

To Serve Or To Be Served?

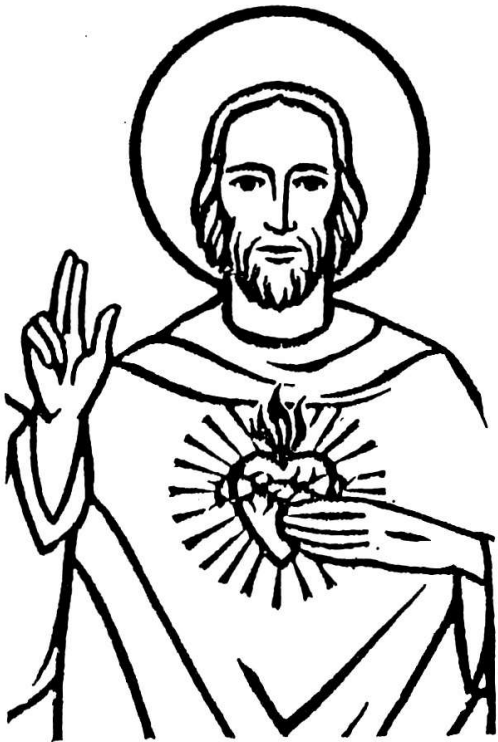
By Luis Gutheinz

Is our Church really a servant Church? The question is not academic, but soberly practical. More and more it seems to stalk us these days like a hunter seeking out its prey, and once having been found in our hiding places, it demands of us a clear, practical response. In this brief article, I would like to address myself to some approaches to the issue beginning with Jesus himself, then moving on to a brief description of how his Church has perceived his mission throughout its history, and concluding with some practical questions we as members of his Church might ask ourselves.

Jesus, the Supreme Model

How many books and articles have been written on this topic? There is no further need to marshall all the scriptural references and endless commentaries of writers that have already established beyond doubt Jesus as the supreme model of service for all Christians. Let us content ourselves here with a brief synthesis of the central character of that service, always with a view to establishing fundamental and sound criteria for viewing the Church as a Servant-Church.

Jesus came forth preaching and proclaiming the kingdom of God among people. This kingdom was something that was being realized in his own person and in his own presence. It was something definite, and it was thoroughly incarnational - Jesus coping and dealing with the real, flesh-



and-blood issues of daily life. Life in the Palestine of those days was to a very high degree socially aware and politically conscious. In such circumstances, Jesus did not preach a gospel of withdrawal, calling upon men and women to remove themselves from that society, to abandon its murky political aspects in order to enter into some private, spiritual retreat where the heart might find renewal - and everything else could look after itself. (This notion of a personal spirituality that is unrelated to the wider social and

political life of people might be one which many of us remember from our childhood days, and still feel, to a greater or lesser degree, its influence on our Christian outlook). The people among whom Jesus lived, however, had no escape from their social and political realities. They were suffering under the heavy oppression of moneylenders and tax collectors; they were acutely aware of the domination of the Roman authorities, and Jesus in his youth would have seen with his own eyes many a man hanging from a cross along the roadside, having been executed after summary arrest and no trial.

One of the scandalous things that Jesus was doing in proclaiming this kingdom was laying bare the nature of injustice and oppression in his own society. Much to the chagrin of many of his contemporaries, he showed little interest in the Roman domination, and refused to assume the role of a political messiah; RATHER, HE WANTED AND PERSONALLY CHOSE TO REMAIN ONE WITH HIS PEOPLE - THUS GIVING HIMSELF TOTALLY IN AN EVER-WIDENING NETWORK OF HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS ULTIMATELY CENTERED IN THE FATHER.

Justice, as preached by Jesus who learned it to a

certain extent from the scriptural tradition of the prophets and psalmists, is fundamentally based on community, or bringing into full communion all those who are excluded from the social, religious, and cultural life of the community - excluded because they are sinners, or because they are lepers, or because they are Samaritans, or because they happen to be unlearned in the Law, or for whatever other reason.

Such a proclamation of the kingdom led to misunderstandings, resentments, and confrontations. Jesus' life of total service, grounded in an unprecedented inner freedom and authority, came as a challenge to the established Jewish "Church" of his time. To the representatives of that church who were primarily concerned with power, both religious and political, Jesus proclaimed total dedication to humble service and self-sacrificing love.

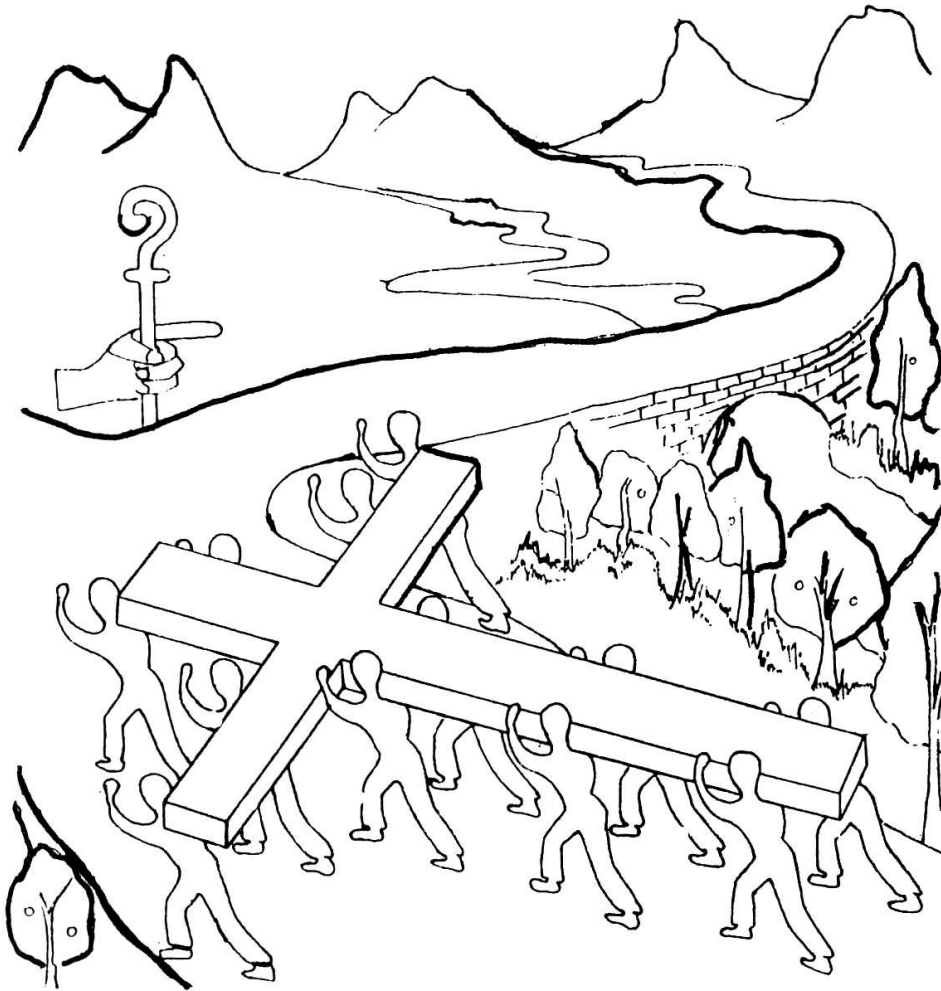
Jesus moved irrevocably forward to the final confrontation that could not help but lead to his suffering and death for the people. But it was to be in his death and resurrection that he gave final meaning to the mysterious paradox: life through death; fulness of life through total service.

How Did the Church Follow the Example of Jesus?

We might summarize the Church's imitation of Jesus, the servant, by offering four general paradigms of the Church throughout the centuries:

- the paradigm of the prophetic-martyr-servant church of the first four centuries.

During this phase the Church seeks out fundamental, concrete ways to follow the example of its Master, Jesus, in his identity as Lord of the Universe: the Christ! She learns how to express the mystery of his death and resurrection in the actual cultural and socio-political context of the hellenistic Roman Empire. Her basic style of life is the life-style of Jesus; primary emphasis is placed on the human person, who appropriates the faith-experience



as an individual living in small basic Christian communities.

In these humble, but vigorous living communities, the model of Mary as the handmaid of God gradually came to be appreciated more and more as a symbol of self-giving service. The public society of the Roman Empire was not able, in the end, to resist the driving force of these many Christian

cells, where love expressed in service was the predominant mode and conviction, and the words of the Master, Jesus, were realised: "By this love you have for one another, everyone will know that you are my disciples" (John 13,25).

- the paradigm of the Traditional-Establishment Church.

From the 4th century (when Christianity became the official state religion of the Roman Empire) up until the 20th century, the Establishment-Church grew to full stature. The prevailing image of Jesus here is that of "Christ the King", with the Church at the center of salvation history; she is the castle of salvation and "outside the Church there is no salvation". Because a uniformity in dogmatic formulations of faith and their expression in public liturgy are necessary to maintain the Church's unity and strength,

the clergy now comes to play a dominant role. Pastoral strategy emphasizes the protection of faith, the preservation intact of the deposit of faith, and the administration of the sacraments. Law and authority become keywords - service and freedom are seldom heard. The "world" is considered now to be outside the Church.

- the paradigm of the Liberal Church.

With the rise of modern thought during the last hundred years the Church's well-ordered strategy goes into crisis when liberal forces both from outside and within (e.g. the whole movement of "modernism") come together to challenge the establishment, the Church's resistance to change. She now has to adapt to a new context. Individual members begin to assert, as they continue to assert, their freedom and personal responsibility. Large numbers of the faithful no longer follow blindly the directives of the Church's leadership (for example in such important areas of life as business-ethics and family life). Salvation is essentially the process of growth towards a fuller humanity. These changes can be illustrated perhaps most dramatically in today's challenge of women to their traditional roles in the Church. Women are now demanding a better place under the sun in the life of the church. Sr. Maria has formulated this most beautifully in the following words:

"It is not merely that women want equal rights and equal opportunity. What we really want is that our experiences as women enter equally and mutually into the human endeavor, both in the Church and in the world. We are also aware, in the core of our being, of what our absence at the centers of power and decision-making have meant; the human family sees with one eye, hears with one ear, walks with one leg, and works with one hand."

We recognize that by limiting the opportunity for women to participate in the shaping of our Church and our world, we are severely limiting our human potential to address the enormous problems which face us today: problems of human survival, human dignity, human community. If we would but open the other eye, listen with both ears,

dance on two feet and clap our hands, I suggest that we would indeed be participating in the most radical liberation process civilization has ever known. Liberation for both men and women."

- the emerging paradigm of the Church after Vatican II

This is the Church in the context of industrial capitalism and Marxism in all their various forms, of National Security States and the majority of the poor nations becoming poorer, of the threat of nuclear war and the deepening desire for world peace and a more human environment, of computer technology and the alarming increase in unemployment.

In this paradigm all mankind remains at the center of salvation history, and the Church exists in service to it. This service is expressed by a convincing witness to the gospel of the kingdom of God in the midst of humanity, in an untiring effort to create a lasting communion among men who are so easily divided by reason of race, language, culture, and sex, and in raising courageously a prophetic voice in defense of human dignity and basic rights.

Such a servant-church tries to live in solidarity with all, following the example of Jesus who lived in and enjoyed the company of God's "poor people" (anawim). Poverty has many faces, but, in the deepest sense, "poor people" are those who - by whatever concrete means - come to know in their heart through their actual experience of life, that they need God and his salvific presence!

Are We Really a Servant Church?

The answer to this question lies in the response of us who are its members. Each of us is invited to judge for himself or herself the actual church of our own experience, the one we know from our concrete and daily participation as a living member. Some of the following questions might serve as criteria in moving us towards an objective and constructive response:-

- Does the concrete Church community where I live dare

to participate in the self-emptying of Jesus Christ in order to become "the salt of the earth and the light of the world"? Do I?

- Is it ready to give up some degree of its security and comforts, which have been based on too firm and often rigid structures that have been gradually created by our own need for security, and sometimes by a thirst for power?
- Is this community ready to open its doors and facilities to be of help to the surrounding human community? Closed doors and empty church buildings are for many people de facto a negative sign, pointing to the fact that this Church is more self-serving than actually seeking to serve others.
- Are there present within our community members, those who, by reason of their faith and courageous struggle for human rights, human dignity, and human conscience, are now suffering or in prison, enduring torture or facing death? If not, then this Church is, humanly speaking, either living in a Christian environment where these values are already guaranteed, or it just might not be fulfilling its mission as a prophetic servant-church.

In conclusion, we acknowledge that to follow the servant-Jesus is indeed a high ideal and that some local churches seem at times to be closer to it and some at times to be farther away. But we all must also acknowledge and remember, too, that there will be no servant-church, unless we, as individual Christians, are willing to follow Jesus in his role as servant.