

Christ The Modern

By Rev Daniel A. Lord S.J.

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The applause that greeted the close of the lecture was courteous but mild. Father Hall, the lecturer, smiled ironically as he recalled the variety of lecturers who had been applauded on that platform; Judge Sam Quincey defending a new morality for youth; Krishna Murtha expounding Nirvana and the delights of non-existence; John Jones, mild-faced little fanatic high priest of atheism; and Clement Burrows, famous lawyer and ironical enemy of Christianity in any form.

“And then,” thought Father Hall, “I lecture to them on “The Catholic Church and the Modern World.”

The chairman of the Open-Mind Forum waited in the wings to greet his lecturer.

“Very illuminating, doctor,” he said, boggling at the title, “Father.” “The committee are waiting to take you to dinner.”

The priest knew that was part of the proceedings. The lecturer of the day was taken to a dinner table and the committee were permitted to ask him questions. “Heckling” was Father Hall’s less polite word for it. Obediently he followed the chairman as he threaded his way toward the private dining room.

To the Athenians.

When Father Hall, famous Catholic novelist and pastor of Lakeside, had been asked to lecture before the Open-Mind Forum, his first inclination was to decline with the suggestion that Christianity would seem to be tame subject matter, indeed, after the radical doctrine that was the Forum’s regular fare. For the Forum was very, very advanced.

Then it occurred to him that on the Areopagus St. Paul had talked to a sort of Greek Open-Mind Forum — Athenians who spent the lovely Grecian days corraling every new-thought lecturer or prophet of strange creeds. Why shouldn’t he tell the Open-Mind Forum something of the Church he loved, and believed to be the hope of the modern world?

To his surprise, his Bishop answered his note with an approval of his accepting the invitation. Hence the lecture; hence the patter of applause; hence the heckling by the committee.

As he followed the chairman’s lead, he wondered what they had really thought of his thesis: “The Catholic Church brings Christ and His doctrine into the heart of modern civilisation, and whether modern civilisation knows it or not, Christ and His doctrine are the only things that will save that civilisation from complete ruin.”

The dinner table in the special dining room was set with all the things that are as essential to a hotel dinner as a band is to a man’s straw hat. Father Hall, seasoned lecturer, noted the customary banquet "props" and sighed. The conversation would need to be very good indeed to compensate.

Novelty.

The committee and the committee's wives and husbands filed into the room. Brief introductions were mumbled, acknowledged, promptly forgotten, and they sat. Next to Father Hall, who was at the chairman's right, were a young woman and her evidently devoted escort.

"Miss Webb, whose verses you have seen, I'm sure, in "The Manhattanite" and "Vanity Bazaar," and Mr. Osborne, the humorist."

"But not, rest assured, a humorist in public," said the young man impulsively. And Father Hall and the young lady laughed.

They sat, and she said, with a genuineness that rather surprised the priest. "Mr. Osborne and I were thoroughly delighted with your lecture. It was brimful of new ideas."

"After twenty centuries of Christianity," the priest replied; "Christ and His doctrines remain the newest things in the world."

He looked at the young couple with interest. Crisp, keen, alert, with an amused attitude toward life, they were healthy specimens of the modern early twenties.

"You never see "The Manhattanite," I suppose," ventured the young man.

"Oh, yes," replied the priest. "I see almost every issue. And if you are Ford Osborne —" He accented the first name.

"I am."

"Then I suppose you are Helen Webb." Again, the accent.

The girl, delighted, turned to Osborne.

"To think we've found a priest who knows us by name!" she cried. And the two turned their undivided attention henceforth to him.

But the chairman was waiting to catch his attention.

New Because Out of Date.

"I think I can say for all the committee that we were much, much interested in your lecture."

"Thank you."

"But with your main thesis, that Christ and Christianity have an important contribution to make to modern civilisation, and that the Church, by giving us Christ and His doctrine, does something of significance for our age — with that, I'm afraid, we largely disagree."

There was a rustle and murmur of assent down the table, and fruit cocktails (conventional to the last touch of red cherry and canned pineapple) were momentarily neglected.

"Christianity is, as you say, a novelty, an old thing odd in a modern world. But so is Persian sun worship, or the religion of the highly civilised Aztecs. It is the product of another century and style of civilisation, interesting and surprising. But it does not fit into modern times."

"Precisely," agreed a distinguished radical editor further down the table. "I personally have the greatest admiration for Jesus."

“That’s good of you,” murmured Father Hall, so softly that only the girl on his left caught the irony. In a delighted whisper she passed it on to Osborne.

“He was,” continued the editor, “a great religious leader, as Mahomet was, or Confucius, or, in a sense, Plato. But He was of another age. He spoke to a primitive people possessed of simple faith and relatively simple morals. He laid down laws for nomads and dwellers in small villages. He had not the slightest conception of the complicated civilisation which is ours, with its problems, its intricate modes of living, its prejudices and needs. His laws —”

“Which, for example?” asked Father Hall mildly.

“Well, about divorce, for example; or the attitude toward wealth, or regarding faith.”

“Thank you,” said Father Hall. “Forgive the interruption.”

“His laws,” went on the editor, “were quite right enough for His own times and place and people. Under the circumstances they were good. But the circumstances have changed. The whole complexus of life is different. To try to fit those laws into the twentieth century is like asking us to drive Roman ox carts down Broadway, or to cross the Atlantic in triremes.”

The committee and its wives and husbands loved the editor’s similes. These two delighted them to audible murmurs.

Not of Our Age.

“In other words,” Father Hall added, “to put it crudely (as arguments must eventually be put), Christ does not fit into our modern times, simply because Christ was not a modern. He and His laws and His Church are out of place in modern life, and it is folly to try to make them fit.”

Half a dozen voices joined in the chorus of assent that went round the table. The editor bowed approvingly.

“You have stated the case exactly,” he said.

Father Hall, who had been unconsciously twirling a stalk of celery (he had never been able to break himself of the habit of playing with celery), swept the table with a comprehensive glance.

“Then, it seems, the only problem is to show that Christ is a modern, that He understood our times from an almost personal experience, that He is the most modern Man that ever lived. Well, that I should be very glad to do.”

The voices that followed his challenge were pitched in high excitement. The art editor of a woman’s magazine dropped her fork in protest.

“Doctor Hall,” she cried, “forgive me for being blunt, but it seems to me that is like suggesting that Caesar would be an excellent chief of staff of our air force, or that Archimedes could serve as consulting engineer on our newest skyscraper. Surely they would be as modern a general and engineer today as Christ would be a lawgiver or religious leader.”

Essentials Remain.

“My dear lady,” answered the priest, “in citing those two cases, you are making just the most outstanding mistake of the modern mind. Because Christ did not broadcast the Sermon on the Mount or cross the Sea of Galilee in a motor boat, you regard Him as almost of another species. Because Caesar commanded soldiers who fought with spears and short swords, instead of rapid-fire

guns and gas, you think him incapable of mastering in two months the details of air fighting. Because Archimedes never saw an elevator, or a heating plant, or a modern bathroom, or a steel-and-concrete structure, you regard him as a primitive-minded mound builder. The machinery of the day does not essentially change a human being. Men are men, and the differences of time change them only in minor ways; and some ages have a way of showing few points of difference.”

“Your Caesar was a bad comparison,” said a famous dramatic critic, addressing the art director. “Don’t you remember that George Bernard Shaw twenty or thirty years ago showed us that Caesar was very much a modern gentleman, who would be perfectly at home in a Broadway night club, or at the head of a squadron of tanks?”

“My thanks for the reinforcements,” smiled the priest. “We have to remind ourselves, much more frequently than we do, that what makes nations different is not the fact that one uses oxcarts and another cars, or that one builds obelisks and another Empire State buildings. They differ by what they do with the oxcarts and cars, and what they think and feel and believe and worship when they put up their buildings. It isn’t machinery that differentiates civilisations; it’s the national cast of mind and morals, its laws and political policies, and religion and moral code.”

Enduring Influence.

The radical editor lifted an index finger that was like the levelled barrel of a Colt.

“And just because our civilisation and Christ’s are basically different, not in machinery, but in the very things you list, He does not fit into the age that is ours. You are beaten, if you’ll pardon the word, in your own grounds.”

Father Hall wheeled and aimed his own index finger, like the second of a pair of duelling pistols.

“And precisely there you are beaten, as I intend to show you.”

Though the waiters were removing the cocktails, many of them untouched, and substituting the soup, pink and tepid, the diners were as alert as spectators at a tennis match. It was the chairman who cut through.

“It seems to me that to call Christ a modern when His influence on modern life is so extremely limited and discredited —”

“That,” interrupted Father Hall, “I would, of course, deny. Because your group is (forgive the word) vociferous, or, at least, highly articulate, that fact prevents you from discovering the wide extent of Christ’s modern influence. The Catholic Church is not precisely an organisation to ignore; yet in that Church Christ is the paramount influence. There is still a very active Protestant Christianity, much interested in and affected by Christ.

“And, once more turning to yourselves, a great many of you who are protesting violently that you do not believe in Christ or His doctrines are living much more in accord with His moral teaching than you are personally aware. I have seen any number of radicals who talk, in a vocabulary violently red, theories that are violently anti-Christian, and yet themselves live like Christian ascetics and anchorites. They preach anti-religion and copy the virtues of the saints. You have not by any means completely shaken off the influence of Christ.

Moderns of Two Ages.

“However, for the sake of argument, let’s say that the modern world that repudiates Christianity is doing all it can to limit His influence and discredit His law. I could agree with that. Big business finds something very disconcerting in His standards.

“He said: ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit’; ‘Go sell what you have and give to the poor.’ His ‘Blessed are the pure of heart’ would probably be plain Greek to the producers of a Broadway revue, or to the advocates of free love or free-and-easy companionate marriage. His insistence on the rights of individuals and their importance and value as against State supremacy and absolutism would sound very odd to certain bureaucrats in Washington, or to Mussolini in Italy, or Stalin in Moscow.

“And when He said to His Church ‘Who hears you, hears Me’, He gave that Church an authority most unacceptable to radical individuals or tyrannical States.

“But if the ultra-modern finds these things odd and strange and unimportant, and unacceptable and discredited, he is very much like the ultra-modern of the day in which Christ said them first. The difficulty with those doctrines of Christ is not that they are not modern, but that they make as heavy demands upon the individual today as they did upon the Jew or the Roman two thousand years ago. I’ll admit that many of Christ’s doctrines have been dropped by ultra-moderns because they are hard; but their being hard has nothing to do with their not being modern.”

A poet broke the momentary silence. He was a poet, be it noted, who looked as much like a pugilist as possible — perhaps to disarm those who found his verse very brief, precious, and not precisely virile.

World Figure.

“I wonder if the doctor, in saying that Christ is a modern, does not perhaps mean rather that He is a world figure, universal in His appeal, as Orestes is, or Hamlet, or Socrates.”

“Who is that?” asked the priest, in a hurried aside addressed to Helen Webb.

“John Andrews, the poet,” she whispered back. “He looks savage, but he wouldn’t tread on a violet.”

“I mean a great deal more than that,” replied the priest. “Of course, Mr. Andrews, as a poet (Mr. Andrews was visibly pleased that the priest called him by name and profession), you cannot fail to recognise the universal appeal of Christ’s literature — His parables, sermons, epigrams, brief summaries of important truths. There is certainly a modern flavour to everything He said, considering it, I mean, as sheer literature.”

The literary editor was not going to let a mere poet get into his field. “The doctor is absolutely right. Jesus as a literary figure is as modern today as ever. A group of us agreed the other night that the story of the Prodigal Son is still the greatest short story that was ever written, and that when the record of great epigrammatists was compiled, Jesus Christ would lead the rest. And while it takes some mental adjustment to appreciate Homer or Virgil or the Greek dramatists, or even our English writers of the Queen Anne period, the stories Christ told, and the sermons He preached, and the crisp epigrams He uttered sound as modern to us as they must have sounded to the men who first heard them.”

“Even we advertising men can learn from Him,” said one of the committee. “His ‘So let your light shine before men’ is the slogan of the men who hung the signs on Broadway.”

Everyone laughed; but, as the laughter died, they turned instinctively to Father Hall.

Unfair.

“When Mr. Andrews mentioned Christ in the same breath with Orestes and Hamlet and Socrates, he was being very unfair. None of the three exercised, or exercises, a tiny fraction of the influence that is Christ’s. In world literature He is a central figure. You cannot possibly read literature without a very fair knowledge of Him and His work. Mohammedanism, I mean the religion of Islam, that rejected His doctrines and Church, ranks Him among its major prophets.

“I have watched with great interest the reversal of the Jewish viewpoint on Christ. Not fifty years ago (the 1890s) rabbis were, in many cases, still insistently teaching that He never had lived. Recently you have noticed rabbis claiming Him as the greatest of the Sons of Judah. Missionaries soon discover that the Oriental mind at once finds Jesus Christ attractive; and, on the other hand, though He was an Oriental by birth and training, we of the Western world built our civilisation upon Him. So, to compare Him to or couple Him with any other world figure is unfair and not according to the facts.

For Best Sellers.

“Modern writers, you probably have noticed, find Him a subject of unfailing interest to the public, and of unfailing inspiration to themselves. Best sellers are still written by modern authors for modern readers with Christ for their subject.”

“To whom were you referring? These modern authors?” asked the chairman, who prided himself that he was a man who did things instead of reading about them.

“Well, Renan and Strauss were of another generation (less modern than ours), but they started a tradition. Papini wrote Christ into a best seller, and so did Emil Ludwig. Your ultra-sophisticate D. H. Lawrence dies and leaves behind a book with Christ for the leading character — a horrible book, for D. H. Lawrence would be the type who could write a horrible book, even about the Saviour. Bruce Barton —”

The art editor visibly shuddered.

“A typical American advertising man,” she said, damning him to the depths in a phrase.

“Yet who, my dear lady, knows more about what the modern world finds interesting? Who has a better idea of what is popular and appealing to the contemporaneous mind than an advertising man? At least you cannot deny that Mr. Barton wrote a book which was an enormous seller when he gave the world, “The Man That Nobody Knows”.

The radical editor spoke up: “Donn Byrne wrote a best seller about Paul of Tarsus, and Elmer Davis wrote one about King David. That does not make Paul and David modern.”

“For one copy of “Brother Saul”, retorted the priest, “or one of Davis’s books (the name escapes me; it was a cheap piece of work), your bookseller handles ten thousand copies of the Gospels, and a thousand copies of lives of Christ. People do not keep on writing books even about Paul and David. They do put forth an endless succession of books about Jesus Christ. His interest for this, as for every generation, is unfailing.”

Fresh Truth.

“Another roll?” murmured the waiter, over Father Hall’s shoulder.

Father Hall helplessly indicated the broken but unconsumed roll on his butter plate and shook his head.

“Thus far,” the chairman cut in “I think we all follow you. The appeal of Christ’s person remains surprisingly fresh and vigorous. His doctrine, however, is quite another thing.”

“His doctrines,” Father Hall replied, in what sounded almost like a retort, “are precisely what makes Him most modern. For His doctrines were given to the world at a time so like our own that, if we placed His age and ours in parallel columns, we could fit Christ with equal facility into either.”

“There we disagree.” said the editor emphatically.

“And that I shall prove. I wish we had a historian present to check me on my historical data.”

A singularly quiet, scholarly-looking man down the table, and in the shadow of a buxom matron, stirred into speech.

“I dabble in history,” he said.

The chairman positively boomed: “Professor Garner is modest. You probably know, Doctor Hall, some of his books — certainly his ‘Village Life in Mediaeval France’.

“If Professor Garner will be good enough to correct my errors, I shall feel safe.”

The priest and the historian bowed to each other down the length of the table.

His Age.

“The world to which Christ announced His doctrines,” Father Hall resumed, “was not primitive and simple and credulous and of high natural virtue. It was complicated and sophisticated and like our own in a thousand startling ways.”

Father Hall felt rather than saw the two young people at his side push away their almost untouched plates and lean forward to watch him. But, close as they were, they could not catch the prayer that in a breath he offered to the Christ he was announcing “to the Athenians.”

“Rome had developed in about four centuries from a handful of straggling Latin villages to a highly organised, fully policed, elaborately developed, thoroughly centralised, yet graft-ridden, empire. The statue of the emperor was placed in the temple, not that anyone was expected to believe the emperor really divine, but because he was the symbol of the State, and the State had reached the summit of absolute supremacy.

“It was a most elaborate State and a most exacting one. It controlled and sanctioned the tolerated religions. It kept a shrewd eye on commerce. It patronised entertainment. It furthered such education as it desired. It counted the people with careful census, taxed them through an army of subordinate officials, watched over birth and marriage records, and was so all-embracing that it counted the sheep in the flock, the children in the nursery, and kept a paternal eye on the meanest of its subjects in the smallest of its provinces.

“Rome had made State domination an exact science. State worship was not merely a theory; it was a practical fact and an accepted religion.

“This is a very different state of society from the primitive civilisation of which modern writers glibly talk in their effort to discredit Christ. It was one of history’s most elaborate civilisations, the culmination of centuries of cultural development.”

Sophistication.

“But the Jewish nation, not the Roman people, was the recipient of Christ’s teaching,” shot the poet.

The historian down the table waited for no cue from Father Hall.

“Judea was perhaps Rome’s most highly civilised province, adding to Rome’s intricate civilisation an elaborate, ancient, and fully developed civilisation and government of its own.”

“Thank you, doctor,” said Father Hall. “That complex civilisation had produced moral and political problems of which our own are exact duplicates. We’ll see these as we go along.

“Those were not days of primitive morals. The stern, austere virtues of republican Rome had gone to pieces. Divorce was so frequent throughout the empire that we know as a commonplace how Roman women counted their age, not by years, but by their divorces. Jewish divorce was almost as easy and was granted with a speed and facility that make the divorce mill of Reno seem clumsily slow in its grinding.

Free Love Then.

“Free love needed no philosophy to bolster it up. It was the accepted fashion of the day. Slavery made free love easy for any of the groups that could afford to buy a beautiful girl in the open market. Slavery made it practically the only way in which slaves could themselves live together. Courtesans had a recognised place in the social system, like that of the ‘heterai’ in Grecian civilisation. (Hence the smutty play of a season or so ago, ‘The Greeks Had a Word for It’). Men did not have the system of the double home; they had triple and quadruple homes — a wife, courtesans, and convenient slaves.

“If we have written modern philosophies of lust, they went us one better and made a religion of it. Venus, Apollo, the Graces and the Muses were served by priestesses who were prostitutes, and they were honoured with ritualistic obscenity. They represented lust and love deified and offered to the people as a religious rule of life.”

Someone down the table tipped a glass of water. There was a frantic damming of the tide with napkins, and a consequent break in the talk.

“I think I see where he is leading,” the girl whispered to Osborne.

“Must be your woman’s intuition; couldn’t possibly be the sudden birth of a sense of logic,” he whispered back.

“We are listening,” hinted the chairman, and Father Hall resumed.

No Faith.

“If anyone thinks that those were people of simple faith and credulity, he simply does not know history. In Rome faith among the upper and educated classes was admittedly dead. Scepticism was the prevailing attitude of mind. When Pilate asked ironically, ‘What is truth?’ he was merely echoing the popular attitude that maintained there was no truth.

“The Roman Government welcomed all the gods, because it believed in none of them. Religion was largely a formal civic obligation without any real foundation in belief. Nothing delighted the common people more than the filthy comedies in which the gods and goddesses were objects of ridicule and obscene laughter.

“The philosophers had Plato and Aristotle to give them an idea of the Supreme Being. But the gods of their fathers were left for vine dressers and cobblers and expectant peasant mothers to worry about.”

“But here at least,” said the poet, “I am right in insisting that the Jews were Christ’s real contemporaries.”

“And faith was at a low ebb in Judea. The Sadducees, powerful in Jerusalem, were out-and-out materialists, who had no belief even in a future life. The Pharisees had allowed the faith to deteriorate into rigid, external formalism, a matter of washed hands and precisely cut clothes, and the exact tithing of one’s income and trim of one’s beard. There remained almost no real reference to the supernatural.”

Superstitions.

“Yet I thought that fortune tellers and seers and all sorts of superstition were common in Rome,” objected the art editor.

“They were, just as they are in the world of today. Roman senators, like United States senators, were known to consult the seers. The people ran to their fortune-tellers as our moderns run to séances and palmists. Probably they had no astrologer in Rome as nationally important as Evangeline Adams who recommended certain investments based on astrology only to see this very investments crash in the Great Depression – a great scandal of the time. But they had their Roman equivalents of Friday the thirteenth, and spilled salt, and walking under ladders.

“You see, contrary to the usual opinion, superstition grows strong when religion grows weak. Superstition does not result from religion; it tries to substitute for it”

“Cleverly put,” murmured Osborne, and his partner nodded approvingly. The history professor was now thoroughly interested.

Ancient Big Business.

“You might tell about big business and the dole,” he suggested.

“I was coming to them,” replied the priest. “But you could do it much better than I.”

“Not at all. You are giving a very competent analysis. Please go ahead.”

“Business,” the priest continued, “had developed on a terrific scale. Trade had become world-wide. Gigantic fleets carried grain and produce and ore. Luxuries were shipped to the farthest parts of the empire. Men made fortunes that were equivalent to millions in our modern money.”

“No one knows how much old Crassus was worth,” put in the professor, all interest; “but he was rich enough to buy what amounted to a third share in the whole empire.”

“And with these tremendous fortunes, a great army of unemployed developed.

“Hence the dole came in. They gave this mob bread and circuses, — panem et circenses, or, as we might say today, ‘a sandwich and the talkies’. Yes, the movies. Men became bloatedly wealthy and they kept the underdogs from biting by a very elaborate dole.

“Rome was filled with the faults of an intricate civilisation, political graft, the buying and selling of power, standing armies, that were gradually coming to consist of hired foreign soldiers, as the Romans developed a decided spirit of pacifism, a thoroughly rotten theatre, to match which Broadway has still a few parasangs to go, the problem of the idle sons of wealthy families, a falling birthrate, and a dozen other very modern features. Am I right, Doctor Garner?”

“Absolutely. You have given highlights only, but they were accurate.”

Christ and the State.

“Into this singularly modern world came Jesus Christ, offering a body of doctrine that, if it now seems strangely out of place to the ultra-modern, seemed absolutely mad to the moderns of His day.

“He met State absolutism and State worship with an insistence on the importance and sacredness of the individual, an almost unheard-of ideal. The single human soul was to Him more important than the whole world, and its loss could not be made up for by the gaining of that world. He divided authority so that the State could no longer be absolute. Caesar had his rights, but so had God. (The Roman gods, be it remembered, were the servants of the State, while, by contrast, the God of Israel was permitted no part with Caesar.)

“The Church He established had clear-cut rights and authorities that caused Roman absolutism to regard it as an active menace. (State absolutists have so regarded it ever since.) There were certain rights of the soul, the individual, the family, that no State dared usurp. Christ’s principle: ‘To Caesar, Caesar’s; to God, God’s’, was startlingly novel. Even more so was His principle that the heavenly Father had care for the least important slave that was kicked about by some half-witted patrician.

“And as He emphasised these things, He talked, not to nomads in loosely organised villages, but to citizens of a proud empire, whose civil administration and complicated legislation and swift-moving armies were strong enough to bind the world together in the Roman peace.”

The State Supreme.

“I think I follow you. I can see what you are driving at,” admitted the radical editor.

“I certainly do not,” said the art editor.

Father Hall turned toward her.

“The modern world is entering upon a State absolutism like Rome’s. Soviet Russia is the obvious case. But if Italy’s Mussolini were to put the statue of ‘Italia Victrix’ in the church of St. John Lateran and demand a formal worship for it, he would not be putting much additional emphasis on the State supremacy for which he stands. Our own short-sighted lawmakers are interfering in everything — denying a man his rights over his own children, and the insane the right to life, and criminals a right to their manhood, propounding a doctrine that there is absolutely nothing above the State.”

“And you all know,” said the radical editor, with set jaw, “what I think of State absolutism and the fools that propose it.”

“Believe me,” continued the priest, “if Christ came today and talked of the rights of the individual to the rulers of Soviet Russia, or of the double loyalty to State and God to those who fought against the candidacy of the Catholic presidential nominee, Al Smith, the hardest, or if He talked of a father’s right to select the education for his children to promoters of a complete State control of education, He would find little more welcome than He found among the people of His day.

“He saw State absolutism all about Him, and hated it and condemned it. And if Mexico and Spain and France and Russia passed laws against freedom of worship or the rights of the Church He established, He would urge His followers to die as the martyrs died for these fundamental human rights.”

“He has them there. Every country he has named has done just that. Yes, and there have been hundreds of exiles and ‘martyrs’,” said Osborne, in an aside to the girl. But she was rapt in attention.

Purity for the Lustful.

“If the teachings of Christ regarding purity sound odd today, believe me they were the stuff of laughter for the men of His times. He was saying to an age of libertines, ‘Blessed are the pure of heart’. He was praising the innocence of children to debauchees, and defending the woman repenting of her adultery from the men who had taught her to sin. He was the first to pick a Magdalen from the gutter into which lust had pitched her, as He was the first man to hold up His own virgin life for imitation.

“Remember, He was not talking to peoples of simple, wholesome morality. He was talking to an age that had made lust a religion and free love a custom of life. He saw, as a practical man might see, that purity was the one answer to the foulness existing everywhere about Him. He came not to approve what they had, but to demand what they sorely needed.

“Christ, if He walked Broadway tonight, could see in free love and unrestricted self-realisation, in the single standard of sin for men and women, in highly commercialised and refined lust, in the stripping of women for public entertainment, in the rotten theatre, in the philosophy that says a man cannot be pure and a woman cannot be good, just a modern counterpart of what He saw under pagan domination.

“And when He met these conditions with ‘Blessed are the pure of heart’, the lustful soldier in the Roman barracks and the lustful patrician in his palace, the pander and the Roman theatrical producer, the priest and priestess serving the temples of Venus, the philosophers who met to discuss abstract virtue amid the morally rotten atmosphere of the baths, the Roman matron with her fifth husband, and the Jewish merchant with his fourth wife — all these thought Him mad, as Herod did when He dressed Him as a court fool and let his lecherous court make mock of Him.”

The Fruits of Divorce.

The group about the table were tense with interest. But Father Hall pushed on.

“Christ was not preaching the discontinuance of divorce to an age that agreed with Him. When He flatly called divorce with remarriage adultery, His own followers were so disturbed that they muttered, ‘Then it is better for a man not to marry’. He saw a world rotten with the effects of universal divorce, and He met the problem by a complete abolition of divorce. He looked upon the practical effects of divorce universally accepted in His day and saw that there was no way of curing

the horrible conditions but by ending divorce completely and making marriage indissoluble and sacred.

“When our modern divorce advocates urge divorce as a solution of marital problems, they are just urging a return to the awful quagmire out of which Christ pulled the human race.

“We may be absolutely sure that if Christ today walked into Paris or Reno or Mexico He would see just what He saw in Rome and Jerusalem, and He would give precisely the same stern answer to the problem that He spoke then: ‘He that putts away his wife and marries another commits adultery’. The Jews and the Romans did not much like His teachings then. Nor does your divorce advocate like them today.”

Against His Times.

No one spoke. There really seemed to be nothing to say. The fact that the waiters were busy removing the dishes was an excuse for the rather embarrassing silence. But the girl near Father Hall talked to her partner in an undertone:

“Had you ever thought of all that?”

He shook his head: “I really thought that Christ spoke merely out of the heart of His own times.”

“And apparently He talked directly against it. It’s astonishing.”

When the clatter of the departing dishes had died a little, Father Hall resumed.

Too Easy Money.

“I suggested that ‘Blessed are the poor of spirit’ would sound like silly nonsense to modern big business. Well, it sounded like rot to the wealthy patricians and commercially-minded Jews of Christ’s day. The Romans saw wealth as power, saw the unlimited possibilities of commerce opened up by Roman roads and Roman fleets and the Roman peace; saw the easy opportunities for exploiting the provinces. Millions could be made overnight — and this crack-brained reformer said it was blessed to be poor in spirit!

“The Jews, natural traders and money-makers, found the principle equally absurd. One rich young man, who really was anxious to follow Christ, found His words so utterly incomprehensible that he turned away sorrowing and left Christ forever.

“Jerusalem was filled, as every city in the world was filled, with Jewish merchant princes. (Lew Wallace in “Ben Hur” gives no exaggerated picture of the extent of Jewish fortunes and enterprises.) The priests themselves had rich concessions in the temple that meant the sale during the Paschal season of possibly a quarter of a million lambs in a single week. They understood quite as little as did the rich patricians what this poor son of an unsuccessful carpenter, the companion of fisher-men and small tradesmen, meant by His nonsense about poverty of spirit and selling all to give to the poor.

“Big business then was like big business now, and equally scornful of what Christ taught. Yet, seeing what big business had done to enslave mankind, exploit the workingman, rob weak provinces, build up a ruthless system of monopolies and high prices, He had for His remedy the incredible contradictory of all this — poverty of spirit and detachment from wealth.

The “Radical” Popes.

So modern, by the way, are the teachings of Christ regarding capital and labour that when Pope Leo XIII. and Pope Pius XI. repeat His principles to the world, they come as the most surprising and radical of theories. They are actually, to a man who studies them with an open mind (few have open minds, and fewer even bother to read the Papal pronouncements at all), doctrines which, if applied to modern business, would be the solution of all our problems of capital, labour, living wage, depression, the safeguarding of private property, and the rights of a man to decent work.”

The radical editor broke the brief silence. “I read them,” he said, “and I must admit they surprised me with their liberal spirit and advanced thinking. It had not occurred to me that they were the echoes of Christ’s teachings.”

“Yet they are,” said Father Hall.

Sceptics.

“For all that,” the poet objected, “I cannot but feel that in one way there is no parallel between our age and Christ’s. He was talking to an age in which faith was easy, especially faith in the supernatural. Our age is too sceptical for His fundamental postulates.”

“It’s interesting,” said the priest, “to see with what complete scepticism His contemporaries received His teachings. When the Apostle St. Paul talked to the Athenians of the resurrection of the body, they met his words with roars of laughter. The Jewish Sadducees found not only the doctrine of personal resurrection, but all idea of a future life, so silly that they thought they could trick Christ by asking Him about the woman with five husbands: ‘Which one would she be married to in Heaven?’

“When He promised the Blessed Sacrament, His Flesh to eat and His Blood to drink, His followers turned away by the hundreds, to walk no more with Him. He was asking too much of human credence.

His miracles had as little effect on them as the miracles of Lourdes (or the delicious miracle of Father Malachy) have on the modern sceptics.

“And when He announced Himself to be the Son of God, far from accepting Him with a burst of blind credulity, they promptly put Him to death.

“Yet He demanded of that incredulous, sceptical group an implicit faith in the supernatural. He stressed the future life, a system of unseen grace, the power of prayer, supernatural reward and punishment, an astounding complexity of truths that passed sense and were too delicate to be weighed in the balance of mere reason.

Pleasure-Mad.

“We live among sceptics; so did Christ. To the great annoyance of these sceptics, the Church stresses the supernatural, but no more so than did Jesus Christ when He thrust the supernatural into the faces of men whose only thought was earth and its enjoyment, and who had, in many cases, less supernatural faith than the most ardent disciple of the newest revival of that ancient creed called atheism.”

Once more Father Hall paused and swept the table with a glance. As no one spoke, he continued:

“Ours is an age of feverish quest for amusement. So was Christ’s. Circuses were coupled in equal importance with bread.

Rome built its places of amusement more elaborately than does the most lavish motion picture theatre architect today. The theatre was an important institution even in distant colonies.

“We have no conception of the days of riotous merrymaking that followed the triumphant return of a victorious general. The temples were centres of pleasure. Weeks were set aside for boisterous celebration. The arena was jammed; the hippodromes crowded. Drunkenness was the commonest of vices.

“And Jesus, Who saw that very modern scramble for amusement, though He Himself was a delightful dinner guest and the best and most companionable of friends, Who delighted in the simple joys of simple people, spoke insistently of two intertwined elements; the shadow of the cross that fell over every life and the importance of the eternal joy that came to those who accepted that cross for His sake.

Pleasure to Pain.

“When the joint doctrines of the cross and eternal happiness were first discussed in the luxurious baths of Rome, they sounded just as ridiculous as they would sound in a modern night club. The weary-eyed Broadway first-nighter and bon vivant finds them today no less absurd as a theory of happiness than did the Roman wandering from chariot race to temple grove, to tavern, to theatre, to arena, to luxurious bath. And the poor, modern shop-girl, coming wide-eyed from following Norma Shearer in the movies, as in beautiful clothes and glamorous settings she breaks the Commandments to the accompaniment of raucous laughter, finds His theory of duty and the cross as strange, and His promise of eternal happiness as elusive, as did the slaves who occupied the top seats to watch gladiators slay one another and actresses be raped for the amusement of the mob.

“Don’t think for a moment that Christ preached unhappiness. He only saw that the mad quest of pleasure ended inevitably in the finding of pain. He saw a joy-mad world whose eyes were heavy with misery, and whose feet were chained with passion, Though He spoke of the cross, He spoke of it as a yoke that was sweet and a burden that was light. Not in running after pleasure do men find happiness. They find it in the path of duty and the road of service and self-sacrifice, which was first traced by the heavily dragging end of a cross.

“Christ’s threats levelled against unjust judges, extortioners, exploiters of the labouring classes, and oppressors of the poor, rang with strangely unfamiliar melody in the ears of the downtrodden of His day and with jangling discord in the ears of those at whom they were hurled. In that too, He spoke in opposition to the existing customs and His times. He would speak the same words to those who today drain the blood of workingmen, or, seated on the judicial bench, buy and sell a parody on justice, or who exploit the helpless to feed their own greed.”

“We Have Our Own Leaders.”

Another pause, which this time was broken by a criticism tossed by a hitherto silent figure across the table. Father Hall remembered him as a well-known Communist who stood high in the councils of his party.

“You have forgotten one thing, doctor. Christ has been supplanted. We have no need to follow a man of twenty centuries ago when we have men of today. Darwin and Karl Marx are our prophets, who give, in a language we understand, answers to the problems they have faced and known. Perhaps Christ might answer them, too. We have no need to investigate. Marx and Darwin satisfy us completely.”

Father Hall faced the objector with a half-smile.

“Yet,” he replied, “I have noticed that no prophets are as short-lived as your modern leaders. Do you know that in Soviet Russia today a thousand copies of Lenin’s books are sold for one copy of Marx’s “Capital”? Do you know that scarcely a leading scientist in the world still holds the theory of Natural Selection, at least as propounded by your Darwin? Socialism remains, but not the socialism of Marx. Evolution as a theory is very strong, but Darwin, its prophet, has been succeeded by minor but more persuasive prophets. Christ alone remains unchanged and without need of change or successor.

“There is something of pathos in the way your modern prophets rise and fall; Ibsen was a prophet forty years ago at the turn of the twentieth century. Who reads Ibsen now for his theories of life? His plays on the current stage seem stale and trite, or absurd. George Bernard Shaw was a prophet. His comedies, written in the first decade of the century, are already outmoded. Havelock Ellis was ‘a startling pioneer in morality’; his voice is now scarcely heard among us. Eugene O’Neill was ‘a master in Israel’; his plays are already becoming literary curiosities.

“And Christ remains. After twenty centuries His doctrines and principles of life are as fresh and vigorous and applicable to modern conditions as they were when He preached the Sermon on the Mount. His words are still the words of eternal life and the grandest of common sense. Christ is the modern of moderns, understanding us better than we understand ourselves.”

Ever New.

The chairman glanced at his watch. The dregs of the coffee in the cups were long since cold and filmy. Ashes covered the table in little grey piles. The dining-room was hot and close and filled with the blue haze of smoke. But Father Hall was not yet through.

“Christ obtrudes Himself on no generation,” he said. “He offers His doctrines and His solutions for problems, and then waits for acceptance. Yet, doesn’t it seem strange that after two thousand years we, who are of another century, still sit and discuss Him with liveliest interest? Plato’s Republic is an interesting if obsolete and unexciting theory of life. Bacon’s sequel to Plato’s book is of concern only to scholars. A thousand scholars and thinkers have devised a thousand theories by which men were asked to live. Who now remembers those theories, or tries to live by them?

Two Remain.

“But Christ’s theory of life and living is just as alive and vital and fresh today as it was when He spoke to ambitious Jews and cynical Romans. All others we see grow stale during the lifetime of their authors. We forget them within a generation.

“But Christ and His theories of life? We still, whether we approve or disapprove, cannot possibly escape them. They are of the immediate day, for He is of all time.

“There are teachers whose teachings fade and fail before their class is ended. He spoke His doctrines under the skies, and they will last until the skies have fallen — ‘always ancient, always new’. Christ, as St. Paul cried, ‘now and forever’!”

The chairman coughed, moved restlessly, and then brought the dinner and its discussion to a close.

“We certainly,” he said, “appreciate Doctor Hall’s great patience with us. We are, I suppose, of the race of Pilate rather than of the race of Peter. We are interested in truth, because we feel we shall

never find that truth. We admire Christ, though we confess we cannot follow Him. But we have spent a profitable evening and a most suggestive one. For that we owe our friend, Doctor Hall, much gratitude. We have had given us abundant food for thought. Without further discussion we stand adjourned.”

Chairs were pushed back with a sharp clatter. Conversation broke loose. Hands were shaken, and Father Hall stood answering vague farewells and acknowledging vague congratulations.

The chairman proffered a lift home in his car, but Father Hall politely declined. A waiter appeared in the doorway, looking with accustomed and weary eye at the soiled and mussed table. The voices of the departing guests came back from the hall beyond.

Then Father Hall felt the presence of waiting figures. He turned and smiled at Helen Webb and Ford Osborne, who stood looking at him expectantly.

“Thank you,” said the girl, simply. “We owe you a great deal. It meant more to us than we can say.”

“Under cover of the noise,” said the young man, “we’ve been talking. You see, it’s queer to admit it, but for a long time back we’ve been feeling there is something missing in our lives.”

“Something central, unifying, binding together all these queer, apparently disjointed things that make up existence,” supplied the girl.

“And we thought it might be — well, the Person you talked of tonight. Do you think He has a solution for our problem, too?”

Father Hall replied gravely: “I can only answer as He answered another young man who asked a similar question, ‘Come and see’.”

“Does that mean we may come and see you?” asked the young man, almost shyly.

“And talk — about ourselves?” she asked, in a quick breath.

“I live an hour and a half by car from town,” Father Hall replied. “Lakeside.”

“We’ll come,” they said, and with a quick shake of the hand were gone.

And as Father Hall, a few minutes later, buttoned his topcoat and swung off into the crisp night air, he smiled happily at the unseen Christ Who always walked close to his side.
