

Topic 13: The Passion, Death and Resurrection of Christ

Jesus freely accepted the physical and moral sufferings imposed by the injustice of sinners. The Cross of Christ is, above all, the manifestation of the generous love of the Trinity for mankind, a love that saves us. The mystery of the Cross, present in the sacraments, leads us to a new life. Through the resurrection of Jesus, God inaugurated a new life, the life of the world to come, and made it available to mankind.

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All the mysteries of Jesus are the cause of our salvation. With his holy and filial life on earth Jesus brings back to the love of the Father the world that had been deformed by original sin and by the successive personal sins of all men. He rehabilitates it and rescues it from the power of the devil.

However, it is only with his Paschal mystery (his passion and death, his resurrection and ascension into heaven to be with the Father) that this redemption is definitively established. That is why the mystery of our salvation is often attributed to the passion, death and resurrection of Christ, to his Paschal mystery. But let us not forget that it is the whole life of Christ, in its earthly and

glorious phases, which – strictly speaking – saves us.

1. Passion and death of Christ

The meaning of the Cross. From the historical point of view, our Lord died because He was condemned to death by the Jewish authorities, who handed Him over to the Romans to be executed. The cause of his death sentence was his declaration before the supreme council of the Jews (the Sanhedrin) that he was the Messiah, the son of God, the one to whom God had given the power to judge all men. This statement was considered blasphemy and so the Sanhedrin decreed that He had to die.

This condemnation of Jesus stands in continuity with the preceding history of the Jewish people. On many occasions God spoke to the people of Israel through prophets (cf. Heb 1:1). However, the word of God was not

always well received by Israel. The history of Israel is a history of great heroic deeds, but also of great rebellions. Often the people abandoned God and forgot the holy laws they had received from Him. Therefore the prophets often had to suffer injustices in order to carry out the mission God had entrusted to them.

The story of Jesus is the culminating event in the history of Israel, a history with a universal vocation. When the fullness of time came, God sent his Son to bring about the establishment of his Kingdom in the world, fulfilling his promises to Israel. But only some accepted Christ and followed Him; the leaders of the people rejected him and condemned Him to death. Never have men rejected God so directly, to the point of being able to mistreat Him in every possible way. Yet (and here is the most mysterious aspect of the

Cross) God did not wish to protect his Son from human wickedness, but gave Him into the hands of sinners: “For the sake of accomplishing his plan of salvation, God permitted the acts that flowed from their blindness” (*Catechism*, 600). And “out of love for his Father and for men, whom the Father wants to save, Jesus freely accepted his Passion and death” (*Catechism*, 609). He courageously confessed his identity and his relationship to the Father, even though He knew it would not be accepted by his enemies. He was condemned to a humiliating and violent death and thus experienced in his flesh and soul the injustice of those who condemned him.

Moreover, that injustice which He suffered and accepted for us, also contained all the injustices and sins of mankind, for every sin is the rejection of God’s plan in Christ, which culminated in the condemnation of Jesus to such a

cruel death. As the *Compendium of the Catechism* (117) states: “Every single sinner, that is, every human being is really the cause and the instrument of the sufferings of the Redeemer.”

Jesus, therefore, freely accepted the physical and moral sufferings imposed by the injustice of sinners, and, in them, of all the sins of mankind, of every offence against God. One can say, metaphorically, that He “bore” our sins on his shoulders. But why did He do so? The answer given by the Church, using different expressions, but with a common thread, is this: He did it to wipe out or cancel our sins in the righteousness of his Heart.

How did Jesus cancel our sins? He took them away by bearing those sufferings, which were the fruit of men’s sins, in obedient and loving union with his Father God, with a

heart full of justice, and with the charity of one who loves sinners, even if they are not deserving, of one who seeks to forgive offences out of love (cf. Lk 22:42; 23:34). Perhaps an example will help to understand this better. Sometimes in life situations arise in which one person is offended by another person he or she loves. In a family, for example, it could happen that an elderly and handicapped person is in a bad mood and makes the caregivers suffer. When there is true love, such suffering is accepted with charity, and the good of the offending person continues to be sought. Grievances die because they have no place in a just and loving heart. Jesus did something similar, although in truth He went much further. Perhaps the elderly person in the example deserves the affection of those who care for them because of the good things he or she did when younger. But Jesus loved us without our

deserving it. And He didn't sacrifice himself for someone he loved for some particular reason, but for each and every person: "He loved me and gave himself for me," says Saint Paul, who had persecuted Christians viciously. Jesus wanted to offer those sufferings, together with his death, to the Father on our behalf, so that, as a result of his love, we could always obtain forgiveness for our offences against God: "In his wounds we are healed" (Is 53:5). And God the Father, who sustained Jesus' sacrifice with the strength of the Holy Spirit, delighted in the love in the heart of his Son. "Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (Rom 5:20).

Thus, in the historical event of the Cross, what was fundamental was not the unjust act of those who accused and condemned Him, but Jesus' response, imbued with righteousness and mercy in the face of that situation. It was, in turn, an

act of the Trinity: “First, it is a gift from God the Father himself, for the Father handed his Son over to sinners in order to reconcile us with himself. At the same time it is the offering of the Son of God made man, who in freedom and love offered his life to his Father through the Holy Spirit in reparation for our disobedience” (*Catechism*, 614).

The Cross of Christ is, above all, the manifestation of the immense love of the Trinity for mankind, of a love that saves us. This is the essence of its mystery.

Fruit of the Cross. Above all, it is the elimination of sin. But that does not mean that we cannot sin or that every sin is automatically forgiven without any effort on our part.

Perhaps it is best to explain this with a metaphor. If, on a hike or a walk in the countryside, we are bitten by a poisonous snake, we will

immediately try to find an antidote for the poison. Poison, like sin, has a destructive effect on its subject. The function of the antidote is to free us from the destruction that is taking place in our organism, and it can do this because it contains within itself something that neutralises the poison. The Cross is the “antidote” to sin. The love present there is precisely a reaction to injustices, to offences, and this sacrificial love in the heart of Christ, in the desolation of the Cross, is the element capable of overcoming sin, of conquering it and eliminating it.

We are sinners, but we can free ourselves from sin and its deleterious effects by participating in the mystery of the Cross, by desiring to take the “antidote” which Christ produced in himself precisely by enduring the experience of the harm sin does, and which is applied to us through the sacraments. Baptism

incorporates us into Christ and, in doing so, erases our sins; sacramental confession cleanses us and obtains God's forgiveness; the Eucharist purifies and strengthens us... Thus, the mystery of the Cross, present in the sacraments, leads us towards the new unending Life, in which all evil and sin will no longer exist, because they have been cancelled by the Cross of Christ.

There are also other fruits of the Cross. Before a crucifix we realise that the Cross is not only an antidote to sin, but also reveals the power of love. Jesus on the Cross teaches us how far we can go out of love for God and for others and thus shows us the way to human fulfilment, for the meaning of human life lies in truly loving God and others. Of course, it is only possible to reach this human fullness because Jesus enables us to share in his resurrection and gives us

the Holy Spirit. But this will be discussed below.

2. Biblical and liturgical expressions

We have just made explicit the theological meaning of Jesus' passion and death. This was naturally also done by the early Christians, who used the concepts available to them in the religious culture of their time, and which we find in the New Testament. There, Christ's passion and death are understood as:

- a) a covenant sacrifice;
- b) a sacrifice of atonement, propitiation and reparation for sins;
- c) an act of redemption and liberation of mankind;
- d) an act that justifies us and reconciles us with God.

Let us look at these different ways of presenting the meaning of Christ's passion and death, which we often encounter when reading Scripture or participating in the Liturgy:

a) Jesus, by offering his life to God on the Cross, instituted the New Covenant, that is, the new and definitive form of God's union with mankind, which had been prophesied by Isaiah (Is 42:6), Jeremiah (Jer 31:31-33) and Ezekiel (Ezek 37:26). It is the New Covenant of Christ with the Church, of which we form part through Baptism.

b) The sacrifice of Christ on the Cross has a value of expiation, that is, of cleansing and purification from sin (Rom 3:25; Heb 1:3; 1 Jn 2:2; 4:10). It also has a value of propitiation and reparation for sin (Rom 3:25; Heb 1:3; 1 Jn 2:2; 4:10), because Jesus manifested to the Father by His obedience the love and subjection

that we men had denied Him by our offences. And thus He “won” the Father’s heart and made reparation for those offences.

c) The Cross of Christ is an act of redemption and liberation of all men and women. Jesus paid for our freedom with the price of his blood, that is, with his suffering and death, and thus ransomed us from sin (1 Pet 1:18) and freed us from the power of the devil. Everyone who commits sin becomes, in some way, a slave of the devil.

d) Especially in the letters of Saint Paul, we read that the blood of Christ justifies us, i.e. restores to us the righteousness we lost by offending God and thus reconciles us to Him. The Cross, together with Christ’s Resurrection, is the cause of our justification. God is once again present in our soul, because the Holy Spirit comes to dwell in our hearts.

3. Resurrection of our Lord

“He descended into hell.” After suffering and dying, Christ’s body was buried in a new tomb, not far from the place where he was crucified. His soul, on the other hand, “descended into hell,” that is, it shared the state of the righteous people who had died before Him. They had not yet entered the glory of heaven, for they were awaiting the coming of the Messiah King, who was to bring about their final salvation.

The burial of Jesus shows that He really died. His descent into hell also had a saving effect: it opened the gates of heaven to those righteous people who were waiting for Christ, so that they could participate in eternal happiness in God.

“He rose from the dead.” “On the third day” (of his death), Jesus rose to a new life. His soul and body, fully

transfigured with the glory of his divine Person, were united again. The soul took on the body again and the glory of the soul was communicated in its entirety to the body. Hence, “the Resurrection of Christ was not a return to earthly life. His risen body is that which was crucified and bears the marks of his passion. However it also participates in the divine life, with the characteristics of a glorified body” (*Compendium*, 129).

The event of Christ’s Resurrection.

Jesus truly rose from the dead. The Apostles could not have deceived themselves or invented the resurrection. In the first place, if the tomb of Christ had not been empty, they could not have spoken of the resurrection of Jesus; moreover, if our Lord had not appeared to them on several occasions and to numerous groups of people, men and women, many of Christ’s disciples

would not have been able to accept his resurrection, as was the case initially with the Apostle Thomas. Much less would they have been able to give their lives for a lie. As Saint Paul says, if Christ was not resurrected, then he, Paul, would be bearing false witness about God: “We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise” (1 Cor 15:15). But Paul had no intention of doing so. He was fully convinced of Jesus’ resurrection because he had seen Him risen. In a similar way, Saint Peter responded courageously to the leaders of Israel: “We must obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised Jesus whom you killed by hanging him on a tree . . . We are witnesses to these things” (Acts 5:29-30.32).

Theological meaning of the Resurrection. Christ’s resurrection

forms a unity with his death on the Cross. Just as through the passion and death of Jesus, God has eliminated sin and reconciled the world to Himself, so through the resurrection of Jesus, God has inaugurated the “new life,” the life of the world to come, and made it available to mankind.

All the physical and spiritual suffering that Jesus endured on the Cross is transformed by his resurrection into happiness and perfection both in his body and soul. Everything in Him is filled with the life of God, with His love, with His happiness, which will last forever.

But this is not only for Him, but also for us. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, our Lord gives us a share in the new life of his resurrection. Here on earth He already fills us with his grace, the grace of Christ that makes us children and friends of God. And

if we are faithful, at the end of our life He will also communicate his glory to us, and we too will attain the glory of the resurrection.

In this sense, the baptised “have passed from death to life,” from being distant from God to the grace of justification and divine sonship. We are beloved children of God by the power of Christ’s Paschal mystery, of his death and resurrection. The development of this life as God’s children leads to the fullness of our humanity.

Christ’s Ascension into heaven. The Ascension into heaven marks the end of Christ’s mission, his sending to be among us in mortal flesh to bring about our salvation. After his Resurrection, Christ at times prolonged his presence among his disciples, in order to manifest his new life and complete their formation. This presence ends on the

day of the Ascension. However, although Jesus returns to heaven to be with the Father, He also remains among us in various ways, and principally in a sacramental way, through the Holy Eucharist.

Seated at the right hand of the Father, Jesus continues his ministry as universal Mediator of salvation. “He is the Lord who now in his humanity reigns in the everlasting glory of the Son of God and constantly intercedes for us before the Father. He sends us his Spirit and he gives us the hope of one day reaching the place he has prepared for us” (*Compendium*, 132).

Let us also bear in mind that the glorification of Christ:

a) encourages us to live with our eyes fixed on the glory of Heaven: “Seek the things that are above” (Col 3:1); it reminds us that we have no permanent city here (cf. Heb 13:14),

and fosters in us the desire to sanctify human realities.

b) urges us to live by faith, because we know that we are accompanied by Jesus, who knows and loves us from heaven, and who constantly gives us the grace of his Spirit. With God's strength we can carry out the mission of evangelisation which He has entrusted to us: to bring Him to all souls (cf. Mt 28:19) and place Him at the summit of all human activities (cf. Jn 12:32), so that his Kingdom may become a reality (cf. 1 Cor 15:25). Moreover, He always accompanies us from the Tabernacle.

4. Relevance of the Paschal mystery for Christian life

As we have said, the resurrection of Jesus is not simply a return to his previous life, as it was for Lazarus, but something completely new and different. Christ's resurrection is the

passage into a life that is no longer subject to the expiration of time, a life immersed in the eternity of God. And it is not something that Jesus obtained for Himself alone, but for us as well, for whom he died and rose again.

The Paschal mystery has resonance in our daily lives. In the letter to the Colossians, Saint Paul says: “If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (Col 3:1-2). With regard to these words of Saint Paul, the following commentary is interesting: “At first sight, on reading this text it might seem that the Apostle intends to encourage contempt of earthly realities, inviting us to forget this world of suffering, injustice and sin, in order to live in anticipation in a heavenly paradise. The thought of

‘heaven’ would in this case be a sort of alienation. Yet, to grasp the true meaning of these Pauline affirmations, it is sufficient not to separate them from the context. The Apostle explains very clearly what he means by the ‘things that are above’ which the Christian must seek and the ‘things that are on earth,’ that the Christian should avoid. Now, first of all what are the ‘things of the earth’ that must be avoided? ‘Put to death therefore,’ Saint Paul writes, ‘what is earthly in you: immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry’ (3:5-6). Putting to death within us the insatiable desire for material goods, selfishness, the root of all sin.”^[1]

It is therefore a matter of putting the “old man” to death in order to put on Christ and the good things that he has obtained for us. Saint Paul himself explains what these goods are: “Put on then, as God’s chosen

ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive . . . And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony” (Col 3:12-14). Hence the search for the goods of heaven is not an escape from a present reality that would only be an obstacle to attaining eternal life; it is rather a matter of walking joyfully in the present world towards eternal life.

This is only possible if we frequently renew the baptismal vocation we have received from Christ, who makes us partakers in his life and grace. We need to live by faith, with trust in God and his providence, expecting from Him that our works will bear good fruit, fostering charity towards all. We need to pray and

have frequent recourse to the sources of grace which are the sacraments. In this way, what was perhaps once a life in bondage to sin, captive perhaps to a thousand little selfish acts, becomes a holy life, pleasing to God. We are being transformed by the grace that makes us saints and, at the same time, we also contribute our grain of sand to the transforming of the world according to God that will be fulfilled at the end of time. But already here, by our example and action as Christians, we give the earthly city a new face that favours true humanity: solidarity, human dignity, peace and family harmony, justice and social advancement, care for the environment in which we live.

“Firmly believing that Christ’s Resurrection has renewed man without taking him from the world in which he builds his history, we Christians must be luminous

witnesses of this new life that Easter has brought. The light of Christ's Resurrection must penetrate this world of ours; as a message of truth and life it must reach all human beings through our daily witness.”^[2] —

Basic bibliography

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^[1] — Pope Benedict XVI, General Audience, 27 April 2011.

^[2] — *Ibid.*

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