

## THE CONFESSION OF PETER

D. J. SAUNDERS, S.J.

*Weston College*

IN A well documented article<sup>1</sup> which considers quite thoroughly the content of Peter's confession at Caesarea, W. Goossens concludes:

It seems by far more probable, indeed morally certain, that in Matt. 16:16, just as in Mark 8:29, and Luke 9:20, St. Peter confessed only the messianic dignity, and therefore the term 'Son of God' in Matt. 16:16 has merely a messianic meaning.<sup>2</sup>

Fr. Goossens is by no means the first Catholic to arrive at such a conclusion. Before him it was held by Fr. Tillmann,<sup>3</sup> V. Rose,<sup>4</sup> P. Batiffol,<sup>5</sup> and F. Prat.<sup>6</sup> He realizes, however, that he is taking his stand slightly *extra chorum*, and makes a careful examination of the contentions of Lagrange, Buzy, Durand, Lepin, Lebreton, Ceuppens, and others before expressing his own conviction.

Before considering the text itself of the confession of Peter, Fr. Goossens makes some preliminary observations on the title "filius Dei" as found in the Old Testament, and as understood by the Jews at the time of Jesus. He notes with all scholars that although in the Old Testament the Jewish people, the theocratic king, the just, and even the Messiah have been called children of God, the term "filius Dei" does not occur there as an "accepted and popular messianic title."<sup>7</sup> Regarding Ps. 2:7, he holds for the interpretation of adoptive filiation, and adds: "Beyond this in the writings of the Old Testament the

<sup>1</sup> W. Goossens, "De Sensu Locutionis 'Filius Dei' in Confessione St. Petri (Matth. 16, 16) et in Quaestione Synedrii (Marc. 14, 61=Matth. 26, 63; Luc. 22, 70)," *Collationes Gandavenses*, XXVIII (1945), 61-85. Our interest here centers particularly on the first part of the article.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>3</sup> "Methodisches und Sachliches zur Darstellung der Gottheit Christi nach den Synoptikern gegenüber der modernen Kritik," *Biblische Zeitschrift*, VIII (1910), 252-262.

<sup>4</sup> *Études sur les Évangiles* (Paris, 1905), pp. 195-6.

<sup>5</sup> *L'Eglise naissante et le catholicisme* (4th edit., Paris, 1927), p. 102.

<sup>6</sup> *The Theology of St. Paul* (Benziger, 1927), II, 140-1. Prat mentions the opinion as at least tenable. But confer his *Jesus Christ*, I, 429-32.

<sup>7</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 65.

Messias is not yet depicted as possessing divine nature."<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, although the second psalm was understood by the Jews as referring to the Messiah, the rabbinic writings and the apocryphal books of the Old Testament clearly indicate that "filius Dei" was by no means a commonly accepted messianic title. The Jews only rarely attributed divine filiation to the Messiah, and they never considered Him as actually possessing a divine nature.<sup>9</sup>

In the New Testament, however, Fr. Goossens finds that the title "filius Dei" sometimes has merely a messianic signification. This is evident, he believes, in Lk. 4:41, "devils also came forth from many, crying out and saying, 'Thou art the *Son of God.*' And he rebuked them, and did not permit them to speak, because they knew he was the *Christ.*" It is evident also in Mt. 27:40 (as is confirmed by Lk. 23:34), and in Acts 9:20 (as is clear from 9:22). It is probably true also of "filius Altissimi" in Lk. 1:22, since the immediate context is messianic; and in Mt. 4:3-6 (the narrative of the temptation).<sup>10</sup>

After this introductory discussion, Fr. Goossens lists the arguments of those who hold that the object of Peter's confession was the divinity of Christ, and then he offers his answer to that contention. We shall give a summary of both sides of the question here.

1. Arguments drawn from the terminology.<sup>11</sup> The first argument is based on the fact that among the Jews "filius Dei" was not a commonly accepted messianic title. Fr. Goossens admits the fact, but refers us back to his preliminary discussion for the necessary proof that, despite its infrequent use by the Jews, the term signifies nothing more than the messianic dignity of Christ in some passages of the synoptics.

The second argument contends that in the Gospel of Matthew, as in the other writings of the New Testament, "filius Dei" expresses transcendent divine filiation and, in the confession of Peter, both the

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* Since this does not affect our question essentially, it is sufficient merely to note some authors who hold the contrary opinion. A. Vaccari, S.J., "De Messia Filio Dei in Vetere Testamento," *Verbum Domini*, XV (1945), 48-55; 77-86. J. Cales, S.J., *Le Livre des Psaumes* (Paris, 1936), I, 103-6. G. Governanti, O.F.M., *In Isaiam 9, 5. Dissertatio Exegetico-Theologica* (Jerusalem, 1945).

<sup>9</sup> The classic example of the Jewish viewpoint is recorded in Justin's *Dialogus cum Tryphone Judaeo*. "All of us expect a Christ who will be a man from among men." (PG VI, 582).

<sup>10</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 67.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 68-9.

solemnity of the formula used (*filius Dei vivi*), and the presence of the Greek article  $\delta$  before *υἱός* would indicate a confession of natural divine sonship. Fr. Goossens answers that the children of Israel are called "*filius Dei vivi*" in Osee 2, from which it is clear that the expression does not necessarily designate more than adoptive filiation. Moreover, the presence of the article in the Petrine formula of itself indicates only that Jesus is the Son of God *singulari quadam ratione*. The messianic dignity belongs to Him alone.

2. Arguments from the context.<sup>12</sup> a) Peter's recognition of the divine filiation was attributed to a special revelation from the Father. Revelation was not necessary for the recognition of Christ's messianic dignity, but it was an absolute prerequisite for the acknowledgment of the divinity (cf. Mt. 11:27). b) The sublime promise made by Jesus proves the sublimity of the object of Peter's confession. Unless he had confessed the divinity of Jesus, Peter did nothing more than the other apostles who had already recognized the messianic dignity of the Master, nor did he merit the special praise and privilege accorded to him. c) Before the confession of Peter, the apostles could have known that Jesus was the Messiah. John the Baptist had proclaimed it, and his testimony was known everywhere. Even the devils attested it. The apostles already had admitted it.

d) Before the confession of Peter the apostles could have suspected the divinity of Christ, and in fact seemed to have done so. In their presence, Jesus had often proved by word and work that He possessed a superhuman and divine dignity and power. He declared Himself greater than the temple (Mt. 12:5); He acted as supreme legislator (Mt. 9:1-8); He performed miracles. Likewise He had signified that His filial relation to God was unique (Mt. 11:25-7). Probably the apostles had also heard the demoniacs proclaiming that Jesus was the Holy of God (Mk. 1:24), the Son of God (Lk. 4:41). Perhaps they knew of the solemn declaration of the Father at the Baptism: "This is My beloved Son" (Mt. 3:17).

On the testimony of J. 5:18 and 10:33, the adversaries of Christ clearly understood His contentions. Could not the apostles, continually living in intimacy with Christ, likewise understand the mind of the Master? Hearing Christ forgiving the sins of the paralytic and

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 69-74.

the penitent woman, should not their reaction have been that of the Scribes and Pharisees: "Who can forgive sins, but God only?" (Mk. 2:7) "Who is this man who even forgives sins?" (Lk. 7:49). It is a fact that when they saw Him walking on the waters and calming the sea, they "worshipped him saying, 'Truly thou art the Son of God'" (Mt. 14:33).<sup>13</sup>

In his answer, Fr. Goossens warns us to keep in mind the concrete messianic concepts prevalent in the Jewish expectations. The popular opinion pictured the Messiah as a king, descended from David, just, powerful and victorious, the liberator of Israel from foreign domination, etc. On the other hand, the Messiah expected in apocalyptic circles was to be a preexisting celestial being who would exercise judgment at the end of the world, punishing the evil and rewarding the just. Before the third century A.D. the Jewish doctors never understood Isaias 53 as referring to the Messiah. A suffering Messiah was scandalous for them.<sup>14</sup>

In the light of these facts, Fr. Goossens feels that it was practically impossible for the apostles to recognize the Messiah in the poor and humble Jesus. Imbued with the false popular notions of a political Messiah, and unable to reconcile the necessity of the passion with the messianic dignity, they did not conclude from the testimony of John the Baptist and the declarations of demoniacs that Jesus was the Messiah. "Nowhere in the synoptic gospels do we read that the Apostles acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah before the confession of Peter."<sup>15</sup>

In view of all this, nothing prevented Jesus from declaring that His messianic dignity could not be known by Peter except through the medium of revelation from His Father. Likewise nothing prevented Our Lord from giving special praise to Peter and promising him the highest authority in His Church because of this profession of faith. This was justified since Peter was the first of the apostles to recognize Him as the Christ.

Regarding the recognition of the divine filiation of Jesus, Fr. Goossens tells us that we must always keep in sharp focus the realization of

<sup>13</sup> Fr. Goossens rightly notes the absence of the Greek article and agrees with those who contend that this exclamation of the apostles should not be understood as a clear perception of the divinity of Christ. Lagrange translates it: "You are a man of God." *Évangile selon S. Matthieu*, p. 297.

<sup>14</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 73.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

how difficult it would have been for the Jews to admit that Christ was the Son of God. On the one hand, they adhered to the strictest type of monotheism. On the other, divine filiation as they knew it from the Old Testament in its application to the nation, or to the just, or perhaps to the Messiah, was always interpreted as adoptive filiation.

Because of this strict monotheism, it is a known fact that Jesus was forced to be most careful in the revelation of His divinity. It is true that at the beginning of His ministry He claimed a superhuman dignity and power, and so implicitly affirmed His divinity. It is likewise true that He affirmed a filial relation with God that was absolutely unique. But the great stumbling block to the formation of an explicit conclusion from these statements of Jesus was the strictly monotheistic faith of the Jews which seemed absolutely incompatible with the possibility of natural divine Sonship.

Fr. Goossens will not admit the validity of the argument based on the fact that the adversaries of Christ were soon convinced that He was ascribing divinity to Himself. These adversaries were seeking an opportunity to accuse Him of blasphemy, and hence were prone to deduce from His words conclusions which they personally considered absurd. The disciples of Christ, on the other hand, because of their conviction that the Master was eminently truthful, were forced to accept his statements. But, since divine filiation in the strict sense seemed absolutely impossible to them, they did not appreciate the fact that He was professing to be the natural Son of God. From all they saw and heard, they could only conclude that somehow or other He was closely united to God. Fr. Goossens seems to favor the theory of Fr. Tillmann<sup>16</sup> that it is more probable that the resurrection removed the last veil from the eyes and hearts of the apostles.

In completing his treatment of the question, Fr. Goossens next lists the arguments of those who hold that Peter confessed merely the messianic dignity of Christ, then the difficulties proposed against such an interpretation, and finally an answer to these difficulties.<sup>17</sup>

The first argument is based on the fact that, according to the other synoptics, Peter says nothing more than that Jesus is the Messiah. "Tu es Christus" (Mk. 8:30). "Christum Dei" (Lk. 9:20).

The opponents of the argument attempt to refute it in two different

<sup>16</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 255.

<sup>17</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 75-78.

ways. Some contend that since the narrative of Mark and Luke is less complete than that of Matthew, the correct principles of interpretation demand that the exact meaning of the passage in the other Gospels be construed in conformity with what is found in Matthew. Mark and Luke were not bound to express explicitly the divine filiation of Jesus because in their minds "Christus" and "filius Dei" were equivalent concepts designating the same person.

Others explain the omission in Mark and Luke by postulating a combination of two distinct confessions of Peter in the Gospel of Matthew. The first of these, in common with that of the other synoptics, refers to the messianic dignity of Christ. The second, peculiar to the first Gospel, proclaims His divinity.<sup>18</sup>

Fr. Goossens believes these answers have no cogency. In the first place, they presuppose that the divine filiation of Mt. 16:16 must be understood as natural divine filiation, and the arguments for that interpretation have already been shown to be invalid. Secondly, there is nothing in the confession of Peter which suggests a distinction between the titles "Christus" and "filius Dei"; on the contrary, "filius Dei" seems to be simply a synonym in apposition with the preceding word. What is found in the command of Christ to preserve silence confirms this.

Moreover, thinks Fr. Goossens, there are other elements in these answers which seem inaccurate and false. In the first place, it is not true that the shorter narration is always to be explained by the longer. Secondly, it has not been proved that "Christus" was a *nomen proprium* for the evangelists Mark and Luke. In their minds the word signified merely the anointed Messiah. Hence, although they knew He was the Son of God, they did not express that filiation by calling Jesus "Christus."

The second argument is based on the command to keep silence. In that command there is absolutely no mention of divine filiation, and hence we can conclude that the words "filius Dei" in the confession of

<sup>18</sup> This solution, proposed by Fr. Lagrange in an early edition of *Évangile selon S. Marc*, is abandoned in the later commentary on St. Matthew. According to Fr. Guenser, however, it is considered the only possible solution. "... nous ne voyons d'autre solution à cette antinomie que d'en revenir à celle que le Révérend Père Lagrange a abandonnée, à savoir que saint Matthieu a condensé les deux confessions en une seule." "La confession de Saint Pierre," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses*, IV (1927), 561-576; p. 572.

Peter signify nothing more than the Messianic dignity. If Peter had recognized that Christ was God, it is certain he would have been warned not to manifest that astounding truth.

Against that argument some theologians claim that an added prohibition would have been superfluous. From the nature of the case, those who are forbidden to proclaim the messianic dignity would be held a fortiori to say nothing of the divinity. Other theologians think the divulgation of the divinity was not prohibited because it would not have been understood by the people in the sense of natural filiation and, in any case, would not have caused the furor and danger of revolution that would inevitably accompany a premature publicizing of the Messias.

Fr. Goossens again finds that these answers presuppose what should be proved, namely that Peter recognized the divinity as well as the messianic dignity of Christ. And he adds that the premature publicizing of the divinity would also have been fraught with danger. Although not calculated to arouse the people to insurrection, it would undoubtedly have given the enemies of Christ a wonderful opportunity to accuse Him of blasphemy.

The final argument is derived from the general context. Fr. Goossens notes that in immediate connection with the confession is the beginning of Christ's prophecies of the passion which was a much more mysterious phenomenon for the apostles than even the Messiahship of Christ. After three years, notwithstanding their national and political expectations, the apostles finally recognize Him as the Messias at Caesarea. It is then that He begins to teach them the necessity of the passion and death as a prerequisite for the messianic glory. The progressive and systematic revelation of the messianic mystery demands that first the Messias, secondly the suffering Messias, and only thirdly the natural Son of God should be recognized and proclaimed.<sup>19</sup>

I would like to differ with Fr. Goossens in some of the major issues of his contention, particularly with the proof of several of his presuppositions to the consideration of the text. Fundamental in these presuppositions is the statement that "filius Dei" must sometimes be considered simply as a messianic title in the Gospels. As we saw, the

<sup>19</sup> This also is the solution of Fr. Tillmann, *Op. cit.*

first proof given for this is based on the juxtaposition of the confession of the devils, "Thou art the Son of God," and the prohibition of Jesus that they should not speak "because they knew he was the Christ" (Lk. 4:41). Such a text would indeed prove Fr. Goossens' point if it were absolutely certain that the word "Christ" should be understood here merely in the sense of Messias-man. In a previous article<sup>20</sup> I have attempted to prove that this restrictive meaning of the term is inadequate for the simple reason that the demons actually knew that Jesus was the natural Son of God. In the light of this discernment of the devils, it can be said, I believe, that in the text at hand "filius Dei" and "Christus" are synonymous, not in the sense that "filius Dei" means merely "Christus" or "Messias," but in the sense that "Christus" in the mind of Luke has all the implications and connotations of "filius Dei." That Luke was in a position to handle his terminology in this manner will be indicated later.

The second argument is based on a comparison of Mt. 27:40 with Lk. 23:35. A harmony of the Gospels will indicate, however, that it is a subsequent verse in Matthew which is the equivalent of Lk. 23:35. Matthew first quotes the words of the passers-by who cried: "If thou art the Son of God, come down from the cross!" Then both Matthew and Luke record the words of the "rulers." "He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ, the chosen one of God" (Lk. 23:35). "He saved others, himself he cannot save! If he is the King of Israel, let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him" (Mt. 27:42).

Another parallel given by Fr. Goossens is found in the Acts. "... he (Saul) began to preach that Jesus is the Son of God" (9:20). "But Saul grew all the stronger and confounded the Jews who were living in Damascus, proving that this is the Christ" (9:22). The parallel between these two texts is obvious. Not so obvious, however, is the assumption that Paul, contrary to the ordinary and universal practice of calling the expected Messias King of Israel or Son of David, or Christ, would have used the term "Son of God" in his first effort to prove that the longed for Messias had come. It seems much more logical to suppose that he was still so amazed and thrilled by the revelation of the divinity of Jesus that such a topic would be the first

<sup>20</sup> "The Devil and the Divinity of Christ," *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES*, IX (1948), 536-553.



truth he wanted to preach. In addition, he also "confounded the Jews," proving that Jesus was the Messiah by his "teaching and interpretation of the Scriptures which the Jews knew."<sup>21</sup>

We may dismiss the probable identification suggested for "He shall be called the Son of the Most High" (Lk. 1:32). The reason assigned is the fact that the context is messianic. We admit the fact, but feel that no principle of exegesis demands that a messianic context, particularly in the New Testament, *eo ipso* excludes the notion that the Messiah is also the Son of God. As Fr. Zorell illustrates with many examples, "often in Sacred Scripture *to be addressed by some name implies to be rightly thus addressed, i.e., to be such or to be known and acknowledged such as is indicated by the name.*"<sup>22</sup> A perfect example of the same is found in the latter part of the first chapter of Luke in reference to John the Baptist, "and thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Most High" (1:76).

The last argument is derived from Mt. 4:3-6, the temptation in the desert. Yet, according to some of the Fathers, the devil tempted Christ precisely in order to come to a correct understanding of the declaration of the heavenly Father at the Baptism when He said: "This is my beloved Son" (Mt. 3:17). This would not be merely the Messianic sense.<sup>23</sup>

From these considerations, it does not strike me that Fr. Goossens has given a solid foundation to his important presupposition and, from the nature of the case, it needs a very substantial foundation before winning acceptance since all the probabilities are against it. The whole world is in agreement with Dalman that "it must be recognized as certain that Ps. 2 was not of decisive importance in the Jewish conception of the Messiah, and that 'Son of God' was not a common Messianic title."<sup>24</sup> It would be extremely surprising, therefore, if it

<sup>21</sup> In this way Theophylactus translates *συμβιβάζων*. (PG CXXV, 646).

<sup>22</sup> *Lexicon Graecum Novi Testamenti* (Paris, 1931), s.v. *καλέω*.

<sup>23</sup> Chrysostom, *In Matthaeum Homil.*, XIII (PG LVII, 210). Theophylactus, *In Evangelium Matthaei*, (PG CXXIII, 179).

<sup>24</sup> G. Dalman, *The Words of Jesus* (Edinburgh, 1902), p. 272. "Neque vero Judaeus fatebitur praedictum a quopiam propheta, fore ut Filius Dei veniat. Quod enim dicunt, illud est, venturum esse Christum Dei. Unde fit, ut saepe nos interrogent de Filio Dei, quasi nullus sit, aut illius nunquam prophetae fecerint mentionem. Atque haec dicimus, non quo negemus Filium Dei praenuntiatum fuisse; sed ut ostendamus Judaeo huic rei minime assentienti male ascribi haec: 'Meus propheta in Jerosolymis olim dixit, ven-

were found to be common in the Gospels which, in all other aspects, reflect so accurately the current attitudes of the time.

On the contrary, in the same Gospels, whenever the people, the scribes, and the doctors of the law wish to speak of the Messias, they always call Him Son of David, King of Israel, Prophet, He who is to come, or simply Christ.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, as far as contemporaneous history can inform us, none of the pseudo-Christ, either before or after the birth of Jesus (Theudas, Judas, Dositheus, Simon), ever made claim to be the Son of God.<sup>26</sup> We may conclude, therefore, that the only possible meaning for the term in the minds of the Jews was either adoptive or natural filiation.

The second point on which I would take issue is the statement that before the confession of Peter it is never recorded in the synoptics that the apostles regarded Christ as the Messias, and that they would have required a special revelation to recognize the messianic dignity in the poor and humble Jesus. In the first place, I do not accept the validity of restricting our sources of information to the synoptics when we wish to consider what occurred in the life of the apostles prior to the confession of Peter. The fourth Gospel, which fills in many synoptic lacunae, explicitly states that at the very beginning of the public ministry both Andrew and Nathanael recognize that Christ is the Messias. This testimony is disastrous to Fr. Goossens' theory. It indicates that, although the apostles were enmeshed in the erroneous Messianic notions of the times, they nevertheless penetrated to the exalted dignity of the Christ practically at their first meeting with Him. It indicates further that Peter was not the first to recognize the Messias. That honor fell to Andrew who ran to his brother with the news, "We have found the Messias" (J. 1:42). Finally, it indicates that no special revelation was necessary for this recognition which Andrew was to share, not only with his fellow apostles, but also with many

---

turum esse Dei Filium.' " Origen, *Contra Celsum* I, 49, (PG XI, 754). M. J. Lagrange, O. P., *Evangile selon S. Marc* (Paris, 1929), CXLVII. F. Prat, S. J., *The Theology of St. Paul* (Benziger, 1926), II, 141; J. Lebreton, S. J., *History of the Dogma of the Trinity* (Benziger, 1939), I, 100; A. Charue, *L'Incrédulité des Juifs dans le Nouveau Testament* (Gembloux, 1929), p. 46; A. Durand, S. J., *Evangile selon S. Matthieu* (Paris, 1938), p. 306.

<sup>25</sup> I. Franzelin, S. J., *De Verbo Incarnato* (Roma, 1869), p. 22. H. Guenser, *Op. cit.*, pp. 561-2.

<sup>26</sup> Origen makes good use of this argument against Celsus (PG XI, 766-7).

of the people. It is little wonder, then, that no mention is made of any praise or reward for such a confession.

These historical facts, as is evident, exercise a definite influence on our interpretation of Mt. 16:16. They deter us from saying, as does Fr. Goossens, that nothing could have prevented Jesus from declaring that His messianic dignity could not have been known by Peter at Caesarea except through the medium of revelation received from the Father; or that nothing prevented Him from giving special praise to Peter and promising him the highest authority in His Church because of his profession of merely messianic faith.

I mentioned above, in connection with Luke's description of the confession of the devil (4:41), that the word "Christus," as used in the passage, had all the connotations and implications of "filius Dei." That statement needs development here in light of Fr. Goossens' contention that it has not been proved that Christus was *veluti nomen proprium* for Mark and Luke, and that it was not expressive of divine filiation. History will provide the proof, I believe, that both Mark and Luke could occasionally handle their terminology in this manner.

According to the testimony of the Acts, "Christ" was a proper name on the lips of the first Christians even from the day of Pentecost. "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ" (2:38). "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, arise and walk" (3:6). ". . . let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, even in this name does he stand before you, sound" (4:10). "But when they believed Philip as he preached the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women" (8:12), etc.

So common was the name among the first converts that they themselves began to be called Christians in Antioch not long after the Ascension (Acts 11:26). And, in this connection, it is to be noted that this designation was not derived from the Jews who, because of the etymological significance of the word, would never think of so desecrating it by applying such a sacred name to those not of their religion. In Jacquier's opinion, the pagans of the city invented the title to distinguish the partisans, the disciples of *Christus* whom they adored as God. Hearing the faithful constantly speaking of *Christus*, preaching

His name, baptizing in His name, it was quite natural for them to call these disciples Christians.<sup>27</sup>

Harnack thought that the title was given primarily to the converted pagans, as distinct from the converted Jews.<sup>28</sup> Whether we accept this last view or not, the fact remains that the name of the disciples was derived from the name given by them to their Leader.<sup>29</sup>

Before the writing of Matthew's Gospel, the word Christ was perpetually on the lips of Paul. Fr. Prat, commenting on the epistles, tells us: "The name Christ (with or without the article) appears alone 203 times; Christ Jesus 92 times; Jesus Christ 84 times."<sup>30</sup> Since at least some of the epistles precede the Gospels in writing, it is quite certain that "Christ" was a word already consecrated by use in the early Christian community. Moreover, if we inspect some of the texts in which it is found, it is clear in many instances that the intended meaning is not taken primarily or solely according to its etymological signification. It is simply a proper name, and has all the connotations that are found in the word as it is used universally by Christians today. This is true whether, in the Greek, it is found with or without the article.

Let us make another point. It is an established fact that in the Gospels the evangelists sometimes adopt titles given to Christ by the post-ascension community. This is particularly noticeable in Luke and John who occasionally designate Jesus as "Lord" in a manner which is typical of the early converts to Christianity. "And the Lord, seeing her, had compassion on her" (Lk. 7:13). "Now after this the Lord appointed seventy two others" (Lk. 10:1). "And the apostles said to the Lord, 'Increase our faith'" (Lk. 17:6). "Now it was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment" (J. 11:1), etc.<sup>31</sup>

In much the same way, both Mark and Matthew borrow "Christ" as part of the proper name of the Savior. "The beginning of the Gospel

<sup>27</sup> E. Jacquier, *Les Actes des Apôtres* (Paris, 1926), p. 352.

<sup>28</sup> Cited by Fr. Jacquier, *Op. cit.*, p. 352.

<sup>29</sup> This is confirmed by both Jewish and pagan historians. According to Josephus, in a passage accepted by virtually everyone, James was "the Brother of Jesus *who is called Christ.*" *Antiquitates Judaicae*, XX. Tacitus writes of those called Christians by the populace, and adds that the author of this name is *Christus*. *Annales*, III, 15. Suetonius speaks of the expulsion of the Jews from Rome because they caused a tumult under the instigation of *Chrestus*. *Vita Claudii*, 25.

<sup>30</sup> *Op. cit.*, II, 13.

<sup>31</sup> M. J. Lagrange, O. P., *Evangile selon S. Luc* (Paris, 1941), CXXXVII.

of *Jesus Christ*" (Mk. 1:1).<sup>32</sup> "The book of the origin of *Jesus Christ*" (Mt. 1:1). "And Jacob begot Joseph, the husband of Mary, and of her was born Jesus who is called *Christ*" (1:16).<sup>33</sup> "... when John had heard in prison of the works of *Christ*, he sent two of his disciples to him" (Mt. 11:34).<sup>34</sup>

In the first two Gospels, therefore, "Christ" not only can be used as a proper name, but actually has been used in this manner. Moreover, since both evangelists not only believe that Christ is God, but also make the proof of His divinity<sup>35</sup> one of the major features of their Gospels, there is no reason why we should say a priori that the word "Christ," as used by them, must always be understood *sensu negante*.

This can be said about the third Gospel with even greater pertinence since it is not only later in composition, but also distinctly Pauline in

<sup>32</sup> M. J. Lagrange, O. P., *Évangile selon S. Marc* (Paris, 1947). "Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ est une term déjà consacré par l'usage de la première génération chrétienne. Si Marc avait voulu affirmer ici que Jésus est le Messie, il aurait mis l'article. Mais il ne se montre pas non plus par cette omission indifférent à la dignité messianique de Jésus. Il suppose simplement avec tous les fidèles que Jésus a été reconnu comme Messie, d'où l'appellation de Jésus-Christ, devenu un nom propre en deux parties." p. 3. E. Gould, *Gospel according to St. Mark* (Edinburgh, 1907). "The title Χριστός became a personal name later, and the absence of the art. would indicate that this is the use here." p. 3.

<sup>33</sup> Fr. Zorell translates the phrase as follows: "Jesus cui est cognomen Christus." *Op. cit.*, s. v. Χριστός.

<sup>34</sup> Later, at the trial, Pilate speaks on two occasions of "Jesus who is called Christ" (Mt. 27:18; 27:22), but this is in reference to acclaims of the crowd. A more pertinent and very interesting example is found in Mk. 9:40. "For whoever gives you a cup of water to drink in my name, because you are Christ's, amen I say to you, he shall not lose his reward." However, both Fr. Lagrange and Fr. Buzy are inclined to think "because you are Christ's" is the insertion of a copyist.

<sup>35</sup> D. Buzy, S. C. J., *Évangile selon S. Matthieu* (Paris, 1935). "Après vérification minutieuse de tous les textes, nous disons que la pensée dominante du premier évangéliste est de mettre simultanément en lumière la messianité et la divinité de Jésus. On ne saurait demander de reconnaître ce double fait à des auteurs qui ne croient pas à la divinité du Sauveur. Mais on s'étonne à bon droit que les catholiques se montrent parfois si parcimonieux et si hésitants à l'endroit d'un dogme auquel ils croient de toute leur âme. Ce phénomène difficile s'explique peut-être par l'influence prolongée des querelles engagées au début de ce siècle.

On a ainsi laissé s'accumuler entre S. Jean et les synoptiques de prétendues contradictions qui n'existent que dans l'esprit de leurs inventeurs. Il est temps de nous en débarasser, achevant de récupérer une liberté que nous n'aurions jamais dû abdiquer. . . La vérité est que l'évangile de s. Matthieu nous révèle la divinité de Jésus autant que sa messianité." XIII.

concept and vocabulary. Knowing how frequently Paul uses Christ as a proper name, we should not be surprised at finding a similar use on occasion, at least, in the writings of his disciple.

This is of paramount importance to us here, because it is a clear warning that a purely etymological interpretation that sees nothing but Messiah-man in "Christus" is not the only interpretation possible in the Gospels. It certainly did not have that meaning for the evangelist when he wrote the Gospel, or for the converts who were the recipients of the Gospel, or for the apostles themselves after they finally realized that the Messiah was God.

Not only is this viewpoint verified in the New Testament, but, as far as I have been able to ascertain, it is the manner of interpretation common among the Fathers. Concerning their testimony relative to the confession of Peter at Caesarea, there are two things to note. First, they have absolutely no doubt that Peter proclaimed that Christ was the natural Son of God. Secondly, they are not troubled by any restrictive meaning derived from the presence of "Christ" either in the same sentence or in the subsequent command to keep silence.

Perhaps the best example of this is found in St. John Chrysostom:

*But who do you say that I am? That is, you who are ever with me and who see me performing miracles and have yourselves accomplished many prodigies through me. What then from Peter, the spokesman of the apostles? Ever ardent, the leader of the apostolic band himself replies though all are asked. Now when the opinion of the people was being asked for, all replied; when, however, He asks them about their own opinion, Peter jumps to be beforehand, and says 16. Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. What then from Christ? 17. Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-Jona, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to thee. And unless Peter had thus truly confessed Him, as one begotten of the very Father, there would not have been this deed of revelation; if he thought him to be one of many, that was not worthy of blessedness. For already before this time, those who were in the boat after the storm said, Truly this is the Son of God (Matt. 14:33), and yet they were not styled blessed, although it was the truth they spoke. For they had not confessed him to be the Son in the sense that Peter had, but they thought the Son to be one out of many, outstanding indeed among the many, yet not of the very substance of the Father. . . . Nathanael also said, Rabbi, thou art the Son of God, thou art King of Israel (John 1:49). And yet not only is he not said to be blessed but he is reproved by Him, just as if he had said something quite beneath what was fitting; for He added, Because I said to thee, I saw thee under the fig tree, thou dost believe. Greater*

*things than these shalt thou see* (John 1:50). Why then is Peter said to be blessed? Because he confessed that He was in the proper sense the Son. On this account Christ never said anything similar to them. Here, however, He even states who had revealed it. . . . And 20. *then*, when He had said these things, *He strictly charged them to tell no one that He was the Christ*. And why did He make this command? To the end that when the scandals had been removed from the midst, and the cross and the other things He suffered were undergone, and finally nothing remained that would hinder or disturb the faith many had acquired in Him, a genuine and unshakeable sentiment in His regard should be imprinted in the souls of the hearers. . . . For if those who had seen so many evidences, and were sharers in so many ineffable mysteries, were scandalized merely by what they heard; and indeed not they alone, but even Peter, the leader of them all, consider, if you will, what the reaction of the people would have been, if they had learned that He was the Son of God, and thereafter had seen Him crucified and befouled with spittle, without having understood the hidden aspects of these mysteries and without having received the Holy Spirit.<sup>36</sup>

This testimony not only constitutes a proof that can stand on even terms with those offered today, but also indicates that the Fathers were not as timid as modern commentators in the presence of the word "Christ." As is clear from the preceding paragraph, St. John Chrysostom has no hesitation in identifying the "Christus" of the prohibition with "filius Dei." Nor do Origen<sup>37</sup> and Jerome,<sup>38</sup> who also treat explicitly of the confession of Peter and the command of Christ to preserve silence, see any reason why the second element should be restrictive of the meaning of the confession.

The same tradition is found in Hilary who, in emphasizing that the belief in Christ as Son of God in name only and not in nature is not the faith of the Gospels or of the apostles, proves it from the confession of Peter.

It is not a part of the evangelical and apostolic faith to have believed Him the Son of God in name rather than in nature. For if this is an adoptive appellation, and He is not on that account son, because He went forth from God, I inquire for what reason the blessed Simon Bar-Jona confessed, *Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God* (Matt. 16:16)? Or is it a question of the power shared by all to be made sons of God through the sacrament of regeneration? If Christ be the son of God according to this appellation, my question is, what is there that neither flesh

<sup>36</sup> *In Matthaeum Homil.*, LIV (PG LVIII, 533).

<sup>37</sup> *In Evang. Matthaei*, (PG XIII, 996).

<sup>38</sup> *In Evang. Matthaei*, (PL XXVI, 117-8).

nor blood revealed to Peter, but the Father who is in heaven (Ibid. 17)? What merit is there in a general profession? Or what glory is there in revealing what is of public knowledge? If He is a son by adoption, on what score is this a blessed confession for Peter, when he ascribes to the Son what is a common property of the holy? But the apostolic faith stretches beyond the bounds of human understanding. . . . For even if He had professed that He was the Son of God, while remaining in the body, nonetheless the apostolic faith now for the first time recognized in Him the nature of the divinity.<sup>39</sup>

Since the same certainty is found, not only in other Fathers,<sup>40</sup> but also in our older commentators,<sup>41</sup> who consistently interpret the passage in terms of natural divine filiation, it is only just to emphasize that the formulation of doubts concerning the content of Peter's confession has been reserved quite completely to theologians of our own time. To my mind, they have been unduly influenced by the prominence given to the critical controversy concerning the messianic dignity of Christ.

The Fathers found as their adversaries heretics who wanted to restrict the filiation of Christ to adoptive filiation. But it apparently never entered the minds of these heretics that "filius Dei" might mean merely Messiah. During modern times, however, since we have become involved in the question of the messianic dignity of Christ because of the insistence of critics who have already abandoned any notion of His divinity, the emphasis has changed from adoptionism to messianism. The effect on Catholics has not always been too happy.

One of the leading contentions of the critics was that "filius Dei" was a messianic title. The answer rightly given by Lagrange<sup>42</sup> and others at the beginning of the century was that such a contention could not be proven. Yet, despite that firm stand, concessions have been made regarding the contents of the New Testament, concessions not only against the traditional interpretation of the Church, but con-

<sup>39</sup> *De Trinitate*, VI, 36 (PL X, 186).

<sup>40</sup> Fr. Guenser gives an imposing list of references. *Op cit.*, pp. 568-9.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. St. Thomas, *Catena Aurea*, in loc. Maldonatus, "Christum ergo non adoptione sed natura Filium Dei appellat." In loc. Jansenius, "Tu es ille singularis Christus, seu Unctus, et verus Messias; et quamvis hominem esse videamus, simul tamen es natura, non adoptione, ut caeteri Sancti, ille unicus Filius Dei, non cujuslibet, sed Dei viventis, cui proprie competit generatio." In loc.

<sup>42</sup> *Le Messianisme chez les Juifs* (Paris, 1909), p. 105.



cessions which even some of the critics admit to be unfounded. The present text is a case in point.

Loisy, after first formulating some of the arguments still used to prove that the confession of Peter was not directed toward the divinity of Christ,<sup>43</sup> was finally forced to admit that "filius Dei" could mean only natural divine filiation. For that reason he claimed the passage was an interpolation.<sup>44</sup> In the *Encyclopædia Biblica* the same admission of divine filiation and plea for interpolation is made.

. . . the text of Mt. has been interpolated by the addition of two terms 'son of Man' and 'son of the living God. Van Manen is probably right in thinking that 'Son of God' is not here a designation of the theocratic king, but to be taken in a metaphysical sense. But to the interpolator ὁ χριστός was no longer a mere equivalent to 'the Messiah'; it had no doubt already assumed the same significance as 'Son of God.'<sup>45</sup>

Dalman has practically the same thing.

The same evangelist by the modification peculiar to himself which he introduces in his account of Peter's confession. . . makes it clear beyond doubt that He who calls Himself merely Son of Man' is in reality the correlative, (sic) i.e. Son of God. Hence it is emphasized in 16,17 that Peter has acquired this conviction not from men, but from God.<sup>46</sup>

The reasons why it is "clear without doubt" are derived, as we have indicated, not only from the words used, but from the context as well. In this matter the first rule of exegesis demands that we interpret the words according to their accepted meaning unless forced to something else by solid arguments. The accepted meaning of "filius Dei" was not Messiah. Since it was not an accepted messianic title, the Jews were faced with two prior interpretations for the term when they heard it. First, the more acceptable, because the more readily understandable, meaning was adoptive sonship. The second possible meaning, more unusual and eminently surprising, yet still in accordance with the native significance of the words, was that of natural divine sonship.

The Fathers, interpreting the passage, inevitably take the second meaning and justify it, explaining how Peter could not possibly have been speaking of mere adoptive filiation. The same arguments, with

<sup>43</sup> *The Gospel and the Church* (New York, 1904), pp. 90-2.

<sup>44</sup> *Les Évangiles synoptiques* (Ceffonds, 1908), II, 1-8.

<sup>45</sup> N. Schmidt, "Son of God," IV, 4700.    <sup>46</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 254.

slight variation, can be advanced today against the interpretation of mere messianic dignity. First, the apostles already knew that Jesus was the Messiah. Secondly, the confession of Peter, on the authority of Christ, required a special revelation, a phenomenon obviously inexplicable on the assumption that Peter was saying what the apostles already knew from natural observation. Thirdly, Jesus in reply speaks of the natural filiation of Peter, thereby indicating that He realized Peter had spoken of His own natural filiation. Fourthly, the sublimity of the promise of the primacy presupposes something really sublime in the previous confession which occasioned the promise.

Against this slight modification of the patristic argument, there are really only two modern objections that merit discussion. The first is the silence of Mark and Luke; the second, the wording of Matthew's recording of the command to "tell no one that he was Jesus the Christ" (16:20).

To my mind, there is no necessity of espousing the theory of conflation in Matthew, as developed by Fr. Guenser, in order to answer the first objection. As Fr. Lagrange points out, it is not the addition of Matthew that needs explaining, but rather the silence of Mark and Luke.<sup>47</sup> Regarding the silence of Mark, the simple explanation given by Eusebius seems very adequate and quite obvious.<sup>48</sup> He emphasizes the fact that since Mark recorded the preaching of Peter, and since Peter in his customary humility omitted the narration of various incidents in the public ministry that would redound to his own personal glory, it is not surprising that there is no mention of the real sublimity of the confession or the promise of the primacy in the second Gospel. This can also explain Luke's omission, since it is clear that in this section, as in others, he is but following the lead of Mark. It is still questionable whether he had even seen the Gospel of Matthew, at least in its entirety.

For these reasons, I would be very reluctant to follow those who like to see nothing less in Mark and Luke than is found in Matthew's description of Peter's confession. To my mind, there is a definite omission in the second and third Gospels and, although I have attempted to show that the title "Christ" can be used by these evangelists with all

<sup>47</sup> *Évangile selon S. Matthieu* (Paris, 1927), p. 321.

<sup>48</sup> *Demonstratio Evangelica*, III (PG XXII, 218).

the connotation of divinity which we give to the word today, I do not believe such an interpretation can be given to what is obviously only a partial quotation of Peter's direct words. The fuller sense is found only in the version given by Matthew.

This silence of Mark and Luke cannot, however, be used in any sense as a valid argument for the translation of "filius Dei" in Matthew merely as *Messias*. Just as the silence concerning the promise of the primacy cannot be urged against the obvious meaning of the words in the first Gospel, so the omission of "filius Dei" in no way attenuates the real signification of Matthew's record of Peter's confession. An argument from silence is at best very weak, and in this case its weakness is only confirmed by the fragility of the arguments advanced to prove that "filius Dei" should be interpreted here merely as a messianic title. These arguments, particularly in the present context, have no validity whatever.

Before interpreting the command of Christ to preserve silence, there are several factors which must be considered. In the first place, unlike the confession of Peter, this is not a direct quotation in Matthew's Gospel. Hence the evangelist's choice of words must be interpreted in accordance with the full knowledge he possessed when writing the Gospel. Secondly, this command is given after the apostles have recognized that Jesus is the *Messias-God*. Hence, if we consider that in the mind of the evangelist who wrote the Gospel, and of the Christians who heard the Gospel, and even of the apostles themselves after the confession of Peter, "Christ" could no longer be confounded with the erroneous notion of the Jews and the equally erroneous notion of modern critics who look on the *Messias* merely as a man, there is no reason why we should look for the addition of "filius Dei" in Matthew's recording of the command of Christ. After the words of Peter, "filius Dei" and "*Messias*" had become synonymous, not in the sense that Jesus was *Messias-man*, but in the sense that the *Messias* was the natural Son of God.