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First Advent Sermon 2017

“All things were created through him and for him”

Christ and Creation

The meditations for Advent this year (there are only two because of the calendar) propose to put the divine-human person of Christ back at the center of the two great components that together constitute “reality,” that is, the cosmos and history, space and time, creation and humanity. We need to recognize that despite a lot of talk about him, Christ is marginalized in our culture. He is completely absent—and for more than understandable reasons—from the three main dialogues in which faith is engaged in our contemporary world: the dialogues between faith and science, faith and philosophy, and the interreligious dialogue.

My ultimate purpose, however, is not theoretical but practical. The issue above all is putting Christ back at the center of our personal lives and our vision of the world and at the center of the three theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. Christmas is the most propitious season for such a reflection, since this is the time when we recall the moment when the Word became flesh, entering physically into creation and history, into space and time.

1. The Earth Was Void

In this first meditation, let us reflect on the first part of the announced themes, the relationship between Christ and the cosmos. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters” (Gen 1:1-2). A medieval author, the English abbot Alexander Neckam (1157-1217), commented on these initial verses of the Bible this way:

The earth was void because the Word had not yet become flesh.

Our earth was void because the fullness of grace and truth did not yet dwell in it.

It was void because it had not yet been made fixed and stable through a union with divinity.

Our earthly dwelling was void because the fullness of time had not yet come.

“And darkness was upon the face of the deep.” The “true light that enlightens every man” who comes into the world had in fact not yet come.¹

¹ Alexander Neckam, *De naturis rerum*, 1, 2, ed. Thomas Wright (1863; repr., New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 12ff.

I believe the relationship between creation and the Incarnation could not be expressed in a more biblical and more inspiring way than in reading the beginning of Genesis and of John's Gospel in counterpoint just the way this author does. The encyclical *Laudato si'* devotes a paragraph to this theme that, given its brevity, we can read in its entirety:

In the Christian understanding of the world, the destiny of all creation is bound up with the mystery of Christ, present from the beginning: "All things have been created through him and for him" (Col 1:16). The prologue of the Gospel of John (1:1-18) reveals Christ's creative work as the Divine Word (*Logos*). But then, unexpectedly, the prologue goes on to say that this same Word "became flesh" (Jn 1:14). One Person of the Trinity entered into the created cosmos, throwing in his lot with it, even to the cross. From the beginning of the world, but particularly through the incarnation, the mystery of Christ is at work in a hidden manner in the natural world as a whole, without thereby impinging on its autonomy. (n. 99)

The issue is what place the Person of Christ occupies in relation to the universe as a whole. This task is more urgent today than ever. The French philosopher Maurice Blondel wrote to a friend,

Our world has expanded through the social and natural sciences. Our world cannot remain true to Catholicism and be content with a mediocre explanation, a limited outlook which represents Christ as an accident of history, isolating Him in the Cosmos as if He were an episode without proper time and place. One cannot represent Him as an intruder, an alien in the crushing and hostile immensity of the universe.²

The biblical texts that our faith rests on concerning the cosmic role of Christ are those of Paul and John quoted in the encyclical. It is worthwhile to recall them here in full. In chronological order, the first is Colossians 1:15-17:

He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

The other text is John 1:3 and 10:

All things were made through him [the Word], and without him was not anything made that was made. . . . He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not.

Despite the striking consonance of these texts, it is possible to distinguish a difference in emphasis between them that would have great importance in the future development of

² Maurice Blondel, "First Paper to Auguste Valensin," in Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Maurice Blondel, *Correspondence* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), 23.

theology. For John the hinge that unites creation and redemption is the moment in which “the Word became made flesh and dwelt among us” (Jn 1:13); for Paul it is instead the moment of the cross. For John it is the Incarnation while for Paul it is the paschal mystery. The text in Colossians in fact goes on to say,

For in him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. (Col 1:19-20)

Patristic reflection, under the pressure of heresies, valued almost only one aspect of these two affirmations: what they tell us about the Person of Christ and the salvation he accomplished for human beings. The Fathers said little or nothing of what Paul and John affirm about its cosmic significance, that is, about the significance of Christ for the rest of creation.

Against the Arians, these texts served to affirm the divinity and the pre-existence of Christ. The Son of God cannot be a creature, Athanasius argued, since he is the Creator of everything. However, the cosmic significance of the Logos in creation is not given proportionate equivalence to his significance for redemption. The only text that lends itself to a development of this issue—Romans 8:19-22, in which creation groans and suffers as if in childbirth—was never, as far as I know, the starting point for any extensive reflection by the Fathers of the Church.

As to the “why” of the Incarnation, the answer from St. Athanasius (*De incarnatione*) to St. Anselm of Canterbury (*Cur Deus homo*) was essentially what is said in the creed: “*Propter nos homines et propter nostram salutem descendit de caelis*” (“For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven”). The perspective for the relationship between Christ and humanity is anthropological: it does not include the relationship between Christ and the cosmos, except incidentally. The latter topic emerges only during the polemic against the Gnostics and Manicheans who contrasted creation and redemption as the work of two different gods and held that matter and the cosmos were intrinsically alien to God and incapable of being saved.

At a certain point in the development of faith, another answer was proposed in the Middle Ages as to “why God became man.” The question was “Can the coming of Christ, who is ‘the creator of the whole creation’ (see Col 1:15), be entirely tied to the sin of human beings that took place after creation?”

Blessed Duns Scotus took a decisive step in this direction, releasing the Incarnation from its basic link to sin. The reason for the Incarnation, he says, is that God wanted someone extrinsic to himself who could love him perfectly in a way that was worthy of him.³ Christ is wanted for himself as the only one capable of loving the Father—and being loved by him—with an infinite love worthy of God. The Son of God would have become incarnate even if

³ Duns Scotus, *Reportatio Parisiensis*, III, 7, 4, in *Opus Parisiense*, eds. Charles Balic et al. (Rome: Vatican City 1950), 13-15; see also *Opera omnia*, XXIII (Paris: L. Vives, 1894), 303.

Adam had not sinned because he is the very crown of creation, God's supreme handiwork. Man's sin determined the *manner* of the Incarnation, conferring on it the character of redemption from sin, but it did not determine the fact of the Incarnation itself. The Incarnation has a transcendent reason, not a circumstantial one.

2. The Cosmic Vision of Teilhard de Chardin

Scotus was the first to attempt to give a precise meaning to the biblical affirmation that "all things were created through him and for him" (Col 1:16). But we certainly cannot yet speak with Scotus of any actual impact of Christ on all of creation. This is only possible if we jump centuries ahead from Scotus to our time, to Teilhard de Chardin. According to Blondel, Teilhard de Chardin was concerned, in a culture dominated by the idea of evolution, to avoid having Christ end up being seen as an "accident of history, isolated from the rest of the Cosmos."

Utilizing his indisputable scientific knowledge, Teilhard de Chardin sees a parallel between the evolution of the world (cosmogogenesis) and the progressive formation of the total Christ (Christogenesis). Christ is not only not extraneous to the evolution of the cosmos but mysteriously guides it from within, and at the moment of the Parousia he will constitute its final fulfillment and transformation, the "Omega Point" as Teilhard calls it.

He deduces from these premises a whole new positive vision of the relationship between Christianity and earthly reality. For the first time in the history of Christian thinking, a believer composes a "Hymn to Matter" and a *Hymn of the Universe*.⁴ An outburst of optimism rippled through a vast sector of Christianity to the point of making its influence felt in a document of the Second Vatican Council, the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et spes)*. It is a reevaluation of earthly activities, and first of all of human labor. The works that a Christian does have value in and of themselves as improving the world and not merely for the pious intention with which a Christian does them.

Teilhard de Chardin is particularly inspired when he applies his vision to the sacrament of the Eucharist. Through the work and daily life of the believer, the Eucharist extends its action throughout the entire cosmos. Every Eucharist becomes a "Mass on the World":⁵

When through the mouth of the priest he says, *Hoc est corpus meum* ["This is my body"], these words extend beyond the morsel of bread over which they are said: they give birth to the whole mystical body of Christ. The effect of the priestly act extends beyond the consecrated host to the cosmos itself.⁶

⁴ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, "Hymn to Matter," in *Hymn of the Universe*, trans. Gerald Vann (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 65-70. See also "My Universe" (1924) in *Science and Christ* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 37-85.

⁵ Teilhard de Chardin, "The Mass on the World," in *Hymn of the Universe*, 9-32.

⁶ *Ibid.*, qtd. in the "Introduction to 'Mass on the World,'" 6. For similar ideas, see *How I Believe* (1923), trans. René Hague (New York: Harper & Row, 1969).

I do not believe, however, that we can define this cosmic spirituality as an ecological spirituality in the current meaning of the word. For Teilhard, the evolutionary idea of progress, of the ascent of creation toward forms that are always more complex and diversified, still predominates while a concern for the preservation of creation is not present, unless indirectly. In his time, people had not yet become clearly aware of the danger that development—especially industrial development—can pose for creation, or at least for the small part of it that is home to humanity.

Biblical faith agrees with Teilhard de Chardin on the fact that Christ is the Omega Point of history, if by Omega Point we mean the One who at the end will subject all things to himself and hand them over to the Father (see 1 Cor 15:28), the One who will inaugurate “the new heavens and the new earth” and will pronounce final judgement on the world and history (see Mt 25:31ff). The same risen Christ calls himself in Revelation “the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last” (Rev 22:12).

However, the faith does not justify Teilhard de Chardin’s idea that the final act of history will be a “crowning” of evolution that has reached its apogee. According to the vision dominant in the whole Bible, the final act could be its very opposite, that is, an abrupt interruption of history, a crisis, a judgment, the moment of separating the wheat from the chaff (see Mt 13:24ff). The Second Letter of Peter says that Christians are “waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be kindled and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire!” (2 Pet 3:12). This is the vision that has characterized the Church’s perspective, as we see in the initial words of the “*Dies irae*”: “*Dies irae dies illa solvet saeculum in favilla*” (“That day of wrath, that dreadful day /Shall heaven and earth in ashes lay”). It will be an end to evil in terms of the present world rather than an apogee of the good.⁷

This weakness in Teilhard de Chardin’s vision is due to a lacuna that has been pointed out even by scholars who admire his thinking.⁸ He did not succeed in integrating into his vision, in an organic and convincing way, the negative dimension of sin; consequently he did not integrate Paul’s dramatic vision in which the reconciliation and recapitulation of all things in Christ occur in the cross and in his death.

3. The Spirit of Christ

Is there anything, then, that allows us to escape the danger of making Christ, as Blondel said, “an intruder, an alien in the crushing and hostile immensity of the universe”? In other words, does Christ have something to say about the burning issue of ecology and the preservation of creation, or does all this unfold in complete independence of him, like an issue that, if anything, concerns theology but not Christology?

⁷ This is Augustine’s thesis who sees the end as “the separation of good and evil, the destruction (*conflagratio*) of the world and its rebirth”: cf. *The City of God*, XX, 30,5.

⁸ See Christopher F. Mooney, *Teilhard de Chardin and the Mystery of Christ* (New York: Image Books, 1968),

The lack of a clear answer to this question by theologians is due, like so many other lacuna, I believe, to the scant attention paid to the Holy Spirit and his relationship to the risen Christ. Paul writes, “The last Adam became a life-giving spirit” (1 Cor 15:45). The apostle goes so far as to say, with a formula that is very succinct, “the Lord . . . is the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:17), to emphasize that the risen Lord now acts in the world through his “operational arm,” which is the Holy Spirit.

Paul’s mention of creation that is suffering the pains of childbirth is made in the context of his discussion on the diverse operations of the Holy Spirit. He sees a continuity between the groaning of creation and that of believers: “not only creation but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly” (Rom 8:23).

The Holy Spirit is the mysterious force that propels creation toward its fulfillment. The Second Vatican Council, speaking of evolution in the social order, affirms that “God’s Spirit, Who with a marvelous providence directs the unfolding of time and renews the face of the earth, is not absent from this development” (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 26). What the council affirms about the social order applies to all spheres, including the cosmos. Every selfless effort and every advance in the stewardship of creation is through the work of the Holy Spirit. He, who is “the principle of the creation of things,”⁹ is also the principle of its evolution over time. This is nothing but the continuation of creation.

What does the Holy Spirit bring that is specific and “personal” to creation and to the evolution of the cosmos? He is not at the origin, so to speak, but at the end of creation and of redemption, just as he is not at the origin but at the end of the trinitarian process. St. Basil writes, “In creation, the Father is the first cause, the one from whom all things come; the Son is the efficient cause, the one through whom all things are made; and the Holy Spirit is the perfecting cause.”¹⁰

From the initial words of the Bible (“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters”), one can deduce that the creative action of the Spirit is at the origin of the *perfecting* of creation. We could say he is not so much the one who transitions the world from nothing to existence as much as the one who makes formless beings into formed and perfected beings, even if we must always keep in mind that every action of God performed outside of himself is always a joint work of the whole Trinity.

In other words, the Holy Spirit is the one who, by his nature, aims to make creation transition from chaos to *cosmos*, to make the world something beautiful, something ordered and clean, according to the meaning of its Latin name “*mundus*. St. Ambrose observed,

⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith (Summa contra gentiles)*, IV, 20, 2, trans. Charles J. O’Neil (New York: Hanover House, 1955-57), 628.

¹⁰ St. Basil, *On the Holy Spirit*, XVI, 38 (PG 32, 136).

When the Spirit began to move upon the water, the creation was still without beauty. However, after creation underwent the working of the Spirit, it gained all the splendor of beauty that made it shine like a “world (*mundus*).”¹¹

An anonymous author from the second century sees this marvel repeat itself, in a striking parallel, in the new creation brought about through the Passover of Christ. What the “Spirit of God” did at the time of creation, the “Spirit of Christ” now does in redemption. He writes,

The world would have been dissolved in confusion and fear at the passion if the great Jesus had not expired saying: Father, into your hands I commit my spirit (Luke 23:46). The whole universe trembled and quaked with fear, and everything was in a state of agitation, but when the Divine Spirit rose again the universe returned to life and regained its vitality.¹²

4. How Christ Acts in Creation

One question remains that is the most relevant of all in terms of ecology: Does Christ have something to say about the practical issues that the ecological challenge sets before humanity and the Church? In what sense can we say that Christ, working through his Spirit, is the key element for a healthy and realistic Christian ecology?

I believe that, yes, Christ plays a decisive role even in the concrete problems of the preservation of creation, but he functions in an indirect way by operating in human beings and—through them—on creation. He does that through his gospel that the Holy Spirit “recalls” to believers and makes alive and operative in history until the end of the world (see Jn 16:13). This takes place just the way it did at the beginning of creation: God creates the world and entrusts its guardianship and stewardship to human beings. The Eucharistic Prayer IV says it this way:

You formed man in your own image
and entrusted the whole world to his care,
so that in serving you alone, the Creator,
he might have dominion over all creatures.

The innovation brought by Christ in this area is that he has revealed the true meaning of the word “dominion” the way it is understood by God, as service. Jesus says in the Gospel,

“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave; even as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mt 20:25-28)

¹¹ St. Ambrose, *On the Holy Spirit*, II, 33.

¹² Anonymous Quartodeciman of the second century [Pseudo-Hippolytus], “Homily on the Holy Pascha,” in Dragos Andrei Giulea, *Pre-Nicene Christology in Paschal Contexts* (Boston: Brill, 2014), 115; see also *SCh* 27 1950.

All the reasons that theologians have tried to give for the Incarnation, to the question of “why God became man,” are shattered before the force of this declaration: “I came to serve and give my life for many.” It is now a question of applying this new understanding of dominion to our relationship with creation as well, as being served by it, yes, but also of serving it, that is, respecting it, defending it, and protecting it from any exploitation.

Christ acts in creation the way he acts in the social sphere, namely, according to his precept about love for one’s neighbor. In relationship to space, which we would call its *synchronic* sense, our “neighbor” refers to people who we are living near to here and now. In relationship to time, in its *diachronic* sense, our “neighbors” are those who will come after us, starting with today’s children and youth from whom we are taking away the possibility of living on a habitable planet without having to go around wearing masks to breathe or having to “found colonies on other planets.” As for all of these neighbors in time and space, Jesus said, “You did it to me. . . . You did it not to me” (Mt 25:40, 45).

Like everything else, care for creation is also played out on two levels: the global level and the local level. A modern saying exhorts us to “Think globally, but act locally.” This means that the changeover needs to start with the individual, with each of us. Francis of Assisi used to say to his brothers, “I have never been a thief in the matter of alms, and obtained or used more than I needed. I have always accepted less than my needs, lest other poor folk should be cheated of their share; for to act otherwise would be theft.”¹³

Today that rule could have an application that is more useful than ever for the earth’s future. We too should propose to ourselves not to be thieves of resources, using more than we need and taking them away from those who will come after us. To begin with, those of us who are accustomed to work with paper could try not to contribute to the enormous and thoughtless waste of this raw material, leaving Mother Earth with fewer and fewer trees.

Christmas provides a powerful reminder to this restraint and frugality in the use of things. Our very Creator gave us an example of this when, in becoming man, he was content to be born in a stable. Let us recall these two simple and profound verses from the song “You Came Down from the Stars” by St. Alphonsus Maria dei Ligouri: “For you, the Creator of the world, / No clothes and fire, O my Lord.”

All of us, believers and non-believers, are called to strive for the ideal of restraint and respect for creation, but we Christians should do it for an additional and transcendent reason. If the heavenly Father has made “all things through him and for him,” we too should try to do all things “through Christ and for Christ,” that is, with his grace and for his glory.

English translation by Marsha Daigle Williamson

¹³ *Mirror of Perfection*, 12, trans. Leo Shirley-Price, in *St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies*, ed. Marion A. Habig (Quincy, Il: Franciscan Press, 1991), 1139; see *FF* 1695.

Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa, ofmcap

“CHRIST IS THE SAME YESTERDAY AND TODAY AND FOR EVER”
(Heb 13:8)

The Omnipresence of Christ in Time

1. Christ and Time

After having meditated last time on the place Christ occupies in the cosmos, I would like to dedicate this second reflection to the place Christ occupies in human history: after first considering his presence in space, we will now consider his presence in time.

At Mass on Christmas Eve in St Peter’s Basilica, the ancient chant of the Kalends drawn from the *Roman Martyrology* has been reinstated since Vatican II. In it the birth of Christ is placed at the end of a series of dates that situate it in time. Here are some of its statements:

When ages beyond number had run their course from the creation of the world...,
in the thirteenth century since the People of Israel were led by Moses in the Exodus
from Egypt,
around the thousandth year since David was anointed King. . . ,
in the one hundred and ninety-fourth Olympiad,
in the year seven hundred and fifty-two since the foundation of the City of Rome,
in the forty-second year of the reign of Caesar Octavian Augustus,
the whole world being at peace, **JESUS CHRIST**, eternal God and Son of the eternal
Father, desiring to consecrate the world by his most loving presence, was conceived
by the Holy Spirit, and when nine months had passed since his conception, was born
of the Virgin Mary in Bethlehem of Judah, and was made man.¹⁴

This relative approach to calculating time, starting with a beginning and referring to different events, was bound to change radically with Christ’s coming, even though that did not happen immediately or all at once. Oscar Cullman, in his famous study *Christ and Time*, explained in a very clear way what this change in the human way of calculating time meant.

We no longer begin with a *starting point* (the creation of the world, the exodus from Egypt, the founding of Rome, etc.) followed by a numbering that goes forward into an unlimited future. We now start with a *central point*, the birth of Christ, and calculate the time before it in *descending* order—five centuries, four centuries, one century before Christ—and in an *ascending* order for the time that follows: one century, two centuries, or two millennia after Christ. In a few days we will celebrate the 2017th anniversary of that event.

This way of calculating time, as I said, did not come about immediately or in the same way. Starting with Dionysius Exiguus (Dionysius the Humble) in 525, people began to calculate years starting from the birth of Christ instead of the founding of Rome. However, only in

¹⁴ See the updated *Roman Martyrology* on the USCCB website.

the seventeenth century (it seems with the theologian Denis Pétau called Petavius) was the custom established of counting the time prior to Christ according to the years that preceded his coming. We now have the general custom in English of using the formula “Before Christ” (abbreviated as B.C.) and “Anno Domini” (“the year of the Lord,” abbreviated as A.D.), meaning “after Christ.” Whatever abbreviations are used in different languages, dates now represent “before Christ” and “after Christ.”

For some time now the custom has spread, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world and in international relations, of avoiding this wording that is no longer acceptable, for understandable reasons, to people belonging to other religions or to no religion. Instead of speaking of “the Christian era” or “the year of the Lord,” people prefer to speak of the “Current Era” or the “the Common Era.” “Before Christ was born” (B.C.) has now been substituted by “Before the Common Era” (BCE), and “the year of the Lord” (A.D) has been substituted by “the Common Era” (CE). The wording has changed but not the essence since the manner of calculating the years and time has stayed the same.

Oscar Cullman has clarified the innovation of this new chronology introduced by Christianity. Time does not proceed in cycles that are repeated, as in the thinking of Greek philosophy and, among the moderns, of Friedrich Nietzsche. Rather, it moves forward in a linear fashion, starting from an unspecified moment (that we are unable to date precisely), namely, the creation of the world, toward a point that is equally unspecified and unforeseeable, which is the *parousia*. Christ is at the center of the line, the One to whom all things before him point and to whom all things point backward after him.¹⁵ Defining himself as “the Alpha and the Omega” of history (Rev 21:6), the Risen One assures us that not only will he gather together into himself the beginning and the end but also that he himself is that unspecified beginning and unforeseeable end, the author of creation and its consummation.

At the time, Cullman’s position met with a strong, hostile reaction from representatives of the dialectical theology that was dominant then: Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, and their disciples. Their theology tended to de-historicize the Kerygma, reducing it to an existentialist “summons to decision.” Consequently they showed a marked lack of interest for the “Jesus of history” in favor of the so-called “Christ of faith.” However, the revived interest in “salvation history” in theology after the Council and the rekindled interest in the Jesus of history in biblical scholarship (the so-called “new quest for the historical Jesus”)¹⁶ have confirmed the validity of Cullman’s insight.

One achievement of dialectical theology has remained intact: God is completely other with respect to the world, history, and time. There is an “infinite and irreducible qualitative difference”¹⁷ between them. When it comes to Christ, however, alongside the certainty of

¹⁵ Oscar Cullman, *Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History*, trans. Floyd V. Filson (London: SCM Press, 1951), 32ff.

¹⁶ See James D. G. Dunn, *A New Perspective on Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005).

¹⁷ A phrase and concept attributed to Søren Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity*, trans. Walter Lowrie (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), 139: “the infinite qualitative difference between God and man.”

an infinite difference, there must always be the affirmation of an equally great “infinite” similarity. This is the core of the definition of Chalcedon, expressed by the two adverbs “*inconfuse, indivise*,” without confusion and without separation. We must say of Christ in an eminent way that he is “in the world” but not “of it.” He is in history and time, but he transcends history and time.

2. Christ: Figure, Event, Sacrament

Let us now attempt to give more precise content to the assertion of Christ’s omnipresence in history and time. It is not an abstract and uniform presence. It occurs in a differentiated way in the different phases of salvation history. Christ “is the same yesterday and today and for ever” (Heb 13: 8), but not in the same modality. He is present in the Old Testament as *figure*, he is present in the New Testament as *event*, and he is present in the age of the Church as *sacrament*. The figure announces, anticipates, and *prepares* for the event, while the sacrament celebrates it, *makes it present*, actualizes it, and in a certain sense continues it. This is the sense in which the liturgy has us say at Christmas, “*Hodie Christus natus est, hodie Salvator apparuit*” (“Today Christ is born; today the Savior has appeared”).

St. Paul consistently asserts that in the Old Testament all things—events and personages—refer to Christ: everything is a “type,” a prophecy, or an “allegory” of him. But that conviction goes back to the Jesus of the Gospels who applies to himself so many words and events of the Old Testament. According to Luke, the Risen One on the way to Emmaus with the two disciples does exactly that: “And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself” (Lk 24:27). Christian tradition has coined some brief formulas to express this truth of faith, for example, that the law was “pregnant” with Christ. The liturgy of the Church lives by this conviction in practice and reads every page of the Old Testament in reference to Christ.

To say, secondly, that Christ is present in the New Testament as “event” means affirming the unique and unrepeatable character of the historical events concerning the Person of Jesus and in particular the paschal mystery of his death and resurrection. The event is that which occurs *semel*, “once for all” (Heb 9:26-28), and as such is not repeatable since it is enclosed in space and time.

Finally, to say that Christ is present in the Church as “sacrament” is an affirmation that the salvation he accomplished becomes operative in history through the signs he instituted. The word “sacrament” is understood here in its fuller meaning to include the seven sacraments but also the Word of God and in fact the whole Church as a “universal sacrament of salvation.” Thanks to the sacraments, the *semel* becomes *quotiescunque*, the “one single time” becomes “as often as,” as Paul asserts at the Lord’s Supper: “For as often as [*quotiescunque*] you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor 11:26).

When we speak of Christ’s presence in salvation history as figure, event, and sacrament, we need to avoid the error of Joachim of Fiore (or at least the error attributed to him) of dividing all of human history into three ages: the age of the Father, which would be the Old

Testament; the age of the Son, which would be the New Testament; and the age of the Holy Spirit, which would be the Church age. Not only would this be contrary to the doctrine of the Trinity (who always act jointly in their works *ad extra*) but also contrary to christological doctrine. Christ as event is not one of the three moments or phases of history but the center of history, the One to whom the time before him points and from whom the meaning of time after him derives. He is the hinge that both unites and distinguishes the two time periods. This is the truth expressed in the new chronology that divides time into “before Christ” and “after Christ.”

3. The Encounter That Changes Life

And now, as usual, we will go from the macrocosm to the microcosm, from universal history to personal history, that is, from theology to life. The observation that Christ, even in the universal custom of dating events, is recognized as the center and the linchpin of time, the barycenter of history, should not be a reason for pride and triumphalism for a Christian but an occasion for a sober examination of conscience.

The question to start with is simple: Is Christ also the center of *my* life, of my small personal history? Of *my* time? Does he occupy in it a central place only in theory or also in fact? In the lives of the majority of people, there is an event that divides life in two and creates a “before” and an “after.” For married people this is usually marriage, and they divide their lives into “before I was married” and “after I was married.” For priests it is their ordination: before ordination and after ordination; for religious it is their religious profession.

St. Paul also divides his life into two parts, but the dividing line is neither marriage nor ordination. He writes to the Philippians, “I was . . . I was . . .,” and what follows is a list of all his claims and guarantees of holiness (circumcision, being a Jew, observing the law, being blameless). But all of a sudden, all of this goes from being a gain to being a loss for him; his claims for boasting become rubbish (see Phil 3:5-7). Why? “Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (Phil 3:8). His dramatic encounter with Christ created in the apostle’s life a personal kind of “before Christ” and “after Christ.”

For most of us, this dividing line is more difficult to specify: everything is fluid, watered down in time, and marked by so-called “rites of passage”: Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Orders or Marriage, and so many others events. Fortunately for us, such an event is not a fruit that is exclusive to sacraments; in fact the sacraments may very well not represent any true “passage” from the existential point of view. The personal encounter with Christ is an event that can take place at any moment in life. In this regard the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* says,

I invite all Christians, everywhere, *at this very moment* [!], to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day. No one should think that this invitation is not meant for him or her, since “no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord.” (n. 3)

In an anonymous Easter homily from the fourth century, in the year 387 to be exact, the bishop makes a surprisingly modern affirmation—almost an existentialist affirmation before the word existed. He says,

For every man, the beginning of life is when Christ was immolated for him. However, Christ is immolated for him at the moment he recognizes the grace and becomes conscious of the life procured for him by that immolation.”¹⁸

As we approach Christmas we can apply to Christ’s birth what this author says about his death.

“For every man, the beginning of life is when Christ was born for him. However, Christ is born for him at the moment he recognizes that grace and becomes conscious of the life procured for him by that birth.”

This is an idea that has run through, one could say, the whole history of Christian spirituality beginning with Origen and including St. Augustine, St. Bernard, Luther, and others. The question is this: “What good does it do me if Christ was born at one time in Bethlehem if he is not born in my heart again by faith?”¹⁹ In this sense every Christmas, including the one for this year, could be the first real Christmas of our lives.

An atheistic philosopher described in a famous passage the moment in which a person discovers the existence of things, that they exist in reality and not just in his mind:

I was in the park just now. The roots of the chestnut tree were sunk in the ground just under my bench. I couldn’t remember it was a root any more. The words had vanished and with them the significance of things, their methods of use, and the feeble points of reference which men have traced on their surface. . . . Then I had this vision. It left me breathless. Never, until these last few days, had I understood the meaning of “existence.” I was like the others, like the ones walking along the seashore, all dressed in their spring finery. I said, like them, “The ocean is green, that white speck up there is a seagull,” but I didn’t feel that it existed or that the seagull was “an existing seagull”; usually existence hides itself. It is there, around us, in us, it is *us*, you can’t say two words without mentioning it, but you can never touch it. . . . And then all of a sudden, there it was, clear as day: existence had suddenly unveiled itself.²⁰

Something analogous happens when someone who has repeated the name of Jesus innumerable times, knows almost everything about him, and has celebrated numerous

¹⁸ “The Paschal Homily of the Year 387,” *SCh* 36, 59f.

¹⁹ See Origen, *Homilies on Luke*, 22, 3, trans. Joseph T. Lienhard (Washington, DC: the Catholic University Press of America, 1996), 94: “For what profit is it to you, if Christ came once in the flesh, unless he also comes into your soul?”; see also *SCh* 87, 302. Angelus Silesius (*The Cherubic Pilgrim* 1, 6, 1) has expressed this thought in two bold verses: “If Christ were born a thousand times in Bethlehem / But not in you, you would still be lost forever” (“Wird Christus tausendmal zu Bethlehem geboren / und nicht in dir: du bleibst noch ewiglich verlornt”).

²⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. Lloyd Alexander (1938; New York: New Directions, 2007), 126-127.

Masses discovers one day that Jesus is not a liturgical and sacramental memory from the past; he is not a collection of doctrines and dogmas and a topic for study. He is not, in brief, a *personage* but a living, existing *person*, even if he invisible to the eye. Suddenly, Christ is born in him; a qualitative leap forward in his relationship with Christ has occurred.

This is what the great converts experience at the moment in which—through an encounter, a word, a revelation from on high—a great light is unexpectedly turned on inside of them. They too are “left breathless” and have exclaimed, “So God exists after all! It’s really true!” This happened, for example, to Paul Claudel when he entered the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris out of curiosity on Christmas day in 1886. Hearing the *Magnificat* being sung, he had “the heart-rending experience of innocence, of the eternal infancy of God,” and exclaimed, ‘Yes, it’s true, it’s really true! God exists. He is here. He is someone, a personal being like I am! He loves me. He is calling me.’ He later wrote about this event, “In an instant my heart was touched and I believed.”²¹

Let us take a step forward. Christ, as we have seen, is not only the center or the barycenter of human history, the one who, with his coming, creates a “before” and an “after” in the passage of time; he is also the one who fills every instant of that time. He is “the fullness,” the *pleroma* (Col 1:19) in the active sense that he also fills salvation history with himself: first as figure, then as event, and now as sacrament.

What does all of this mean when carried over to the personal level? It means that Christ should fill my time as well. We should fill as many moments of our life with Jesus as we can. It is not an impossible plan. It does not mean thinking about Jesus all of the time but “noticing” his presence, abandoning ourselves to his will, telling him quickly, “I love you!” every time we have the opportunity (or better the inspiration!) to recollect ourselves.

Modern technology offers us an analogy that can help us understand what all this means: connecting to the Internet. When I am traveling and far from home for a long time, I have experienced what it means to fiddle for a long time trying to connect to the Internet, whether using cables or wireless, and then finally, as I was about to give up, suddenly the liberating Google display appears on my screen. Before that I felt cut off from the outside world and unable to receive email, to search for some information, or to communicate with the people in my community, and now suddenly the whole world is open wide to me. I am connected.

But what is this connection in comparison to what happens when one is “connected” in faith to the risen and living Jesus? In the first case the poor, tragic world of human beings is open before you; in the second case the world of God opens before you because Christ is the door; he is the way that leads into the Trinity and into the infinite.

The reflection on “Christ and Time” that I have tried to present can bring about an important inner healing for the majority of us: a healing from the unfruitful regret about our lost “blissful youth,” a liberation from that ingrained mentality that leads us to see old

²¹ Paul Claudel, “Ma Conversion,” *Œuvres en Prose* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), 1009-1010.

age only as a loss and a disease but not also as a grace. In front of God the best time of life is not the time that is the most full of possibility and activity but the time that is most full of Christ because this time belongs already to eternity.

The coming year will see youth as the focus of the Church's attention with the Synod on "Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment" in preparation for World Youth Day. Let us help them fill their youth with Christ, and we will have given them the most beautiful gift.

We end by recalling how the event of eternity entering time is proclaimed in a simple yet magnificent way at the Midnight Mass at Christmas:

In the forty-second year of the reign of Caesar Octavian Augustus, the whole world being at peace, **JESUS CHRIST**, eternal God and Son of the eternal Father, . . . was born of the Virgin Mary in Bethlehem of Judah, and was made man.

Around the feast of Christmas of the year 1308, addressing her spiritual sons gathered around her deathbed, the great mystic Angela of Foligno exclaimed, "The Word was made flesh!" And, after a long delay, as if coming from another world, she added, "Oh, every creature is found wanting! Oh, the intelligence of the angels is likewise not enough!" They asked her: "How are creatures found wanting, and for what is the intelligence of angels not enough?" She responded: "To comprehend!"²² And she was right.

Holy Father, Venerable Fathers, brothers and sisters, Merry Christmas to all of you!

English translation by Marsha Daigle Williamson

²² Angela of Foligno, *Complete Works*, trans. with intro. Paul Lachance, O. F. M. (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 313.