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Christ and Lard

by **KILIAN McDONNELL, O.S.B.**

OVER the past decade the bishops of the country have stressed in their yearly pronouncements the evils of materialism. Once a year is by no means too often to be reminded of the evils of materialism. Of all theisms materialism is the slyest. Seldom does it show its own face. No, it has a thousand masks, all seemingly pleasant virtues. Sometimes it is the mask of humanism, sometimes the mask of patriotism, and, God help us, sometimes it is the mask of religion. An honest enemy will meet you in open battle. But how do you recognize, let alone fight, an enemy who lights vigil lights with the best of us, carries the flag aloft, and speaks fine words about the freedom and the rights of the people? For all the world he looks like a bosom friend. Of all such we need frequent warning.

Chesterton once said that the only thing worse than the purely material is the purely spiritual. Materialism is difficult to detect because of its disguises. It is ashamed to show its unwashed face. Not so spiritualism. It is without shame. It needs no mask. The purely spiritual has no need to blush nor hide. The purely spiritual is the soul of purity. Cleanliness is not only next to godliness, it is divinity itself. Never is there dirt under its fingernails. Spiritualism has a disdain for honest dirt, a disdain which it likes to think of as angelic and as a sure sign of the elect. Even matter is considered an untidy thing. Undoubtedly dependence upon material things is a condition of human existence, but this is a sad state of affairs. It would be much better if we could float around above the necessities of the body, if we could rise above all the accredited machinery of earthly living and dying. The purely spiritual is evidently a paragon of virtue, and who wants to quarrel with virtue?

This is not an imaginary attitude. Many heresies have been cradled and nursed at the breasts of the purely spiritual. Whenever a spiritualist heresy arose, the Church gave vent to a

holy anger. I am almost tempted to say that the Church was vindictive. The fury of her anger was not fed by any secret sources of wounded pride. The spiritualist heresy attacks the very foundation of the Church, the Incarnation. To attack the Incarnation is to attack Christ.

The first of the spiritualist heresies was Docetism. The Docetists said that Christ was not really and truly man. He just seemed to be man. The thinking behind this error is that matter—in this case flesh and bone—is a base thing. So lowly and degrading is matter that God would not contaminate Himself by taking a human body. To take a human body would also mean that the God-Man would be subject to material needs. He would need food to eat, a house to live in, a bed to sleep on, a basin in which to wash. The Docetists considered it unthinkable that God would have anything to do with crass matter. They came to the conclusion that the Second Person of the Trinity merely appeared on earth as man, but was not man in all reality. He was a phantom come down from heaven. Christ was purely spiritual.

The Church's indignation knew no bounds. It was not a case of bishops fighting over a theological bone. This was a case of life or death. If Christ was not truly man, then we are not redeemed. Heaven is still closed. There is no such thing as the Church. The sacraments have no value. Against the Docetists the Church insisted upon the most literal interpretation of St. John's words, "The Word (Son of God) was made flesh." The Church underlined the word "flesh."

When the Son took on a human body He did so in order to transform and consecrate all creation—first man and then dumb matter. We cannot despise wood and stone and the good earth without in some way despising Christ. Way back in the eighth century, St. John Damascene defended the sacredness of material things because the Son of God took a material body and used

material things to redeem us. "I do not worship matter," he wrote, "I worship the God of matter, who became matter for my sake and deigned to inhabit matter, who worked out my salvation through matter. I will not cease from honoring that matter which works my salvation." Christ consecrated matter by becoming man. He also consecrated matter by using it as a means of making us holy: water in Baptism, bread and wine in the Eucharist, oil in Confirmation and Holy Orders.

The Church continues the actions of Christ. She too blesses and consecrates matter. She too uses matter to lead us to God. Every priest has a book called a Ritual. In it there are blessings for many things. I give here a partial list of objects for which there is a special blessing: ambulance, beer, bees, butter, car, cattle, children, electric dynamo, fire engine, home, horse, lard, medicine, mill, oats, printing press, railway and its cars, sick persons, swine, typewriter, wheelchair, wine. Lest some object be forgotten there is prayer entitled "Blessing of Anything."

WE might think it comic to the point of sacrilege to relate a horse to Christianity or lard to Christ. But if we are squeamish in this matter, the Church, following Christ's example, is not. The Church says that in the life of a total Christian there is no such thing as a nonreligious object. The total Christian dedicates to God the objects he uses as well as the actions he performs. St. Paul said, "Whether you eat or drink, or do anything else, do all for the glory of God." The Church goes a little further and says that we should dedicate not only the eating but the eggs, not only the sleeping but the bed.

In spite of its pretended virtue, both Christ and the Church are not afraid to quarrel with the purely spiritual. By His birth Christ joined the material and the spiritual. Together they lead us to God. And what Christ has joined let no man put asunder.