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Talk #5
Scandal of the Cross: 1 Cor 1-2



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5. Scandal of the Cross: 1 Cor 1-2

At the center of the preaching of St. Paul, and of the Christian claim in general, there lies the Cross of Christ, which is a scandal to the worldly mind, but the greatest stimulus to charity and conversion for those whose hearts are well-disposed under the action of grace.

St. Paul speaks of the scandal of the Cross in the First Letter to the Corinthians:

“For the doctrine of the cross is foolishness to those who perish, but to those who are saved, that is, to us, it is the power of God. . . . For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For the Jews ask for signs, and the Greeks look for ‘wisdom’; but we, for our part, preach a crucified Christ — to the Jews indeed a stumbling-block and to the Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1 Cor 1:18,21-25).

In fact, the Cross of Christ, while a scandal to many, is at the same time a magnificent motive of credibility of Catholicism as the true religion and the fulfillment of Judaism, for those who have the eyes to see it.

Three of the most important reasons for believing in the Catholic faith, mentioned in the First Vatican Council, are the prophecies of the Old Testament, the miracles of Christ, and the expansion and continuity of the Catholic Church through twenty centuries. However, there is a fourth no less important motive of credibility, which is the unique sanctity of the doctrine and life of Christ, which is a most powerful testimony to the truth of His divinity.

This sanctity of Christ’s doctrine and life is visible on every page of the Gospel, but it was especially manifested in His Passion. The Cross of Christ is the greatest witness and seal of the sanctity and divinity of His doctrine.

The Cross of Christ is simultaneously a motive of scandal to many and a witness to the truth and sanctity of Christianity. Obviously, this is a paradox. How can something that causes scandal be a reason for belief?

Christian doctrine teaches that God Almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, He who rolled out the heavens and created the light, He who determined the laws of nature, He to whom all the angels cry out in awe: Holy, Holy, Holy; He who dwells in ineffable light and whom no earthly eye can see, the Holy Trinity, determined from all eternity that the second Person of the Holy Trinity, the Son of God, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, would take on human nature in the course of human history. And

why? In order to suffer tremendously, be humiliated and rejected, and die abandoned on the Cross in unspeakable pain, drinking the cup of sorrow to the very bottom, so as to pay the price for the sins of His ungrateful creatures.

Who would do such a thing? Only God would do it. Who could first conceive such thing? Only the divine wisdom could entertain such divine folly. This violates all our instincts and all our ordinary common sense. It is either ludicrous madness, or infinite love: infinite sanctity.

If any religious teaching could be called scandalous, it is the Cross. St. Thomas Aquinas says that belief in the fact that Christ, the Son of God, died for us and for our salvation is “so arduous, that our intellect can barely conceive it, indeed, our mind cannot properly grasp it at all.”¹

The Cross as the Foolishness of God and the Weakness of God

In 1 Cor 1:18, 22-25, St. Paul speaks of the Cross as the “foolishness of God” and the “weakness of God”: the foolishness of God with respect to the Greeks and the weakness of God with respect to the Jews. In other words, St. Paul says that the Cross is a scandal for two principal reasons: because it seems to demean human wisdom, on the one hand, and to debase the divine majesty, on the other.

He connects these two principal objections against the Cross of Christ with the two groups that he principally sought to evangelize: Greeks and Jews. The former is an objection that springs from intellectual pride, while the latter is an objection springing from a kind of religious pride.

One of the terrible qualities of pride, unlike other vices, is that it can find a breeding ground even in what is in itself most excellent. This is what made Satan, the finest of God’s creatures on the natural order endowed with the greatest intellect, particularly exposed to the sin of pride, to which he succumbed. An excellent gift of mind or even of piety can, if not controlled, lead to intellectual or religious pride. Greeks and Jews are singled out because the classical Greeks were given a most excellent gift of philosophical brilliance, whereas the Jews were obviously especially favored with religious gifts: their election and their God-given tradition of piety. Obviously, the objections are made not only by these two groups (Greeks and Jews), but are universal tendencies of man.

The Cross is a scandal to the Greek mind, for it seems to be absurd, sheer *folly*. And so it appears to so many today as absolutely extravagant, for it tells us that salvation has come to us not through the efforts of human wisdom and accomplishment, as we would have it, but through suf-

¹ *Commentary on the Apostle’s Creed*, on the 4th article, n. 59.

fering, the suffering of God incarnate. This is the Greek objection, and it is *extremely powerful* today as well. It is the objection of a culture that glories in its human science and a tremendous advance in technology.

The Cross is rejected for it seems to demean human reason and human wisdom, preferring to it something ignoble, irrational, and repugnant: suffering. We want to be saved through human wisdom: medicine, technology, science, which should eliminate suffering. This objection has inspired modern culture since the 16th century, and the dream of an ever more perfect dominion over nature through science has continued unabated until our own time, and has tended to become identified with faith in the unlimited power of human reason, and the unlimited extension of human freedom.

This type of utopian dream of perfect human dominion over the world has taken two principal forms in modern times: the Western cult of science as the cure for all evils, and the Communist dream of a utopian society based on mastery of the dialectical “laws” governing history and economic development. In both cases religion is seen as the major obstacle, and particularly the religion that glorifies weakness and suffering as a path to eternal life in the hereafter. But God chose to save man precisely through suffering, an abyss of suffering.

For this reason, St. Paul does not preach the Gospel as if he were simply a philosopher giving human wisdom and science, but his preaching is based on the Cross, and on the power of God that works through human infirmity and humility: through the weak things of the earth. In 1 Cor 2:1-8 he writes:

“When I came to you, brethren, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to *know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified*. And I was with you in weakness and in much fear and trembling; and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glorification. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.”

Satan was fooled and defeated by Christ because with all his natural wisdom he failed to grasp the mystery that the world would be redeemed by the Cross of Christ. Satan thought that the Cross of Christ would mean Christ’s defeat. Otherwise, he would not have engineered His Crucifixion. It seems that it did not dawn on Satan’s angelic

intelligence that the ignominy of Christ’s cruelest suffering and humiliation would be the instrument of Satan’s ultimate defeat by meriting the forgiveness of all sin.

Although Satan and the other “rulers of this age” failed to see it, the Cross of Christ is the profoundest wisdom: a supernatural wisdom. The highest gift of the Holy Spirit is precisely the capacity to see everything in the light of the Cross of Christ by which the world is reconciled with God.

The Cross as the “Weakness of God”

The Jewish objection, on the other hand, rejects the Cross for it seems to debase the divine majesty: it is an absolute scandal for the one who prides himself on being the recipient of God’s favor. God may be accepted as appearing on earth if He comes with majesty as on Mt. Sinai, with the sound of trumpets, fire and smoke; or refulgent with light, brighter than the sun, as in the Transfiguration on Mt. Tabor. God’s presence would be acknowledged in signs of power and victory, victory in battle, liberating Israel from foreign domination, establishing world peace under Israel.

As we know, this was the expectation even of the Apostles themselves, as it was of most, if not all, of their countrymen. A paradigmatic example of this temptation was given by St. Peter just after he had received the primacy in Mt 16:18-20. Jesus then gives them the first prophecy of his Passion, and Peter seeks to dissuade Him from such an ignoble end:

“Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you.” But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men.” Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” (Mt 16:21-24)

Peter, before his conversion, was scandalized by the Cross, and sought in vain to have it eliminated from his Master’s doctrine and life, meriting a very severe rebuke, moments after receiving the promise of the primacy in the Church. This attempt to eliminate the scandal of the Cross from Christian doctrine has been repeated down through the centuries by Jews and Gentiles, and in scores of heresies. A God who frees men from illness and death, from underdevelopment and oppression, through a spectacular display of power, would be accepted, but not one who preaches victory through the Cross, the necessity of taking up one’s Cross and following Him along the way of the Cross.

Rabbis today counter Christian missionaries and the Messianic claim of Christ simply by stating that world

peace and the dominion of Israel over the nations have not yet arrived. Of course, this objection misses an interior reconciliation that is far more profound than that between nations: the reconciliation between man and God worked by the Cross of Christ. Ultimately, every other reconciliation depends on the reconciliation between man and God.

The most powerful work of God is precisely that which works the reconciliation of the world to God through the power of the Messiah's utter humiliation and suffering.

The Jewish objection is more noble than the Greek, in a sense, because it presupposes faith in the omnipotent God, and fidelity to His covenant. However, it fails to see the power of the Cross, as the Greeks failed to see its wisdom.

The Jewish objection that Paul mentions here is also noble because it accepts the need for motives of credibility.

If God wishes to speak to man through an intermediary entrusted with the mission to speak in His name, such as the Prophets, the Messiah, and His Apostles, it must be possible to recognize that they truly have a divine commission. Otherwise, it would be extremely imprudent to believe, for we could be deceived by any charlatan or honestly deluded person into believing all kinds of absurdities, which indeed we can observe all around us in the multiplication of religious beliefs and sects (New Age, etc). Therefore, prophets and apostles must come equipped with divine credentials. These divine credentials are *motives of credibility*.

These motives of credibility are supernatural signs that show the action of God, such as the realization of prophecy, miracles, and the sanctity and profundity of the doctrine. The Jews were not wrong to seek for miraculous signs from the Messiah, and the realization of prophecy. In the absence of these signs, it would be extreme imprudence to believe in a supposed "revelation" as coming from God. The mistake lies in thinking that the suffering, humiliation, and crucifixion of Christ is a divine sign that He is *not* the Messiah.

The Cross of Christ, like the Resurrection, is a sign that still requires faith in the one who accepts it. Like the promises given to Abraham, the Cross of Christ is a promise of victory and reconciliation that still requires the just man to live by faith, believing in what cannot yet be seen.

The Gospel of Prosperity and the Great Temptation of the Present Day: to Silence the Cross of Christ

This objection that Paul connects in a particular way with Jews continues to be strong today among Protestants influenced by Calvinism. One of the features of Calvinism as it developed in America was the "gospel of prosperity," the idea that God's predestination and favor will manifest itself through material prosperity, as in the temporal promises of the Old Testament.

One danger of this mentality is that it tends to lead one to think of the Cross—suffering, poverty, and humiliation—as a punishment, rather than as a gift of God that He permits us to receive so as to conform us more closely to Christ and His Passion, and give us a precious opportunity of co-redemption.

St. Paul says that if I must boast, I boast in my weakness and suffering. The strength of the Church does not consist in her temporal prosperity, but her spirit of sacrifice, humility, and love for the Cross.

One of the reasons for the Calvinist Gospel of prosperity was the Lutheran tendency to deny our capacity to participate in the Cross of Christ. He thought that the value of Christ's Cross would be magnified by denying our redemptive participation in the Cross. Nevertheless, the Mystical Body of Christ, the Church, continues to walk in the way of the Cross in imitation of her Head, and the crosses borne in union of Christ have been given redemptive value by Him. Christ has wished us to share in His Cross, becoming co-redeemers, according to the measure of grace and charity with which we carry that yoke.

Teaching salvation by faith alone, Luther denied the value of all our good works, and therefore he denied the meritorious value of our own crosses carried in charity and in union with Christ. Personal mortification and abnegation of self, although beautifully practiced by many Protestants, logically has no redemptive value from the Lutheran perspective.

Today, liberal theology, progressivism, follows in the footsteps of Luther. The royal road of the Cross is generally neither preached nor practiced.

Christ's enemies, at the Cross, mocked Him by telling Him that if He came down from the Cross they would believe in Him. Today as well, many would have Christ come down from the Cross, preaching a **comfortable Christianity without cross or sacrifice**. But the truth is the reverse. We believe in Christ precisely because He did **not** come down from the Cross, but drank the chalice to the bottom in a holocaust of love.

Negations of the Cross

The desire to silence the Cross is not a new temptation, for we have seen that it began with Peter, and has continued to accompany the Church in various forms through the centuries.

Docetist Heresy

It is surprising that the first Christian heresy to arise did not deny the divinity of Christ, but rather His true humanity, and with it the reality of His Passion. Apparently the reason for this was the scandal of the Cross and the humility of the Incarnation, which they thought absolutely absurd and unworthy of God. They fell into the temptation

of St. Peter, rebuking the Lord for His humiliating death and suffering, fashioning a new Christ for themselves without His Passion.

This first heresy was called *docetism*, stemming from the Greek word for “appearance.” Christ’s humanity, and particularly his Passion, was only an “*appearance*,” according to this heresy. Therefore, this heresy directly denies the truth of Christ’s Passion.

Islam

In some ways Islam can be considered to be a Christian heresy, since it adopted some truths from Christianity while rejecting others. It is well known that the Moslems venerate the figure of Jesus Christ as prophet, although denying His divinity. However, with respect to the Cross of Christ, Islam followed the doctrines of the Docetists and Manichees, and taught that the Passion of Christ was a pure appearance. In Surah IV, 155-158, the Koran says that God will punish the Jews for slandering Mary’s virginity and claiming to have crucified Jesus. Then it says: “*They (the Jews) did not slay nor crucify him (Jesus), but so it appeared to them. For Allah took him up unto Himself*” (Surah IV, 155-158)². Inconsistently, however, in another passage the Koran explicitly affirms Christ’s death and resurrection, as in the prophetic statement of the Christ Child shortly after His birth, when He miraculously announced, “*Peace on me the day I was born, and the day I died, and the day on which I shall be raised alive*” (Surah XIX, 33).³

Islam has no doctrine of the redemptive sufferings of a Mediator between God and man, no doctrine of redemption in the Christian sense.

For this reason, Islamic doctrine does not manifest the tremendous incomprehensible love of God for man that is manifested in Christian doctrine in the Cross of Christ.

Jehovah’s Witnesses and Mormons

The Jehovah’s Witnesses (as well as the Mormons⁴) attack the devotion to the Cross of Christ, denying that

2 The preceding sentence reads: “Allah has set a seal upon them because of their disbelief, and of their speaking against Mary a terrible calumny, and because of their saying, ‘We slew the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, Allah’s messenger.’”

3 See Fr. John Hardon, *Religions of the World*, chapter 14 on “Islam” (Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Press, 1963), 339-381, available online at <http://catholiceducation.org/articles/religion/re0679.html>.

4 Speaking on this topic, President Gordon B. Hinckley said: “For us, the cross is the symbol of the dying Christ, while our message is a declaration of the living Christ... The lives of our people must become the only meaningful expression of our faith and, in fact, therefore, the symbol of our worship.... On Calvary he was the dying Jesus. From the tomb he emerged the living Christ. The cross had been the bitter fruit of Judas’ betrayal, the summary of Peter’s denial. The empty tomb now became the testimony of His divinity, the assurance of eternal life, the answer to Job’s unanswered question: “If a man die, shall he live again?” (Job 14: 14.)”

Christ was crucified on a Cross. They hold that He died on a “torture-stake” with no crossbar. Furthermore, they see the death of Christ as something purely shameful, and they hold that it should have no place in worship or liturgy.

With regard to the factual aspect, the claim of the Jehovah’s Witnesses is absurd, for it goes against the entire Christian historical tradition that goes back to the first century. Surely the memory of the Christian community was extremely faithful to the key event of Christian belief: Christ’s death on the Cross. Christian devotional representations of the Cross (with crossbar) can be found already in the first century AD⁵, when there was still living memory of the events. Furthermore, we know from pagan sources, and from archeological findings, that Roman crucifixions of the time of Christ used the crossbar.

However, the most important point is that the Jehovah’s Witnesses completely fail to understand the glory of the Cross. Note these statements of the Jehovah’s Witnesses in the *Awake!* magazine of Nov. 8, 1972:

“How would you feel if one of your dearest friends was executed on false charges? Would you make a replica of the instrument of execution, say a hangman’s noose or an electric chair? Would you kiss that replica, burn candles before it or wear it around your neck as an ornament? “Of course not,” you may say.

“To the Jews and the Romans the manner in which Jesus died was humiliating and shameful. He was executed like a criminal of the lowest sort, like the wrongdoers impaled alongside him. (Luke 23:32) His death therefore misrepresented him in the worst way possible. To Christians the instrument of execution itself would therefore have been something very repulsive. Venerating it would have meant glorifying the wrong deed committed on it - the murder of Jesus Christ.”

Whoever wrote this text hasn’t understood love. If someone died for us to save our physical life (as St. Maximilian Kolbe saved the life of his fellow prisoner), wouldn’t we venerate the memory of such an act with love and gratitude?

The Cross is not something shameful to the Christian, rather it is infinitely glorious, for it is the instrument of Christ’s victory over sin, the world and the devil, the means of our Redemption, the instrument on which “*He loved me and delivered Himself for me*,” as St. Paul writes in Gal 2:20. The Passion of Christ gives more glory to God than all the works of creation and the noblest deeds of history combined, infinitely more glory, for it was the means of the most intense exercise of charity that can be conceived, as we have seen. Thus the Cross of Christ is infinitely glorious. Christ Himself speaks of this glory when He

5 See the wooden Cross found in the house of Herculaneum in 1939, which was destroyed by the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in 78 AD.

says: “And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all things to myself” (Jn 12:32). And in His priestly prayer at the Last Supper, shortly before His Passion, He prays: “And now, Father, the hour is come, glorify thy Son, that thy Son may glorify Thee” (Jn 17:1). The Son is glorified and glorifies the Father not only in the Resurrection, but in the Passion itself, which is Christ’s “hour.” The Cross “glorifies” Christ because it manifests the extreme of His charity, to those who have eyes to see it. To the world, of course, the Cross is not glorious, but infamous, for the world is blind to spiritual realities.

For this reason St. Paul writes to the Galatians (Gal 6:14): “But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.” All Christians worthy of the name must passionately love the Cross of Christ, as did the Saints.

Paradox of the Cross

In other words, the Cross is a most powerful of motive of credibility for some, and for others a scandal that not only fails to convert, but may turn men into *enemies of the Cross of Christ*⁶ and of the faith that proclaims it. In the Letter to the Philippians, St. Paul speaks of the worldly-minded (and those who give scandal), as “enemies of the Cross of Christ.” He writes: “For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with their minds set on earthly things.” The Cross is a sign that can be read in two ways, according to the dispositions of our hearts.

This was revealed to Mary by St. Simeon in the Temple when the baby Jesus was presented in the Temple after 40 days: “Behold, this child is destined for the fall and for the rise of many in Israel, and for a sign that shall be contradicted. And thy own soul a sword shall pierce, that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed” (Lk 2:34-35).

Christ was destined for the fall of those who were scandalized by His doctrine of the Cross: for Judas, for Caiaphas, Annas, and their kin. And of course He is destined to be the rise of all the saints, all those who die graced by faith, hope, and charity.

In Psalm 118, the Messiah is spoken of as a stone rejected by the builders, which would be set up into the cornerstone. Christ is a stone of stumbling, a stumbling block, causing the fall of those who are scandalized by the Cross. And at the same time, Christ crucified is the foundation of all those who will be built up on top of the corner stone, to be made into a spiritual edifice in Christ, the Mystical Body of the Church.

In 1 Pt 2:7-9, it is written:

“To you therefore who believe, he is precious, but

⁶ See Phil 3:18-19.

for those who do not believe, ‘The very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner,’ and ‘A stone that will make men stumble, a rock that will make them fall’; for they stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”

The “stone of stumbling” of which St. Peter speaks, is evidently Christ crucified.

Paradoxically, the scandal of the Cross is simultaneously the greatest sign of the sanctity of Christianity. Christ Himself attests to this when He says that when lifted up from the earth (on the Cross), He would draw all men to Himself (see Jn 12:32) In other words, it is principally by means of the mute eloquence of the Cross that Christ draws souls to Himself in conversion. The Crucifix is the greatest preacher of the doctrine of Christ. This is what St. Paul means when he says that he knows of no wisdom other than the Cross of Christ.

The Cross Is the Great Motive for Conversion

Thus we can say that the Cross is the greatest motive for conversion. By conversion, we do not mean something that happens only once in the life of a Christian. We can speak of a first conversion to the faith, and a *second conversion* which leads the Catholic into a deeper level of the spiritual life. This second conversion is the great need of our souls. The saying of Christ that His Passion would attract all hearts to Himself applies to both levels of conversion.

A beautiful example of the second conversion can be found in the *Life* of St. Theresa of Avila. She had been a Carmelite for many years, but had fallen into lukewarmness, from which she was first awakened by an encounter with the Man of Sorrows. She says:

“It happened that, entering the oratory one day, I saw an image which... represented Christ sorely wounded; and so conducive was it to devotion that when I looked at it I was deeply moved to see Him thus, so well did it picture what He suffered for us. So great was my distress when I thought how ill I had repaid Him for those wounds that I felt as if my heart were breaking, and I threw myself down beside Him, shedding floods of tears and begging Him to give me strength once for all so that I might not offend Him.... And from that time onward I began to improve.”⁷

Christ wished to suffer so much so that we would be led to love Him more, and to live for Him who died for us. But this effect can only be attained to the extent that we keep that suffering before our mind’s eye, to the extent that it is

⁷ St. Teresa of Avila, *The Life of Teresa of Jesus*, chapter 9 (Image Books, Garden City, NY, 1960), p. 115. Tradition has it that the image was an *Ecce Homo*.

portrayed in art and displayed in our churches and homes. We must not allow the Passion of Christ to be hidden from public view, banished from the public square, for it is our greatest treasure.

Another great example of the power of the Cross to convert our souls is the meditation before the Crucifix that St. Ignatius puts in the Spiritual Exercises. At the end of the First Meditation on Sin, St. Ignatius has us do a colloquy, or intimate dialogue with God, on the following theme:

“Imagining Christ our Lord present and placed on the Cross, let me make a Colloquy, how from Creator He is come to make Himself man, and from life eternal is come to temporal death, and so to die for my sins.

“Likewise, looking at myself, what I have done for Christ, what I am doing for Christ, what I ought to do for Christ.

“And so, seeing Him such, and so nailed on the Cross, to go over that which will present itself.”

Such a meditation has been the source of so many holy resolutions and works of sanctity through the Christian centuries.

The Psalmist asks, “*What shall I render to the LORD for all his bounty to me?*” (Ps 116:12). The Cross gives infinitely greater force to this demand of the heart: *What shall I render to the LORD for all the blood He shed for me?*

On the Cross as a spur to virtue, St. Thomas writes: “*In every temptation, the Cross is our protection. There we find obedience to God, love for our neighbor, patience in adversity.*”

St. Augustine says: “*The Cross was not only the gallows of the sufferer, but the throne of his teaching.*” Or according to Alonso Rodriguez: “*The Cross is not only the bed on which Christ died, but also the chair from which He taught us by His example what we are to do and imitate.*”

Finally, Christ’s Passion shows us the full magnitude of the evil of sin, as nothing else could do. For the Passion of Christ was necessary solely to redeem for sin. We cannot see the malice of sin with our senses, with the eyes of the body. Only the Passion of the Son of God shows us the true measure of the evil of sin. As St. Paul says in 1 Cor. 6:20: “*You are bought with a great price: glorify and bear God in your body.*”

Love for Christ crucified gives us the most powerful motive to mortify our disordered passions, that is, to put to death sin and vice, for we recognize them to be the true causes of the Passion of Our Lord.

The Cross and Christian Spirituality

Love creates identification with the loved one. True love for Christ leads to love for the Cross, and a desire to participate in the Redemption by offering to God the crosses that God’s providence sends in our way. St. Paul

has stated this perfectly when he said in Col 1:24: “*Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church.*”

Obviously nothing was lacking in the Cross of Christ, for it had infinite redemptive power in itself on account of Christ’s infinite dignity and charity. What was and still is lacking is our participation in the greatest treasure of mankind: Christ’s Cross.

I think that it would not be an exaggeration to say that all of Christian spirituality lies essentially in love of the Cross of Christ, just as it lies in the double commandment of charity, for charity cannot be possessed on this earth without love of the Cross.

We cannot love God above all things and our neighbor as Christ has loved us, without abnegation of self, without the destruction or mortification of self-love, which means taking up the Cross of Christ.

After all, the new commandment of Christ is to love one another as He has loved us, and He loved us most supremely in His Passion, shedding all His blood for us, and suffering all that man can suffer. “*Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends*” (Jn 15:13).

The price of perfect love is the Cross of Christ, taken up for love and embraced, as Christ embraced it in His Way of the Cross. (By the way, this was beautifully portrayed in Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*.)

From the love of the Cross has come all the spiritual richness of the life of the Church. First of all, the witness of martyrdom is the greatest response of love to the Cross of Christ. All of the Apostles (except St. John, who nevertheless was thrown into boiling oil and exiled in Patmos in the salt mines) gave this supreme testimony in imitation of their Master.

Then there is the glory of monastic life, religious life, in which the cross takes the form of the three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. The great motive of entering religious life is to embrace the saving Cross of Christ. There is the charity of the missionaries who leave home, family and country, enduring voluntary exile with love to bring Christ to souls. Through love of the Cross, religious and laypeople, with great abnegation, serve their neighbor who labors under sickness, poverty and ignorance.

And finally, the great army of the faithful who offer to God the Father in secret the fruit of their crosses, difficulties, pains, which fill their daily lives, and sanctify themselves by this offering in Christ and with Christ.

There is a great prayer attributed to St. Andrew on desire for the Cross:

O good Cross, made beautiful by the body of the Lord: long have I desired you, ardently have I loved

you, unceasingly have I sought you out; and now you are ready for my eager soul. Receive me from among men and restore me to my Master, so that he—who, by means of you, in dying redeemed me—may receive me. Amen.

Beautiful testimony to the glory of the Cross is given by several great Christian hymns, such as the *Vexilla Regis* (Royal Banner of the King):

The Royal Banners forward go;
 The Cross shines forth in mystic glow;
 Where He in flesh, our flesh who made,
 Our sentence bore, our ransom paid:
 Where deep for us the spear was dyed,
 Life's torrent rushing from His side,
 To wash us in that precious flood
 Where mingled Water flowed, and Blood....
 O Tree of beauty, Tree of light!
 O Tree with royal purple adorned!
 Elect on whose triumphal breast
 Those holy limbs should find their rest:
 On whose dear arms, so widely flung,
 The weight of this world's ransom hung;
 The price of humankind to pay,
 And spoil the spoiler of his prey:
 O Cross, our one reliance, hail!

Another great testimony of the glory of the Cross is the hymn *Stabat Mater*, in which we plead that the Virgin may intercede for us so that we may participate in her sorrows at the foot of the Cross, thus glorifying the Cross of her Son:

May His Wounds transfix me wholly,
 May His Cross and Life Blood holy
 Inebriate my heart and mind;
 Thus inflamed with pure affection,
 In the Virgin's Son protection
 May I at the judgment find.

The power of the Cross of Christ to attract all hearts is beautifully expressed in an anonymous 16th century Spanish sonnet to our Lord on the Cross:

I am not moved to love you, O my God,
 That I might hope in promised heaven to dwell;
 Nor am I moved by fear of pain in hell
 To turn from sin and follow where you trod.
 You move me, Lord, broken beneath the rod,
 Or stretched out on the cross, as nails compel
 Your hand to twitch. It moves me that we sell
 To mockery and death, your precious blood.
 It is, O Christ, your love which moves me so,
 That my love rests not on a promised prize;
 Nor holy fear on threat of endless woe;
 It is not milk and honey, but the flow

Of blood from blessed wounds before my eyes,
 That waters my buried soul and makes it grow.

This poet does not mean to say that we ought not to be moved to love of God by the promise of heaven or fear of hell, but that the *highest motive* inciting us to the love of God is the Cross of Christ.

One of the most fundamental differences between Christ's doctrine and all other religious doctrines lies in the Cross: the Passion of God to redeem His creature; the Revelation of the Love of God. No other doctrine of any other religion makes any pretence of teaching such a love of God for man.

The Attraction of the Cross for Judaism

Despite the fact that the Cross of Christ is a stumbling block for a great many Jews, past and present, it also has a mysterious power of attraction for Jews, especially those with a mystical bent. Of all peoples, it would seem that Jews have the best preparation for understanding the mystery of the Cross, precisely through the Old Testament treatment of suffering starting with Job up through the Macabees, and their subsequent experience of suffering through 2,000 years in exile, culminating in the Holocaust.

In fact, the medieval Jewish tradition developed the theme of the redemptive suffering of the Messiah, based on the witness of Is 53. There is a large collection of rabbinic tales of the Suffering Messiah, in which he is depicted suffering at the gates of Rome, winding and unwinding his bandages covering festering sores, suffering for endless years. And he suffers for love of men and to atone the sins of Israel. In the Zohar, the Messiah summons all the pain, disease and sufferings of Israel to come upon him to make atonement for his people.⁸

If seen in this context, it becomes clear that the Passion of Christ has a quintessentially Jewish spirit, except that it goes far beyond the most audacious speculations of the great rabbis.

The Cross and the Conversion of Israel Zolli

Most, if not all conversions, involve an encounter of some kind with the cross of Christ.

An interesting example is given by the former Chief Rabbi of Rome, Israel Zolli, who said that for most of his life (some 50 years) he lived with the doubt as to whether this text of Isaiah 53 was fulfilled in Christ. The doubt came into his mind (at the age of 8!) when he saw the crucifix hanging in the home of one of his childhood school companions (a Catholic), after having read the Canticles of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah in school. In his autobiography he describes this encounter with the Crucifix:

“Sometimes — I did not know why — I would raise my eyes to that crucifix and gaze for a long time

⁸ See Raphael Patai, *The Messiah Texts*, 104.

at the figure hanging there. This contemplation, if I may call it that . . . , was not done without a stirring of my spirit. Why was this man crucified? I asked myself. Was he a bad man? . . . This crucified one, moreover, awakened in me a sense of great compassion. I had the same strong impression of his innocence as of his pain . . . He agonized . . .

“No. He, Jesus, that man—now he was ‘He’ for me, with a capital H — He was not bad; He could not have been in any way wicked. Perhaps He was, or perhaps He was not, the ‘Servant of God’ whose canticles we read at school. Perhaps He was, or perhaps He was not, that sufferer of whom the master told us briefly: ‘It is King Hezekiah, or the people of Israel.’ I did not know. But of one thing I was certain: He was good.

“But then, why did they crucify Him? In the book of Isaiah there are four canticles — 42:1-7; 49:1-5; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12 — which present to us an innocent man, purer than any other in the world. He is stricken and humiliated, exhausted by so much suffering; he dies in silence as in silence he suffered. Then the crowd seems to recover from its fury: ‘Why have we tormented and put to death Him who bore our sins?’”

Israel Zolli finally obtained complete certainty in 1944, shortly after the end of the Second World War, while celebrating the feast of Yom Kippur (Feast of Expiation) in the synagogue in Rome. He was baptized some months later in February 1945 at the age of 64, with his wife, followed by his daughter shortly thereafter. For his baptismal name he took Eugenio, the name of Pius XII. Not surprisingly, he was ostracized from the Jewish community, although he had been very well-known Biblical scholar, and had guided the Roman synagogue in her period of greatest trial.

Marc Chagall

An interesting example of Jewish interpretation of the Cross of Christ is given by Marc Chagall, who frequently expresses the suffering of the Jewish people throughout history with the image of Christ on the Cross, clothed in a *tallit*: the Jewish prayer shawl. In 1940, he gave expression to the holocaust that was beginning with a painting entitled the *White Crucifixion*. Between 1938 and the end of the war he painted numerous variations on the theme of the Crucifixion.¹⁰

In a speech to the Jewish Writers Committee in New York in 1947, he said that “the ‘crucifixions’ in the streets of Vitebsk [portrayed in *White Crucifixion*] and other cities take on the tragic look of the crucified Christ himself.”¹¹

⁹ Eugenio Zolli, *Before the Dawn* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1954), 24-25.

¹⁰ Already in 1912, one of the first works that got him international reputation was a cubist crucifixion entitled *Golgotha*, in which Christ on the Cross is juxtaposed with what seems to be Jacob’s ladder

¹¹ John A. Coleman, “Mel Gibson Meets Marc Chagall: How Christians and Jews Approach the Cross,” *Commonweal* (Feb. 27, 2004).

Chagall was a friend of Jacques and Raissa Maritain, the latter of whom was a Hebrew Catholic. She said of Chagall that “*with a sure instinct, he showed in each of his Christ paintings the indestructible link between the Old Testament and the New. The Old Testament was the harbinger of the New and the New Testament is the fulfillment of the Old.*” Interestingly, Chagall appreciated this insight enough to include it in the catalogue of one of his retrospectives.¹²

In 1944 he wrote: “*For me, Christ was a great poet, the teaching of whose poetry has been forgotten by the modern world.*”¹³ Chagall was not wrong to see Christ’s mysticism as being forgotten by an increasingly post-Christian society in the modern world.

In Chagall’s works, Christ crucified stands for the Jewish suffering as a whole, the Holocaust, and Chagall himself. This is a great insight. Only in the Cross of Christ does the problem of suffering and its compatibility with God’s goodness and omnipotence receive a full answer. God’s permits suffering for its redemptive value, and this redemptive value finds its foundation in the Cross of Christ.

By taking on all human suffering and making it the instrument of the redemption of the world, Christ gave a tremendous dignity to all human suffering, and irrevocably associated it with Himself.

A tremendously tragic expression of this is given in the preface to Elie Wiesel’s book, *Night*, written by the Catholic writer Mauriac:

“On that day, horrible even among those days of horror, when the child watched the hanging (yes!) of another child, who, he tells us, had the face of a sad angel, he heard someone behind him groan: ‘Where is God? Where is He? Where can He be now? And a voice within me answered: Where? Here He is—He has been hanged here, on these gallows.’ . . . And I who believe that God is love, what answer could I give my young questioner, whose dark eyes still held the reflection of that angelic sadness which had appeared one day upon the face of the hanged child? What did I say to him? Did I speak of that other Israeli, his brother, who may have resembled him--the Crucified, whose cross has conquered the world? Did I affirm that the stumbling block to his faith was the cornerstone of mine, and that conformity between the cross and the suffering of men was in my eyes the key to that impenetrable mystery whereon the faith of his childhood had perished?... But I could only embrace him, weeping.”

The future conversion of the Jewish people, or as St. Paul says in Rom 11, of “all Israel,” can only come about by understanding the full meaning of Christ’s Cross as the complete outpouring of the Heart of God for His beloved creatures, to the point of becoming man—a Jewish man—

¹² Ibid.

¹³ *Partisan Review*.

so that He could give His Heart for His chosen people and the whole world.

Judaism speaks again and again of the tenderness of God for Abraham and his people, and the anthropomorphic nature of His love for them, as for a bride who is yet not always faithful. The Cross of Christ carries that tenderness of God for Abraham and his descendants, both by flesh and by faith, to the point of divine folly and divine weakness, as it were. But the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of man, and is powerful to conquer the hardness of the human heart.

The prophet Zechariah speaks of the future conversion of Israel in 12:10-14, in terms that allude to the mystery of the Cross of Christ:

“And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of compassion and supplication, so that, when they look on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn.”