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EDITORIAL: CHRIST AMONG US

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MY WIFE AND I WERE RECEIVED INTO THE CATHOLIC CHURCH ON HOLY SATURDAY, 1974, so this past Easter season marked the most important tenth anniversary in our lives. When the news was issued at about this time that the Holy See had ordered Archbishop Gerety of Newark to remove his imprimatur from the catechetical text *Christ Among Us*, we felt that a special anniversary gift had been provided for us. This book, you see, was used as a text during our period of receiving instruction in the Faith. At that time we frequently complained about the inaccuracies in the book and its flirtations (at the least) with heresy. Inevitably our complaints were rebuffed by recourse to the imprimatur on the copyright page, supplied for our earlier edition by Cardinal Dearden, then Archbishop of Detroit. How could mere inquirers, mere catechumens, dare to question the orthodoxy and soundness of a book with an imprimatur by a prince of the Church? Should we ever again come across that priest, the temptation to say “I told you so,” will be hard to resist.

In the aftermath of what should come to be seen as an historic decision by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, I have taken my copy of the volume down from the shelf and browsed through it, noting especially passages marked off by question marks and exclamation points in the margins. This stroll down memory lane has led me to a number of reflections which I wish to share here. I am impressed first by the book’s banality, second by its insidiousness. The Vatican could have chosen more a blatant book for reproof, not a more dangerous one. It is only to be hoped that this important and long overdue step will be promptly followed up by continued actions to set the Church’s house in order. The “decertifying” of selected European theologians and American books is surely edifying and good for morale, but this kind of procedure will not resolve the crisis in the Church. The problem is institutional, and it requires courageous intervention by the Holy Father and his delegates at every level of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Ultimately it is a question of the selection and assignment of bishops.

Perhaps the first thing to notice about *Christ Among Us* is how bland, simplistic, and just plain dull it is. In this regard it is the perfect textbook of Catholic neo-modernism. As a group, “progressive” Catholics invoke such terms as “scholarly,” “intellectual,” “innovative,” and so on with numbing regularity, as if saying so made it true. One is reminded of the bravado of a group of pre-adolescent boys holding forth on their athletic prowess. But how could anyone read *Christ Among Us*, the modernists’ preferred “catechism for adults,” and attribute scholarship or intellectual keenness to the book’s promoters? The book is full of sentimental curtsies to the banal clichés which dominate the secular media: “Many today, including many younger people, find their purpose in the service of others. In this age of great social change and consequent confusion these highly motivated individuals are bringing about great good in our world. “ Likewise there is a frequent recourse to vague, emotive speculations which suggest that the author is terribly excited about theological innovation without wholly knowing (or caring) what it signifies:

A mind boggling view of God is presented to us today by process theology which says, briefly, that God is so involved in our human situation that he actually suffers and rejoices with us, in other words, he experiences with us the daily working out of our destiny, with all its hopes and fears, joys and sorrows. God need not have done this, but he loves us so much that he wills to become this involved in the human process. (Emphasis in original)

The first sentence suggests a kind of pantheism, or perhaps anthropotheism; the second sentence seems to withdraw the suggestion. Taken together they produce a kind of theological mush, which is neither illuminating or inspiring.

But it is precisely this vagueness which constitutes the extreme danger of a book such as *Christ Among Us*, for very often out of the theological fumbling emerges a calculated equivocation on a matter of doctrine which can only serve to undermine the faith of the unsuspecting reader:

TO BELIEVE IN CHRIST'S DIVINITY ONE MUST HAVE AN OPEN MIND AND A WILLINGNESS TO LIVE HIS TEACHINGS-AND THE POWER OF FAITH. Skeptics, those whose minds are closed to his teachings or to moral improvement like Herod, Pontius Pilate, and the Pharisees, probably would have seen nothing had they been with the apostles when Christ appeared after his resurrection. Others' minds may be open but they lack the power of faith. (Emphasis in original.)

Now the author does not exactly deny the bodily presence of the risen Christ; he merely speculates that He would have been invisible to those without faith. This seems to imply that "faith" is the faculty of seeing what is not there—a kind of wishful thinking. But seeing the risen Christ, if He is really there, should not require faith; "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1). Our Lord clearly distinguishes between those who have seen and believed, and those who have not seen and yet believed (Jn. 20:29). The whole point of the "doubting Thomas" episode is that a "skeptic" could see Christ, and seeing believe. *Christ Among Us*, without any explicit rejection of the plain Scriptural evidence and the Catholic teaching that Christ rose from the dead in His glorified but quite tangible body, encourages the reader to regard the Resurrection

as something other than an objective, historical event.

When my wife and I were receiving instruction we used to refer to *Christ Among Us* as the "fine-print catechism." Like a new-car warranty or a mortgage application, *Christ Among Us* hides most of its surprises in the fine print. The back cover of my edition boasts of the book's "three-level format that meets the needs of a variety of readers and users." This format comprises "brief expositions in bold-face type," "paragraphs of information for those who want to go deeper," "detailed information for those who seek it." "As a rule the statements in bold-face are orthodox magisterial teaching; as the print grows smaller this teaching is qualified, undermined, or flatly contradicted. The implications of the "format" are clear: orthodoxy is fine for simpletons who do not read much; anyone who "wants to go deeper," who is a true seeker, will obviously end up denying the Magisterium. This procedure is wonderfully illustrated by the book's treatment of the Church's teaching on contraception. The correct teaching is stated (albeit with the hesitant grammar of a past perfect tense): CONTRACEPTIVE BIRTH CONTROL AS A MEANS OF PREVENTING THE GENERATION OF CHILDREN HAS BEEN CONSIDERED WRONG IN THE CHURCH'S TEACHING." This teaching is explained in three peremptory sentences. Then follow three pages, mostly in fine print, explaining the teaching away. It includes numerous assertions such as this: "The standard the Church proposes is not possible for some." Perhaps the finest piece of misinformation is the statement, "*The Rhythm' method of periodic abstinence is one definitely approved method of family planning.*" There we were in 1974, not yet Catholics, trying to explain to a priest that calendar rhythm had been superseded and that he ought to know this.

We were blessed with easy access to correct Catholic teaching and a number of solidly Catholic friends, and we got through the neo-modernist hazing which passed for instruction relatively unscathed. Not everyone is so blessed, and there can be no doubt that *Christ Among Us* has done incalculable damage to the faith and understanding of those subjected to it. Of course the grace of God works in many strange ways; many people will ignore or simply forget much of the book's contents. (One of the heartening memories from our inquirers' class is of a young man who fell asleep from time to time.) Still, the great peril of *Christ Among Us* is that it seems comparatively harmless by virtue of its blandness—Anthony Wilhelm is hardly as strident as Hans Kueng—and of its

cunning method of calling dogma into doubt without directly denying it. How many catechumens have been swindled out of their nascent faith by a periphrasis?

It would seem then that the Sacred Congregation exercised especially good judgment in singling out this particular book for condemnation, and not a little courage. The very feature of *Christ Among Us* which makes it so destructive, the craftiness with which the heresies are tricked out, makes its unorthodoxy somewhat more difficult to demonstrate. Hence we have already heard that indignant modernists are complaining that the book does not deny magisterial teaching. Cardinal Ratzinger and the Holy Father apparently have determined that a catechism must be affirmatively, positively orthodox; it is no longer sufficient to crawl along the edge of the abyss of infidelity. Likewise it is reassuring that the book is not to be reconsidered even with substantial revisions; no amount of cutting and pasting will salvage a book which assumes an adversarial posture toward the Church's supreme teaching authority from the outset. The tone of *Christ Among Us* is as deficient as its content.

The only ultimate solution to our massive problem lies in the restoration of credibility to the episcopal hierarchy in this country. As a recent issue of *Catholic Eye* observes (June 11, 1984), we are in a strange state of affairs when a heretical catechism can be on the market for seventeen years and sell more than a million and a half copies with hardly a demurrer from anyone in a position of ecclesiastical authority. What sort of shepherds are they who literally invite the wolves into the sheepfold? *Christ Among Us* has received an imprimatur

from two prominent American archbishops and has been mandated for use in CCD and inquiry classes in countless dioceses throughout the country. Then of course there is the problem of books without imprimaturs in the first place. What is to be done about them? As an example, consider Richard McBrien's *Catholicism*. It is quite as inadequate as *Christ Among Us*, and I know that it has been used as the text for adult discussion groups in my own diocese. I suspect that it is being used in seminaries. With no imprimatur to remove and no index on which to place it, the Holy See would be confronted with a tactical problem should it decide to act against it. The answer lies-as the problem originates-with local ordinaries, religious superiors, and officials of Catholic universities. Why is the chairman of the theology department in the most prestigious Catholic university in America permitted to publish a book on a religious subject without obtaining formal ecclesiastical approval? In short, there is still a great deal to be done.

Nonetheless, it is an important step and an occasion of hope for the faithful to see *Christ Among Us* officially identified for what it is, a deceit. We might say that the suppression of *Christ Among Us* is truly a sign of Christ among us, speaking to His Church through the voice of His Vicar. Let us hope that it continues to be heard and heeded on this side of the Atlantic, and let us give thanks for vigilance and pastoral concern of our Holy Father.

-R. V. Y.

