

## I Believe in God

Metropolitan Anthony of SourozhI met Christ as a Person at a moment when I needed him in order to live, and at a moment when I was not in search of him. I was found; I did not find him. I was a teenager then. Life had been difficult in the early years and now it had of a sudden become easier. All the years when life had been hard I had found it natural, if not easy, to fight; but when life became easy and happy I was faced quite unexpectedly with a problem: I could not accept aimless happiness. Hardships and suffering had to be overcome, there was something beyond them. Happiness seemed to be stale if it had no further meaning. As it often happens when you are young and when you act with passion, bent to possess either everything or nothing, I decided that I would give myself a year to see whether life had a meaning, and if I discovered it had none I would not live beyond the year. Months passed and no meaning appeared on the horizon. One day, it was during Lent, and I was then a member of one of the Russian youth organizations in Paris, one of our leaders came up to me and said, 'We have invited a priest to talk to you, come'. I answered with violent indignation that I would not. I had no use for Church. I did not believe in God. I did not want to waste any of my time. Then my leader explained to me that everyone who belonged to my group had reacted in exactly the same way, and if no one came we would all be put to shame because the priest had come and we would be disgraced if no one attended his talk. My leader was a wise man. He did not try to convince me that I should listen attentively to his words so that I might perhaps find truth in them: 'Don't listen,' he said. 'I don't care, but sit and be a physical presence'. That much loyalty I was prepared to give to my youth organization and that much indifference I was prepared to offer to God and to his minister. So I sat through the lecture, but it was with increasing indignation and distaste. The man who spoke to us, as I discovered later, was a great man, but I was then not capable of perceiving his greatness. I saw only a vision of Christ and of Christianity that was profoundly repulsive to me. When the lecture was over I hurried home in order to check the truth of what he had been saying. I asked my mother whether she had a book of the Gospel, because I wanted to know whether the Gospel would support the monstrous impression I had derived from this talk. I expected nothing good from my reading, so I counted the chapters of the four Gospels to be sure that I read the shortest, not to waste time unnecessarily. And thus it was the Gospel according to St Mark which I began to read. I do not know how to tell you of what happened. I will put it quite simply and those of you who have gone through a similar experience will know what came to pass. While I was reading the beginning of St Mark's gospel, before I reached the third chapter, I became aware of a presence. I saw nothing. I heard nothing. It was no hallucination. It was a simple certainty that the Lord was standing there and that I was in the presence of him whose life I had begun to read with such revulsion and such ill-will. This was my basic and essential meeting with the Lord. From then I knew that Christ did exist. I knew that he was thou, in other words that he was the Risen Christ. I met with the core of the Christian message, that message which St Paul formulated so sharply and clearly when he said, 'If Christ is not risen we are the most miserable of all men'. Christ was the Risen Christ for me, because if the One Who had died nearly 2000 years before was there alive, he was the Risen Christ. I discovered then something absolutely essential to the Christian message &mdash; that the Resurrection is the only event of the Gospel which belongs to history not only past but also present. Christ rose again, twenty centuries ago, but he is the Risen Christ as long as history continues. Only in the light of the Resurrection did everything else make sense to me. Because Christ was alive and I had been in his presence I could say with certainty that what the Gospel said about the Crucifixion of the prophet of Galilee was true, and the centurion was right when he said, 'Truly he is the Son of God'. It was in the light of the Resurrection that I could read with certainty the story of the Gospel, knowing that everything was true in it because the impossible event of the Resurrection was to me more certain than any event of history. History I had to believe, the Resurrection I knew for a fact. I did not discover, as you see, the Gospel beginning with its first message of the Annunciation, and it did not unfold for me as a story which one can believe or disbelieve. It began as an event that left all problems of disbelief because it was direct and personal experience. Then I went on reading the Gospel and I discovered a certain number of things which I believe to be essential to the Christian faith, to the attitude of the Christian to the world and to God. The first thing that struck me is that God, as revealed to us in Christ, is everyone's God. He is not the God of a nation, or a confession, or of a denomination, or a more or less peculiar group, he is everyone's creator? Lord and Saviour. In him I discovered that the whole world had cohesion; that mankind was one; that differences and divergencies were not final and decisive, because we were loved of God; all of us equally, although we were called to serve him in a variety of ways, with a variety of gifts, and with a very different depth and width of knowledge. But the greater the knowledge, the greater the closeness, the greater the responsibility in a world that God loved so much that he gave his only begotten Son, for him to die that the world may live. The second thing I discovered was that God not only does not want us to be subservient to him, but that he stands as none other for the dignity of man. He refuses to accept us as slaves; he does not permit us to forsake our dignity of sons and of children. Remember the parable of the Prodigal Son. In his humiliation the Prodigal Son is prepared to recognize that he is not worthy to be called any more a son, but in his longing to be accepted again into the forsaken household of the father he is prepared to be admitted into it as a servant. Yet when he comes to making his confession the father allows him to say, only 'I am not worthy to be called thy son,' but he interrupts him then because his son can be an unworthy son, but cannot be a worthy servant. Sonship is a gift that cannot be lost, although it can be profaned. This vision of a God who has respect for human dignity, who stands for it, who will not accept any debased relationship with man, filled me with admiration and with respect and with incipient love for him. And as a corollary &mdash; the acceptance by God of utter humiliation and abasement. All the gods of the Ancient World were great: they were the sum total of all that was valued and admired &mdash; justice, wisdom, goodness, power. Only God revealed in Christ defeats human imagination, could not be invented by man: a God made in

the image of the servant, vulnerable, despised, humiliated, rejected, contemptible, defeated, killed, ruled out, unredeemed in the eyes of men. A God no one would wish to invent or to have &mdash; a God one can discover when he reveals himself. A God one accepts with awe and with fear-because he calls us to be like him, upturning all values and giving new meaning to all things. Then I discovered that the world was dear to God. That he had not only made the world to remain afterwards its Creator and become later its Judge. He had created the world in an act of love, and he had never become alien and indifferent to this world he had thus created. The Incarnation unfolded itself (and I am now speaking no longer of this first primeval experience of mine, but of something that has developed in the course of years), the Incarnation unfolded itself in a variety of meanings of depth. But not only of meanings, for the basic experience of reality remained always untouched. When we read the Old Testament we may at moments think of the world once created by God moving and developing before the face of its Creator, and called one day to be judged. This vision is so poor and so inadequate to what the Old Testament teaches us. The fact that God called us, all the world visible and invisible, the fact that God called all things and beings out of naught, out of radical non-existence, into existence is already a relationship. We are related to God by this act of creation and in this act of creation. When we think that whatever and whoever he called into existence is called to be a companion of God for all eternity, we can see the depth of the divine love and the extent of the divine risk. Because we are free to accept the love of God and to reject it we can frustrate this love or fulfil this love. But God's love remains immutable and he remains faithful for ever. He creates each of us in hope and in faith, and at moments when our faith vacillates and our hope sways and wavers we can rest in the divine faith and in the divine hope. When we think that the cost of our faithlessness and our waverings is paid by God in the life and death of the Incarnate Word then we can rest assured in his love. There is a relatedness and a deep relationship between us and God in the very act of creation, and in the very gift of freedom. Freedom is an absolute condition of love, because love is the gift of one's self in perfect freedom, and has no meaning apart from freedom. But there is more to it &mdash; the English word 'freedom' is rooted in the Old English word that means 'beloved'; 'my free' meant 'my beloved'. The word Liberty which signifies freedom in other languages defines the status of the child born free in a freeman's household. The Russian word for freedom indicates that we are called to be our own selves, not to imitate, not to ape, not to resemble, but to be ourselves in the image of the One who is perfect freedom and perfect love-truly himself. In all this the relatedness there exists between us and God is revealed particularly in this final act of solidarity which we call the Incarnation. Not only did God remain concerned with us throughout history, but he became one of us through history, and this not for a moment, but forever; not escaping the heaviness, the limitations and the pain of our human destiny, but in order to carry on his human shoulders the consequences of his divine act of creation and of our human rebellion, our rejection of him, lovelessness, godlessness itself. The Incarnation of the Word of God, the becoming man, meant for him that he entered into the realm of time and of death and of limitation and of all the consequences of human godlessness. This solidarity was not for a moment, it was definitive. He became a man, in human history, and he remains a man for ever because 'He sitteth on the right hand of the Father' as a man with hands and feet pierced by the nails, and with his side pierced by the spear. Throughout history and throughout eternity we can see this vision of divine solidarity with us. This solidarity goes infinitely further than we often imagine. It is not simply that he was tired and hungry and thirsty, that he had to face ill will and unfriendliness and eventually hatred. He had to face something more basic to our mortal condition and more essential than this. He had to face the coming of death and the actual dying. This is more than we can imagine, because in the natural course of events Christ could not die! A human body and a human soul united indissolubly and for ever with the Godhead in the mystery and the miracle of the Incarnation was beyond dying. Death was not only like ours &mdash; a result of our lack of life &mdash; it was the result of an act of divine will which inflicted death on One who was, not only in his Divinity but even in his humanity, alive with life eternal, because life is defined by oneness or union with God. We see him in the garden on the Mount of Olives face to face with death coming upon him, abandoned by human friendship; by those who were his disciples and were no longer solid with his destiny at that moment. He accepted death, which meant already the loss of what was his own being in life. Again upon the Cross the decisive, the most tragic words of history: 'My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?' Why? Because death is possible only through separation from the source of life, from the Godhead, and for him to die meant that he went through the experience of total, radical, real deprivation of God; of godlessness not only as a world-outlook, not only as an absence of the sense of God, but as a positive loss of the Father. There is not one man on earth who can claim to have known godlessness as Christ knew the absence of God at that moment, without which absence he could not die. This is the extent of the divine solidarity with us. This also is the measure of the divine love and consideration God has for the friend he has created to be his companion of all eternity. People are often prepared to believe in the death of the Cross but not in the Resurrection. How strange! To believe that life can die, and not to be able to believe that life can live. How strange also that we are so poor in the experience of things of our own faith that the only event of history which belongs to our own day is so obscure, and we do not know the Risen Christ while we imagine we are capable of knowing the Christ of the flesh; that Christ of whom Paul said, that we do not know him any more while we now know the Christ of the Spirit, revealed and known to us by the Spirit of God. But in Christ we do not discover only this Divine solidarity and incipiently, as I have tried to show, the value which God attaches to us. We discover also what man is, because he is not only Very God he is also Very Man. Our vocation is to be what he is. This is the meaning of our belief in the Church as the Body of Christ. We are called to be live, real members of a real enlived body, the head of which is the Lord Jesus &mdash; one real body, what St Ignatius of Antioch in the first century called the 'Total Christ', Head and Body together. We are called to such intimate community of life with him that what he is we also are to become, in the words of one of the greatest writers of the fourth century, Athanasius of Alexandria, who says, 'God has become man in order that we should become gods'. Before we become gods we must become men in the image of the One who became what we are. The extent to which we are called to be identified with him who chose to be identified with us is greater than we think. It is because we have a very mean vision of our calling that we are not aiming at the full

stature of Christ. Irenaeus of Lyons taught in the second century that, if it is true that we are the Body of Christ, that in him we are one, that our life is hid with Christ in God, then the final vocation of men is, together with Christ because of our oneness with him, to become the only-begotten son of God, an extension in time and in space and in eternity of this incredible, unfathomable relatedness and relationship with the Father. In that sense we can say soberly, yet with what exultation, that Christ is the very center of history as he is the beginning of all things ('by the Word were all things created') and the end of all things, because in him, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we shall in our total humanity have reached to the fullness of our human vocation and God shall be all in all. When we think of the life of Christ and of the death of Christ it is with anguish that we think of the extraordinary insensitiveness and indifference with which we partake in what we see in him. The act of perfect intercession, the act by which he took a step that brought him to the core of the human tragedy; the act by which he became that man of whom the Book of Job speaks in the ninth chapter, who could take his stand between God and one who was judged by God, in order to bring both together. The One who is an equal of both and therefore can bring them together in his own self, but also at his own cost, because every act of intercession is an act of sacrifice. I would like to illustrate this vision of a sacrifice and its consequences for us by something taken from the late history of the Russian Church. In the years of the Civil War when the opposing armies were contending for power, conquering and losing ground in the course of three years, a small town fell into the hands of the Red army which had been held by the remnants of the Imperial troops. A woman found herself there with her two small children, four and five years of age, in danger of death because her husband belonged to the opposite camp. She hid in an abandoned house hoping that the time would come when she would be able to escape. One evening a young woman of her own age, in the early twenties, knocked at the door and asked her whether she was so-and-so. When the mother said she was, the young woman warned her that she had been discovered and would be fetched that very night in order to be shot. The young woman added, 'You must escape at once'. The mother looked at the children and said, 'How could I?' The young neighbour, who thus far had been nothing but a physical neighbour, became at that moment the neighbour of the Gospel. She said, 'You can, because I will stay behind and call myself by your name when they come to fetch you'. 'But you will be shot,' said the mother. 'Yes, but I have no children'. And she stayed behind. We can imagine what happened then. We can see the night coming, wrapping in darkness, in gloom, in cold and damp, this cottage. We can see there a woman who was waiting for her death to come and we can remember the Garden of Gethsemane. We can imagine this woman asking that this cup should pass her by and being met like Christ by divine silence. We can imagine her turning in intention towards those who might have supported her, but who were out of reach. The disciples of Christ slept; and she could turn to no one without betraying. We can imagine that more than once she prayed that at least her sacrifice should not be in vain, and here we can see the image of another man who stood before death and hesitated. The greatest of those born to a woman, John the Baptist, who as death was coming to him, sent two of his disciples to Christ to ask him, 'Is it really you, or should we expect another one?' If it is really you then all the sacrifices of my youth, all the years in the wilderness; all the hatred I was surrounded by; the coming of death; my diminishing in order that you might grow, is a blessedness; but if it is not you then I have lost my life, I have lived and I shall die in vain. Here again the prophet received the reply of the prophet, but no word of consolation. This young woman probably asked herself more than once what would happen to the mother and the children when she was dead, and there was no reply except the word of Christ, 'No one has greater love than he who lays down his life for his friend'. Probably she thought more than once that in one minute she could be secure! It was enough to open the door and the moment she was in the street she no longer was that woman, she became herself again. It was enough to deny her false, her shared identity. We can see again one of the strongest men in history, Peter the apostle, challenged by a woman in the coldness of night and in his desperate loneliness denying in order to save his life. She died, shot. The mother and the children escaped, and here we see one more thing which will be the last I wish to mention. St Paul tells us, 'It is no longer I who live, it is Christ who lives in me'. We often wonder at the meaning of these words. How can Christ live in one? We can have an inkling of this meaning from the life of this mother and her children. They remained alive because another died. They have remained aware throughout their lives that they lived on borrowed life. Their life was cut off the earth by the hatred of men and it was given back by the love of this woman. If they were alive it was because she had lived; her life was theirs. They had to live and fulfil her life. They had to live as she had taught them. Is not this something which we can learn also? Is not this what we must learn from the act of perfect solidarity which we find in the Incarnation, from the insuperable courage and love of God, from the Garden of Gethsemane and the death upon the Cross? Solidarity not only between ourselves, but with every man, because God is solid with the godless as with the saint. The victory of life is in us not only because we receive the miraculous gift of life from God, but because if we live as he taught us he will be alive in us, and we shall be alive in him, now and for all eternity.

\* - We believe in God / Ed. Rupert E. Davies. London, 1968. AAK;:C: Publications: Somatopsychic Techniques (translated into English and published in 1957)