"If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also" (Mt 5:39). How many times have we not read or heard this simple sentence of the Sermon on the Mount? However, who among us can boast that he or she has ever put into practice this precept of Jesus? And this is only one example among so many other demands of the Sermon on the Mount which have hardly penetrated our lives. Moreover, if we look around us, we notice that in fact very few Christians really seem to practice the ethics recommended by Jesus in this famous Sermon on the Mount. Hence the question: is this ethics actually feasible?

In this study I will first survey a certain number of inadequate answers to that question. Then in a second part I will propose a tentative answer which hopefully will prove more satisfactory. Finally, in a third part I will very briefly return to the question of the feasibility of Jesus' demands in our Christian behavior today.

I. INADEQUATE ANSWERS

A. ABSOLUTE NEGATION

For a lot of people the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount is unworkable. Not only is it objectively unworkable but, some of them will add, Jesus actually never had the intention of giving us concrete instructions which we could implement in our world today. This is a global stand which characterizes a whole gallery of authors. These, however, have differing points of view and,
in order to do them justice, it is necessary to specify their points of view more accurately. I will attempt to do just that presently, and as I go along I will point out the limits and weaknesses of these points of view.

1. FUTURIST ETHICS

A first group of authors believe that the ethical demands of Jesus have never been formulated in order that they be lived out in this world of ours. These demands form an "ethics of the Kingdom of God," in the sense that they will be put into practice only when the Kingdom will have definitely arrived. In this connection H. J. Schoeps, one of the proponents of this thesis, writes that in his beatitudes and antitheses Jesus only meant to describe clearly the essence of the future aeon. For then "man will stand as a new being before God, will have a new heart and will be able properly to do the pure will of God as it is interpreted by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount... When the kingdom comes, this aeon will cease, and with it the Jewish law will cease being transgressed."¹ According to this author, therefore, Jesus did not formulate any ethics whatever to the crowd of his listeners (except perhaps a call to conversion and faith), and was content with presenting a picture of the holiness and happiness which were to characterize the future Kingdom.

Unfortunately, this benevolent exegesis cannot be defended, for obviously the maxims and demands of Jesus presuppose in reality the living conditions of this world. For example, the indissolubility of marriage (Mt 5:31-32) as required by Jesus will not be applicable in the world to come, because then "they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven" (Mk 12:25). In the future world, likewise, there will be no more litigations and trials, no more offences to forgive, no more occasions to misuse oaths, no more almsgiving (for there will be no more poor), no more worry about one's subsistence,

etc. In general, the imperative commandments will then have no more meaning because, in the words of Maurice Goguel, "those who will be admitted into the Kingdom will know . . . the will of God and will fulfill it without any effort." In those conditions we no longer see what many precepts of Jesus have to do with lawsuits, almsgiving, etc. (Mt 5:40; 5:23-26; 5:33-37; 6:1-4; 6:25-34; etc.), if he has in mind the living conditions of the perfect future world. Besides, the demands of Jesus not only do not presuppose that we would already have entered the Kingdom, but also are presented as *conditions of entrance* into that Kingdom (Mt 5:20; 7:13.19.21.22-23). We must *first* fulfill those conditions *before* being given access to the kingdom.

2. IMPOSSIBLE PRECEPT

There is a second way of denying the feasibility of the moral requirements of the Sermon on the Mount. It is often found expressed within Lutheran orthodoxy, and is called the "theory of the impossible precept" (in German: *Unerfüllbarkeitstheorie*, or literally "unfulfillability-theory"). In the past centuries it has played an important role and, even nowadays, still retains many supporters (K. Barth, C. Strange, E. Thurneysen, G. Kittel, etc.). This second view of the Sermon on the Mount says: when we read the extreme demands of Jesus (v.g. on anger, chastity, veracity, love of enemies), we realize that no one can live out such demands; now Jesus, who knew this, sees his demands exactly like Paul saw the Law — something which awakens the consciousness of sin, provokes transgression, reveals our impotence and, by bringing us to despair of ourselves, prepares us to receive God's saving grace as an undeserved gift. In short, the Sermon on the Mount is "designed to hold up a mirror to our sins, so as to lead us in this way to him who alone as our representative has fulfilled for us the righteousness demanded

3. According to H.-D. Wendland, *Ethik des Neuen Testaments* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1970) 17, however, this view of Lutheran orthodoxy "should not be simply assimilated with Luther's personal interpretation." Further on (pp. 20-22) this author presents the position of Luther himself. To the best of my knowledge, however, no other scholar has ever proposed such a distinction.
by God."⁴ In a caricature of this interpretation of the Christian ethical demands, Nietzsche writes that these are intentionally exaggerated "so that man may not fulfill them; they are not meant to make him more moral, but to make him feel as sinful as possible."⁵

This rather extreme position has been strongly opposed by several authors, notably by H. Windisch,⁶ who in the words of R. Schnackenburg "eloquently reminds the exegetes of their obligation to interpret the Sermon on the Mount not in terms of Paul, but in terms of its own content. Neither Matthew (Chapters 5-7) nor Luke (6:20-49) contain anything to the effect that man is incapable of obeying the law." Anyone who, Schnackenburg concludes, reads the Sermon "without preconceived notions will have to admit that Jesus did indeed intend that his demands ought to be met."⁷

True, the Sermon does seem to include demands impossible to fulfill, at least at first sight — and this is no doubt the element of truth that the "theory of the impossible precept" was able to discern. One has only to think of these verses: "If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away . . . if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away" (Mt 5:29-30). But expressions such as these, used as they are by a popular Oriental preacher, must not mislead us: we are dealing here with the hyperboles proper to Oriental oratory. Is not the metaphor of the speck and the log (Mt 7:4-5) merely the literary garb of that type of figure of speech called "paradox"? We can hardly base ourselves on these stylistic details to conclude that Jesus wants to lay on us impossible demands.

On the contrary, Jesus really seems to expect that his disciples will implement his instructions. Several times he appeals to the freedom of his listeners. The conclusion of the Sermon emphasizes this very clearly through its four metaphors of the narrow

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⁵ Cf. F. Nietzsche, Humain, trop humain (Paris: Gallimard, 1968) 117. This is my translation from the French translation.
and wide door, the sound tree and the bad tree, the people receiving their sentence at the last judgement, and the two houses built one upon the rock and the other upon the sand (Mt 7:13-27). When the storm of the judgement will be unleashed on the world, the only person to hold out against perdition will be the one "who hears these words of mine and does them." Whoever wants to become a disciple of Jesus must, therefore, apply to himself or herself the demands of Jesus: they are conditions of entrance into the Kingdom. Consequently, we must reject the "theory of the impossible precept": it is a Paulinizing exegesis, that is, a tendentious way of interpreting Jesus through Paul, instead of vice-versa.\(^8\)

3. SIGN OF ABSOLUTE DEMAND

Always in this line of thought which maintains that the moral requirements of the Sermon on the Mount are not meant to be put into practice, Rudolf Bultmann believes that Jesus does not intend laying on his disciples any demand having a definite content, but aims only at awakening them to God's radical summons in the "here and now" of concrete existence. He writes: "What God's will is, is not stated by an external authority, so that the content of the command is a matter of indifference, but man is trusted and expected to see for himself what God commands."\(^9\)

This interpretation of Bultmann can hardly be correct, for Jesus claims the role of revealer of the divine will. And this he does by means of authoritative declarations: "And I say to you . . . ." It is through precise commandments that he expresses this divine will, as for example in the six antitheses of Mt 5:21-48. True, in each individual's life situation this divine will which addresses the individual provokes him or her to very specific decisions, which are never perfectly identical with those of the neighbor;

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8. In this section I have followed very closely Joachim Jeremias' refutation of the "theory of the impossible precept" as we find it in his The Sermon on the Mount, Biblical Series no. 2, Facet Books (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963) 7-9.

and God's will concretely expresses itself only in a unique and unrepeatable situation. In this connection Bultmann is quite right in insisting on the idea that God's will reaches a person only in a quite specific situation. But this, however particularized it might be, does not take indifferently any direction. It always formulates itself in the direction indicated by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, namely in the direction of interiority, gratuity, forgiveness of offences, meekness, generosity. We have here a "categorial" content which is far from being undifferentiated and which we must not lose sight of when God's personal summons is heard in our lives. And it is this specific categorial content that Jesus means to formulate authoritatively in God's name. Besides, according to the testimony of the apostolic Fathers of the second century, the Church of the first Christian generations has always maintained that the demands of Jesus, in the words of R. Schnackenburg, "exceed the Law and the Old Testament in content as well, and that they are binding in their concrete content." ¹⁰

B. RELATIVE NEGATION

Up till now we have heard a certain number of authors state that, in the intention of Jesus, the moral demands of the Sermon on the Mount were not at all meant to be implemented, that they had been formulated with an entirely different aim (describe the future aeon, awake the awareness of the need for salvation, place human beings before God's radical summons to a decision, etc.) and that in consequence we should not expect to be able to implement them. These various positions have the common characteristic of being, as it were, a priori and absolute.

A second line of thought adopts a point of view which is rather relative-experimental and a posteriori. According to this different perspective, the demands of Jesus are not absolutely impracticable, even though they are so to a large extent. And here various explanations (which represent as many different schools of thought) are offered to justify this mitigated opinion.

¹⁰ Cf. Schnackenburg, Christian Existence, 1:138. I owe much to this author as to the development and the formulations of the views expressed in this study.
1. ELITISM

In the judgement of a first group of thinkers the injunctions of Jesus cannot be put into practice by all, because they are too demanding and sublime. They are addressed, in short, to a handful of truly spiritual individuals, to an elite of "perfect" Christians. Such is, for instance, the opinion of J. Klausner, one of the most eminent representatives of contemporary Judaism. In his book on Jesus he writes: "Judaism also knows the ideal of love for the enemy . . . but Judaism never emphasized it to such a degree that it ultimately became too high an ideal for ordinary mankind, and even too high for the man of more than average moral calibre. ( . . .) When these extreme ethical standards are . . . taught as religious rules, while, at the same time, everyday life is conducted along completely different lines . . . it is inevitable that such ethical standards can make their appeal only to priests and recluses and the more spiritually minded individuals, whose only interest is religion; while the rest of mankind all pursue a manner of life that is wholly secular and even pagan." 11

Here let us note in passing that many Protestant exegetes (v.g. H.-D. Wendland, 12 A. M. Hunter, 13 etc.) classify under the rubric of "elitism" the traditional Catholic interpretation with its distinction between precepts and counsels, and its two-tier or two-class ethics: the "perfect" or those who "make profession of aiming at perfection," and on the other hand the "ordinary Christians" or the "simple faithful." We have to admit that these Protestant authors are merely describing with objectivity what we find formulated by many a Church Father (v.g. Chrysostom, Bonaventure) and many a theologian. Fortunately, the Second Vatican Council has corrected this mistake, reminding us that we are all called to the same (unlimited) degree of holiness.

However, be that as it may, we now have to face the question

12. Cf. Wendland, Ethik, 17. This author, however, admits that this traditional Catholic position has ceased to be maintained since the Second Vatican Council.
raised by the proponents of elitism. Is it true that, in formulating his radical demands, Jesus was aiming only at a more generous elite and not at the person of “average moral calibre”?

Certainly nothing in the words of Jesus suggests any distinction of the sort. On the contrary, by its entire context the Sermon truly seems addressed to the crowd, which is mentioned at the beginning (Mt 5:1) and at the end (7:28) of the Sermon. No doubt Jesus’ words are aimed primarily at the disciples, that is, at those who have already opted to follow him at the time of the proclamation of the Beatitudes (“You are the salt of the earth . . . You are the light of the world” — Mt 5:13-14), but he is also addressing all those who are not yet disciples; otherwise, why would he be delivering this speech in public instead of before the limited group of his disciples, as he often did on other occasions?

Moreover, according to Mt 7:21-27 the entrance itself into the Kingdom of heaven depends on the implementation of the words of Jesus. To suppose, then, that not all are called to fulfill this condition for entrance, namely to put into practice the demands of Jesus, amounts to the claim that not all are called to enter

14. “This mention of the crowds, repeated at the end of the discourse as an inclusion (5:1 and 7:28) discreetly underlines the universal scope of the message and teaching of Jesus who, Matthew tells us, healed ‘every disease and every infirmity among the people’ (4:23). The cosmic vocabulary of the discourse — and not only any more the geographical vocabulary as in chapters 3 and 4 — further emphasizes this universal scope of the words of Jesus” (cf. J. Radermakers, Au fil de l'évangile selon saint Matthieu [Bruxelles: Institut d'Etudes Théologiques, 1972] 79. My translation). In a footnote the author indicates what cosmic terms he is referring to: earth (5:4.13.18.35; 6:10.19); heaven (5:18.34; 6:10.20.26), world (5:14), light (5:14.16; 6:23), darkness (6:23), sun and rain (5:45), etc.

15. If a distinction can be made between these two groups, it is not on the basis of the greater or lesser practicability of the demands of Jesus: nothing in the text allows us to think that Jesus addressed some demands to the disciples and some other demands to the crowd. All seem called to the same requirements, just as all seem called to become disciples. But the fact remains that, at the time when Jesus begins to speak, not all as yet have opted to join the circle of his disciples. It is only in this sense that the demands of Jesus are not addressed directly and immediately to the crowd of non-disciples. But they are addressed to them inasmuch as they are potential disciples. And, in this respect, no gradual implementation is contemplated: any listener of Jesus is called to become a disciple, and any disciple is requested to “be perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt 5:48).
the Kingdom. But the whole Gospel contradicts this idea. No
doubt Jesus is aware that, as a matter of fact, not all will accept
his demands (cf. Mt 7:14 about the narrow door), but that will
not be from lack of a call on his part.

2. INNER DISPOSITION

In this same perspective of a relative negation of the applicability
of the demands of Jesus, another approach has been attempted.
At the end of the last century Wilhelm Hermann\(^{16}\) was seeing
in the Sermon a Gesinnungsethik, an ethics of disposition, of
frame of mind, an "ethics of feeling."\(^{17}\) For Hermann, as well
as for O. Baumgarten,\(^{18}\) M. Dibelius,\(^{19}\) etc., the demands of Jesus
are dependent on their times and cannot be harmonized with
the present culture. Their value comes from the fact that they
present a saturation of the heart, a very noble attitude of the
mind, and that they orient our intentions toward a pure and lofty
morality. Jesus was not legal-minded, they say, and was far more
interested in what people must be than in what people can do.
The commands of Jesus are not real commands. In the words
of Henri Bergson, "the purpose of these maxims . . . is to create
a state of mind."\(^{20}\) In this perspective the demands of Jesus are
only the relative expression of an interior morality which, in the
concrete situation of today's Christian, could just as well express
itself differently.

Let it be granted right away that this approach contains a large
amount of truth. For it is true that the Sermon on the Mount
aims at producing a change of mentality, at creating primarily
an inner attitude of right intention, of disinterestedness, of

16. Cf. Hunter, Design, 101-2. This author summarizes thus Hermann's inter-
pretation: "Accordingly we should see in the precepts of the Sermon illustrations
of a new set of the mind and will, i.e. of the disposition based on the
consciousness that God the Father is the supreme reality and love the highest
good" (p. 102).
17. In reality, as Wendland (Ethik, 18) remarks: "This interpretation originates
from Kant and idealist philosophy; it was defended by the liberal theologians
of the nineteenth and twentieth century." My translation.
18. Cf. O. Baumgarten, Bergpredigt und Kultur der Gegenwart (Tübingen, 1921).
20. Cf. H. Bergson, Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion (16e éd.;
Paris: Alcan, 1934) 57.
sensitivity, of conciliation, etc. However, as Bornkamm writes, "this antithesis between frame of mind and deed is unquestionably a wrong way out of the difficulties into which the Sermon on the Mount leads us." 21

In reality, to what would correspond an interior attitude which would not express itself in concrete actions? The final parable teaches the absolute necessity of doing: if Jesus gives instructions aimed at definite actions, this is undoubtedly because he requires that our being express itself in a concrete doing: "Whoever hears these words of mine and does them . . ." (Mt 7:24). "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 7:21). Besides, if Jesus means to bring the law of Moses to its perfection and not to abolish it (Mt 5:17), he cannot do this by being less demanding than Moses; now the demands of Moses had an obligatory character of law affecting one's concrete behavior, and they have always been understood as such in Judaism. Consequently, the demands of Jesus, too, must have the obligatory character of a law affecting one's concrete behavior.

3. INTERIM ETHICS

Before concluding our survey of the various currents of thought which reduce the practical scope of the demands of Jesus, let us consider briefly the "eschatological" school. The latter sees in the Sermon on the Mount an "ethics of the interval" (Interimsethik) or "temporary ethics" or "ethics of transition." Such an interpretation was developed at the end of the last century, mostly by two prominent scholars: Johannes Weiss 22 and Albert Schweitzer. 23 In reality, these men were protesting against the rationalistic-humanistic understanding of the Gospel which was widespread at that time with its naive faith in scientific and technological "progress" viewed as solving all human problems as it proceeded along an unbroken line of continuing development. In this connection many Protestants, then, saw the

message of Jesus as an ethics of civilization (*Kulturprotestantismus*). The eschatological interpretation of the gospels was a vigorous rejection of such a view.

This is how James Wood describes this eschatological interpretation: "According to this view the Sermon is to be understood in the light of what Jesus and his followers believed about the imminent end of the ordinary, everyday world. The end was so near, that the wise thing to do was to prepare for it. The world with all its allures ought to be rejected. Men were to gird their loins and to make strenuous efforts to live up to the claims of the Sermon." These claims were actually, as J. Jeremias writes, "exceptional laws, laws valid only for the time of crisis. It is, so to speak, a form of martial law declared in the last decisive phase of a total war. (...) All these are heroic commands, valid only for the short period before the End in which unheard-of sacrifices must be made."24

Here again — we must emphasize this — this line of thought contains a large amount of truth, for indeed the coming of Jesus among us is in a sense God’s ultimate offer of salvation, the last delay given us before the final judgement. And so, the ethics of interim is right in claiming that Jesus undoubtedly wanted people to live at the same lofty moral level that they should be living in the eventuality of an imminent end of the world.

However, after having said this, we must also point out the flaws of the eschatological interpretation. And these amount to a serious distortion of the Sermon on the Mount. For indeed, the latter does not reflect any violent tension in face of the supreme catastrophe. Moreover, it is never the apocalyptic end of the world which motivates the ethical demands of Jesus: love of neighbor and enemy, purity, faithfulness and truthfulness, all these are merely the will of God. But once does Jesus appeal to the end of the world to justify ethical behavior. Thus, he orders his disciples to be perfect, not because “the time is short,” but because God their Father is himself perfect. Likewise, he urges them not to amass treasures on earth, not because the last trumpet is about to be heard, but because “where your treasure

is, there will your heart be also."

True, the ethics of Jesus is an "ethics of transition" in that it constitutes the model of Christian life during the interval of time between the coming of the Kingdom in his historical person and the final consummation when God will complete the salvation begun by Christ. But it is so far from being a "temporary ethics" in the sense that the eschatological school understood it, that even when the expectation of an imminent Parousia weakened, the primitive Church always maintained the demands of Jesus with the same strictness in the subsequent generations.26

C. ABSOLUTE-LITERAL AFFIRMATION

In an altogether different perspective, we encounter a line of thought which represents the exact opposite of all the opinions we have examined until now. For indeed, in the course of history there has been no lack of attempts to interpret and implement the teachings of Jesus literally. This was often prompted by attacks launched by social reformers against Christians who failed to live out the Gospel. Thus K. Marx writes at one point: "Does not every minute of your ordinary life give the lie to your theories? Do you consider it wrong to go to court when you have been wronged? But the Apostle says that it is wrong. Do you offer the right cheek when someone smites you on the left, or do you not follow it up with legal action for bodily injury? But the Gospels forbid it . . . Does not the major part of your trials and civil laws deal with property? But it has been said to you that your treasures are not of this world."27

In answer to criticisms of this kind, many socially-minded admirers of Jesus have sought in his teachings (particularly in his commandment to love the enemy and to forego retaliation — Mt 5:38-48; Lk 6:27-30) the inspiration for radical pacifism, for example, or even the abolition of private property, of State laws, of military service, of oaths even in courtrooms, of police

26. In these last paragraphs I have borrowed heavily from Hunter’s Design, 101.
enforcement, of penal institutions — in short, the inspiration for
the blueprint of an ideal society of love and peace. Prominent
among the defenders of this radical literalism in their interprer-
tation of the Sermon are Leon Tolstoi,\textsuperscript{28} who advocated a
complete social program based exclusively on the Sermon on
the Mount, and the various "socialist" interpreters K. Kautsky,\textsuperscript{29}
M. Maurenbrecher, L. Ragaz,\textsuperscript{30} and others.

Let us at least grant to the line of thought just described the
merit of witnessing to this truth that, if Jesus gave command-
ments, it was so that we might obey them. In this respect we
could characterize the views of Tolstoi and of those who share
these views as being those of an ethics in love with the absolute,
resolved to attempt a sincere effort to bring the ethics of Jesus
to produce all its fruits. And, in this, we can only applaud such
an attempt.

However, when the programs and revolutionary dreams of a
certain anarchic illuminism are placed under the banner of Jesus,
we cannot but feel somewhat uneasy. Is it really enough to sweep
away the old society, for love to triumph? Is it enough to abolish
the State, the police, the army and the laws, for justice and
perfection to emerge in the ultimate reign of love?

Furthermore, let us remind ourselves that, on the other hand,
everything we know about the teaching and the behavior of Jesus
shows him to be, not a revolutionary idealist, but on the contrary
a realist who did not want to intervene directly in the economic
and social conditions of his time (v.g. Lk 12:13-15 on his refusal
to arbitrate the division of an inheritance; Mt 22:15-22 on the
tribute to Caesar, etc.). Jesus was in no way a "revolutionary"
in the political sense of the term. His direct and immediate action
was aimed at changing the human heart, at converting it, at
turning it away from selfishness, violence, hypocrisy, lie and

\textsuperscript{28} Cf. H. Weinel, \textit{Jesus im neunzehnten Jahrhundert} (3 Aufl., Tübingen, 1914)
250-59; J. Ackermann, \textit{Tolstoj und das Neue Testament} (Leipzig, 1927); K.
Hamburger, \textit{Leo Tolstoj. Gestalt und Problem} (München, 1950); Nicolas Weisbein,
\textit{L’Évolution religieuse de Tolstoi} (Paris: Librairie des cinq continents, 1960) 224-
25 and 446-51.

\textsuperscript{29} K. Kautsky gave the title "Concerning the Rebellion of Jesus" to the
chapter on Jesus in his book about the origins of Christianity, \textit{Ursprung des
Christentums} (14 Aufl., 1926) 384-90.

\textsuperscript{30} Cf. L. Ragaz, \textit{Die Bergpredigt} (Bern, 1945).
hatred. And this conversion of the human heart, whenever it took place in the course of history, has actually had tremendous repercussions on all social institutions. 31

II. PROPOSED THEORETICAL ANSWER

There remains a last line of interpretation, the one which I consider the most faithful to the thought of Jesus. How could I characterize it? If I had called the preceding opinion simply an "absolute affirmation" of the moral demands of the Sermon on the Mount, I would find myself forced to call this one a merely "relative" affirmation. If such an expression, well understood, is acceptable, nevertheless it is in a sense very ambiguous. To accept "relatively" the ethics of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, would that not be equivalent to making a choice among his demands, to following Jesus "up to a certain point" and not any further? But, then, would we still be faithful to the precept "be perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect"? And so, the term "relative" is too equivocal to be of much use here. We must firmly maintain that Jesus requires an absolute acceptance of his demands. None of his statements allows for less than that. Yet, as we already saw and as we will see better in a moment, a literal acceptance of his teaching leads to behaviors in contradiction with the behavior of Jesus himself. The only solution is to combine these two positions: absolute fidelity and at the same time non-literal fidelity. It is this double characteristic which, under the influence of certain remarks of Dodd who speaks of the "quality" and "direction" of the moral precepts of Jesus, 32 I shall condense in the expression "absolute-intentional affirmation." The following considerations will attempt to clarify the meaning of this expression.

Thus we will see in the first place that the demands of Jesus are to be put into practice absolutely in terms of their fundamental orientation (of their "direction"). It is in this sense that the answer proposed here to the question, "are the ethical


demands of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount practicable?" is an absolute affirmative. Then we will complete this first statement by showing that the categorial (= concrete) content of these demands has to be interpreted (situated, lived out) according to the real intention of Jesus. And it is in this sense that the answer here proposed is an "absolute-intentional affirmation."

A. ABSOLUTE AFFIRMATION

The ethical demands of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount are not only practicable, but they must actually be implemented in respect to their fundamental orientation. Several of the objections made earlier to those who denied the feasibility of the demands of Jesus should be taken up here under the form of positive arguments. I will content myself with stating them briefly.

1. The section of Matthew's gospel which contains the Sermon on the Mount begins this way: "Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them" (Mt 5:1-2). Commentators have not failed to point out the solemnity of this exordium. The mention of the mountain seems to suggest a reminder of the gift of the Law on mount Sinai: according to the Yahwist tradition, "Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up" the mountain of the Lord (Ex 24:9). Moreover, "the fact that Jesus was seated while teaching recalls the attitude of the rabbi interpreting Scripture for his disciples, whereas the Greek rhetor spoke standing."33 Finally, Matthew specifies that Jesus "opened his mouth and taught." This, in the words of Pierre Bonnard, "is a traditional formula highlighting the importance of what will follow (Dn 10:16; Jb 3:1; 33:2; etc.)."34

But there is more. In an often-quoted article about the Beatitudes, Yves Trémel analyzes the Matthean comment following the discourse: "The crowds were astonished at his teaching,

for he taught them as one who has authority, and not as their scribes” (Mt 7:28-29). Trémel finds in this remark an added emphasis on the solemnity of the discourse. He writes: “The crowds are astonished, therefore, by the fact that Jesus teaches as a real master, one who wields authority, whereas they know very well that he does not hold the title. Anyhow . . . the listeners of Jesus admire his teaching as well as his authority, comparing him to the doctors of his time. And so, Jesus is a master, and more than a master. He is qualified to interpret the Law, and that is precisely what we are dealing with in the present Sermon.”

Already, therefore, the solemn tone of the introduction and the remarkable finale of the Sermon invite us to see in it an authoritative teaching, in which the moral demands being taught will doubtless have a strongly marked obligatory character.

2. This feature is even more explicit in the section of the antitheses in which Jesus begins to describe the “superior justice” of the Kingdom of God (Mt 5:21-48). As Hunter points out: “Six times he quotes the provision of the old Law. Six times with a sovereign ‘But I say to you’ he sets over against it the divine ideal of the men of the Kingdom.” It is clear, as all the commentators of the Sermon believe, that Jesus here means, not to “abolish the Law . . . but to fulfill it,” as he himself warns us a few verses earlier (Mt 5:17). “To fulfill (plêrōn),” as a footnote of the TOB informs us, means here to “work out something to its perfection.” It is indeed the Law that Jesus means to bring to its perfection by giving it a radical depth. Now this presupposes that the demands he makes must have an obligatory force at least equal to that of the Law, or else they will be annulled by the obligatory force that the Law already

35. Y. Trémel, “Béatitudes et morale évangélique,” Lumière et Vie, n. 21 (1955) 363-82. The quotation is on p. 369. These references are made according to the continuous pagination of the volume of the year (pagination within parentheses) and not according to the pagination proper to that particular issue. My translation.
36. Cf. the hypothesis of D. Daube, in The Journal of Theological Studies (1938) 45-59. (This footnote is by Trémel.)
possesses in itself. In other words, if the Law already obliges by its very nature, it cannot effectively be given a more radical depth except by opposing to it an even greater obligation.

3. The finale of the Sermon insists on putting into practice the demands of Jesus. This comes out very clearly in the following verses: “Not every one who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’, shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Mt 7:21). Entrance itself into the Kingdom is conditioned by the fulfillment of the demands of Jesus. To those who reject them, Jesus tells us, “I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me’” (Mt 7:23). And the final parable confirms the strength of these declarations: “Everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them ...” is like a house falling in ruins (Mt 7:26-27). This shows how, seriously Jesus thinks his demands should be taken. On their implementation depends the entrance into the Kingdom, the ultimate victory or defeat. Now, if that is the case, how could we conceive these demands as being other than demands absolutely obligatory by their very nature?

4. When Jesus says, “Whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments ... shall be called least in the Kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:19), is he hinting that on minor points one can disobey the Law brought by him to its radical depth, and nevertheless enter into the Kingdom, even if it entails holding a lesser position in it? This does not seem to be the case. The TOB, for example, warns us that “the words least ... great do not express the idea of a hierarchy in the Kingdom.” 39 We have here, according to Pierre Bonnard, “Jewish expressions which refer to exclusion or participation in the Kingdom.” 40 True, this interpretation is opposed by a certain number of authors, who then accept that there are degrees in the obligatory force of Jesus’ demands: the more serious demands would be more obligatory than the less serious ones ... However, even if one were to adopt this exegesis, one cannot deny that here Jesus speaks in a preceptive key (“relaxes ... commandments”) and

39. Cf. ibid. 54, footnote q.
expects to be obeyed. That disobedience to the commandments of Jesus would have more or less serious consequences, in no way detracts from the fact that they are real commandments, and hence that they have an authentically obligatory character.

5. In Mt 7:12 Jesus declares: “Whatever you wish that people do to you, do so to them.” This is the precept that tradition felicitously called “the Golden Rule.” Now Jesus immediately adds that this Golden Rule summarizes all the precepts of the Old Testament: “This is the Law and the prophets.” This condensed form of Jesus’ demands being thus placed on par with the Law as its practical equivalent, we are brought to conclude that the demands of Jesus have at least the same obligatory force as the Law itself which, let us not forget, has retained its full validity, since Jesus did not come to abolish it but to bring it to perfection (Mt 5:17).

In view of all that has just been said, we are not surprised to hear Paul speak of “the law of Christ” (Gal 6:2). Obviously, then, in the opinion of one who is the earliest interpreter of Christ’s thought among the authors of the New Testament, Jesus has indeed given a law to his disciples. And, as in the case of any law, this law certainly has for Paul an obligatory character, or else it is not a law. It simply, then, must be implemented. Herein is the meaning of the many exhortations and admonitions which we find scattered throughout his letters, so much so that he ends up assimilating faith with obedience. Thus he speaks of “the obedience of faith” (Rom 1:5; 16:26), where “of faith” is an epexegetical genitive: the obedience which is faith. Such also is the idea of John (let us remember the insistence, for example, with which Jesus at the Last Supper comes back on the necessity of “keeping his commandments”), of James (Jas 1:21-25), of the author of Hebrews (Heb 12:25), of Peter, and after them of the apostolic Fathers of the second century.41

B. ABSOLUTE-INTENTIONAL AFFIRMATION

Even though, therefore, the ethical demands of Jesus are to

41. Cf. V. E. Hasler, Gesetz und Evangelium in der alten Kirche bis Origenes (Zürich, 1953); P. G. Verweijls, Evangelium und neues Gesetz in der ältesten Christenheit bis auf Marcion (Utrecht, 1960). These references are found in
be put into practice absolutely, we still have to understand how, namely under what form, these demands are to be lived out. Do we have to fall back on the literalist interpretation of Tolstoï and of the others of his tendency?

Yet, we have already rejected that interpretation. However, we did this only on the basis of a global confrontation with what we know of the attitude of Jesus: the latter has neither spoken nor acted as a pure socio-political revolutionary. Still, although this stance represents a decisive objection to the thesis of the absolute-literal affirmation, it nevertheless has to be justified on the basis of the text itself of the Sermon on the Mount. This is what we will now proceed to do.

I would summarize my position in the following formula: if the demands of Jesus have a really obligatory character (as we have seen), their content however (what, that is, Jesus actually requires of us) must be interpreted and specified according to Jesus’ deepest intention. Now that intention is indirectly revealed to us, first by Jesus’ behavior itself, and second by the literary genre he has used. Let us now pursue these two ideas, essential to our purpose.

1. Jesus has shown us, at least indirectly through his behavior, how we should understand the absolute of his demands. Now, if we examine systematically one after the other the demands of the Sermon, we discover to our amazement that in some cases Jesus himself did not fulfill these demands literally!

Thus, Jesus declares that “everyone who is angry (orgizomenos) at his brother shall be liable to judgement” (Mt 5:22). However, at least once in the Gospel it is said explicitly that Jesus became angry. This happens in the episode of the cure of a man who had a withered hand; “And he looked around at them with anger . . . .” (Mk 3:5). But there are also all those passages where, even though the gospel text does not state as clearly that Jesus was angry, nevertheless he is shown as a man acting under the effect of anger: for example, the insults to the Pharisees (Mt 23:13-36),42 the cleansing of the


42. For indeed, we are dealing here with real insults: after having called the Pharisees “hypocrites” 6 times, Jesus then proceeds to call them “serpents, brood of vipers” (Mt 23, 33).
Temple (Mt 21:12-13), the harsh scolding to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! (Mk 8:33) — and many other passages.43

Then Jesus goes on to say immediately afterwards: “Whoever says, ‘You fool!’ (mōros) shall be liable to the hell of fire” (Mt 5:22). But he himself called the Pharisees “fools” (mōroi) in Mt 23:17!

Then in Mt 5:34 Jesus says: “But I say to you, ‘Do not swear (= take an oath) at all.’” And yet, in the opinion of many commentators it does seem that, when he answered the high priest’s solemn adjuration during the hearing before the Sanhedrin, Jesus gave an answer which had the weight of an oath (cf. Mt 26:63-64). At any rate Paul, who always aimed at imitating Jesus (1 Cor 11:1), never thought that the prohibition of Jesus in Mt 5:34 had to be taken literally (as some people did in the course of history: the Anabaptists, the Quakers, Tolstoï, etc.), for he himself often made statements under oath: Rom 1:9; 2 Cor 1:23; 2 Cor 11:31; Gal 1:20; etc.

In Mt 5:39 Jesus says: “If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.” And yet, when a soldier struck him during the hearing before the high priest Annas, he did not turn the other cheek but raised a strong protest (Jn 18:22-23). Neither did Paul turn the other cheek in similar circumstances, but instead called his judge “whitewashed wall!” (Acts 23:3).

In Mt 6:6 Jesus goes on to say: “When you pray, go into your room.” And yet, he himself did not refrain from praying in public occasionally (for example: Mt 11:25-27; 14:19; 15:36; Jn 11:41-42).

And so, we have a first indication, deduced from the way Jesus himself behaved, as to how we should understand his deepest intention when he formulates his demands in the Sermon on the Mount. At least for some of them, we must go beyond a purely literal interpretation and see in them a spirit or mentality rather than precise rules which must be applied as they stand in their material tenor. However, we also have another indication going in the same direction, but this time deduced from the style

or literary genre itself used by Jesus.

2. Many commentators of the Sermon have called attention to the hyperbolic character of certain statements of Jesus. Some of these hyperboles stand out on a first reading: a log in the eye (Mt 7:3-5) and a left hand unaware of the right hand’s actions are certainly impossible things. Equally impossible is the image of one scandalizing eye in Mt 5:29: how can only one of my eyes, apart from the other one, scandalize? Is not the look which causes me to sin made with both eyes? Likewise, it is difficult to imagine that fasting should necessarily be accompanied with perfume (Mt 6:17) or that anyone could be tempted to throw pearls at swine (Mt 7:6). Those are obviously paradoxical images which can in no way be interpreted literally.

Now these particularly clear examples have the advantage of illustrating the whole atmosphere of the Sermon, and even of informing us on its literary genre. Other examples, perhaps less clear than the preceding ones yet all in all revealing a specific intention, could be cited here. In this connection, A. M. Hunter has perfectly analyzed this phenomenon: “Take for instance our Lord’s sayings in the Sermon about ‘plucking out the eye’ and ‘cutting off the hand’ (Mt 5:29-30). Interpret them with rigorous literalism, and we may end up, as Origen did, by mutilating ourselves. We may then ask ourselves how far our action has advanced us in our Christian discipleship. If we cut off the hand that pillers, do we kill the temptation to steal? If we pluck out the offending eye, do we mortify the passion of lust? Common-sense ought to tell us that it is the principle, not the literal meaning, which matters here.”

This last mention by Hunter of the notion of principle provides us with a fundamental key to interpret some of the more embarrassing passages of the Sermon. For indeed, these passages become easily understood if we distinguish in their content between principles and examples. The former are moral imperatives (for instance, the injunction not to resist one who is evil, in Mt 5:39 = a principle forbidding revenge in personal relationships), whereas the latter are concrete illustrations of the previously given general principle (for instance, in connection with

44. Cf. Hunter, Design, 22.
non-vindictiveness, the four illustrations which follow the basic principle "not to resist one who is evil": turn the other cheek, abandon your cloak, walk the extra mile, lend generously). The principles are to be taken literally, because they are couched in quite general terms; but anyone who would take literally their accompanying examples and transform them into general principles to be obeyed in all circumstances, would end up creating absurd situations. These considerations apply, for example, to the principles of speaking the truth (Mt 5:37), of being free of greed (Mt 6:19), etc., which are illustrated by concrete examples which should definitely not be erected as universal principles.

These examples should convince us that the Sermon, while containing ethical demands which have a truly obligatory character, does not belong to the literary genre "legal code." For indeed, the latter is written in a precise, technical vocabulary; it uses a style devoid of color and poetry, in which every term and expression is carefully defined, where fantasy and lyricism are properly unthinkable. But the Sermon on the Mount has a quite different literary form. In it everything is concrete, paradoxical, even humorous — in short, full of metaphorical language which can hardly be taken literally, whereas a code of law should. However, even though we must not take the Sermon on the Mount literally, it does not mean that we must not take it seriously. And that is precisely the difficulty proper to the Sermon, as W.K. Grossouw has seen so clearly. In this connection he has this to say: "The type of men we are — with a Western temperament, modern outlook, etc. — can hardly imagine that binding precepts can be given in the form of paradoxes. If we cannot take commands literally, we are at a loss and simply do not know what to do with them. But Jesus pronounces his most earnest injunctions with playful ease in parables and imagery, and with most surprising turns of phrase." 

In other respects, too, the Sermon differs fundamentally from a code of law. For the latter is always geared to the minimum in terms of moral demands, whereas Jesus constantly aims at the maximum where human excellence is concerned (see, for

example, the six antitheses of Mt 5:21-48). This gives the Sermon a dynamism not found in any code of law, because it removes any limit to one’s creative initiative. In the words of Grossouw: “It gives no directives, but points in a direction; it places us on a road that is endless but not without an objective: ‘You therefore are to be perfect, even as your heavenly Father is perfect.’”

Let us hold on to this formula of Grassouw: Jesus does not give directives, but rather a direction. Because of this, we can easily understand that such authors as B. W. Bacon, A. M. Hunter and others can declare that the Sermon is in character, not juridical but prophetic. There is some truth in this opinion, because Jesus’ clearly paradoxical and hyperbolical style is surely closer to that of Amos or Jeremiah than to that of Leviticus, for example.

The conclusion which can be drawn from all the preceding observations is this one: the ethical demands of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount must not be taken literally, yet they must be taken seriously. And this affects us. How are we, in the twentieth century, to implement seriously but not literally the demands of Jesus?

III. PRACTICAL IMPLEMENTATION

Of course, more than ever in this connection the Christian is referred to “the law written in the heart” (Jer 31:31-34), namely to the Spirit of God (Ez 36:25-28) who enlightens and animates from within the children of God. The Spirit alone will teach every individual what concrete decisions are to be taken here and now in order to actualize in one’s life the demands of the Sermon on the Mount. The action of the Spirit, let it be said once again, is the primordial and essential element of Christian

46. Ibid. 40.
47. Actually I believe that Grossouw has borrowed it from T. W. Manson, The Sayings of Jesus (London: SCM Press, 1975) 37. The first edition of this work goes back to 1937. On this topic of the style and literary genre of the Sermon on the Mount, one can find similar observations in Dodd, Gospel and Law, 72-83.
50. C. H. Dodd refers explicitly to the prophecy of Jeremiah, when he treats of the actualization of the Sermon. Cf. Gospel and Law, 68.
behavior under the New Covenant.

But Christians are not all "spiritual" to the same degree. No one is such completely. Hence the need for a certain help coming from outside. For example, will the average Christian, under the sole motion of the Spirit, be able to make the proper distinction between Jesus' prohibition to take an oath (Mt 5:33-37) and Jesus' prohibition to divorce a spouse (Mt 5:32)? And yet, these two prohibitions follow each other in the Sermon: are they both to be interpreted in their strict literal sense? in a wide sense? one in the strict literal sense and the other in a wide sense? if so, which one? We really feel that, in such delicate matters, the interior inspiration of the Spirit must be accompanied and specified by an orientation coming from the ecclesial environment, in which the Spirit expresses himself in fullness. As Schnackenburg rightly states: "When we are faced with such problems which exegesis cannot solve with certainty, we will have to be guided by the interpretation of the Church."\(^{51}\) And we could also add: with the support of common sense, of the recta ratio.

Of course, if we appeal to mere human judgement in this matter of actualizing the radical demands of Jesus, it is to be feared that very soon we will render "bourgeois" the ethics of Jesus, we will tame it, we will take away its bite and flatten it to the level of our pragmatic ideas, putting "the dynamic power of the Sermon on the Mount, so to speak, under lock and key."\(^{52}\) God knows that in the course of the last twenty centuries, Christians have been only too prone to sugar-coat the harsh rigor of the demands of Jesus and to turn a deaf ear to his call to heroism. Unfortunately, we have too often counted on "common sense" when we should have relied more on grace and taken more seriously the gospel message. However, be that as it may, the fact remains that the excesses of a foolish literalism lead to inhuman situations and have proved historically as pernicious as the excesses of a certain "humanitarian liberalism" which has nothing evangelical about it anymore. And Christian conscience, at least in the teaching of its saints, its doctors and of the ordinary

51. Schnackenburg, Christian Existence, 150.
52. Cf. Bornkamm, Jesus of Nazareth, 221.
ecclesial Magisterium, has always spontaneously felt that simple common sense (enlightened, of course, by the grace of the Spirit) had something to say when it is a matter of applying the Sermon on the Mount to everyday life.

This role of the *recta ratio* is often a negative role, consisting in rejecting absurd applications rather than in suggesting creative behaviors (the latter, it seems to me, depend more on the motions of the Spirit), but this role is certainly not to be neglected. Here we could take a look at a few specimens of such negative judgements of the Christian conscience. Even though they are borrowed from a long past era, they are still completely valid for today and can provide a valuable help for the formation of our conscience. For the sake of brevity, we will limit ourselves to only one passage of the Sermon.

Commenting on the recommendations of Jesus not to resist the one who is evil, to turn the other cheek, to lend to whoever asks, etc., saint Augustine specifies the limits of these recommendations: “It is sometimes better to avenge a fault out of affection than to let it go unpunished, and this in the desire, not to sadden the guilty party because of the punishment, but rather to be useful to him in working for his conversion.” 53 A little farther the same author, commenting on Jesus’ words, “Give to him who begs from you, and do not refuse him who would borrow from you” (Mt 5:42), has this to say: “(The Lord says): ‘Give to him who asks’, but not all that he asks for, only what honesty and justice allow you to give. For indeed, what if you were asked to give money so that someone else be harmed? What if you were solicited to fornicate and to do so many other similar things which I will not mention? It is obvious that you must give only what will not harm you or anybody else.” 54

Such is also the opinion of saint Thomas according to whom the Christian would contribute to the production of injustice and disorder, if he allowed the fools and the wicked to operate

53. St. Augustine, *In monte Domini* I, 20, 63. (For the complete reference, see following footnote.)

54. Ibid. I, 20, 67. The complete Latin title of this work is *De sermone Domini in monte secundum Matthaeum libri duo;* PL 34:1299-1308. Here we might take note of Jacques Dupont’s remark (*Les béatitudes* [2e éd., 1969] 1:347 — my
freely.55

This way of looking at things is shared by almost all the modern commentators who have studied this problem. A. M. Hunter can serve as a typical example, chosen at random, of their views: here he specifically refers to the above-chosen passage of Mt 5:38-42: “Interpret these illustrations as laws to be obeyed to the letter, and we miss the point. Literal obedience to them would only result in violence, robbery and anarchy. For Jesus is here talking to disciples, and speaking of personal relations: he is not laying down moral directives for states and nations, and such issues as the work of the police or the question of a defensive war are simply not in his mind.”56

Of course, the rejection of a literal interpretation of the Sermon only tells us how we must not actualize the Sermon on the Mount. But, when it is a matter of making more positive suggestions, we feel quite embarrassed: the subject is practically infinite57 and depends so much on the concrete circumstances of everyday life that, unfortunately, we cannot attempt here to explore even the fringe of this immense topic. Suffice it to say, though, that whether acting in the sphere of his or her private life or serving a term of office in the arena of public life, the


57. Whereas the Sermon itself contains very little matter or very few concrete examples on which we could base ourselves for the details of our lives. As J. Guillet explains, if the Sermon contains general commandments but no social "code" as in the Old Covenant, this is because it must be lived out in all possible codes! Cf. his article “De l’Ancien Testament à l’Evangile. Une expérience globale,” RechScRel 64 (1975) 397-406.
Christian’s behavior will constantly be inspired by the Sermon on the Mount, and this will necessarily permeate his or her behavior with a certain style, a particular character, a specific atmosphere. For instance, while vigorously opposing criminals, the Christian will treat them with kindness and loyalty, seeking their true good, working for their genuine reform. Likewise, in the area of national defence, the Christian will refrain from negative propaganda against foreigners, will favor mutual understanding, will foster reconciliation and prudent compromises in an atmosphere of respect and love, trying sincerely to understand the other’s point of view, etc.

CONCLUSION

Is the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount a feasible ethics? Are the moral demands of Jesus in that Sermon practicable? We are now in a better position to answer that question, but then only if we understand its meaning well. The ethics of Jesus is practicable in the sense that it is not only the ethics reserved for the eschatological Kingdom which is still to come, nor is it an impossible ethics whose only purpose is to reveal our sinfulness, nor a mere reminder of God’s radical summons to a life of faith, nor an ethics limited to the elite, nor an exhortation aimed at creating a frame of mind, nor a provisional ethics for the generation preceding the eschatology. In other words, everything in the gospel text leads us to think that Jesus really had the intention of proposing to us an ethics actually obliging us with specific demands of a very concrete nature; and, since Jesus would not require us to put into practice the impracticable, we must conclude that his ethics is in fact practicable and feasible.

However, it must be implemented according to the particular intention of Jesus. Many of his sayings, as we have seen, must not be taken literally, as if they were the provisions of a code of law. He himself did not do so. The examples he proposes are often hyperbolic and paradoxical: they are not meant to give directives but rather a direction. This direction is no doubt provided by the tenor itself of the text of the Sermon, which we shall always have to take care not to sugar-coat; but it is
provided above all by the ecclesial milieu which interprets this
text and shows it to us embodied in the saints; and finally, it
is provided by the Spirit, day by day and in the details of our
lives.

The Spirit not only guides us in the right direction, but above
all he gives us the strength to rise and advance ever more
towards the Father. In a sense, the demands of the Sermon on
the Mount are impracticable, because we will never have finished
putting them into practice, we will never succeed in living them
out perfectly. No one will ever be able to say: I am perfect as
the heavenly Father is perfect. But with the strength of the Spirit
we will always be able to say with Paul: “I can do all things
in him who strengthens me” (Phil 4:13). Or again: “It is not to
be thought that I have already achieved all this. I have not yet
reached perfection, but I press on to make it my own, because
Christ Jesus has made me his own” (Phil 3:12). Because, finally,
the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount is not primarily an ethics,
however lofty it might be. It is first of all a person, Jesus. And
it is he who is saying to us: “If you love me, you will keep my
commandments. And I will pray to the Father, and he will give
you another Counsellor, to be with you forever” (Jn 14:15-16).