to when they say that the death and resurrection took place “according to the scriptures,” that is, *according to the biblical schemas that we have just presented, or according to the Old Testament theology of history*. Taken out of this context, the expression “according to the scriptures” turns into an absurd search for concrete prophecies which at times seizes upon a similarity of words to find an announcement of Jesus’ death; such an understanding goes way beyond the symbolic meaning of many passages in the First Testament and turns them into official announcements.

Removed from such a context, references to the First Testament degenerate into an impoverished understanding of words like redemption, expiation, or propitiation, which come

to be interpreted according to the penal mentality of the west. As a result, it is not God himself who carries out the expiation, but it is a man who buys it from God with his suffering. This real deformation of the God of Jesus brings with it another deformation, that of the meaning of suffering: God is no longer the one who gives all he is out of love, but is the cruel justice that is satisfied only with infinite blood; and Jesus is no longer the expression of the extremes to which love will go in a loveless world, but gives rise to a truly masochistic view of suffering, as if suffering in itself were pleasing to God. As I have written elsewhere, the hard law of our sinful history, namely, that “everything worthwhile costs something,” becomes disfigured into the theological absurdity of “everything that costs something is worthwhile” (here we are always talking of suffering that is not sought for its own sake).

The life pattern of “self-donation – death– resurrection” is in some sense the legacy of the real Jesus and the gateway to his revelation of God.

Perhaps we can now understand what we were saying at the beginning of this booklet: the ecclesiastical institution appears to be quite ready to respond to the question about *who Jesus is* with words like “God of God, Light of Light, ... consubstantial with the Father.” These words figure in the Christian creed, even though they really express just the negative limits of our faith, devised some 17 centuries ago to respond to the Arians. They hardly give positive expression to our faith today. But the church institution is always dis-

tributed when someone tries to respond to the other question: *what was that Jesus like*, the one whom the Church confesses to be God of God and Light of Light? It prefers to “imagine him” according to its own idea of God, rather than seek help from historical studies and the other sciences in order to get closer, in whatever small measure is possible, to the real Jesus. It thus falls back on a procedure that I decried 30 years ago. It refuses to argue thus: “Jesus was like this –this is how Jesus was consubstantial with the Father– and so God is like this!” Rather, it prefers to argue the opposite way: “God is like this –this is how Jesus was God– and so Jesus must have been like this.” As a result, the God revealed in Jesus becomes easily digestible for us, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s statement no longer rings true: God turns upside down everything that religious people (and religious institutions!) expect of God. Paradoxically, the great synthesis between faith and reason that was achieved in the Middle Ages breaks down, and theology becomes the “handmaid of philosophy.”<sup>30</sup>

So we see that the triple biblical schema mentioned already provides us a key for understanding those curious games that theologians play. All the pairings we analyzed have as well a *historical basis*, which is what gives rise to them. The exodus–land pairing emerges from the harsh reality of a brutally oppressed people. The exile–return pairing arises from the historical experience of a sinful people. And in complete accord with those, the death–resurrection pairing is born out of

the bosom of a concrete history that was the particular life of that particular Man. The death of Jesus was a consequence of his life: it was not the result of a circumstantial misunderstanding (R. Bultmann), nor was it demanded by the incomprehensible justice of a sadistic divinity. Nevertheless, the liturgy speaks too often speak exclusively of the death–resurrection and never of the *life* that was completely committed to people until the horrible end –*that* is what God raised up. In the death–resurrection pairing, “death” ends up being reduced to a generic term applicable to any human being; it loses its specific coloring as *that concrete death* which is precisely the one that reveals the God of Jesus.

As completely precarious and provisional as the findings of critical research often are, one of its great contributions is precisely that statement: the death of Jesus is a consequence of his life. And if that life and that way of being human truly reveal God, then the death of Jesus also reveals the temptation of all religious persons (and especially religious institutions): to eliminate that God.

Let us conclude with an observation that helps us to see the importance of, and the differences in, these two ways of conceiving the matter. It has to do with a topic that is very current these days in the dialogue among world religions. If that Christ whom we call God has the face and the concrete manner of Jesus, then his divinity becomes, as Saint Paul already stated, “folly for the wise and a stumbling block” for the religious. Such a situation places Christianity rather in a position of modesty and inferiority in its approach to the world’s religions, for it knows that it is announcing something scandalous.

But if the Christ whom we call God does not have a concrete face, then his divinity becomes for Christianity an invincible weapon and a source of power that places it in a position of superiority when approaching the other cosmovisions of the earth.

This helps us understand the temptation of some theologians to renounce that article of faith, for the sake of being able to approach the world of the religions on a basis of equality.

### 3. FEAR OF JESUS: A DIAGNOSIS

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«With the armor of the holy rule, the helmet of holy observance, and the sword of holy tradition, I have a very hard time defending myself ... from Jesus!». This saying of a superior general of the Cistercians sums up perfectly the conclusion of this essay. Perhaps the best brief diagnosis of the sin of present-day Catholicism is that it is unconsciously fearful of Jesus. At the same time, if there is something that present-day Catholicism needs terribly, it is a radical and confident turning toward Jesus.

If such is the case, it's worth asking whether this unconscious fear of the human figure of Jesus is what has caused certain ecclesiastical voices (which we think are too ready to hurl *christological* anathemas against *historical* questions, without respecting the autonomy of each field) to show a fearful, unconscious preference for an indefensible biblical fundamentalism, rather than for a discomfiting Jesus. We find ourselves in a situation similar to that of Saint Peter: just when we were hoping that our faith and our zeal would be praised as coming "from the Father

who is in heaven, and not from flesh and blood," Jesus turns unexpectedly on us, calling us nothing less than "Satan" and telling us that our ideas about him come not from the Father, but indeed from flesh and blood (cf. Matthew 16,16 ff.).

This would help to explain the fear of critical research that has arisen again quite recently in ecclesiastical authorities, despite the magnificent, nuanced declarations made in its favor by the Pontifical Biblical Commission (and by Vatican II itself). We can legitimately suspect that what they find frightening in historical criticism is not

so much the exaggerations or the absurdities that come from a particular author (there will always be these); rather, it is the embarrassment caused by the attractive figure of Jesus that has emerged from such criticism. What has happened with many historical promises could also be happening here: that famous slogan with which historical research was born (“freeing Jesus from the prison of dogma”) is finding its fulfillment, though in a manner very different from what the nascent research expected: Jesus is coming closer to us, with some of his features blurred, but with certain traits that are unmistakable. And he approaches us freed, if not from the prison of dogma, then certainly from the prison of “dogmatism,” that perversion of all dogma that long held him securely incarcerated. He is liberated, for example, from what Rahner condemned years ago as the most prevalent heresy in many Christian minds: a sort of crypto-Monophysitism, more or less latent.<sup>31</sup>

To illustrate all this, I refer to something I wrote not long ago: “The current problem of the ecclesiastical institution may be due to its *fear of Jesus*. Unconsciously, it seeks to defend itself from him, and it doesn’t know how to do so. It therefore prefers to speak of a “faceless Christ” and goes so far as to prohibit the use of the word “Jesus” in some catechetical texts, claiming that such usage might lead to forgetting his divinity. As if the Johannine writings, which so often mention the name of Jesus, were for that reason forgetful of his divinity, when the real danger was an exclusive affir-

mation of the divinity! Nevertheless, Jesus reveal no more divinity than that which is found in his human figure, and therein lies the scandal of the Incarnation: “no one comes to the Father except through me” was the answer he gave to the apostle Thomas when Thomas asked him to “show” them the Father.

In Paul’s time, when the memory of Jesus was still fresh, the apostle could speak of Christ as synonymous with Jesus (when he was not using the term with the meaning of “Messiah”). Nowadays the two words have distanced themselves from one another: “Jesus” (without “Christ”) may refer simply to what we observe, *leaving unexpressed* any views of belief or unbelief regarding him. But the word “Christ” as a substitute for “Jesus” seems to appeal to a divinity *with a face that is different from or foreign to the face of the Nazarene*. Paradoxically, we run here the risk of falling into the same errors that Catholics in years gone attributed to R. Bultmann: Christian salvation is placed simply *in the fact that* Jesus existed, but *not in the content of that fact* (in German, he was said to stress the *Dass* [the that] but not the *Was* [the what]) –what saves us is *that Jesus* existed, and not *which Jesus* is the one who existed.

When I published my christology text more than 30 years ago, I insisted as much as possible on a feature of faith in Jesus Christ that often remains buried, even in the official orthodoxies: the divinity of Jesus is not something that affects him exclusively (in such a way that someone who “possessed more

of him” would also possess more of God), but rather, as Vatican II rediscovered through a quite classical text of the primitive church: “by the Incarnation God in some way united himself with all human beings” (GS 22). With *all*: no doubt the official orthodoxies would have preferred a statement saying that God had united himself in some way with the pope or just with the bishops, ... but the faith of the Church says “with all human beings.” For that reason “Jesus has an ‘affiliation’ that ‘affiliates’ and a divinity that divinizes.”<sup>32</sup>

Starting from this given, which the Pauline school formulated as the “recapitulation of all creation in Christ,” I concluded the christology text by stating that the Incarnation allows us to speak of a christological structure of all reality. And this structure, unfolding out of the life of Jesus, allows us to speak of reality as absolute, of reality as curse, and of reality as promise (Incarnation, Cross, and Resurrection: the three characteristics that sum up christology).

Now, on the basis of what has been argued in this booklet, namely, that Christ has no other face than that of Jesus of Nazareth, we should speak also of a “Jesuan” structure of reality. This expression should not be understood as giving us reason to consider Christianity

to be something superior, since by his resurrection Jesus has ceased to be the exclusive patrimony of Christians. Rather, it should be understood as a summons to see reality as portrayed in terms of the kingdom (which “is at hand”), the anti-kingdom (which appears more present), and the eschatological promise. And consequently it should turn our religiosity toward the reality that bears this triple existential sign.

In this way we may possibly understand why Jesus turns out to be at once so seductive and so “threatening”: he opens up almost inaccessible horizons, which overwhelm our human smallness. “Only God can be so human,” wrote Leonardo Boff with great insight, summing up the experience of many who walked and talked with Jesus. But such tremendous human quality appears beyond our reach, and even more so, the more and the better we know each other: Jesus, the real Jesus, not the one replaced by a faceless Christ, makes absolutely imperative for us the ancient temptation of the serpent: “to be like God.” But the very idea of God has been turned around in that promise, because it now involves being “merciful as your heavenly Father is merciful” (Luke 6,36). Again, it is something seductive and terrifying for our human tininess.

## CONCLUSION: «FEAR NOT»

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Tennis fans have sometimes commented on Roger Federer's game: when you watch him, tennis appears easy. In contrast, Rafael Nadal leaves us with a certain sensation that winning is the fruit of constant running and tireless effort. But it's not that way with Federer: it's as if he just happens «to be there».

### The impossible ease

The scholastics used to wonder “*si licet magna componere parvis*” (whether great things can be made up of small things).

Perhaps we could move one rung further up the ladder of greatness and think of Mozart: his music appears easy (prescinding perhaps from the *Requiem*). An aria from *Don Juan* leaves us with the sensation that that music has always been just that and nothing more than that. It therefore springs forth and flows quite easily, without that feeling of painful childbirth that we sometimes sense in the genius of Wagner.

Well, then, I have the sensation that the greatest impact that the humanity of Jesus leaves on us is something similar.

When we draw close to him, being human looks easy. It is only when we try to mold our own humanity into shape that we grasp how difficult this whole business of being human is. That's why there's so much truth in that celebrated saying of Boff, which sums up the journey toward faith in the divinity of Jesus: “Only God can be so human.” Here once again seduction and vertigo meet one another and kiss. And precisely here is where we are given over to that adventure of radical, trusting commitment we call faith.

The same fear that Jesus Christ can inspire in us today he inspired in those days, not only in the Jewish religious authorities, but also in his own disciples. Among these latter, however, the attraction of Jesus turned out to be stronger than the fear. Something of that nature is what is asked of us today: that same confident following of Jesus which dares to hear the oft-repeated words, “Do not be afraid,” and which is finally convinced that our faith is the victory that overcomes this world. Thus, the true follower of Jesus will more than once end up weeping bitterly like Peter, but also singing like the prophet Jeremiah, half grateful and half fearful: “You seduced me, and I allowed myself to be seduced... Your word has been stronger than I, there is in my heart a burning fire, etc.” (Jeremiah 20,8 ff.).

Kierkegaard claimed that if Jesus were to return today, we would kill him again. And those who would kill him, as back then, would not be the officially bad people (publicans, Samaritans, prostitutes,...), but the officially good people, the guardians of religion, the high priests, and the Pharisees. Once, when I wrote something to that effect in *La Vanguardia*, a most worthy cardinal of Holy Mother Church placed an angry phone call to my provincial, protesting my statements and claiming that he certainly wouldn’t kill Jesus—and I have no doubt about that at all. I would only point out that *those who killed Jesus did not want to kill anyone sent by God either*: they did not condemn Jesus

because they were evil, but because the positions they held left them blinded. Nor did they kill him because they were Jews: they killed him because they were “religious.” (All the anti-Semitism in the church’s history rests on this confusion: the truest Jews were all those who followed Jesus, bemoaned his death, and then gave their lives for him. We can therefore in no way speak of a God-murdering *people* or attribute the death of Jesus to Judaism.)

In a word, I have the impression that something unique is occurring in our days: Jesus has returned in a manner that is not only metaphorical: he has been brought close to us by historical research. The reaction of many “high priests” has been to try to eliminate Jesus again, just as that great Danish Christian announced they would. But they run the danger of confirming these prophetic words of J. Ratzinger, with which we conclude:

Today the Church has become for many people the main obstacle to faith. They see in her only the struggle for human power, the shameful theater of people who by their observations seek to absolutize official Christianity and paralyze the true spirit of Christianity.<sup>33</sup>

So perhaps it is true that we need to return again and again to those words that form part of Jesus’ farewell discourse in the fourth gospel: “Be confident, for I have overcome the world” (John 16,33).



1. *Libro de la vida* c.22. See also chapter 7 of the sixth of the *Mansions*: "If they lose the guide, who is the good Jesus, they will not find the way."
2. *El conocimiento sobrenatural*, Madrid, Trotta, p. 84.
3. Cf. *Subversive Memory, Subjugating Memory*, CiJ Booklet n. 102.
4. I use this word to include both father and mother. We should perhaps make clear that the word "parent" is not related to the masculine word "father" (*pater* in Latin, *padre* in Spanish), but comes from the Latin verb *pario*, which means "give birth".
5. Matthew's version of the "Our Father" uses the term Kingdom "of Heaven," which was simply a circumlocution customary among the Jews to avoid pronouncing the name of the "Unnamable One." It in no way refers to "another world." For Jesus there is no "other world," if there has not first been a "this world."
6. This procedure is at the root, for example, of all the condemnations of liberation theology.
7. For a longer analysis, I refer the reader to chapter 2.3 (Jesus and the outcasts) in the book *La Humanidad Nueva. Ensayo de cristología*.
8. Cf. Jesús Martínez Gordo, *Dios amor asimétrico*, Bilbao, Desclée de Brouwer, 1993.
9. Even in the Old Testament, the expression *sêmeia kai terata* (Greek for "signs and wonders") does not necessarily refer to miraculous actions, but rather to liberations and cures in a broad sense. In the book, *Clamor del Reino: Estudio sobre los milagros de Jesús*, I mentioned the possibility, suggested by J. Jeremias, that many cures were what later would be called "improvement therapies," but this point is not so important now.
10. H. C. Klee, *Medicina, milagros y magia en tiempos de Jesús*, Córdoba, El Almendro, 1992, p. 122-23.
11. See Matthew 11,19; Mark 2,16.
12. The reason for this was perhaps that the earlier searches sought to study the texts too abstractly or academically, removing them from their social and historical context.
13. Luke's comment that the people "wondered at the words of grace that came from his mouth" seems to refer to the fact that Jesus, in citing Isaiah, omitted the expression, "I have come to announce the day of Yahweh's vengeance," which was in the prophet's text. For many Jews, the vengeance of Yahweh was always against foreign oppressors.
14. It would also be worthwhile to comment on chapter 6 of Matthew, which explicitly refers to the Jewish religion, but ultimately goes beyond the orbit of Judaism and constitutes a critique of all human religiosity. I leave out such a commentary for reasons of space and because I have written in that vein elsewhere.
15. Just as only someone profoundly Catholic could have been so bothered by the ecclesiastical institution as were Oscar Romero and Pedro Arrupe. I cite this example to show that *the question is not so much about the fact of belonging as about the quality of the belonging*. Sometimes I wonder if the so-called "third quest of Jesus" has forgotten this.
16. J. Reed, *Archaeology and the galilean Jesus*. Harrisburg, Trinity Press International, 2002.
17. On the biblical notion of election, see my *Proyecto de hermano: Visión creyente del hombre*, Santander, Sal Terrae, 1987, pp. 671-72. See also H. Wolff, *Anthropologie des Alten Testaments*, München, 1973, p. 209,

18. In fact, in the passion narratives, which are usually considered the oldest ones, the Pharisees have very little protagonism as compared to the priests, the Sadducees, and other Sanhedrin members.
19. See J. Reed, *op. cit.*, pp. 18 and 142.
20. And, since I am a Jesuit, I should not forget that the word "Jesuit" became a synonym of "hypocrite" in the dictionary, precisely because of the surprising boldness and the accomplishments of Ignatius's first followers.
21. This poses a question we cannot avoid. If today we have the impression that the Vatican and the Roman Curia bear much more resemblance to the Temple and the priestly hierarchy of Jerusalem than they do to the group of Jesus' followers, what is a Christian to do who confesses that God was infinitely more present in Jesus than he was in the Temple or the priestly hierarchy? The answer, for which there is not sufficient room here, does not mean simply breaking with religion (Jesus didn't break with the Judaism of his time), but it does mean being ready to accept conflict and persecution, or as Saint Ignatius put it, "the shackles and chains of the Inquisition, for the love of Christ."
22. In Latin: "*Non coerceri maximo, contineri tamen a minimo divinum est*".
23. This phrase, which appears in Hebrews 13,11-13, is not only a geographic indication, but contains a slight irony of a social nature: he died outside of our "civilization."
24. In Greek the word *doxa* means both "opinion" and "glory."
25. Jeremiah 9,24. Of course, the original does not speak of baptism but of circumcision: those circumcised in the flesh, but uncircumcised in the heart.
26. Jeremiah 25,9; 27,6.
27. Might we not say the same today, now not of Nebuchadnezzar, but of many who have been considered enemies of Christianity, such as Marx or Freud or Nietzsche? Were they possibly sent by God to a Church that was blind to the message of Jesus?
28. For more information on the figure of the Servant, I refer the reader to my Booklet, *The Struggle for Justice in the Poems of Isaiah* (no. 96 of CiJ).
29. Since there is no space here for more, we cite just one example: Jeremiah 22,13-16.
30. I give one quick but illuminating example of this: there are countless instances in liturgical formulas of the expression "Almighty God" (in prayers, creeds, blessings, etc.), but very rarely will you find the expression "All-merciful God" (which is infinitely closer to the biblical concepts of *Hesed* and *Emeth*). Of course, we are not denying God's omnipotence, but this one-sided depiction of God covers up a great falsehood, for God has no more power than that of Love and he has renounced all other forms of power in his relationship with humankind. If you wish, he is a God who is all-powerful in love. Similarly, it is difficult to find in our penitential liturgies any expressions such as "fidelity" (or "infidelity") to Jesus and the gospel. There is generic talk about faults and sins, but all such language suggests a sort of generic religious morality more than it relates to our following of Jesus.
31. Monophysitism (from the Greek *mono-physis*, "one single nature") was perhaps the hardest heresy for the Church to combat: because of its particular ideas about God's greatness, the heresy held that what was human in Jesus was swallowed up by the divinity, just as a drop of wine is lost in the sea. It most definitely communicated the image of a God who needed to suppress the human in order to affirm the divine.
32. Cf. *La Humanidad Nueva*, Santander, Sal Terrae, p. 303 –understanding "affiliate" in the sense of "making a son/daughter" of someone [from Latin *filius/filia*, son/daughter]. There also we read: "History, as recapitulated in Jesus, finds itself made 'Son,' and the relation between the Son and the Father that constitutes the Spirit is transferred to the relation between history and the Father, in the form of the Spirit as the gift promised by Jesus" (p. 339).
33. *Introducción al cristianismo*, Salamanca, Sígueme, 1970, p. 301.



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