

Salvation

by Anna Rist

And Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. And we believe and know that you are the Christ, the Son of God.

John 6.68-69

THIS TEXT from the Gospel of John occasioned a homily which impressed me as very much to the point, and challenging in that it made me want to formulate my own thoughts around it. My sense of the remarkable was only increased when my fourteen-year-old son claimed that this was the first sermon he had sat through with profit in many years! As an incentive for mustering my thoughts, it seemed worthwhile to try to pass on something of what the preacher—a member of the Order of Preachers—had conveyed to my understanding. Lest my memory should prove faulty, however, I wrote to him and received his blessing, plus a copy of the homily in question. I had already drafted my own restatement, and I was curious to see how it differed from the original. What follows is a blend of both.

In what sense, it was asked, could we echo Saint Peter’s words? What criterion would we produce for our claimed commitment to Christ? “Evangelical” Christians would have a ready answer in the experience of “being saved,” which marks a once-for-all turning point in the individual’s life; henceforth, he is “born again.” The preacher accepted the legitimacy of such experiences, but questioned whether it was an adequate criterion for the great mass of Christians. People who lacked the evangelical experience could not be assumed to lack all experience of Christ, a view that is apt to imply that such people are “reprobate,” rejected by God. Notoriously, in the wake of Calvinism, not a few melancholic souls lived under a dreadful fear that they themselves were so condemned. Samuel Johnson (1709-84) and the English poet William Cowper (1731-1800) are two well-known such cases.

“Evangelicals,” then, claim one single category of Christ-experience. Within the Catholic Church we might point to other decisive experiences of conversion. The Gospel call to poverty spoke with insistence to Saint Anthony and Saint Francis; the latter might also be taken as an example of those to whom the

revelation of God in created nature has been paramount. To others the liturgy or the sacraments have been outstanding occasions of grace. Catholics normally see the operation of grace in a series of conversions rather than in the blinding flash that Saint Paul typifies; this growth in conversion appears to have been the norm for the other Apostles. Singular experiences are those of singular individuals, rare radiances cast on an otherwise mundane and plodding path of life. They will not serve as the foundation of faith for the ordinary man or woman who participates in the Eucharist and grows in the imitation of Christ. For these, faith itself is the bedrock, the basic gift, and it is faith grounded in the experience and the witness of the Church. We experience Christ, and have real if mysterious contact with him, precisely in his Church.

The basic Catholic experience of Christ does not contradict other particular experiences; it yields them all their place, though it would deny any claim to exclusivity. And, concluded the preacher, the more deeply we enter into the riches of the Church's teaching and tradition, and reflect on the implications of our having faith at all, the more will Peter's words be true for us, too: "We believe and know that you are the Christ, the Son of God."

Some final reflections.

The doctrine of the Mystical Body, first alluded to by Saint Paul, and the related vision of the Church as the Bride of Christ, beckon us with their mysterious poetry, and continue to elude the grasp of probably even the most saintly. Yet this surpassing vision of the Church has its roots firmly in the ground, in the Rock that Saint Paul also calls "the pillar and the ground of truth." In our pluralistic world we may be tempted to protest, with Pilate, "What is truth?" and to point to the multifarious shams, the false prophets that have been exposed in the course of time. Many have spoken in the name of God, and not a few in the name of the Church, and near enough to the centre for us to feel that she, the mystical Bride, is all but compromised by such narrowly conceived dictates as that there is no salvation outside her, or that the beatific vision is reserved to the baptized. Yet that the Church finally is the guarantor and the repository of truth we hold; the scriptural evidence is Our Lord's own words, that the Spirit "shall lead you into all truth."

Vigilant against abuses we must certainly be, for the "prince of this world" is everywhere about this world, and will try to slip into those holy spaces where we feel we should be able to relax our guard. No mortal is proof against the values of this world—of which the chief is power—unless guarded by grace; no theologian, no bishop, not the Holy Father himself is immune except in so far as the grace of his office shields him, which is why we ought particularly to pray for them. All must proceed "in fear and trembling," as the Apostle said, to "work out their salvation." This is offered to everyone, and our way to it lies through our concern

for the salvation of all; no one can work out his salvation by concentrating on himself. For us who are already and for those who are to be of the Catholic Church, the criterion lies near to hand: a loving fidelity to the Word that Church speaks for us. 