PART TWO

Verifying the Presence of the Divine in the Life of the Church
9 The Locus of Verification: Human Experience

Now that we have reached the final stage of our journey, let us retrace our path thus far so that we may address the crucial question that stems from it.

We have illustrated the substance of man's religious sense, its perennial structural dimensions, and its possible declensions, and we have encountered the historical fact of Christ, the incredible announcement of God made man, who entered the history of a humanity pervaded by the longing to see the divine revealed. Moreover, we have asked ourselves: how can such a fact be drawn upon 2000 years later, in such a way as to make it the basis for such an inherently serious decision?

The Christian message announces the permanence of the fact of Christ, as a continuous happening – not something that happened once – but as something that still happens. This is the Christian message indicating the visible, historical face of the Church, which is the people of God from the social point of view and the Body of Christ from the profound, ontological point of view. This is the way in which the Church emerges in history as a phenomenon. It is a community conscious of its exceptional origin, an integral part of life, inherent in the flesh and blood of life. It is a gift from above, which is the Spirit – the energy with which Christ invests history. It is a newness of life, or communion. The profound need for change in human history solicits an ideal, a universal through which everything in human life flows into a unity. Here, this universal is held up and affirmed as the ontological starting point, and therefore, becomes the motive for and source of
ethical value, the reason for moral dynamism and the building of a new world, the basis for a different human reality.

We have also noted, however summarily, the terms of the type of self-awareness which this new phenomenon acquired. The Church is perfectly conscious that it is a human reality and so, by definition, it cannot be surprised nor scandalized by the faults it will always be found to have; it is also equally aware that in the midst of all the magma, one must seek – and one finds – the pure gold of truth, the pure gold of definitive reality, of the humanity of the new creature reborn, in grace. This eschatological term indicates something already begun at a precise time and which will appear in all its fullness at the end of time.

And so we come to the question: does all of this, the fullness and peremptory nature of this claim, correspond to the truth? The Church's identity as a phenomenon is unmistakable, but is the message, by whose virtue it claims to have a dimension totally beyond the realms of its verifiable nature as a phenomenon, true or not? Is the Church truly the prolongation of Christ in time and space? Is it the place and sign of his presence? Is the perpetually unfolding event of the Man-God now inevitably present in the world until the end of time?

Firstly, we must clarify the criteria we will use to answer these questions.

I WHAT THE CHURCH DEMANDS AS THE CRITERION OF JUDGMENT

In continuing what Jesus did in his earthly life, the Church addresses our humanity as it is. But its maternal embrace of things human, like the gaze and the acts of the Redeemer, are aimed at sparking in man the most original stirrings of his heart. Like Jesus, the Church makes an appeal to that capacity of man which we called elementary experience, the essential component of the religious sense, the "complex of needs and evidences ... with which the human being reaches out to reality, seeking to become one with it. He does this by fulfilling a project that dictates to reality itself the ideal image that stimulates him from within."

This means that the Church proposes to enter into the drama of the universal comparison to which man is projected when he parallels any element of reality with the elementary experience constituting his heart. The challenge the Church launches can be summarized in this way: it bets on man, so to speak, hypothesizes that the message which it brings will be sifted by man's elementary experience and will reveal the wondrous presence. It also believes that the answer the message holds for the needs of the human heart will be unforeseeably and incomparably greater and truer than the fruit of any other hypothesis.
By entering into this drama of the man who compares everything with his elementary experience, the Church stresses that it is this very experience of man it is addressing and not the masks of humanity which dominate the various forms of society in a vain attempt to cover man's real face or replace his nature with something else. In an essay on the relation between religious experience and the nihilism of the modern world, Bernhard Welte made the following comments:

Despite the immediacy of the factor of experience, it is not at all easy or obvious to recognize true experience and distinguish it from forms of human life which come close to but do not constitute experiences proper. In fact, it is partly true that the immediacy of what we experience is often confused with what might be called public opinion and it can easily happen that there are no clear demarcation lines between the two. In this case, the things that happen come almost inadvertently closer to hearsay pure and simple and this is nearly always completely devoid of experience of any kind. But it is true to say that the immediacy of real experiences is often hidden and repressed and although they are definitely there, they are no longer felt or else they are totally ignored.

This German philosopher of religion adds:

When for purely conformist reasons we simply accept or repeat opinions or expressions taken from the social context in which we all live ... then the immediacy of the fact itself is annulled. Indeed, it does not even take form. So everything comes via something else. Just the words remain and they no longer testify to any experience.²

As we already said in the first volume of this trilogy, this is why the complete man, equipped with a critical sense and capable of global judgment, will be the man who has "trained" himself to compare everything with the bundle of profound needs which constitute the core of his true "I," a core uncensored by outside intervention. This is, within Christian tradition, an ascetic task, its reflective element serving "to discover the primary elements often hidden in the depths of our being and ... it therefore serves the immediacy we call experience. In this sense, reflection is not taking the place of immediacy that is no longer there. Rather, it serves to discover immediacy, which is only blocked, repressed or confused. It serves to distinguish it and render it visible in the mists of everyday uncertainties."

It is then, with this supreme critical sense, to be sought and won over and over again, that the Church wishes to measure up, placing itself at the mercy of authentic human experience. It leaves its message to the actuation of our hearts' original criteria. It does not require certain conditions to be mechanically respected. Rather, it entrusts itself
to the judgment of our experience and, indeed, it constantly urges that experience walk its path in completeness. Thus does Henri de Lubac warn us: "'Ah, I beg it of you ... Christ would never have said such a thing if he had known how badly it would have been abused' (Tolstoy, Anna Karenina). This could be said of every phrase in the whole Gospel both because of the use made of them and because they do not sound "good" to human wisdom. This notwithstanding, Jesus did say those words. Let us be careful not to abuse them. But, on the other hand, let us not be persuaded that there is any abuse when those same words wound us and strike us in the heart." And, in this context, the word "heart" is used in its most meaningful, biblical sense, for in Old Testament vocabulary:

The heart's main task is not to represent human sentiment. In contrast to what we always say, it is the spirit which is the seat of feeling while the heart is more the seat of our thinking and judgment. "Heartless" means being unreasonable and lacking in understanding (cf Jer 5:21 etc.). ... [The heart] is the seat of intuition and volition, of our memory of the past and of our planning for the future. It unites our observation and understanding of a fact and our decision-making. ... The heart determines man's exterior and interior conduct. If heart-searching means talking "to ourselves" ... then, in our hearts, we might well adopt a certain position regarding ourselves. ... So the watchword is: keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flows the springs of life! (Prov 4:23).5

2 ON THE USE OF A CRITERION OF JUDGMENT IN ITS UTMOST EXPRESSION

Not only is the criterion of verification through experience, to which the Church wants to submit itself, that of man's original experience, adulterated as little as possible by the false needs induced by the social context. The Church repeats with Jesus that it can be recognized as credible because of its correspondence to man's elementary needs in their most authentic flourishing. This is what Jesus meant by the expression we have already cited, by that promise to his disciples of a "hundredfold" on this earth, and it is as if the Church is also telling man: "With me, an experience of fullness of life that you will not find elsewhere will be yours." It is on the razor-edge of this promise that the Church puts itself to the test, proposing itself to all men as the prolongation of Christ.

After all, is it not true that each one of us, even in the simplest of our daily tasks, seeks just that: greater fulfillment? This is the criterion that guides us even in the least important of our choices. Men accept this or that invitation. They choose to be with this or that person because, in
making their choices, they hope for more satisfaction, more intense correspondence with their heart’s desire. And since freedom is the power of adhering to the object of our aspirations, man who is made for happiness, steers his free dynamism in pursuit of what Saint Augustine referred to as the “greater fascination.” And this means an ever greater fullness of life, ever more total possession of being.

Now, within the history of humanity, the Church proclaims that its only concern is to bring man’s supreme yearning to fulfillment without asking him to forget any of his own very real desires or his own elementary needs. Rather, it promises him a result superior to his own powers of imagination – the hundredfold.

Having staked everything on this bet, century after century, the Church cannot deceive. As it emerges from a study of the history of God’s revelation in the world, it is already clear, from the time of the people of Israel and their experience, that in revealing itself, God’s pedagogy has never shied away from a critical approach. According to Claude Tresmontant:

God did not ask the prophets to believe, and he did not ask the Israelites to believe what the prophets were saying without first discerning and being critical, purely for the sake of the credulity factor. God asked the prophets to believe him because he affected verifiable demonstrations of all that he said – not demonstrations of the type carried out in some secret laboratory but demonstrations out in the open, before the eyes of everyone, in history. This type of demonstration is what the Bible calls signs. God gives signs and asks that these signs be read, interpreted and understood. God does not ask the people to believe just any prophet. On the contrary, he provides them with a rule of discernment for distinguishing the false from the true prophet – he whose words come true in history. He is the true prophet.6

Nothing is haphazard about this bold challenge launched by the Church. It turns the whole question over to our experience as human beings and goes on to promise, as the Lord did, an experience of fullness unthinkable to our normal existence.

3 OPENNESS OF HEART

For us – just as for those who knew Jesus 2,000 years ago, for the Pharisee or Zachaeus, the publican, the Samaritan woman or Simon, the leper, for those who crucified him or those who grieved for his death, for him who, scornfully nailed the crucifixion order on the cross, just as for him who took pains to lay him in a suitable tomb – for us and for all of these people, the problem of verifying such a far-reaching
claim must have as its starting point an “encounter,” a physical presence. And the Church is this physical presence: it cannot cheat in making its proposal. It cannot just hand over a book and a series of formulas to exegetes for it is life, and it must offer life, and it must enfold the experience of men deep within the embrace of its claim.

But neither can man attempt to make such a portentous verification without a commitment that engages his entire life. Nor can he reach the end of the journeying that will assure him of the credibility of all the Church proclaims, without first being willing to make a commitment. If the Church presents itself as life, a fully human life charged with the divine, then man must commit his life to be sure of the truth of the challenge. And he will not be able to encounter the truth — of whether the Church’s promises are true or not — unless he starts out from what the Church is today, near him. If the Church cannot cheat, then neither can man. Man’s prospect is true journeying, but his heart must be willing.

Nothing can predict the steps man will take and the faces he will meet along the way. Christianity, which affirms an incarnate God, has precisely this characteristic. Just as someone might wake up in the morning to find that a husband, a son, a brother has unexpectedly changed their attitude to people or things, so then – if I may make this comparison – God also presents himself in the life story of each one of us by means of the real and changeable face of the community, which nevertheless claims to perpetuate his presence in history.

The minimum requirement for starting out on this journey is the type of willingness to make a commitment that Christian tradition calls poverty of spirit. In his commentary on the first chapters of the Confessions of Saint Augustine, Romano Guardini writes:

Then come the immortal words: “since you created us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it finds repose in you.” In these words, the Augustinian concept of man touches its deepest core. Man is placed by the Creator inside the realms of true being. He is authorized to keep to his own heart and to press on at his own pace. But his reality is different from that of other creatures. They are rooted in their own natures. Their foundation is self and to self they will always return. The symbol of their existence is the circle which closes on itself, while man’s symbol, in contrast, is the arc curving beyond all he encounters, each time he makes an encounter in the world, especially when he encounters another person, “you,” and in the final analysis this is the “you” within which God has placed himself for man’s sake ... This is the law of his existence and the proof is a profound uneasiness which never calms. It might be misunderstood, but it cannot be banished and when man realizes this it becomes a
torment. When he accepts it, it leads him on to the essence of calm, to the fulfilment of his being.7

It is precisely this acceptance of the law of existence that the Gospel calls poverty, this willingness to stretch the string of one’s bow to reach out, not to self but to another. It might also be referred to as the search for greater richness, although its dynamics rest on that other immortal phrase of Jesus’: “Anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who wants to lose his life for my sake, will save it” (Luke 9:24). For the focal point of this attitude of acceptance, of poverty of spirit, is a trained eye on all that constitutes the treasure of man, on that gold of a truth and reality so pure that any other image of truth and reality, even our own lives, is humbly recognized as having less value.

To conclude, I would like to reiterate that beginning on the pathway of verification with an open, willing spirit holds the promise of existential fulfillment which the Church declares it can obtain, over and above or in the face of any other proposal. But, naturally, this fullness – the Gospel’s “hundredfold” – is just the dawning of the totality. The totality is immeasurably more than we can possibly imagine: it is the “hundredfold.” But this hundredfold is the sign that the totality is approaching. It is a hidden sign which makes totality manifest. However, unless he lives this experience, man will never be convinced.

It is worthwhile quoting here the liturgical prayer of the twentieth Mass of Ordinary Time: “God, you who have prepared invisible good things for those who love you, fill us with the sweetness of your love because, by loving you in all things and above all things, we will obtain the good things you promised and which are beyond all desire.”