

Realized Messianism

by Father Daniel Callam, C.S.B.

JARGON IS TECHNICAL LANGUAGE, appropriate, therefore, in its place. The most inaccessible of these places is surely mathematics, as is indicated by the fact that “parameter,” one of the few mathematical terms to have emigrated into common speech, must be the most misused word in English. Theology, too, has its jargon, indispensable if intimidating. For those who understand, the effect is to compress an entire paragraph of ordinary prose into a word or two, but the opposite can also happen, in that a new term may have to be expanded into a paragraph, or even an short article, in order to be understood. I propose to do this with “realized messianism.” To begin with, we must examine a related expression, “realized eschatology.” This latter phrase refers to the “foretaste of heaven” which is available to us even on earth. The final state of things (eschatology) is made real (realized) for us now. At Mass, for example, we anticipate heaven by joining even now on earth the angels’ praise of God: “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Hosts, heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest.”¹ Similarly, realized messianism will refer to the making real, in our day, of the activity of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. His work was the establishment of the Kingdom of God which Scripture in a special way allocates to the poor and the outcast, to widows and orphans who have learned that no one can be looked to for help but God alone. Jesus Christ is the Kingdom in his own person, not only in his preaching but also in his healings and as a friend of tax collectors and sinners. The Church’s mission as the Body of Christ is to continue his activity in time: “realized messianism.” It is an all-embracing programme. Besides the praise of God and the administration of the sacraments are the healing ministry of Catholic hospitals, the countless schools, the various chaplaincies, Christian art, social involvement, and so forth. Mother Teresa, Thomas Aquinas, Augustine, Paul, each in his own ways continues the work of the Messiah.

Theologians tell us that realized messianism was the main project of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65): “All the other words of the Council—its recasting of theology, its liturgical innovations, its ecumenical outreach, and so forth—must be viewed in the light of this ultimate *pastoral* goal.”² What is needed in 2010 is for the world to hear the message: “The Kingdom of God is among

¹ Cf. Isaiah 6.

² H. Kobler, “The Synod of Bishops,” *The Canadian Catholic Review*, February, 1986.

you.”³ The revelation of Jesus Christ is for all men, of all times and places. Without it man is doomed to destroy himself, and today we know as never before that his capacity for self-destruction has become absolute. If we are to survive we must comprehend that each of us is the widow and orphan of Scripture who has been forced by the terrors pressing down upon him to look to God alone for the salvation that man cannot achieve.

In earlier times the Church embodied and proclaimed the concept of realized messianism primarily within her own confines. How, then, will the Church be able now to address the modern world in which many, if not most, people are closed to the very notion of transcendent order. A methodology for doing so has in fact come out of Vatican II. The starting point is that the Church has something to say to the world. The renewal which came out of Vatican II was not to alter the Church’s understanding of herself, but to find a way to make her proclamation comprehensible to all men. At that time, Pope John XXIII, in his person, was the perfect embodiment of the spirit of Vatican II. As his autobiography reveals, he was a man of profound—and utterly traditional—holiness. Yet he had an uncanny knack for presenting it in a manner accessible and attractive to a secular society. His encyclical *Pacem in terris* (1963) was eagerly read and acted upon virtually the world over. What the Council asks of us is to follow along the route opened by John XXIII and sedulously developed by his successors: Paul VI, John Paul II, and now Benedict XVI.

Let me give some concrete instances of what I mean. The alterations to religious life were not meant to lead men and women under vows, i.e., monks and nuns, to question the value of their vocation but to reveal the beauty of a life of voluntary poverty and self-abnegation in the service of God and neighbour. The renewal will fail in its purpose if these men and women focus on themselves rather than on their unique and striking way of living the Gospel. In jargon now comprehensible to us, they are to exercise their prophetic vocation of a realized eschatology in the broader context of realized messianism.

The same pattern repeats itself in other aspects of ongoing renewal in the Church. Ecumenism, for example, is a call to join with all those who profess faith in Jesus Christ so that our combined witness to the Gospel may be the more powerful. It is not a programme to strip Catholicism down to some inoffensive minimum in order to enhance inter-Christian dialogue. That would be to look inward when we should be looking out. Similarly, the Church moves beyond the limits of Christianity into contact with other world religions. Wherever there is a belief in God there is a chance to exhibit the transforming power of the Spirit. The

³ Luke 17.21

same prophetic quality attends the Church's teaching about abortion, to take a final example. It cannot be chance that abortion has become widely accepted at a time when there are national leaders that can calmly discuss the possibility of millions of casualties in a nuclear war. What is needed is a firm adherence to the value of each human life. It was Churchill, I believe, who told Stalin that if one man counts for nothing, then millions count for nothing.

The Gospel has the power to transform society. Each of us, by his baptism has been called to be part of that crucially important transformation. The very voice of Jesus Christ will be muted if Christians do not act. ❧