

# An outline of St. John's Doctrine on the Divine Sonship of the Christian

## C. EVIDENCE FROM THE FIRST EPISTLE

1. We have so far tried to illustrate the Johannine thought on our divine sonship by adducing passages selected from the Gospel, namely, from the Prologue, where the idea appears for the first time, and from Chapter 3, where it recurs for the second and last time throughout the Fourth Gospel. St. John's view may, however, be still better brought out if we turn our attention to his First Epistle, where the argument is dealt with at length and *ex professo*.

Just to keep some kind of connection between our previous argumentation from the Gospel, we choose to take first under consideration such passages of the Epistle where John speaks of the Spirit of God. We have remarked that in Jn 3. 5, 6, 8, instead of the usually recurring phrase *gennethenai ek Theou*, the Evangelist puts *gennethenai ek tou pneumatos*. But, it is just in the First Epistle that John takes upon himself the charge of explaining in what sense Christians may be said to be "begotten of the Spirit", namely, because God gives them "of his Spirit" (85). It is, therefore, God who begets them by giving them of His Spirit, that is to say, by making them participants, in some way, of His Spirit. It is to be observed that John speaks again of the Spirit of God in Chapter 4, 2, 3, 6, where it is easy to see that the matter dealt with is only that of moral feeling and thinking, whether according to the Spirit of truth, that is, of God, or according to the spirit of falsehood (v.6). Such an interpretation is clear enough from the whole pericope (vv. 1-6), by which the Apostle takes pains in warning his beloved faithful to guard themselves against false spirits (86). The case is different in such passages as 3.24; 4.13. Here the Spirit is considered to be a gift of God, an object which may be bestowed (*edoken, dedoken*). Note also the partitive signification of the preposition *ek* with the genitive, indicating the fullness out of which something, as a part of a whole, is given (87). It is beyond our purpose to state whether the Spirit of God

---

\*The first part of this article appeared in Vol. VII. No. 1 (1955), pp. 1-26.

85 1 3.24; 4. 13.

86 Note the plural *ta pneumata*.

87 ZORELL, *Lexicon*, s.v. *ek*, col. 389. In 3.34 the Vulgate takes the pronoun *hunc* as an attracted genitive and translates by the accusative, "*quem dedit nobis*". The sense is evidently the same as that of a partitive genitive.

spoken of in these instances does enjoy a proper and concrete personality. What concerns us is only that it seems to be a real object, something which can be delivered by God to believers and which they can possess within themselves (88).

As a matter of fact, in the texts we are examining the divine gift of the Spirit is considered to be a principle, a pledge of certainty that we abide in God and God in us (89). Christians are conscious that God abides in them, because they are conscious of the presence of the Spirit which God has given them. The Spirit, being sensitive to the souls in which he lives, makes them know that they are in fellowship with God. True it is that the very presence of the Holy Spirit in our souls is again testified by the good effects He produces in ourselves, resulting in our good moral actions. We, however, believe, following Bonsirven (90), that John, as any other mystic and particularly St. Paul himself (91), deduces the self-assurance of his own divine filiation directly and immediately from his self-experience, from the inner feeling of the real presence of the Holy Ghost in his soul. Mystics, in fact, infer the presence of God in their souls not only from its supernatural effects, but also from the wonderful fact of their mystic experience through which they feel God really present within themselves (92). It is this experimental feeling of the Holy Spirit that John and Paul experienced within themselves and were convinced that it should have existed also in the souls of their disciples. In this sense, then, the Holy Spirit can give us the assurance of our being begotten of God in a double way: by

---

88 Elsewhere John speaks again of the Spirit as a gift which may be given and received (20.22; 7.39).

89 We shall have a better opportunity of seeing that this Johannine formula expressing mutual indwelling is intimately connected with the idea of divine childhood.

90 *Epîtres*, pp. 50f., 204. See also P. De AMBROGGI, *Le Epistole Cattoliche di Giacomo, Pietro, Giovanni e Giuda*, 2a ed., Torino-Roma, 1949, p. 219.

91 Rom. 8.14-16; Gal. 4.6.

92 A. POULAIN, *Des grâces d'oraison, traité de théologie mystique*, 10e ed., Paris, 1922, pp. 27, 30f., 44ff.; P. DESCOQS, *Praelectiones theologiae naturalis, Cours de Theodicée*, Paris, 1932, I, pp. 573-605.

empowering us to exert supernatural actions and by making us feel our union with God through His real presence in our souls (93).

The presence of the Holy Ghost within the souls of the faithful is again indicated by St. John in I 2.20, 27 by the metaphorical expression *chrisma apò tou hagiou; chrisma ap'autou*. The interpretation commonly given to the characteristically Johannine word *chrisma* is that it refers to the gift of the Holy Spirit. The idea, probably suggested by the preceding *antichristoi* (v. 18), points to the anointing of old, by means of which those who were consecrated were regarded as thereby endowed with the Holy Spirit and with divine gifts (94). Precisely the same qualities or effects are attributed to this "unction" as are elsewhere predicated of the Spirit, namely the teaching of truth and the enlightenment of the mind, so that there does not seem to be any doubt as to the identity of the two terms (95). Now, Christians are said to have received (*élabète*) this *chrisma*, the Holy Ghost, and they still have it permanently, for it abides in them (*ecchete, menei en hemin*). Indeed such emphatic assertions point to something really existing within the soul

---

93 LAW, *o.c.*, p. 297, explicitly rejects such an immediate testimony of the Spirit and recognises only that which comes through the fruits produced thereof: "It is a misconception to regard the Epistle as teaching that the Spirit bears immediate and self-evidencing testimony to the divine sonship of the believer..... It is only as an objective fact and by necessary inference that the reception of the Spirit's witness and the resultant confession of Christ give assurance that 'we are of God'." — See also p. 395.

94 Cf. I Sam. 16.13, Is. 61.1. — In the Old Testament, chiefly in Exodus, it is the act of anointing which is indicated rather than the oil used (Ex. 29.7; 30.25; 35.15; 40.8, 13). *Chrisma* translates always *mishhah* and not *shemen*; hence in the LXX *to elaion tou chrismatos* is the usual translation of *shemen hammishhah* — Cf. A. E. BROOKE, *o.c.*, p. 55.

95 Cf. Jn 14.17, 26; 16.13. — Many other different interpretations have been given to this word *chrisma*, all of which are referred to by CORNELIUS a LAPIDE, *Commentaria in Epistulas Canonicas* (Comm. in S.S., X), Neapoli, 1859, p. 675f. Baptism, Confirmation, Christianity, faith, grace, the gift of Wisdom, the inspiration of the Holy Ghost — all these have been viewed by different authors as corresponding to *chrisma*. Indeed, there could not be any objection on the part of the word "unction", so far as these gifts are considered as the fruits and effects of the Holy Ghost, who is really the "*Spiritualis unctio*".

of the Christian, being in it a permanent source of certainty and of truth (96).

But the connection of the gift of the Holy Ghost with the supernatural childhood of the Christian is still much more emphatically stated in I 3.9. John, speaking of the man begotten of God, says that he possesses within him the very "seed of God". The thought is really strong: the divine act of generation is thought of — after analogy with the physical act — as implanting a divine principle from which the new nature of the children of God is produced and which, once implanted, remains (*menei*) in them (97). Following again the commonly held opinion, regarding the interpretation of the word *sperma*, we cannot but see indicated thereby the Holy Spirit of God or, as others may have it, the "divine element" by which men are begotten of God and become His children (98).

- 
- 96 Exegetes, commenting these passages, relate the problem concerning the agent of this "unction", whether he be the Father or Christ. In fact, in 2.20, *hagios* denotes rather the Father (as in Rev. 4.8; 6.10; — comp. Jn. 17.11), though it could also denote the Son. (cf. Jn. 6.69; Rev. 3.7); in 2.27, then, *autos*, refers rather to Christ (cf. v. 28, *can phanerothe*). BONSIRVEN, *Epître*, pp. 28, 142, thinks that the Apostle may have used this manner of speaking to indicate that this divine action is common to both the Father and the Son alike. Cf. also A. CHARUE, *Les Épîtres Catholiques* (La Sainte Bible, XII), Paris, 1946, p. 533.
- 97 The divine action in the human soul is viewed also by Philo as the "seed of God", *tà tou Theou spermata*, *De Ebrietate*, 8.30, ed. L. COHN, II, Berolini, 1897, p. 174; again, God is considered as *speirein en autais aretas*, *Leg. Alleg.*, III, 63, 108f., ed. cit., I, Berolini, 1896, p. 153. — Philo's thought is, however much different from that of St. John; by the divine action virtues are implanted in the soul, but nowhere it is said that this act of God begets men anew.
- 98 CHARUE, *ib.*, p. 538 and De AMBROGGI, *ib.*, p. 249 refer it to sanctifying grace. This is no doubt true; but it seems to be more consistent with the Johannine thought if it is taken as indicating directly the Holy Ghost Himself (cf. I 3.24; 4.13), who is elsewhere referred to as the source of divine begetting (Jn. 3.5, 6, 8). A. AUGUSTINOVIC, having related the different views of exegetes with regard to this Johannine expression, concludes: "*Concordes igitur ad substantiam quod attinet, in interpretando sperma Theou de illo elemento divino, quod homini regeneratione communicatur et per quod revera fit filius Dei, seu de principio divino novae vitae*" (*Critica "Determinismi" Joannei*, Hierosolymis, 1947, p. 85).

John, therefore, in this passage excellently enough explaining the wonderful way in which God begets us, His children, that is, by communicating to us His Holy Spirit, which is implanted and remains within us as the acting principle of our divine begetting. In the meantime, then, he clearly states that our divine childhood is a real state, owing its origin to a real and direct act of God, by which its divine germ is infused into us.

Thus it follows naturally that, to the mind of John, Christians are truly and really children of God. In fact, he is not content with merely stating this truth in simple terms, but makes use of much stronger and more emphatic expressions, such as, *nun tekna Theou esmen* (I. 3.1.2). Indeed, this manner of speech should induce the reader of the Epistle to consider the problem more seriously. The phrases, taken by themselves as they are put here on this page, cannot afford the full significance they may give when considered with reference to the context. For it is the context, the mind of the Apostle as expressed in these passages, that can show the reason of these emphatic repetitions. In the latter instance (I 3. 1), the passage runs as follows: "Behold what manner of charity the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called, and should be, the sons of God", *hina tekna Theou kletomen, kai esmen* (99). The Vulgate version fails to make the real thought of the author sufficiently clear. It is rendered better in this way: "that we should be called children of God, and so we are" (100). The parenthesis *kai esmen* is indeed awkward. And it seems to be for this reason that in some Greek manuscripts the phrase is omitted (101). Nevertheless, it is in the author's own style, as it may be seen from Jn. 1. 15, Rev. 1. 6; II Jn 2. This incidental clause, then, is by no means insignificant. A slight comparison between the two phrases *tekna Theou kaleisthai* and *tekna Theou einai* soon suggests the reason for it. The sense is not really affected whether those last two words are allowed or whether they are excluded: for, undoubtedly, according to common usage, "being called the sons of God" means becoming

99 Note the characteristic Johannine use of *hina*, meaning the same as *hoti* (cf. 1.27; 15.8, 12, 13; 17.3). Hence, not "in order that" we may be called children of God, but simply "that"; thus explaining what this great love of God towards us consists in. See M. ZERWICK, *Graecitas Biblica*, Romae, 1949, nn. 286, 290.

100 The French idiom would give: "*Et en fait, nous le sommes*" (Charue); or in Italian: "*E lo siamo in realtà!*" (De Ambroggi).

101 1175, 917-431r, 242-216, 1518, 614, 255, K.1. The accepted reading is undoubtedly genuine as it is attested by the most authoritative mss.

the sons of God (102). Only, they add to the emphasis of this noble claim; they mark a magnificent *crescendo* in the expression of the thought. The phrase "We are called children of God", although it does not lessen our dignity, might however suggest the thought that it is an insignificant title. Hence, in order to show that it is not a matter of a mere formula, John adds — with the calm and consoling assurance of a soul which day by day has had personal experience of the reality — *kai esmen*. Thus a more profound meaning is brought out: "We are not only *called* children of God, as if we were adopted in an outward way. That is not a mere empty title; it is a real fact, *we are such in reality!*"

Again, in the following verse, the kindred phrase *nun esmen* contains the same power of testifying the reality implied in our noble title of children of God. This time it is with reference to a future state that the problem is considered. John attests: *nun esmen* — it is not a privilege which will be bestowed on us in the life to come; it is now, even now, at present, that we are the children of God (103). It is a present reality, though the perfect manifestation of our noble dignity has still to come. We are already in possession of this divine filiation, but we do not have at present except its "seed".

3. It is not without reason then, that John bursts out into the ecstatic exclamation: "Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the children of God; and such we are in reality". This rapturous exclamation at the beginning of the Third Chapter is prompted at the very thought of our divine begetting in the last verse of the Second: "Every one also, who doth justice is born of him" (I 2, 29). Begotten of God! The thought seems to strike John's mind with fresh astonishment. Familiar as it is, he sees in it, as it here occurs to him, new cause of wonder. It is, indeed, the surprising dignity, the sublimity beyond all understanding of this privilege, that first calls forth the Apostle's expression of amazement. If then the very thought of our divine sonship prompted such a strong and amazing exclamation, is it not right to think that something more than a mere title is thereby implied? Of course, the reason why John is so much amazed is rather the great love of God towards us, Who grants us the gift of divine childhood. The thought of our being begotten of God immediately suggests the Father's love. It is this fatherly love that explains our being begotten of God.

---

102 See CORNELIUS a LAPIDE, *o.c.*, p. 682.

103 Cf. Gal. 4.6; Rom. 8.16; — comp. v. 23.

It is indeed conceivable that, in some other way and on some other footing, we might be called children of God. We might think of being the children of God in so far as we are morally like to Him, that is, irrespectively altogether of any new divine generation. Again our being "called children of God" might be considered simply as an act of adoption, analogous to what is practised among men. Viewed in this light, it would unquestionably be an instance of fatherly love of no ordinary kind. It is as if the monarch were to admit into the royal household a vanquished and forgiven rebel to be on the same filial terms with him and enjoy the same filial privileges, as his own first-begotten. Yet this is not "the manner of love" that awakens John's admiring rapture; or, at least, not the whole of it. It is our being "begotten of God". That in such a sense and to such an extent God should have us as His very children in respect of being begotten of Him, is a love which would never have entered into man's mind to conceive.

It is not therefore the simple fact of our divine childhood, as such, which John thinks so amazing a wonder, but rather the fact that this noble dignity depends directly on the act of God Himself, Who begets us. This is again more emphatically stated in this same passage, where divine childhood is considered to be a great gift of God. It is God Himself Who gave us this wonderful title and so it cannot be a mere empty title, but implies some reality (104). A more accurate analysis of the whole expression may help to show this more easily. Really, each word used here is peculiarly adopted for this purpose. *Idete potapèn agapen dedoken hemin*: the subject is so important that John invites his readers to consider it seriously. The whole phrase then is peculiarly strong, even stronger than if simply put like this: "See, how much did God love us!" (105). Such a manner of speaking, though in itself clear and expressive, would not have brought out sufficiently the greatness of the Father's love. On the contrary, John chose another formula which, even awkward as it is, expresses more fully the reason of his amazement. The love of God is considered as a concrete, real thing, by means of the substantive *agapen*, which is moreover considered as an object given to us (*dedoken*). God, therefore, has "imparted" to us the gift of divine childhood. Truly, the force of the verb *dedoken* suggests

104 BONSIRVEN, *ib.*, p. 39, remarks: "*Ce titre leur est donné par Dieu, comme témoignage de son amour, c'est donc pas un titre vain, ils sont réellement fils de Dieu*".

105 Note the use of *idete*, which expresses admiration (Mk 13.1).

106 Some mss read *edoken*. But the perfect *dedoken* is much better attested.

that this "love" is a reality existing by itself. Again, the tense, in the perfect is no less significant: it states that the divine love, once infused into us, abides and remains within us as our own possession (106). And what kind of love is this! (107). St. John gives in some way its definition by stating what it consists in, namely, in the gift of divine filiation.

#### D. THE EFFICACY OF THE DIVINE BEGETTING

1. In order to come to a better understanding of the Johannine mind regarding our being spiritually begotten of God, we have so far made use only of those passages which contain, so to speak, some direct evidence. But far more numerous are those passages, by which John testifies indirectly or, as one may say, *a posteriori* our real relation of sonship to the Father, whereby he shows us the right way of knowing whether we are truly the children of God. The First Epistle is particularly rich in such passages. Indeed, its subject-matter seems to consist chiefly of the delineation of the ideal christian life, which naturally answers to the dignity of the christian as a child of God (108). Thus, for the Christian, a good and right moral life, consisting in the observance of the divine commandments, is the sign of his being a child of God, the test of his being begotten of God.

The knowledge-giving rule is already included in Jn. 3.7, where the action of the Spirit upon the believer is considered to be like the action of the wind. "As the tree (for example) by waving branches and rustling leaves witnesses to the power which affects it; so is everyone that hath been born of the Spirit. The believer shows by deed and word that an invisible influence has moved and inspired him." (109). But its development is a common theme of the Epistle. Our Lord, speaking to Nicodemus, contemplates the germ and first principle of the new life. St. John, writing to those who had long received the "laver of regeneration", con-

---

107 A description of the nature of the love God has bestowed upon us is already included in some way in *potapos*. The word (class. *podapos*) originally meaning "of what country", "what kind of" (Mt. 8.27; Lk 1. 29, 7.38; II Pt. 3.11). refers rather to the nature and quality of this love, than to its greatness. Hence, it is also suitable enough to call the attention of the reader, thus carrying on with it the sense of "mysterious, amazing, unaccountable" (as Mk 13.1).

108 Cf. E. M. BOISMARD. *La Connaissance de Dieu dans l'Alliance Nouvelle, d'après la première lettre de Saint Jean*, RB 56 (1949) 374f.

109 WESTCOTT, *Gospel*, p. 51.

templates not the germ, but its fruits; he deals with the ideal new life issuing from the new birth (110).

It is really interesting to observe how often John speaks of the ethical conduct of the Christians in connection with their divine filiation (111). Indeed, in many of such instances he rather identifies divine sonship with men's moral affinity to God, so far as they imitate in some way the attributes of God. As we have already remarked, many times John stresses more emphatically the outward and moral behaviour of the Christians, as being the children of God. Their good actions show and testify that they are of God; their divine filiation is proved and tested by their works inasmuch as they are like those of God their Father.

Does this imply that the state of divine childhood is antecedent to external action, from which they come forth as from their source, or simply that childhood is in some way defined by such actions? The latter is quite possible and, as a matter of fact, some passages do not yield but this aspect of sonship (112). And even if sonship were to be considered not as simply consisting in a matter of character, but as preexisting or presupposed to any action, it might easily be explained as a moral and psychological predisposition, naturally manifesting itself by external actions. Such is the case, for example, when John speaks of the children of God and the children of the devil being known to be such by their actions, whether good or bad (113). Again, for clarity's sake, we may quote Jn 8.47: "He that is of God, heareth the words of God. Therefore, you hear them not, because you are not of God". In 47b the general rule, stated in 47a, is applied to the Jews. They do not hear the words of God just because they are not of Him, namely, ethically not like to Him but to the devil their father (v.44). Here the diabolic sonship of the Jews is antecedent to their wickedness, but in the sense of being a morally bad disposition and, consequently, the cause of their unbelief. The same thing, therefore, must be said of 47a: the reason

---

110 "The fourth Gospel refers principally to the new birth, to the shower of grace; the Epistle of St. John refers principally to the new life" — ALEXANDER, *The Epistles of John*, London, 1881, p. 328.

111 I 2.29; 3.9, 10; 4.7; 5.1, 18; III 11, etc.

112 Cf. I 3.8 (comp. Jn. 8.44): "He who sins, is of the devil". The sense is not that he sins *because* he is of the devil, but he is of the devil, because he sins and in as much as he sins.

113 I 3.10, 12; so St. Augustine: "*Dilectio ergo sola discernit inter filios Dei et filios diaboli ... Qui habent charitatem nati sunt ex Deo; qui non habent, non sunt nati ex Deo*", — *In Ep. Jo.*, Tract. V, 6, PL 35, 2015.

why they hear the words of God is because they are willing to yield to God's will, having already that moral affinity with God (114).

Of course, this is also some kind of divine sonship, but, it is not that kind of sonship which John attributes to Christians in 1. 12-13 and throughout the First Epistle. Jn 8.47a deals with those who, though being men of good will, have not yet known christian revelation (115). But christians, having received Christ by faith and having been baptised in His name, have become children of God by the direct action of God Himself, namely by having been begotten of Him. We have seen already from other Johannine passages that the divine childhood of the Christians does not merely consist in their outward likeness to God, but is an effect of the begetting of God, Who implants within them His divine "seed". Now, this inward aspect of divine childhood is to John's mind the foundation and the source of its outward aspect. Christians can perform good actions just because they are begotten of God. This seems to be the right interpretation, at least, of some passages we are about to quote. Hence, also with regard to other passages of the Epistle in which which sonship is viewed primarily in its outward aspect of likeness to God, being undoubtedly referred to the Christians, the inner aspect is not excluded but rather presupposed. Indeed, the texts in which childhood is looked at directly from the divine point of view as the source of a good Christian life are comparatively few (116). In any case, they are sufficiently suited to prove or suggest that divine childhood is considered by John as being an antecedent to good Christian behaviour — and this in a stricter sense, that is, as being really the source of good actions (117). Thus, to the Christian his morally good actions, being the effect of his generation from God, prove and testify that he is really a child of God.

We have already remarked that to John mystical inner experience can afford self-assurance of one's being a child of God or of his being begotten of God. Nor is this the only criterion. He still gives another principle or standard of judging — which may even be better

---

114 Cf. the Latin proverb "*Similis simili gaudet*".

115 Similarly, 10.16, 27; 11.52; 18.37. These passages evidently refer to those who are not yet Christians, at least, as not yet having true faith in Christ nor received Baptism. Some authors consider Baptism implicitly included in their good disposition (*votum implicitum in caritate perfecta*). In this case they may be treated as real Christians with regard to the grace of divine childhood.

116 Such as I 2.29; 3.9; 4.7; 5.1, 5, 18.

117 STEVENS, *o.c.*, p. 245: "The divine begetting is the logical *prius* of the spiritual life and of all its fruits".

and safer. It is he who practises good actions, that can rightly be said to be begotten of God (118). Certainty of being a true son of God is based on moral actions, in so far as these presuppose the intervention of a supernatural agent hidden within themselves. Those who are really the children of God show it by their way of behaving, both negatively, by keeping themselves far from sin, and positively, by embracing righteousness, especially by showing love towards their brethren (119).

2. "Whosoever is born of God, committeth not sin: for his seed abideth in him, and he cannot sin, because he is born of God" (I 3.9; cf. 5. 18; 3.6). It is not an easy task to elucidate this Johanneine passage. The Apostle does not only say that everyone who is begotten of God does not sin actually, but, even more, that he cannot sin (*ou dunatai hamartanein*). In the first hemistich, *hamartian ou poiei* denotes a state or condition or habit, rather than a simple action (120). It refers, of course, to actual sins, but what is meant thereby is the habitual state of the Christian. The difficulty in interpreting the second part of the verse is even greater, since even the possibility of sin is hereby excluded. No doubt, if some kind of impeccability is ever stated here, there can be no question of intrinsic and physical impossibility, by which the christian would be confirmed in the state of grace, having no more the fear of losing it

---

118 John proposes this rule of judging as an antidote to the false teaching of the Gnostics, who unjustly claimed to have true knowledge of God and fellowship with Him. They claimed to be sinless (1.8), but they did not observe the commandments (2.4-6; 9-11). May be, the expressions "begotten of God" or "being a child of God" like "knowing God", were used — and in the author's view misused — by those false teachers. John, therefore, emphasizes the point that only those who do righteousness and avoid sin can really claim to be begotten of God.

119 CORNELIUS a LAPIDE, *ib.*, p. 681, remarks on I 2.29: "*Nullum certius est argumentum quod quis natus sit ex Deo quam si factis et moribus Deum exprimat velut lineamentis*". Cf. BIOSMARD, *art cit.* RB 56 (1949) 383.

120 Cf. v. 8, *ho poion ten hamartian*. According to the Hebrew usage, *poion* in the present participle denotes not act, but habit; cf. the Latin "operarius iniquitatis". So MALDONATUS on Mt 13.41: "*Omnes qui iniquitatem exercent et, ut ita dicam, iniquitatis artem facitiant; magis enim habitus quam actus Hebraica phrasi significatur*".

again (121). This would not only be against sound christian doctrine and experience itself, but even against John's testimony in this very Epistle (122). St. Augustine, to solve the apparent contradiction, restricts the statement to the sin against charity, in which all others are included (123). But this interpretation proves to be unsatisfactory for the fact that John surely speaks of all sins in general.

A better and easier way of interpreting this passage would be to see in it the ideal state of the true Christian. "Following his usual custom, the writer states the truth absolutely without stating the modifications which become necessary as it is applied to individual cases in actual experience" (124). In other words John speaks in an absolute and general way. With his vivid consciousness of the characteristic quality of the christian life, John states of the Christian that "supremely and characteristically sinful he cannot be; that would be a contradiction in terms" (125). This is indeed true. But it is still to be remembered that the writer's purpose is not only to exhibit an ideal, but also to apply a test (126). If, therefore, the Christian — even a perfect and ideal Christian — does not sin, nor even can sin, he shows thereby that he is begotten of God. What the Apostle primarily aims at here is not to attribute some kind of impeccability to the Christian, but simply to state that such impeccability, where it occurs also in particular cases, testifies the fact that he, as a child of God, has within him the seed of God. Divine filiation asks for

---

121 The Protestants of the XVI and XVII Centuries made use of this passage for the purpose of defending their doctrine on the impeccability of the Christian. Cf. Conc. Trid., Sess. VI, *De iustificatione*, can. 23, Denz. 833.

122 I 1.8; 2.1; 5.16.

123 "*Est quoddam peccatum quod non potest admittere ille qui natus est e Deo; et quo non admissio solvuntur coetera, quo admissio confirman- tur coetera. Quod est hoc peccatum? Facere contra mandatum Christi, contra testamentum novum. Quod est hoc mandatum novum? Man- datum novum do vobis, ut diligatis invicem*", — In *Ep. Jo., Tract.* V. 3, PL 35, 2013.

124 BROOKE, o.c., pp. 89-90, 131; De AMBROGGI, o.c., p. 249; J. J. LIAS, *The First Epistle of St. John*, London, 1887, p. 238.

125 STEVENS, o.c., p. 13. Father P. GALTIER (*Le Chrétien impeccable: I Jean III*, 9. *Mélanges de Science Religieuse* 4 (1947) 137-154) thinks that *hamartia* is the same as *anomia* (3.4) and concludes that *hamartia* does not denote any particular sin, but points rather to a morally bad inclination. The formula "to do wickedness" means "*commettre le péché par principe et par mépris de la foi*" (ib., p. 150).

126 Cf. I 3.7ff.

a divine element in the Christian; such a divine element naturally excludes sin. The divine germ is considered as an active force, permanent in the soul and influencing all its actions. So far as this seed abides in the soul, it cannot produce wickedness: the good tree cannot yield bad fruit. So also the child of God. And the only reason is simply because (*hoti*) he is born of God and a divine seed remains in him (127).

3. Furthermore, the divine principle, immanent in the child of God, does not only keep him from sinning, but is also an inward source of supernaturally good actions. The moral character of the Christian is often designed by the expression "to do righteousness" or "to be righteous" (128), just as the Father, whose child he is, is righteous. The righteousness of the child of God is then made manifest by the acts of love towards his brethren and by acts of faith in Jesus Christ. For the practice of these virtues John assigns a common reason, namely, that the Christian is begotten of God (129). So love and faith and holiness are all of them effects and tests of the same reality (130). We may be allowed to remark again that these passages might lead to the conclusion that divine childhood consists in being holy and righteous. As a matter of fact this is not excluded. But what is really taught here is that this transformation of moral character is explicable only by a renewal of the moral nature, which is wrought directly by divine influence and which can be conceived only as the communication of a new life-principle (131).

Regarding the love of brethren, we consider it here only as a form of Christian righteousness and therefore as being a sure and sufficient mark of the child of God. This is clearly implied in 3. 10-40: love and hatred are the typical forms of righteousness and sin respectively. The pagan world reveals itself as a realm of hatred and of death. Christians, on the contrary, dwell in a realm of life, whose distinguishing mark is the love that exists among God's children. The decisive test of this divine childhood lies in their attitude to their fellow-men. However, this pericope deals rather with son-

---

127 "*C'est la cause divine qu'est rapporté tout l'effet moral*" — J. BONSIRVEN, *La Théologie des Épîtres Johanniques*, MRTh 62 (1935) 928.

128 I 2.29; 3.7.10.

129 I 2.29; 4.7; 5.1.

130 However faith, being likewise a sign of divine begetting, is not its effect, at least, in the same sense as righteousness in general.

131 "*Il ne'est pas dit qu'il devient fils de Dieu, mais seulement que la foi, l'amour, la justice du chrétien sont un signe et un effet de la génération divine dont il est l'objet*" — BONSIRVEN, art. cit., NRTh 62 (1935) 927.

ship as consisting in ethical character. There is still another passage, 4.7, which though easily admitting of the same interpretation, may somehow suggest something more. "Everyone that loveth is born of God". Love here does not seem to be the reason of the divine begetting, but its effect and its test. It is considered as having its origin in God, "charity is of God". Human love is its reflection, something of the divine nature itself. Its presence in the Christians shows that they have experienced the new birth from God and share in that higher quality, which is the very nature of God, Love, — "because God is love" (v. 8). Thus the nature of true love is manifested in those who have begun to share the very life of God, by having been begotten of Him. Indeed, the love of God is within us as a real object; and it is really this love of God, which makes us love our neighbour and God himself (132).

The righteousness of the child of God still manifests itself in his belief in Jesus Christ. "Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ, is born of God" (133). Faith, therefore, is the sign of the birth from God. Where true faith in Jesus as God's appointed messenger to men is present, there the new birth has taken place. He does not state here whether faith is the cause and condition or the result of the divine begetting. What he wishes to emphasize is the fact that, where true faith is, the new birth is a reality and has abiding and permanent consequences. The believer has been begotten of God. So his belief is a sign of his divine childhood; it brings him assurance because it affords objective testimony that he is begotten of God. Nothing is here intimated as to the logical or chronological relation of faith to the divine begetting; it is only said that everyone who believes in Jesus has been begotten of God, and is His Son. Such faith is the unfolding mark of sonship to God.

However we cannot assert of faith what is said of love — that it is the outcome and effect of divine filiation. Indeed the tenses (*pisteuon / gegennethai*) might suggest the idea that the divine begetting is here considered as the antecedent of believing. This is, in fact, also true in some sense, namely, so far as the grace of divine sonship is considered as contributing to the increase of faith. But to regard faith itself as being strictly the outcome and result of divine

---

132 Cf. I 4.16; — comp. 17.26. In the light of Rom. 5.5, "The charity of God is poured forth in our hearts, by the Holy Ghost, who is given to us", we can easily understand which is this love "which God has in us", that is, it is the Holy Ghost Himself, as even John states in I 4.13.

133 I 5.1; — comp. 2.23, 24; 4.2f., 15.

begetting (134), would be against John's testimony clearly stated in Jn 1. 12. Here faith in the Word Incarnate is the *conditio sine qua non* of the divine childhood on the part of man, as the act of begetting is its condition on the part of God. Faith is, then, in this sense, the foundation and root of filiation (135). We must, however, be careful not to interpret the act of faith as being a mere condition preceding one's becoming a child of God, as if the latter were the next step after faith. On the contrary, the complete coordination of receiving Christ (believing in Christ) and being begotten of God shows that they are two inseparable aspects of the same event or process. Thus, as man by being begotten of God becomes a child of God, so by receiving Christ by a true and active faith he is already and *ipso facto* a child of God (136). Similarly, in I 5.1, parallel to Jn 1. 12, to believe and to be born of God form one kindred and inseparable idea (137). A slight difference, however, still exists in that here faith is simply viewed as a test and a sign of the divine begetting — which is a natural consequence of the very fact that the ideas of faith and divine begetting are inseparable from each other.

Therefore, the righteousness of the Christians — showing itself in love towards the brethren as well as in faith in Jesus — is the test of their being begotten of God. But, while love is the test of filiation as its consequence and effect, faith is its test as its condition and as a reality necessarily connected with it (138).

- 134 So. R. LAW, *o.c.*, p. 270: "Belief is the outcome; therefore the test of life. The truth is not that our abiding in God and God's abiding in us are the result of our belief in Christ, but conversely, that the confession is the result of the abiding".
- 135 Such as the Council of Trent teaches, *Sess. VI, De iustificatione*, cap. 6, Denz. 798; cap. 8, Denz. 801.
- 136 The doctrine of Baptism in connection with divine begetting (3.5) is not against this interpretation, since where true faith is, there is also, as they say, the implicit desire of Baptism. Of course, there is no question here of the old Protestants' "saving faith". John always views faith in connection with love and, consequently, it implies the life of grace. Cf. BONSIRVEN, *Epîtres*, p. 234 and AUGUSTINO-VIC, *o.c.*, p. 82f.
- 137 "How closely the divine begetting from God and faith — the divine and human factors in salvation — are coordinated by John is apparent from the parallelism of this verse (I 5.4), where to the statement that what is born of God overcomes the world, he adds that faith is the power that overcomes the world" — STEVENS, *o.c.*, p. 245f.
- 138 J. CHAINE, *Les Epîtres Catholiques*, Paris, 1939, p. 188; BOISMARD, *art. cit.*, RB56 (1949) 472.

We may add a word about the tenses of the verb *gennethenai* as used in connection with this last view of divine childhood manifesting itself in righteousness. The fact that, wherever it occurs, it is always in the perfect, thereby considered as a past event, might be, in some sense, a confirmation of what we have said of the divine begetting as an antecedent to a morally good conduct. In the Gospel the aorist prevails, though also the perfect is used (139), in the Epistle the divine begetting is always referred to in the perfect tense (140). An important difference is stated between the fact of the birth (aorist) and the state which follows as the abiding result of the begetting (perfect). The perfect denotes at once the past completion of the action and its abiding results (141). "Is begotten" is a good translation, yet "has been begotten" would be less ambiguous making it clear that divine begetting is the antecedent, not the accompaniment or consequence, of the action associated with the sentence. The tenses, therefore, suggest in each case the divine begetting as the necessary antecedent to human activity.

Thus one's embracing righteousness — loving and believing — and the keeping oneself far from sin are considered as the result and the proof of an active principle already imparted by a divine begetting, not as the condition or the means of its attainment. It is not because we embrace righteousness, that we are the children of God. On the contrary, if we believe and love, it is because we have already received within us the divine life principle, the *sperma Theou*, which is radically incapable of producing effects contrary to its nature.

4. Brotherly love is still looked at by John from another point of view. The Christian must love his fellow-christian just because he is his own brother, being like him begotten of God and the child of God. The general rule is clearly stated in I 5.1: "Every one that loveth him who begot, loveth him also who is born of him". The child's love for its parent naturally carries with it love for his

139 Aorist: 1.13; 3.3, 5, 7; perfect: 3.4bis, 8.

140 I 2.29; 3.9bis; 4.7; 5.1bis, 4.18. — On I 5.18 WESTCOTT, *Gospel*, p. 50, remarks: "The true interpretation depends upon the contrast between the one historic Son of God (*ho gennethês*, opposed to the evil one) and the sons of God, who live in virtue of their new birth (*ho gegenneménos*)".

141 Cf. E. RAGON, *Grammaire Grecque*, 18me ed., Paris, 1911, p. 162: "Le parfait indique proprement l'état qui résulte actuellement d'un fait passé". See also ZERWICK, *o.c.*, n. 209. Hence it may easily be taken as having the same meaning of a present, such as Jn 11.27; 20.29; 16.27; Lk 20.6.

brothers and sisters (142). So when, or as soon as, we love God, we love also the children of God, in accordance with the law that love for him who begets has, as its necessary consequence, love for those whom he has begotten (143). Thus the duty of loving the brethren is deduced from the natural law of affection. It is indeed unnatural to love the Father, the Begetter, and not to love also in the meantime His children, begotten of Him. John draws the analogy from family life, thus indicating the deep reason of our love for the brethren, that is because in the begotten there is something which comes from the Father and which belongs to the Father. As in family life the children love one another because they are sons of the same father, having all received from him the same nature, so in the family of the children of God, fraternal love is based on the fact that they all have within themselves the life-giving seed of the same divine Father (144).

5. Still in connection with the state of divine childhood, John infers other consequences regarding the attitude of the children of God both towards the world and towards the Father.

The world, viewed by St. John in his usual contemptuous way, does not know us because it knew not Him (I 8.1). The relative pronoun *auton*, though much nearer to "the Father", on account of the verb in the past tense (*egno*) must be referred to Christ. The thought that by the exceeding love of the Father, we are children of God recalls to John's mind Jesus Christ, the natural Son of God. The world did not know Jesus, even "his own received him not" (I. 11), they rejected Him and despised Him. We, too, are in an analogous position, being the children of God. If the world did not recognise Him, who is the natural Son of God, there is no

142 BROOKE, *o.c.*, p. 127f. interprets I 5.1 as referring literally to natural family life, thus stating a rule, the application of which to God and to the faithful is understood. The context, however, shows rather that the words *gennesanta* and *gegennemenon* refer directly, and literally to God and to the faithful. It is likewise against the context to refer *tôn gegennemenon* to Christ, as St. Augustine does, *In Ep. Jo., Tract. X. 2*, PL 35,2055.

143 So B. WEISS, *Die drei Briefe des Apostel Johannes*, Göttingen, 1899, p. 135.

144 The same thought is also easily suggested by the expression "to love the children of God" in the following verse: *Ta tekna tou Theou*, instead of the expected *tous adelphous*, puts stress on the idea of filiation as the reason why they must love the brethren. Such passages as I 4.20-21; 4.11-12 contain also the same idea. Cf. Bonsirven's remark on I 4.11 (*Epîtres*, p. 232).

wonder if it does not know us and despises us. The world rejected Christ, because it refused to see in Him the Father, whose Son He is. For the same reason, the world despises also the children of God, having refused to know the Father Who begot them and His true Son Jesus Christ (145). Yet, our being God's children is not a matter of opinion, dependent on the world's vote, but a matter of fact, flowing from the amazing kind of love which the Father has bestowed upon us.

Hence, notwithstanding this antagonism between the world and the children of God, the latter, in virtue of their divine begetting, gain victory over the world and its followers. "Whatsoever is born of God, overcometh the world" (5.4). Victory over the world is due to the divine begetting. Everyone who is born of God has within himself a power strong enough to overcome the resistance of all the powers of the world. It is the "seed" of the divine begetting, which gives us strength to conquer our enemies (16. 33). As Jesus, the Son of God, scored victory over the world (146), so whosoever becomes a child of God shares also in His victory in a permanent and habitual way (147). Again, in 4.4, the children of God are said to gain victory over false prophets. Yet, it is not by their own power that they triumph. It is because they are "of God" and, consequently, they have God living and acting in them. God is greater and stronger than the adversary. This is, of course, obvious by itself. But John puts it down just to show that it is by the very power of Him who abides within them that they gain the victory (148).

6. With regard to the Father, who begets them, Christians must show a true filial attitude. This naturally implies that they would have deep confidence in Him and that they love Him without being afraid of Him. "Fear is not in charity: but perfect charity casteth out fear" (4. 18). Evidently John deals here with perfect filial love as distinguished from the so called servile love.

145 16.3, "And these things will they do to you; because they have not known the Father, nor me".

146 The present, *nika*, denotes permanent victory. The neuter *pan to gegennomenon*, undoubtedly for the masculine as in Jn 6.36, 39; 17. 2,24, may rightly be regarded as putting some stress on the power of the divine begetting. "The statement is made in its most abstract form, which emphasizes the power of the new birth, rather than its possession by each individual" — BROOKE, *ib.*, p. 130.

147 "*Il possède en sa nature de régénéré, dans la semence de Dieu, qui est en lui, la force de repousser les assauts des ennemis de Dieu*" — BONSIRVEN, *Epîtres*, p. 252.

148 Hence St. Augustine rightly concludes: "*Noli te extollere, vide qui in te vincit*" — *In Ep. Jo. Tract.* VII, 2, PL 35, 2030.

Christians are not slaves who serve their Lord for fear of punishment. They are the children of God: so they love Him and serve Him as their Father and because He is their Father, not because they are afraid of being punished by Him. But this perfect love towards the Father is based on the state of their divine childhood.

Filial love then reaches its highest point of perfection when the children of God show an unlimited trust in their Father (4, 17). Even the thought of the terrible Day of Judgement must not deter them. Being the children of God, they must have confidential approach to Him as to their real Father.

Indeed, it is not said clearly and explicitly in these passages (4, 17-18) that the reason of their perfect love to the Father and of their absolute trust in Him is because they are begotten of Him and are His children. But this is naturally included in the highest degree of love as dealt with here, which is indeed that kind of love practised by children. It is then implied in the assertion: "Because as he is, we also are in this world". The reason indicated is the fact that we are like Him. *Ekeinos* evidently refers to Christ, Who will appear as Judge on the Day of Judgement (I 2.28). We are therefore like to Jesus Christ: As He is, so also we are. Our state of being is analogous to that of Jesus, the only difference being that He is in heaven and we are still in this world (149). Our likeness to Him consists, no doubt, in being holy and loving the Father like Him. But, this is not all that our likeness to Christ, the natural Son of God, implies. Assimilation to the Son of God carries also with it our real participation in His divine Sonship (150). The Johannine thought included in this passage may thus be reproduced by a paraphrase: "Our love towards God is really made perfect by our absolute confidence in Christ on the Day of Judgement; and we must have this perfect love and confidence, because, as he is the Son of God, so also we are the children of God".

FR. DONATUS, O.F.M. Cap.

(to be continued)

---

149 Our likeness to Christ is not because we are in this world as He was in this world. If so, no confidence could ever follow thereby. Moreover, the verb *estin* points to the present state of Jesus. Oecumenius indicates the holiness of Christ's conduct in this world and explains the present tense with reference to Christ as being *kata antichronion* (*Comm. in Ep. S. Jo.*, PG 119, 669). But, it should be said that the comparison is simply based on the radical meaning of the verb *einai*, which indicates a state; *en to kosmo touto* refers only to men, who are still in this world, and not to Christ.

150 The same idea is also implied, though in a different way, in I 2.28 "Abide in him, and when he shall appear, we may have confidence".