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ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS CHRIST BY FATHER MÉDAILLE

Conference of Father Marius Nepper, SJ, 1968.

Every Sister of St. Joseph is aware of the place the Persons of the two Trinities (created and uncreated) occupy in the devotion of Father Médaille. This expression concerning the two Trinities, which he himself did not coin, we are abandoning without regret.

All know that even if "the Congregation bears the name of St. Joseph, it is nonetheless consecrated to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, as well as to Jesus, Mary and Joseph". However, could we not find in one Person, the values recognized as authentically those of Father Médaille? In which person could we more readily find a synthesis of these values? Would it not be God the Father? How many times are we not directed towards Him, His presence, His will, His good pleasure, His happiness, His providence, His glory, His perfection, His love? The second maxim would seem to justify our choice:

"Make it your rule of life, to be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect".

But could we not also direct our attention to God, the Holy Spirit? He is the substantial love of the Father and the Son; He is the Spirit of Perfection. How many "Veni Creators" does not Father Médaille have us recite? He justifies this insistence:

". . . It is the most adorable Holy Spirit, who by communicating His graces, bestows all virtue, particularly that which is great" and giving as example the Virgin Mary ". . . who in great meekness, humility and obedience allowed herself to be led by the most adorable Holy Spirit. . ."

Nevertheless, it seems that it is our Lord Jesus Christ who embodies most adequately these values in question, without on the other hand, minimising the essential and integral importance of the Father and the Holy Ghost. It is then to Jesus Christ that we shall give our attention. I should like to close this series of conferences to the Reverend Mothers General of St. Joseph by speaking of Him whom Father Médaille frequently calls "our dear Jesus", on whose life he wished all the Sisters to model their lives, "in order to show that Jesus Christ lives in them and they in Jesus Christ".

However splendid the subject, we not only appear to be, but actually are frightfully handicapped in this matter. Father Médaille has not composed long meditations on the Incarnate Word. We are reduced to struggling now and again, with interesting but disconnected texts, except the one which we shall introduce. Besides, do not expect anything very original in his views. Father Médaille adheres to standard principles.

However, I approach the subject confidently. No matter how classical he is, he knows how to stimulate our zeal for Jesus whose faithful servant, disciple and friend he is, for Jesus our "ultimate norm" and "supreme rule". Here are the difference aspects under which Father Médaille presents Jesus:

1. as intimately present to us
2. as model for our conduct and activity
3. as life of our life

I CHRIST INTIMATELY PRESENT

Father Médaille makes us live lovingly in a world filled with the presence of Christ.

- 1) This Jesus whom Father Médaille feels to be so near is obviously united to him if we can judge by the tender, heartfelt invocations which he utters while writing the Constitutions, but in a literary style far removed from that used in our modern Constitutions and Canon Law:

"O Jesus effect eternally in them, all that comes from the pure design of your adorable will!"

"Yes, dear Jesus, we accept and tenderly cherish all that your heavenly Father ordains for us now and for eternity."

- 2) Evidently, it is especially in the Blessed Sacrament that he envisages the source of this life:

- a) In the first "Little Design", Jesus in the Eucharist was the inspiration for the very nature of the new Congregation. It was not only the hiddenness of Jesus in the Sacrament, but all the details of His Eucharistic life: His dependence, poverty, which evoked this comparison of the Institute with Jesus in the Eucharist.
- b) When we come to the second foundation of the Congregation of St. Joseph, the mystique of the secrecy disappears, but not the emphasis on Jesus in the Eucharist, for whom the Sister retains "an immense love" and toward whom she turns throughout the day. Again, he says that immediately on rising, she should turn to Him:

"Kiss the floor, remembering that before His majesty, you are dust and ashes, and that at death, you will return to ashes; or else, in desire, kiss the ground on which the Saviour and the glorious Virgin walked."

"After dressing, if convenient, go to adore our Lord in the chapel; if inconvenient, make your offering before the statue in your oratory . . ."

During the day certain activities are concerned directly with Eucharistic worship such as "the mending of liturgical vestments", care of the altar:

"in order that the Sisters may keep it neat and as beautiful as possible", "but also adoration whenever the Blessed Sacrament is exposed, taking care to have perpetual adoration of this august Sacrament established according to the manner prescribed by the Bishop of Le Puy"

In any case, during the day, the Sisters are exhorted:

"Visit spiritually our Lord Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, if you cannot actually visit Him. This can be done easily at the beginning and at the end of your hours of work."

3) It is not only in the Blessed Sacrament that Father Médaille sees Christ present, but also in His Mystical Body, in every person with whom we come in contact. He thus encourages the entire household, the Infirmarian, the Cook, the Bursar, the Superior, as well as all the Sisters.

- a) The Infirmarian: "Let her frequently consider Jesus Christ as ill in the person of His servants and Spouses."
- b) The Cook: "Let her labour to nourish the Spouses of Christ who will consider as done to Him all the services rendered to the Sisters."
- c) The Bursar: "Let her be assured that in spite of whatever poverty there is in the house, God will never fail to provide as long as she, in the name of Christ, endeavours to satisfy the servants of Jesus who have left all for love of Him in order to serve the poor and needy."
- d) The Superior: "Let her consider herself the 'servant of Jesus Christ'. In governing her daughters, she should seem to request rather than command in a domineering arbitrary manner. This is altogether contrary to the meekness and humility found in the gospel of Jesus Christ."

Each Sister should strive to see Christ:

- a) in the poor: "They will also have great charity toward the poor, whom they will love, acknowledge and serve with their whole heart and affection as if they were serving the person of Jesus Christ."

b) in the sick: "They will prepare meat broths or other necessities prescribed by the physician for the relief of the sick, with the same care and charity as if they were rendering service to the sacred person of Jesus Christ.

c) and of course in her Superior: "Let each Sister recognize Jesus Christ in the person of her Superior, and with tender feeling, show profound respect every time she approaches her." "Let them accept from the Superior, in humble submission and joy of heart, all commands, advice, corrections and penances, as if they came from the very mouth of their heavenly Spouse, our Lord Jesus Christ."

It is not surprising that it was to Jesus that the young Sisters addressed the formula of their profession, despite the fact that it was not customary in congregations of that time:

"Lord Jesus, God all-powerful and eternal, I . . . your unworthy daughter and servant . . . vow to your divine Majesty . . . Lord Jesus, receive this offering as an odour of sweetness. Amen."

If Father Médaille's faith reveals Christ as intimately present, so does his love stimulate him to choose Christ as

"Ultimate Norm" (absolute standard)
 "Unique Model" (exemplar)
 "Supreme Rule" (Highest authority)

II CHRIST AS MODEL

All the saints have placed themselves in the school of Christ, but each one has manifested certain preferences, (according to grace received, his temperament and the special charism of the Holy Spirit). For which mysteries of the Gospel did Father Médaille show a preference? He contemplated all the Gospel mysteries - We can, however, select three areas of predilection:

the outstanding self-emptying of God the Son
 the double thrust of His Heart
 i) toward the Father and his glory
 ii) toward men and their salvation.

1. The loving self-emptying of the Incarnate Word:

This especially impressed Father Médaille. It can be inferred from the frequent recurrence in all his writings of that which we call, in the recitation of the rosary, "the fruit of the mystery", Humility.

The extraordinary incarnation of the Word made flesh is to him, in fact, more incredible than the acceptance of the Passion.

An English convert used to say, "I trembled when on reaching manhood I realized that God had become man . . . If this is true, that is the only truth that needs to be taught and learned."

I trembled: We are not so affected: We find ourselves inhibited even before the translation given to the Pauline word "anéantissement" (self-emptying), so much do we fear overstressing it. We even abandon the use of any expressions that might be an obstacle to the piety of a Christian, and if the word "annihilation" is one of these words, renounce it!

Do we prefer to speak of "humility"? The word seems in effect less frightening; but Father Médaille does not appear to put them in opposition when he asks that we "take delight in profound and self-emptying humility". Between the two words (Anéantissement and humilité) is there not a slight yet interesting difference which should be pointed out?

The word "humility" comes from the Latin root "humii", which means "to the earth". It is the term suitably applied to the Word made Flesh. Because of His relation with us men, we speak of the "humility" of the Incarnate Word. But in regard to Himself, it is the Pauline word "aneanti", that is preferable. The Greek word used by St. Paul properly signifies "to empty", consequently, "to reduce to nothing", to annihilate. In the Incarnation the Word was despoiled of His majesty, His glory. This was a frightening step for God the Son: a step which suggested to St. Bernard his substituting the expression, "Abridged Word" for the biblical term "Incarnate Word". This term was picked up by Father Médaille. In whatever fashion we translate St. Paul, we can count upon finding Father Médaille's thought in the conclusion. We have no hesitation in accepting the fact after reading this Maxim:

"Annihilate (empty) yourself . . . in honour of the Incarnate Word, who lovingly emptied Himself for you and make profession toward all . . . especially toward God . . . of living in the practice of the most sincere humility."

Humility is the virtue dear to Father Médaille. How skillfully he introduces it everywhere, and with what ingenious and abundant qualifications: he even applies with word "abyssmal" when speaking of the humility required in a Superior. If our humility is to be modeled on that of the "Abridged Word", then it cannot be a mediocre humility.

2. The Word Was Made Flesh:

This was done to save us, but also to lead us,

- toward the double object of His love:
- toward the Father, in His love as well-beloved Son
- toward the children of the Father, in His love as Saviour.

You recognize these two ends always united in Father Médaille:

- that which burns in the heart of the Incarnate Word from the first moment of His existence should constantly stimulate the soul of a religious.

"to wish to do everything, to suffer everything, to undertake everything for the advancement of the glory of God and the salvation of the dear neighbour."

By way of Summary:

Christ is our Model assuredly in His life and in all the circumstances of His life, but especially on three occasions:

- 1) In the great mystery of God the Son emptying Himself for us, inviting us along the way of "humility";
- 2) In His condition as loving and beloved Son, orientating us "toward the Father";
- 3) In His function as Saviour, drawing us to an involvement "in the saving of souls".

This is the epitome of the Gospel (I take pleasure in stating it), the conclusion of the Eucharistic Letter and the significance of Maxim 39, "Nothing for myself, all for God and the neighbour".

III CHRIST THE LIFE OF THE SOUL

The loving soul who strives courageously to mold herself according to the Divine Model, will not stop half way; impelled by Christ Himself, she will yearn for the infinite, for intimate union with Christ, even for participation in the divine life. Christ, the life of the soul, of whom we are now going to speak, evokes the theology of the Paschal mystery:

- the death and life of Christ
- the death and life of the baptized person.

Does Father Médaille speak of this? Yes and no. In the second part of the Maxims he speaks of life; he speaks of death but in two different contexts: sometimes death and life, sometimes life and death.

A. What does he mean by that?

i) When he says (Life and death) he is referring not to Christ as life, but Christ as model. The "Contemplations" appearing in the Book of Maxims (We have stated this with some surprise perhaps) end with the death of Christ. This is not surprising: the Resurrection is not an object of imitation. This is how he concludes the chapter:

"... after having contemplated your holy life and your loving death, my poor heart has no other desire than to live and die for Him who has deigned to live and die for me. To you, my dear Jesus, is all glory and honour, forever and ever. Amen."

This is the response of a generous soul desirous of imitating in his own life, the life and death of Jesus our model.

ii) But Father Médaille develops another formula, "Death and Life" and this he does at greater length. It is familiar to us. He evokes the Paschal mystery but with this difference. He is not considering the external life of Christ but His interior dispositions. Indeed he does not ignore the fact that "by baptism we die with Christ", but he never forgets the part the baptized soul has to play in this:

"Die to all self-love, to all the movements of the heart which belong to a nature rebellious to the grace of the Holy Spirit. Thus, dead to nature and the 'old man', live the life of Jesus Christ in such a way that you can say with St. Paul, "I live not I, but Christ lives in me. (Gal. 2, 20).

B. How does Father Médaille develop this theme of "Death and Life"?

i) First of all, in the ancient ceremony of Baptism, the catechumen had to disappear symbolically in the water of the baptismal font. Concerning this first act, preliminary to the Resurrection, (the death of Christ) the synonyms of which are well-known to Father Médaille (to disappear, strip oneself, annihilate oneself, to empty oneself, to die,) we moderns have very little to teach him. He simply means by that, our subduing the 'old man', that side of our nature "rebellious to the grace of the Holy Ghost". This is all explained in the "Elevations of the soul toward Christ in order to empty oneself of self and be filled with Him". All of this is said in a similar fashion in the expression:

"Detach me, dear Jesus, from myself, Grant that, if it is pleasing to You, I may die entirely to myself to live only for You, in You and by You."

"Deign to fill up my emptiness and my nothingness, with Yourself. Vivify me by the presence of Your Holy Spirit alone."

ii) But now it is necessary to treat of the question "Life". Let us see how Father Médaille proposes to bring about this transmutation:

- a) On what does he base his doctrine?
- b) How does he develop it?

a) He selects two favourite biblical texts. The first is from St. John:

"You in me. I in You." (Jn. 14:20; 15:5)

the second text is from St. Paul:

"I live no longer I, but Christ lives in me." (Gal. 2:20)

This theme is repeated four times in the Book of Maxims, never in the Constitutions nor in any of the individual maxims.

b) This is the way Father Médaille explains and in a certain sense simplifies the explanation of this mysterious union:

1) He does not ignore the basic tenets of theology, that is, that the supernatural life of grace is in Christ in its fulness, that Christ has merited it by His life and death, and that Christ effects this life in us, especially through the Eucharist, the sacrament of union par excellence. (cf Eucharistic Letter #21, Max.)

2) But he prefers to speak in images. He thinks, as Christ did in His day, that man often understands the truth more completely through the use of 'picture-language'. It is quite evident that the images he uses are borrowed from general knowledge and daily living. His thought blends easily into a formula well known to-day

"Do all in Jesus":

uniting yourself to Him as the vine to its stock. Did He not say that He is the Vine and we the branches and shoots?

"Do all with Jesus":

that is, united always with Him as the instrument to the Principal cause, as the hand of a child is guided by his master.

"Do all through Jesus":

desiring that all you do, begin from Him as its first principle,

"So that He may be the soul of your soul, the life of your life and the spirit which animates all your actions."

In this way, may each Sister arrive at such a state as to show to all with whom she comes in contact that it is not she but Christ who speaks, acts and lives in her. To that, I can only add a benevolent Amen!

CONCLUSIONS

I shall outline two: one historical which will keep us in the tenor of the text; the other, practical, which will suggest to us a workable presentation; it will start from the text but go beyond it.

1. I asked myself while studying the writings of the Founder in preparation for this talk, how Father Médaille understood Christ? This is the result of my investigation:

Christ is present in my environment.
 Christ is present in the Eucharist
 Christ is present in His Mystical Body.

It behooves me therefore to try to find Him in my way of life. He came to unite Himself with me as "my guide and model". I must therefore learn from the pages of the Gospel how to find Him, and how to orientate my life toward the Father and toward those whom the Father loves. Christ goes so far as to invite me in a marvellous manner "to participate in His life as Son of God". How can I overlook the opportunity of benefiting the Church, my Community and my own soul? May it not be I myself, but He, who speaks, acts and lives in me!"

Father Medaille wrote and lived that, three hundred years ago. Would he not say the same to-day? It is possible. Would we not say something better, we, who are living in 1968? Why not? But that is what the Founder of the Sisters of St. Joseph has said and I have not wished to point out anything else.

- II. Christ is intimately present as the model of our activity and our life. This is what Father Medaille's texts indicate. But over and above the texts, the "life of the Founder" should be of interest to us. It would be an engaging play of wits, to imagine the ardour of his soul and the genuine thrust of his religious spirit. Unfortunately no spiritual notebook has come our way. We shall, for our own purpose attempt to engage in this play of wits. We could easily imagine three stages in his spiritual development. This notion is not entirely unwarranted, as all the information which has been brought to light has been retained carefully, but in an order intentionally different.

First Stage

I see Father Médaille lingering over the abasement of the Word Incarnate. At every turn he insists on recommending that humility is the fruit of the mystery of the Incarnation and he convinces us that he is especially impressed by the humility of the Son of God. He uses the terms:

"loving annihilation" (anéantissement)
 "Holy abasement"
 "ineffable abasement"
 "ineffable annihilation" (self emptying)
 "holy destitution"

In the face of this stupendous course of action of God the Son, we should give a worthwhile response, so that we may not deserve the reproach that Yahweh made to Israel:

"You did not strive to please me, Israel".

Second Stage

Father Médaille tries to give this worthwhile response in two ways:

- a) by modelling himself after this unique exemplar, Jesus Christ, model of all virtues, especially humility.
- b) by profiting, to the utmost, from the boundless riches which Jesus Christ, Himself offers: a participation in His life as Son of God. Father Médaille's great desire and one which he wished to be considered sincere, was to exemplify;

"I live no longer I, but Christ lives in me".

Third Stage

Following then, in the steps of His model and living His life, he enters into a new life. This entrance is less a matter of time than of a hierarchy of values. Who could stop him? "Christ, his life", urges him on:

- i) to collaborate in the work which He began while on earth.
- ii) to pursue His love as Son; the glory of the Father, and to pursue His mission as Saviour, the salvation of the world.

It is not a question of vague wishes, but of

"living and dying, suffering and labouring tirelessly".

He wishes to communicate this zeal to the Sisters of St. Joseph:

"In honour of Jesus, so zealous for the glory of God the Father and for the salvation of souls, for they, (the Sisters) must be filled with zeal in order to advance as much as possible the salvation and the perfection of the neighbour, for the greater glory of God".

The essential parts of this spiritual development that we have imagined, are they really Father Médaille's ideas? Did Father Médaille live according to the precepts he introduced? Do we question this merely because of our modern preoccupation concerning apostolic works? The answer matters little. It is essential to remember that, without abandoning the religious values of the Founder, there is a place for a synthesis: the old and the new unite as in the treasure of the Gospel writings.