

THE FASCINATION OF CHRIST

BY MAOL IOSA

To know the character of our friends we must have met them repeatedly, not merely at an occasional social function, but at those intimate leisurely functions of life that give scope for character to unfold itself naturally and without rush, unrestricted by stilted customs and conventionalities. Persons must be framed in their usual surroundings and acting naturally. What they say and do then reveals their character, for they have removed the wrappings, dropped all masks and disguises. Similarly, to get to know, even imperfectly, the beauty of Christ's character, we must listen to what He says, watch what He does, find out why He does it, notice who His friends are, even Who His enemies are; a man's enemies often give a distinct clue to his character; they certainly did to Christ's.

In one sense to study Christ is easier than to study a human being, for the All-Holy was also the Always-Sincere. He never acted a part; never "put on an act." He was always Himself pure and simple, always "Just Christ." With creatures one never knows how much they mean of all they say, how much is genuine of all they do. The world has such a corrupting influence that few even in the cloister escape contamination. Worldliness, like infection, is carried by the wind, and easily affects an entrance everywhere. Moreover, men always carry with them their debased human nature. Even after 30 or 40 years' acquaintance, someone will upset your estimate of him by doing or saying something, good or bad, of which you believed him incapable.

CHRIST'S FRIENDS

All Christ said and did is of a piece, a texture beautifully interwoven and in perfect keeping with the Divinity. Let us study His friends, since friends are an index to character. First we notice that He does not number on His list of friends the High Priests, the proud Roman Rulers, the Upper Ten, the Scribes, the Pharisees, the wealthy merchants, the flaunting butterflies of society, the blue-blood of the Jewish aristocracy. No! none of all these. He comes in contact with all classes, rich and poor, learned and ignorant, long-lineaged and upstarts, snobs and simple. But His inner circle of friends consists entirely of the simple and lowly and good-living, the fishermen and carpenters and day-labourers of Judea and Galilee, unlettered men to whom He teaches the secrets of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Not that He rejected the rich if their hearts were true, for He became the friend of Lazarus and Martha but made short work of the hypocritical pretensions of the wealthy Simon. Zaccheus, the money-grubber, He singled out for special notice and favour, because Christ, unlike stupid men, read beneath the surface and found good where good existed.

He refutes the sophistry of the erudite doctors, yet explains to shreds His parables when instructing the poor and illiterate, content to repeat and illustrate a doctrine continually till their untutored minds grasped it in all its significance. With men of good-will He was gentle and sweet and patient, putting forth all the charm of His gracious personality. But with the malicious, the cunning, the hypocrites, He used stronger methods. He pierced and tore asunder the leathery mask of their hypocrisy with biting epithet and fierce denunciation: "Woe to you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites. . . Woe to you, blind guides. You serpents, generation of vipers, how will you flee from the judgement of hell?" (Matt. 23).

The little children pluck at His garments, cling to His hand, sit on His knee resting their curly heads against His breast, climb up the back of His chair and fling their arms round His neck. The sick get themselves carried out on stretchers and left by the roadside, knowing that when passing He will, even unasked, say the word that will make them whole. And not one is disappointed.

The afflicted follow Him, sure that if they even touch the hem of His robe they will be cured. The broken-hearted widows and mothers know Him for a tower of strength and a refuge in trouble. The possessed, the mentally-afflicted, the sin-weary, the sick and sore, even the dying and the dead, are brought to His feet to receive that pitying glance that restores to them their pristine vigour. All realise that they can be His friends if only they cast out satan in order to let the Lord Christ enter in and take possession of their hearts.

All love the Wonder-Worker, the Kind Prophet, the Sinless One Who is nevertheless the “Friend of sinners.” He magnetises all but the hypocrites and the insincere, these fly Him. Falsity cowers in His presence, all the starch and presumption gone out of it. He is the dear Friend of upright men, of Peter and James and John, and Lazarus at whose death He actually weeps. He is the dear Friend of women, of Martha and Mary, of the Widow of Naim, of “Joanna the wife of Chusa, Herod’s steward and Susanna and many others who ministered unto Him of their substance” (Lk. 8: 3). In fact, so numerous were His friends that He had to fly lest they make Him King.

CHRIST’S ENEMIES

Now let us glance at His enemies. Among them we find the High Priests, jealous of His distinction, His power, His popularity, His integrity, His exemplary life, His manly bearing, His divine attributes; the Pharisees who hated Him as vice and hypocrisy ever hate virtue and straightforwardness, and whose hypocrisy He lashed with tongue of scorn; the Scribes who “love salutations in the market-place and who devour the house of widows” by exploiting them; the sensualists, the double-dealers, the cheats—all these formed a coalition against Him, but not one “man of good-will” do we find among them. Let this console us when we too make enemies. If we have done nothing to deserve the enmity it should not worry us.

HIS SPEECH

Of the beauty of Christ’s speech no tongue can adequately speak. His hearers summed it all up when they said:

“Never did man speak as this Man.” Wonderful clearness combined with beauty of diction, a childlike meekness and humility yet a firm unflinching claim to Divinity, wholehearted sincerity and simplicity united with manly dignity, extraordinary patience in expounding His doctrine, homely, appealing illustrations taken from the everyday life of His listeners, forceful and telling answers to hecklers, for we read: “And after that, they (the Scribes) durst not ask Him any more questions” (Lk. 20: 40)—these were the outstanding features of His speech.

He was no boaster or pusher of Himself. He quietly but firmly asserted His co-equality with God the Father, when that assertion was necessary. He never spoke aggressively; never hurt anyone’s feelings—the Pharisees were beyond hurting; never exposed sinners publicly, but rather shielded them, and even defended them when they were attacked, as in the case of Mary Magdalen.

Though yielding and kindly when to be so involved no sacrifice of principle, once the question of principle entered in, He was adamant. When His doctrines, especially that of the Blessed Eucharist, were attacked with ridicule and disbelief, He quietly re-iterated them with greater emphasis; not a tittle—not an iota did He yield: “Except you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His Blood, you shall not have life in you” (Jn. 6: 54). And on another occasion: “Whosoever doth not carry His cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple . . . So likewise every one of you that doth not renounce all that he possesseth cannot be My disciple” (Lk. 14). What an inducement to hold out to His followers! Absolute integrity of speech was His. Fancy any leader recruiting disciples by telling them: “You shall be hated by all men for My Name’s sake”! And strange to say, they flocked to Him, and have ever since been flocking to His standard, the despised Cross, eager and enthusiastic to lay down their lives for Him even under the diabolical tortures and incarceration camps of Eastern Europe.

HIS GENTLENESS

Study the tenderness of His dealing with the weaknesses of men. That character is surely lovable in which manliness is allied with gentleness and consideration for others. The vacillating though well-intentioned Nicodemus, afraid to risk his reputation by being seen even talking to this Prophet of doubtful standing who was condemned by both Church and State, and yet curious to find out if He is genuine and has any “message,” seeks a stealthy interview at midnight with Christ, and the understanding Christ gives it. The melancholy, shiftless cripple at the Probatic pool who, if he were worth his salt,

would surely in 38 years have devised some way of reaching the pool just after the angel's visits to it, made his despairing whine to the Saviour about having no one to help him, and Christ cured Him instantaneously without a single reproach for his lack of initiative, The dejected disciples at Emmaus with their courage down-at-heel and their confidence in the Christ gone to pieces, meeting Him at Emmaus as they sadly dub His whole mission another of "History's lost causes," are so reinvigorated by His words, so fascinated by His personality that they implore Him, nay, even "constrain Him to stay longer with them." He does. No reproach for these back-sliding doubting disciples! What a torrent of vituperation any earthly leader would excusably pour forth on such weak-kneed adherents, who in spite of all they saw Him do, now openly doubt His promise to rise again, though "the third day" is but a few hours old!

See His treatment of the renegade Peter, the doubting Thomas, the fickle, selfish apostles and disciples who in His hour of direst need "all leaving Him, fled." Notice His motherliness—yes, motherliness—in thinking of the needs of the multitude who followed Him listening to His words till long past their dinner hour. And who but One with all the tender thoughtfulness of a mother would have ready for the Apostles, wearied after an all-night fishing expedition, a cheery, glowing fire and roast fish, and Who, waiting on the shore, hailed them with a "Come, children, and dine"? And this was the risen Christ of the glorified Body!

CHRIST THE HEALER

Where there was suffering of any kind—sorrow, disease, diabolical possession, death—there Christ was to be found removing it, or giving strength and consolation to bear it. He demanded no conditions, exacted no promises—the need of His presence was enough. He asked no questions, put no limitations to the extent of His goodness and mercy. He did not inquire if the sufferer were Jew or Gentile, poor or rich, sinful or holy; He just went straight for His creature's sorrow and removed it. And—He is the same now as then. All we need do is tell Him the trouble, leaving the rest to His Compassionate Heart. He was touched to the quick by the anguish of the widowed mother at Naim, and raised her dead son to life. He wept with the sisters of the dead Lazarus, and gave him back life and strength. Entering the Centurion's house where all were weeping and mourning the dead daughter of the house. He said, "Weep not, the maid only sleepeth." And though "they laughed Him to scorn," He took her by the hand, saying, "Maiden, arise!" She did, and—notice the thoughtful kindness of His next words— "Now give her something to eat." The God of Heaven and earth was always as mindful of the physical needs of His followers as of their spiritual needs. To read the Gospels, teeming with such examples, is to realise He had a heart of gold, compassionate and tender as a mother's. He never hurt but to cure; never sent a sorrow but in order to eradicate a greater evil, just as the surgeon's knife removes a tumour.

HIS INDEPENDENCE

His marvellous union of manliness and gentleness, strength and sweetness, firmness and amiability won all hearts. He never toadied to the rich or powerful, never sought their favour or notice. On the contrary He condemned them even when His life was in danger from them. Who more powerful than the High Priests, the Pharisees and Rulers? Yet He lashed them with invective after invective for their camouflaged wickedness and duplicity. There is no trace of fear about His eight-fold denunciation of them, "Woe to you, Pharisees" in Matthew XXIII! To their faces He called them "an evil and adulterous generation" (Matt. 12: 29). He denounced them publicly, though like ourselves today He knew it would go back to them increased a hundredfold, especially as it was criticism of the high and mighty: "Beware ye of the leaven of the Pharisees which is hypocrisy." How striking to call it "leaven" (so familiar to them), permeating every thought, word and deed of the Pharisees!

And of the governor Herod, who, He was warned, "had a mind to kill Him," He said: "Go tell that fox; 'Behold I cast out devils, and do cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I am consummated'" (Lk. 13: 32). And this was not done to curry favour with democracy whom He equally condemned when they violated God's laws.

After His most striking miracles He warned the recipients, "Go now, and tell no man." Human praise and approval, the breath of men's mouths, affected Him no more than their blame and execration, for His Soul was enjoying the Beatific

Vision far above the flux and reflux of ephemeral mundane things. It takes us mortals a lifetime to grow indifferent to our neighbour's judgements on us, and few of us ever attain that harbour.

HIS TEACHING V. THAT OF THE PHARISEES

Apart altogether from the compelling truth of His doctrine and the charm of His personality, the people could not help loving and admiring Him—He was such a contrast to the religious leaders they saw around them. He prayed in the mountain, apart; they in the market-place and prominent parts of the Temple. When He and His disciples fasted they did so quietly and even cheerfully; the Pharisees put on long, woebegone faces, “made broad their phylacteries,” and told everybody what great penance they were doing, and—ate their fill in secret. He taught and practised poverty; the Scribes and Pharisees ostentation and worship of wealth. He taught love of obscurity and of the lowest place; they taught ambition, love of power and prominence; He taught the virtue of giving-in; they taught the doctrine of reprisals, “an eye for an eye.”

He said: “But I say to you not to resist evil; if one strike thee on the right cheek, turn to him also the other.” He sought out the poor and lowly and unimportant; they had eyes and ears and hands for none but the “Big Ones” of the earth. He championed converted sinners; they spurned all who had the “weakness” to be converted or found out; with them the only sin was discovery. He inculcated the simplicity and trust of little children as an essential for Heaven; the Pharisees' whole lives were patterned after the subtle cunning of the serpent.

He taught inflexibility of principle, straightforwardness of dealing, the sanctity of an oath, manliness of bearing, justice for the lowest, kindness to the old and suffering, tolerance and patience towards all creeds, classes, colours, peoples, all except one class whom He could not stand—the hypocrites, the players-up, the liars, the whitened sepulchres whose fair outside conceals a soul full of rapine and rottenness. He preached love first, last and all the time; they preached hate and vengeance and hitting back hard. His life was open and Godly; theirs was secret because “dunged with rotten death.” Is it any wonder they hated and feared Him and hired assassins to do away with Him?

Christ's exquisite character is a wonderful combination of what we deem opposites. He was all-powerful yet He pleaded for love; simple yet sublime; a Teacher with a divine mission—yet He loved to be surrounded by prattling, clinging children, having no use for the learned self-opinionated doctors. He was homely yet full of dignity and reserve; strong as a rock yet soft-hearted as a tender mother; pitiful to the weak and erring, dead against “casting stones” by word or deed, yet fierce in His denunciations of hypocrisy and harshness and rigid narrowness; sinless and hating sin, yet loving and excusing the sinner He was the great Almighty Son of God dying on the Cross to draw all hearts throughout all ages to His standard, yet at the same time grateful for a word or glance of pity from the outcast thief, Dismas.

CHRIST'S MANLINESS

Christ our Leader was the manliest and noblest of the sons of men. None ever had to the same degree the qualities deserving the epithet “manly.” Our idea of it is strength, bravery, courage to fight for right and for principle, steadfastness in adhering to what conscience says is right, firmness in opposing those in the wrong, no matter how powerful and mighty they may be. It is usually allied with. an optimistic faith in the power of right to win through in spite of insuperable obstacles,

“Never doubting clouds will break

Never dreaming tho' right be worsted, wrong will triumph.”

Christ was magnanimous, forgiving readily any personal insult or treachery, even when He suffered the greatest wrong one human being can suffer from another—betrayal into the hands of his enemies. He was ready, even longing, to forgive Judas if only Judas had repented and asked forgiveness. Peter, too, denied Him in His hour of need, “cursed and swore that he knew not the Man.” “And the Lord turning looked on Peter,” not reproachfully but understandingly and forgivingly! All the Apostles but John forsook Him, leaving Him to His fate, yet His first thought after His Resurrection was for them: “Go tell My Brethren,” etc.

He brooked no belittlement of God's temple or His service, showing quick anger at any offence against the majesty of His Father. He whipped the money-makers out of the Temple for they had made "His Father's House a den of thieves." A manly man does not stand tamely by when God's Name is taken lightly or His service ridiculed, or His chosen ones insulted or His goodness impugned. He refuses to let such expressions go unchallenged and is not afraid to demand their instant withdrawal. He is not ashamed to lift his hat passing a church, or to say the Angelus or Grace at meals, or to approach the Blessed Eucharist often; in a word he is not ashamed to let others see that his religion is a vital thing and that to insult it is to insult him.

Christ loved sinners and went out of His way to save them from themselves and from the contempt of the self-righteous. He sat by the well trying to win back to purity the much-married woman of Samaria; he defended the converted sinner Magdalen against the insults of the whited-sepulchre Simon the Pharisee, though He knew well that by so doing He gave food for talk to His malignant enemies. How many of your manly young men of this modern age would put themselves into such an invidious position? How many of them allow the character of even a good girl to be pulled to pieces and listen unprotestingly! Would they stand up for even a reclaimed "outcast" or help to re-instate her and get their womenfolk to help her? I wonder! Christlike charity ignores worldly prudence.

Christ preferred death to dishonour literally and truly. When a Prisoner, hustled across the city to Herod's court to contribute to the amusement of that besotted monarch, who was eager to see this much-talked-of Prophet and see Him perform some of His "spectacular tricks and wonders," Christ uttered not a word in Herod's presence, though His very life was at stake. He knew the rottenness and insincerity of Herod's heart. For the poor and lowly, the diseased, the crippled, the outcast, the leper, He was eager to perform miracle after miracle because they were men of good-will. For the sin-sodden, brutalised sensualist who sent for Him to mock Him, He had not a word or a glance! The wily, accusers of the poor woman taken in adultery were shown by Christ their own shameful sins so that they slunk away one by one.

Our Lord was no diplomat, though we know that He was tactful and considerate but He loved straight talk, honourable methods, a clean fight if fight there must be as with the Pharisees. For Him therapeutic truth did not exist, He knew only absolute truth. There was no room in His speech for half-statements, innuendoes, vague terms, double-meaning phrases or for anything that could be called a *suppressio veri* or *suggestio falsi*. Fear inspired by a truth-drug will never replace love of truth. He knew souls inside out—was He not their Creator? To Him personality was an open book. He probably smiles at the late-twentieth century claim to cure defects of character by physical curatives instead of by the good old-fashioned mother's method of training the child to curb its passions and strengthen its will-power with perhaps occasional recourse by the mother to external physical measures!

Real manliness and strength of character are shown when a man remains true to his ideal through jibes and scorn and mockery, and when, in addition, He is abandoned and betrayed by His own followers. Jesus went through that agony of heart in a divine manner. The scoffers on Calvary, most of whom must have been the recipients of His miraculous favours, jibed at Him: "Vah! Come down from the Cross and we will believe in Thee." "He saved others, Himself He cannot save." Jesus took no notice of scorn; but as in the hey-day of His vigour was a thirst for souls. Even in His death-agony His mission is ever before His eyes.

A noble character disdains to soil his hands with his opponent's dirty tools and methods even though such base tactics may be necessary to his success. To meet trickery with trickery, disloyalty with disloyalty, is not by any means decried in this pushing, struggling world of ours. It needs superb courage to keep one's hands spotless while others climb aloft by means of soiled ones! Judas the arch-traitor betrayed Our Lord with a kiss—the signal agreed on for the selling of Him Who was beyond price; Christ did not strike Judas dead, did not denounce Judas as thief and hand him over to justice as He could have done, but hoping against hope to soften that money-hardened heart, He gently reproached him: "Friend, dost thou betray the Son of Man with a kiss?"

When His enemies used chicanery and spying, word-twisting and calumny against Him, He went on His way just as usual, His "yea" being "yea," His "nay" "nay." No refuting of their accusations, no turning of the tables on them, no showing-up of their secret crimes, as we mortals would have done! He has, too, a big way of bestowing praise even in

small things. “Well done, thou good and faithful servant! Because thou hast been faithful over a few things I will place thee over many.” He is quick to recognise goodness, however slight: “She, since she came in, hath not ceased to wash My feet with her tears.”

He is grateful for even a kind word of recognition which He rewards a hundredfold: “Zaccheus, make haste and come down for this day I must abide in thy house.” This, to a tax-gatherer who has merely shown curiosity to make His acquaintance! And then when this money-grubber repents and offers four-fold restitution he gets the magnificent reward: “Behold, this day is salvation come to thy house”—not merely to himself but all his people! Similar generous treatment was accorded to the woman who kissed the hem of His garment with faith: “Who hath touched Me? Virtue is gone out from Me.”

Christ disliked seeing people distressed and humiliated. His manly, protective instinct impelled Him to come to their rescue. Witness His action at the marriage of Cana when the good couple ran out of wine. He created it for them to save their blushes, and it was a “God-send” in quality and quantity. No man ever tasted as good. Again when the over-zealous, fussy disciples call on Him to send away the Canaanite woman “for she calleth after us,” He quickly takes her part, saying: “Amen, I say to you. I have not found so great a faith in Israel.”

Christ in common with all noble, manly men reverences His Mother, obeys her slightest wish, thinks of her all through life, saves her all unnecessary pain, and at the hour of His death bequeaths her as His most precious treasure to His beloved disciple St. John, to be cherished as his own. She had been preserved free from the slightest taint of sin, Immaculate in her conception and life, and as was fitting, God did not allow her sacred flesh to see corruption in death for He assumed her body and soul into Heaven where He crowned her Queen of Heaven and earth. That feast of her Queenship we celebrate on November 1st.

Consider the majesty of His utterances all through the New Testament. To take a few: “Come to me all you who labour and are burthened and I will refresh you”; “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life”; “I am the living Bread which came down from Heaven. If any man eat of this Bread He shall live for ever.” And add to these the wonderful Sermon on the Mount, and the sublime discourse after the Last Supper (Jn. 14: 17). See His grandeur and majesty as He stands amidst the cowering disciples in the half-submerged boat commanding the winds and the waves to be at peace, “And there came a great calm.”

Is it any wonder thousands down through the ages have given Him love for love, have cried out with Fr. W. Doyle: "Oh, Jesus! who would not love Thee! Who would not give his heart's blood for Thee!"

LOVE WINS HIM

His is surely a character such as no mere man had ever possessed. We may “sound what stop we please but we cannot pluck the heart out of His mystery,” for He is the great God and hence, too divine, too complex for our limited intelligence to understand. There is one little golden “key” and one only that can help us unlock the secrets of His character—the magic key of love, one that childlike hands have grasped effectively all down through the ages. With this key, souls like St. Thérèse, St. Margaret Mary, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Thérèse de Couderc, humble in their own estimation, obtained admittance to a perfect understanding of the character of Christ. This is the key we, too, must employ if we wish to know Him more clearly and follow Him more nearly. A human being is said to be fascinating whose beauty, charm and influence weave a potent spell over others during at most a few years. But what fascination has the world ever seen powerful enough to cast its spell round the best men and women of 2,000 years, impelling them to give up youth and love and worldly happiness, even life itself for the sake of a Christ they had never seen but Whose love they prize beyond all the possessions of earth?

The young who are full of ideas and enthusiasms, eager with all youth's impetuosity for self-sacrifice, flock joyfully to His service day after day, ready to labour for Him in India or America, Nigeria or Japan, under the Northern Star or the Southern Cross, in the frigid zone or in the burning tropics. They have never seen Him yet they love Him with a personal love, as lover loves the twin of his soul; and the holier they are the more wildly romantic is that love. His presence fills

their life, thrills their being, fascinates their imagination. Each can say with truth: “I live, no, not I, but Christ liveth in me.”

But still greater proof of the fascination of Christ is afforded by the example of the hundreds of thousands of staid men and women, whom no flight of imagination can deem visionaries or idealists, who continue year after year to honour their bond of 20, 30, 50 years ago, devoting to Him their energies of mind and body and heart, sacrificing to Him their time and health and hopes of earthly happiness that often seem only the more alluring when the capacity for enjoying them begins to decline. Christ’s chosen ones make use of external work of some kind by which to serve His Cause, and this activity carries with it its own pleasure and balm. But the fascination of Christ is also shown—and more remarkably perhaps—by the fact that these same elect of God are content to lay aside all active work for at least ten days in each year, and sacrifice their time and leisure and freedom in order to go with Him, the Christ Who lived on earth 2,000 years ago, into a desert place, practising prayer, mortification, silence, listening to a preacher expounding truths that in the last 30 or 40 years they have been listening to, and reading about, day in, day out in lectures and meditations. Such a life is attractive to the young to whom it is novel, but for the old who have grown so sensitive to the cool breezes of monotony or weariness, whose blood not runs but creeps haltingly and frigidly through vein and artery, in whom cold, calculating reason has been trying for years to gain the mastery over a warm sentient heart and in whom the fires of life and vigour have died down to cold ashes—for these to be still enthusiastic about the close following of Christ or even to adhere to it at all with any sort of constancy, proves incontestably that the fascination of Christ is as strong today as it was twenty centuries ago, and is as vigorous in those who never had the happiness of seeing the Christ as it was in those who fell under His spell in the vine-clad countryside of Galilee or on the sunny slopes of the Judean hills.

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