

EDITORIAL

SOMEONE was talking to me the other day about what he called the 'Magnificent moments' in his life - the times when he had been certain of God's presence and he said that the most significant moment for him was one which concerned jam jars and confirmation. As I prepare this issue of **Source** for the printers it seems to me that 'jam jars and confirmation' is not a bad description of the understanding of **the reality of the incarnation** which the articles explore; for, as Patrick Kavanagh has memorably expressed it:

God is in the bits and pieces of Everyday

A kiss here, a laugh again and sometimes tears.

This issue looks at how people's understanding of the reality of the incarnation has developed in the course of their lives and how they bump up against the reality of the incarnation in the mess and ordinariness and struggle of their life and ministry every day, and it closes with Teresa Okure's theological reflection. It has been a stimulating issue to prepare, even if the mess and unforeseen circumstance of every day have delayed its appearance unconscionably.

Since the last issue appeared the new editorial board has had a meeting in Rome with the general council and plans are afoot to improve the format and appearance of **Source**. Watch out for the next issue!

The editorial board continues to hope for more subscribers to **Source**. A subscription in any currency is acceptable; we ask for at least £6 or \$12 or 50 naira or 2000 cedis per annum. If you know of anyone who would like to subscribe, please contact one of the editors.

Once again we invite contributions, suggestions and responses to published articles. The next issue will be devoted to the theme **Imaging Futures**. Copy for the first issue of each year should reach the editor by the beginning of the previous September; for the second issue by the beginning of February.

JUDITH LANCASTER SHCJ

CHANGING VIEWS

Dorothy Wilson SHCJ

MY earliest ideas about the incarnation, as also my present ones, are all entwined with the trinity, Christology and the human race. So this article is necessarily inclusive and involved. My apologies as preamble.

For me as a child the incarnation was something that happened when Jesus was born. He was a baby, but he was also God. So he was already more than a thousand years old, even though he didn't look like it!

That was because Jesus had come out of heaven, where he had been forever, with the other two, who were also God. The most important there was his Father. The Father and the Son were the same age, though the Father looked older in his pictures. The Father was the one who had made everybody. He made all the rules too, and he got real mad when people broke them. He could see all the bad things you did, and when you died he would have to punish you. Sometimes he even killed people or sent them to hell. But he was nice too. And if you went to confession he forgave you (but you still had to be punished).

The Father and the Son loved each other very much, and that was why the third Person was there. He was a ghost! But he was a good ghost, so his name was the Holy Ghost. His job was to help people be good. He sort of lived inside people, though they didn't know it. He was something like the wind too. No one ever knew where he was going to show up. When he did show somewhere, he looked kind of like a bird.

So the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost lived in heaven. It was sort of like a club, with only three people, and they enjoyed it. They always agreed on everything, and they always decided together which one would do which thing. But all together, they were only one God. It was like magic or something: three was one and one was three. When you put the three together, they fit perfectly, sort of like a puzzle, and it was only one thing.

Then one day they had a meeting because they saw that down here on earth people were committing sins all over the place, and there was such a mess that a big ransom had to be paid. Maybe even more than a million dollars! It was more than anybody had, and more than everyone put together had. I didn't know who would get the money, but it had to be paid, or God would have to kill everyone or send them all to hell. That was because God was just. It was real scary.

But the Son was a hero. So he stood up and said that, instead, he would go down to earth and become a human being, and fix everything up. They said he would have to be tortured and killed to make the ransom big enough. He agreed to that, so they decided. The Holy Ghost said he would help too.

They picked out Mary to be the mother because she was the only one that didn't have the spot on her soul. (The spot was from the apple that Adam and Eve ate.) God had kept the spot off Mary because they knew ahead of time what they were going to decide. So the Holy Ghost appeared to her, and she said OK. Joseph was her husband, and he said OK too. He was a real nice man. But he wasn't Jesus' father, though. He just faked that so that people wouldn't talk.

So Jesus got born, and he was just like us except that he never committed any sins. Well, really, not quite like us, because he only had one parent, and he

didn't have the spot on his soul, and he knew everything - even what would happen tomorrow, and what people were thinking, and who was going to kill him. He could see all the sins on people's souls. And he could do anything he felt like. It would be OK because he was God. He had a thing called the beatific vision, which meant that he could always see God and enjoy him just the way he had done in heaven. He had two natures, too, but just one 'me'. It was something called the hypostatic union. No one else had one. But except for these things, he was just like us.

Jesus grew up, and he was real nice to everybody. He was always doing nice surprises for people. He loved kids, and he really loved everyone. But some bad people tortured him and put him to death in a terrible way on a cross. After he was buried he came out of the tomb alive! Everything was fixed up in heaven, so after a few visits he went back there to live. But he still stayed here too, to visit us in Holy Communion. In between, he waited in the tabernacle. It was real lonely for him there, so he liked people to come visit him in church.

This conception, probably somewhat refined and matured, was more or less what I brought with me when at age 17 I entered the SHCJ. I loved God with a Jesus and me' mentality and I wanted to 'belong entirely to him'. Novitiate instructions on the passion and on devotion to the Sacred Heart no doubt reinforced that orientation. Though the relationship to Jesus was real, and deep, one never spoke of it to others because it was 'the secret of the King' and to be respected as such.

Second year novices were allowed to select the subject of their own morning meditation. I became wedded to the gospel narratives. A few years later I became the happy possessor of a new testament in Latin. It opened my eyes to possible gains and losses through translations: eg the 'half-dead' victim rescued by the good Samaritan was in Latin 'semi-vivo'.. That experience prepared and opened me for later awareness and easy acceptance of the influence of culture and history on perception and articulation, and of the differences between the figurative and the literal, the functional and the ontological, the kerigmatic and the historic.

A major experience for me (I remember vividly the moment and the spot) occurred sometime probably in the 1940s. I was reading some book by Frank Sheed in which he made the statement that most catholics were (unconsciously) unitarians: that if you told them that there was only one Person in God, it would not really make any difference to them. The statement struck home. I was appalled. Then in a flash I received some deep insight into God's ineffability that neither then nor since have I been able to articulate. It moved me so deeply that, until long afterwards, thought of the trinity brought tears of joy to my eyes.

It launched me - or maybe just intensified? - a quest that still continues. Being, as I later discovered, a Myers Briggs INTJ and an Enneagram Five I wanted to study everything that was known about the trinity. I longed to change my field of work to theology. Unable to do that, I shifted my private reading pattern from spirituality and devotion to theology and scripture.

But I was also graced with realization of the folly and the arrogance of assuming that theology had God all sewed up in a bag, and of the illusion of trying to grasp and encompass God through merely human reason and learning. I needed and longed to pray - **really** to pray. Typical of me, I read my way through all of Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. Nothing satisfied me.

Afterwards, I came upon the anonymous **The Cloud of Unknowing**. It was providential for me, helping me to be, just **be** before God, open, empty, wanting, waiting, asking for God. Only God could show me God, what manner of being this personal God is. There came home to me gradually the realization that it is Jesus who shows us God - who God is, the Way to God, that Jesus **is** the Way, and the 'image of the unseen God'.

Meanwhile, outside of times set aside for prayer, I continued to snatch any spare time from work in reading - about the Holy Spirit, the trinity, Christology. I found that, after a thousand or fifteen hundred years elapsed without further development since the definitions of the church's christological and trinitarian dogmas, newer studies with contemporary researched insights had begun to appear.

I resonated most of all with what writers on the trinity were saying: that most catholics today are (unconsciously) tritheists, thinking of God as three people. I realized that the theologians were not contradicting Sheed's insight, but rather complementing it: people were acknowledging three Persons in God, but only relating to one, and passing over the other two as almost irrelevant. Karl Rahner's caution, in particular, I read with gratitude: that because today's meaning of the word person is so radically different from that of the Greek fathers who had embodied it in their definitions, it is no longer a good word to use with reference to the trinity; but that, as we have no better term, each time we use it of God we should specify that we mean that God '...subsists in three distinct manners'¹. Rahner's development, it seemed and seems to me, succeeded both in avoiding the error of modalism and in somewhat elucidating for us the nature of God. Most of the other theologians whom I have read do not follow Rahner's caution, and so (contrary to what they intend) continue to seem to speak of three people in God.

Although every analogy breaks down at some point, analogy is often our most helpful way of imaging the invisible/intangible. Somehow, none of the analogies proposed through the centuries to shed some light on the mystery of the trinity appealed to me. One day, another occurred to me, using myself as central figure. I, a single individual, am, by the sheer fact of my existence, daughter, sibling, niece, cousin etc etc. If any ordinary human being can have, simultaneously, multiple identities, can not God? This analogy, too, limps, in that for human beings it supposes the existence of other persons, in classified roles, whereas God's 'Persons' are inherent and self-contained. But for me this analogy helps. Just recently I notice that Daniel Helminiak speaks of God's 'identities'².

At last I came upon Bernard Lonergan's: **the** analogy, he considered it - that of the working of the human mind: first, insight (perception); then, second, its expression in a word or concept; and third, choice (love, rejection, or just allowing it to fade through inadvertence). With us human beings there is always a time lapse between the three stages, a lapse longer or shorter, depending on the degree of intelligence. With God, the three are simultaneous. Moreover, the Source does not **cause** the expression, the Word (one can fail to advert, and therefore to give expression). And neither Source nor Word **causes** (determines) the choice, Love (choice remains free - to choose, reject, or ignore)³. This analogy helped me enormously.

Lonergan's analogy refers to the trinity. But what of the incarnation? How could God become human? And what change might this have made in the

changeless God? Let me return for a moment to the analogy involving myself. At one point in my life I freely became a teacher. I took on all that that identity entails, preparation, occupations, responsibilities, relationships, and all the rest. After close to five decades I freely retired from teaching. I was and am the same individual before, during and after. But there is now a change in me. I now have packaged inside me an **experiential** knowledge of teacher and teaching whereas beforehand I had only an abstract and an onlooker's knowledge. Can we not say that our God now knows **by experience** what it means to be bound by human limitations, what it is to be cold and hungry and homeless, to be tempted, exasperated, uncertain, lonely, anguished, abandoned, what it is to fail?

When, where, or how, I do not recall, but it was a statement made by James Walsh SJ that alerted me to the fact the Cornelia's devotion was not to the nativity, but to the incarnation. I remembered key passages in her rule: '...contemplating the Eternal Wisdom in the lowliness of His Humanity...' '...throughout His whole life from the crib to the cross...'.⁴ Later, I noticed that of the direct gospel quotations appearing here and there in the rule, all seven are words attributed by the evangelists to Jesus in his public life.

I wondered much about Mary's 'virginal' conception of Jesus, especially after I learned that the scriptural original for the word **virgin** could mean either what we understand by it, or simply a young woman. If Jesus had no human father, was he only half human? How then could it be said that 'He was like us in everything save sin'? The church had never defined the virginal conception as dogma. Was the tradition, which must have antedated the Matthean and Lucan gospels, due just to the church's age-old problem with sex? Could it not be said of every future mother in her early youth that 'this virgin shall conceive and bear a child'?

I read in Raymond Brown⁵ that the virginal conception could not be proved **pro** or **con** from scripture. I found unconvincing his own reason for opting **pro**, based on his reading of John 8:41, 'We were not born for fornication,' in which he accented 'we' rather than 'fornication' thus seeming to make the intended implication depend on intonation rather than on phraseology. I wondered how one could know, after such time lapse, about the intonation, but was incapable of reading from the original, lacking as I did both knowledge of the language and access to the text.

Secular studies too helped to change my ideas. Long a student of French literature, I learned especially from Flaubert how a serious writer wrestles with words until successful in finding those that express the thought exactly, and then scraps superfluous verbiage. This was of value to me as I perused theological formulations. The study of linguistics taught me much about the nature of verbal expression, and its relations both to underlying reality and to changing realities. In a sense, everything I learned helped.

The incarnation is and will remain a mystery, to be contemplated deeply, reverently, gratefully. As of this writing, other than the few citations made above, I am for the most part regrettably unable to pinpoint source and sequence of the many insights with which God has graced me - whether in prayer, reading, study, listening, observing or whatever. I long ago ceased to think of God as limited to maleness (or femaleness or unisexness!) in any of the three Persons (= 'distinct manners of subsistence' cf Rahner above) other than precisely in the incarnation, the second 'Person's' historical assumption of

human nature ie in Jesus, a human male, one Person with two natures. Happily gone, too, are my early ideas that Jesus during his earthly life was omnipotent, omniscient, possessed of the beatific vision; and the idea, always repugnant to me, of a vengeful God who 'willed' or required or planned Jesus' passion and death as 'ransom'.

Rather I now see the incarnation as the marvel of God's goodness, compassion, forgiveness, overflowing saving grace. Jesus is the sacrament (Schillebeeckx)⁶, the outward sign of that hidden grace which he reveals to us, the first human being who fulfilled God's plan in creating us, and whose eternal reward is extended to the human race. I see Jesus' foreknowledge as that of an intelligent and perceptive man, undeceived by hypocrisy and error, able to read the signs of the times. I perceive his sense of his own identity as messiah, not as recognition from infancy onwards, but as gradually emerging, clarifying, intensifying much as that of a child heir-apparent becoming gradually aware of his identity as successor to the throne and eventual monarch. I doubt that during his earthly life Jesus ever realized his divinity. I see Jesus' manner of life, his values, his words and parables about God and the kingdom - all that he was and did and said - as revelatory of God.

His passion and death I assess as the foreseeable, explainable, human outcome of his confrontation of hypocritical leaders who felt threatened by him, an outcome which he knowingly, freely, and with anguish accepted rather than be unfaithful to his mission. I see his resurrection, not as the resuscitation of a corpse, but as continuance of his human existence, now glorified and sharing in God's beatitude. I see that through the incarnation and through Jesus' fidelity to God, his dedication to God's kingdom, his embracing of his human brothers and sisters, there is extended to the whole human race something analogous to naturalized citizenship or adoption: in due time, if faithful here on earth, a share in God's beatitude, in some qualities of God's divinity.

Meanwhile, we are to be his extension, his arms and legs, his eyes and ears and heart, carrying to all his - our - brothers and sisters his message of love and acceptance and help, especially to those most in need. He awaits us in each one, though he leaves us free to neglect or to serve according to our modest capacities. His help is always at hand. Wherever two or more of us gather in his name, he is in our midst. Especially when we gather to commemorate his passion and death in the memorial sacrifice he left us at the last supper - asking us to remember him. May we praise and thank him as never before. May we always continue to ponder.

If you only knew what God is offering.. (Jn 4.10)

Ask and it will be given to you,

search, and you will find;

knock, and the door will be opened..(Matt 7.7)

Footnotes

1. Karl Rahner **The Trinity** translated by Joseph Donceel, Herder & Herder, New York 1970 p109.
2. Daniel Heminiak **The Same Jesus: A Contemporary Christology** Loyola Press, Chicago 1986.
3. Quentin Quesnell 'Three Persons - One God' Chapter VIII in Vernon Greeson, Ed, **The Desires of the Human Heart: An Introduction to the Theology of Bernard Lonergan** Paulist Press, Chicago 1986.
4. **Constitutions of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus** [updated reprint] paragraphs 3 & 25, Italy 1953.
5. Raymond Brown **The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus** Paulist Press, New York 1973 passim.
6. Edward Schillebeeckx **Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God** Sheed and Ward, Kansas City 1963, translated from the third revised edition of the Dutch by Paul Barrett, English text revised by Mark Schoof and Laurence Bright passim.