

TO THE HEART OF THE MYSTERY OF REDEMPTION¹**1. Introduction**

“For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2): there you have Paul’s plan of action. Why? Because the entire Credo of the early Church was focused on the interpretation of the appalling end of Jesus, of the Cross, as having been brought about *pro nobis*, for us; Paul even says: for each one of us, thus, *for me*.

“The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20).

What effect can such an act of love have? Is it a manifestation of solidarity? But if I suffer from cancer, what good does it do me if someone else lets himself be stricken by the same illness in order to keep me company? In order to understand the original faith, we must certainly go beyond the simple concept of solidarity.

For the early Church, this ‘going beyond’ was justified after the experience of the Resurrection. Far from being a private event in the history of Jesus, it is the attestation on God’s part that this crucified Jesus is truly the advent of the kingdom of God, of the pardon of faults, of the justification of the sinner, of filial adoption.

Well, then, what did happen on the Cross?

The ancient Roman liturgy speaks of a *sacrum commercium*, or *admirabile commercium*, of a mysterious exchange that Saint Paul expresses by these words: ‘[If] one has died for all, therefore all have died’ (2 Cor 5:13), which obviously means: if a single one has the competence and the authorization to die for all, that creates an objective fact that affects them all. Consequently, Paul can continue: ‘And he died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised’ (2 Cor 5:15).²

2. The Beloved Son Handed over by the Father

Why this method of redemption? Was it really necessary for a victim to appease the wrath of God?

¹ This handout includes excerpts and an exposition from various texts, but Balthasar’s *To the Heart of the Mystery of Redemption* and *Heart of the World*.

² The Christian tradition has tried to articulate how this mystery takes place by using four concepts, all of which are indispensable but each insufficient by itself: merit, satisfaction, sacrifice, redemption (or atonement). All of them have their references in Scripture, in the Fathers, and in the great theologians, though Scripture seems to advocate sacrificial vocabulary (Letter to the Hebrews); the Fathers, atonement/redemption; Saint Anselm, satisfaction; Saint Thomas, merit, while stressing the interpenetration of the four aspects. In this text, we focus on the biblical claims and try to understand them in their full breadth.

2.1 The ‘wrath’ of God and his love

On the one hand, we have passages that speak of God’s ‘wrath,’ in the New Testament as well as the Old. In the NT, we see:

- ‘much more shall we be saved by [Christ] from the wrath of God’ (Rom 5:9)
- The Son coming from heaven “delivers us from the wrath to come” (1 Thes 1:10); as for the Jews, “God’s wrath has come upon them at last!”
- Finally, the Apocalypse will even speak of “the wrath of the Lamb” (Rev 6:16) and of the “great day of their wrath” (that of God and of the Lamb) (Rev 6:17)

On the other hand, we have passages where the entire initiative of reconciliation comes from a God who is Love:

- “God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son” (Jn 3:16)
- “He who did not spare his own Son ... will he not also give us all things with him?” (Rom 8:32)
- Through the work of the Cross, he demonstrated to us his efficacious will for reconciliation (cf. 2 Cor 5:19).

And did not Christ himself always proclaim in parables and action this disposition of the Father—for example, in the story of the prodigal son (Lk 15:11-32)?

There must be some way to reconcile these apparently contradictory statements. In God, wrath is not a passion; it is the total reprobation of sin, which contradicts the divine goodness. We oftentimes hear the cliché that God hates sin but loves the sinner. There is some truth to that. But the problem, all-too-often overlooked, is that the detested sin is found precisely in the beloved man: it is he who has committed it! It was thus necessary to be able to find a method to separate the sin from the sinner—and it is of this that the Pauline texts speak to us, whether we like their mystical realism or not.

2.2 Christ Burdened with sin

In reality, it is a question of a gathering together, a concentration of universal sin in Christ: ‘[God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God’ (2 Cor 5:21).

Two things must be noted here: on the one hand, ‘righteousness [or justice] of God’ always designates, according to the Old Testament, the salvific justice of the Covenant, and ‘justice’ in Saint Paul never has a vindictive sense; on the other hand, Christ can be made ‘sin’ (not ‘sinner’) precisely because he is without sin.

A similar assertion is formulated in Galatians 3:13: ‘Christ redeemed us ..., having become a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed be every one who hangs on a tree’” We find

here again that ‘for us,’ that exchange of place, which is at the center of all New Testament soteriology.

The same basic assertion is found again in Romans 8:3: ‘Sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, [God] condemned sin in the flesh’

The same idea is developed in the long passage of Ephesians 2, where it is said that ‘through the cross,’ Christ ‘in himself’ brought hostility to an end.’

Let us recall once again that if God *hands over* his Son to this process of exchange, it is also said that Christ hands himself over, and not only through obedience, but through love: ‘The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me’ (Gal 2:20).

John speaks much the same way in the discourse following the Last Supper.

3. *Christ dead and risen ‘for all’*

Paul’s assertion ends logically in observing the success of this exchange, which the liturgy, as we have said, would very early on call the *sacrum commercium* or the *admirabile commercium*.

The Pauline affirmation is solemn, realistic, and precise: ‘We are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised’ (2 Cor 5:14-15).

Once again, ‘for us’ ‘for them’ is said: which implies a person capable of substitution—some man might well die for another or for a good cause, but never for all and in such a way that all participate in his death and, thereby, in his Resurrection. It is a matter here of uprooting men from their own land in order to have them take root elsewhere, of transplanting them, as Colossians 1:13 says. The transplantation is question is real; it sets up a new ontology of the human being, henceforth incorporated ‘into the kingdom of the beloved Son.’

[For right now, we will bracket the more intimate association of the faithful with this death and this Resurrection of Christ through baptism and the Eucharist, such as Romans 6 and 1 Corinthians 10 and 11 describe it].

Anyone who would wish to take these texts for what they mean should in any case admit one fact: the substitution that Paul describes cannot be understood as a pure symbol by which God would supposedly demonstrate the intensity and seriousness of his love or would indicate to us that in truth there is no wrath in him. ***Paul presents an event, not a symbol, and an event by which, as he expressly says, God reconciles the world to himself.***

If we compare Saint John’s meditation on this event, we arrive at the same conclusion. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep, and he gives it of his own accord so as to obtain eternal life for them (10:17ff); and when he is lifted up from the earth, he will draw all

men to himself (12:32); he himself will do it, and not God the Father alone, showing us in the Crucified a symbol of his love.

4. *God's Judgment*

It is superficial to wish simply to suppress everything that is said about God's *judgment* in the Bible, in the New Testament as well as in the Old. I am speaking here, not of what is said there about God's *justice*, which is a technical term for the clemency of the God of the Old Covenant, but about what concerns the inexorable judgment of God about all that is not conformed to holiness and to divine love.

In brief, we cannot make a distinction in God between apparently opposite attributes that are not in harmony in him. The wrath of God and his love, in the final analysis, are but one. Saint Therese of Lisieux can confirm this point for you.³

"It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God," when "the Lord will judge his people," cries the author of the Letter to the Hebrews (10:31, 30)—a fearful thing for those who do not want to belong to him, because for the others, is there anything finer than to fall into the hands of the living God?

"Our God is a consuming fire" the same Letter to the Hebrews says (12:29): it is the same burning essence that annihilates what is impure and glorifies what is conformed to it. This beautiful passage from the First Letter to the Corinthians (3:21 ff.) confirms this for us: 'The fire will test what sort of work each one has done. ... If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire. ...': 'gold ... is tested by fire' (1 Pet 1:7).

5. *The event of the Cross*

Now the Cross of Christ is judgment: 'Now is the judgment of the world' (Jn 12:31; cf. 16:10-11). This inexorable judgment falls on the anti-divine reality of the world, on sin, but it is Christ who, according to Paul, 'was made sin': here we meet again the great Pauline and Johannine texts quoted at the beginning.

Here, it is not a matter of the punishment of an innocent in the place of the guilty; that notion does not appear anywhere. And it is not the concept of sacrifice that is introduced in the

³ "Let us be consumed by love! ... St. Francis de Sales says, "When the fire of love is in the heart, all the furniture flies out the windows". Oh! Let us leave nothing ... nothing in our heart but Jesus! Do not believe that you can love without suffering, without suffering a great deal... It is our *poor* nature that is there! And it is not there for nothing! ... This is our wealth, our livelihood! ... It is so precious that Jesus came to our earth in order to make it his own. Let us suffer bitterly, without courage! "Jesus suffered with *sadness*! And without sadness does the soul suffer!?" And we would like to suffer generously, nobly!... Celine! What an illusion! That would be!" (LT 89, 26. April, 1889)," among many others.

first place when we want to try to understand; its New Testament use is explained by its importance in the Old Covenant, but the Letter to the Hebrews warns us that the whole sacrificial order “according to the order of Aaron and Levi” is transcended in Christ and in his filial obedience. It is much rather the idea of substitution that is at the center, the apostolic *for us*, with all that is contains of the mysterious.

How are we to understand this? The first thing that’s important is to see a voluntary and loving concentration in Jesus of all that is opposed to God. Without this taking on of our sin, the related mystery of the Eucharist, by which, in an *admirabile commercium*, Christ gives us what is his, would not be comprehensible.

Second, this shows us how the experience of abandonment by God is undoubtedly situated at the center of the event of the Cross. This experience is that of sin given over to the hands of divine justice, to the fire of God’s holiness. What is contrary to the latter can only be rejected by it. So that Christ might know this repulsion, he had, in some way, to identify himself with the sin of others.⁴

Third, this means that Christ no longer wishes to distinguish between himself, the innocent, and his guilty brothers. He does not even want God to distinguish. We must, as the preaching of the Gospel already does, suppose in the passive Passion, willed and enjoyed by God, a sovereign spontaneity in Jesus, who, at the head of all those who will follow him, takes up his Cross (Lk 8:23; 14:27), that Cross whose weight is out of proportion to his human strength alone. It will crush him, and more spiritually than physically.

6. *A Trinitarian mystery*

How shall we conclude?

If he is the Son of God, as the centurion affirms (Mt 27:54), then everything changes. Then we enter into a divine drama, a Trinitarian drama. As Christians, our point of departure can only be a *homousios* Trinity, in which the liberty, dignity, and spontaneity of the Son and the Spirit are as divine as those of the Father, where the Son and the Spirit do not merely approve and carry out the orders of the creative and salvific plan of the Father but conceive that plan in the beginning in the most perfect unity with him.

And since it is the Son who, in this plan of salvation, will have to suffer in order to justify the fact that this world—even though blameworthy—might in the end be judged ‘very good,’ since it is he who will have to bear the weight of it like a spiritual Atlas. This means that he offers himself to the Father in order to sustain and save the work of creation. And it seems that this proposition of the Son (namely, to offer himself) touches the heart of the Father—humanly speaking—more profoundly even than the sin of the world will be able to affect it, that it works

⁴ Saint Thomas assures us of this in his own terms: the cause of Christ’s interior suffering was ‘the sins of mankind, for which he atoned’: ‘Hence he ascribes them to himself, saying [Ps 21:2]: ‘The words of my sins’” (ST III, q. 46, a. 6).

in God a wound of love already form the beginning of creation—if not to say that it is the sign and expression of this ever-open wound in the heart of the Trinitarian life, a wound identical to the procession and circumcession of the Divine Persons in their perfect beatitude.

This means that for the salvation of the world the Father sends the Son, guided on earth by the Spirit, who indicates to him, at every instant, the will of the Father and that this will might be both infinite love of creatures and infinite respect for the offer of the Son, which the Father has accepted and which the Spirit allows to be carried out up to supreme ‘distance of’ or ‘space between’ the Father and the Son on the Cross, which is in truth the ultimate revelation of the tri-personality of God.

7. *What does this mean?*

Jesus consecrates his divine heart to ours. He weds his fate to ours. He takes our hearts into himself. He dies the death with the crying voice of one man, but he rises up in each of us with his thousandfold voice—a voice that will be your voice, the voice of the Church’s choir. Before he becomes that grain of wheat, he raises up his voice one last time to the Father:

FATHER, THE HOUR IS HERE. Glorify your Son that your Son may glorify you! Let me descend into death and let my veins gush forth. Allow my Heart to grow wide, great as the world’s bounds, by dying a death that is greater than life. Allow me to manifest in gestures of earthly suffering the glory of our love, a glory which you bestowed on me in the beginning, before the world came to be, ever since my Being was born from you. Do not refuse me this request of being allowed to reveal you in the terrors of hell and even in the very form of sin, so that you too may be glorified through me in these, my members and branches. For henceforth we—they and I—are one indistinguishable unity. Earlier on, Father, you and I were one, and they stood outside of us as enemies, and from a distance we took counsel to see how they might be helped. Today I stand in the midst of our enemies; I have become a traitor to your justice, and if you want to strike out at them, strike first at me. I cover them like the hen protects her chicks. I take their place. I consecrate myself wholly to them: I catch the lightning-bolt which is destined for them and which you are already preparing in your storm-pregnant stillness. I rob from your Olympus the fire with which you kill me in order to forge with it the jewel which is the Church. I forge the arrow of your justice into the scepter of your mercy. For, O my Father! What else is your justice than your love for me, and what the wrathful glance of your eye other than the most glorious revelation of your love for me? It is not I who am the lover: it is you, and all that is mine is yours.

And so look: even your enemies here, my friends, are yours. And I do not place myself as a protective wall before them to shield them from your fury. Rather, I take them into my hand like the celebrant takes his paten and I raise them up to you. They are yours because they are mine, and all that is mine is yours. They are yours; you have entrusted them to me and they have kept your Word. For I have given to them the words which you

gave to me, and they have accepted them. And they have believed and understood that I came forth from you, for my Word is in them, I myself am in them, one with them, just as you, Father, and I are one single One.

And when I now go and sacrifice myself for them, to whom should I entrust them if not to you, Father, as my precious inheritance, as my Incarnation's fruit of sorrows and as the grapes on my vine? For whom have I ripened them if not for you, so that, once I have conquered death and hell, I might place them on your eternal table in the perfected vessel of the Kingdom? They are yours: protect them from the Evil One. And because they are now indeed a part of myself and my destiny has not remained foreign to them, and because I consecrate and sacrifice myself for the world in the mystery of vicarious atonement, for these reasons I say yet this: Consecrate them to your Truth!

As you have sent me into the world, so too have I sent them out into the world. Sacrifice them also in their mission, as rays of the light, they may shed light as they go down into the darkness and, as they themselves are consumed, they may brighten the darkness. Partaking in my mission from you, they will go out from me, and as they wander forth, beaming my light and expending themselves, they will realize their unity with you. They will experience what our love is, a love which does not clutch to itself but which ventures separation, throwing even the utmost forsakenness into the gamble. For you, Father, are now going to let go of me.

And before I no longer know it because of the night which will soon overtake me, I want to tell you this for the last time: in this night I recognize your highest love, and do not wish it to be otherwise (your will be done!). In the freedom with which you now cast me out I adore your divine right, and I kiss the finger that shows me the way out, that they too, believing and not feeling, may in the night of the spirit come to perceive our Spirit as it blows. May they be one as we are one, and in no other way. May I be in them as you are in me, and in no other way. Salvation lies only in your Cross, and consolation lies in being forsaken by you, and graces flow from the open side of the pierced Heart.

Thus do I blossom before you, Father, and for you I bear the world's vine-branches. You recognize the life that flows in my boughs: it is your own life with me. What flows down into me vertically from you, my Source, this I have spread far and wide horizontally over the earth's expanse. And what was our eternal life, shared by both of us horizontally, up above in the circle of eternity, this have I brought down vertically to the very depths of the earth. This is why I, as the Mediator, have the shape of the Cross. The Cross is within me, and I will carry it because, in virtue of your mandate, I am what I am. I am the Cross, and whoever is in me cannot escape the cross. Love itself has the shape of the cross for in love all roads cross. For this reason, Father, you have given man the form of the cross when he extends his arms in love, so that the world, judged in the sign of the Son of Man, may through his judgment be directed towards you and be saved. (*Heart of the World*, 85-88).

8. *Proclamation of the Mystery Today*

In the proclamation of the Cross, suffering is not more tolerable simply because God is in solidarity with us in that suffers. How would a co-suffering God relieve me in my suffering? What does that matter to me? Rather, God's suffering on the Cross encompasses all the sufferings of the world—which includes my sufferings—in order to transform them into prayer, into a dialogue in the midst of abandonment, thereby conferring on all human tragedies a meaning they would not have in themselves, a meaning that is in the end redemptive for the salvation of the world. All suffering is being taken up secretly, mysteriously, into the sacrifice of the crucified Christ: of the Head who is inseparable from his members.

Without Easter, Good Friday would have no meaning. Without Easter, there would be no hope that suffering and abandonment might be tolerable. But with Easter, a way becomes visible for human sorrows, an absolute future: more than hope, a divine expectation.

The sign of Christ is legible only if we read his human love and self-gift unto death as the manifestation of absolute love.

Christ's act of creating space in himself for God is not self-mastery, but is itself already obedience, an obedience willing to take on whatever task the 'ever greater Father' gives. The task, however, consists in letting the sins of the world into the same space he had allowed the Father to fill, and to do so out of the love that God also fills, as the 'Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world' (Jn 1:29), and therefore takes away mine.

Love alone is credible; nothing else ought to be believed. This is the achievement, the 'work' of faith: to recognize this absolute *prius*, which nothing else can surpass; to believe that there is such a thing as love, absolute love, and that there is nothing higher or greater than it; to believe against the evidence of experience ..., against every 'rational' conception of God, which thinks of him in terms of pure impassibility, or, at best, totally pure goodness, but not in terms of this inconceivable and senseless act of love" (101-102).

Once a person learns to read the signs of love and thus to believe it, love leads him into the open field wherein he himself can love. If the prodigal son had not believed that the father's love was already there waiting for him, he would not have been able to make the journey home—even if his father's love welcomes him in a way he never would have dreamed of. The decisive thing is that the sinner has heard of a love that could be, and really is, there for him; he is not the one who has to bring himself into line with God; God has always seen in him, the loveless sinner, a beloved child and has looked upon him and conferred the dignity upon him in the light of this love.