

**THE CHURCH AT THE SERVICE OF
THE KINGDOM OF GOD****A FUNDAMENTAL PERSPECTIVE FOR MISSION****INTRODUCTION**

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BIBLIOGRAPHY**INTRODUCTION**

The subject of "the kingdom of God" is again making its presence felt in ecclesial life and theological reflection. This is due to several factors among which we would point out these three facts :

- The first is the present cultural sensitivity towards the future. We are particularly concerned about the future and we anxiously seek the novel, the radically new. Believers and non-believers coincide in this search. Moreover, it has often been the Marxist movements and thinkers (e.g. E. Bloch) who have stimulated Christian thought. We believers feel the need to state what our faith is in the future of mankind. There is, therefore, a polarization towards the future. Thus the eschatological dimension of Jesus' Message takes on new vigour. The actual Church is made relative and interest in the past is lost. One gets the impression that the ecclesial institution will be heard insofar as it can say a word about the future, and have the courage besides, to foresee that future in its own life.
- Secondly, in the conscience of Christians at present, the Church has ceased to be the centre of their concern. Vatican II is a witness to this. There is a polarization towards the mystery of God. What interests us more than the ecclesial organization is the action of the Father in history, through Christ and the Holy Spirit. The Church knows she must keep her eyes on our Lord Jesus in the mystery which transcends her, and not on her own achievements or problems. The ecclesial conscience of Vatican II is characterised by its

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having overcome ecclesiocentricity to centre on God himself and on the world. The Church is increasingly understood as a Church of Christ for the world.

- And thirdly, the opening up of the Church to the world around it, to the secular world, and to the world of the great religions, has helped her to better understand the salvific action of God present everywhere. The discovery of the great values of other religions and the efforts of men of goodwill to create a more just and human world have created a great admiration for everything "outside". Simultaneously, this makes it obligatory to re-think the theology of the mission and what is meant by missions. There is ever increasing awareness of the variety of ways in which God directs the world towards fulfillment.

If this is so, if the most important thing is the action of God who calls history towards final fulfillment in Him, who gathers the peoples in his Kingdom; if that action of God is present in a thousand ways in this world, the question immediately arises: What then is the meaning and function of the Church? Does the Church really have a singular and unrepeatable vocation in the announcement and manifestation of the Kingdom of God? Does the Church have a mission to fulfill in relation to the other religions and in general with mankind at present?

These questions concern us today. The question "how do those who are not in the Church save themselves?", which until yesterday was traditional, is no longer the centre of our attention; the perspective has simply changed.

In this work we shall try to answer these questions, in the following order. The first chapter contains a detailed study of the message of Jesus on the Kingdom and the meaning of his person in relation to that same Kingdom of God which he announces. This starting point seems to us necessary both to understand what the Kingdom consists of and to then see its relationship with the Church. This is precisely the content of the second chapter where we show the continuity between the mission of Christ and the Church's mission as witness of the Kingdom and carrier of salvation in this intermediate time, and we highlight the irreplaceable function of the Church as sacrament of the Kingdom in the world.

From there in the third chapter we study in what way the Kingdom and its values are present in other religions and what is therefore their salvific meaning. All of which serves to clarify the manner of conceiving and orienting the mission and missions. At the same time, the universal and cosmic perspectives of the Kingdom of God and the present endeavour of mankind to build a new society makes us ask ourselves what relation there is between the growth of mankind in history and in the Kingdom. This is the content of the fourth chapter.

To conclude, we return in the fifth chapter to the theme of the Church as servant of the Kingdom. We stress the demands this implies as well as giving a few pastoral guide-lines which may help Christian communities today to be truly a sacrament of the Kingdom of God.

I. THE KINGDOM OF GOD IN THE GOSPEL

The presence of the "Kingdom of God" as main theme throughout Jesus' Message is too obvious for it ever to have been ignored or doubted. However, through a process which begins already in the N.T., this concept took second place, giving way to a concern for the Church, which fills the greater part of theological reflection over the centuries.

Both exegesis and theology today restore with renewed interest the original reality of the Kingdom as the central theme of all of Jesus' preaching and the content of his *eu-aggelion* from which the very Church is born, and to whose service she feels each day more committed. (See LG 5, 9.)

In trying to give a correct image of this reality in order to see then its true relation to the Church, it is indispensable to re-read the Gospel in the light of the Kingdom - a task which contemporary biblical-theological thought is carrying out with great determination.

Here we shall try, very schematically, to give an overall vision of what the Kingdom of God signified in the preaching and very life of Jesus, as told in the Gospel. As He in no place defined this Kingdom, we must "distill" a notion or description which will allow us to guide ourselves in our reflection, starting from the facts supplied in the biblical text as it reaches us.

The "sources" to hand may be summarized thus :

- Life and attitudes of Jesus, as expression of his idea of the Kingdom of God he announces ;
- The express teachings transmitted to us through his parables, talks, and more or less casual instructions he gives to his disciples and the people ;
- His very person, insofar as it is known to us, either in his own self understanding or the understanding his contemporaries and the primitive Christian community have of him, whose awareness is shown to us in all the N.T. writings including, naturally, the Gospels themselves.

With the help of these elements an image may be sketched of the Kingdom of God, announced by Jesus, whose basic traits may be summarized as follows :

- The Kingdom of God, in St. Matthew "Kingdom of the Heaven" to avoid the ineffable name of God, appears as the saving power of God announced in the O.T. and present in the more or less deformed hopes of Jesus' contemporaries ;
- This saving love of God - which is the salvation of man - is offered to all, without exception. Not only are all the elitist concepts of "sacred few", in the style of the penitential movements, like Qumram, overcome, but the limits of Israel as a chosen people are outweighed by far ;
- The welcome given to this salvation means and involves a metanoia, a conversion and orthopraxy. But such a conversion does not create a "right" to salvation ;
- In effect, salvation is "free" the work of the power and mercy of God who is coming, his own pure initiative winning over all opposition from his enemies who fight it "with violence" ;

- This saving power of God is presented as "imminent", close, already in action, and not only as something which is to come in a subsequent era, as an eschatology of the future ; although this "being present" does not exclude a future dimension having its full and perfect fulfillment at the end of time ;
- Finally, Jesus not only appears as the "eschatological" prophet who announces the arrival of the Kingdom, but himself offers this salvation in the name of God, carries it out, and so Jesus "is already salvation".

In order to develop these points, after a brief look at the messianic expectations of Jesus' contemporaries, rooted in the old tradition of Israel, we will reflect upon Jesus' preaching, his life and the significance of his person. For their singular importance we shall deal separately with these three points :

- The personal religious experience of Christ regarding the Father - "Abba" as the intimate and most profound root of all his preaching and of his life ;
- The act and meaning of his death in its relation to his preaching of the Kingdom ;
- The meaning of the Resurrection and exaltation into Heaven, with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, as they appear in the "paschal experience" and the reflection of the Christian protocommunity, always with regard to the soteriological and Christological meaning of salvation announced by Him.

As an introduction to the presentation of the message of Jesus, we recall briefly how the subject of the Kingdom of God was present in the faith of Israel and in its messianic expectations.

1. The Kingdom of God in the messianic hope of Israel until the time of Christ

1. The words "Kingdom", "lordship", "Kingdom of God" - BASILEIA TOU THEOU - and its equivalent in St. Matthew "Kingdom of Heaven", are not attractive terms to our modern mentality. They sound like authoritarianism, dominance.

Not so in biblical thinking. They are terms used to designate the communication of God to his creatures, his goodness, his mercy, in a word, salvation. Remember, for example, the Canticle of Mary in which "God my Saviour" is mentioned. . . who "has done great things to me" ; "whose name is holy" -where holy means "great", powerful, inaccessible, "remembering his mercy" . . . etc. (Lk. 1 : 46-55). For the Bible, the God who reigns is the God who goes out to meet man, to communicate his mercy and grace to him, and with these, liberation from all evil, in any of its forms : suffering, sin, death. It is the same divine power in its salvific action in our history ; but at the same time also in its eschatological and final sense, which puts an end to a world dominated by malignant powers, inaugurating a new world in which God comes into possession of his rights : it is what we ask when we say in the Lord's Prayer : "Thy Kingdom come" (Mt. 6 : 10). That the Kingdom of God *is coming* means that God seeks man to make his Kingdom of salvation operative and actual. Thus God's cause becomes man's cause.

2. Evolution of the idea of the Kingdom in the O.T.

The idea of the Kingdom of God has its roots in the deepest reaches of the Old Testament. The more or less diffuse ideas which Jesus encountered in his time were the fruit of a long and complicated process over the centuries in which intervene the most varied social, political, religious and cultural factors surrounding the people of Israel. Perhaps this process could be summed up - greatly simplifying it - in the following basic stages :

- a) *The origins* - The first allusions to Jahweh as King are ancient. We find them in the "cantic of the sea" of the Exodus, 15 : 11 - 13, 18, though some feel we are dealing here with a subsequent addition made for liturgical purposes. God appears as King "for" Israel, as leader and guide of his people, whereas relationships with him still continue to be presented much more in the schema of an alliance than of a kingdom.

It is with the institution of monarchy, in the time of Samuel, that thinking on the categories of the reign on the part of God, begins though always stressing the superiority and transcendence of the Kingdom of God over all the kingdoms of the earth, always superior and different to a political reign. The prophets take it upon themselves to keep the idea of God very lofty, which prevents all divinization of earthly kings, and we begin to hear about the "heavenly throne" of God. This royalty is based on creation and on the great benefits God has granted his people (Cf. Is. 6:3-5). This, added to the steadfast monotheism of Israel, leads to the representation of God in his universal and cosmic realm; an idea which is developed above all in the Psalms with a clear cultural intention. (Ps. 10:11 -12; 47:93, 96-99, etc.) In these are celebrated God the creator and God the doer of prodigies for his people who invoke him, looking to the future.

- b) *The image of the eschatological Kingdom* - This idea, not exempt from ambiguity and darkness, takes shape above all during the great catastrophes which assail Israel. The prophets on the one hand announce the judgment and revenge of Jahweh on the enemies of his People, and on the other hand the reign of God over the just: these are the two sides of the same coin, developed more or less according to circumstances (Cf. Jer. 25:15ff; Ezek. 8:18-23, etc.) This is how the idea of the universality of the Kingdom is developed, which will be so important to Jesus (Cf. Mt. 6:11ff). In this perspective the "feast of God" in the apocalypse of Isalah is interesting (Is. 25:6-8)

- c) *Late Judaism* - In the last two centuries before Christ and at the beginning of the Christian era, the ancient "national eschatology" - a special intervention of God in favour of his People - continues to inform the thought and hopes of many sectors of the people. The best source to get to know this state of things is the very Gospel in which it appears as a contrast to Jesus' teaching, as we shall soon see. A whole apocryphal inter-testamentary literature amply develops these ideas which have two basic facets :

- the strictly eschatological one, of a Prophet - Messiah who shall come on behalf of God to restore the Kingdom of Israel. . . (Cf. Acts 1:6);

- the other, more properly apocalyptic : a swift intervention by God, frequently described in catastrophic images, which will upset all existing order, re-establishing a new "age" in which all hopes and promises will finally be fulfilled in favour of those who will have persevered till the end.

3. The mission of the Baptist

The Gospel of Jesus - apart from childhood accounts by Matthew and Luke, whose "theologoumena" character of the primitive community springs to mind - opens, and not purely by coincidence, with the preaching of the Baptist in the desert.

His preaching of the *baptism of penance*, inserted in the framework of the preachers of "metanoia" of the time, is taken seriously by Jesus. He listens to it while mingling with the crowds and wants to be baptised by him (Mt. 3:13 & par). On more than one occasion during his public life Jesus will testify to the importance of the one who is "more than a prophet" (Mt. 11:9), although declaring that "he that is the lesser in the Kingdom of heaven is greater than John the Baptist" (Mt. 11:11)

This is no doubt a first hermeneutical clue to explain the person and message of Jesus. Because declaring his undeniable connection with John's message, the contrast also appears with great clarity. John preaches "the judgment of God" which is near. He describes it with images taken from ancient prophetic literature such as "the axe is laid to the root of the trees" (Lk. 3:9; Is. 10:33-34; Dan. 4:11, 15:20; the "fire" (Lk. 3:9; Is. 5:24, 10:17-19, 47:14; Jer. 21:14, 22:27); the "winnowing" to clean the grain (Is. 30:24; 41:15-16; Jer. 15:7, 51:33 . . .); all of these images applied by the old prophets to the "Judgment of God". According to Mt. 3:2, Jesus also said "the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand". But apart from the fact that this is a critically unsure text, the expression must be understood in coherence with the image of John given by all the Gospel, as announcement of the day of Jahweh (Am. 5:18) as punishment preceding the messianic Kingdom.

2. The Kingdom as saving power of God who is coming

1. The message of Jesus as "eu-aggelion" or Good News -

In relation to, and by contrast with the Baptist's message, Jesus brings above all a joyful message, "good news for all the people" (Lk. 1:10). The Kingdom of God is at hand (Cf. Mk. 1:1). Time is up. Later Jesus himself will allude to John's message as a "funereal chant" whereas his is a "happy song" (Mt. 11:16-19; Lk. 7:31-35) before which the people were invited to rejoice.

This invitation to happiness at the good news he announces, not only stems from his message, but irradiates from his own person. The relationship of Jesus with the men who come near him is a liberating one, a source of peace and joy. The disciples "cannot fast" while the Master is with them (Mk.2: 18-22 ff). More than a rupture with Jewish practices, on principle, we are dealing with a presentation of them in the light of a non-oppressive God. . . "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mk. 2:28). In Jesus all who come to him discover a gift of God. . .

2. **The content of this salvation** extends to all that is bad, oppressive, alienating and impoverishing to man. But it is not only man for man's sake which concerns Jesus; but that man's cause has been taken up by God. His life is a constant "celebration" of this marvellous fact. That saving will of God becomes the critical element of everything that may be bad for man. Jesus thus becomes a model of orthopraxy for the Kingdom. For this he lived and for this he died: man's cause is God's cause, and God's cause is man's cause: absolute veracity of God who seeks man; immovable certainty of man in God's salvation.

It is not possible to make a complete list of all the aspects of evil which can befall man and from which God wishes to liberate man by his saving power. Jesus is not indifferent to any of the difficulties man may face. He does not live by abstractions nor general terms. He always sees man in a very concrete situation. This is why he can be so surprisingly and irresistibly human towards his neighbour.

- a) Let us begin with *forgiveness of sins*. Recalling that Jesus moves in a world particularly prone to seeing a consequence of sin in any type of evil (Cf. Jn. 9: 2), he rectifies this mistaken view; but dedicates all his life to seek out sinners "I came not to call the just, but sinners" (Cf. Mk. 2: 15-17 ff). This defence of the Son of Man's faculty to forgive sins - an eschatological work of God - is one of the strongest made by Jesus in front of his enemies. (Cf. Mk. 2: 10 ff) His dealings with sinners and publicans (Magdalen, Zacheus, Levi...) eating with them - something forbidden by the Jews - offering them his pardon and friendship; the forgiveness of sins conferred on his disciples after Easter, make this chapter one of the most characteristic of the praxis of Jesus for the Kingdom of God already present.

And if we pass from the life and praxis of Jesus to his teachings, this point is strongly confirmed. The parables of the prodigal son, of the lost sheep and the drachma, of the debtors, etc. are not only eloquent in themselves in this respect, but also for the specific situation in which they are nearly always delivered: to explain his own conduct with sinners (Cf. Lk. 7: 41-43).

- b) **The casting out of devils** - By contrast to the most certain tradition of classical Judaism, the late Judaism with which Jesus is faced, undergoes a real inflation of "demonology". Any illness, such as that of the blind, dumb, deaf, epileptic... is attributed to the devil. The devil appears as the very incarnation of evil in all its forms. Man groans under the overbearing strength of this malicious reality, before which he feels impotent. The frequent references in the Gospel to curing the possessed are not aimed at showing Jesus' "power". He on the one hand was accepted because of the evidence of the facts, and on the other hand it was not something exclusive to him, because it was also recognised in other exorcists (Mt. 12:27; Lk. 11:29). What the accounts wish to stress is the relationship of the facts of Jesus' ministry to the beneficial arrival of the Kingdom of God. If he who acts in God's name casts out devils, he makes it evident that it is a sign that God is *already* acting out the awaited salvation, the Kingdom. For Jesus' contemporaries, the extraordinary act did not encounter any difficulty regarding its existence; the problem was one of interpretation. And the interpretation is that of an eschatology

already present and acting. Because the Kingdom of God is not abstract or metaphysical, to be found in man as something belonging to him, but rather something which comes to man's help, which makes itself present by its beneficial activity. It is in this sense that we should interpret the sovereignty of God announced by Christ: not as an attribute of divinity, but as service to man. This is of tremendous importance later on in order to understand the orthopraxy of the Kingdom.

This is the meaning of "orthopraxy". It is not simply a new way of revealing the power of God, which belongs to him as his own attribute, but rather a translation into beneficial activity which challenges man to do likewise to his brothers (Mt. 5: 45-48). This is also the meaning of the fact that the mission of the disciples to preach the Kingdom always underlies the power of "casting out devils" as a sign of the active presence of God's power in favour of man (Mt. 10:1ff Mk. 16:17; cf. also 1Cor. 4:19ff).

- c) **The miracles of Jesus in the Gospel** are all performed along these lines: to cure an illness, remove death, return the resurrected son to a widowed and desolate mother, free man from harm in all its forms. Jesus does not perform miracles to "present his credentials" but to help man, and if in curing the paralytic (Mt. 9: 6 & par) he performs a miracle to prove his power of "forgiving sins", it is always in order to liberate man from harm, making him see by an evident and indisputable experience that he has come to bring salvation also at deeper levels, although they cannot be seen. This is why he insists so repeatedly that news of his miracles be not spread (e.g. Mk. 5: 43). In the multiplication of bread he refuses to accept the consequences which the people drew from the (Jn. 6: 15) prodigy and retired to the hill to pray alone to God... It is not "to show the power of God" which is available to him, but to assure that it is a "saving, efficient power at the service of man", which reaches everything that is evil, poverty and suffering, in the men he meets on his way.
- d) **His solicitous and liberating presence among the people**

According to the account in Acts 10:38, Peter summarizes thus the activity of Jesus before the centurion, Cornelius: "(He)... went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him." And when the Baptist, from prison in Makeronte sends his disciples to ask if he is the one who is to come, he answers: "Go and relate to John what you have heard and seen: the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the poor have the Good News of God announced to them" (Mt. 11; 4-5ff). It is the prophet who brings the joyful news that "God will reign" (Is. 52:7, cf. 61:1). And this message is spread through words and deeds. Wherever he goes he leaves an unforgettable memory of his bountiful power. People from all over crowd around him. (Cf. Mk. 1:21-33; 3:7-8; 6:53-56.) Jesus warns against performers of fake wonders (Mk. 13:21-23). His own traits are goodness and mercy. He does not seek further identification than that of identifying with the people who suffer, to liberate them from their alienation and restore them to themselves, so that they may again be free for others and for God. His closeness is felt by people as salvation. This is, substantially, the *eu-aggelion* of Jesus to the world.

- e) An interesting point in this aspect is that of Jesus' *meetings to eat* with his own. Sometimes he would let himself be asked, other times he would invite them. Well-known is the meaning of the banquet, as announcement of the Kingdom in the prophetic accounts. The Gospel does not fail to recall also this trait in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. As a scandal to his enemies, he is often seen seated at the table with sinners and publicans (Lk.15:2). But neither does he disdain the table of the pharisees (Lk.7:36-50, etc.). It is on the occasion of these banquets that Jesus frequently delivers, in the form of familiar conversation, some of his most beautiful parables. Precisely those which best explain the meaning of his saving mission: e.g. that of the creditors (Lk.7: 41-47).

At other times Jesus himself does the inviting. To this group belong the accounts of the multiplication of loaves (outdoors as corresponds to his itinerant character); the last supper, the post-paschal meeting at the Sea of Galilee (Jn. 21) and the meal with the disciples of Emmaus where, though he is the guest, he takes on the role of host in blessing and breaking the bread, a gesture by which he is recognised by his disciples (Lk. 24). (Cf. E. Schillebeekx, o.c., p.208 ff.)

3. The Kingdom of God announced to all. Absolute universality of salvation

1. Movements of "penance", in the style of Qumram, of the Baptist, were frequent in the late Judaism at the time of Jesus. Besides these, there existed particularly dynamic groups, conscious of the hopes of Israel, who tried by all means to keep and foster their adherence.

A characteristic note among all these was generally a "sectarianism", a more or less puritanical type of elitism based on the old model of "sacred few" as can be found, for instance, in Daniel. For them humanity was divided, with different names, into two groups: "the children of light" — the group itself, pious and observing—and "the children of darkness"—all the rest. This also reached the people of Israel, according to whether or not it followed the norms of the initiated. . . of the "pure". Of the groups whom Jesus frequently met stand out the Pharisees and the Essenes. Alongside the norm of loving God there is no mistaking the explicit order to "hate all the children of darkness, each in accordance with his own malice", so says a prescription of the Qumram. This same sect decrees that "the paralytic, lame, blind and dumb. . . may not form part of the community of the "pure": they are excluded from the eschatological community of salvation.

2. Bearing this in mind, we understand better the interest of the Evangelists in presenting Jesus as particularly involved in helping and curing precisely this category of persons. And the answer they place on Jesus' lips takes on a special force, when replying to the disciples of John, who ask him about his own identity (Mt.11:4-5). This same picture may be guessed from Jesus' expression (Mt 9:36, Mk.6:34) when he qualifies the people who approach him as "sheep who have no shepherd" *He has come to bring to every one the Good News of Salvation*, preferably to the "sick" (Mk. 2:17). . . all of whom are! In this respect the parable of the banquet (Lk.14:14) is especially eloquent in that it is precisely all the injured and rejected who come to take the places of those first invited who "were not worthy" . . .

We have possibly to find here the reason for two important gestures in Jesus' behaviour in the Gospel:

- a) His discretion when faced with the option of a community of his own. . . Texts referring to a "qahal", an "ecclesia", apart from taking a very secondary role in the Gospel, belong much later. These were names which at that time evoked an image of private, select groups, totally distant from the mind of Jesus. And when, no doubt, he wished to surround himself with a group of disciples who would be with him "to send them out to preach" (MK.3.14), he also includes a publican (Mt 9:9) and he does not make them a closed group, a community, in the sense then in vogue.
- b) His effort to show that the Baptist belongs to another age despite all the admiration and respect he feels for him, and the fact of having been baptised by him. (Cf. LK.16:16 ff) And that the lesser in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than John the Baptist. He is come to call the twelve Tribes of Israel, without distinction (Mt.10:5-6; 15:24). This indicates a universality which makes all boundaries disappear.

The fact that his very personal mission is limited "to the lost sheep of the House of Israel" does not in any way detract from his universalist vision, when it comes to sending out his apostles (Mt. 28:19-20). A great number of his miracles are effected in favour of the Gentiles and non-Jews (Mk. 9:14-29 ff).

His initial rebuff of the petition of the Canaanite (Mt. 15:21-28) seems to be oriented to undoing an impression which many of his listeners might have had about his mission. And he thinks nothing of asserting that "many shall come from East and West to sit beside Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the Kingdom of God, whilst the sons of the Kingdom shall be cast out" (Mt. 8:12).

If any preference is to be noted in his "praxis" in favour of the Kingdom, it is for the outcasts of all kinds: the poor, sick, rejected, publicans, prostitutes . . . With great discretion for a person's past, from the moment a change of conduct is shown and they open themselves to the offer of salvation given them (Zacheus; the adulteress; Levi; the Samaritan woman).

4. Conversion - metanoia - as praxis* of the Kingdom of God

1. The fact that *salvation*, as power of God who comes, is as much the cause of man as the cause of God, who makes it his own, *necessarily implies conversion, a "metanoia"*. This conversion entails, above all, the attitude of total openness to the saving act. Man is to let himself be won over by the joyful message of God's sovereignty operating mercifully as of now. This requirement of a deep and radical conversion is already per se a characteristic of the Kingdom in action. It is man's reply of YES to salvation.

* We must say with theologians and Scripture scholars that Christ did not reveal an orthodox teaching (an orthodoxy), but rather an orthodox practice (an orthopraxy), that is, a genuine way of life: "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life".

- a) Such a demand, as orthopraxy of the Kingdom, is found amply developed in the *parables*. In them appears in all clarity the God of Jesus: An infinitely magnanimous, merciful God, full of forbearance; but also demanding in his sanctity, to which he wishes to call men. (Cf. Mt. 5:48; 11:29) In this sense, the parables of the talents (Mt. 25:14-30), of the pharisee and the publican (Lk. 18:9-14), the iniquitous judge (Lk. 8:1-8), the unjust debtor (Mt. 18:23), the sterile fig tree (Lk. 13:6-9), the wheat and the cockle (Mt. 13:24) etc. are especially relevant.
- b) But we also have, in the same vein, a whole series of teachings of Jesus, about the demands of the Kingdom, always based on the absolute sovereignty of God who comes. In this respect, the *Sermon on the Mount* is particularly eloquent. (Mt. 5-7; Lk. 6:17-49) Commented on frequently and thoroughly well known, it need not be explained here at length. Let us underline some aspects in the light of the doctrine on the Kingdom:
- Besides the Beatitudes, which we shall mention later, the sermon underlines from the very beginning the radical difference between the demands of the Kingdom and the ancient Law: love of one's brother (5:21-26); purity of heart and the sanctity of marriage (27-32); truth and simplicity in speech; love of one's enemies (38-48); to finish with the conclusive watchword: "be, therefore, perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (48), where the ultimate reason for inner sanctity is simply the likeness to God who comes.
 - Then he underlines interiority as a characteristic of conversion to the Kingdom. As opposed to the external, formalistic legalism of the pharisees: prayer, alms, fasting - three things where temptation to exhibitionism may be particularly insidious (6:4-17)
 - Disdain of riches and confidence in Providence (6:19-34).
 - The need for entering into the Kingdom with a sincere attitude, not merely words, but putting into practice - against all gnosticism - the demands of the corresponding praxis (7:13-27).
- c) **The Beatitudes** - The diversity of interpretations proposed and being proposed about this central and original point in Jesus' preaching on the Kingdom of Heaven is well known. We cannot here go into too much detail. Let us recall the following points:
- The Beatitudes are not, in the first place, a moral code of a prevalently ethical and moralizing content; we are dealing with a truly "eschatological revolution" (E. Schillebeeckx, o.c., p. 172). The poor - the one original beatitude, according to the opinion of many - and with them all the rest who are rejected, cast out, persecuted . . . receive the good news that the Kingdom of God comes for them. And that already, now, they are the preferred and the favourites.
 - In interpreting them we must avoid two opposing, equally inexact, extremes: an interpretation of a pure eschatology of the other world - which would be no "good news" but instead a real alienation of resigned conformity; and a predominantly ethical interpretation that the law can liberate man. The Beatitudes are in the basic line of all doctrine on the Kingdom of God which is already coming, which will

change the situation of outcasts, of oppression of the weak and unjustly persecuted. And this not in an apocalyptic perspective of violent upset of the situation, but neither as mere hope for the other world. The characteristics of the Kingdom are a deep conversion of heart in the appraisal of things and of the fate of men in a world distant from the God of salvation.

- d) And as a summary and fulfillment of all the other demands of the Kingdom, *the great order of love of one's brother* which fills all the Message of the New Testament. See the great themes of the offering at the altar (Mt. 5:23-24); the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:25-37); the Final Judgement (Mt. 5:31-46); the New Commandment (Jn. 14 and 17) etc.

N.B. The subject is so well known and so central that we need not expatiate on it.

2. **Important, too, is the role attributed to faith as condition for receiving salvation.** The expression "your faith has saved you" is often found in accounts of miracles performed by Jesus (Mk. 5:34; Lk. 8:48; Mt. 9:22). The faith which Jesus wants is the confidence in Him who is sent by the Father.

The miraculous act is for Jesus' contemporaries indisputable. It is a question of the "interpretation" of these acts, which some even attributed to Satan. The faith that God is behind these acts, as an offer of grace, of love, of salvation, is what Jesus wants of his contemporaries. Were it otherwise, such acts of power would have no eschatological, salvific significance (Cf. Mk. 6:5-6). Remember the case of the ten lepers cured by Jesus (Lk. 17:11-19) of whom only one returns to give thanks to God; and he is the only one to whom is said "your faith has saved you".

A second aspect of faith in relation to the praxis of the Kingdom is that referring to the *disciples*, to persons who wish to or have followed Jesus. Of these a greater confidence and security is asked, without any need for miracles and extraordinary acts. For this they are reprimanded for their "little faith" (Mt. 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8). It is a question of those whose faith, at present weak and vulnerable, must be strengthened against doubt and vacillation. This will only come after Easter. But, although different in context, the meaning still continues to be the certainty that Jesus announces a new nearness of God and helps men to experience this. For this, more than for faith in Jesus himself, he asks them to have faith "in God" (Mk. 11:22). Apart from the text of Mt. 18:6 - surely touched up in a paschal sense - faith "in Jesus" is not spoken of in these cases. When dealing with the subject of Easter we shall see the new meaning of faith in the Risen one.

5. Gratuitousness of the salvation of the Kingdom

This "praxis" demanded as an opening to the salvific power of God, promised by the Kingdom, does not in any way darken its *absolute gratuitousness*. Precisely because it means absolute submission to God, a return cannot be demanded (Lk. 17:10).

This is one of the ideas most repeatedly illustrated by the parables. We can cite, amongst others:

- The parable of the servant who waits (Lk. 17:7-10) "useless servants..."
- The parable of the prodigal son; both for what refers to the free pardon - the metanoia supposed - of the younger son, and for the condemnable attitude of the older son who "asks" for recompense for his "services" to the father . . . (Lk. 15:11-32)
- The parable of the workers called to the vineyard who receive the same wage despite the different service of each (Mt. 20:1-16).
- The parable of the merciless servant; the pardon of the enormous sum is entirely free and should be sufficient motive for him to do likewise (Mt. 18:15-34).
- It is the theme of the "Our Father": forgive us . . . as we forgive (Mt. 6:12, 14-15). Together with gratuitousness, the demand for praxis with one's brother is required by the Kingdom.
- The parable of those invited to the wedding (Mt. 22:1-14).

This trait of the Kingdom, and the parables which illustrate it, can sometimes shock our judicial and legalistic mentality. But it is precisely this that Jesus wants to impress on us. The relationship of man with God is not a relationship through a "hypostatized" law, raised to the category of absolute value, and therefore degrading. It is a relationship of love. This hit at the heart of the pharisaical conception, and, in general, of the contemporary penitential movements, more or less all centred on the same idea of legalistic retribution through observing the Law, taken more in its formal, judicial sense than as a personalizing reality.

This aspect of the Kingdom, as absolutely free grace which "comes" by the pure initiative of God, is fundamental in order to understand the whole "mystery" of the Kingdom. The parables of the mustard grain (Mt. 13:31-32) and of the seed which grows by itself (Mk. 4:26-29) have no other meaning. It is not a question of presenting the Law of an organic growth of the Kingdom, but rather of understanding the utterly free action of God which from so humble a beginning is capable of of carrying out so large a work . . .

Here it is necessary to place the real co-operation of man for the Kingdom. In the "Our Father" we are taught to ask that it "come". The apostles preach it. But only God really builds it. It is the doctrine that St. Paul will develop with famous "neither he who plants nor he who waters . . ." (1 Cor. 3:6-9).

6. Eschatological meaning of the Kingdom of God

1. One of the most important and perhaps most discussed subjects surrounding the "mystery" of the saving power to come, is that of the time in which the Kingdom of God is to be realized.

Late Judaism, of the time of Jesus, was dominated by this concern, which was generally resolved by reverting to an "apocalyptic" conception. A sudden and radical intervention by God, anxiously awaited, which would come to upset the situation, changing the luck of Israel, or at least of the faithful "few", and

humiliating its enemies. Some with a passive hope, others "trying to give the God of Israel an armed help" (E. Schillebeeckx, o.c., p. 177) like the Zealots and other revolutionary groups . . . The gaze was on a different and better future, spectacularly brought about by God.

Whatever Jesus' ideas may have been over the immediate future of the world and the arrival of the Judgment of God, his whole message about the Kingdom of God is animated by the hope of the realization *already in this world* of the cause of God. But this absolute future cannot be isolated at the expense of its commitment in the present. The Kingdom of God should not be a "consoling promise, satisfaction of the pious curiosity of men about the future, a projection of unsatisfied desires. . . as thought Feurbach, Marx or Freud. . ." (H. Kung). Although it is true that the present may not be made absolute, at the expense of the future, the future remits man to the present. And the orthopraxy of the Kingdom means that it is to be carried out here already, though projected towards a future which is to come.

2. In this sense, and speaking of the Sermon on the Mount, one has been able to talk of an *eschatological revolution* (E. Schillebeeckx, o.c., p. 172) on the part of Jesus. When Jesus sides with the poor, the hungry, the humiliated, the afflicted of all kinds, or when he dedicates himself solicitously to the sick, the possessed, sinners, those in despair. . . he is announcing the arrival of a Kingdom in which guilt, pain, suffering, death will be ended. In Jesus, the Kingdom on earth, of justice, of freedom, of love, of reconciliation, of peace, is being brought about.

Popular hopes, fed on more or less ancient tradition, centred on a "happy news" which the Eschatological Prophet would bring. The Beatitudes mean: "Now" this hope in God who saves is being fulfilled. With Jesus arrives the Kingdom of God. Jesus brings, "on behalf of God", the announcement of the *radical NO* of God to the history of human suffering. The very meaning of history seen eschatologically is peace, joy, happiness. . . salvation. All expressed in the conceptual model of its time.

The affirmations of "present" and "future" disseminated throughout the whole Gospel have equally to be taken seriously. A pure "eschatology of future" like that of A. Schweitzer is unacceptable; but neither is a "realized" eschatology (C. H. Dodd). While concentrating on the power of God already revealed by Jesus, the Gospel makes of the fulfillment of the future - *still* to be realized - an unquestionable assertion. Let us recall rapidly the following points:

- All those places in the Gospel where the Kingdom is presented as something which is to come: Our Father (Mt. 6. 12; Lk. 11: 2) The affirmation that "The Kingdom of God does not come with ostentation" (Lk. 17:20); all the references to the Kingdom of God which will come "with power and majesty" (Mk. 9:1; Mt. 16:28; Lk. 9:27. . .)
- The expressions referring to "to enter" or "to be cast out" of the Kingdom and synonyms: Mt. 5:20; 7:21; 18:3; 19:3ff; 21:31; 22:12; 23:13; 25:10; 21:23 (Final Judgment); Mk. 9:47; Jn. 3:3-5.
Mt. 7:2ff; 8:12; Lk. 13:28; Mt. 13:42; 13:50; 22:13; 25:30; 24:51; 25:11. . .
- The images used to designate the future Kingdom of God: the main one is

one that already in Judaism contained an eschatological meaning, that of the *feast* prepared by God: Mt. 8:11 ff; 22: 1-13; 25:1-2; Lk. 12:37; 14:10-11; 18:14; 14:15. Cf. in the parables the idea of *harvesting*, Mk. 4:1-9ff. . . , *fishing*, Mt. 13:47; the grain of mustard seed, Mk. 4:30-32; the images of the treasure and the pearl, Mt. 13:44, 45ff.

- To sum up, here are R. Schnackenburg's words (Regne et Royaume de Dieu, pp. 137-138): "The Kingdom of glory which has not yet arrived but which is coming, is undoubtedly for Jesus like the star which guides his preaching; it is not merely an appendix to his actual announcement of salvation, to open some supplementary horizons, but rather, on the contrary, it is the central point of perspective from which the declarations referring to the presence of the Kingdom of God must find their real meaning and all their light". Perhaps we might add that the fulfillment of what has *already* arrived is guarantee that what is announced now will arrive: fulfillment and prophecy unite in this dialectic so characteristic of all biblical prophetism.

In the words of H. Kung: "The cause of Jesus is God's cause, and therefore can never be a lost cause." In the same way as we must distinguish the event originating in creation from the pagan myths of the beginning, so must we, from the myths of the end of the world, distinguish the final event of consummation. With the myths referring to the end of the world, the N.T. has behaved like the O.T. with the myths of the origins: historicizing them, linking them to history. History, it is true, has overcome short term hopes, strictly linked to a certain historic moment, but not the hope for the future as such. The present is the time for decision in the light of the absolute future of God. The polarity of "already" and "not yet" constitutes the tension of human life and of the history of the world (o.c., p.244).

7. Jesus "Carrier" of salvation, or Christological meaning of the Kingdom of God

1. The preceding subject, Eschatology, introduces us directly to the central point of the theology of the Kingdom, which has been more or less hinted at in all the previous points: it is what we could call the Christological sense of the Kingdom, such as it appears in the Gospel. Jesus is not only the "Prophet of the Kingdom", announcing and proclaiming it; He himself is already in some way that Kingdom, present and acting in history. And this is not only after Easter, as we shall see, but during his mortal life, the historic Jesus is presented by the Evangelists, although not without the influence of the paschal faith.
 - Throughout Jesus' life, apropos of his miracles, his activity, his very "teaching with authority", the following question was indispensable and was heard very often: "Who is this?" He himself would say he provoked it on purpose as he did in Caesarea Philippi (Mt. 16:15), although this is an account certainly influenced by the fact of the Pasch. (Cf. Mk. 4:40ff.)
 - Jesus does not tell parables like an ordinary narrator. And even when he uses popular, already existing parables, these become part of his own life, characterized by the announcement of the power of God who comes. One cannot forget the concrete circumstances in which he so often tells his parables: when confronted by murmurings, or criticism, or simply a feeling of astonishment from his listeners or witnesses to his activity with the sick or sinners. (Cf. Lk. 7:31-35; 15:1-2; Mt. 11:16-19; 20:1-15)

- In their simple, superficial and profane content, these parables already have a theological meaning, but in the context of Jesus' activity, of the praxis of which they form an integral part, they are also a sign of the self-understanding of Jesus; they pose a critical *theological* question: "Who is this?" "Do we, yes or no, accept from Jesus his offering of clemency, love, mercy grace. . . and in the acceptance of this *grace* we let ourselves be challenged by his absolute demand for 'change', for *metanoia*, in our behaviour in life." (E. Schillebeeckx, o.c., p.171).

2. In some way it would have to be said that *Jesus himself is a living parable of God*. A parable to which we, directly questioned, after a lapse of so many centuries, feel ourselves obliged to answer.

- So could he affirm, in a confrontation with the very Law of God, not to deny it, but rather to give it its true liberating meaning that "the Son of man is Lord of the Sabbath also" (Mk. 2:28). So apropos of healing on the Sabbath (Mk. 3:1 - 15) or purification rituals, or fasting, etc.
- This Jesus does in his absolute identity with the cause of God as cause of man and thus restores to man the sovereign liberty to "do good". (Cf. Mk. 3:4). St. John, who, like no other Evangelist, feels the influence of paschal faith, stresses the fact in a still more "provocative" way. Of the three healings he narrates in his Gospel, two take place on a Sabbath (Jn. 5:1-14; 9:1-39). Already in the one of the paralytic, in a totally surprising manner, not only does he cure him, but he orders him to take up his bed (5:8) . . .

This soteriological character of the very person of Jesus, who after Easter will explain himself ecclesiologically, is implicit in all Jesus' activity, at least in the form of that question which constantly came from the lips of his contemporaries: "Who is this?"

3. Take *the act of forgiving sins* (Mk. 2:10). Jesus who, as we have seen, never performs miracles simply to present his credentials, but rather to remedy the necessities of man oppressed by harm, here makes use of an opportunity offered him by the presence of that paralytic let down from the roof of his house - prodigy of faith which moves the Master - before performing the miracle, to launch a kind of defiance to his enemies who were spying on him intently: "But that you may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins . . ." (Cf. Mt. 9:6 - 8; Lk. 5:20 - 26). Never in Judaism was the power of forgiving sins attributed to anyone but God. In the tradition of the messianic hope, the eschatological Messiah has the power of interceding for the sinner before God, not that of forgiving sins.

In speaking of the risen Christ we shall spend more time on the *Christological* aspect of his activity in favour of the Kingdom.

8. Jesus' unique experience of God, the source of his message of the Kingdom

1. It has already been said repeatedly, and it will never be said enough, that the message of liberation and salvation brought by Jesus, for which he lives and for which he dies, is a message centred on the absolute power of God. He makes man's cause passionately his own. But always as God's cause. All intent to identify Jesus with a "humanitarian" group in favour of man for man, without this deep and burning reference to his loving intimacy with God, not only substantially deforms his life and his message, but clashes openly with the evidence which stems from all sources available to us for reaching Him.

It is well to make it quite clear that the God of Jesus is the God of Israel, of the Patriarchs and of the great Prophets of Judaic antiquity, among whom were found the best men of their time, in the apocalyptic movements and in the pharisaic and Essenian piety.

But it must not be forgotten that the late Judaism of Jesus' time had somewhat distorted that image. "The temporal distance between the great prophets and Jesus cannot be saved with impunity". (Schilleebeckx, o. c. p. 263)

That deep level of his personal religious experience is the privileged place for us to find *the root and force of all his life at the service of the Kingdom of God*, of saving and merciful omnipotence, incorruptible security in the salvation to come which he could not find in the reality of the world around him, which was marked by pain, injustice, illness, death. He got it from his most profound experience of intimacy with God, unique and unrepeatable.

2. In trying to fathom Jesus' religious conscience, we find, apart from the natural difficulty of penetrating a person's intimate mystery, the other difficulty arising from the almost impenetrable reserve with which Jesus spoke of himself. We have to get closer to that conscience through his actions, which will always continue to be an inadequate sign of a person, which at the same time reveals and almost hides in equal measure.

It is a fact accepted by exegesis, in general, that one of the least risky ways of discovering this intimate nucleus of Jesus' religious conscience, is to examine his way of referring to the Father, both when talking of him and above all, when he talks *with* him.

This manner of referring to the Father has its privileged expression in *his unique and constant use of the term ABBA in Aramaic*, this has been claimed scientifically to correspond to "the Father", "Father" or "my Father" of the Greek texts, apart from the usage without translation in Mk. 14:36. It has been shown that it is one of the most historically correct and authentic words of Jesus. He refers specifically to the expression "my Father" 17 times in St. Matthew ; 4 in St. Luke ; and 25 in St. John (E. Schilleebeckx, o.c., p.271).

In the way in which Jesus, in contrast to the current use during his time of referring to God, uses the designation *Abba*, may be found the basis of the characteristic experience of the Father, which the disciples had noted in Jesus religious life and which for them expressed the central point of his spirituality.

3. Without wishing to exhaust the content of this biblical theme, so rich and full of meaning, we shall simply note that *he refers to the Father as carrier of authority "exousia"*. Doing the will of God - as ordered by the fourth commandment of the Decalogue - was also the central point of Jewish spirituality. But for them, whenever they referred to the Father - to avoid pronouncing the ineffable name of God - a designation was invariably added, such as "sovereign Lord of the universe", "who art in heaven", etc. The use of the familiar formula ABBA, with no transcendental addition, denotes a grade of intimacy with God which is at the same time proof of a conscience clear about the distance between his own experience of God and that of his disciples, for example.

- This use of such a term hinting at an intimate relationship with God, does not escape his listeners. It is the reason why, for example, his fellow men of Nazareth will be scandalized: "How came this man by all these things? What wisdom is this that is given to him and such mighty works as are wrought by his hands? Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, the brother of James and Joseph, and Jude, and Simon? Are not also his sisters here with us? *And they were scandalized in regard of him.*" (Mk. 6 : 2-3) (Cf. Mt. 13 : 54-56 ; Jn. 6:42 ; 7 : 27).
- This is one of the reasons which will lead Jesus to the Cross "because, being man, he has made himself Son of God" (Jn 10 : 33). But now we only wish to stress it as the source of the very nature of Jesus' message and praxis which, outside such experience, lose all their own, authentic meaning.
- It is clear that one of the truest facts of the life and praxis of Jesus is the announcement of the divine reign to come ; its content is clarified above all through his parables announcing the conversion and praxis of the Kingdom of God. But belonging to that same content is his very life : his miracles, his relations with sinners and publicans, his offering of salvation on behalf of God, his attitude to the Law, the Sabbath, the Temple. . . And the centre of all this is always God interested in man. . . God alive is the focal centre of all his life.

Thus we find on the one hand, the incorrigible history of human suffering, the lack of salvation, of peace, of justice, the humiliating servitude which enslaves. . . and on the other hand, God's, 'Abba's', own particular experience, as benevolent, solicitous, merciful, who will not let evil have the last word. From here stems Jesus' conviction and preaching of the liberating power of God which must be carried out already in history, and can be carried out besides, as Jesus himself has experienced. During his earthly life, by his word and his life, Jesus invited us to faith in his God. To this faith he gave himself up lovingly at the moment of dying on the cross. (Lk. 23 : 14).

9. The death of Jesus and the Kingdom of God

1. If one can say that the life of any man acquires its true and final meaning only with his death, this is valid in a very special way for Jesus of Nazareth, whose existence is marked from beginning to end by the presentiment and announcement of an end laden with meaning, which constantly reappears on the horizon of his daily life. (Cf. Lk. 2 : 35 ; 9 : 31). The death of Jesus may be considered as, and in fact it is unanimously, *the last prophetic act of his life*. The one which becomes the irreplaceable key in order to understand him. Jesus is, by antonomasia, "The Crucified".

It is of interest to us here to situate the death of Christ, where feasible, in the framework of his praxis for the Kingdom of God. To see what relation it may have, according to the interpretative outlines we have available, in order to clarify the meaning of what, as we have seen, makes up the centre of his whole message, and of his whole life: the imminent arrival of the saving power of God for humanity. And all very schematically, although in no other point, of those here dealt with, will the risk of simplification and synthesis make itself felt quite so much.

2. Therefore, for a start, we must make a distinction of the utmost importance: between what was the interpretation of those who reflected upon it from the beginning, and what may be an auto-interpretation of his own, if we really dispose of elements for this.

As to the first, we can count three different "interpretation outlines", though not always entirely separate, which can be discovered in the sources which have reached us, and which transmit to us the feelings of the primitive Christian community:

- that which may be called the "outline of contrast" of the eschatological Martyr-Prophet;
- the "salvific-historic" outline, according to the divine economy of salvation;
- the "soteriological" outline of expiatory death.

- a) The first "outline of contrast", of the Martyr-Prophet centres on the evidence of the contrast between the denial of the prophet by the leaders of his own co-religionaries and the act of exaltation effected by God in his favour.

- . The most characteristic representative of this outline of interpretation is St. Luke: Lk. 11:47-48, 49ff; 13:31-33; Acts 2:22-24; 5:30-31; 10:40; and *above all* 4:10.

- . Such an interpretation is found in a much wider tradition, and is very present in the writings of the N.T.: the tradition of the death of the prophet sent by God and the rejection of his message: Israel who kills her prophets. (Cf. Mt. 5:11-12; 23:29-36; Lk. 11:47-51; 13:31-33 etc.) And this Christian tradition, with its origins in the pre-Christian Jewish tradition which continues in subsequent rabbinical writings. (Cf. E. Schillebeekx, o. c. , p. 282).

- . The root of this interpretation is above all polemic: the death and exaltation of Jesus are proof that he is the real eschatological prophet, and not, as his enemies would have it, a false prophet who blasphemed God. (Cf. Mt. 27:61-64; Jn. 7:12; Mk. 14:64, etc.) The antithesis of this accusation is that Jesus, the real Prophet, is the Light of the world.

- b) The second outline - called "salvific-historic" - consists basically of the assertion that the death of Jesus "had to happen" because it was foretold in the Scripture. The most typical places are: Mk. 8:31; 9:12; 14:14; Lk. 24:7. Its principal representative in any case would seem to be the tradition of Mark.

- . If we found the origin of the previous interpretation in a polemic intention, the origin of this one might be called *edifying*: the desire to solve the measure of the drama of the Cross and make it understandable to believers. This is exactly the meaning of the account of Emmaus (LK. 24-26).
 - . In this perspective, the passion and death of Jesus appear as an event put in motion by God himself. Men here do not appear as those "for whom Christ died". Their presence is more like those "into whose hands the Master was delivered" (MK. 9:31; 14:41; LK. 24:7).
 - . Firmly rooted in, above all the inter-testamentary, the Judaic tradition, it is of note that references to the Scriptures - where "it was written" - are practically limited to quotations of Psalms: Ps. 22:2; MK. 15:34; Mt. 27:46; Ps. 22:8; MK. 15:29; Mt. 27:33... etc. No stress is laid on the resurrection, not even in Is. 53 which talks of death, interpreted at least as "to suffer for others"...
- c) The third soteriological outline, of expiatory death refers to several traditions where the death of Christ is seen as expiation for men: the formulas "hyper" "for", sometimes "men", others "sins". It is of note that the "pre-synoptic" or "pre-Pauline" material in which this interpretation is situated, is extremely restrictive. Already fixed formulas which show an ancient origin are: Gal. 1:4; Rom. 4:25; 5:8; 8:32; Eph. 5:2; 1Cor. 15:3-5. Authentically synoptic texts are only MK. 14:24 (the Supper) and MK. 10:45.
- . In a subsequent period this soteriological interpretation would become the decisive force of Pauline Christology, in the letter to the Hebrews, in the deutero-Pauline letters, in the Apocalypse and in John's Gospel.
 - . In this interpretative outline, the text of Is. 53 plays a big role. But there exists also a whole Jewish literature of the late period, about death as vicarious expiation, in which some, without any basis, have wished to see the origin of this Christian interpretation.
3. How Jesus lives his own death. This poses the problem of knowing whether this soteriological interpretation should not be referred to some historic gesture by Jesus himself when, at the end of his life, he had to face the reality of approaching death, and of squaring it in his own conscience and self-understanding, as prophet of the power of God.

We shall be seeing this briefly, indicating only the basic ideas and logical line in which they could be arranged:

- Before the fatal moment of his condemnation to death, Jesus understood the rupture which was occurring between him and those who rejected his message of salvation. After having evidenced the clamorous success at the beginning of Jesus' preaching (MK. 1:33-34, 38; 2:13; 3:7-11; 20, etc.), the Synoptics - namely Mark from Ch. 7 onwards - let it be seen that the positive reactions of people diminished visibly. (Cf. MK. 7:37; 8:1, 4; 9:14, 15; 10:1, 46; 11:8-10, 18).

- In Mt. 16:21 it is said that "from that moment" Jesus began to speak insistently of the cross. Leaving aside the problem of the origin of the accounts - paschal influence or not - the fact is that they fill the last stages of the life of Jesus.
- What interpretation is there by Jesus himself of this approaching death? Although Jesus does not announce himself, but rather the Father and his Kingdom of salvation, from his words and gestures may be deduced that he understands his death as a *gift of himself*, the carrier of salvation for all men. Above all in the account of the farewell Supper in the "Lukan" tradition: Lk. 22:20; 1Cor. 11:25 and Markan tradition: Mk. 14:24; Mt. 26:26-28. It is an announcement made with extreme delicacy, but very firmly, of his approaching death and which opens, without a doubt, the perspective of the renewed communion in the Kingdom of God. (Lk. 22:15-18).

To sum up: Christ is constantly open to the future, of God for man. On the other hand, all his life is a service of love for man. "If any man desires to be the first, he shall be minister of all. . ." (Mk. 9:34; cf. Mt. 7:12; Lk. 6:27-28). His "being for" others, his unconditional obedience to the will of the Father, give proof of his fidelity to his own Message, always open to the future for God. Only God has the last word. He felt his own death as implicit in man's salvation on behalf of God, as a historic consequence of his solicitous service to men and of his irrevocable solidarity with them. The "for you" expresses very clearly that his death is the seal of his whole life. He dies as he had lived: for man. And this as an offering of the loving will of the Father for man's salvation. There is not the slightest "rupture" between the interpretation of Christ's death by the Church and that which Jesus himself has left us—a death by love and fidelity to what constituted the only passion of his life: the cause of God, as cause of man; the cause of man as cause of God.

10. The Kingdom of God takes on the face of the risen Christ

1. **The paschal Christ.** Up to now we have been occupied with the Kingdom of God such as it appears in the message, in the life and in the death of Jesus of Nazareth. Although the accounts we have had are certainly influenced by the paschal faith of the disciples, we have endeavoured - following the path taken today by exegetic and theological studies - to isolate, insofar as is possible, the pre-paschal content underlying them. A really very delicate task, and not an easy one!

Now we shall dwell on the phenomenon of the Pasch itself, so intimately connected, moreover, with the rest of evangelical tradition: the certainty experienced by the apostles, the small community of followers of Jesus, that "the Lord lives"... that his death which so deeply impressed them and scandalized them—something they make no effort to hide - (cf. above all Mk. 14: 27) was not the last word of that drama; that the message of salvation of the Master not only did not disappear in view of the "failure" of his execution by the Roman and Jewish authorities, but rather it is now that it really acquires all its significance and is being brought about, just as he had foretold.

2. **The "paschal experience" as experience of salvation.** From neo-testamentary accounts of the appearances of the Risen Lord, and from their characteristic structure, it clearly emerges that we are dealing with an *historic-salvific event*: an act of grace; a divine initiative of salvation. It testifies to the passing of Peter and the other disciples from desertion - strongly underlined by traits of

defection or of "treason" (Cf. Mk. 14:66-71) to conversion and *reunion*, experienced as a grace of God, in the style of what, in another time and context, the Gospel tells us, referring to Peter: "... neither flesh nor blood, but my Father who is in heaven ..." (Mt. 16:17).

Christianity, says Schilleebeckx on the subject: "was born of the message and of the whole of Jesus' activity until his death; and *contemporarily* of a renewed offering of salvation on the part of God, after the death of Jesus, made by the Risen Jesus, with the consequence that the return of the disciples to Him is a return to the "*Risen-Crucified*" (o.c., p 410f).

3. Throughout the N. T. the connection between *Resurrection and forgiveness of sins* is clear. The "mystery of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:18) is mentioned in relation to Baptism in all accounts of official apparitions (Lk. 24:27; Mt. 28:19; Jn. 20:23). The Gospel of John concludes the accounts of the day of the Passover with the words of Jesus addressed to the disciples: "Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them" (Jn. 20:22-23). The forgiveness of sins - a typically messianic gift - is a "paschal" grace. After their experience of the Pasch, the disciples "preach the remission of sins" (Lk. 24:47; Acts 3:26). Paul assures the disciples of Corinth: "If Christ be not risen again, you are yet in your sins" (1 Co. 15:17). Jesus was resurrected "for our justification", he affirms in Rom. 4:25.

Thus, in the experience of the grace of pardon, of an entirely "new" existence - assumed at the risk of faith - is implicit the certainty, likewise of faith, that Jesus is alive and is the future Judge of humanity and of history.

4. The "*Credo's*" of the primitive Community. In the diversity of proto-christian "*credos*" which have come down to us and which can be identified through the sources available to us, different facets of Jesus are accentuated. But through all the vicissitudes undergone by tradition, the "cause of Jesus" has remained clear, formulated neo-testamentarily as the saving power of God, the Kingdom of God.

The models of interpretation we find are as follows:

- The interpretative model of the "*maranatha*" or Christology of the "*parousia*".
 - That of the "*Eschatological Prophet*", "full of the Spirit of God" (Is. 61:1; Lk. 4:18).
 - That of the eschatological-messianic "*Son of David*" with the exclusion of the politico-dynastic model (Mt. 21:9; Mk. 12:35-37).
 - That of the "*Son of Man*" always on Jesus' own lips, aside from indirect accounts like that of Act 7:56 (Stephen).
5. Christology of the "*Maranatha*", or of the "*Parousia*". We shall only notice this hermeneutic "model" to explain the figure of Jesus in the Christian proto-community because it is the one bearing most relation to the theme of the Kingdom. In all probability it is the oldest "*credo*" we know. It finds expression in the *logia* of the prophetic and apocalyptic tradition of the primitive Church. It used such expressions to interpret Jesus as he who after his death would *come*, as decisive figure of the definite future, which, moreover, was considered at the beginning as being very near. The confession of faith of this interpretation may be summed up thus: this Jesus of Nazareth is the Lord, who at the end of time shall come to save and judge (aspect of judgment and grace at the same time). This confession, at the beginning unique, went on to form part of more elaborate "*credo's*" up until today: "... "From thence He shall come to judge the living and the dead".

Cf. 1 Cor. 16:22; Apoc. 22:20; Didache 10:16. Paul in 1 Th. 4:16-17 is a witness of this credo: "The Lord - Mara in Aramaic - at a given signal, at the voice of the Archangel and the trumpet of God, shall come from Heaven and we shall be taken up into the clouds to Heaven with the Lord." In this formula are joined the honorary titles of the risen Christ: The Kyrios, the Lord, the Son of Man.

6. **We can summarize with Schilleebeckx, oc., p. 576:** "The neo-testamentary hermeneutics broke the apocalyptic concept of resurrection. Although history goes on as usual, God has fulfilled his definitive salvific action in Jesus of Nazareth, the Crucified-Risen Lord. Jesus, who proclaimed the imminent sovereignty of God has not failed, despite the contradiction of rejection and of death. With him, who during his life identified with God's cause, the imminent sovereignty of God, God himself has identified in turn, in resurrecting him from the dead: Jesus Christ himself is this sovereignty of God. Thus Jesus, who did not announce himself but rather the sovereignty of God, proclaimed himself as it were "without meaning to", so that the announcer has become the announced. With this the eschatological eras have been inaugurated. In effect, they are characterised by the experience of the eschatological gift: the Spirit of God who (with the probable sole exception of Mark) is called "the Spirit of Jesus" (Acts 2:33; 10:44ff; 19:5-6; Rom. 8:9; Phil. 1:19; Gal. 4:6). And the Spirit of Jesus is the same Spirit of God (1 Cor. 2:12; 3:16; 6:11; 7:40; 12:3). The eschatological period was to begin with the mission of the Spirit (Jl. 3:1ff; Ezek. 36-37) and would include the forgiveness of sins and the new law imprinted on the hearts of the believers (Jer. 31:31ff). And "where the Spirit of the Lord be, there be liberty" (2 Cor. 3:17). This liberty had been manifested in Jesus' own earthly life; it was a human liberty founded on the link of giving in to the absolute freedom of God. The "freedom of the children of God" (Rom. 8:21) was in effect the characteristic of primitive Christianity, which separated itself from the law. The basic credo of the early Christians was: Jesus of Nazareth is Christ, that is, the one entirely full of the eschatological Spirit of God. He is the definitive eschatological revelation of God, and through this, the paradigm of eschatological humanity."

11. Until the Lord returns

1. **The Salvation brought by Christ, assumed by Faith.** All apostolic preaching after the Pasch, as described by St. Luke in the Acts of the Apostles, tends towards this: that men should "believe" Christ in Jesus (Cf. Acts 8:27 the conversion of the man of Ethiopia by the deacon Phillip). And that faith appears explicit by the incorporation to the group of those who already believed in Jesus, of the "Church": 2:41; 4:4; 6:7, etc. In all the texts in which in the apostolic writings this faith is described, it is clear that to believe in the risen Christ is to recognise his significance as universal salvation for all men. (Acts 4:12; also MK. 16:16).
2. **The universality of Christ and the mediation of the Community of Faith.** In all the "mystery" of Easter, one cannot lose sight of the presence of a specific group of persons - which will very soon call itself "Church" - whose mission it is to be mediator between the *historic* meaning of the risen Christ and his *universal* meaning. The universality of Jesus Christ, the catholicity of his

Church, and mission of *witness*, especially through the praxis of the Kingdom of God, are other such forms of the one same reality of faith, fulfilled by us under the guidance of the Spirit of Christ.

The unique universality of Christ made manifest to the world is specifically an historic task of Christians: "that they may know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent" (Jn.17:3). And this, thanks to the praxis of the Kingdom of God carried out in the Church, as community of believers. In spite of the unrepeatable originality of the apostles, who knew Jesus before his death and saw him after his resurrection, (Cf. Acts 1:21 apropos of the election of St. Mathias) between their way of being Christians - or "coming to be"- and ours, there is no substantial difference. For all Christians, if their faith is not simply a routine thing, the affirmation of faith that "God has resurrected Jesus from the dead" can be valid effectively as the description of an immediate experience of the reality and not as a secondary description or an ideological construction which may be separated from experiential reality. Therefore, in the very description of Revelation at the basis of our life of faith, enters the mediation of those men who were immediate receivers of the message God gave us "through the life, death and glorious resurrection of his Son". D.V.4).

3. **In active waiting.** Like every "vital" conviction which is not limited to a purely intellectualist attitude, but rather penetrates the whole inexhaustible and unforeseeable richness of life, faith must be expressed with ever increasing precision as the circumstances place the believer before new situations and new challenges. Christians from the first moment had to formulate their own confession of the person and work of the risen Christ, faced with the rebuke of their co-religionaries, the Jews. The small community of believers spread little by little. New problems arising from very specific contexts very soon demanded explanations, clarifications, solutions. All the New Testament, including the Gospels, are written in the light of this vital, and in some cases even urgent, problem area. The new Testament sets the pattern and norm for any subsequent interpretation which life requires. But the duty to always search for adequate expressions, to maintain the dialogue of faith with men of all times, is inescapable. (Cf. G.S.11). In any case, on being confronted by men in every era, it is always the Church's duty to express and transmit its own faith and thereby being able to "satisfy everyone that asketh you a reason of that hope which is in you". (1 Pet 3:15; cf. LG 10). Thus in faith, hope and love she contributes, under the guidance of the Spirit towards the arrival of the Kingdom of God: The Spirit and the Spouse say: Come, Lord Jesus" (Apoc.22:20).

We shall now deal with this Church, born at the Pasch, and whose mission is the joyful announcement of the Kingdom of God manifested in Christ.

II. THE KINGDOM ANNOUNCED BY JESUS AND THE CHURCH

After Easter the same phenomenon - only more heightened - is observed as during Jesus' public life. Faced with him people define themselves, they take sides. Those who believe that Jesus lives form a group whose reason for being is to witness to the reality of the Kingdom of God in Christ. This group, which is the Church, continues today to confess that same faith and that same hope. It is interesting for us now to see the position of the community of believers in the face of the Kingdom, and what force keeps it going in its witness and mission.

1. Those who welcome the Kingdom

This group is formed by those who realise that the liberating lordship of God has manifested itself in Christ, and they open themselves unconditionally to its action. They welcome the Kingdom offered them, on confessing that God re-established his liberating power already among men through faith in Jesus Christ resurrected from the dead.

To admit and confess that Jesus has risen means to recognise that God has testified on behalf of Jesus; he has guaranteed in a more definite and radical way than through his miracles or style of life, that he is the one sent, to whom we should listen (cf. Mt. 3:16ff; 17:5); in whom is salvation.

By resurrecting him from the dead, God makes the scandal of the cross his own, which thereafter becomes a sign of hope. This recognition means a radical change of perspective in the hope of the apostles and their contemporaries who calculated the messianic expectation in other very different objectives (e.g., a king who assures food; or the immediate political liberation from Roman oppression; or the restoration of past splendour, etc.). For the apostles it is a matter of a real conversion, of a readjustment of their criteria and hopes. This is what believing and confessing that Jesus has resurrected implies. Now it has been manifested that God saves us from death, gives meaning to the world and to humanity in Jesus Christ. In him lies hope and the future, in him death and failure are overcome.

Jesus is believed as the first-born, the first among the dead because what happened to Jesus is guarantee and assurance that God saves men from death (Cf. 1 Cor. 15:12-22).

It also means that in Him and from Him spreads God's capacity to communicate life, to make us participants of his interpersonal love, for he gives us his Spirit. The Risen Lord's gesture of breathing over his disciples saying: "Receive the Holy Spirit" makes us think at once of the first page of the Bible, in which God breathes to communicate life to man—the real life which comes from God and is the fruit of the resurrection. Therefore Easter and Pentecost are inseparable realities, two sides of one same fact.

Through Christ and from Him unfolds before the world and more specifically, the community of believers, the new creation, the new style of life which in Jesus has reached definite goals.

In this group, as in a first concentric circle, the new being is unfolded, the style which Jesus as man embodied during his life, and which since the resurrection is radiated in the world through the believers :

- the special relationship and absolute confidence in the Father, made in filial abandon - Abba! - which overcomes all servitude;
- the renewal of mind and heart;
- openness to definitive salvation;
- attitude of service to the mission;

- above all, the dynamics of charity, radical and efficient love which exceeds all other gifts.

These believers are happy because they have welcomed the Kingdom and their experience is translated into contagious joy which arouses the interest and membership of new persons. (Acts 2: 44-47).

2. United In Christ

What unites them, what makes up their reason for being is faith in the Lord Jesus. This is the message announced by the Apostles (cf. speeches collected in the Acts 2:14-36; 3:11-26) and it is precisely those who welcome this Word who form part of the community (Acts 2:41).

The believers, on being converted, must be baptised in the name of Jesus (Acts 2:38). It is clear that in this way they did not join any group of persons, but rather that to believe means to adhere to the Lord Jesus: "And the multitude of men and women who believed in the Lord was increased more than ever." (Acts 5:14).

Next to the word of faith and baptism is the Lord's supper - all of it lived as memory and memorial of the Lord's death, of his resurrection and waiting for his return. Paul, on recalling to the Corinthians the meaning of the Eucharist and its institution by the Lord, ends up by saying: "For as often as you shall eat this bread and drink this chalice, you shall show the death of the Lord, until he come" (1Cor. 11:26).

This union of the community in Christ must be understood in a dynamic, existential sense. To be baptised in Christ means to join in his death and resurrection, to live the paschal process existentially, to associate oneself once and for all with Christ's destiny, so that in this way it may be reproduced in us. Such is Paul's theology on baptism (Phil. 3:10; Rom. 6:2-10).

It is a new birth. Therefore a new life in community is essential and within it in each Christian. "If any then be in Christ a new creature, the old things are passed away, behold all things are made new" (2 Cor. 5:17).

This dynamics is also expressed by saying: put on the spiritual man, i.e., the man according to the Spirit, who is par excellence Christ resurrected. He is the new Adam who inaugurates a new way of being which emerges progressively from within us, in the community of believers. We are dealing in all this with a process of Christ-conformation which sums up all ethics, mysticism, and asceticism of the Christian community (Cf. 1Cor. 44-49; Rom. 8:29; Eph. 4:13; 2 Cor. 3:18).

From this understanding of the Church as "being in Christ" (cf. Rom. 8:1; 2Cor. 5:17), Paul develops his doctrine of the Body of Christ, both along the lines of mutual participation and dependency among the members (Rom. 12:4ff; 1 Cor. 12:12ff), and from the perspective of the total saving influence of Jesus Christ (Eph. 4:15ff, Col. 2:19). In this way the Christian community gathered in one place deserves every right to be called the Church of God, the Body of Christ, in the different places where the Church of Christ makes its presence felt and fulfills itself (cf. Col. 1:18-24; Eph. 1:22).

In the Gospel of John it is equally clear that the Christian community has its basis in the union of each believer with God, through Christ (Jn. 14:20; 17:20-26; 15:1-6; allegory of life and the vine-shoots).

This union is the basis of our hope, as Paul says. Faithful is God by whom you have been called unto the fellowship of his son Jesus Christ our Lord (1Cor. 1:9).

3. It is the community of the end of time

The Christian community is neither the product of just any human will, nor the result of fear of persecution. It was the Lord who added to the community those who would be saved (Acts 2:47). To every Israelite, People of God means having been gathered by Him in the peoples of the Alliance. But Christians realize that the promises have already been fulfilled in Jesus, that in his blood and in his cross God had established the new alliance (Heb. 8:6-13). . . This is equal to saying that they are the new people whom God creates through the new alliance. Therefore, the Christian community takes on the title of People of God, of people of the end of time.

From its very beginning, the new community knows itself to be the creation of God, the new creation based on Jesus, the alliance of reconciliation. They are no less than the "saints" (Acts 9:13; Rom 1:7; 1Pet. 2:5, 9; 1Cor. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:9), the "chosen ones" (Rom. 8:33; Col. 3:12; 2Tim. 2:10).

While gathered together by God, they know they are the new People of God. This "novelty" is made specific in the overcoming of barriers: it is not limited to one race, to one culture. All dividing walls have been knocked down; barriers of hatred, discrimination. You are all Christ. (Gal. 3:27).

At the same time, purely earthly and political concepts of the Kingdom are overcome. The true life is hidden in God with Christ in heaven. But it is new life, its presence is now felt in those who accept the will of God over their lives and recognise Jesus Christ as the deep meaning of their lives and of history.

Finally, they await the day of the Lord, being the People of the end of time, the people among whom the definitive salvation of God will be fulfilled.

All Christ's preaching had consisted of announcing the Kingdom of God. This is the reason which makes conversion so urgent: Repent, the Kingdom of God is at hand (Mk. 1:15). This same theme is the object of the Apostles' preaching. And with reason, for they recognise in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ the definitive event of salvation. In this sense Peter's speech, gathered in Acts 3:19-21, is clear: "Now you must repent and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, and so that the Lord may send the time of comfort. Then he will send you the Christ he has predestined, that is Jesus, whom heaven must keep till the universal restoration comes which God proclaimed, speaking through his holy prophets."

4. Continuing the mission of Jesus

The apostles and first disciples were aware that they were carrying on with Jesus' work. Through the witness of their life and of their words they would announce that, in Jesus Christ, God saves us from death, uncovers man's vocation and the destiny

of the world, and they would call men to an in-depth conversion so that the new life of the Risen Lord would be manifested in them.

Luke, editor of the Acts of the Apostles, has a special interest in stressing the continuity of and similarity between the historic mission of Christ and the life of the early believers. To give an example:

- The Kingdom of God is made manifest in the person of Jesus with his miracles and actions (Mk. 1:31; 5:41; 9:27). The apostles, in the name of Jesus, perform miracles and prodigies which make salvation explicit (Acts 3:1-10).
- Jesus is tempted, persecuted, and is finally killed. The believers, the apostles, are likewise taken to tribunals and tried for the name of Jesus. (Acts 4:1-22; 7:55ff).

It is up to the community of believers to continue this service of being, living and suffering for the salvation of humanity. This is the vocation discovered by the Christian community. "In this we have known the charity of God, because he hath laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren". (Jn. 3:16).

To sum up:

- . To be a living sign of this charity and this service
- . To continue in history the task and mystery of Christ
- . To suffer like him, united with him, for the salvation of all men.

This is the task of the Church. Because being a Christian is a grace, but it is given to us in relation to all of humanity, for others, and the fate of the real community cannot be other than that of Christ: death and resurrection.

To assert that the life and mission of Christ continues in the Church by the power of the Holy Spirit is also to determine what is the relationship and function of the Church with respect to the Kingdom. If Jesus - as we have recalled, especially in the first part - has been the herald, the one to announce the Kingdom of God and at the same time the one to make it present, the one who offers it to us, then these two functions constitute the mission of the Church.

A. The Church announces the Kingdom of God

Its reason for being is the mission. Those who receive the power of God through faith, communicate what they believe and live (Cf. 1Jn. 1:1-4). The word the disciples of Christ announce and proclaim is not an information without interest, it is not mere words, neither is its effectiveness comparable to any human word. Its effectiveness resides in the power of God who calls to salvation. (Cf. Rom 1:16)

The Gospel is not proclaimed with mere persuasive tactics but with the power of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit who opens up the hearts of listeners so that they may receive the offering of salvation made by God. True, the Gospel of the cross of Christ is a scandal both for those who seek rapid solutions and

short term effectiveness, and for those who wish to satisfy their scientific aspirations. But for those called, for those prepared to receive the Kingdom, it is the power of God and the knowledge of God, which makes men free, makes them sons and brothers, and directs them towards the definite future with the joy of hope. (Cf. 1 Cor. 1:17-25; Rom. 8:14-16).

It is an effective word which poses radical decisions and demands an answer, the answer of orthopraxy, the answer of a welcome to the gift of God: to open oneself to salvation offered in Christ; to recognize that human existence is enveloped in the love of God and that only by opening himself up to Him can man find his centre, his identity and his meaning.

It is also a word pronounced in time, which calls to conversions in history, which poses the demands of the new life in a certain context. That Word, then, becomes prophetic reading of the reality and judgment of the present; of the personal present and of the situational present. By virtue of God's promises for a universal peace, for justice, for love already present, the word uncovers what is false and old in the situations of men.

The word which calls to faith and to conversion has been the vehicle used by Jesus to proclaim that the Kingdom is near, and is also the means used by the Church for the mission. The word, a humble tool, becomes strong in the hands of God. The Word of God, which is Jesus Christ, continues to call men today, calling them to the Kingdom and to hope for definitive salvation. Christ continues to preach the Kingdom through his disciples, the apostles and their successors. "He that heareth you, heareth me; and he that despiseth you, despiseth me." (Lk. 10:16).

At the service of this word are all those in the Church though there be different ministries, and some, imitating the apostles, dedicate their whole existence to the proclamation of the word. But all the people are prophetic, all the people are called to proclaim the wonders of God with the witness of their own life and of the word. (Lk. 9:12; AA 6).

When she believes this word, proclaiming and announcing it with the power of the Spirit, the Church is the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

But the Church does not own the word, rather it is at her service. She receives it and believes and therefore speaks (DV 1, 10).

The Church, however, may not neglect that word; even more; she runs the risk of preaching to herself, of undermining the demands of the Kingdom. This possibility and this temptation are proper to her condition as pilgrim and sinner. Herein lies the necessity of each believing community frequently to ask itself whether it is not becoming like insipid salt, incapable of transforming everything around it?

But the Church also knows she can count on the Spirit of Jesus who guides her towards complete truth, who helps her to see and discern the signs of the times, who arouses persons and prophetic movements within the Church to increasingly convert her to the Word she must announce.

B. The Church, carrier of salvation

Jesus promised his disciples that they would perform the deeds he did and even greater ones (Jn. 14: 12). In effect, the community of believers in Christ does not limit itself to repeating the announcement, but rather communicates God's salvation to all persons and peoples, makes possible incorporation with Christ, reception of the Spirit and pardon of sins. If we said that Christ announces the Kingdom through the Church's preaching, and the witness of believers, so, too, does Christ transform persons, sanctifying them above all through the sacraments celebrated by the Christian community. The sacraments in the life of the Church represent the culminating points that show that his will to make us his own sons is serious and definite, to forgive us our sins, to give us his Spirit, to share his bread with us, to come to our aid in the decisive moments of life.

The sacraments of the Church are signs of the Kingdom because through them God shows his saving and liberating power, and man becomes a new creature.

Through Baptism man is incorporated in the mystery of Christ, and Confirmation enables him to give witness of the truth before people. In the Eucharist men recognise themselves as people of the New Alliance who await the definitive fulfillment of the promises of God, remember the death and resurrection of Christ, experience the joy of his presence and gain strength to continue his mission. The remaining sacraments are likewise the presence of grace at critical moments of existence, or enabling one for the ministry in the Church.

The sacraments, of course, are not magic rituals, but they always assume faith. However, their effectiveness does not depend on man. They are signs of the seriousness with which God offers salvation. It is only left to the believer to welcome, sincerely and thankfully, the gift of God and to co-operate in making it fruitful in his life. There then is Christ who calls men to salvation through the Word, who through the sacraments initiates and perfects the life of the Spirit which enables us to reach the definitive Kingdom.

The Church has this gift of God, this power of the Kingdom, but knows that it holds it in containers of clay. In the distribution of these gifts the Church also experiences its fragility. The temptation in this field is double. On the one hand the Church can abuse the sacraments, conceding them to those not prepared to receive them or living in conditions objectively contrary to the Kingdom. On the other hand, there are those in the Church who arrive at a practical disdain of the sacraments, insisting exclusively on the importance of the personal option to faith and on orthopraxy. In truth, evangelization and the sacraments claim each other mutually. (S.C. 5-7 ; Ev.N. 28, 47).

C. The ecclesial community, with its different charisms, at the service of the mission

The Church is at the service of God's cause, of the cause of Jesus, which is always man's cause, not only in the moments of celebration of the sacraments or the proclamation of the Gospel, but in everything she is and does. The community is already a gathering of those who confess that Jesus is the only Lord ; of those who have experienced that to submit to the will of God manifested in Christ is the really effective way of getting to be free, of preparing for the final plenitude. The Church serves the Kingdom's cause above all by the testimony of love.

Love is not merely a sign, it is the already acting presence of the saving and unitive power of God. There is a Church when there is communion in love, when people love each other, forgive each other, share their means and live for others. A new fraternity thus arises, not born of flesh or blood but of the Spirit (Jn. 1:12 ff ; 3:1-6). It is not an ideologic or psychic affinity ; it is a gift, the fruit of the Spirit within us. That is why it can overcome all differences.

As he grows in his own identity, the believer feels himself at the same time son of the Father and brother of the other believers. In reality, each believer can only say "our Father", i.e., Father of those who in Christ have had access to becoming sons in the Son. As filial consciousness grows, so does the consciousness of fraternity. That is why the Our Father is the prayer of the Christian community. Hereby will they know that you are my disciples, if you love one another (Jn. 13 : 35).

The testimony of the first community remains as a model and type for the Church of all times. (Cf. Acts 2:44 ; Jn. 17:11ff ; Gal. 2:9 ; Phil. 4 : 10-16 ; Eph. 4 : 1-3, etc.). Of course it is a community of fishermen, but with the will to convert itself day by day. Thus, then, the Church is the manifestation of the power of God to the extent that she is space for communion, acceptance of pluralism, progressive search for truth, for pardon, for ever better forms of sharing of means, etc. In the same way she gives evidence when she denounces oppression and puts herself like Jesus at the service of the oppressed, of those who have neither voice nor power ; when in this task she looks for, as final objective, the salvation of all and also of those who now oppress and exploit. To be Church is presence already of salvation, and is therefore sign and deed of God's power which shows how this unitive power is already working, creating communion, of putting everything at the service of man.

In addition, this community is composed of different gifts and vocations. Every talent that builds the community is a charism of service, a power to give life to, to contribute to the common good and as such should be recognised by all.

The Christian community is thus a dynamic fraternity made up of active persons directly under the influence of the Spirit. The common Spirit they share produces in them gifts and talents, and is manifested in all that co-operate positively. That is, it is not an organization where only some act and the rest accept, but rather one where each receives the gift of the Spirit for the common edification. (1Cor. 12:7ff) Naturally the equilibrium between the different gifts and charisms is a permanent tension, but it is the Spirit who creates unity within the Church.

In the community there also exists the pastoral charism of coordination and government. This pastoral service is carried out by the bishops with the priests and deacons, all presided over by the Pope. This organisation is not merely accidental in the Church. In order to fulfill the mission of being witnesses of the Kingdom, of celebrating the Eucharist and other sacraments, of building unity, the Church needs this ministry. For it the Bishops and their collaborators receive the power of the Spirit and in this way act in the name of Christ. Thus, both the charisms are gifts of the Spirit, given for the common good and to enable the Church to fulfill its mission. Through various ministries and charisms, through pastoral service, Christ

is present in the Church to lead her towards the Father. At the same time, those who receive the ministerial pastoral charism, those who have any authority in the Church, are especially invited to imitate the Lord Jesus who came not to be served but to serve.

We could even say that they are invited to participate in a special way in the cross of Christ, to serve more, to dedicate themselves more without hoping for reward. Such, at least, is the experience of Paul (cf. 2Cor. 10 : 13).

The temptation of those in authority in the Church is the abuse of power ; to dominate instead of to serve. Not to consider themselves servants of their brothers and of the Lord, but owners and masters. This is a difficult temptation to overcome, as history shows. But here also the Spirit provides a diversity of charisms which complement and question each other.

5. Irreplaceable function of the Church in relation to the Kingdom

We can already summarize: we have seen how Christ's mission is continued by the Church or, better still, how through the community of believers Christ continues to announce and communicate the lordship of God, his liberating proximity which man receives in the obedience of faith.

We discover, therefore, a line of continuity between Christ and the Church. The Christian community comes to be the prolongation of Christ and of his mission at this intermediary stage. This is true. But we must likewise show the other side of the coin: what puts the Church at a distance from Christ.

We can specify this distance or differentiation in these two points above all:

- The Church has nothing of her own. Everything in her, which is presence of the Kingdom and of salvation, belongs to Christ and his Spirit. She welcomes, experiences, announces and transmits salvation - which is solely the work of God in Christ. She is announcement and communication of the Kingdom, always with reference to Christ.
- She is not perfectly transparent to the action of the Spirit as Jesus was. She is a deficient instrument. Along with saintliness she also has sin; with the word of God, her own misleading word; with the saving action of God, the deadweight of meaningless institutions; together with the witness of love we also find laziness and complicity with those who dominate.

In spite of everything, the Church's vocation at this time is unique. In effect, only through her can we recognise the Kingdom re-established by Christ. Only through her can we discover what the saving lordship of God inaugurated by Christ consists of. Despite all her imperfections, the Church is the only means of knowing Christ and the power of his resurrection. That is why her role in preaching and developing the Kingdom is irreplaceable.

The mystery of the Kingdom is now manifested in Christ-acting-in-the-Church (Eph. 1). The revelation of the Kingdom, which forms part of the presence of the same among us, is fulfilled through the Church's preaching (Eph. 3:6-8).

The Church understands today, as yesterday, that everything the Lord preached and was fulfilled in him for the salvation of mankind must be announced and spread to the ends of the earth so that what was carried out once for the salvation of all may achieve its effect in all men (AG 3).

This manner of transmission, this way of making the mystery of the Kingdom present, of the lordship of Christ through the Church, is in fact the way the Father has chosen to make known to us his mystery, his plan for salvation. And the direction of this saving action of God is made manifest to us in the call made to all peoples, because the Kingdom of God is the encounter and reconciliation of all in Christ (cf. Eph. 3:6; Col. 1:26). This mystery of the Kingdom which gives meaning to history operates in all places, but it is made epiphany and revelation in the ecclesial community which also represents, in its special way, the growth of the Kingdom of God on earth (cf. LG 3). We know that the Church's history is marked by this tension towards fulfillment; tension in turn which is lived by all creation and constitutes the ultimate meaning of the historic becoming (Rom. 8).

At this intermediate stage, therefore, the revealing action of Christ without the Church is unthinkable; it is thanks to the believing community that humanity can recognise the meaning of the action of God, the coming of the Kingdom, the direction towards which history is going.

There is a continuity between the revealing function of Jesus of Nazareth and his revealing action as Kyrios through the preaching and signs of the Church. Certainly the Church is only a sign of the Kingdom to the extent that it is witness of Christ, and not a preacher of herself. Certainly the power of God to make things new is God's, Christ's and never the Church's. But it is, nonetheless, true that the Kyrios wished to manifest himself and make himself known to people through his holy and sinful community, which is the Church.

The question of the purpose of the historic Church leads us on to the question of the objective of the historic revelation of Jesus in time. In that way the Kingdom of God erupted into history, in that way we are to accept it, and certainly not without violence and without scandal.

6. The Church's position in the face of the Kingdom

For greater clarity, we state the relationship between the Kingdom and the Church in a series of propositions, taken mostly from Vat. II, which express the present ecclesial conscience on the subject:

- *The Kingdom is the aim*, the ultimate goal for which the Church strives, and which gives meaning to all her tasks. The Church's purpose lies not in herself but in the already inchoate Kingdom which must be subsequently expanded until it is carried to its fulfillment by God. (LG 9).
- The Church, then, *awaits* the Kingdom, and not as something already manufactured beforehand but as something totally new which is being created by God in our world through the new humanity, but which only He can carry to fulfillment.
- The Church is *witness and spokesman* of the Kingdom, the cause of the Church is Jesus' cause, the Kingdom of God. This announcement is at the

same time good news and judgment for the world, but it is also judgment for the Church because she is only the Church of Jesus Christ to the extent that she is constantly converted to the Kingdom. The Church's task is centered on the Kingdom. She must:

- . announce her coming in Christ
 - . be witness of the Kingdom in faith, hope and love
 - . be instrument of realization of the values of the Gospel in the temporal order, which will make her preaching and worship believable.
- The Church *works for the Kingdom*. Christ uses her as instrument of salvation and sends her out to all the people. (LG 9). It is the Spirit of Christ who compels her to do her part towards the full realization of the will of God, who has established Christ as the source of salvation for the whole world. (LG 17).

The Church calls insistently on the motives of the Kingdom, on metanoia and faith. She prepares the ground for Christ as condition to participate in the definitive Kingdom. With full power she guides those awaiting the Kingdom, for Peter was given the keys of the Kingdom. She also celebrates the Eucharist as token of the banquet of the Kingdom.

- **Announces the Kingdom to all nations.** The Church has received the mission of announcing and re-establishing the Kingdom of Christ and of God among all people.
- Recognises the presence of salvation among peoples, admires the work of God in the various religions which constitute a real preparation for the Gospel, and makes an effort to fulfil its values (LG5; 16; GS 1; AG 3).
- She herself is already on earth *source and beginning* of the Kingdom for all humanity. She is only the beginning of the Kingdom, not the reality itself; while carrying out her mission she yearns for the perfect Kingdom. (LG 1; 5; 9).
- That is why the Church *prays* constantly and moved by the Spirit cries: Come, Lord Jesus! (Apoc. 21; LG 17).

From what we have already said about the Church/Kingdom of God relationship, we discover the existence of a *tension difficult to maintain*. This at any rate is the lesson we draw from the history of the Church.

The risk of identifying the Kingdom of God with a realization of our own, be it ecclesial, be it political, harasses us constantly. Whilst the first community lived the eschatologic direction of its faith, thinking even of a "close" end of time, it was not difficult for it to recognise itself above all as a community awaiting the promised Kingdom. But when the community realised that the end was not so near at hand, the attention of believers centred on the lordship which Christ exercises in the Church through faith. And the lordship of Christ in the Church was soon easily identified with the Church as the Kingdom where Christ is already Lord.

History takes it upon itself to dismantle these facile identifications: "The Kingdom of God was neither the massively institutionalised Church of medieval Catholicism or of the Counter-reformation; nor was it the theocracy of Calvin in Geneva, nor the apocalyptic Kingdom thought out by the apocalyptic and subversive fanaticism of one

Thomas Munzer. Neither was it the present Kingdom of morality and perfect bourgeois culture conceived by theological idealism and liberalism, and much less the millenarianist political Kingdom based on ideologies of people and race, which found its spokesman in national socialism. It was not, finally, the classless Kingdom of the new man, as until now communism has tried to bring about." (H. Kung, *Essere Cristiani*, ed. c. p. 245).

One could even write the history of the Church with this keystone: how the relationship with the Kingdom was understood in each era. In outline fashion one could speak of a process with this constant: Movements of identification emerge, either at the political or ecclesiastical level ("worldlinization" of the Kingdom) which provoke reactions of absolute dissociation, either seeking refuge in an atmosphere of interiority ("spiritualization" of the Kingdom), which begins then with gnosis and goes through many versions; or giving itself up solely to the future action of God, to the Kingdom which must only be waited for and of which the Church would be its denial (eschatological reductionism).

The manner of understanding the Kingdom/Church relationship is also reflected in the theology of mission and of the missions. When, as the fruit of a meditation on the Kingdom of Christ, Xavier thinks about saving souls by rescuing them from the dominance Satan, there evidently is a practical identification between the lordship of Christ and the Church.

"The oldest and most conservative vision established that the Kingdom exists there where the Church is. To be in the Church was to be in the Kingdom. The most recent view (proposed by several catholics and also by protestants) is that the Church exists there where the Kingdom is, i. e., there where human beings do good and where people come to be friends. But this focus tends to mar the specific character of the Church as community which especially recognises the lordship of Jesus Christ and praises and gives thanks to the Father through the sacraments. The Church cannot simply be identified with the Kingdom, and this principle is valid equally for the new left as for the old right". (R. McBrien: *Church, The Continuing Quest*, Newman Press, New York, London, p. 38).

To conclude, let us say that against any intent of simplifying identification, one must remember and insist upon the "ultimate" and definitive character of the Kingdom of God which is always the object of hope. To recover the eschatological tension is useful both for the Church and for humanity in general.

And this observation is also valid for the new approach to mission: The fact of having discovered that the spaces of salvation are greater than the Church has allowed; the more frequent usage of the term Kingdom to mean the universality of salvation already present. (Cf. e.g., A. Pieris, s.j. *The Church, the Kingdom and the other Religions*, Dialogue n. 22 Oct. 1970, Colombo G.) This manner of talking, in any case, cannot be used to lessen the eschatological tension towards the definitive Kingdom, as the tendency and orientation to the Kingdom-yet-to-come is what stimulates us into not being content with what has so far been achieved. And it would be fatal to the Church to be satisfied with those forms of presence of salvation, refusing to work and pray with all its strength for the coming of the definitive Kingdom, just as God promised.

The other element to clarify in the Kingdom Church relationship is to maintain the identity of the Church as a different group in the face of other religions and human groups. To wish to avoid difficulty by saying that "all is Kingdom" there where good appears, would be too easy.

Summing up : *neither* the actual presence of the Kingdom can make us forget that the definitive Kingdom has not yet arrived

nor can the action of God throughout the world make us forget the *singular emergence* (manifestation) of the Kingdom already present in the community of believers.

7. The Church, sacrament of the Kingdom

This title expresses perhaps better than any other the relationship between the Church and the Kingdom. Vatican II uses the equivalent expression of the universal sacrament of salvation (LG 48, 1).

This definition of the Church will help us to see the relationship between the Church, the non-Christian religions and the other signs of the Kingdom. The problem is not new. If God's plan consists in his saving grace reaching all men, and has created all in the image of Christ, it is evident that the history of salvation began before the historic event in Israel and therefore before the birth and death of Christ ; and it is equally clear that salvation acts in space and time far beyond the visible frontiers of the Church.

We have it then that the plan and saving action of God is for *all* men of all eras, for they are all called to salvation and there is no salvation other than in Christ. However, the history of the manifestation and public revelation of that plan of salvation begins in a certain place, among a certain people (Israel) and in a relatively recent time. There is therefore a *universal* salvation, filling time and space, and a *limited* revelation in time and space. Christ, as Saviour of all men, is only historically so (visibly) with a handful of his contemporaries. Since his resurrection, his action is made manifest in a community of believers, in the Church which is at present practically unknown to two thirds of humanity, and which neither in the past nor the future will come to be recognised by a multitude of peoples (Cf. AG 10).

This uncovers for us the fact that the saving and revealing action of God has a *sacramental structure*. The *divine* mystery of universal salvation is made present in human form in a limited time and place. This is a constant in the history of salvation. The Kingdom of God comes to us through that manifestation limited in time and space. But the said manifestation reveals the meaning of the whole reality and shows us not only the fact of salvation but its very content : God gathers, calls, reconciles everyone in Christ through his Spirit. Both the historic revelation of Jesus and his manifestation continued through the church, reveals the meaning of the whole reality, reveals that God's love is acting in all men.

The Church is sacrament (visible sign), limited in time and space, in an analogous way - although obviously much less perfect - to how Jesus was sacrament during his earthly stay, limited in time and space. But in that limited revelation emerges the meaning of the whole reality and the direction in which history is going.

It is clear that the Church is sacrament only because Christ is the great Sacrament of God working in her through his Spirit. The Church is not the perfect continuation of Christ's incarnation (in the style put forward by the neo-romantic ecclesiology) but the Church in its perfection is a real sacrament because it is made up of a human element through which the Spirit of God acts (LG 8).

The Church is sacrament, yes, because Christ is Sacrament in the first place. In him God's plan for universal salvation becomes a public event. The Church is sacrament, that is to say, the effective sign of salvation because in her we come into contact with Christ and his Spirit, the unique point where the future touches us and reaches us already. (Jn. 1 : 15 ; 28 : 10-17 ; 1 Tim. 2 : 5. . .).

In asserting that the Church is sacrament we recognise that she is a *portion*, a limited reality vis-a-vis the *totality* of salvation. In fact, in theology the notion of sacrament as applied to the Church is rediscovered when it becomes more evident that the Church and the world are not co-extensive dimensions, but rather that the visible Church is only one part of the world.

Sacrament also means *revelation of the meaning* of what is happening in humanity : reconciliation in Christ until the coming of the Kingdom in its fulfillment.

The sacrament is not an empty sign, a lifeless indicator. That the Church is the sacrament means that it is full of the saving presence of Christ. To come into contact with this sacrament is to make oneself fit to receive the action of Christ, to go via the decision of faith, to live solely for the Kingdom, in a dynamic of constant conversion.

We must also stress that being the place where Christ, the only saviour, is recognised and confessed, the Church is not *a* sacrament in the midst of humanity, but *the* sacrament par excellence of this era, the only one capable of unveiling the other forms of the presence of God's saving love. And the Church does not have it by its own merits, but solely by the will of Christ.

That is why the Church is the sacrament of salvation to all, for the Kingdom comes in the measure that all men gather together for love, in one family, and are open to communion with the only Father, through the one Mediator who gives us all the same and only Spirit.

To each individual, to each human group, salvation may come in a thousand ways, but the task of the Church is that of being the manifested public sign in history that all men and all peoples are called to the only people of God, the only body of Christ, the only temple of the Spirit. (Cf. AG 7).

This identification of the Church as sacrament of the Kingdom can help us to clarify the meaning of the other religions. The Church knows that God is greater than her own dimensions, that the lordship of Christ reaches the universe ; that the Spirit makes all things new and does not only move Christians.

That is why the Church has to recognise the presence of grace wherever it should appear, and she finds it in a special way in the great religions and in the historic movements born of love of justice and of peace.

She would not be the Church of Christ if she did not rejoice in communicating what she has received in helping to unveil the meaning of what those groups already live, through witness of life and preaching of the Gospel. The Church which knows where humanity is going, also knows that everything she has received is for others. Therefore she is open to communicate everything she has. And she should also be open to receive, because not everything in her is fruit of the Spirit. The Church is in constant need of conversion in her contact with other signs of the presence of

love, of the action of the Spirit, that she may recognise her sin and feel called to conversion. The full transparency to the Spirit has only been achieved by Jesus: it is up to the Church to walk towards salvation renewing herself constantly.

On the other hand, her catholic vocation demands that she be open to all the good to be found in persons, people and great religions. She would not be catholic and would therefore undermine her value as sign of the vocation of all to one people of God, if she were not prepared to incarnate her witness and her preaching in all languages, cultures and human systems.

For this task the Church counts on the Spirit, the same Spirit which acts upon all men and permits the Church to trust that sooner or later (only God knows how and when), those diverse gifts of the Spirit present in the various groups will come to a mutual recognition of each other. Something which will not happen without crisis or conversion.

The Spirit of Christ is present and active wherever men seek the meaning of life, love and fight for justice and goodness. But all those anonymous paths become significant when they find Christ. The Church must accept this interchange with other religious groups and with the world in general; welcome the secular prophecy but at the same time testify that only in Christ does humanity find its fulfillment.

In effect, not only in other religions, but in all human groups may be found values, fruits of justice and truth, which are signs of the Kingdom. At this time the Church and the world interact and are influenced by each other in very diverse ways, sometimes peaceful, others tragic. But the faithful walk in the hope that the world and the Church will finally merge in the plenitude of the Kingdom (cf. GS 40-45). We shall now, however, deal with these aspects more slowly.

III. KINGDOM, CHURCH AND NON-CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS

We shall now consider that particular dimension of the present problem area surrounding the Kingdom of God.

If all men are called to salvation and if the power of God acts beyond the limits of the sacrament par excellence of the Kingdom, which is the Church, we have to ask ourselves : what is the value and significance of non-Christian religions in relation to the Kingdom?

We shall try to define the problem and then bring to it the elements of solution. Finally in an overall vision, we shall try to define more precisely the Kingdom-Church-other religions relationship.

1. The terms of the problem

- The problem, from the Council to date, is as follows :

There is a "*consensus*" apropos of these truths :

- God, who wants all to be saved, offers his grace (= entry into his Kingdom) to all men, and with it sanctifies in fact, all who welcome the free gift of God.
- Salvation comes exclusively through Christ, sole mediator between God and men.

Object of *discussion* is, however, the manner in which the salvific power of Christ acts outside the Church : are men saved independently of the religion, to which they belong, or *in* and *through* these religions?

- Apropos of this, there are *two* main *currents* of thought :

- a) An understanding of Christianity as "*fulfillment*" of pre-Christian religions (this theory originated in India and was subsequently adopted by De Lubac and Von Balthasar especially).

Christianity fully answers the aspirations of men, which have arisen in them by the "predisposing" grace, and which have had their expression in the various religions of the world. But not for this can it be said of those religions that they are "salvific"; they are a mere preparation for the Gospel.

Christianity is the only valid means of salvation. There is one redemption and one revelation and the Church is the trustee of both. (Were it not so, the unity of the plan for salvation could not survive). In ways which for us are a mystery, Christ can come into direct contact with men and these, even without knowing the Gospel, can with their faith answer this secret inspiration: to these men has been applied the expression "anonymous Christians". But there are no "implicit anonymous Christianities" (anonymous Christian religions).

- b) Recognition of the "*presence of Christ*" in religions (Pannikar, Rahner, Schlette).

Non-Christian religions are in fact channels of the salvific power of Christ : the non-Christians are saved by Christ *in* their own religions. These are, therefore, anonymously Christian.

Prior to the preaching of the Gospel, adhesion to *him* made these Christians (until then anonymous) pass from non-consciousness to the awareness that they were Christians and belonged to the Church.

It seems we must overcome the postulates of either theory. The theory of fulfillment makes clear the unicity of the Church as visible trustee of the mystery of Christ; but does not sufficiently recognise the salvific value that other religions have for their followers.

The theory of the *presence of Christ* recognises that non-Christian religions are for their members normal means of Christian salvation; but it would appear to reduce the distinction between Christianity and other religions to the mere fact of being aware or not of a reality, that of salvation, which in fact may be found in either; and neither does it sufficiently take into account the need for "conversion" or for qualitative change towards the Christian "novelty".

In this respect we should recall the doctrine of the Council : "Nor does divine Providence deny the help necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, but who strive to live a good life, thanks to His grace" (LG 16).

There may be an implicit knowledge of God, an existential faith and obedience, made living, a baptism of submission corresponding to a revelation of God or to a "sowing" of his Word, which in fact occur (essentially) animating all basic honest option, all adhesion to the voice of conscience.

There is a basic, existential level of membership of the community of those who believe in God, which unites all men who have linked themselves to God in this way (men of "goodwill")

In the Council, the Church recognises that "doctrines, norms of life and sacred rites", with which other religions try to answer the concerns of the human heart "often reflect a ray of that Truth (Christ) which enlightens all men" (NAE 2). The Council states that these religions are in the sphere of the universal plan of salvation, under the action of the grace of God. It does not state, but neither does it deny, that these religions are, or can be, means of salvation.

For all this it is legitimate to think of these religions as special means of salvation, in a relationship of dependency on the universal or general means; or as incomplete sacraments of salvation, ordered to the universal sacrament and which continue being valid today also, after the historic coming of Christ. (1)

- In this way we can now formulate the problem in a more precise form:

The incorporation into Christ, essential to salvation, comes about in Christians through the visible signs of their incorporation into the Church. How does one who is not a Christian join Christ? How does Christian salvation reach him, from the moment he is outside the economy of the visible sign which is the Church and outside its sacramental actions? Does this happen through a direct and invisible action of the Lord, or can we say that the non-Christian religions incarnate a certain vicarious visibility of the saving power of Christ? Are those religions real signs, even though in an imperfect and incomplete form, of the salvific action of Christ?

That is to say, what is the role of the non-Christian religions in the plan of salvation, in the Kingdom of God which is already coming? This basically, is the problem of relations between the Church and non-Christian religions.

2. Elements for solving the problem

we shall start off from some axioms or basic principles which enlighten the problem. Then we shall determine the essential difference between the mediation of Christian and other religions, to conclude by underlining the need to consider the latter from an historic and existential perspective.

A. Principles to be borne in mind

- **Anthropological principle.** Given the social nature of man, although non-Christians are saved due to the sincerity of their subjective religious attitude, one cannot deny that their religions also have for them, objectively, a salvific value. In fact those religions originate from the religious life of their adherents; their writings refer to their concrete religious experiences of encounter with truth; their practices are the codified crystallization of their religious experiences . . . If there is no purely natural religious life, there is no purely human historical religion.

(1) Cf. I. Dupuis, S. J. : "The salvific value of non-Christian religions" in *Service & Salvation* (Bangalore 1973) pp. 207-233.

- **Christological principle.** All salvation is "Christic" (coming from Christ); thanks is given for an encounter with the mystery of Christ, which may be implicit or explicit; the first is sufficient — and is necessary — to save oneself; the second is the privilege of Christians.

The problem of the salvific value of non-Christian religions can be resolved by merely making clear on what relations they are with the mystery of Christ, his person and work, his revelation, his saving power; to what extent they contain (though in an imperfect form) that mystery of Christ of which the Church is the explicit manifestation, and which apart from this must perfect herself ever increasingly until the end of time.

- **Ecclesiological principle.** Christ is "the" mystery; the Church is only "derived mystery", universal sacrament of salvation, organ which dispenses, in time and space, the mystery of Christ, with the visible signs instituted by him.

Now then, if the ecclesial eschatological community is the perfect means of Christian salvation, other religious communities can be imperfect means, insofar as they are essentially oriented towards it.

The mystery of Christ, which makes itself fully visible only in the life of the Church, can have hazier expressions in the life of other religious communities. We must distinguish, then, several forms of the presence of Christ's mystery and, therefore, of mediation. The grace of God though unique goes through several stages of visible mediation; and these differences are not only of grade but also of nature (qualitative).

This means to say that non-Christian practices and rites cannot be placed on the same level as Christian sacraments; but at the same time one must acknowledge in them a certain capacity for mediation of the grace of God. The mystery of Christ (or of salvation) is present and acts in non-Christian religions and Christianity, though in diverse ways. In Christianity it is openly present (to all light) : the Church is that part of the word explicitly "Christified", in full view of the community of eschatological salvation. But the fact of the opening of the word to the mystery of Christ is not limited to this community; it spreads to all men saved in fact by other religious confessions, since the mystery of Christ is present in a mysterious way and acts in the religious life of these confessions.

The novelty of Christianity is in the fulfillment, not only of revelation but also of the mediation of grace. The religious experience of a non-Christian does not become Christian without an intrinsic transformation (conversion) i. e., without an entering a new order of mediation of the grace of Christ.

B. Essential difference in mediation between non-Christian religions and Christianity

- **In the transmission of the Word:** It is one thing for God's word to man to arrive through the mediation of the great seers who have transmitted their personal experience of God, and another quite different thing to hear God's word to man from his incarnate Son. However rich in profound intuition, non-Christian writings will always be incomplete and ambiguous. Only the words, of Christ contain the authentic and definitive manifestation of God to men.

- **In the mediation of rites:** It is one thing to come into contact with the mystery of Christ through symbols and rites with which men over the centuries have attempted to express their faith and obedience to God, and another very different thing to be able to count on, for this, the full sacramentality of the symbolic actions which Christ himself instituted and handed on to the Church.

Only the Church's sacraments instituted by Christ offer us the full guarantee of channels through which God's grace is offered to us in an infallible way, though their present effectiveness depends on man's answer to the free proposal of God.

- **In spiritual experience:** It is one thing to live the mystery of Christ in a veiled manner, without clear knowledge of the infinite condescension God has shown us in it, and another very different thing to recognise that in the humble condition of Jesus the man, the proposal of God, in Christianity, is made in a wholly human way.

Here is the characteristic of the experience of God peculiar to Christianity; and this in the order of objectivity, as the personal presence of Christ in the life of every man depends on the personal answer given by the latter to the intervention of God in his life.

We could describe this peculiarity like this: through the *Church*, sacrament instituted by Christ and by action of the *Spirit* living in her and me, *Jesus of Nazareth*, son of Mary, died and buried, reveals to me the loving goodness of the *Father*, who created and renewed (re-created) in him all things and shall re-establish them at the end, at the time of his coming. Only Christianity can have this explicit experience of the mystery of Christ.

Therefore the step from a non-Christian religion to Christianity supposes an authentic novelty: the insertion in a new order, that of the Christian economy of salvation. It involves a break with the past to be able to assume what is new: a real *conversion*. To pass from the pre-Christian regime of salvation involves a process of death and resurrection, the experience of the paschal mystery of Christ.

C. The need to consider religions in a dynamic perspective

The questions on the salvific value of non-Christian religions and the inspiration of their sacred books cannot be resolved abstractly, with theories applied indiscriminately to all situations: they must be resolved concretely, in a historic manner, case by case.

- Historically and specifically, salvific grace comes to the aid of men who are not isolated in the solitude of their conscience, but placed in a socio-cultural context. Men normally - especially the "simple ones", those with little learning - live their religious experience in the forms proposed by their own religious community. It is in this context, in this set of historic circumstances, where for man the radical, imperative of his conscience normally increases. It is thus that non-Christian religions can be means of salvation for such men: those who are saved, not *in spite of* their religion, but *in* their religion, although by means of Christ. This statement is not the expression of an attitude of indifferentism, according to which all religions are the same, and each man is saved in the one he prefers. Man is saved in the way in which

he in fact finds himself with the absolute and to the extent that in his conscience he goes to meet God's immutable invitation. Through these means man orients himself towards the salvation of God offered us in Christ.

- Being a relationship with the absolute, each religion tends intrinsically to universality, to catholicity. We then get a dynamic convergence among all religions. In this sense every religion is valid and to the extent that it is - in this dynamic sense - universal and catholic, it represents the only universal salvific will of God: (in traditional language we would say: in that it manifests a "votum ecclesiae").

The relationship between Christianity and other religions cannot be understood as a simple static confrontation. It must be understood dynamically as a historical process. Kung ("Christ sein") says: "Religions are not historical monuments. . . , rather they are vital attitudes of faith which real men live in constantly renewed ways throughout history (e.g. the majority of Asians have today a much less impersonal idea of God than we might gather from the ancient systems of Shankara and the like). As a consequence one must interpret religions by looking ahead: open as they are to new problem areas, they themselves are the ones who incessantly pose new disquieting questions." In this sense we could say that they also walk towards the plenitude of the Kingdom.

Traditional doctrine points clearly in this direction when it states that the moment one non-Christian religion *meets* Christianity and has to define itself in the face of it, in favour or against, its position in the history of salvation and its theological legitimacy change radically.

But it is clear that an encounter entails reciprocal interaction and an interchange among partners. When there is only a mutual exchange of information, the real "encounter" does not take place. For this there must be a real dialogue, reciprocal discovery and mutual enriching. It is in this perspective that we understand the "mission" of the Church today.

3. Towards an overall vision

The Church, "universal sacrament of salvation", sign and instrument of love and life, of unity and salvation which God offers everyone, could also be designated sacrament of *universal salvation*. That is, a sign of the sovereignty of God over all eras, men, societies; and for that reason sacrament also of all religions as such.

The Kingdom (Rule and Realm) of God is a mysterious reality which acts in history in a silent and powerful way, like yeast in dough. The Kingdom is manifested in love, peace, justice, in the gentle creation of beauty, the dignity of man, etc.

Grace (Kingdom) which has been "sowed" in human history also has its own history and grows and develops. It tends increasingly to incarnate itself in human history (become humanized). By virtue of its very inner strength it becomes articulate and expresses itself in various socio-cultural languages. It thus becomes constantly crystallized and specific. Up to the moment this reality of grace becomes at a certain point so intense and incandescent that it appears like a sociological visibility and tangibility; it is then that it can be called sacrament or sign of what God does for men, always and everywhere.

All religions are, in this sense, social expressions of the Kingdom: although fragile and imperfect, never quite safe from human darkness.

Hebrew history is a particularly luminous sacramental manifestation ("special sacramental flame") of the liberation, of the unification which God works always in the world and in its favour. To the point that grace comes to be the guiding thread of the national history of that people, and the interventions of God are made visible and consciously accepted, this process of sacramentalization culminates in Christ. He is the point where everything that God, since always and everywhere, has been doing for man emerges in an incandescent manner. Jesus is, as a consequence, the universal sacrament of salvation, and the definitive sign of universal salvation. Being the "eschaton" and the "focal point" of history, he exerts a transforming influence which penetrates and totally electrifies the whole universe in evolution.

The Church is not an ulterior focal point. It is the manifestation ("blossoming") of the salvific mystery constituted by Christ. It is the "visibilization" of his presence as the Risen Lord, the sign that salvation is obtainable, the promise of his permanence and the proclamation of his universality. *In the same manner as Jesus is the Kingdom, in that specific point where he emerges as personal history, in that same way the Church is sacrament of the Kingdom, in as much as developed in a social history.* Through it the Church is the sacrament of all religions of humanity in Jesus and with Jesus.

Many - all in fact - are called to the Kingdom and to its blessings. But not all have been chosen to constitute the sacrament of the Kingdom.

What is sure is that there are always a certain number of men of all races, peoples and religions, who are called to be Church - sign of the redeeming love which God has for all men. Thus, a special historic witness of the love manifested on Calvary offers the world an intimate experience of that same love. But we do not know who and how many are the chosen ones. For this reason the Church continues to give witness and to invite men to join her, to give thanks with her.

(Cf. S. Rayan: "Mission after Vat. II: problems and positions" in Intern. Rev. of Mission LIX (1970) pp. 414-426)

IV. HISTORIC GROWTH OF HUMANITY AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD

1. Questions we ask ourselves today

The subject is of interest from several perspectives. In the first place we have already seen that the saving action of God transcends the frontiers of the visible Church, transcends, too, the circle of the great religions and acts in the hearts of all men. If all this is so, the question immediately arises: what is the salvific value of everything man does? To be true to one's own conscience, develop the values that contribute to the growth of the person and of humanity, further history and the world; what relation has all this to the Kingdom of God and therefore to salvation?

To pose the problem better, let us remember that the kingdom of God is not the work of men, but a transcendent reality, the intervention of God in history, a free

gift and not our own conquest. What relationship is there then between the Kingdom of God and the human efforts to build a better world?

The problem may be posed from a different angle. Once the limitations and shadows of the past have been overcome, humanity goes toward the conquest of new personal and communitarian values. With its war on hunger, misery, oppression, ignorance, divisions, it tends towards the creation of a better world. For many there is no other salvation than that coming from man's efforts to liberate himself and humanity, on the way to fulfillment... Often, as a reaction against the clericalism of the past, this affirmation of man takes the form of total rejection of the Church and even of God. Is this always and only an excessive pretense of independence? Or does this affirmation by man have a meaning and value in the light of the Kingdom, once purified of these distortions arising not only from subjective circumstances but from historic conditionings also.

The subject presents another interesting dimension. As we said in the introduction to the theme on the future, the question of where humanity is going is at the center of all present concern, and constitutes a mandatory point of dialogue between the believing community and the rest of men. The Church sees herself today more than ever in need of giving a reason for her hope.

Does the Church, the believing community have its own good news for the future of man and of the world, or do Christians limit themselves to repeat humanist programmes and the new ideas, once these have lost their novelty and shock value? Such a question is not merely academic. Many times on hearing certain preaching or on reading ecclesial documents, one asks oneself if they are not limiting themselves to popularize the ideals of the French Revolution or of the Socialist Revolution. In giving witness of her faith the Church really should not look for opportunism, but fidelity to the Gospel. On the other hand, it would not be true to the Gospel if in fact what it proclaims and lives is not good news for the men of our time.

2. What faith tells us

Note : We have already dealt with the worth and meaning of human values and of the historic efforts of humanity for a growth of their own*. Therefore we shall now deal directly with the present concern over building a better future and its relation to the promises of God in Christ.

A. The mystery of Christ embraces the universe.

Faith teaches us that God made him Lord of the universe and that his power of salvation extends to all that has been created. (Eph. 1 and 10; Col. 1:14-20). All humanity and the cosmos is summed up in Christ. He was resurrected as the first-born: all of us are following him. He was made the point of cohesion of everything, for in him were made heaven and earth and through him history walks towards the definitive fulfillment.

But he lives in us; helping us become the person we want to be; resurrected in his image and transcending the limits of space and time; new creatures.

At the same time, the future of man is unthinkable without the future of the world. Creation was made with a view towards man. And to a body, to an immortal, incorruptible, transformed humanity corresponds a new world, a new heaven and a new earth; the earth which the same God in Jesus assumed and in him has already been glorified. Throughout the Bible it is quite clear that the fate of the world is man's fate. Both develop in history and both have been assumed by God in Christ. Man is always a being for the world as he is always a being for others. (Cf. Rom. 8:18-25). So then shall we again find the best fruits of our historic actions in the new life of the resurrection, transformed according to the new ineffable manner of existing which God in Christ grants us. Human values are oriented towards the Kingdom because they are also the fruit of the action of the Spirit of the Risen Lord. (Cf. GS 39).

Teilhard de Chardin said with reason that the Kingdom of God deeply penetrates the universe and animates and directs from within the evolution of the cosmos, manifesting an irresistible tendency to the supreme personalization of the God-Man who, as head, sums up and unifies the universe.

We know all this, but we do not know how and why. It is necessary to stress this with sobriety so as not to fall into futurologies and illusions. If the future we await really is "the new", the new existence of the heavens, we can neither imagine nor describe it with present categories: all we could say is little, and all we could imagine useless.

B. Creators of the new world

We are also protagonists of the future. The exaltation of Christ as lord consists precisely in that his capacity to give life and make all things new is unfolded, to initiate germinally the new mode of existence which he has already achieved (cf. Rom. 1:4; 1 Cor. 15:45; Jn. 37-39).

With this manifestation we too receive the capacity to achieve the future, the new world. God has wished to communicate to man his creative power and liberty. Not only to man is the development of this world linked. The new life which since Christ takes root in us makes us capable of carrying out the fruits of the Kingdom of God: truth, justice, love, peace. The creative and unbounding love of God makes us capable of sowing in our history the fruits of his alliance; he associates us with the building of the future (Mt. 25:29ff).

This capacitating is at the same time demanding. To the God of faith and promise we must correspond with our action, with our committed life. The love which God communicates to us goes back to him through the love we give to man. The Spirit of Jesus Christ makes us free for this. (Gal. 5:13)

C. One single task

We go back now to the question we asked ourselves at the beginning of this section. What relation is there between earthly hopes and the salvation promised in Christ? Certainly there is a close relation. The hope opened up on the horizon of faith is in the mainstream of history. History is where the salvation of God occurs. And it is the saving God who has given us the liberty, who drives our efforts forwards. "Earthly progress must be carefully distinguished from the growth of Christ's Kingdom. Nevertheless, to the extent that the former can contribute to the better ordering of human society, it is of vital concern to the Kingdom of God." (GS 39).

On the other hand, one does not hope for the true God without showing belief in his promise through the progressive effort in the transformation of the world. The believer knows the way history is going, a direction of brotherhood for all, liberty for all, life for all. His message does not appear effective unless in this active waiting.

Vatican Council II took a special interest in refuting the accusation that religion was the opium of the people. This is why it emphasizes how living one's faith and charity leads Christians to commit themselves to the building of a world worthy of man (cf. GS 34, 38-40, 43).

It is up to us to accelerate the coming of the Lord, not as something automatic but as an answer to a promise of God in Christ. We also know that faith does not give us any specific instrument or programme. The believer has to carry out this task in a creative and associate way, hoping in the God that makes us grow and who is not content until man, collectively considered and each one in particular, reaches the stature of the free man He would like him to be.

This same faith introduces us, however, to the dynamics of "hoped for" salvation, so that man should not glory in his own works and that these may be recognised as incapable of giving an absolute, definite future to himself and to history. That future must be welcomed as grace, for it is God himself communicated in plenitude.

3. To live in an attitude of discernment

The believer is not so ingenuous as to think that the prophets of the new coincide with the frontiers of the Church, but neither can he simply state the contrary. His attitude is more of one who searches for the new and just everywhere, following the trail of God. The same Christian hope makes us live this tension in a permanent manner:

- To oppose everything which is selfishness, stagnation, wherever it be; to oppose incredulity and idolatry. The message "be not conformed to this world" will always have meaning. We have to translate it in an existential way, i. e. : "be not conformed to those asleep, those who have as their life's goal to live for themselves or to possess; to those who, in the name of God even, exploit others, etc." (cf. Rom. 12:2).
- But at the same time the believer has to recognise the call and the love of God already present in the world. Which is translated in an attitude both ecumenical and open to all that is noble, in religions and historic movements.

It is therefore a matter for the Church to live in an attitude of constant attention to the signs of the times, attentive to what goes on in the world, to perceive the work and design of God.

The signs of the times for us have the meaning of a word of God, above all, the set of facts which at a certain moment express the deepest aspirations of men. The certainty that Christ is present in history and acts in it, allows us to overcome the history-salvation dualism and discover the salvific meaning of history itself.

The attitude faith demands is that of *listening deeply* to what goes on in the world. To grasp the great aspirations of humanity, although its expressions be contaminated by imperfections or errors, is to perceive the voice of God. But if God acts in the

world and if it is possible thanks to faith to perceive his action, it is not enough to recognise this action. One must also serve the values in which that action is manifested. To this end it is necessary that Christians incarnate an attitude of dialogue and of collaboration and participation in the great ideals of humanity.

“To act in favour of justice and take an active part in the task of transforming the world are, to our understanding, a constitutive dimension of preaching the Gospel.” (Synod 71, Document on Justice, Introduction).

In his Incarnation God in Christ has given his YES to humanity, totally assuming the human reality, with the sole exception of sin which, in its most intimate nature, is nothing but the expression of the anti-values of selfishness and of sufficiency, obstacles to the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God.

Sin has been defeated by grace, to the point that the presence of grace in the world is more consistent than the presence of sin.

The Church is called to exercise discernment over events; to discover where God acts, in order to be able to say yes to this, his action, and to be witness of the presence of Christ; and also to discover the situations of sin, to be able to say no, where God says no, where selfishness and sufficiency work to impede the carrying out of his plan.

Wherever signs of grace, which defeat sin, are discovered, there the Church should second this action of grace. Thus she becomes a community which discerns, like a prophetic community, like a salvific community.

V. THE CHURCH AT THE SERVICE OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

That the Church is the sacrament of the Kingdom of God is not only a title or definition. It is also a vocation and a demand. That is why this reflection cannot end without alluding to a few basic attitudes which condition the fidelity of the Church and of every believer, nor without proposing a few pastoral guidelines which could contribute to the Christian community's being at this time a sign and instrument of the Kingdom of God.

The list we make is by no means exhaustive. We only want to suggest some trails which would serve to stimulate the creativity and commitment of persons and groups. Furthermore, the suggestions we make here take into account the various aspects of the subject of the Kingdom which we have studied.

1. Imitation of Jesus Christ

The Church is at the service of the Kingdom not only when she *says* what Jesus said about the Kingdom, but also when she *lives* or tries to live for the Kingdom like Jesus. This implies translating, today, Christ's dedication to the poor, the oppressed the blind. . . (Lk. 4 : 16-21).

It is not difficult to see that the Church today finds itself faced with groups and conceptions of social life analogous to those existing in Jesus' time. Therefore, the Church ought to define itself today and show the Kingdom of God she is waiting for, in a concrete way :

- In the face of the established order, avoiding being used as justifying ideology ; favouring everything which means change for the better of man ; denouncing all forms of messianism. She must likewise accept the provisionality of her position and institutions.
- In the face of the conquest of power, even that planned to favour social change for the betterment of the people, the Church must give witness that its strength lies in poverty. She must remain free to be able to question the new power. She must show she believes in the means of Christ.
- In the face of the temptation to convert herself into a group of the select, the pure, who separate themselves from the condition of the majority, and their struggles, happiness and ambiguities, the Church must feel herself a travelling companion to every human group, must be aware of her own sin and follow the way of the Incarnation.
- In the face of political postures of commitment, she must decidedly take the side of the cause of Jesus, i.e., define herself in favour of the poor, promote justice and denounce oppression. For this she must live in constant discernment.

(Cf. LG 8 ; AG 5 ; also H. Kung : "Essere cristiani", c.p. 572-578).

2. Constantly discover the Gospel

Discover it as the great good news which gives meaning to life. Only from this joyful discovery will the dynamism of the mission be reborn. As Paul VI expressed, in a happy phrase : "In the end, is there any other way of communicating the Gospel than by transmitting to someone else one's own awareness of faith?" (EN 46).

3. Go out to meet all those who fight and love

Many are the people who follow this path, but at the same time they ask themselves whether it is worthwhile continuing to love and wait. In effect, love - which is the experience of salvation at hand to everyone - once the first enthusiasm is over, becomes aware that it is a real giving of self, and then the basic question arises : is it worthwhile loving? It is then that the Christian dialogue becomes necessary lest the love should recede or go astray. And this dialogue can be made in many ways, naturally ; sometimes just the presence is enough !

This dialogue about the great problems of man, and in conclusion, about the meaning of life, is the greatest test of love the Church can give. (GS 3 ; Ecclesiam Suam).

In this dialogue the Church not only evangelizes, but is evangelized on being questioned about her own faith, on being obliged to give a reason for her hope. The Church discovers, besides, new gifts of the Spirit and thus enlarges the spaces of its catholicity.

4. More specifically, establish an in-depth dialogue with the great religions

The missionary action cannot be reduced to a monologue, nor to an attempt to

"convert" people ; nor can it be a mere "adaptation" of the Gospel to non-Christian religions, carried out with the criterion of only preserving its exterior forms, but by sacrificing its original meaning and religious contents to replace them with "Christian" contents. This would be a deceitful function, contrary to the principle of the Incarnation. Because the Word has not behaved "as if" he were made man, but took on a definite human nature and this is how he has guided it to its fulfillment. No culture is susceptible to "being perfected" in Christ if only its wrappings, and not its religious nuclei, are accepted.

Just as Christ was made incarnate in order to manifest and carry out salvation, so the Church fulfills this function by incarnating herself in the religious, cultural, social forms of the various peoples. And this incarnation follows the way of the "Passover", of "conversion" necessary for all. (Cf. A. Dulles, o.c., p.33).

In the field of praxis and historic experience, this function would have to be carried out by "dialogue" in shared search for Truth, through reciprocal confrontation and mutual enrichment.

In reality, there are aspects of the mystery of Christ that other non-Christian men experience in greater depth than many Christians.

So non-Christians can help Christians to deepen their experience of the Mystery which has been authentically revealed to them, whilst Christians can purify and demythify the beliefs of non-Christians . . . (cf. Kung, pp. 113-116)

5. Incarnate the Gospel in the various cultures

"The Gospel, and consequently evangelization, are certainly not identified with culture and are independent with respect to all cultures. However, the Kingdom the Gospel announces is lived by men deeply linked to a culture and the building of the Kingdom cannot but take on the elements of the culture and of human cultures. Independent with respect to cultures, the Gospel and evangelization are not necessarily incompatible with them, but rather are able to impregnate them all without submitting to any. The rupture between the Gospel and culture is without any doubt the drama of our time, as it was in other periods. Hence the necessity to make every effort with a view to a generous evangelization of culture, or more exactly of cultures. These must be regenerated by encounter with the Good News. But this encounter will not take place if the Good News is not proclaimed." (Paul VI, EN 20).

6. Go into action

Man's growth, the overcoming of his limitations, the creation of favourable conditions for the exercise of his own liberty, depend today for the most part on political action in the wider sense of the word. Politics is offered to us today as a privileged field in which to give historic shape to our faith. It is the way to consciously assume conflicts proper to living together with others, whose origin is frequently violence and institutionalised oppression. Of course in this task one has to reckon with the ambiguities and contradictions of the human heart. But this does not stop it from being an important and necessary field: it is worthwhile spending one's life in an effort to humanize the world and each parcel of reality.

Therefore, for Christians this commitment is neither a luxury nor a free option, it is

an urgency of our faith. For in one way or another every problem has political roots and incidences. Now then: a community which is not committed to man is a community which neither believes, nor awaits, nor loves.

7. Be at the same time critical instance and liberating impulse

The Church knows that all men have a future. Even more: that the future is the same for all men according to the promise of God in Christ. And if the future is awaiting all, one must already be living in the present for all - a present of love and liberty, of faith and hope. That is why the Christian community feels the responsibility of carrying out a critical and liberating function with respect to the world in which it lives, and of which it is a part. A task of criticism and discernment to prevent man and political systems from stagnating, of already considering a moment of its history as goal. God's promise is what the "eschatological reserve" imposes on the Christian community. That is to say, by virtue of the Christian faith itself, one must renounce every form of idolatry, every intent to convert a certain type of society into absolute, for none of that is worthy of man: every man is capable of more. This contribution of destroying all idols is a critical contribution inseparable from Christian faith, and requires that the Church be very present in the world.

By virtue of this mission, she shall denounce all oppressive power; shall awaken from somnolence those who do not put all their lives at the service of others and the progress of the world; shall equally try and question those who make of production and consumption the zenith of humanity, forgetting creativity, contemplation or the liberating praxis.

This critical function is inseparable from the function of liberation. By reason of faith itself the Christian community has always to opt in favour of man and the world, because it knows that both have the capacity to live in plenitude in Christ and receive God who is given to us as a gift. Therefore the Christian, at the same time as he relativises every concrete programme and denounces ingenious utopias sides with that programme which has more possibilities of favouring man; True, in this task he is fallible, but that is his concern, this is what we should demand of it and search for all together.

A liberation which is not content with just any type of development, because the Christian's humanism is always open. In conclusion, it is a question of making man go from less human to more human conditions, and man's conditions are fully human when they are open to communion with God in faith and in love. (PP 21).

8. In constant tension

This irrenounceable vocation of giving witness of hope leads the Christian community to a constant tension. Here are some specific instances where this is manifested:

- In our welfare society the community testifies its hope in the Lord Jesus if it overcomes the temptation to install itself in present conditions, of putting down roots in the first oasis it finds.
- In a technocracy it will believe in man and in the existential values which cannot be reduced to calculations and computers.

- In a competitive society it will foster the cooperation for, and appreciation of outcasts.
- In a world which values efficiency, our hope and communitarian commitment will show we really care for man and that he is always at the centre of our concern.

Living the evangelical counsels, the fr̄ee giving up of means, the love which transcends the dimensions of sexuality, and the service which accepts the limitations of cooperation and of groups . . . all these are ways of giving witness of the hope within us.

9. Sharing the cross of Christ

Very frequently our commitment to justice and liberation will not see any fruits. The power of evil and organized oppression are sufficiently strong to resist several initiatives for change. That is why we need a mystique of hope. The suffering that moderates in hope is the source of liberty, of communion and of new commitments. The believer knows that suffering is participation in the passion of Christ and, through it, the road to liberation.

10. With joy and thanksgiving

The Christian community also knows how to enjoy and celebrate the values of the Kingdom, the new life, already present in it and in the world. The paschal joy and "joie de vivre" are another form of testifying that it believes in the promise, that the process of renewal of the universe is working, that the risen Christ is present in it every day. It celebrates and sings the beauties of life: children, spring, love, poetry, technical advances . . . and also celebrates the struggles for justice, liberty. It does not wait until it has won the ultimate victory, but sings and blesses God for what he has done through Christ and for what He carries out within us day by day. A community is an expression and rouser of hope; so, in the poverty of its actions and sins, the Christian community maintains alive the hope that was described in the Apocalypse as the translation of the best of man's aspirations:

"And I saw a new heaven and a new earth. For the first heaven and the first earth were gone, and the sea is now no more. And I, John, saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice from the throne saying: Behold the tabernacle of God with men, and he will dwell with them. And they shall be his people; and God himself with them shall be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes: and death shall be no more, nor mourning, nor crying, nor sorrow shall be any more, for the former things are passed away. And he that sat on the throne, said: Behold, I make all things new. And he said to me: Write, for these words are most faithful and true.

And night shall be no more: and they shall not need the light of the lamp, nor the light of the sun, because the Lord God shall enlighten them, and they shall reign for ever and ever." (Apoc. 21:1-5; 22:5).

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