

THE OPERA "JESUS CHRIST, SUPERSTAR"

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A certain local Superstar's musical director said in an interview: "Webber and Rice have written here half of the whole story . . . the human half. That would clear up a lot of this "mystifying buzz" that seems to fill the air whenever Superstar comes up in any conversation."¹ This is indeed an easy, but quite superficial way to justify the opera we are reviewing. Let us dwell now in this division of Christ's story in two halves!

There is a Spanish proverb that runs somewhat as this: "Half a truth is worse than a full lie". And this saying may prove more valid still when the truth is not actually composed of two parts or halves, but rather is a single reality composed of two different but mutually complementing elements coalescing into one indivisible being. Then any presentation of a single constituent element *isolated* from the other, as if it could stand without the other, cannot be even a part of the truth; it is simply a distortion of the truth, and thus it becomes the worst falsehood because it may more easily lead to error under the semblance of a grain of truth. In a case like this we should not speak of one-half of a reality, as if there were other half independent from it, other half from which it can prescind. To prescind of an essential, though incomplete, element of a reality is equivalent to deny the reality itself. Let us give an example.

We know that man is a being composed of body and soul united in one person. Man is not made up of flesh and spirit as if these were two independent parts closely tied together to supplement each other; in man, flesh and spirit are two incomplete substances or elements intimately blended or fused together and mutually complementing each other in one single person.

¹ cf. THE FREEMAN, December 12, 1971, p. 6

We cannot speak of man's body without necessarily supposing or taking into consideration the actual working of its life-giving principle, the soul. Without this we would be speaking, not precisely of the body of a living man, but of the dead corpse of a person who has passed away. Hence, whatever I say or speak about a man's body does not and cannot reflect his person unless I take into consideration his life-giving principle, his soul.

This is a mere illustration of what we have to say about the most sacred Person of Jesus Christ. Indeed, we can speak of Christ, the Man, the "Son of Man", the "Man of sorrows" as the prophets talked of Him; or we can say with Pontius Pilate: "Behold the Man" (Jn. 19,5). But we cannot forget that this Man was at the same time God. We cannot speak of Christ as a *mere* man, as "just a man", as the "man-plus-nothing-else". That kind of Christ — at least, for us Catholics — did *never* exist. There was never a Christ who was a man "as anyone else, just one more, the same as anyone I know," as Magdalen and Judas repeat in Webber and Rice's opera.

Even Pontius Pilate who spoke of Him as "*this man*" (Lk. 23, 4.14), upon hearing that Jesus "has made himself Son of God" (Jn.19,7), the pagan governor, sceptic though he was, sensed a vague fear that the accused man before him might be a "human-plus-something-else" being, and thus asked him: "Where are you from?" (Jn.19,9). We will see later whether "Christ as He appeared to those around Him . . . , the Apostles . . . and all the simple folk of the Jerusalem of His time" did not produce other impression than that of a "man-plus-nothing-else", a *mere* man; whether "for most of them this happening called *Jesus Christ* was an *entirely understandable human* drama with political understones" (!) But, whatever might have been the possible "*blindness*" of some people around Jesus at His time, a *blindness* which did not allow them to realize His divine character or power, it is admitted for sure that we should "now regard such 'blindness' with *compassion*".² And since, unfortunately it is that sort of "*blindness*" "that Webber and Rice have turned into song", hence the least we could do is to regard their rock opera affected by that "*blindness*" *with compassion*, and by no means with praise or

² Ibid., loc. cit.

enthusiasm. Because with that "blindness" they present us a Christ that never existed, a Christ different from that of the Gospels, a Christ different from the One we Catholics adore.

How can we dream to find in such play "an inescapable insight into the humanity of Jesus Christ", if that humanity is presented there divested from the divinity to which it is so closely united in one divine Person, that even death which separated His soul from His body, could not separate His divinity from either the one or the other?³ I say and maintain that in the play the human character of Jesus appears, not only in the opinion of the people of His time but before the general public of our times, so utterly divested of any sign of divinity that no one witnessing the play can find any ground even to surmise from his words and actions that Christ the Superstar could be something more than a *mere* man, without any divine power, gifts or mission, ignorant of his own identity or destiny, a mere faith-healer, an impostor, a megalomaniac misfit, an unbalanced and mentally sick man. We shall prove these points later. Now we want only to make it clear that the error of Webber and Rice has been to attempt in their opera an "impossible dichotomy" between Christ's humanity and His divinity. It is indeed impossible to dissect Christ's personality which is that of the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, that of the Son of God, by trying to present us His humanity prescinding *entirely*, even without *openly and explicitly* denying it, from His divinity. To prescind *entirely* of one of the two essentially necessary and mutually complementary elements of an indivisible reality is tantamount to present a distorted and unreal view of that same reality, because it implies a *denial*, at least implicit, of an essential element of the reality. That is why we said in the previous article that the opera stresses Christ's humanity by denying His divinity.

Just as to speak of man's body without taking into consideration the actual working of its life-giving principle would be really tantamount to speak of a dead corpse, not of a living body or of a person, in the same way, and even with greater reason, we cannot present correctly Christ's humanity if we prescind *entirely* from His divinity. By the so-called "hypostatic" union Christ's humanity belongs to a Divine Person and is inseparably united to the divinity of that Person. As the

³ cf. Denzinger-Schoenmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum* n. 2663

Athanasian Creed puts it, "Christ is absolutely One, not through any confusion of natures (divine and human), but by the unity of a single Person", that of God the Son; "because as a rational soul and the flesh make one man, thus God and Man is only One Christ"⁴ The two natures in Christ are inseparably united;⁵ and in Him there are not two persons, one human and other divine, but two natures (divine and human) in One Person; hence, His actions are "common", i.e., His flesh does not act without the Word of God, and the Word of God does not act in Him without His flesh; this "common" way of acting in Christ is called "*theandric*"⁶ (which might be translated "*humanly divine*" and "*divinely human*").

Therefore I repeat, it is an "impossible dichotomy" to try to offer a proper "insight into Jesus' humanity" by prescribing totally of his divinity, as if that were *another part of the other half* of the story. Such dichotomy could not but result into an adulterated version of the true Christ of the Gospels, the Christ of our Christian faith.

Jesus Christ was a true Man, a perfect Man, but never a mere man, "just a man" as the Superstar appears to anyone. As true Man, He "who is God over all" (Rom.9,5), "who . . . was by nature, God . . . emptied Himself (note: not by surrendering the divine nature, which is impossible, but by foregoing the glory attached to it), taking the nature of a slave and being made *like* (note: it is not said, *identical*) unto men" (Philip.2,6-7), "one tried (note: it is not said, *imperfect*) as we are in all things, except *sin*" (Hebr.4,15) and, obviously, the *consequences of sin*, such as the human passions of vices, or the disharmony of desires, conflict of wills and tempting allurements of the flesh.⁷ What an abyss between this Christ of the Scriptures and of the Church Magisterium, and the *Superstar* of Webber and Rice's opera!

⁴ Ibid., o.c., n. 76

⁵ Ibid., o.c., nn. 302, 317, 420, 534, 543, 555-557, 561, 564, 619, (1337), 2529.

⁶ Ibid., o.c., nn. 317s; 515

⁷ Ibid., o.c., nn. 130, 148; 299.