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TRANSFORMED IN CHRIST, THE MASTER OF UNCOMMON SENSE

“I am the way and the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me.” As a sixteen-year-old seminarian in Piedmont, Italy, James Alberione was seized by those words of Christ. He had read Leo XIII’s encyclical for the dawn of the twentieth century, *Tametsi futura prospicientibus, On Jesus Christ the Redeemer*. He had absorbed the thinking of now-Blessed Giuseppe Toniolo, economist and leader of Christian social thought. Together, they launched Alberione on a unique, lifelong quest into the Person of Christ the Master, both rooted in Christian Tradition and responsive to society.

Exactly one hundred years ago, that response took the form of what gradually became the ten branches of the Pauline Family. Each branch, in its own way, bears witness to Christ the Master, Way, Truth, and Life. The theological-spiritual synthesis that undergirds this witness is the principal reason that at Alberione’s beatification, John Paul II would call him “the first apostle of the new evangelization.” What secret does this synthesis hold for us here as we attempt to renew the West?

The whole Christ

The title, ‘Jesus Master, Way, Truth, and Life’, is derived from both the Synoptics and John. The “master” of Jn. 13:13—“you call me master and Lord and you say rightly; so I am”—is not slaveholder, but teacher (in Greek, *didaskolos*, akin to our English word, ‘didactic’). This translation is borne out by the text itself. Jesus has just washed the feet of his disciples as “an example. As I have done, so you must do” (13:15). This Master is not one who pontificates from on high, but who offers himself as a model, an exemplar. He is like the medieval master craftsman who takes the appren-

tice under his wing, into his family, or like the Oriental master who has walked the path of enlightenment and can then enlighten his disciple.

Matthew's Jesus is the Teacher, Instructor. In his Gospel, the Greek reads: *kathigētēs*, the teacher who announces the kingdom from the *cathe-dra* of the new Sinai—the Mount of the Beatitudes, and later, the cross—"Nor shall you be called teachers, for you have one teacher, the Messiah" (Mt. 23:10). This Master-Teacher does not equivocate when revealing the secrets of the kingdom: "You have heard it said . . . But I say to you . . ." He holds crowds spellbound precisely because he teaches "as one with authority" (Mt. 7:29).

But why Way, Truth, and Life? In the New Jerusalem Bible, the Johannine text reads: "I am the Way: I am Truth and Life." This construction is an interpretive reading of the passage. It emphasizes the Way, which is suggested by the context: "No one *comes* to the Father except *through* me," in response to Thomas who had just asked, "Master, we do not know where you are going; how can we know *the way*?" According to this reading, the reason that Jesus can be Way for human beings is because he is in himself Truth (the revelation of the Father) and Life (eternal co-existence with the Father).

But is there another way of reading this trinomial without contradicting this interpretation? The original Greek construction would suggest that there is: "I am the way and the truth and the life"—almost as three aspects of the same Person. In the words of Thomas à Kempis: "I am the Way you must follow, the Truth you must believe, the Life you must hope for."¹

Fr. Alberione saw in Christ the perfect Master, with whom total configuration of will, mind, and heart is the only sure way to salvation, to sanctification: "Lord, to whom shall we *go*? You alone have *words* of eternal *life*" (Jn. 6:68). Uncommon sense, indeed.

In addition, although Paul never referred to Christ as Master or described him as Way, Truth, and Life, Paul, more than any other figure, represented for Alberione the human being's total response to the transforming call to apostolic discipleship: "It is no longer I who live; Christ lives in me" (Gal. 2:20). In other words, John offers us the image of the whole Christ; Paul offers us the image of the whole human person in relationship with Christ. In its totality, the Pauline mission meant bringing the

¹ Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, Bk. III, ch. 56.

whole Christ to the whole person and the whole person to the whole Christ. It still does.

The whole human person

We read in the Gospel that one day a scribe asked Jesus which commandment was the greatest. Jesus answered, “The first commandment is this: ‘Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is Lord alone! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.’” (Mk 12:29–30).

Heart, mind, strength. From philosophy, we know that the powers of the soul are distinguished on the basis of their activities, and those activities on the basis of their ends. Thus, the mind recognizes the good perceived through the senses, the heart desires it, and the will, informed by the mind and spurred on by the heart, chooses it.

I do not mean to suggest that, holistic though it is, this is the only way to understand human nature or its integration. For instance, in its *therapeutic* capacity, psychology examines how a person’s story interacts with his or her sentiments, beliefs, needs, and values and even shapes them. In its *formative* capacity within catechesis, as well as in religious and priestly formation, psychology attempts to integrate growth in faith and congregational charism with one’s cognitive, volitional, and affective development. In either case, it is nevertheless valid to cast the aspects or powers of the human person in terms of mind, will, and heart. Let’s look at these powers of the soul to see how discipleship configures the whole person to Christ.

In *Tametsi futura* Leo XIII wrote: “There are many who study humanity and the natural world; few who study the Son of God. The first step, then, is to substitute knowledge for ignorance, so that He may no longer be despised or rejected because He is unknown” (TF 13). Years later, in his book, *The Sanctification of the Mind*, Alberione repeats that it is the **mind**, with its convictions and power ideas, that governs the will. “The greatest battles are fought in the mind . . . If you save your mind you will save yourself.” Paul, too, urges us to “have the mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:16), “bringing every thought captive in obedience to Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5).

As the **will** is conformed to Jesus, the Way to the Father, he frees it to choose what is eminently human. Everything that is of Jesus is ours, because we are grafted (to use Paul’s expression), incorporated in Christ

Jesus, whom God made “our wisdom, our justice, our sanctification, and our redemption” (1 Cor. 1:30). Thus understood, faith is more than just the assent of the mind to a known truth. There is no dearth of people who recognize the truth without accepting it. What Paul called “the obedience of faith” (Rom. 1:5) is an act of the will, also, and life is brought into conformity with what is believed intellectually. Hence virtue; hence acceptance, hence the sanctification of the will.

In the Bible, the **heart**, in its broadest sense, denotes not only the physical organ as the source of life, but the whole personal composite of emotional, intellectual, and moral powers, to which God’s grace imparts new life. St. Paul adds that the heart is the dwelling place for the Spirit, who purifies and strengthens the person in love.² As the seat of desires and sentiments, the heart is the power that animates us and urges us to choose. Grafted onto Christ-Life, the heart is freed from its corruption so as to sanctify the whole person in the life of grace, leading him or her to the life of glory (see TF 11).

“No disciple is above his teacher (*didaskolos*) . . . It is enough for the disciple that he become like his teacher” (Mt. 10:24, 25). As the powers of the soul, split from each other by sin, are brought into harmony with the truth, into right relationship with Jesus, the Master heals and integrates them, making them one. As *Gaudium et spes* phrases it, “Whoever follows Christ, the perfect man, becomes himself more of a man” (GS 41).

‘Tom’ was a member of the Daughters of St. Paul young adult prayer group in Toronto about fifteen years ago. At a meeting one evening, we were talking about our vocation to be true human beings. Tom asked, “But how do we know what it means to be truly human?” I answered with two words: Jesus Christ. Within moments, he and the whole group were energized: the Gospel made *personal* sense. I learned the following week that Tom had brought a Muslim friend to the gathering. Afterward the friend told him, “Now I understand what Christianity is about.”

Jesus did not come to call a select few to some esoteric *gnosis* or way of life that the ‘great unwashed’ have no access to. Jesus Christ preached the Gospel—better, as the Word of God, he *is* the Gospel—to show us how to be truly human and to enable us to reach our full human potential—life with God. In this sense, the Gospel is not ‘uncommon’

² *The Collegeville Pastoral Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. Carroll Stuhlmueller (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1996), 422, 424.

sense at all, but is oriented toward everyone attaining the full stature of Christ (Eph. 4:13).

Unification of the sciences in Christ

An initiative dear to the hearts of Fr. Alberione and his spiritual director, Canon Francesco Chiesa, was an attempt at the unification of the sciences. He and Chiesa joined regularly in prayer “that God’s Providence will raise up a new Aquinas who will assemble . . . the sciences . . . into a synthesis that is systematic and clear . . . and mold them into a sole body” so that “every science will beam its own ray of light through Philosophy toward Theology . . .”³ They and a number of Pauline priests made several attempts to carry out this synthesis over the years, but never succeeded. I do not intend to analyze such a unification in general or their experience in particular, but to offer a brief reflection on how unification might serve us as we embark on the new evangelization.

Certainly a major difficulty was their approach to the sciences as “a sole body,” rather than as habits of the intellect. Unification is not to be a common method, an attempt to unify branches of knowledge, or a common denominator identified with any one science. Philosophy, for example, cannot replace theology in explaining the ultimate purpose of life; theology cannot suffice to explain the workings of the universe; the natural sciences cannot answer the questions, “Why is there something rather than nothing?” or “How do we know anything?” much less, “What is the reason for it all?”

Despite its tendency to refer to philosophy as a system or body of knowledge, *Fides et ratio* also speaks of it as an “exercise,” (FR 106) and a “habit of mind” (FR 15) and it emphasizes the “primacy of philosophical enquiry” that springs from wonder and from which all reasoning stems (FR 4).

Peter Redpath makes a compelling argument for situating philosophy within the philosopher rather than in the end product of philosophical reasoning: Only a person can possess wisdom, which guides the way in which that end is achieved and thus, defines the way, habitually exercised, as science. He further notes that this order is essential for the unification of the sciences and of the arts, because as an act of the intellect, “science

³ James Alberione, *Abundantes divitiae gratiae suae: Charismatic History of the Pauline Family*, (Rome: Society of St. Paul Generalate, 1998), nos. 192, 193.

knowledge must do more than facilitate right judgment about its specific subject matter.” To “contribute to the perfection of a human being as a whole,” it must be capable of “co-existing with other forms of human science/philosophy.”⁴

Fides et ratio phrases it this way: Understood as metaphysics in consonance with:

the word of God, philosophy needs first of all to recover its *sapiential dimension* as a search for the ultimate and overarching meaning of life . . . In doing so, it will . . . take its place as the ultimate framework of the unity of human knowledge and action, leading them to converge towards a final goal and meaning (FR 81).

If the first principle of the act of science is the scientist, then the unification of the sciences is, if I can say it like this, the unification of the scientist! That integration, as we have seen, is fully accomplished only in Jesus Christ, Way, Truth, and Life. Within their science, Christ gives believing scientists the answers they need to understand the ultimate causes of things.

How could he not? “In him all things hold together . . . God wanted all fullness to be found in him and through him to *reconcile all things to him[self]*, everything in heaven and everything on earth” (Col. 1:17, 19–20). The Constitutions of my congregation read: “Christ is the Master, the unifying center in whom every human being and the whole of history find complete fulfillment.”⁵

Transformation of culture and society in Christ

In his latest book, Dr. Redpath maintains that the educational system in the West is founded more on rhetoric than on philosophy, with the result that opinion is often valued more than truth, dialectic, more than metaphysics, meaning conferred on reality, more than meaning discovered.⁶ True. How often students are told, “It doesn’t matter what conclusion you reach, as long as you can show how you got there.” “You have your truth, I have my truth.” That may be valid for subjective exercises, but not for science—

⁴ Peter A. Redpath, *A Not-So-Elementary Christian Metaphysics* (Manitou Springs: Socratic Press, 2012), 26.

⁵ *Constitutions* (Rome: Daughters of St. Paul, 1984), no. 7.

⁶ Redpath, *A Not-So-Elementary Christian Metaphysics*, 104ff.

whether natural or supernatural. Two and two is four, not twenty-two, regardless of how I reach that conclusion.

Clearly, the morass we find ourselves in is sophistic. But this has been centuries in the making. What makes its deception so deadly now? Why is extrication so urgent? I submit that a culture generated and sustained by the explosion of the media of communication, in which ephemeral sensation rules, and a text is far less important than its context, a culture in which all interpretations are equally valid, and communication serves consumerism rather than communion or justice—such a culture is often hostile to objective and abiding truth, goodness, and beauty, even as it searches incessantly for them.

In the book, *Following Christ in a Consumer Society*, Jesuit John Kavanaugh writes that in this milieu, “cultural consciousness is saturated by mercantile media.”⁷ He amply demonstrates that the partnership between media and consumerism in forming or deforming our culture is fundamental. Nor is it limited to America. As Pope Francis wrote in his exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel*:

In the prevailing culture . . . What is real gives way to appearances. In many countries globalization has meant a hastened deterioration of their own cultural roots and the invasion of ways of thinking and acting proper to other cultures which are economically advanced but ethically debilitated (EG 62).

To us could be applied the words of the Master, pronounced in a different, though not unrelated context: “You have taken away the key of knowledge. You yourselves did not enter and you stopped those trying to enter” (Lk. 11:52).

Thus, the problem is not only the nature of media as such, but their partnership with the ‘isms’ of our society, a confluence of factors, that spawn a perfect storm. The media culture is not irredeemable. Nothing human is. God is there. It is challenging, but possible to unify the art of media literacy with the science of metaphysics and the relationship with God that is spirituality. Unified in Christ the Master, we *can* engage our media world and still maintain our integrity. Do you and I know how to analyze and evaluate media messages communicated through various media and construct wise messages ourselves? How can we help those

⁷ John F. Kavanaugh, *Following Christ in a Consumer Society* (New York: Orbis Books, 2006), 59.

younger than we pursue wisdom in this culture if we do not show them how? New wine needs new wineskins. Hanging onto the old skins will keep us all media illiterate, regardless of our ability to navigate the Web or work devices, because in the final analysis, it is not a technological question, but a human one. Again I quote from *Fides et ratio*:

This sapiential dimension [of philosophy] is all the more necessary today, because the immense expansion of humanity's technical capability demands a renewed and sharpened sense of ultimate values. If this technology is not ordered to something greater than a merely utilitarian end, then it could soon prove inhuman and even become a potential destroyer of the human race (FR 81).

Our culture will never be transformed from without, but only from within, from you and me choosing to put Christ at its center. Look at the alternative: the pseudo-Buddhism so popular in Hollywood that can only lead to pessimism, despite its being a mutation by an ever-optimistic America; an isolated existence revolving around media meant to connect; powerlessness before the highly addictive character of video gaming and social media. These can be harnessed only if we turn ourselves over to Christ, our highest Power, choosing his discipline, allowing ourselves to be 'discipled' by the Master. *Christification*, configuration with Jesus Christ, not only humanizes and unifies persons; it humanizes and unifies societies and cultures.

Is this all too little, too late? In *Navigating the New Evangelization*, Raniero Cantalamessa, preacher of the papal household, quotes Friedrich Nietzsche and Adolph von Harnack—not exactly bastions of orthodoxy—who attached the 'success' of Christianity in its first centuries to its inculturation within a milieu supposedly defined by philosophy.⁸

Cantalamessa takes exception to what he labels this "historical revisionism," by quoting two parables of Jesus. The first is the seed sown that grows without the sower knowing how. Our job is to sow well. After that, "the sower can even go to sleep, for the life of the seed no longer depends on him. When this seed is the seed that 'falls into the earth and dies,' that is, Jesus Christ, nothing can prevent it from bearing much fruit." The second parable concerns the mustard seed that grows far beyond the sower's expectations. "Here Jesus teaches us that his Gospel and his own person

⁸ Raniero Cantalamessa, OFM Cap., *Navigating the New Evangelization* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2014), 5–6.

are the smallest things that exist . . . because nothing is smaller and weaker than a life that ends in death on a cross. Yet . . . all creation, absolutely all, will be able to find refuge there.” He observes: “This is what we need most today: to awaken in Christians . . . the intimate certainty of the truth of what they proclaim . . . The success of the new evangelization will depend on the degree of faith that it successfully brings forth in the Church among the evangelizers themselves.”⁹

Jesus Master teaches from the *cathedra* of the cross and the empty tomb. With confidence, then, we can forge ahead, taking heart from these words of Paul VI: “The road . . . is certainly difficult and laborious. But lift up your soul in hope, for the cause is not ours but that of Jesus Christ.”¹⁰

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SUMMARY

Both definitive and enigmatic, the figure of Christ, the Master-Teacher emerges from the pages of the Gospel. What does he reveal? How does he reveal it? In an age that markets transformation as a commodity, what promise of rebirth does he offer us as persons and societies? What key implication does this hold for the unification of the sciences, as well as of art and science? The unique insight of Blessed James Alberione, SSP, sheds light on what has lain hidden in plain sight: what Jesus’ personal profile, ‘Way, Truth, and Life,’ can mean for our cynical yet searching times and particularly for us, who now find ourselves immersed in the Church’s new evangelization.

KEYWORDS: transformation, Way-Truth-Life, Christ the Master, unification of the sciences, media, new evangelization, Alberione, common sense.

⁹ Id., 6–10.

¹⁰ Paul VI, *Message to the General Chapters of Religious Orders and Congregations*, (May 23, 1964) [http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/speeches/1964/documents/hf_p-vi_sp_e_19640523_capitolari_en.html, accessed on 14.07.2014].