

Our Vision of the Cross

This article was first published in Arabic in 1979, and translated into English in 1993, yet it is suitable for us to meditate always.

IN DISCUSSING OUR VISION OF THE PASSION OF CHRIST, we have spoken of three phases: The first was Christ's declaration of his sufferings in a symbolic manner. Secondly, Christ's direct declaration of his sufferings accompanied by specific times and other pertinent descriptions.

Finally, in the third phase Christ declares his sufferings through sacrament. This mystery goes beyond limitations of time and space such as it is found in his statement: "After three days the Son of Man is going to be killed" (Cf Luke 13:31-33). Although still unable to fathom these words, Jesus stunned the disciples by taking the cup and the bread while they were relaxing around the table and declaring: "This is my body... This is my blood... Eat and drink from it, all of you." They were unable to ask how such a thing could be or what was the meaning of the "broken body" and "shed blood", yet they took the cup, ate and drank in astonishment.

Thus Jesus communicated to the very souls of the disciples, not the concept of pain, but the very essence and mystery of his mission.

Every human action is destined to evolve and finally pass away. Every human action and every created thing is susceptible to change. As the apostle Paul said: "...they will perish, but thou remainest; they will all grow old like a garment, like a mantle thou wilt roll them up, and they will be changed. But thou art the same, and thy years will never end" (Heb 1:11, 12). Every event that transpires and every human utterance is likewise destined to pass away. John the Baptist stated: "he who is of the earth belongs to the earth, and of the earth he speaks; he who comes from heaven is above all" (Jn 3:31). This is the one who speaks from above, such that not one letter or dot of what he speaks will fail (Mt 5:18). Every event and every human idea in all realms of philosophy and science will undergo change and ultimately pass away. No matter how inerrant it may seem in a particular era, it inevitably passes through a period of transition and then passes away.

On the other hand, every spiritual act, such as prayer, does not fade away. Prayer is a spiritual act and whoever enters into prayer with sincerity and intensity participates in

an act whose significance will not diminish. Every prayer a man says remains forever. All other acts undergo change and ultimately pass away. Each prayer you have uttered as a child or adolescent is stored up for you. Every instance in which you have communicated through the spirit is laid up for you because “our commonwealth is in heaven...” (Phil 3:20). This is the citizenship of all who believe in Christ, of all who worship the Lord with all their hearts. It is stored in the heavens. All that is in heaven is written in light. Every name of those who have believed is carved in the palm of Christ’s hand, in his cross and even in his body.

Christ communicated the act of God (suffering, death and resurrection) to his disciples in this sacramental method that Thursday. The mystery of his suffering, death and resurrection was communicated through the broken bread and the shed blood. Let us not say the message was abridged or communicated out of a sense of exigency, or yet communicated without full assimilation on the part of the disciples, it was rather communicated by Divine wisdom. When the human mind was incapable of comprehending the mystery of His death and resurrection, Christ communicated through a superior means—the Holy Spirit who penetrates the spiritual essence of man. Hence, Christ succeeded in reaching the deepest level of the disciples understanding. He did not communicate the idea of pain which they had failed to comprehend, nor the meaning of the cross which they had previously denied to Jesus, yet the mystery and essence of his suffering—the atonement accomplished in the cross and the power of the resurrection.

This is the third phase about which we have already spoken in depth. It is Christ’s particular vision of his sufferings and his practical yet mystical communication of them through the sacrament.

Today, Christ’s perception of his own sufferings has been precisely fulfilled. His vision has been fulfilled in space and time with astonishing accuracy. Christ went forth with his arms open wide, offering himself as the victim of his killers’ malevolent design. He neither showed regret nor asked reprieve. He forth knew fully well what was about to befall him.

Jesus’ vision of his own crucifixion was perfectly clear. Thus it is only reasonable to expect that this clarity of vision would be fulfilled precisely with no anxiety on Christ’s part in spite of multiplied sorrows. I have previously related some of my meditations on the sufferings of Christ while I was a young monk. I read Saint Paul’s words: “I have been crucified with Christ” and “...provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him” (Gal 2:20; Rom 8:17). I began to wonder how I would react if I were suddenly called upon to literally share in Christ’s suffering and crucifixion. I pondered how I might accept Christ’s passion as my own portion for the rest of my life. I began to envision his travail enclosing me from all sides. I became terrified. However, the power of the cross pierced through the cloud of distress and revealed the glories of this suffering. I found myself accepting his passion, albeit with great distress, until the

light of the resurrection flooded my way; the resurrection that accompanies the cross and proceeds from it.

If there were an undoubtful consequence to voluntary sufferings and participation in Christ's death, it would be the resurrection. It is inappropriate for all who believe in the resurrection to plead for reprieve during pain—even unto death.

For this reason, I say that today should be the day of our vision of the cross. It is a twin vision.

The first aspect of the vision concerns what Christ has completed on the cross on behalf of the entire world and on my behalf. "If any one does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the expiation of our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:1-2). Our vision must be extended to include this breadth. The work that Christ has accomplished on the cross demands a full biblical comprehension of the breadth and depth of his mission. We must see ourselves as a part of this great commission that Christ has completed in order that it spread throughout the earth.

The second aspect of the vision is our actual vision of ourselves embraced by the cross without regret or hesitation. "Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple" (Lk 14:27). Here, we are transferred from the expansive work which Christ has accomplished, to the scale of the individual and his personal assimilation of the cross. It is a free transferral because it is a call and a command from the redeemer, who loved those he redeemed to the point of death. Thus, by participating in his suffering and his crucifixion, they are raised with him to the glory which had been prepared for them to share.

The command of Christ carries within it a confirmed promise of implementation: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away" (Mt 24:35).

In meditating the death of Christ and its effect on us the following verse has drawn my attention: "And just as it is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgement, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him" (Heb 9:27-28).

Here, two events that are essential to all of mankind are uncovered. The first is death and the second is judgement.

We see the first action taking place before our very eyes every day. The second one, although it remains unseen, is keenly felt.

Beginning with childhood, man deals with the sensation of a coming judgement. It begins with simple regulations of allowances and prohibitions, which plant the seriousness of judgement deep within the human conscious as soon as man begins to reason about the world around him. For instance, when a mother punishes her child for a wrong action, the child immediately comprehends through his mother's reaction that the

consequences of bad behavior are undesirable. Such initial impressions as these form a lasting concept of the coming judgement. Thus, the concept of Judgement is formed within us during childhood accompanying us throughout life.

Similarly, death begins tracing its lines upon us from the moment of our birth. Every sickness attacking the body, whether it is a common cold or a high fever, has its negative effect on the brain, the nerves and the chemical makeup of the bloodstream. Thus begins the countdown in the life expectancy of man.

Therefore, Death and Judgement are two actions that accompany man from the moment of his birth. Accordingly, we begin to realize the depth of the following verse, "It is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgement" (Heb 9:27).

Death and judgement continue to be present in the human mind although we are not always consciously aware of their presence. However, when the consciousness is fully developed, the mind becomes aware of spiritual reality just as it is aware of temporal reality. This is when man first realizes the fact of judgement and death, which are present in his consciousness and toward which he is progressing. So, when we read the gospel and understand the meaning of the commandment, the punishment and its significance, the judgement and its meaning, Christ's sufferings and the agony that befell him, the Cross and what it means, then all our past observations of cause and effect awake within our consciousness; we begin to formulate an accurate understanding of the final judgement and a correct evaluation of the death which we will experience. As we mature in our understanding of the spiritual events in the gospel, especially those related to the passion and death of Christ, we also mature in our understanding of death and judgement.

However, there is a second verse which responds to the former one and completes its meaning: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:1).

Christ has experienced death and judgement. He thus trampled over death and nullified judgement. However, due to the weakness of our human nature, we are unable to pass through these events without being affected by them. For this purpose, Christ himself has passed through death and resurrection in order to experience the judgement for all human beings and receive full justification on their behalf. With his cross and passion, Christ has canceled our judgement. He has also done away with death. This is the cross in which Christ demands that I participate in order to receive the benefits he has won through it. This is our vision of the cross.

Our conscience, which has inherited the concept of judgement from our past sins, on which have accumulated intimidation and fear as a result of our religious and familial upbringing is called to discard this build up of guilt and fear from his past if it has grasped the significance of the cross and its participation in it. The cross annuls the effect of death and judgement and cancels the inevitable verdict that has been pronounced on

mankind.

Yes, mankind has entered into freedom – in all its absolute meaning – whether from death or judgement; for man has been released from the sentence of death as “the end of life.” Death has become a mere transfer to a better life. The sentence of condemnation has passed and there is now “no condemnation” (Rom 8:1).

This is the effect of the cross on my nature when I bear it and participate in it.

Just as Christ stretched out his hand that Thursday prior to his crucifixion, He continues to extend it beyond the most distant future and previous to the most remote past. Thus he lifted man’s condemnation forever, taking it upon himself. Man was justified retroactively because Christ, in his death, bore the sins of all mankind in his body upon the cross. All who believe in him are free from condemnation. Condemnation is a result of sin, which is intrinsic to our nature since the day of our birth. “There is no man without sin, though his life were only one day on the face of the earth” (the Prayer of the Reposed—the Divine Liturgy).

Christ’s hand has been stretched back into past eternity and forward into future eternity and summoned every law, which engendered death from the time Moses first recorded it. He has taken in his own body the condemnation due to the world because of its transgression and sins, thus acquitting mankind. This acquittal or justification is reserved for those who, this day, accept the cross and what transpired there. Why? Because this declaration of acquittal was issued from the Supreme Court of God and sealed in the blood of Christ. Therefore, whoever believes in the shed blood becomes a beneficiary of this acquittal.

The effect of the cross was a general acquittal of mankind, from the time of Adam until the birth of his youngest descendant born. It is the right of every man to demand this acquittal although he who disdains it has lost all right to it.

For this reason, it must not be said that our salvation is guaranteed unconditionally. Let us examine the two verses together in order to make the condition clear.

“It is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgement” (Heb 9:27).

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:1).

So, only those who live in Christ and walk on His path are justified in Him.

We have taken this same cross as the standard of our life and the symbol of our struggle. We wear it as an outward expression that we have hidden it in our hearts. We adorn our homes with it in order to show that we have also drawn it in our mind and conscience. It is not a mere story—it is extended to you and, in it, the hands of the Lord is also extended. It is not a mere illustration. It is an event, the effect of which will be valid for all eternity. It is a power that entered the world and will never leave it. As we have said, every human act tends to fade away. Unlike other historical events, the effect of the cross is unchanging. It is not subject to even the minutest alteration and will never

diminish in its effect. What happened then is still happening. The shed blood is still pouring out. The power that has entered the world with authority to forgive and cancel all condemnation for all men has never left and will never leave the world. Who is the world? It is you and me and every generation and every locality in the world. The event of the cross is a Divine occurrence. The material and the eternal were intertwined in the incarnation and in the sacrament of the Eucharist. The temporal was united to the eternal giving man (the temporal) an authority which would never forsake him: "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day" (Jn 6:54).

Death and condemnation terrorized man, ruled the world and tyrannized all humanity. However, when the act of reconciliation came down from above and entered the world, both sin and condemnation were laid upon Christ. Death and condemnation were nullified.

The work that Christ accomplished on the cross is not bound by time. His death overstepped the boundaries of past, present and future, having its effect on eternity. Since it is a divine act, it is not bound by the temporal or material. Every act of God remains effective by nature. In other words, it is not "static," yet "dynamic," meaning that it produces other acts. The act of Christ's death on the cross, for example, has produced the act of the resurrection.

The Cross—like the body and blood in the sacrament of the Eucharist—is not static, but dynamic. It transcends time carrying you over condemnation, transporting you from death to life.

For this reason, when we say, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Jesus Christ, who walk not according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit," it is clear that the event of the cross is not merely a story, nor history, but a dynamic power.

This is the effect of the cross when it intersects with our faith. For this reason, the verse states with certainty: "who walk not according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit." It is up to us to believe fully in this, for the power is ours and resides in us even if we have not yet begun to use it.

We do not deem this transformation to be exaggerated. There are many examples of those who have gone before us and experienced it. Take Black Moses, for example or Maria the Egyptian or Augustine. Maria the Egyptian lived a life of immorality. See how the power of the cross has snatched her out of her past in a spirit of repentance. She set out in the wilderness of Jordan to live a life of piety. In the end, Christ presented her to us as an example of a holy woman, filled with repentance and devotion. A woman who lived with the beasts of the wilderness, eating grass and leaves, clothed in sack cloth and palm fibers.

Tell me, who are you? How great is your sin? I tell you: "There is now no

condemnation for those who are in Jesus Christ,” those who have accepted the cross, not as a story, but as a Divine act completed in the fullness of time. It lifts man above his helpless nature. It raises the mind above all logic to give it what no mind can imagine. This is the transforming power that can make the vile sinner a venerable saint of whom it can be said that he is a new creation made ready for the resurrection.

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