

you up in business again and you'll be all right."  
"Thank you, father, thank you with all my heart," said Danny earnestly. "I'll go back to God—I'll turn over a new leaf."—The Cross.

**THE STORY OF CHRIST**

BY GIOVANNI PAPINI

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**THE PROPHET OF FIRE**

While Jesus, in the poor little work-shop at Nazareth, was handling the ax and the square, a voice was raised in the desert towards Jordan and the Dead Sea. Last of the Prophets, John the Baptist called the Jews to repent, announced the approach of the Kingdom of Heaven, predicted the coming of the Messiah, reproved the sinners who came to him, and plunged them into the water of the river, that this outer washing might be the beginning of an inner purification.

In that dark age of the Herods, old Judea profaned by the Idumean usurpers, contaminated by Greek infiltration, scorned by the Roman soldiery without Kings without unity, without glory; already half dispersed throughout the world; betrayed by their own priests; always remembering the grandeur of their earthly kingdom of a thousand years ago; always obstinately hoping for a great vengeance, for a miraculous resurrection, for a return of victory in a triumph of its God, in the coming of a Saviour, of a liberator, of an anointed one who should reign in a new Jerusalem stronger and more beautiful than that of Solomon, and from Jerusalem dominate all the peoples, overcome all other monarchs, conquer all empires and bring happiness to its nation and to all men,—old Judea, hating its masters, robbed by the publicans, plagued by the mercenary scribes, and by the hypocritical Pharisees, old Judea divided, humiliated, plundered and yet in spite of all its shame full of faith for the future, willingly lent an ear to the voice of the desert, and hastened to the banks of the Jordan.

John's figure was one to conquer the imagination. A child sprung by a miracle from parents of great age, he was set apart from his birth to be Nazir—pure. He had never cut his hair, had never tasted wine or cider, had never touched a woman nor known any love except that for God. While he was still young, he had left his parents' home and buried himself in the desert. There he lived for many years alone, without a house, without a tent, without servants, with nothing of his own except what he had on his back. Wrapped in his camel's skin, his flanks girt by a leather belt, tall, bony, baked by the sun, his chest hairy, his hair hanging long on his shoulders, his long beard almost covering his face, his piercing eyes flashed like lightning from under his busy eyebrows when from his mouth hidden by his beard burst out the tremendous words of his maledictions.

This hypnotic wild man, solitary as a Yogi, despising pleasure like a stoic, seemed to those whom he baptized the last hope of a despairing people.

Jesus heard the people talk of those "washed ones" who returned from Jordan and took up their former lives, as in the morning a garment is resumed which was thrown away with relief the evening before; and He understood that His day grew near. He was now in His thirtieth year, the right and destined age. Before he is thirty, a man is only a sketch, an approximation, dominated by the common sentiments and common loves of all. He does not know men well, and hence cannot love them with that love, sweet with compassion, with which they should be loved. And without knowing them or knowing how to love them, he cannot speak with authority, cannot make himself heard, has not the power of saving them.

**THE FIRST ANNUNCIATION**

The desert sun burned John's body and his fiery longing for the Kingdom burned like a flame in his soul. He was the foreteller of fire. He saw in the Messiah, soon to appear, the master of flame. The New King will be a fierce husbandman. Every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down and cast into the fire. He will thoroughly purge His floor and gather his wheat into the garner, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire. He will be a baptizer who will baptize with fire.

Rigid, wrathful, harsh, shaggy, quick to insult, impatient and impetuous, John was not gentle with those who came to him. He took no satisfaction in having drawn them to take the first step towards repentance. When Pharisees and Sadducees, notable men, learned in the Scriptures, esteemed by the crowd, of authority in the temple came to be baptized, he shamed them more than the others. "O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance: And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham for our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham."

You who lock yourselves up into houses of stone as vipers hide themselves under the rocks, you Phari-

sees and Sadducees, are harder than stone: your minds are petrified in the letter and the rites of the law: your selfish hearts are stony: to the hungry who ask bread of you, you give a stone, and you throw the stone at him who has sinned less than you. You Pharisees and Sadducees, you are haughty statues of stone which only fire can conquer, since water poured over you is quickly dried up. But God, who from a handful of earth made Adam, could make from stones from the shore, with rocks from the cliff, other men, other living beings, other sons for Himself. He could change granite into flesh and soul, while you have changed soul and flesh into granite. It is not enough therefore to bathe in the Jordan. That ablution is holy and salutary. Change your life, do the opposite of what you have done until now if you do not wish to be burned up by Him, who will baptize by fire.

And the people asked him, saying, What shall we do then? He answered and saith unto them, He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none, and he that hath meat, let him do likewise. "Then came also publicans to be baptized and said unto him, Master what shall we do? And he said unto them, Exact no more than that which is appointed you. And the soldiers demanded of him, saying, And what shall we do? And he said unto them, Do violence to no man, neither accuse any falsely; and be content with your wages."

Compelling, almost superhuman when he announced the terrible separation of the good from the bad, John becomes commonplace when he descends to particulars and falls, one might say, exactly into the Pharisean tradition. His only advice is to give alms, to give away the superfluous. From the publicans he asks only strict justice: let them take what has been allotted and nothing more. To the fierce, thieving tribe of soldiers, he recommends only discretion! "Be satisfied with your pay and do not rob."

This is nothing more or less than the Mosaic law. Long before him, Amos and Isaiah had gone further. Now is the time for the accuser of the Dead Sea to give way to the liberator of the Sea of Tiberias. The lot of precursors is hard: they know, but are not permitted to see; they arrive on the banks of the Jordan, but do not enjoy the promise which they make plain the path for him who comes after them, but will pass beyond them. They prepare the throne and do not sit themselves on it. They are servants of the master whom often they do not meet face to face. Perhaps the fierceness of John is justified by this consciousness of being an ambassador and nothing more. A consciousness which is never envious, but which leaves a tinge of sadness, even in his humility. They came from Jerusalem to ask him who he was, "What then? Art thou Elias?"

"No. I am not."  
"Art thou that Prophet?"  
"And he answered, No."  
"Art thou the Christ?"  
"No." He said, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness. He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose."

At Nazareth, in the meantime, an unknown working man was lacing up His shoes with His own hands to go out to the wilderness, resounding with the voice which three times had thundered, "No."

**THE VIGIL**

John called sinners to wash in the river before repenting. Jesus presented Himself to John to be baptized. Did He then acknowledge Himself a sinner?

His texts are explicit: the prophet preached the baptism of repentance in remission of sins. He who went to him acknowledged himself a sinner; he who goes to wash, feels himself polluted. The fact that we know nothing of the life of Jesus from His twelfth to His thirtieth year, exactly the years of fallible adolescence, of hot-blooded youth, has given rise to the idea that He was in that period, or at least held Himself to have been a sinner like other men. The three remaining years of His life are the most brightly lighted by the words of the four Gospels because in thinking of the dead, what we most vividly remember are their words and deeds during the last days of their lives. Nothing of what we know of those three years gives any indication of this supposed existence of sin in Christ's life between the innocence of its beginning and the glory of its ending.

There is not even the appearance of a conversion in Christ's life. His first words have the same accent as the last. The spring from which they run is clear from the first day; there is no muddy sediment of evil. He begins with frank absolute certainty, with the recognizable authority of purity. You can feel that He has left nothing turbid back of Him. His voice is clear and limpid, a melodious song not roughened by the sour lees of voluptuous pleasure, or by the hoarseness of repentance.

The transparent serenity of His look, of His smile and of His thought is not the calm which comes after the clouds of the tempest, or the uncertain whiteness of the dawn which slowly conquers the malign shadow of the night: it is the clearness of Him who was born only once, and remained a youth even into His maturity; the limpidity, the transparency, the tranquillity, the peace

of a day which ends in night, but is not darkened until evening: eternal day, childhood intact and unshaken until death.

He goes about among the impure with the natural simplicity of the poor among sinners, with the natural strength of the sound man among the sick, with the natural boldness of health. On the other hand, the man who has been converted is always at the back of his mind a little troubled. A single drop of bitterness, a light shadow of impurity, a fleeting suggestion of temptation is enough to drive him back into anguish. He always feels a doubt that he may not have rid himself wholly of the old Adam, that he may not have wholly destroyed but only stunned the Other, who lived in his body. He has paid so much for his salvation, and it seems to him so precious but so frail, that he is always afraid of putting it into jeopardy or of losing it. He does not shun sinners, but he approaches them with an involuntary shudder with a scarcely confessed fear of fresh contagion, a dread lest the sight of the villainess where he also took delight will renew unbearably the recollection of his shame, will drive him to despair of his ultimate salvation. When a servant becomes a master he is never on familiar terms with his servants. When a poor man becomes rich he is not generous with the poor. A converted sinner is not always a friend of sinners. That remnant of pride which sticks fast in the hearts even of saints mingles with his compassion. Why do sinners not do what he has done? The way is open to all, even to the wickedest, the most hardened: the prize is great, why do they remain down there, plunged in black Hell?

And when the converted sinner speaks to his brothers to convert them, he cannot refrain from dwelling on his own experience, his fall, his liberation. It may be only that he wishes to be helpful, rather than to vaunt himself, but in any case he is always eager to point to himself as a living and present example of the sweetness of salvation.

The past can be renounced, but not destroyed. It reveals itself almost unconsciously in the very men who begin life with a second birth of repentance. In the story of Jesus no sign of a different way of life before conversion ever shows itself in any allusion or in any implicit meaning, is not recognizable in the smallest of His acts, in the most obscure of His words. His love for sinners has nothing of the feverish obstinacy of the proselytizing penitent. It is a natural love, not a dutiful love. It is brotherly love without any implications of reproach, spontaneous friendly fraternity needing to make no effort to overcome repugnance. It is the attraction towards the impure of the pure who has no fear of being soiled and knows that He can cleanse—disinterested love—love felt by the saints in the supreme moments of their holiness—love beside which all other love seems vulgar—such love as no man saw before Jesus! Love which is rarely found again, and not in memory and in imitation of His love—love which will always be called Christian, and by any other name—never! Divine love—Christ's love! Love!

Jesus came among the sinners, but He was no sinner. He came to bathe in the water running before John, but He had no inner stain. The soul of Jesus was that of a child, so childlike as to outdo sages in wisdom and saints in sanctity. He was no rigorous Puritan. He never felt the terror of the morally shipwrecked man, barely saved from destruction. He was no overscrupulous Pharisee. He knew what was sin and what was right and He did not lose the spirit in the labyrinth of the letter. He knew life; He did not refuse in which though not a good in itself, is prerequisite condition of all good things. Eating and drinking are not wrong, nor looking at people, nor sending a friendly look to the thief lurking in the shadow, nor to the woman who has colored her lips to hide the traces of unasked kisses.

**THE BAPTISM**

And yet Jesus came in the midst of a crowd of sinners to immerse Himself in the Jordan. The problem is not mysterious for him who sees something beyond the most familiar meaning in the rite reinstated by John. The case of Jesus is unique. The baptism of Jesus is like others superficially, but is justified in other ways. Baptism is not only a washing of the flesh as a symbol of the will to cleanse the soul, a remnant of the primitive analogy of water which washed away material stains and can wash away spiritual stains. This physical metaphor is useful to the symbolism of the crowd, is a necessary ceremony for the carnal eye of the many who need a material help to believe in the immaterial. But it was not made for Jesus.

He went to John that the prophecy of the precursor might be fulfilled. His kneeling down before the prophet of fire was a recognition of John's quality of true announcer, of his worth as a loyal ambassador who has done his duty who can say now that his work is finished. Jesus submitting Himself to this symbolical investiture really invests John with the legitimate title of precursor.

Jesus, about to begin a new epoch of His life, His true life, bore witness by His immersion in water to His willingness to die, but at the same time to His certainty that He

would rise again. He did not go down to the Jordan to cleanse Himself, but to show that His second life was beginning and that He will not die, but only seem to die, just as He only seemed to be purified by the waters of the Jordan.

TO BE CONTINUED

**INVERTING THE PYRAMID**

A modern educator in one of our secular colleges believes that "it is decidedly wrong and false to force religion and sectarian principles upon children before they are mature enough to think for themselves." This is a sample of the restless modern mind that tires of the solemn grandeur of perennial principles, and rushes headlong into novelties and experiments with the vain hope of erecting a substantial educational structure upon the shifting sands of fruitless experimentalism.

For centuries the simple, solid principles of child training adopted by the Catholic Church were accepted as the granite basis of education. The Church conceived education as something higher and fuller than mere book learning and mental gymnastics. In the Catholic system education means character training, and character training means the development of moral as well as intellectual capacities. The greatest nay the only, source of moral cultivation is religion. Hence religion is the adamant foundation of education. From this broad and secure foundation rises a superstructure of culture and refinement fashioned like a pyramid rising ever higher with the passing of the years and pointing ever upward as it grows.

The statement of this modern educator is an attempt to invert this pyramid, by placing religion which should be its base at the apex. The result is a crazy structure resting on a point, that is always in danger of toppling. And the worst of it is that the pyramid is pointing downward. Inverting time honored educational methods has resulted in confusion of thought, intellectual hysteria, and moral anarchy.

Yet men today are still openly advocating the same dangerous experimentalism. It is time for educators in high places in the country to proclaim with the courage of some of our leading jurists, publicists, and students that until we firmly imbed religious principles in the heart of the child, we can never expect to rear God fearing, law abiding, and home loving citizens.

If children are not taught religion in the plastic days of childhood, they will never accept religious principles, "when they are mature enough to think for themselves." This is a fact that experience abundantly proves. Statistics show that the majority of our criminals had little or no religious training. Guarding them from religious principles until they were old enough to think for themselves helped to put them where they are today.

Religious principles, the foundation stones of life, are what children need today. Living in a welter of intellectual confusion, with false theories infesting the air, with controversies over fundamental doctrines splitting up religious bodies outside the Catholic Church, a child growing into youth and developing into manhood cannot be expected to pick and choose his religion for himself.

Our Divine Lord did not intend that we should be tossed about by every wind of doctrine. He established a Church, gave her definite doctrines, and a commission to

teach these doctrines, and enjoined on all men the command to listen to her. "He that heareth you, heareth Me, and he that despiseth you, despiseth Me, and he who despiseth Me despiseth Him that sent Me." Secular educators in quest of new theories in child training will do well to examine the fruits of education with religion, and education without religion, before they attempt to banish religion from the heart of the child.—The Pilot.

There is nothing so unwelcome to man as a severe sorrow. And yet for many men it is the only thing which leads them to God.

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