

Baptism, Faith and Conversion

ABHISIKTANANDA

I

Unless a man is born from water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God (John 3:5).

He who believes and is baptized will be saved (Mark 16:16).

Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:38).

Without baptism man cannot be saved. The texts quoted above are explicit enough. Tradition has always understood them in a literal sense. Yet Christian conscience does not remain unaware that God's power and love cannot be limited even to the signs which He Himself has instituted.

Already the Scripture hints at it: Cornelius the Centurion receives the Spirit before being baptized, and baptism in his case seems rather a ratification by men of what God has already done in him. (*Acts 10:44-47*—the reversal in a way of the common process through which God ratifies in heaven what is done by his ministers on earth, cf. *Matthew 16:19* and *18:18*.) The text of *I Corinthians 7:14* is understood by not a few interpreters in the sense that, apart from any actual baptism, the husband/wife and children of a Christian share in his/her own consecration and 'sanctity'. There is too the case of the Fathers of the Old Covenant who could have been baptized only symbolically 'in the cloud and in the sea', as St. Paul says (*I Corinthians 10:2*). There is also the case of catechumens who die before receiving baptism, and sometimes even by violence in witness to their faith. Christians never believed that they would be excluded from eternal salvation.

To maintain the necessity *de jure* of baptism for the salvation of each individual, theologians speak of *votum baptismi*, a desire for baptism arising at least implicitly in the heart of a man tending sincerely towards God. Such an approach is really too juridical and finally aims simply at preserving intact the categories within which men want to enclose the mystery of God and his design of salvation. We wonder whether the solution should not be found in a more exact 'anthropology'—an anthropology which takes into account both the present awareness in philosophy of mankind being a 'communion' (a

co-esse), and the Biblical revelation of the *koinonia* and of the unity in Christ of all that is (cf. *Colossians*, *Ephesians*, *I Corinthians* 15:28, *St. John's* Prologue).

Such an approach would link intimately—ontologically, we could even say—the salvation of people who *woke up* to themselves and to the mystery of God (or even of those who actually never woke up) before the 'fullness of time', with the salvation of those who, by divine privilege, belong to the eschatological times, the *plenitudo temporum* or *pleroma tou chronou* of the New Testament (*Galatians* 4:4).

So in short this perhaps could be said: Without baptism indeed no man can be saved, which means that without baptism (of individual men) mankind has no access whatsoever to salvation. However, it cannot be said that in the case of every individual actual baptism is indispensable for his own salvation.

II

Personal *conversion* is absolutely necessary for the salvation of every individual man—we mean, of course, men who wake up to self-awareness and become capable of a personal and free act (cf. *Acts* 2:38, *Mark* 1:11, *Luke* 13:3, *Matthew* 18:3, *I Thessalonians* 1:9).

The word *conversion* is taken here in its Biblical sense of *metanoia* (the Greek word generally used in the N.T.). *Metanoia* does not mean simply some act of repentance or penance, as is often understood. It signifies nothing short of a complete internal change-over, a reversal of the most intimate and deep dispositions of a man, a real turn-over of oneself to God. To make use of Biblical and very expressive symbols: from darkness to light, from *sarx* to *pneuma* (from flesh to spirit), from the creatures to the Creator, from the Old Adam lying deep in each one of us to the New Adam rising again in and from the same depth in each one of us.

Conversion does not mean first a change in rites, religious practices or intellectual tenets. Such things are all 'external' and have value only as signs of the change in the heart. They are required in fact by the change in the heart when a man realizes that for various reasons the old ways have to be given up—which happens in a definitive manner when the true Light that is Christ begins to shine in his heart.

There is no *metanoia*, Biblically speaking, when the so-called conversion to Christianity happens only, or at least chiefly, on an external level. Examples of this can be given from past times, for example, the conversion of the Saxons by Charlemagne or of the Moriscos by the Spaniards. It is better not to dwell on similar 'conversions' in not so olden times. . . .

We cannot deny indeed that at times such 'conversions' or rather 'baptisms' ushered in a progressive *metanoia* and finally a real Christian life, if not in the recipients of such baptism, at

least in their children or children's children, both through the working of divine grace and through the impact of social life. Yet nobody can be absolved from the crime of sacrilege, who dares to use so lightly the sacraments of the New Covenant. We cannot forget, either, the lamentations of the great Origen when he was comparing the neophytes of his old age (who for the most part fell miserably during the Decian persecution) to those of his youth, at a time when the ever-pending risk of martyrdom deterred from asking for baptism all those for whom baptism did not mean a real and complete *metanoia*, a total dedication in faith to Christ with all the temporal risks involved.

III

Faith such as is required for baptism (cf. *Luke* 1:45, *John* 20:29, *Romans* 4:3, *Acts* 8:37-38) is not the mere *I believe* which has to be formulated at the time of the ceremony—an intellectual adherence to what has been taught by the minister or the catechist. The faith which gives its value to the ceremony of baptism is a definite act of the will through which man gives himself completely to Christ—for better and for worse, as we could say in a human way and by analogy to human commitments. (Again here, we do not want to minimize the intellectual aspect of faith and the necessary acknowledgment by man that Jesus is the Son of God, but we think it needful to stress that this adherence to Christ should spring up in man from far deeper levels than the merely intellectual one.)

Faith is a gift from heaven. The Father alone could reveal to Peter who Christ was (*Matthew* 16:17). The Father alone can lead men to Christ (*John* 6:44, cf. *Matthew* 10:21, *John* 17:2, 7). At the same time it is something which springs in man from the very source of his being, an act which is the most personal and the most free of all acts he is capable of performing, something which engages his whole being without the possibility of anything in him standing aloof, an act which man takes at the very point of himself in which he is the complete master of himself and the only responsible agent of his internal destiny.

Faith does not mean the acceptance of the routine of the so-called Christian society—or, for that matter, of any religious society at all. Faith is a personal engagement. Christ warned his disciples in no uncertain terms that he did not come to provide his own with a peaceful life. Faith in Christ is bound to put men into contradiction with those who are dearest to him (*Matthew* 10:33-39). Faith means that man is ready to give up everything for Christ's sake (*Luke* 14:26, 27, 37). Faith means a complete donation of oneself to Christ, and especially to Christ as present actually in our brother-men (cf. *Matthew* 25:31 ff.). The two commandments of the Law are one (*Matthew* 22:39, cf. *I John* 4:20), and Jesus explains in St. John

(15:13) that love for the neighbour may lead eventually to the supreme sacrifice.

It is such faith which is really expected from the candidate for baptism. Faith and conversion will, of course, grow indefinitely in the new Christian under the fostering of the Holy Spirit. But the initial stage of faith and conversion is already a state of fullness, of 'loving God above everything'. That does not mean that the believer will never sin again, nor that he will do everything thenceforth with the utmost perfection. He is weak, and God knows the stuff of which he is made (*Psalms* 103:14). However, the initial steps must already involve the whole of the man, his whole will, his whole awareness and intelligence, as they are actually developed in him according to his own culture and training, and according to the circumstances of his life and age.

We may note here that Christianity alone requires such a *metanoia* coupled with faith in candidates to the sacrament of initiation (the *diksa*, in Indian terms). Neither Hinduism nor Buddhism nor Islam ask for anything comparable. In the case of Hinduism, it may be said that belonging to Hinduism depends on birth; yet even the Hindu organizations which encourage the *suddhi* or re-conversion will never ask anything more from people than an external adherence. In Hinduism, indeed, such a thorough and real conversion as described above is what is expected to take place at the last stage only of successive births, as the ultimate (and only adequate) preparation for the final release or *moksa*. All previous religious practices are only meant as a remote preparation towards such a decisive 'change of mind' which turns man's desire from impermanent joys here or above towards the only Reality.

In the ancient practice—revived recently in the Roman Church—baptism was conferred by steps, and such steps marked the different stages of the catechumenate. The catechumenate is a preparation for conversion, in the same way as, in religious orders, the noviciate is a preparation for profession and final vows. The performance of the sacrament at the end of the rites and of the preparation of mind and will should always mean that the catechumen has realized within himself the essential *metanoia*, the conversion from idols (mental as well as material) to the real and living God (*I Thessalonians* 1:9).

Christians are saints, they are perfect, *teleioi*, in the Biblical sense of the terms. The sharing in the Holy Eucharist is the main mark of Christians, and the baptismal *diksa* (initiation) is essentially ordained towards its reception and participation. The Eucharist is not a means towards getting grace (though, of course, it is the main channel of grace), nor a mere preparation for the Kingdom, even less a kind of spiritual insurance for what lies beyond death. The Eucharist is actually the main outlet in us of the divine grace, the main manifestation of the

life of the Spirit, in the Church as well as in each individual Christian. The Eucharist is an actual participation in the Kingdom. Its value is directly eschatological: it is the sacramental anticipation of the eschatological condition of mankind. Only he who is converted is capable of sharing in the Eucharist. Baptism has conformed man to the Risen Christ. Through the Eucharist man lives his life of resurrection, his celestial condition (cf. *Ephesians* 2:6, 19, *Colossians* 2:12, 3:3, *Philippians* 3:20). Using Hindu terminology, we might say that baptism has conferred *de jure* the *moksa* on the initiated one (though, of course, Christians know very well that as long as he lives, the baptized man is capable of lapsing from his position).

IV

It is a Biblical truth that God wills the salvation of all men (cf. *I John* 4:14, *John* 3:17, *I Timothy* 2:14, *Romans* 1 and 2). It is a Biblical truth also that salvation, like faith, is a gift of God. When the Apostles asked Jesus, 'Then who can possibly be saved?', Jesus answered them, 'Humanly speaking it is impossible, but to God everything is possible' (*Matthew* 19:25 f.).

Yet in that act, which will decide the eternal destiny of an individual man, God treats man as a free partner, and the final decision will be both entirely from God and entirely from man, in a way which baffles the theologians, certainly, but is none the less true for that. If, then, man has to work out freely, from his side, his own salvation, the work asked from him in this connection must be proportionate to his own possibilities. If the will of God to save all men be real, God cannot set to salvation conditions such as a given man in a given situation would be unable to fulfil in spite of all his endeavours and yearnings.

The conception of a *massa damnata* ('mass of perdition') from which God would select at will, as it were, a few saved ones does not ring true either to the idea or the experience of God that man can reach by his reason or his spiritual intuition, even less to the revelation of God as the Lord of Justice and Love. It is even directly opposed to the Scriptures. For example, in *Ezekiel* (ch. 18) where God, speaking through his prophet, stresses that nobody can be condemned for the sins of others, however close they may be to him, even a son or a father.

Neanderthal or Cro-Magnon man could not have faith in Christ. He was lacking even the most elementary requisites to perform such an act. One can even wonder if he had already emerged sufficiently from the 'group' to be capable of an act really free, personal and fully responsible. Who could maintain that God simply sent him to hell because of his failure to

abide by the eschatological conditions of salvation, more precisely by the conditions of salvation as revealed by God in eschatological times, once the world has reached the fullness of time? Yet that man of Cro-Magnon was a necessary link in the evolution and development of mankind. In order that the humanity of these last three or four millennia should be what it is, physically, psychologically and socially—in order that the Word of God should find a human body, a human psyche, a human milieu, in which he could first experience and express to himself, then transmit to his brother-men, the mystery of God and his plan of salvation—all the preparatory stages of human body, human mind and human society were altogether necessary. How could anyone maintain that those steps which were necessary in the growth of mankind towards its fullness in Christ be condemned just because they were only *steps*?

The same has to be said analogically of all those who woke up to human consciousness then went to the eternal sleep before the eschatological times dawned on them. There are in fact countless stages in the situation of human souls as regards their relation *de facto* with the mystery of Christ. First there are those who never rose to the possibility of a free personal act: children dead in their mothers' womb or in their infancy, or even people unable, due to diverse circumstances, ever to reach such a degree of human maturity—as expressed perhaps in some prehistoric or left-behind human groups. There are those who never heard of Christ, whether they lived before or after his Incarnation. There are those who heard of him indeed and who have at times a wonderful knowledge of the Gospel and a sincere love and veneration for Jesus, yet who, in all sincerity, cannot become convinced that the acceptance of Christ's message means the obligation of asking for baptism and of adhering to the Church: a case not infrequent now in India, especially among the followers of Mahatma Gandhi. And there are, too, the myriad religious men in the world of the past as well as of the present time, who have realized the essential *metanoia* or inner conversion to God, through the variety of myths and symbols in which the spiritual patrimony of mankind is so rich—not forgetting those who refuse all conceptions of God (or even deny the 'god of the religions') but at times realize wonderfully in the service of their brothers that 'renouncing oneself' which is the essence of any true *metanoia*.

According to Aquinas, there is in the life of every man—every adult man—a moment in which he is confronted with the dilemma of 'God or himself', or rather of 'himself as manifested phenomenologically to himself' and 'himself as surging in the depth of his conscience' (*S. Th. II*, 89:6). That is really the beginning of any personal, free and 'human' life. In any case, however, theologians may explain it, the salvation of man will always be the result of a free decision. But the tragedy is that, in most cases, the choice which will decide the

eternal destiny of man will have to be made outside any reference to Christ or the Gospel.

V

There is no salvation possible without faith and *metanoia*. Yet in most cases it is impossible to find in man's decision leading to salvation the external contents at least of faith as understood by Christian tradition. We are, then, invited to try to discover what is the most central essence of faith, something which can be found in any conversion or *metanoia*, and which at the same time will obtain its fullness only in perfect Christian faith.

In the last analysis, is not the essence of faith identical with the Biblical *metanoia*? The acknowledgment that man is not the supreme arbiter in his own life, that he has not the right to decide finally his own acts, nor is his intelligence the ultimate norm of the truth. Faith is first the surrender to God by man of his highest faculties—which includes 'docility' to God, the readiness to be taught by him in any way he may choose, of which St. John speaks after Isaiah (*John* 6:45, cf. *Isaiah* 54:13 and *Jeremiah* 31:33 ff.). It is not our purpose here to study the various symbols through which that 'essential' faith expresses and manifests itself phenomenologically at the many levels of mankind's or individual man's evolution and development. But we have been taught by divine revelation that, in the fullness of time, the acceptance of the superior arbiter referred to just now is the acceptance of Christ—not only indeed of Christ as a man of superior wisdom and religious experience (still then on a relative plane), nor a mere prophet sent by God (there could be many), but as the Word of God himself incarnated as a man. Then through Christ alone can the real mystery of God and the definite plan of God in creating the world be known: through Christ alone is man able to know exactly what God wants from him.

Conversion to Christian faith can, therefore, happen in two ways.

There is first the case of those who have already performed within themselves the essential *metanoia*, whatever may have been the symbols or concepts with the help of which they did so. Their conversion to Christianity will mean precisely that they now accept the belief that true knowledge of God and man's decision for salvation pass through Christ. That will be in fact the decisive test of their *metanoia*, the definite proof that their previous *metanoia*, their inner conversion, was really towards God himself and not simply towards some idea of God or of the Absolute they themselves have conceived—which would have amounted to a conversion only to oneself. But it is vital also that the bearers of the saving Word present the

message in its essential divine purity and do not proclaim instead some human concoction in which those who have already tasted the Spirit (like Cornelius before his baptism) could scarcely recognize the Word already mysteriously 'implanted' in them, the *emphytos logos* (James 1:21).

For those, on the other hand, who have not yet realized this *metanoia* or inner conversion, the acceptance of Christian faith will mean that they pass from complete darkness to the fullness of light, for nobody can accept Christ seriously without at the same time being converted or 'turned around' to God (I Thessalonians 1:9). Of course, the mystery of Christ—his love, the Father's love manifested in him—will be the most cogent and powerful incentive towards realizing that *metanoia*. Moreover, the mystery of Christ (and therefore the initiation into this mystery that is baptism) is not only a sign or a symbol but a sacrament, that means it is efficacious by itself in bringing down grace to man. However, we can never forget that any sacrament is a sign of faith. If the sacrament gives the *metanoia* its full value it gives it only to a real and existing *metanoia*.

We agree that if we take the Scriptures, and especially St. Paul, it looks as if only the second hypothesis was common. It seems that before the preaching of the Gospel there was everywhere nothing but darkness and moral corruption. We do not want to discuss the problem here, but is it not the daily experience of those who live among non-Christians to observe some at least of them much more submissive to the dictates of their conscience than too many of the so-called disciples of Christ? The first chapters of the Epistle to the Romans should be carefully studied in that connection. The case of Cornelius also is very enlightening. It was because of his prayers and alms that the Lord did miracles in order to have him baptized. He even received the Holy Spirit before baptism was administered to him.

VI

The call to salvation is addressed by God to the whole of mankind, that means not only to man as an individual but also to man as a totality. That is precisely the election of the Church whose vocation is not so much to pick up here and there some individuals from the world as to aggregate the whole world to the Kingdom (cf. *Matthew* 28:19, *Mark* 16:15, *Ephesians* 5:26-27).

Theology and philosophy stress this paradox of the destiny of man. On the one hand, each individual man is like the summit of the whole creation; he has a unique and personal value, an incommunicable vocation. Yet he cannot develop, live nor even come properly to himself except in communion with his brother-men. '*L'homme vit essentiellement dans l'altérité.*' It is what is called the 'reciprocity of consciences' or 'human solidarity' (on the ontological level). In Biblical theology this

comprises the whole mystery of the Mystical Body of Christ and the communion of saints—stressed in so many ways by St. Paul, and especially in the symbol of the two Adams: human-kind altogether falling in the first one, and rising again in the second one.

We must add here that this ontological solidarity of mankind and in particular its consequences for man's salvation are above all a Christian tenet. In Hinduism, for instance, man is till the end absolutely solitary in his quest for salvation. No doubt he can be helped by the *guru*. Yet no *guru* can save him. Such an 'intersubjectivity' of men, reaching up to the centre of man's own personality, is possible only if there is a man who, at the same time, is an individual and a 'whole', the Son of man *par excellence*, the Man-Head, the Man-Origin and the Man-Consummation, the Alpha and the Omega.

Here lies the solution, or at least some elements of a solution, of the problem presented by the salvation of those whose *metanoia* is not connected with the reception of baptism, either by an actual reception of it or at least by faith in Christ and an explicit desire for baptism.

We must maintain firmly that no salvation is possible apart from Christ and His Church. No other name has been given to man by which he may be saved, as Peter said to the Jews (*Acts* 4:12). But the salvific Name of Jesus is not only his name as uttered by the mouth, externally (*verbum prolatum*). The name of Jesus stands for his *doxa*, his glory, his power, which goes far beyond anything which can be said or understood by man. The name of Jesus stands for the whole mystery of Christ, the passage—the Passover—of Jesus beyond himself towards the Father and towards man, in a unique act of love: the supreme expression of the faith-conversion as explained above. The *egredere* addressed by God to Abraham ('Leave behind thee country, kinsfolk and father's home'—*Genesis* 12:1) is really answered by Jesus in the name of Abraham and all his progeny in the most excellent way: 'I leave the world, I go to the Father' (*John* 16:28). Indeed, is not the Spirit of Christ at work in any man who renounces himself? Is not Christ himself performing the unique Passover and reaching the Father, even if that man is ignorant of the revealed name of God and of the incarnation of his Son?

However that may be, Christ is never absent in the whole development and evolution of mankind. As is said in the Scriptures, there is no need to scale the heaven nor to go down into the depth to find him (*Romans* 10:6-7), he is everywhere and in everything. Christ is not only at the beginning and at the end, he is himself the Beginning and the End, the Alpha and the Omega (*Revelation* 1:8), and the Middle as well—as is so often sung of the Lord by the mystic poets of India. It is enough to refer here to the letters of Paul, chiefly to Ephesus and Colossae, to the Apocalypse and to the Prologue of St. John. In him 'all

this'—the *sarvam idam* of the Upanishads—has been created, in him *all this* is constituted and stands in being (*con-stant, syn-esteken*). 'He is the Upholding Principle of the whole scheme of Creation' (*Colossians* 1:20, tr. J. B. Philipps). In him *all this* has to be gathered in one, *ana-kephalaiosis* (*Ephesians* 1:10) at the end. Death itself will be subjected to him. Sin has already been vanquished by him. All will come to him as to a unique Head (cf. *Ephesians* 1:10) and will be offered by him to the Father as an eternal oblation (*I Corinthians* 15:28).

It is the privilege of Christians to know already, from the divine revelation, what will be made manifest to all on the Day of Judgment, the day of the ultimate *krisis* (through which have passed already all those who have participated in Christ's Passion and Resurrection through faith and baptism—cf. *John* 5:24).

Christians are indeed the ministers of the eschatological times, the royal priesthood of the Scriptures (*I Peter* 2:9), the priests of the whole of mankind. Their role in the creation is to give fulness and definitive achievement to everything which ever went out from the heart of man as prayer or praise to the Lord. Their eschatological offering is the complement and the completion of all the sacrifices and offerings which were sent from earth to heaven in the pre-eschatological times.

It is therefore their faith, their knowledge, their *metanoia* realized in fullness of light, which finally gives value and efficacy to all conversions, *metanoia*, faith and knowledge of those men on whom Christ's light has not yet dawned during their earthly life. Such considerations can help also to solve the problem of the salvation of those who were never able to reach the psychological maturity required for a personal *metanoia*.

VII

The Church is in the world a *diakonia*, a ministry. She is all through history the witness of the eschatological times. She is a servant, the 'handmaid' of the Magnificat. She possesses nothing of her own. Everything she has, she has received from her Lord (*John* 3:27, *II Corinthians* 4:7), she possesses it only for the service of the Lord, and of men also, since it is through men that the Lord manifests himself (*Matthew* 25:31 ff., etc.). She is in the world for the sake of others, to lead them to the fulness of time, to anticipate and realize that fulness in their midst, in their name.

It is her presence in the world which gives its value to the conversion to God of any man answering the call of the Spirit, in these very conditions of life which belong to him, and through those actual circumstances and symbols which help him to realize it. It is she who gives value, perfection and fulfilment to the whole evolution of nature and humanity towards self-awareness in man, and supplements, as it were, that self-awareness in men who die before reaching it and are therefore

not capable of the free act conducive to salvation. That is implied in the victory of the Cross. If all who died in Adam—without their actual and personal participation in Adam's sin—could not be revived in Christ through his Church when they do not directly refuse grace, then the enthusiasm of Paul would be in vain: 'Where, O Death, is thy victory?' (*I Corinthians* 15:55). How could the same Paul say that 'where sin abounded, grace did more abound?' (*Romans* 5:20).

The role of the Church in the world is to gather everything *in one*, all together, *epi to auto* (*Acts* 2:1). In each heart which wakes up to the light of Christ, it is the whole of mankind which wakes up and rises to the Father, led by the Spirit. In each man who receives the sacrament of faith, baptism, it is the whole of mankind which is, in fact, plunged into the death of Christ, passing through the deep waters of which the Scriptures speak so often.

In each man who receives the Spirit, it is the whole of mankind which is burned by the eschatological fire and become an holocaust acceptable to God. In each Christian who, entitled by baptismal initiation, shares in the divine Eucharist, it is the whole of mankind which shares in the eschatological feast. In the adoration 'in spirit and in truth' (*John* 4:23) of every true Christian, it is the whole of mankind who adores the Father in truth, through the Son, in the unity of the Spirit.

No man is ever apart from his brethren. That holds true even more forcibly as regards the Christian who participates more than anybody in the 'corporate' condition of Christ. Each Christian stands before God, along with all Christians (though each one in his unique call and vocation) in the name of all his fellow-men. And we may even say boldly that nobody is excluded from that communion, fellowship and *koinonia*, except the man who, willingly and knowingly, excludes himself from it.

VIII

To baptize is not to destroy but to fulfil.

Christ gave its perfection to everything which is thought or done by individual men in the various cultures in which men express themselves socially. Christ is the fulfilment of all symbols through which man has groped towards God his Father and his Creator all along the ages. Christ's sacrifice accomplished once and incessantly memorialized in the Church is the fulfilment of all rites. Supreme revelation as he is of the supreme mystery of God, Christ is the fulfilment and the perfection of everything man ever knew of God either by reason or by mystical personal experience.

Baptism is resurrection. Therefore it means first death. It is the culmination of the putting to death of all the so-called death-instincts in man—'O death, I shall be thy death!' (*Hosea*

13:14, Vulgate)'—and of all propensities to sin, a death which is implied in any true *metanoia*. Baptism is in the man who receives it the two-edged sword of the Epistle to the Hebrews (4:12), which operates judgment, *krisis*, as far as the most hidden recesses of the heart.

It means the death of the flesh, the *sarx*, in the Pauline sense. But the *pneuma* remains untouched by that death: will not the body, the *soma*, rise again a spiritual (*pneumatikon*) body (*I Corinthians* 15:44)? It is that very *pneuma* in man which is called to the participation of the divine *Pneuma*, when man unites himself with the Lord (*I Corinthians* 6:17).

No matter how deep they may lie hidden, God's image in man and the ray of the Word's light which enlightens all men (*John* 1:9) cannot be destroyed in man except by the 'second death' (*Revelation* 2:11). And that is the seed from which the new man rises, 'who is created in God's image justified and sanctified through the truth' (*Ephesians* 4:24).

Baptism can never be separate from conversion, *metanoia*. Baptism is the sign of the *conversion to Christ*, God made man. The *metanoia* of the baptism reaches to the most intimate depths of the heart. No conversion is full in fact which does not culminate in faith/baptism, either personally or vicariously (through brother-men, actually through Christians), for the deepest self of man is revealed only in Jesus, the only man who *knows* the depth of God, and who therefore knows also the depths of man (cf. *John* 2:25).

IX

Will not these considerations give rise then to the question, Why baptize? The Church exists in fact and develops and grows within herself without any need, it seems, of accretions from outside. The desire for baptism and for full Christian faith implicit and latent, as they are, in all authentic *metanoia*, is already fulfilled in that section of mankind which composes the Church and is the witness of eschatological fullness. The whole of mankind shares in this fulfilment through the Church in her representative capacity. Would it not therefore be enough simply to help others to 'convert' themselves to God within their own religious or philosophical systems or to deepen their actual *metanoia* within the framework of thoughts, symbols and rites, to which they are accustomed and which generally are wonderfully adapted to their disposition of mind and to their temperament?

It should even be said that the vast majority of non-Christians have practically no chance to be touched in their lifetime by a real and effective preaching of Christ's death and resurrection—we mean, a preaching able to reach both their ears and their hearts. Yet the Church is responsible for the salvation of the whole of mankind. It is not by catechizing a few

thousands here and there that the Church is able to discharge such a responsibility. The few lakhs brought every year to baptism mean very little compared to the crores of non-Christians who every year awake to themselves and to the dilemma of choosing for or against God without any conscious reference to the fact of Christ.

Would it then not be better—some may argue—to look first for the *metanoia* itself (that is, for the inner conversion to God apart from any direct conversion to Christ and the Church) and, in view of this, to make the best of such possibilities as are actually at hand for individual men, each one in his own providential situation? We do not think here of the so-called primitive religions (animism, fetichism and the like) which are disappearing inevitably, incompatible as they are any longer with the present age of human evolution, but of the great religions of mankind, like Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam, which have already helped innumerable people so wonderfully to realize their inner conversion, and are still helping them even in our times, not without ‘signs of Spirit’.

The answer must be, it seems, the one given by Jesus in the Gospel: ‘This has to be done, and that has not to be omitted’ (*Luke 11:42*).

There are cases in which the direct preaching of the Gospel and of the necessity of baptism is practically impossible, physically or normally. That may be due to a lot of reasons on which it is not possible to dwell here. It is in fact just such a situation which is at the basis of the present longing for dialogue. So it behoves Christians to find out all possible ways of helping people of that kind to make their conversion to God by all means possible, even by avoiding the post-pentecostal preaching of the Apostles, if, in given circumstances, such preaching would be an obstacle rather than a help.

But there is a no less incumbent duty on the Church to announce Christ in the fullness of his mystery, not only by her silent witness, but her ‘word’, received from the Word himself. The Gospel demands it: ‘Go and preach, and make all men my disciples’, said Jesus, when he was about to leave this earth.

And there is another no less incumbent duty on the Church, that is to bring to Christ all the riches of the nations (*Isaiah 60*)—under the New Covenant, that means directly spiritual riches. Such a duty cannot be fulfilled except by aggregating to the Church all the nations with their cultures and all their own preparations for the Gospel. In this way alone the Church will be able to become fully *catholic*, and to bring the Mystical Body of Christ to the fullness which belongs to it in the plan of God (cf. *Ephesians 4:13*). That can be achieved only through baptism and explicit faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man to save mankind.

Universal as she is, the Church must fulfil both obligations. She fulfils already the first one, to some extent at least, through educational, charitable and social works. We wonder, however, whether there is not some place, too, for a more direct witness and preaching in that way, which could be rightly called the message of Galilee. To the crowds of Galilee, and before he informed secretly his near disciples of his imminent Passion, Jesus did not preach at all in the way Peter preached after Pentecost. He simply announced the coming of the Kingdom without actual reference to his death and resurrection, even less to some new religious group to which his hearers would be obliged to give allegiance. He even prevented the devils from proclaiming his identity as Son of God, which they seemed to have guessed earlier than men. Jesus was then preparing the Kingdom by preaching the Beatitudes, love of the Father and of one's brother-men, obedience to the Spirit, the transitoriness of the world and therefore the need for man to detach his heart from it (cf. the *viveka* of Hindu tradition).

Would not such an approach be, in fact, actually more suitable in places in which the open name of 'Christian' has become tainted in the mind of many Hindus, due to special circumstances and especially to the collusion of Christians and of their leaders with temporal powers and forces, which has created a painful and widely spread suspicion towards everything connected with the established Churches? The fullness of times will come among them, too, some day, and the possibility of direct preaching. Meanwhile, the example and the silent witness of real and prayerful Christians will bear fruit and bring home to their brothers the spirit of Christ more surely than an indiscriminate and often too noisy and external proclamation of his revealed Name.

It has been even suggested that the Church quasi-officially takes care of those Hindus who revere Christ but cannot accept the obligation of joining the Church. Frankly we would prefer that those Hindu devotees of Christ, if they want to unite, do it by themselves and be helped eventually only by individual non-official members of the Church. Who knows even if the Spirit will not make use of them to wake up the traditional churches and remind them of their duty to transfigure in Christ all the riches prepared by the Spirit among the 'nations'?

As for the direct preaching of the name of Christ and of the obligation of baptism—which also by all means has to be done—as much stress should be put on resurrection as on death, on fulfilment as on destruction. The death to the 'old man' which is inherent in baptism has to be explained not so much as a renouncing of external tenets or practices but as a deepening of the inner conversion often already existing in sincere non-Christians. A mere passing from an external Hinduism to an external Christianity is absolutely useless. A passage through

the 'deep waters' is altogether essential. Here *only* is a Pass-over realized, of which baptism is the sacrament. When the preaching of the Gospel is conducted on such lines as to give the impression that everything is in utter darkness, sin and death, outside the visible flock of Christians (and Christians fight among themselves as to who belongs to the authentic flock), it cannot but be the laughing stock of educated Hindus and others, who know very well that the real *metanoia*, thank God, occurs in actuality everywhere, given the assent of man, for the Spirit fills the whole world (*Wisdom* 1:7) and the grace of Christ and the love of the Father know no boundary whatsoever. Conversion to Christianity should always be presented as the fulfilment of the *metanoia* already existing or as the supreme help to realize it in those who are still on the way towards it.

Christianity is the fullness of light, and it is true that when Christ, the true Light, at long last shines in the firmament of the heart, no other light can possibly be distinguished any longer. Yet who can forget that the moon and the stars have been very precious to the traveller during the night—and sometimes the journey was easier by the cool clarity of the moon, which after all simply reflected the light of the sun.

When then the Gospel is properly preached, Christianity no longer appears—as is the case, alas, not so infrequently—as a kind of imperialist power which tries by all means to undermine and tear away the possessions of other *faiths* and boasts of so doing. On the contrary, the Church appears then in her true aspect, the humble servant of the Lord and of his creation, whose *diakonia* in the world is to help everybody to grow more and more in the Spirit towards the glory of the Father.

Baptism and admission to the Church is the fulfilment of that inner conversion to God which from the beginning the Spirit is working in the hearts of all men, and in all the varieties of races, cultures, social and religious organizations through which man is trying to realize himself, and, consciously or not, to make his way up to God, his Beginning and his End.

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