

## THE SPIRIT AND THE BRIDE: I

*Saint Luke's Witness to the Primitive Church*

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*And I saw the holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride and adorned for her husband . . . And there came one of the seven angels . . . and spoke with me saying: Come and I will show thee the bride, the wife of the Lamb. . . . I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you these things in the churches. I am the root and stock of David, the bright and morning star. And the spirit and the bride say: Come. And he that heareth, let him say: Come. And he that thirsteth, let him come. And he that will, let him take the water of life freely.* (APOC. 21. 2, 9, 22. 16-17.)

**I**N an impassioned appeal for apostolic activity on the part of layfolk, described in the foreword as 'a disturbing and courageous book',<sup>1</sup> the author strongly decries the defeatist attitude that some adopt in face of the present calamitous state of society. The spread of gross materialism, the threat of unparalleled destruction by new and horrible means of warfare, and the success of what is well-named 'apostolic Communism', may easily tempt us to think that now is the time to close up the ranks, concentrate on the faithful remnant, and leave the unbelieving multitude to its fate. This attitude is not new in the history of the Church. It recalls the example of those early Christians who were so persuaded of the imminence of the second coming of our Lord that they thought it not worth while concerning themselves with the ordinary affairs of life, or of anything else but their private preparation for that great event. But the Church's answer to that problem was the same then as it is today; it was to repeat the final injunction of her Master, to go into the whole world and announce the good news of salvation to every creature. And if we know anything at all of the state of human society in the first century, in the days of Tiberius, Caligula and Nero, we shall not wonder that the prospect was enough to daunt any man who was not supported by assurance from on high.

Think of St Paul himself at Corinth in the middle of that first century. He had arrived there from Athens where his experience

<sup>1</sup> *L'Eglise en Etat de Mission* by Mgr Suenens, auxiliary bishop of Malines; preface by Archbishop Montini of Milan.

had done little to encourage his hopes of the apostolate. And what he found at Corinth must have depressed him as much as the religious scepticism and cynicism of the Athenian schools. At that date Corinth was a somewhat new city. The old capital of the Achaean League had been completely destroyed by the Roman consul Lucius Mummius in 146 B.C., and it was not until a hundred years later that Julius Caesar had rebuilt the city. He peopled it with an Italian colony mostly composed of freed men, but soon the population was enormously increased by members of every race from the eastern Mediterranean, Greeks, Egyptians, Syrians, and Jews; for new Corinth became a great trading port, occupying as it did a site between the Aegean and the Adriatic, thus forming a link of communication between the oriental and the western world. Making due allowance for exaggeration, we can form some idea of the condition of the city from the report of a first-century writer who credits Corinth with 460,000 slave labourers. The place became a byword for wealth and for that moral corruption which generally is the accompaniment of great wealth. Its unbridled licence was too much even for the standards of the pagan world, and the word *korinthiadzein* or *corinthiazare* was coined to signify outrageous immorality. Here and there in the two epistles to the Corinthians<sup>2</sup> we find St Paul making very pointed allusions to what went on even among his own converts; but the best place to find what sort of impression the place and the people created on his mind is the striking picture he paints of pagan moral degradation in the first chapter of his epistle to the Romans, written from Corinth about the year 57 after he had spent several years working in the city. At that time he had not yet seen Rome. When we recall how he had been brought up in those strict rabbinical circles where Gentiles were regarded as beyond the pale of God's mercy, hateful to God and to his chosen race, it bears striking witness to the miraculous character of his conversion to see how he faces the task of reclaiming a people like the Corinthians. Doubtless he too was at times tempted to think it was an impossible task. But the kindly Gentile convert Luke, who had invited<sup>3</sup> and led Paul into Europe, reminds us

<sup>2</sup> 1 Cor. 5. 1; 6. 9-20; 2 Cor. 6. 14; 7.

<sup>3</sup> I hope it is not fanciful to suppose that the man who appeared in a vision to St Paul at Troas, Acts 16. 9-10, was no other than Luke, whom St Paul recognized next day in the streets of the city. It is in 16. 10 that Luke begins what are known as the 'we sections' of Acts.

in the Acts of the Apostles that Christ appeared again to the Apostle at Corinth encouraging him with the hardly believable news: 'Fear not, but speak, and hold not thy peace. For I have much people in this city'.<sup>4</sup> How thoroughly in keeping with Luke's gospel of universal salvation!

We ourselves may well take encouragement from this incident, and hear the same Jesus Christ, 'yesterday, and today, and the same for ever',<sup>5</sup> addressing us in the same words. Bad as things appear, we may believe that 'he has much people in this city'; and there are not wanting grounds of hope for those who look for them. One is the increasing evidence of the growing realization among Christian people divided from us in faith that the seriousness of the times cries out urgently for a closing of the ranks in face of the enemy: not such a closing of the ranks as that decried above, but such as is being sought by many earnest efforts towards some kind of unity among those who sincerely desire to count themselves in the ranks of Christ's disciples. While admitting, as we are bound to admit, that they are still a long way from seeing that the only real and effective principle of unity is oneness in faith—and this necessarily supposes unity of divinely guided and therefore infallible teaching authority, the only kind of authority which provides security of belief when the object of faith is supernatural revelation—let us at least admit that fundamentally the desire for unity is a right desire and one to be guided in the right direction. It is so easy for those in our position to be derisively critical. But no one who has come into contact with some of these non-Catholic groups working and praying for Christian unity ought to fall into that temptation; for there is a vastly different atmosphere from what was prevalent in the past. It touches the heart to see the humble spirit of prayer that animates so many, and on the authority of Scripture this cannot fail to pierce the clouds. I hope I shall not be misunderstood when I say that this might well induce a more humble approach to the problem on our side, a thing that ought to be the accompaniment of our necessary refusal to compromise in matters of principle.

In a word, despite the darkness over the face of the earth, there are signs that the Spirit of God is again moving over the deep. After all, bad as the situation may be, it is not so black as the

<sup>4</sup> Acts 18. 9-10.

<sup>5</sup> Hebrews 13. 8.

primeval darkness and chaos of nothingness presented to our view in the symbolism of Genesis. The Spirit that brought light and life, beauty and unity and order out of the dark abyss of nothingness, is the same Spirit that St Luke continually keeps in view in his account of the birth and propagation of the Church in the Acts of the Apostles. In this respect Acts forms a fitting continuation of his Gospel where, much more than his fellow Synoptists, he draws our attention to the influence of the Holy Ghost upon the life and actions of Jesus, as well as upon all those who were associated with the work of the Incarnation. Moreover, in keeping with his own gentle nature and the kindliness of his whole Gospel, he insists that the Spirit is a good spirit, and the works of the Spirit are works of loving-kindness. His is the only Gospel to go into details about our Lord's first sermon, preached in the synagogue at Nazareth, of which he gives us the text; and the text is the words of Isaias 61. 1-2:

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. Wherefore he hath anointed me to preach the good news to the poor: he hath sent me to preach deliverance to captives and sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord.'<sup>6</sup>

How characteristic it is of him to omit the closing words of the prophet who announced also 'a day of retribution' or divine vengeance! That does not fit in with Luke's idea of the character and work of the Spirit. Note also the variation in the parallel accounts of Matthew and Luke concerning our Lord's teaching on prayer.

Matthew 7. 11

'If you, then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?'

Luke 12. 13

'If you, then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the Father from heaven give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?'

Gentile convert though he was, Luke had thoroughly grasped the teaching of the Old Testament and cleverly used it to show how the new dispensation introduced by Christ grew out of the

<sup>6</sup> *Diem retributionis* (Vulg.), 'day of reward' (Douay), is not in the Greek of Luke.

<sup>7</sup> The Douay follows the Vulgate, which reads 'good spirit', but the best Greek texts read 'Holy Spirit'.

old; and this is especially true with regard to the benign work of the Holy Spirit in the world. He must have been familiar with the ancient rabbinic interpretation of the story of creation, according to which the Spirit of God hovered over the waters 'like the dove which hovers over its young, at times touching them, at times not touching them'. Those who tell us that the spirit of the Old Testament is a spirit of slavish fear, and that God is always presented to the Hebrews as a hard task-master, have failed to notice that God first appears on the scene under this mild and gentle aspect. Luke has not missed this. The same idea is expressed in a more appealing fashion still in the commentary of Rabbi Rashi, who in the eleventh century records the ancient tradition: 'The Throne of Honour hovers in the air and broods over the face of the waters by the breath of the mouth of the Holy-One-Blessed-Be-He, and according to his saying, like a dove brooding on the nest'. Milton carries on the same tradition in the opening lines of *Paradise Lost*:

'And chiefly thou, O Spirit, that dost prefer  
 Before all temples th' upright heart and pure,  
 Instruct me, for thou know'st; thou from the first  
 Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread  
 Dove-like sat'st brooding on the vast abyss  
 And mad'st it pregnant: what in me is dark  
 Illumine, what is low raise and support;  
 That to the height of this great argument  
 I may assert eternal Providence,  
 And justify the ways of God to men.'

Certainly Luke has something, like this in mind when he tells the story of the new creation which took place at the pentecostal appearance of the Holy Spirit at the beginning of Acts; and with that the Acts of the Apostles grows logically out of his Gospel which he had ended with the promise of Christ: 'Behold I send you what has been promised by my Father: but stay you in the city until you be endued with power from on high.' This carries our mind back to the beginning of his Gospel where the angel had said to Mary: 'The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee'. It also carries our mind forward to the beginning of Acts where Luke tells how the risen Jesus gave 'commandments by the Holy Ghost to the apostles whom he had chosen'. One of the commands was that

they 'should not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for the promise of the Father', through which they should be 'baptized by the Holy Ghost', and receive the power of the Holy Ghost in order that they might be infallible 'witnesses unto me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the uttermost part of the earth'.

Faithfully Luke carried out the intention with which he began his history of Christ and the Church. 'It hath seemed good to me also, having diligently attained to all things from the beginning, to write to thee in order, most excellent Theophilus, that thou mayest know the security of the things in which thou has been instructed.' The opening words of Acts recall this noble prologue with which he commenced the Gospel, to which he refers as his 'former treatise'. Both he addresses to his friend and patron Theophilus, a Christian of rank and dignity it would appear, who remains unknown to us save for these sole references to him; unless we prefer to accept the suggestion that Theophilus, 'the beloved of God', is a literary figure representing you and me and every disciple of Christ. The gentle and cultured Antiochene physician, to whom his companion and master St Paul, so stern on occasion, refers in such terms of endearment and praise,<sup>8</sup> begins his first treatise with an apologia, as was the fashion in the educated Greek circles where he had been brought up. He seems to excuse himself for writing over again what has already been written by so 'many (who) have taken in hand to set forth in order a narration of the things that have been accomplished amongst us, according as those have delivered them unto us who from the commencement were eye witnesses and ministers of the word'. It would be very unlike the exact and painstaking Luke to refer merely to Matthew and Mark as 'many', and these were the only canonical Gospels in existence when he wrote the above words. Another generation was to go by before John's Gospel was to appear. But both history and elementary psychology assure us that of course there were from the beginning many who wrote some account of the gospel story. Every enthusiastic disciple who could wield a pen would write for the sake of his absent friends an account of the wonderful things which had produced so great a change in his own life and outlook. Moreover, acceptance of the gospel carried with it the obligation to spread the good news

<sup>8</sup> Col. 4. 14.

throughout the world. It is not surprising, or even regrettable, that nearly all these documents have disappeared, when we remember that the Church has guaranteed with her divine authority only those on which she has set her seal as inspired by God.

It would again be very unlike Luke if, as some have supposed, he were here criticizing unfavourably the many accounts that had preceded his own, as though he wished to put Theophilus on his guard against them; and there is nothing in the text which warrants such an assumption. On his own showing, his predecessors had done only what he himself had ever been careful to do: they, like himself, had appealed to the voice of living tradition. How could he censure them for committing to writing what those 'had delivered who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word'? For Luke this was the established rule for obtaining that security of faith, desired by all reasonable men, which he sought to convey to his friend Theophilus. And it is very much *apropos* to insist on this point in speaking of the primitive Church. It was the charge of the Reformers of the sixteenth century, as it was the charge of some groups in the early ages of the Church, that Catholic doctrines and practices were not primitive, and it was their claim to return to the teaching of the primitive Church by the aid of the written Scriptures.

(To be concluded)



## FROM SYNAGOGUE TO EARLY CHRISTIAN ASSEMBLY: I

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**T**HE purpose of this paper is to show how the Synagogue as an institution, as it was organized by the Jews on their return from the Exile in Babylon, not only provided the early Christian Church with a whole set of services, customs and ritual laws, but also supplied a certain kind of atmosphere which played an important part in the development of early Christianity.

<sup>1</sup> Translated from a talk given at N. D. de Sion, Paris, July 1955.