

sion. It occasions an encounter with the Lord, a participation in his suffering, an anticipation of the dissolution of all things that will prelude their renovation. As such, sickness is the fitting framework for the reception of a special sacrament that brings us the reality of which the present world and its frailty are only a shadow.'

Perhaps, as we live in an age of liturgical reform, when all the outward ceremonies of the Church are being made more realistic, in closer touch with the life of the ordinary man, it may be that the manner of administering these two sacraments will also be restored to something of their early significance. Then confirmation might play a greater part in preventing the leakage of our youth, and the sacrament of the sick be more of a health-giving and comforting act for the suffering. In this way the Christian life of men today would be strengthened and the life of the Spirit given greater opportunity to grow and overcome the special difficulties which now confront it.



## CHRIST'S ACTIVE PRESENCE IN HISTORY<sup>1</sup>

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**T**HE Revelation of Jesus Christ.' Those are the first words of John's message to the persecuted Churches. He wished to give them a teaching that would enlighten and comfort them. Although not new, it would be more developed on the person and role of Jesus, 'the faithful witness, First-born among the dead, Prince of the kings of the earth' (I, 5). To give them confidence in the midst of trials, he would make manifest the active presence and entire mastery in temporal history of the risen Lord. The very first doxology already declares this dominant position of Christ in the vision that the exiled apostle will soon unfold:

To him who loves us, and who has washed us from our sins in his blood—and he has made us a kingdom and priests to his God and Father—to him the glory and the power for ages of ages. Amen. (I, 5, 6.)

The first vision (I, 12 *et seq*) further strengthens this impression

<sup>1</sup> Translated from Chapter III of *L'Apocalypse de Saint Jean: Vision Chrétienne de L'Histoire*.

that the book is entirely dominated by the power of Jesus, and that all other teaching derives from this, as a ray of light from its luminous source. Of all the writings previous to the fourth gospel, the Apocalypse may be thought to contain the most developed Christology. It recalls the main themes of the theology of St Paul, and those of the primitive catechesis. The fourth gospel itself will only be able to take up again and insist upon the new traits which appear for the first time in the Apocalypse, beginning with the doctrine of the Word. The Christian vision of history that we receive from Patmos is in the first place this: a vision of Christ and of his invisible but sure and irresistible action in history. In the manner of the book itself we will proceed by means of great evocations, successive and complementary, ranging from the close presence of the risen Lord among his own, to his universal dominion as King and Judge of the nations.

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The opening visions and also the 'Letters to the Churches' tend to show us Christ's mysterious but very near presence as the first impression about him.

I, John, your brother . . . I heard behind me a great voice. . . .

And, being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks, and in the midst of the candlesticks (One) like to the Son of Man, clothed in a long robe, and girded about the breasts with a girdle of gold. And his head and his hairs (were) white as wool, white as snow, and his eyes as a flame of fire, and his feet like unto brass that is fired in the furnace, and his voice as the voice of many waters.

And he had in his right hand seven stars, and from his mouth there came a sword, two-edged, sharp, and his face was as the sun shineth in its power.

And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as (one) dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying 'Fear not. . . .' (1, 9 *et seq.*)

And again, the beginning of the first letter, that to the Church at Ephesus, which shows him to us coming and going in the midst of the Churches (symbolised as we are shown in chapter 1, verse 20, by the golden candlesticks):

Behold what he says. . . . He who walks in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks (2, 2).

And above all, the insistence with which he repeatedly affirms Christ's risen life 'for ages of ages':

And I was dead, but behold I am living for ages of ages: (1, 18; cf. 2, 8).

Even the very tone itself of the letters reinforces this impression of the nearness, invisible yet almost sensible, of the risen Lord among the Churches. Certainly the resurrection of Christ is not a teaching proper to the Apocalypse: it was the first subject of the teaching and faith of the first generations of Christians and one already finds in St Paul (Col. 1, 18) this very expression, 'the First-born among the dead', which is one of Christ's Apocalyptic titles (1, 5). What is proper to St John is above all this insistence upon the presence of the risen Lord among the communities of believers. That is where St John sees him and shows him and not in some unknown, distant heaven (1, 12; 1, 20). We may note in passing that what he thus suggests is very akin to the impression given by the fourth gospel in the chapters devoted to the appearances after the resurrection. Here, as there, Christ appears and disappears, makes himself recognized at the very outset or, on the contrary, only suggests, and that by stages, his mysterious closeness. In short, there is this entirely individual way of action of a personal presence. Moreover, here as in the fourth gospel, this presence is not perceptible except to single disciples and to those after them who are capable of believing without seeing. And such was certainly his way of acting at the time of the Apocalypse. He 'walks' in the midst of the Churches (2, 1), ready to eject one from its primacy (2, 5), or to intervene 'swiftly' (2, 16) in the affairs of another; threatening to punish severely the woman Jezebel and those who follow her in her evil ways (2, 22 *et seq.*) or standing outside the door ready to sit at table with any who open to him (3, 20). The Acts of the Apostles also gives this impression in many passages of the risen Christ's invisible action in the conduct of the apostolate, acting himself or acting by the spirit. But no other book of the New Testament is so evocative on this point as the Apocalypse. There is no better commentary than this book on our Lord's words which end St Matthew's gospel: 'Behold I am with you always, even unto the end of the ages'. Before it paints the apotheosis of Jesus and so recalls his ascension into the mysterious heaven of divine glory, the Revelation of Patmos considers it ought to bring out in full relief his

active presence among the persecuted Church. One readily sees how much comfort such a message could hold. It is of far more tonic value to troops in battle to make them feel their invincible leader's presence in their ranks, than merely to evoke for them the glory which surrounds him in his distant palace.

It is not so certain that we present-day Christians have, as a whole, kept this realization of the first Christians' faith in Christ's resurrection and in the power that it has given him. One should here remark that in consequence of this many will fail to grasp the outcome of John's message in its full relief. If we honestly question ourselves, will not most of us have to acknowledge that our belief in Jesus's resurrection does not differ in its real meaning—though perhaps in its formulation—from our belief in the immortality of departed souls. Our belief that he is risen hardly makes us see him as any more active than they in the unrolling of the world's affairs. Certainly we deny neither his survival nor theirs, but practically we fail to distinguish between his case and theirs. We place him, like them, up above our world in that region, disembodied, extra-cosmic, divine if you will, to which men are brought by death. And we well know that with that region we have in no sense any kind of communication, apart from that thought and prayer which brings us into touch with them in the Creator of all these worlds. Whatever may be the influence of the works which they leave behind them or the power of the prayers they offer to God for us, our dead are no longer personages of history. That goes its way without them.

It is to be feared that we have only conceived Jesus Christ's relations with our human world in a way analogous to this, and that we have thus practically denied his resurrection. Like the dismayed women on Easter morning whom the angel already reproached with this, we insist upon 'seeking the living among the dead', whereas he has gone before us to Galilee (Luke 24, 5, 6); that is to say, to the heart of this world in which we still move and into which his resurrection has triumphantly brought him back. By so doing, we reduce this resurrection to being nothing but an episode with no morrow, perhaps inaugurating the personal triumph of the Crucified, but with no consequences for the exterior progress of his work here below. But the Apocalypse teaches us that in reality on that day began the triumph of this work of Jesus. Then began the irresistible victory which he must

win over the world, in virtue of the absolute mastery with which he has taken possession of the keys of death and hell. Hence the risen Christ is, though invisible, for ever the first and most active personage in human history.

By what title would he inherit such power? Undoubtedly in virtue of his bloody sacrifice. The passion is inseparable from the resurrection, in the Apocalypse as in the whole New Testament.

'I was dead, but behold I am living . . .' (1, 18). 'I was dead'—a rapid bringing to mind of the bloody passion, but it suffices. This is obviously no new teaching. The redeeming passion is clearly at the heart of all New Testament Christology, and our book does not seem to dwell upon it particularly. Rather it evokes the passion always in the context of the triumph Christ won by it. Thus the King of kings and Lord of lords of chapter 19 will appear 'clothed in a garment dipped in blood' (19, 13), just as he is presented under the characteristics of a sacrificed lamb in the apotheosis of chapter 5 (v.6). Even in his sufferings it is Christ triumphant whom the message of Patmos reveals for their comfort to the persecuted Churches.



## THE NEW ISRAEL

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**H**ATH God cast away his people? God forbid! . . . God hath not cast away his people which he foreknew . . . Even so at this present time there is a remnant saved according to the election of grace.' Thus wrote Saint Paul to the faithful at Rome: to those who had accepted Christ as the promised Messiah of Israel and the Saviour of mankind. For Christ did not found the Church independently of Israel but used the faithful of that nation in the establishing of it, as the prophet foretold: 'For as the new heavens and the new earth, which I will make to stand before me, saith the Lord: so shall your seed stand and your name.' (Isaias 66, 22.) During his lifetime he prepared his new Kingdom out of the material of the old, and if the old seemed to reject him it was he who in reality rejected those who