

Brother John

“I Have Come
That They May
Have Life”

The following pages will develop three simple affirmations that attempt to offer a starting-point for reflection on the meaning of the Christian faith.

1. Christianity is a Life

Two thousand years ago, what made the most impact on the inhabitants of the Mediterranean world, when they came into contact with the early followers of Jesus as the Christ, was seeing a group of people who lived in a certain way. It was the way the early Christians lived that spoke first and foremost, because their acceptance of Jesus as Lord and Messiah led to a particular lifestyle. In many respects, of course, these men and women lived like everybody else. A text from the second or third century says, “Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe. For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity” (*Letter to Diognetus* V, 1-2). And yet this letter goes on to say, “But, inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities, (...) while following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they demonstrate the remarkable and admittedly unconventional character of their way of life” (*Ibid.*, V, 4). Their way of life set them apart; it attracted people while seeming to stretch human possibilities almost to their limits. The Acts of the Apostles describes a community of intense prayer and sharing (Acts 2:42-47; cf. 4:32-35; 5:12-16), that “enjoyed the approval of the whole people” (2:47).

This portrait of the early believers in Christ may seem a bit idealized to us, and indeed elsewhere in his book the author does not ignore the very real problems and inconsistencies in their existence. Here, however, he wants to

emphasize what made the new teaching distinctive. It stood out by its capacity to inspire a life that went “against the stream,” that contrasted with many of the values of the surrounding society and culture while at the same time speaking to aspirations buried deep within the human heart.

This priority accorded to living goes back to Jesus himself. The second Gospel begins with a summary of his message:

The time has come and the Kingdom of God is at hand; change your hearts and believe in the good news! (Mark 1:15)

The “good news” is that God is now entering into the world to do something new. And the response of human beings must be to welcome this message, to take it seriously and by so doing to allow it to change their lives. The verb *metanoēō*, usually translated into English by “repent” or “be converted,” refers to a shift in one’s basic orientation that leads one to live and act in a new way, a change of mind and heart that leads to a change in behavior.

What does this mean concretely in the lives of individuals? Mark provides us with the answer in the very next verses:

Walking beside the Sea of Galilee, Jesus saw Simon and Simon’s brother Andrew casting their nets into the sea – for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fishers of people.” And immediately they left their nets and followed him. Going a little further, he saw James the son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were also in their boat mending the nets. At once he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in

the boat with the hired men, and set out after him.
(Mark 1:16-20)

Some ordinary fishermen, surprised in the midst of their daily activities, are told: “Come with me and I will make you fishers of people.” No doubt these men had very little idea of what fishing for people entailed, but they understood enough to know that Jesus was calling them to a radical change of occupation and lifestyle. Little by little, walking in the footsteps of their Teacher, they would understand better who they were following and what this life of discipleship entailed.

We should note that this picture is very different from that of the traditional rabbi, whose pupils sought him out to sit at his feet and learn from him how to read and understand the Torah, God’s revealed Word. With Jesus, the accent is not on reading and understanding but on calling people to be part of something new that God is actively accomplishing here and now, something expressed in a new manner of being in the world – a way of life.

It is interesting in this regard to see how the disciples of Jesus described themselves. According to the Acts of the Apostles, the name “Christians” was first given to them by outsiders (see Acts 11:26). They referred to themselves differently. Luke tells us that Saul wanted to arrest “any *followers of the Way*, men or women, that he might find” (Acts 9:2). In the book of Acts, we find the expressions “the Way of the Lord” (18:25), “the Way of salvation” (16:17) and especially “the Way” used absolutely, with no qualifications (9:2; 18:26; 19:9,23; 22:4; 24:14,22), to describe the fact of being Christian.

This mode of speaking has its roots in the Hebrew

Scriptures. The metaphor of the “way” or “road” often refers to someone’s manner of being and acting. In the Hebrew Bible, God’s commandments are referred to as “the ways of the Lord” (e.g. Psalm 119:3; 25:4) not just because they are ordained by God, but for a deeper reason: they describe God’s own behavior, which human beings are called to imitate to find true life. For Christians, this path of true life was shown not by words written on a page but by an existence lived in the world, that of Jesus. So by describing their faith as “the Way,” the early Christians were expressing their conviction that the life they lived in faithfulness to and in imitation of Jesus was a transcription in this world of God’s own life.

Christianity is thus, first of all, a “way of life,” a specific manner of leading one’s existence in this world. But it is also a life in another and related sense. In his First Letter to the Thessalonians, Saint Paul first speaks of the believer’s way of life:

We remember before our God and Father the activity of your faith and the effort of your love and the steadfastness of your hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.
(1:3)

He calls this “leading a life worthy of God” (2:12). And then he continues:

We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God’s word, which is also at work in you who believe. (2:13)

Paul says here that his message is not just human words

made up of arbitrary sounds, but the divine Word at work in those who believe. The apostle uses the verb *energeitai*: God's Word is a force or energy, the same power through which God created the universe (cf. Genesis 1). Today we would say that it is performative: it achieves what it announces.

Elsewhere, Paul speaks of the Gospel message as something that is "bearing fruit and growing throughout the world" (Colossians 1:6), an immeasurably great power at work in us, the same one that was active in Christ when it raised him from the dead (see Ephesians 1:19-20) – an indomitable energy of life, stronger even than death. Most commonly, in the Bible this energy is identified with the Holy Spirit, God's own Breath of life. Jesus acted "in the power of the Spirit" (Luke 4:1,14), a dynamism manifested especially in his resurrection (see 1 Peter 3:18; Romans 1:4) and, by his death and resurrection, he communicated this spirit to his followers (see John 20:22; Acts 2). To describe the Christian life in shorthand, Saint Paul sometimes uses the expression "life according to the Spirit" (Romans 8:4,5) and urges his readers to "walk in the Spirit" (Galatians 5:16).

The Christian faith is thus, on the one hand, a way of life and, on the other, the gift of an inner dynamism. It is God's own life-force or Spirit at work in human hearts. The Christian message makes a further claim: that these two meanings of life are intimately related. Simply put, the second (the gift of inner life) makes possible the first (the way of life), and the first in its turn makes the second concrete. Here we have in a nutshell Saint Paul's thesis in his Letters to the Galatians and to the Romans: Christians

do not live in obedience to a written code; their actions are motivated by an inner law written on their hearts, the indwelling presence of God's Spirit. Paul thus takes up and comments the biblical theme of the "new covenant," announced by the prophet Jeremiah (31:31-34) and developed by Ezekiel (36:23-28). The Gospel is thus at the opposite extreme from a theory or an ideology. Understanding follows living, not the other way round.

At the same time, from the very beginning, believers reflected on the life they were living. They were required to "give an account of the hope that was in them" (1 Peter 3:15) and to distinguish it as clearly as possible from other spiritualities and ways of living. Often, indeed, it was misleading or incomplete views of the Gospel that caused believers to deepen their own understanding. Not until people began acting and teaching in other ways did they realize that, as Paul put it, "we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God". (1 Corinthians 11:16). Contrast led to a deeper and more explicit perception.

At first, then, understanding accompanied life as a kind of control. But at a certain point, the balance between life and reflection upon life shifted. One reason for this was undoubtedly the fact that, as the new faith gradually became more acceptable to society, what was distinctive about the Christian way became less manifest. The divisions of the Christian Church may also have made it harder to grasp the sign-value of the life actually lived. In any event, at some point explanations of reality became more important than the life lived. Doctrines took the place of lifestyle as a touchstone of orthodoxy. In the end, one could be confident of one's Christianity because one

held the correct ideas about God and performed the corresponding rituals, while living a life in almost all respects indistinguishable from anyone else. This may explain in large part the failure of the Gospel to be a significant force for hope and peace in the world. Rediscovering the priority of living, then, would seem to be a necessary step towards overcoming divisions among Christians and offering an authentic witness to a world in search of true life.

2. Christianity is life with others

What more can be said about this way of life? The *Letter to Diognetus*, that early Christian apology quoted briefly above, tells us that, while living in the midst of society like everybody else, Christians “demonstrate the remarkable and admittedly unconventional character of their way of life.” The expression “way of life” here translates the Greek word *politeia*, which can also mean “citizenship” or “commonwealth” and is related etymologically to our word “politics”. Christianity is thus essentially life turned outward. The inner life it offers is one that necessarily leads to a new way of being together with others – the other standing next to me and all the others who inhabit our planet.

Again, this is already evident at the very beginning of Jesus’ career. He did not merely relate to each of his disciples one-to-one, but formed a group or community out of them. Almost immediately, this community became structured, informally but quite clearly, in what we could describe as a series of concentric circles: all the disciples, the Twelve, three particularly intimate disciples (Peter,

James and John), and Peter by himself. And when Jesus sent his disciples out to spread the word, he sent them two by two (see e.g. Mark 6:7), as if to emphasize that the relationship between them was part of the message they were communicating.

Further, following the death and resurrection of Jesus, the early Christians were grouped together in Jerusalem and then in small communities in the different cities of the Eastern Mediterranean basin. These communities brought together women and men of different linguistic, social and ethnic backgrounds. And these people referred to one another as brothers and sisters. This practice may not at first strike us as particularly remarkable – one more example of familiarity breeding not contempt, but insignificance. And yet, if we place ourselves imaginatively back in the world of the first century of our era, we may be able to sense how “remarkable” and “unconventional” it was to belong to a multicultural and multi-ethnic family defined only by one’s faith in Jesus as Messiah.

It is true that historical studies have shown the importance of voluntary associations (*collegia*) of many different sorts in the Greco-Roman world contemporary with the early Christians. In an evolving cosmopolitan society where a kind of rudimentary globalization – the *pax romana* – was eroding traditional bonds, these associations could become a surrogate family for many. And

yet, by and large, they did not break down the social differences between individuals, but rather maintained and even reinforced them.¹

In this respect, what was unique about the early Christian endeavor was that the style of the life together was a translation into social reality of one's existence as a disciple of the Christ. In the introduction to his first epistle, an early Christian teacher states this clearly:

What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – for this life was made manifest, and we have seen it and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life that was with the Father and has been made known to us. (1 John 1:1-2)

Here too, Christianity is described as a Life, and the first disciples discovered this Life which is indistinguishable from God's own Life (John calls it "eternal life") made manifest in the existence of their Master Jesus. They discovered it not as an abstraction but as the most concrete of realities, by hearing, seeing and touching. And they felt called to share it with others. Why?

We declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. (1:3)

¹ "Christian groups were much more inclusive in terms of social stratification and other social categories than were the voluntary associations. There was some crossing of social boundaries in the associations.... Rarely, however, is there evidence of equality of role among [the different] categories, and for the most part the clubs tended to draw together people who were socially homogeneous."
– Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 79.

The purpose of communicating this Life is to create "fellowship" or "communion," in Greek *koinōnia*, shared life, life together. And John says that this shared life is in fact a sharing of God's own Life. The notion of *koinōnia* is thus situated within the Godhead itself. God is not some faraway deity immured in a kind of sublime loneliness; at the heart of the Christian message God is revealed as relationship, shared life. Here we have the true significance of that primordial Christian doctrine, the Trinity, which seems so abstract, confusing and even unnecessary to many. God is communion, and so if believers in this God strive to share their life with others, beginning with those who have the same faith, that is in order to mirror God's own life at the heart of the created universe.

And John concludes the passage:

We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. (1:4)

What is joy? It is the subjective apprehension of life lived to the full. When we are completely alive, fully the persons we were meant to be, we experience joy. John tells us, then, that this experience of shared life among human beings and with God is a revelation of the true meaning of existence.

This conviction explains why other New Testament letters, notably those of Saint Paul, spend so much time giving advice for the common life of Christians. In his letter to the Philippians, for example, the apostle encourages them to "conduct [their] life together (*politeuesthe*) in a way worthy of the Gospel of Christ" (1:27). And he continues: "...standing firm in one spirit, combating together

with one mind for the faith of the Gospel” (*Ibid.*). He then expands upon this:

... make my joy complete insofar as you strive towards the same goal, having one and the same love, being united in spirit, all aspiring to one and the same thing. Do nothing out of rivalry, nothing out of ambition, but in lowliness of heart let everyone consider the others superior to themselves. Everyone should be focused not on their own interests but also concerned about those of others. (Philippians 2:2-4)

And Paul goes on to root this behavior in the life of Jesus himself, in the celebrated hymn of Philippians 2:5-11, which immediately follows. This hymn expresses the truth that being like God does not mean lording it over others, accepting a privileged status, but on the contrary giving one’s life. The meaning of existence is thus not to shore up the individualistic and isolated ego, but to find one’s own fulfillment in a life with and for others.

As a result of the death and resurrection of Christ, by which his own Spirit is communicated to them, believers undergo a change of identity. They no longer “belong to themselves” (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:15; Romans 14:7-9). They leave behind their isolated egos and are transformed into “beings for others,” people of communion in the image and likeness of Christ. This transformation does not happen in an instant, automatically or magically; it is nonetheless real. How does it come about? In his teaching, Jesus often used images to explain it. The new life he offers is like a mustard seed, or a bit of yeast. Slowly but surely, making use of our cooperation, it overcomes

the inner and outer resistances, turning us into what the Letter to the Ephesians calls a “new humanity” where all divisions are abolished (see Ephesians 2:11-22). And this new way of being human is expressed in the existence of communities open to all where the followers of Jesus live as brothers and sisters; these communities are signs and first fruits of God’s intention for all of creation. They are thus local and universal at the same time.²

This outlook contrasts dramatically with our current situation. In the Western world, at any rate, individualism is still going strong, though generally in a passive rather than aggressive mode, more in tune with a consumer society. People imagine that their individual identity comes first and relationships afterwards. Is there any wonder that, with no solid ground to build on, relationships in contemporary society tend not to last? What cement can hold the independent individuals together, especially when the inevitable problems and misunderstandings arise?

And today, do our churches offer a “remarkable and admittedly unconventional way of life,” a true alternative to a society founded on competition and consumption? Very quickly, the virus of division infected the Christian community. Even in the early centuries, it was not always easy to understand and enter fully into this new way of being for others. Saint Paul’s insistence on the importance of community indirectly testifies to its lack of full realization. In the first Letter of John, an even more serious situa-

² “One peculiar thing about early Christianity was the way in which the intimate, close-knit life of the local groups was seen to be simultaneously part of a much larger, indeed ultimately worldwide, movement or entity.” (Meeks, *op. cit.*, p. 75)

tion seems to have occurred. Certain members of the community have left, apparently feeling that they have reached a stage in the spiritual life where they no longer need either the support of their brothers and sisters or explicit reference to the historical Jesus. These individuals may have been among the most talented, humanly speaking, and apparently were held in esteem by the surrounding society (see 1 John 4:5). John for his part uses a very strong word to characterize these “super-Christians”: he calls them “antichrists” (1 John 2:18-19,22; 4:3). Despite their pretensions and their talents, they have understood nothing of the work of Christ, and indeed strike at the heart of his message by breaking apart the community which is the sign of the new reality he came to bring to earth.

As time passed, in addition to individuals and groups leaving a given Christian community because they understood the Gospel differently, entire communities and groups of communities became estranged from one another. This propensity to define oneself in opposition to others, and to mistrust what is different, led to the creation of separate “confessions” anathematizing one another in the name of Christ. It is any wonder that it became increasingly harder for many to see the newness of the Gospel reflected in the Christian Church? Christians often seemed merely to mirror the divisions of the surrounding world rather than to offer a clear alternative. Our task today, then, is to rediscover the Church as one body, God’s universal family, the anticipatory sign of a new way of being together as human beings. We need to re-imagine Christian love as a force that reconciles oppositions and creates a community of brothers and sisters out of the most diverse men

and women, so that the ongoing life of this community radiates a power of attraction that can change people’s hearts for the better and make peace a possibility for our planet.

3. Christianity changes our understanding of death

Our final thesis is certainly the most difficult. And yet it is essential, since it underpins the other two. It is this: Christianity changes our understanding of death. Perhaps not surprisingly, in order to talk about life correctly we have to explore the meaning of death.

It has become something of a truism to say that death is the taboo of our day, the great unmentionable, as sex used to be in Victorian times. The roots of this go back a long way. Ernest Becker, in an epoch-making book published in 1973 and entitled *The Denial of Death*, used that fact to explain much of human culture. He argued that a great deal of what human beings habitually do has as its chief motivation that of exorcising the specter of our demise. He pointed out that members of our species are in the unique predicament of knowing that their life on earth will come to an end without being able to conceive imaginatively what that could mean. On this reading, human culture is a vast enterprise of convincing ourselves of our immortality by varied and sundry means, in the teeth of the evidence that one day we shall all die.

When we turn to the New Testament, we find that

death is not ignored. The symbol of Christianity for most people is the cross – an instrument of torture, the symbol of a horrible death. Those who take the trouble to look further, however, will discover that the cross by itself does not capture the essence of Christianity. At the heart of the Christian faith is the Good News of the resurrection, of a life more powerful than death. In fact, the first expression of this Good News was quite possibly a single Greek word, *anestē*, “He is risen!” (cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:14). And yet, almost from the outset, the proclamation of the resurrection was coupled with the mention of Jesus’ death on a cross: “The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree” (Acts 5:30; cf. 1 Corinthians 15:1-5).

If Christianity is a Life, then it is fitting that the exaltation of life – and indeed, life with others – in the resurrection is found at its core. For the Jews of Jesus’ time, the resurrection was not the reanimation of a single individual but the event that ushered in the age to come, when all (or all the righteous) would inhabit “new heavens and a new earth, the home of righteousness” (2 Peter 3:13). But what is the relationship between this life and what seems to be its polar opposite, death? Why has the cross come to occupy such a central place in the Christian message? And what is that place?

A human interpretation of Jesus’ execution would see it as a sign of failure, or of the powerlessness of good in the world. He thus seemingly takes his place in the long line of those who tried to witness to God in a world where the good seems inevitably to be vulnerable and short-lived.

And yet, in the face of the resurrection, this interpre-

tation of the cross cannot be the definitive one. Seen in that light, Jesus’ death could not signify the final victory of evil. In attempting to understand the deeper meaning of their Master’s death, his disciples searched for clues in the Hebrew Scriptures. And they could not fail to come upon one enigmatic passage which seemed, almost uncannily, to correspond to what they had witnessed with their own eyes. Chapter 53 of the Book of Isaiah speaks of a mysterious being whose life seems to have been a failure, even a curse. He suffered and died like someone far from God. And yet, in fact, he was innocent. Still more, his fate had a secret significance: “He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5). At the end of the poem, the true meaning of the man’s life and death is revealed: he was God’s Servant, mysteriously accomplishing the divine purpose on earth.

This text presents suffering and death as a language that God uses to express the true meaning of existence. Authentic life does not consist in possession, in holding on at all costs to what one has achieved or attained. It consists rather in solidarity with others, in responding to evil with good (cf. 1 Peter 2:22-25). In a word, it consists in giving oneself for love: “There is no greater love than this,” Jesus tells us, “than to give one’s life for those one loves” (John 15:13). The good news of the resurrection, by revealing a Life stronger than death, frees us from fear, thus allowing us to discover a deeper meaning in dying. We can henceforth see it not as the end of all hope but rather as a possible expression of self-giving, and therefore of love,

and therefore of life. Life and death are thus shown not to be polar opposites, but two sides of one and the same coin. If true life consists in existence with others, then it seems to include within itself a form of dying to oneself.

In this reading of things, physical death is only one example of a more general “law”. Jesus expresses this “law” in a simple but telling image:

Truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. (John 12:24)

Let us, for economy’s sake, henceforth refer to the Christian understanding of death as “the law of the wheat-grain.” This law asserts that dying is in fact the other face of living, the dark face, the break with the known which makes possible a new beginning, a wider communion. Would true fulfillment for the seed consist in remaining forever a seed? Could the caterpillar understand ahead of time the need to enter the tomb of the cocoon in order to emerge as a butterfly? The desire to cling to the good one has attained ends up being the greatest obstacle to an ongoing life which always goes beyond what one can imagine.

In all four Gospels, this “law” is found on the lips of Jesus: “Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it” (Luke 17:33; cf. Mark 8:35; Matthew 16:25; John 12:25).

It even sheds light on our natural existence on earth. Our first experience of it is our birth. Paradoxically,

perhaps, birth is the first death we undergo – a separation from the paradise of the womb, described by some psychologists as the first trauma human beings experience. And yet it is this “death” which makes life possible. In fact, the nostalgia to return to the womb is the true enemy of life – an illusory attempt to go backwards, to stop the flow of time, to nullify history.

The story of salvation in the Bible also begins with a kind of death:

The Lord said to Abram, “Leave your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” So Abram went, as the Lord had told him... (Genesis 12:1-4)

The fullness of life, in biblical terms the blessing, requires a break with the old that can be anything but comfortable. What makes it possible to leave the familiar in this way, except trust in the One who makes such a promise? Trusting means rooting ourselves in the certainty of a life more potent than death, so that we are able to die to the known and head towards the unknown in the company of the One who promises. The New Testament does not err in viewing Abraham as the model of faith (see Hebrews 11:8-12).

The Exodus story, focal-point of the Hebrew Scriptures, takes up this theme in its turn. The Israelites are liberated from an inauthentic existence and promised a land flowing with milk and honey. But between the land of slavery and

the Promised Land lies the desert, and it is there that things become more complicated. When faced with the difficulties of the wilderness, the great temptation is to turn back: this is accompanied, not surprisingly, by a false, nostalgic vision of what was left behind (see Numbers 11:4-6) and a caricature of God's intentions (see Exodus 17:3).

Is not the essence of what has traditionally been called sin the attempt to cling to a partial good in a futile attempt to fill the emptiness within us, or to avoid the rigors of the quest? Such clinging demonstrates a lack of trust, the inability or unwillingness to believe that by letting go of our provisional comforts and setting out in the company of God we will find something infinitely greater. We are called to enter the fullness of joy, but we are unable to believe it and so we content ourselves with crumbs, and then imagine that God wants to take even those crumbs from us. In this we are like children whose parents stop them from eating sweets before Christmas dinner and who imagine this to be a punishment.

Across the centuries, the God of the Bible thus attempted to teach his people that death is not the opposite of life, that the road to the fullness of joy requires successive departures whereby we let go of what has been attained in order to receive still more. The true obstacle to fulfillment is revealed not as dying but rather, paradoxically, as the clinging to the life we already possess, and the consequent refusal to move on in order to enter into an even greater life, which can never be known ahead of time. Life is by definition on the move; when we cling to it, it becomes true death, death in the negative sense. The main obstacle to fulfillment consists in the unwillingness to trust that

God wants what is best for us, that at the heart of the universe there is a Presence of love that casts out fear.

The life of Jesus recapitulates this whole dynamic. In coming to announce the fullness of life available here and now in a simple relationship with God offered to all ("The Kingdom of God is at hand!"), Jesus attracted the ire of those who were not disposed to let go of what they had attained. To hold on to their privileges, they were obliged to do away with the troublemaker. For his part, Jesus was not trying to hold on to anything. He went forward in simple trust in the one he called Abba, even when, as in the Garden of Olives, that trust was not easy. Since the law of his life was self-giving, even an atrocious death could become a language to express his identity. By consenting to this death and thus allowing God to reveal the divine presence even in that place of darkness, Jesus opened once and for all the road to the fullness of life. As the Letter to the Hebrews puts it, Christ shared our human condition "so that by dying he might... free those who, all their lives, were held in slavery by the fear of death" (Hebrews 2:14-15).

We can read the entire Bible, then, as a pedagogical exercise on the part of God to inculcate in us the law of the wheat-grain. God wants for us the fullness of life, which consists in a communion with him and with others, and this indeed is what we long for in the depths of our being. Our deepest desire is what sets us on the road, but by itself it will not bring us to the goal. Between the call to set out and the Promised Land lies the desert. To cross the desert, we need to trust in the One who calls and walks alongside us, and to realize that difficulties are part and parcel of the way. Otherwise, we attempt either to turn back or to settle

down. Turning back is impossible: an angel with a flaming sword bars the way. And who can make their home in a barren waste? Therefore, says the Letter to the Hebrews:

Surrounded as we are by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that lies ahead of us, focusing our eyes on Jesus, who inaugurates our faith and brings it to completion, who for the sake of the joy that lay before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:1-2)

Let us conclude by recapitulating our three theses and attempt to show more clearly how they fit together.

We began by claiming that Christianity is a Life. This means that it is not a second-level reality, in other words a reflection on life, an understanding of life, a philosophy, an ideology or even a theology, but a simple, first-level reality, a life to be lived. More precisely, it is a way of life, and it is also what makes this way possible, an inner dynamism. And this inner dynamism or life is God's own Life, his personalized energy, often referred to in the Bible as the Holy Spirit. The New Testament shows this Life fully present in Jesus of Nazareth, who came in the fullness of the Spirit and who communicated this Spirit to us through his life, death and resurrection.

Second, this Life is quintessentially life with others. True life is shared life; in the deepest part of our soul we belong to God and to God's creation, and therefore to one another. Ethics follows ontology: if we are indeed one in Christ, then our way of life must attempt to mirror this. Otherwise we accept as inevitable a permanent contradiction between our true identity and our empirical self.

And finally, this Life is not destroyed by death, but rather conquers death by revealing its true meaning in God's plan, by removing what St. Paul calls its "sting" (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:55-56). When fear is cast out by love, dying is shown to be the "other side" of living, an expression of trust and love by which we abandon ourselves to the movement of Life. God constantly invites us to leave behind what we have attained, in order to enter into a wider communion. As Gregory of Nyssa, a Christian teacher of the fourth century, put it: with God we go from one beginning to another, in an endless series of new beginnings.

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