

CHRIST OUR MODEL

*By M. Aherne, O.Carm.
First published by Carmelite Publications, 1989.*

CHAPTER 1: CHRIST OUR MODEL

“This is my beloved Son on whom my favour rests. Listen to him.” (Matthew 17:5).

Christ is the perfect image of the Father. The Father has given us his Son as the perfect model of holiness. The will of the Father is that we would come to our eternal salvation by the perfect imitation of his Son, under the influence of the Holy Spirit.

As we go through life, we come to realise more and more our dependence on Christ. This increasing realisation of God’s power and our own littleness is an indication of growth in our spiritual life. It means that we are coming to understand, through experience, that we are in need of God’s help at every step. Christ has told us that he is the way, the truth and the life. It is logical, then, that we should walk in the way pointed out to us by Christ in the gospel. But, in all our efforts to conform to the example of Christ, we must remember his words: “Without me, you can do nothing.” (John 15:5.) St Paul says: “For when I am powerless, it is then that I am strong.” (2Corinthians 12:10). He is telling us that, in his weakness, he is thrown back on the strength of Christ and then he really knows what it means to be strong. When we are weak, we are literally at the mercy of God. Our sense of dependence, then, draws us closer to God. So, a true intimacy with God is more and more established. God enters into our lives in a deeper way. This closer union with God makes us more holy. St Paul expresses it this way: “I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me.” (Galatians 2:20).

CHAPTER 2: GOD’S PLAN FOR MY LIFE

God has his plans for us. It is well for us to keep this in mind, because there are times when we find it very difficult to reconcile what happens to us with what we consider should be the will of God in our regard. At such times we ask such questions as: Why does God do this? Why does God not do that? We are complaining before God. I suppose it is true to say that our complaints are very often like the complaints of children in relation to their parents. They are neither very serious nor very forlorn: they are more in the nature of efforts at seeking sympathy and reassurance. There are, however, times when we simply say that we have had enough, that we can bear no more. Perhaps we even ask God at such times to take us. But God does not take us. God has his plans for our lives. Only God knows those plans. Only God knows when exactly our work is to finish in this life.

I remember reading the following lines many years ago: “I have my life before me still – And Thy purpose to fulfil.” It has remained an inspiration to me ever since. Those lines sum up the whole life situation: I have my life before me – life that God gave me. I have God’s purpose to fulfil: only God knows when that purpose will be fulfilled.

CHAPTER 3: GOD, OUR CONSTANT HELPER

When we are in trouble, we can count our earthly friends with no great effort. The friends who stand out are those who are ready to enter into our difficulties with us. They get inside

us, as it were, and help us to solve our problems from the inside. Those who are truly sympathetic feel deeply for us and become one with us in our suffering.

When we call upon God in our distress, that almighty, all-knowing God already knows everything about us. God wants us to ask for what we need. Again and again in the scriptures, we are told to call upon God when we are in trouble.

God helps us in many ways. His answer to our prayer is his way of answering. We often see the matter so differently. We pray for something and we have all the answers parcelled up in our own expectations. The difference between our approach to the answer and God's approach lies in the fact that God sees into the future, has our welfare in view and answers our prayer accordingly. When we come to consider this, how wonderful it is. It makes us realise that God, in his supreme wisdom, is guiding our life every moment of our day. When we ask God for something, the answer God gives fits into the tapestry of his plan for our salvation. This thought should immediately fill us with gratitude, with humility and with the spirit of surrender to the will of God.

CHAPTER 4: CHRISTIAN JOY

"Blessed be God the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with all the spiritual blessings of heaven in Christ." (Ephesians 1:3)

St Paul, speaking here to the Ephesians, paints a beautiful picture of the Christian life, showered with blessings from the Father, through Christ. He puts before us the ideal state of being a christian; the ideal that we, as christians, are intended to aim at: "to be holy and spotless, and to live through love in his presence." (Ephesians 4:4).

Too often during our lives, we assess our spiritual state in a strange, sad sort of way: by reference to the number of misfortunes we have overcome. This is a negative kind of approach to life. We are far too fond of highlighting our misfortunes. How different is the attitude we see in the lives of the saints. They were full of Christian joy. They could see more clearly than we do how their difficulties fitted into the plan of God for their lives. But they had the great gift of being able to look beyond their misfortunes to the joy that far outweighed their troubles – the joy of being a christian and all that that meant to them. Christian hope filled their hearts: "I reckon that the sufferings of this time are not worthy to be compared with the glory to come, that shall be revealed in us." (Romans 8:18).

CHAPTER 5: COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

"In all things you are made rich in him....so that nothing is wanting to you in any grace." (1Corinthians 1:5, 7).

When we have been in difficulties, we have been told to count our blessings. It is a sound philosophy of life. It is advice seasoned with wisdom. The blessings we receive from God are

many. If we make a review of our lives, this pouring out of blessings will be very evident. I might immediately add here that, on reflection, we will find that innumerable blessings have been taken for granted by us and that this review of blessings received from God will teach us a lesson in gratitude.

Our Blessings: The first thought that we should dwell on is the fact that we have been born into a Christian home. This is an inestimable blessing. How fortunate we are to have been in the Christian fold from our earliest youth. Coming now to our everyday life, God pours out his blessings on us day after day: in the carrying out of our duties, in solving our problems, in healing the ills of our souls and bodies.

True it is that we have much reason for joy. We have been given so much by God. Let the joy of our hearts be an appreciation of God's goodness to us.

CHAPTER 6: THE POWER OF PRAYER

"Ask, and it shall be given you." (Matthew 7:7).

When we repeat the words of Christ, "Ask, and it shall be given you," do we really dwell deeply on their meaning? They were said by Jesus Christ himself, who is truth itself. Christ never did or said anything in vain. So, these words of Christ mean exactly what they say: if we ask God for something, we will receive it. In order to get the significance of the words, let us consider the case in which we ask our fellow man for something. Suppose he tells us that we will receive it. He is speaking as an ordinary human being and we know it. We know in our heart that he may or may not be able to give us what we ask. He has the wish to do so, but he has not the absolute power. The power to give comes from God.

On the other hand, when we ask something of God, we know that he can give it to us. Jesus Christ is God and he has absolute dominion over all things. Moreover, he wants us to ask and he wants to give: "Ask, and it shall be given you." But, we must ask with faith, believing that we will receive, if it is God's holy will.

CHAPTER 7: THE ANSWER TO THE PRAYER OF THE DISCIPLES

"Lord, teach us to pray." (Luke 11:1).

We must ask - pray - in the proper way. Most of us are novices in the way of prayer: just trying to learn how to pray. We can be consoled by the thought that so many millions are, and have been through the centuries, learners in the art of prayer. "Lord, teach us to pray," the disciples said to Our Lord. The disciples must have felt an awful want deep down in themselves when they asked Jesus to teach them to pray. They must have keenly felt the need for prayer and they must have been deeply conscious of the efficacy of prayer. Jesus responded by teaching them the perfect prayer, the Our Father. That was the answer to their prayer. So it

was the prayer of the disciples “Lord teach us to pray”, that gave to the world the greatest of all prayers. What an answer that was to the prayer of the disciples! Well, the lesson for us here is quite plain: the disciples had their problems about prayer. They appealed to the Lord for help and their prayer was answered. We, too, have our problems in prayer. Let the example of the disciples be our inspiration. The Lord knows our problems and the Lord has the answer to those problems. Like the disciples, let us ask his help.

CHAPTER 8: THE PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING

“Were not ten made clean? And where are the nine?” (Luke 17:17).

When we reflect on our own prayers and the manner in which we say them, we will find ourselves beating our breasts and saying: O Lord, be merciful to me for my appalling ingratitude. How often has it happened that we have had some trouble that really worried us – illness, for instance. It may have been an illness that posed a real threat to our lives. We thought that it was something really bad. We prayed – prayed with humility and faith – and our illness disappeared. Yes, it was just gone. And we took it for granted, as if it were our due. The fact is that something very extraordinary happened to us as a result of our prayer. This has been the experience of all of us. No wonder the power of prayer is voiced so strongly.

As regards our thanksgiving to God for granting our petitions in prayer, a good resolution would be to spend as much time in thanking God as we spent petitioning him for what we needed.

Such a suggestion may come as a surprise to us. Yet, God’s answer to our prayer is greater than all our thanksgiving. But, you say, I had been praying for years for this intention. Do I now have to keep thanking God for years? My answer to you is: no thanksgiving could be long enough in return for a favour from God. As for the length of your thanksgiving, don’t worry. Just make the sincere intention of putting this act of thanksgiving into all your prayers for the rest of your life. Do not neglect, however, to make specific acts of thanksgiving immediately after receiving a favour from the Lord.

CHAPTER 9: THE DESIRE TO BE RIGHT WITH GOD

“Seek ye therefore first the kingdom of God and his justice.” (Matthew 6:33).

I suppose one of our earliest memories is that of saying our night prayers. This act, at the end of our childhood day, made us feel holy. If we could re-live those moments now, perhaps we would find that we were very holy, – indeed, really angelic creatures. We would, perhaps, stand back in reverential awe, in holy fear, at beholding something so close to God. We spoke to God then with all the absolute confidence of the child-father relationship. The loveliness of childhood welled out towards the tenderness of the heavenly father whom our parents had portrayed so well for us, for as long as we could remember.

Our relationship with God. That is what has really mattered all through the years. God's material world has affected us one way or another as we have passed through it. There have been joys, there have been sorrows; there have been successes, there have been failures; there have been moments of elation, there have been moments of disappointment and grief. Yet, all the time, we have known, without the shadow of a doubt, that just one thing mattered. That one thing was that we were right with God. Again and again, a thousand times a day, consciously or unconsciously, we have returned to the touchstone of real values: sanctity. How well we have known, how well we now know, that all that this world holds dear for us, were it to be swept away tomorrow, the loss would be a merely human one. And great though this loss might be, it would only serve to emphasise all the more the plain fact that what matters for us, in the final analysis, is our spiritual worth, in the eyes of God.

CHAPTER 10: HOLINESS

"Be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy." (Leviticus 19:1).

Holiness! How we long for it day after day! That longing began away back in childhood days. How the Lord must have loved us and led us on. And how receptive our young hearts were then. Does the Lord love us less now? Does he speak to our hearts less frequently? No. The Lord is always with us, working in our souls through the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, our advocate, is always pleading our cause: "For we know not what we should pray for as we ought; but the Spirit himself asketh for us with unspeakable groanings." (Romans 8:26).

Through the years, the world has grown in on us. Our souls are not perhaps, so receptive now. But, let us not be unduly worried. Let us remember that, in the spiritual life, we can never go it alone. In fact, without God's help we can't get anywhere in the realm of spirituality. From God alone comes our ability to be truly holy souls. Let us ask God to make us holy.

We must never underestimate our responsibilities towards God, towards ourselves and towards our neighbour. We have been called to greatness and we must act in accordance with that call. When God created you, when God created me, he created a masterpiece. How else could we describe ourselves? – we, who are destined for eternal life; we, who are called to be imitators of Jesus Christ; we, whom Jesus himself referred to as the salt of the earth and the light of the world. We are called to be saints – nothing less.

CHAPTER 11: GOD'S GOOD SERVANTS

"Well done, good and faithful servant." (Matthew 25:21).

We all want to be good. This desire for personal goodness is something that is deep down in our nature. We may not always take the proper means towards achieving our end, our approach may give a very wrong impression, but, ultimately, our aim is to be good.

This longing for goodness is part and parcel of our makeup as creatures of God. Man was made by God to be perfect. This means that when God created man He wished him to be a perfect creature. St Augustine puts the matter very clearly when he says: "For Thyself, O Lord, Thou hast created us, and our heart is restless till it rests in Thee."

Let us now look at our own individual lives and see this desire for good in practice. Your life and my life are made up of all sorts of occupations. Is there a single occupation in which we wish to acquit ourselves badly? No. We know that a thing done badly, through our own wish, is a debt both spiritually and materially and we will have none of it. Firstly, we want to please God at all costs. Secondly, from the material or human point-of-view, we want to be as good as the best.

The desire to be good is a great inspiration to us as we go through life. If we are aiming at goodness, we are, at the same time, rejecting evil; we are setting up for ourselves a noble objective; we are ensuring for ourselves a sustained interest in life.

CHAPTER 12: HOPE IN GOD

"Trust God and he will help you; make straight your ways and hope in him." (Ecclesiasticus 2:6).

In this present age, one of the great problems confronting society is a malaise of disinterestedness. Increasing numbers of people seem to have an insufficient understanding of the meaning of life. Life here on earth is intended to lead to life hereafter. As our catechism told us long ago: God created man to know, love and serve Him here on earth and to see and enjoy Him forever in heaven. If such people kept before their eyes the true meaning of life, they would seldom have a dull moment and would never be in serious danger of falling into depression from lack of interest in God's wonderful world.

God's world is full of possibilities and opportunities. In the Scriptures, the Prophet Isaiah (Chapter 45), speaking of God's creation of the world, says: "He did not create it in vain, he made it to be lived in." The Second Vatican Council, speaking on the value of human activity, has these marvellous words to say: "When men and women provide for themselves and their families in such a way as to be of service to the community as well, they can rightly look upon their work as a prolongation of the work of the creator, a service to their fellow men, and their personal contribution to the fulfilment in history of the divine plan." ("Church in the Modern World" No. 34).

CHAPTER 13: HUMILITY

"I exhort you, therefore, to walk worthily in the vocation to which you are called, with all humility and meekness." (Ephesians 4:1,2).

Humility is a virtue which has been universally admired all through the history of mankind. Men have been criticised for many reasons; they have been misjudged; they have been

misunderstood; they have been justly admonished; but the truly humble are both masters of the world and the admiration of all eyes, – patterns of virtue amongst their fellow-men. All categories of men, from the Emperor to the least in the Roman Empire, sought out St Simon Stylites kneeling on his pillar. The humility of the Curé of Ars claimed its clients from every stratum of society in France.

What is this levelling force which characterises the virtue of humility? How does it happen that this same force can strip a man of all the accretions of human fame and pomp and can loosen the fetters which bind him to the evergrowing mass of conventional minutiae in social life, – leaving him simply an untrammelled human being? The answer surely is this, that when one encounters true humility – which implies true detachment – one sees in it the image of what a man should really be and, having seen this image, strives, momentarily or otherwise, to grasp it, forgetting all else.

CHAPTER 14: JESUS, SOURCE OF OUR REST

“Learn of me, because I am meek and humble of heart: and you shall find rest to your souls.” (Matthew 11: 29).

‘Learn of Me,’ Our Blessed Lord said, “for I am meek and humble of heart and you shall find rest to your souls.” Let us examine these words of Our Lord. First of all, Our Lord asks us to learn of Him. Learn what? Meekness and humility – twin virtues. Secondly, note that the Lord draws a conclusion from what He has said: “... and you shall find rest to your souls.” Our Lord is simply telling us that if we are meek and humble we shall find rest, rest to our souls. Rest, – that is, spiritual rest, – is what we seem to be always striving after. Mere bodily rest we know to be something that can be secured by a good night’s sleep. It is always within our grasp. Rest for our souls is in an altogether different category. Peace of soul means peace of mind, – peace with our God, peace with ourselves, peace with our neighbour... and all this the Lord promises in return for meekness and humility. And this is precisely what we feel when we come face to face with the truly humble being. Now our nature is such that, when it is confronted with something that it sees to be really good, it will react by going straight for that good. Confronted with true humility, we cannot resist it. It registers as part of ourselves.

CHAPTER 15: PEACE IN CHRIST

“Humble yourselves, therefore, beneath the mighty hand of God.” (1 Peter 6).

We now see that peace of soul comes through the practice of meekness and humility. These two virtues will give us true peace. It follows that if we do not possess these virtues we shall not have peace. The opposite of humility is pride. So the lesson is clear: We must cut down on pride and practise humility.

Humility consists in recognizing ourselves for what we really are, – creatures of God, wholly dependent on Him. Of ourselves we have nothing. Whatever good is in us is a gift from God.

Let us take just some of the gifts of God: ability, both bodily and mental, facility in understanding, success in our lives, good health, cheerful disposition, the art of conversation... There are thousands of others. Whatever gifts we possess, we have them from God. They do not belong to us. A genuine act of humility on our part would be, for instance, a habit of constant thanks to God for his gifts to us.

We are, in absolute reality, just what we are in God's sight. When we examine this statement, it is both a sobering thought and a marvellous consolation and inspiration. On the one hand, whatever faults we have to have had, are all crystal clear to the all-seeing, all-knowing God – there can be no pretence, no deceit on our part. On the other hand, all the good that we have done – from our first good act until this moment – has heaped up for us “treasures in heaven: where neither the rust or moth doth consume, and where thieves do not break through, nor steal.” (Matthew 6:20).

CHAPTER 16: SIMPLICITY AND OPENNESS

“Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no guile.” (John 1:47).

When we see simplicity of life as a characteristic of someone, it has an amazing attraction for us. Perhaps the reason is that we see so much in life that is complex. It is like being freed from the meshes of a restrained environment to meet somebody whose outlook in life is open and simple. To make the matter more clear, we may ask: What exactly is simplicity? It is a characteristic that indicates that we are not complex or compound in our personality make-up. A person who is simple in manner is one who is plain, unpretentious unsuspecting and guileless. When we read this description, we probably have two reactions. First we say: I wish I could be like that. Secondly we say: How do I get there? Having said these two things, we have made an open admission of the excellence of simplicity and of its absence to some degree in our life. Such an open admission is good for us.

In developing our thoughts about simplicity in our way of life, I think the word openness might be used as a good key word to our understanding of how that simplicity enters into our lives. Let us consider openness in two ways: openness with God and openness with our neighbour.

CHAPTER 17: OPENNESS WITH GOD

“For you were heretofore darkness, but now light in the Lord. Walk then as children of the light.” (Ephesians 5:8).

Openness with God is not something new to us, though we possibly have not reflected on this. The fact is that we were all once open with God, in our childhood days. Our simplicity before God at that stage was not something we had positively developed. Rather, it was just there. Our child's mind was all-trusting.

When we then asked God for something, it never occurred to us, provided we were good, that God would refuse us anything we asked. We asked then with faith, childlike trust and gratitude. How true it is that we could now borrow many a leaf from the book of our childhood days. The passage of years is a great accumulator. So many things get heaped up in our lives. From every new acquaintance, from every new experience, something rubs off on us and not always does it illumine and adorn our path. Coupled with this, there are the concomitant personality reactions. When we encounter people and situations, there is always the coping element. The encounter always involves selectivity, acceptance or rejection. This is a constant, ongoing judgmental process. If we are not on the alert, our simplicity and our openness with God may suffer from the accumulation of ideas and opinions which serve only to cloud our relationship with God.

CHAPTER 18: OPENNESS WITH OUR NEIGHBOUR

“All things therefore whatsoever you would that men should do to you, do you also to them.” (Matthew 12:12).

(Alternative rendering: “Treat others the way you would have them treat you” – New American Bible Edition).

I think a good way to approach this question is to ask ourselves how we would wish our neighbour to be open with us. We all know the quality called openness. To define it is not so easy. However, openness suggests to us the dropping of barriers which would make us seem strangers to those amongst whom we live. Many of the barriers that exist at community level are broken by interpersonal relations which begin to take shape as a result of a sort of spontaneous initiative on both sides. But, without a doubt, when the neighbour comes to us from outside our community, the onus lies with us to hold out the hand of welcome: “I was a stranger and you took me in” the Gospel instructs us. I remember a few years ago a young married couple coming in as strangers to a certain district. Their description of being visited and welcomed by their new neighbours was an almost unbelievable expression of joy, relief and happiness.

Welcome leads on to co-operation. Whether it is at community level or at group level or at general social level, we all know that one of the greatest tributes we could pay to any section of the people is that they are pulling well together. In this good relationship, we see an ideal of community effort which makes for happiness, contentment and a healthy spiritual outlook.