

## Jesus-Me / Jesus-We

Father Ernie Larkin, O. Carm. has been active in the Charismatic Renewal since 1972. Formerly a professor of theology in his Order's major seminary in Washington, D.C. and at the Catholic University of America, he has been working in adult and continuing education in Phoenix, Arizona since 1970. He was the founding president of Kino Institute and presently is co-director of the spirituality section of this diocesan academy of religious studies in Phoenix.

The call from individualism to community is one of the earmarks of contemporary spirituality. Individualistic piety was once the strength and the weakness of both Catholic and most American religion. Today it has fallen into disrepute, at least in aspiration, and community ideals and processes have taken over. The shift is based on the Scriptures and on Vatican II theology.

Individualistic piety as such is not egoism or selfishness. It is one way of organizing a spiritual life. It sees the one-to-one relationship with the Lord as the central value, the hub of the wheel, around which everything else is structured. Other values like community, ministry, peace and justice are the spokes of the wheel. They move out from the center as branches of a tree or shoots from a source. They are effects, not causes, so that action together, whether in prayer or in work, is not the heart of the matter. People are not excluded from one's life, but neither are they center-stage.

### Personal Relationship

There would be less quarrel with this view if a personal rather than an individual relationship with Jesus were underlined. Person and individual are two different concepts. Person implies relationships with others; individual is isolationist. We become persons through others, biologically through parents and psychologically through a whole sweep of interpersonal relationships. We are given our personhood by others, and these others remain part of ourselves forever.

Persons and community are correlatives. The individual is alone, a cipher, a singleton among singletons.

Thus a personal relationship with Jesus (not an individualistic one) is indeed the heart of the matter. It is lodged firmly in community, so that it finds expression equally well in liturgy or group praying as in solitude. An individualistic relationship, on the other hand, inevitably becomes restrictive; it blocks out others, at least by neglect, and in this way it sins against the solidarity of Christians in the body of Christ. There is no warranty for this kind of individualistic piety in the Scriptures.

Scripture gives the highest priority to personal relationship with the Lord: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart" (Mk. 12:29). All else is secondary, even the "new commandment" which is, Jesus' own and the distinctive mark of His followers, the command to love one another (Jn. 13:34-35). These are two commandments, not just one; yet the first stands alone. The second is "like the first" and is proof of the first. In other words the two exist together or not at all. "if anyone says, 'My love is fixed on God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. One who has no love for the brother he has seen cannot love the God he has not seen" (1 Jn. 4:20).

In individualistic piety the danger of neglecting other people, the world, the human dimension of life is almost unavoidable. The philosophical roots of this approach to God are Platonic and Gnostic, and that means a bias in favor of the abstract and immaterial.

There is scant attention paid to the body or to life together on planet earth. Its shibboleths are rugged individualism, laissez-faire, and will power religion, all of which are counter-values of our time. They are counter-Gospel as well. The individualistic system is a mistaken development and doomed to be recognized eventually as counterfeit Christianity. Our religion is too incarnational for such a non-human approach and latent egoism. God so loved the world that He became part of it Himself (Jn. 3:16). Who are we to thumb our nose at the world as God's self-revelation and seek a totally other-worldly God beyond our bodily condition, beyond our social interdependence, beyond the earthly condition of a Jesus of Nazareth?

Today "Jesus and me" piety is recognized as a defective synthesis of the Christian life. It represents an excessively other-worldly and privatized view of life that is oblivious, not only of other people's needs, but of the tremendous potential for human growth in the interpersonal approach to God.

### **Centrality of Community**

As Christians we are saved and sanctified together. "You are the body of Christ, and individually members of it" (1 Cor. 12:27). This ringing statement of Paul is realistic beyond imagination. Though we retain our individuality and our own personhood, we are in fact the living Christ (1 Cor. 12:12), one "new man" (Col. 3:10-11). This new reality is the body of Christ in the world today. It is a living body made up of many members, and the glory of the Lord which once shone on the face of Jesus now shines forth on the faces of brothers and sisters who make up this body (cf 2 Cor. 3:18).

We do not form a new physical body of Jesus of Nazareth. We are "incorporated" into His risen body in terms of function and activity. Filled with the Holy Spirit our sovereign Head pours out graces and charisms

on us His members to build us up together to form this new body. "Of His fullness we have all received" (Jn. 1:16). Thus we are made holy in the body through Him, in Him and with Him.

It is obvious that we depend on Jesus Christ, but it is also true that we depend on each other. "Through Him (Christ) the whole body grows, and with the proper functioning of the members joined firmly together by each supporting ligament, it builds itself up in love" (Eph. 4:16). Our new life in Christ means living no longer for ourselves but for Him who died and was raised up for us (2 Cor. 5:15). Practically speaking, this means that "each one looks to others' interests rather than his own" (Phil. 2:4). This formula is each member's program, so that all of us ideally are living for each other. This is the beautiful mutuality of the body of Christ. The very opposite of this new life in Christ is egocentricity, divisiveness, jealousy, quarreling-in a word, breaking the bond of unity in the Spirit. In this renewed vision of the Christian life the capital sins, as Archbishop Plourde of Ottawa pointed out in a beautiful pastoral last year, are apathy and unconcern rather than the enemies of pride and lust within.

This life together is community. It is grace in action, the way, the truth, and the life, precisely because it brings us "the Way, the Truth, and the Life," who is the Lord Himself (Jn. 14:6). Community is the place of nourishment, refreshment, and re-creation, because it is where the living Jesus dwells with His people. Community provides the very air we breathe as Christians. Formerly that atmosphere was often identified as prayer. Prayer is still vital, but community is equally important. Community relationships on whatever level are forms of prayer, i.e., implicit forms of encounter with God. We can no more exist without community than we can live without prayer. Together prayer and community are the oxygen of life.

## A New Image

In this renewed view community, ministry, and social action are not mere consequences or moral imperatives flowing out of our dedication to the Lord Jesus. These activities are “constitutive” parts of our life with the Lord. The image of the wheel mentioned above undergoes radical change. Jesus Himself, alone and transcendent, becomes the center or hub and there are no spokes. Instead, there are multiple concentric circles, each representing a human community of our life. I exist as a point in each of those circles; I stand next to brothers and sisters. The communities are not static; they are in motion, touching and affecting one another, those closer to the center moving outward in an undulating pattern.

My own relationship with the Lord is still profoundly personal. Sometimes it is even individual, as when I gaze upon the Lord in private prayer, conscious only of myself and Him, “alone with the Alone.” But even here who can measure the role my brothers and sisters play? I am acting personally, with the richness and potential that others have given me, both in terms of past formation and this present opportunity.

In such “private prayer” I leave my place in my innermost circle and go into the center where the Lord dwells to enjoy my audience and to do my dance. But I carry my loved ones with me. I go supported by, brothers and sisters who remain behind in the circle. When I finish I return to my place. I want to share even these “private” experiences. Sharing becomes a way of life, so that eventually I find it more and more difficult to think of myself as a loner. I begin to get the point that my happiness, my future, my identity is that of a member of the body, a fellow human being among fellow human beings. We are a people facing the living Lord, and we stand together, shoulder to shoulder, supported by one another, called forth by one another, and making it possible

for others to relate to the Lord in the same way.

Note, “Jesus and we” piety does not neglect prayer. It is not totally horizontal, activist, concerned exclusively with the love of fellow men. The rediscovery of this community approach to God in the 1960’s was a heady experience, and some advocates went overboard in intemperate exaggerations. Prayer was neglected and social and community action regarded as the only viable form of Christian life. This was the denial of our birthright which is “to know You, the only true God, and Him whom You have sent, Jesus Christ” (Jn. 17:2). Movements like the Charismatic Renewal in the late 1960’s righted the balance and reaffirmed the primordial place of prayer and worship in Christian life. But once again the swing of the pendulum tended to go too far. Social action was sometimes lost sight of. Today this dimension has become like a second arm of a pincer movement to renew Christian life to its very foundations. It is the call to peace and justice. We are being called on all sides to serve, not only one another, but the poor, the oppressed and those suffering from war. This is an obvious demand of the “Jesus and we” spirituality.

## Christ in Us

It is possible to be cultivating a “Jesus and me” piety even with a healthy community involvement. This will happen if one’s perspective is basically individualistic in the style of the lonely hero like Matt Dillon of *Gunsmoke* or the tough, little Mrs. Dubois in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, who died “beholden” to no one. Generally speaking these are insufficient responses to the movement of the Spirit in our time.

A “Jesus and we” spirituality results from taking our interdependence and mutuality seriously. Perhaps it would be more simple to say that it means taking horizontal reality seriously. If I see the present world as

“passing away” (1 Cor. 7:3 1), on its way to the dust bin, if I look upon my life as a mere testing period without roots or history, I will be tempted to think entirely in terms of saving my soul. If I help others in their project, it will be as one outsider to another.

But I am more than a soul. I am a body-person, sprung from this earth but having a spark from heaven within. I am bound up with other persons in multiple networks. Even my Lord and Savior, the man Jesus Christ (1 Tim. 2:5), is part of this network, since He is one of us. In this perspective my thinking will be plural, social and cosmic; it will be “we” more than “I” Individualistic thinking will smack of selfishness and sin.

In this context we shall be less at home with compartmentalization of life, with separate sectors for religious and for secular action, for contemplation and for work in peace and justice. Rather our work in the world will be tied in with our prayer life, just as our worship will grow out of and nurture our involvement in human problems. We will make time for ail these elements, but as different dimensions of one life together, all of them complementary and mutually inclusive of each other. We will be building a spirituality based on Matthew 25. It will take time to develop this kind of system because it will come out of experience, the experience of being led by the Spirit of God in this renewal of life together in Christ Jesus.