

Association of Hebrew Catholics Lecture Series
The Mystery of Israel and the Church

Spring 2009 – Series #4
Themes of St. Paul

Talk #7

“Christ Loved Me and Gave Himself for Me” (Gal 2:20)



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It will eventually undergo final editing for inclusion in the series of books being published by
The Miriam Press under the series title: “The Mystery of Israel and the Church”.*
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7. “Christ Loved Me and Gave Himself for Me” (Gal 2:20)

In this talk I would like to speak about St. Paul’s understanding of one aspect of what it means to have a personal relationship with Christ.

One of the greatest glories and mysteries of Judaism is the personal relationship that God established with Abraham and his descendants. The prior religious history of mankind can be characterized as mankind in search of God. With the calling of Abraham out of Ur, the relationship changes. Instead of man seeking God, God now seeks out man, and reveals to him His personal and intimate love for him.

The Old Testament is full of the revelation of God’s tender love for Israel. For example, in Is 43:1-2, God says: “But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: ‘Fear not, for I have redeemed you; *I have called you by name*, you are mine. When you pass through the waters I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.’” This tender and personal love of God for His people is compared to that of a father, shepherd, and spouse, and indeed of an aggrieved and jealous lover of an unfaithful spouse, who is Israel as a whole and each Israelite individually.

In the fullness of time, 2009 years ago, at the conclusion of the Annunciation, this personal love of God that seeks out the lost sheep became incarnate and took on human nature so that this divine love could be experienced and expressed *in a human heart: the Sacred Heart of Jesus*. Just as God eternally knows and loves mankind with a personal love, so the Son of God became man so as to love each man with the beating of His human heart, and pour out His life’s blood for each one. St. Paul expresses the personal love of Jesus’ Sacred Heart in a beautiful way in Gal 2:20, in which he says that Christ “loved me and gave himself for me.”

In chapter 2 of the Letter to the Galatians, St. Paul is speaking of his vocation as Apostle to the Gentiles, and makes an ardent defense of the position that they do not have the religious obligation to follow the Mosaic ceremonial and judicial precepts. After explaining this, he speaks of his relationship with Christ in faith, hope, and charity:

We ourselves, who are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners, yet who know that a man is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ, and not by works of the law, because by works of the law shall no one be justified. . . . For I through the law died to the law, that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; *it is no*

longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and 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.

What St. Paul says of himself can be said of each one of us. The Messiah has loved us personally throughout His earthly life, and given that life for us in agony.

But how did Jesus love us during His earthly life? Did He love us simply as members of a vast and anonymous humanity that would come to populate the earth after His death, for the sake of whom He died? This would be an abstract love, which could not rightly be conceived as personal or spousal. For no one has a mad and boundless love for the nameless members of a horde, nor does anyone have spousal love for a person who is not intimately known.

If Jesus loved me in His Passion only as an unnamed member of the mass of humanity, then His love for me would only be a *superficial and anonymous* love, like that of idealists, revolutionaries, or even terrorists, etc., who give their lives for an ideal or for humanity, but who may not for all that have charity, (which is a supernatural love of friendship for God and for His creatures).

Did Jesus not rather love us with His *human heart* in an utterly concrete and personal way, through an *intimate knowledge* of every aspect of our personal identity?

Since we cannot love what we do not know, spousal love requires an intimate knowledge of the beloved. Jacques Maritain gives a good description: “Then in a free and unceasing ebb and flow of emotion, feeling, and thought, each one *really participates by virtue of love, in that personal life of the other* which is, by nature, the other’s incommunicable possession, . . . consenting to be entrusted with the revelation of, and the care for, all that the other *is* in his or her deepest human depths.”¹ Did Jesus Christ know each of us with His human mind in this most intimate way during the course of the mysteries of His earthly life, so as to love us with a spousal love and with the deepest emotions of sorrow and joy? Was His human consciousness the recipient of the revelation of *my* being and *yours*, in its “deepest human depths,” when He sweat blood in Gethsemane, and when He cried and shivered in Bethlehem? Did He sweat blood and cry for me and you, in our concrete and incommunicable personal identity? Did He, during the mysteries of His earthly life, in His human mind and heart, “participate by virtue of love” in my personal life and yours?

This question is not of minor importance. Our spiritual life depends on the answer we give to it. Just as each man’s

¹ *Notebooks*, p. 244, quoting *Reflections on America*, pp. 140-141, 143.

spiritual life depends on the answer that we give to the question He directed to His Apostles: “Who do men say that I am?” so too it depends on the answer we give to the question Jesus’ love poses for us: With what kind of love have I loved you?

St. Paul responds to this question in Gal 2:20: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and 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.*” Here St. Paul perfectly describes his mad and boundless love for Christ, and shows us that it has its foundation in the conviction that Christ first loved Paul personally in this way, giving Himself for *him*. To attain to this overflowing maturity of love, each one of us must be able to say likewise: “Christ loved *me* and gave himself for *me.*” This conviction is necessary so that, in the words of St. Paul (Eph 3:18-19), “we may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the *love of Christ which surpasses knowledge.*”

But *how* could Jesus have loved each one of us in this utterly personal way with His *human heart*? One cannot love what one does not know. In order for Christ to have given His life for me personally in Gethsemane and on Calvary with “mad and boundless love,” He had to know me personally in my innermost identity, with my good desires, but also with all my sins and infidelities. And He had to know me in His *human intellect* during His earthly life, in order to love me unto death in His *human heart*.

Could Jesus in His Passion have loved all men who have ever lived in this personal and concrete way? Could He have loved some 50-100 billion people concretely and personally? In order to answer this question, we have to consider the knowledge that Jesus had in His human mind during His earthly life.

Three Types of Knowledge in Jesus’ Human Soul

When we consider Christ’s human soul, we always have to remember the principle that Christ is *perfect man*, as defined infallibly in the Council of Chalcedon. *Perfect man* does not mean *mere man*, but rather the supernatural perfection of man. This means that we have to attribute to Christ’s humanity everything that belongs to the perfection of humanity, insofar as it is compatible with His mission, while subtracting from Him the defects of sin and ignorance, which belong to us men but not to the *perfection of man*. Sin and ignorance, furthermore, would be incompatible with His mission as Redeemer and Revealer of the Father.

In His divine nature, Christ is omniscient with the same omniscience as the Father and the Holy Spirit. What kind of knowledge did He have in His human soul? Someone might think that it would not be necessary for Christ to have a specifically human knowledge in His human intellect,

since He already has the infinite divine omniscience. Why would it be necessary to add anything to omniscience?

However, if Christ had no knowledge in His human soul, then His human intellect would be less perfect than any other man’s—it would be empty! Obviously this would not be fitting! Furthermore, in order for Christ to do properly human acts, they needed to be directed by His human intellect. Indeed, to deny Christ’s true human intellect is to fall into a heresy condemned by the second, fourth, and sixth ecumenical councils.

Christ then had to have properly human knowledge in His human mind. What kind of knowledge? Clearly it must have surpassed our own level of knowledge, for He is the Revealer of the Father, the Word made flesh.

In their theological study of Christ’s human soul, the great theologians of the thirteenth century distinguished three kinds of knowledge in Christ’s human intellect: (1) acquired or experiential knowledge, (2) infused or prophetic knowledge, and (3) the vision of God face to face.

Acquired Knowledge

Acquired intellectual knowledge is gained through abstraction from sense experience, and through reasoning from first principles and experience. All of our ordinary human knowledge is of this type, and all our human sciences are developed in this way through our own effort.

Christ certainly had this kind of acquired human knowledge, for He had an intellect capable of abstraction from sense experience, learning, and reasoning, as does every man. If He didn’t use His intellect in this way, it would have been in vain. In this sense Christ learned through experience like every other human being. Thus He learned carpentry from St. Joseph, and, in the words of Heb 5:8, “he learned obedience through what he suffered.” That is, He learned about the depths of suffering through acquired experiential knowledge.

The teaching of Christ, for example, is full of examples drawn from the everyday life of His time, which He would have acquired through experience.

Infused Knowledge

Above our acquired knowledge there is a higher, supernatural way to receive knowledge which is said to be *infused*. God can enlighten our minds directly, infusing some knowledge into our minds that we didn’t acquire through experience or reasoning. It is in this way that God enlightened the minds of the prophets with His revelation. All the prophets of the Old Testament received infused knowledge. Moses, for example, clearly received infused knowledge at the burning bush, when he ascended Mt. Sinai, and in the Tent of Meeting. It would have been in this way that God’s Law and will were communicated to him, as well as the early history of mankind recounted in Genesis. Abraham likewise received infused knowledge

when God called him from Ur and communicated to him His will and His promises. All prophecy, by definition, involves the reception of infused knowledge from God.

Many saints in the life of the Church also received infused knowledge. It is well-known that the Curé of Ars and St. Pio received infused knowledge of the state of the souls of their penitents. There are also cases of saints learning Latin by infused knowledge, like St. Catharine of Siena.

What about Christ? Did He also have infused knowledge? The great medieval theologians answered this with their general principle that all perfection should be attributed to Christ's humanity that is compatible with His mission of redemption. Clearly infused knowledge is a great perfection of the human intellect necessary for the missions of the prophets and many saints. Would it be any less necessary and fitting for Christ? We know from the Scriptures that He could read the secrets of hearts, and that He knew future events such as His Passion, death, and Resurrection on the third day, and the future destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD.

His teaching in the Gospels, as in the Sermon on the Mount, clearly shows a knowledge that goes far beyond what can be acquired by study. Nor do we have any indication in the Gospels that Christ studied with other rabbis. On the contrary, it is clear that He did not, for the people of Nazareth and Jerusalem marveled that He spoke as He did without having studied: "How is it that this man has learning, when he has never studied?" (Jn 7:15).

So clearly it is necessary to think that Christ had all the gifts of infused knowledge, and in the highest degree, such that every gift of supernatural knowledge distributed to other saints and prophets was possessed more perfectly by the human soul of Christ Himself.

It is reasonable to think that this infused knowledge was possessed by Christ in a habitual way. This means that He was not actually considering this kind of knowledge all the time, but nevertheless, He had it in a stable way and could use and consider it "when He willed."² In other prophets and saints, on the contrary, infused knowledge is not possessed in an abiding way, but only intermittently when God wills to impart it to them, for prophets cannot prophesy when they will, but only when God wills.

Immediate Vision of God

Is this all? Did Christ have any knowledge in His human intellect beyond the reach even of infused knowledge? Is there any knowledge beyond infused knowledge? Yes. Infused knowledge arises when God directly puts concepts and judgments into our minds. However, we could never know God as He is, face to face, with this kind of infused knowledge, for God's ineffable essence cannot be known

through any created concept or judgment, even the highest and most sublime prophetic insights that He might give us.

Above all infused knowledge there is the vision of God face to face, the beatific vision, in which the Word of God Himself will be the "medium" for our knowledge of God, and thus we shall know Him as He is. There is an infinite gap between the highest infused contemplation of the saints and the vision of God, which will be our essential beatitude in heaven.

Did any saint ever receive the beatific vision during this earthly life? Perhaps St. Paul received this most sublime of all gifts, for in his second letter to the Corinthians (12:2-4) he says: "I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows . . . and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter."

What about Christ? St. Thomas Aquinas, together with all other medieval theologians (and with practically all Scholastic theologians up until the twentieth century), taught that Christ during His entire earthly life enjoyed this highest perfection of the human intellect, the beatific vision, by which His human intellect knew all things in the Word of God, which is indeed Himself.

From the beginning of His Incarnation, Christ possessed by right that treasure which He came to earth to bring to us as our heavenly reward for fidelity to grace in the trials of this life. St. Thomas explains this by a simple principle. Christ came to give supernatural gifts to men. However, you cannot give what you do not have. The cause must always be greater than the effect produced. *Everything that Christ came to give us must first have been received in His own human soul*, by which He was made perfect and equipped to be the perfect Redeemer and Revealer of the Father.³

If Christ came to give us sanctifying grace and charity, then He must first have had the perfection of those gifts in His humanity. If he came to give us all virtues and supernatural knowledge, then He must first have had those virtues and that knowledge in His humanity in its perfection. If He came to give us the beatific vision, then He must first have had that perfect beatific union with God in His own humanity. After all, His humanity was already united with God in a still higher union: the hypostatic union by which Christ's humanity is assumed by Person of the Son.

Christ therefore had three kinds of knowledge in His human soul: acquired, infused (prophetic), and the vision of God. It is extremely fitting that Christ's human soul was endowed with three complementary types of knowledge—acquired, infused, and beatific—which are proper, respectively, to man, to the angels, and to God. Or to put it another way, acquired knowledge is proper to the natural order; infused knowledge is proper to the

² St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, III, q. 11, a. 5.

³ *Ibid.*, q. 9, a. 2.

order of grace; and the vision of God is proper to the state of glory. Christ's human intellect thus was a true "microcosm" which mirrors the whole of creation: nature, grace, and glory. The higher levels of knowledge do not detract from the properly human level and its functioning. Quite the contrary, higher gifts ennoble the lower faculties, and thus supernatural gifts ennoble the natural order. Here we can apply the Thomistic axiom: "Since therefore grace does not destroy nature, but perfects it, natural reason should minister to faith as the natural impulse of the will ministers to charity."⁴

These three levels of knowledge in Christ's intellect would have complemented each other in perfect harmony, without interference or competition. The fact that Christ already knew something by infused knowledge or the vision of God does not mean that He could not also learn it through experience in a properly human way, which would add something unique. For example, it is one thing to know a truth abstractly, and quite another to have it impressed upon us by a vivid personal experience.⁵ Christ's teaching—as in the parables—constantly exhibits both the flavor of life experienced at first hand, as well as a truth which comes from above.

How Did Christ Know Me during His Earthly Life?

Let us return to our question: by what kind of knowledge did Christ know me during His earthly life, so as to love me and give himself for me?

Obviously Jesus could not have known all human beings personally so as to love them personally, with only acquired experiential knowledge. Even infused knowledge would be inadequate here, for infused knowledge implies separate intellectual ideas, and this would not have enabled Christ to think of billions of distinct individuals at once, while in agony or in the crib.

Only in the vision of God could Christ have had all the members of His mystical Body actually before His mind's eye, so as to love us personally, in His crib, in His hidden life in Nazareth, in the Last Supper, in the Passion. In the beatific vision, all men with all their particularity and sin could be seen by Christ simultaneously in their source, the Word of God. We cannot imagine this, but theology can see that it is not contradictory or impossible.

Did Jesus know me in this way in His human mind so as to love me with His human heart? Many contemporary

4 *Summa theologica*, I, q. 1, a. 8, ad 2.

5 See Garrigou-Lagrange, *Our Savior and His Love for Us*, 170-171, who comments that Christ's acquired knowledge "was not made useless by reason of His superior knowledge, for even though experience taught Him the same things He already knew by other means, it taught Him to know them in a different way. He foresaw far in advance and infallibly that He would be crucified at a given hour on a certain day. Yet when the moment of the crucifixion came, the experience of pain taught Him in a way something new that no prevision could reveal to Him in the same degree."

theologians put this in doubt by abandoning the traditional thesis that Christ's human intellect possessed the vision of God during His earthly life. A great consensus of theologians, however, running from St. Jerome and St. Augustine to Pius XII, have taught that Christ's human soul enjoyed a plenitude of knowledge from the beginning of His Incarnation. This plenitude would include intimate and immediate knowledge of the Father, of all the future members of His Mystical Body, and indeed of all mankind and all the secrets of their hearts, according to Jn 2:23-25: "Jesus did not trust himself to them, because he *knew all men* and needed no one to bear witness of man; for he himself *knew what was in man.*" From the thirteenth century to the end of the nineteenth, all major Catholic theologians held that Christ possessed the vision of God in His human intellect throughout His life. They also held that in this vision of the Word, Christ's human intellect would have seen every human person—past, present, and future—in his concrete identity as forged through the secrets of conscience, with all his sins, prayers, and desires. In short, Jesus would have seen, in the vision of the divine Word, all men in their relationship to Him, the Redeemer of man.

Pius XII on the Vision of God in Christ

The Magisterium of the Church has dealt with the question of Christ's intimate human knowledge of the future members of His mystical Body in Pius XII's 1943 encyclical on the Church, *Mystici Corporis*. Here he develops the traditional thesis that Christ enjoyed the vision of God from the first moment of His Incarnation, as a consequence of the hypostatic union:

He is gifted with those supernatural powers that accompany the hypostatic union, since the Holy Spirit dwells in Him with a fullness of grace than which no greater can be imagined.... "All the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are in Him" (Col 2:3) abundantly. The *knowledge which is called "vision" He possesses with such clarity and comprehensiveness that it surpasses similar celestial knowledge found in all the saints of heaven.* So full of grace and truth is He that of His inexhaustible fullness we have all received" (cf. Jn 1:14-16).⁶

Later in the encyclical he shows how Christ's vision of God enabled Him to keep His entire Mystical Body before His eyes in each of the important moments of His earthly life. Thus He was able to love us intimately in the Crib, on Tabor, in the Cenacle, on Calvary. He writes:

Now the only-begotten Son of God embraced us in His infinite knowledge and undying love even before the world began. And that He might give a visible and exceedingly beautiful expression to this love, He assumed our nature in hypostatic union: hence—as Maximus of Turin with a certain unaffected simplic-

6 No. 48 (my italics).

ity remarks—“in Christ our own flesh loves us.” But *the knowledge and love of our Divine Redeemer, of which we were the object from the first moment of His Incarnation, exceed all the human intellect can hope to grasp. For hardly was He conceived in the womb of the Mother of God, when He began to enjoy the beatific vision, and in that vision all the members of His Mystical Body were continually and unceasingly present to Him, and He embraced them with His redeeming love.* O marvelous condescension of divine love for us! O inestimable dispensation of boundless charity. *In the crib, on the Cross, in the unending glory of the Father, Christ has all the members of the Church present before Him and united to Him in a much clearer and more loving manner than that of a mother who clasps her child to her breast, or than that with which a man knows and loves himself.*

From all that We have hitherto said, you will readily understand, Venerable Brethren, why Paul the Apostle so often writes that Christ is in us and we in Christ...⁷

In these two paragraphs, Pius XII is teaching two fundamental truths: (1) the vision of God is a gift that accompanied the hypostatic union and Christ’s unique fullness of grace from the beginning of His life; and (2) this vision contributed in a crucial way to Christ’s redemptive mission by enabling Him to see all the members of His Mystical Body (and all men of every time), and to unite Himself to them in love during all the mysteries of His earthly life.

Pius XII introduces the subject of the beatific vision present in Christ from the moment of His conception in the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary in order to show the intimate and personal union of charity that bound Christ, the Head of the Mystical Body, to all the members of that Body, past, present, and future. Christ, the Head of the Church and her Bridegroom, lived His earthly life for the sake of His spouse, the Church. Pius XII teaches that He did this not as for some abstract cause, but rather for the sake of each individual member, or potential member, of that Church. Thus all the acts of His earthly ministry, which were all foundational for the Church, were done with each and every actual or potential member of His Mystical Body before his mind’s eye and in His heart. *He founded His Church and enriched it with all its treasures from His life, for me and for you.*

Christ loved *me* and gave Himself *for me*. How could He love billions of people yet to be born, while in agony in Gethsemane and Calvary? Of course this was naturally impossible, but it was made possible through the “beatific vision.” In this case, the vision was not so “beatific,” so to speak, for He also saw in it, by focusing the attention of His Sacred Heart, all the sins of the world, all the infidelities to grace, all the betrayals, all the abominations of history,

all the horrors of sadism, inhumanity, and ingratitude. However, He also saw our conversions, our good will, our prayers, our love.

There is a double contact between the events or mysteries of Christ’s earthly life (Nativity, Baptism, Transfiguration, Passion, etc.), and our lives here and now. His mysteries touch our lives through the sacraments, the liturgy, and through prayer. The sacraments are a kind of mystical continuation of Christ’s life in us. However, this contact with Christ in the present time of the Church presupposes a prior spiritual contact in the soul of Christ Himself. We were all present in His human mind and heart throughout all the events and mysteries of His earthly life. Christ’s sacraments *bring Him to us* in our time; His vision of God *brought us to Him*, in the time of His earthly life.

Pius XII also affirms the beatific vision in Christ in his 1956 encyclical on the devotion to the Sacred Heart, *Haurietis aquas*, no. 56, in which he says that the Sacred Heart is the “symbol of that burning charity which, infused into His soul, enriches the human will of Christ, enlightened and governed by the *most perfect knowledge* derived both from the *beatific vision* and that which is directly infused.” Christ was able to love us with His sacred human heart, only because He first knew us in His human mind through the beatific vision and infused knowledge.

Once again this mention of the beatific vision is not unrelated to the subject of the encyclical—the Heart of the Redeemer—for the human love of the Sacred Heart depends on His having knowledge of the beloved in His human mind. *The vision was an essential precondition for the burning charity directed to every human being, which we venerate in the devotion to the Sacred Heart.* The human love of the Sacred Heart could only encompass every human being with anguish and joy, throughout His earthly life, if Christ’s human mind was enriched by the vision of God throughout.

What type of assent does this teaching on Christ’s beatific vision demand from Catholics? Pius XII is exercising the ordinary Magisterium of the Church, to which the faithful must respond by giving to it “*religious submission of will and intellect*.”⁸

8 See *Lumen gentium* 25: “This religious submission of mind and will must be shown in a special way to the authentic magisterium of the Roman Pontiff, even when he is not speaking *ex cathedra*; that is, it must be shown in such a way that his supreme magisterium is acknowledged with reverence, the judgments made by him are sincerely adhered to, according to his manifest mind and will.”

In accordance with *LG* 25, the third proposition of the *Professio fidei* states: “Moreover, I adhere with religious submission of will and intellect to the teachings which either the Roman Pontiff or the College of Bishops enunciate when they exercise their authentic Magisterium, even if they do not intend to proclaim these teachings by a definitive act.” See the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Doctrinal Commentary on the Concluding Formula of the *Professio Fidei*,” no. 10 (June 29, 1998).

7 No. 75 (my italics).

Catechetical Importance of Christ's Vision of God

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches the same doctrine as Pius XII, although avoiding the word “beatific” and other technical language. In no. 473, the *Catechism* speaks of the fullness of Christ's human knowledge of the Father:

But at the same time, this truly human knowledge of God's Son expressed the divine life of his person. “The human nature of God's Son, not by itself but by its union with the Word, knew and showed forth in itself *everything that pertains to God.*”⁹ Such is first of all the case with the *intimate and immediate knowledge* that the Son of God made man has of his Father.¹⁰ The Son in his human knowledge also showed the *divine penetration he had into the secret thoughts of human hearts.*¹¹

The *Catechism* here is citing a text of St. Maximus which effectively affirms the beatific vision in Christ, although without using that specific term, for St. Maximus says that Christ's human intellect knew, “by its union with the Word, . . . everything that pertains to God.” Only in the vision of God can a created mind know *everything that pertains to God.*

Secondly, the *Catechism* refers to Christ's knowledge of the Father as “intimate and immediate.” All of our knowledge of God through acquired or infused knowledge is mediated by created concepts and images. The only “immediate” knowledge of God that is possible is through the vision of God, face to face. “Immediate and intimate knowledge of the Father” is a non-technical way of referring to the beatific vision.

In no. 478, the *Catechism* speaks of Christ's human knowledge of each of us, citing Gal 2:20: “*Jesus knew and loved us each and all during his life, his agony and his Passion, and gave himself up for each one of us: ‘The Son of God . . . loved me and gave himself for me.’* He has loved us all with a human heart.”¹² A footnote refers to the above-mentioned texts of Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis* and *Haurietis aquas*, in which he refers to the beatific vision in Christ as directing the love of His Sacred Heart.

Cardinal Ratzinger comments on this text of the *Catechism* (no. 478) in his work, *Gospel, Catechesis, Catechism*:

Each one of us can and may apply to himself the dramatic personalization that Paul accomplishes in these words. Every man may say: The Son of God loved

⁹ St. Maximus the Confessor, *Questions and Doubts*, no. 66, PG 90, 840a.

¹⁰ The footnote in the *Catechism* cites *Mk* 14:36; *Mt* 11:27; *Jn* 1:18; 8:55; etc.

¹¹ The footnote in the *Catechism* cites *Mk* 2:8; *Jn* 2 25; 6:61; etc. Italics are mine.

¹² My italics.

me and gave himself up for me.¹³

Only with this statement does christological catechesis become gospel in the full sense of the word. We are not an indistinct mass before God. Christ does not and did not treat us as such. In all truth, Christ walked his path for me. This certainty is a grace given to accompany me in all the stages of my life, in my successes and failures, in my hopes and my suffering. He did all that he did for me and for every man who crosses my path in life. . . . When we have learned to believe this again, when we are able to announce it to others as the message of truth, evangelization takes place. Then we know that the kingdom of God is near. And this knowledge gives us the strength to live and act out of this nearness.¹⁴

Christ's Vision of Sins in the Garden of Gethsemane

It has become a commonplace to object that Christ could not have possibly possessed the beatific vision in the Garden of Gethsemane and in Calvary, because it would have been incompatible with the immense spiritual suffering—to the point of agony—that Christ then experienced.¹⁵ Would not the beatific vision have made it impossible for Christ to have truly suffered interior abandonment, and to have exercised freedom of choice marked by consummate difficulty and temptation? A prominent theologian asks:

How could a Jesus filled with the delights of the beatific vision have experienced profound suffering? Together with the truth of the Incarnation itself, the truth of His redemptive sacrifice is put at risk. How can we attribute to a Savior filled with celestial beatitude these words: “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” . . . The cry of Jesus on the cross manifests all the depths of a suffering that is incompatible with the beatitude of the vision.¹⁶

There is no doubt that the objection is extremely powerful. Either the beatific vision is compatible with the extremity of suffering in body and spirit, or else we must

¹³ See also International Theological Commission, “The Consciousness of Christ concerning Himself and His Mission,” proposition 4, in *Texts and Documents 1969-1985* (San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1989), p. 314: “The consciousness that Christ had of being the Father's emissary to save the world and to bring all mankind together in God's people involves, in a mysterious way, a love for all mankind so much so that we may all say: ‘the Son of God loved me and gave himself up for me’ (Galatians 2:20).” See also the commentary on the same page: “Now, this love has not been understood by the Church as just a general attitude but as a concrete love expressed in terms of personal consideration for every individual.”

¹⁴ *Gospel, Catechesis, Catechism: Sidelights on the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), p. 71.

¹⁵ See Rahner, “Dogmatic Reflections on the Knowledge and Self-Consciousness of Christ,” *Theological Investigations*, vol. 5 (Baltimore: Helicon, 1979), 203.

¹⁶ Jean Galot, “Le Christ terrestre et la vision,” *Gregorianum* 67 (1986): 435.

deny that Christ had it. The nearly unanimous consensus of Scholastic theologians since the beginning of the thirteenth century until Pius XII (and including John Paul II and Benedict XVI), held both that Christ's human soul had the vision of God, and that He suffered true spiritual suffering, in the most tremendous degree, without finding these two truths to be incompatible. How can this be? We are familiar with the spiritual trials of the saints in their dark nights of desolation. Christ clearly suffered something greater than all the trials of the saints. How could He do this and see God?

John Paul II commented on this mystery in the Apostolic Letter of 2000, *Novo millennio ineunte*, nos. 26-27:

Jesus' cry on the Cross, dear Brothers and Sisters, is not the cry of anguish of a man without hope, but the prayer of the Son who offers his life to the Father in love, for the salvation of all. At the very moment when he identifies with our sin, "abandoned" by the Father, he "abandons" himself into the hands of the Father. His eyes remain fixed on the Father. Precisely because of the *knowledge and experience of the Father which he alone has*, even at this moment of darkness he *sees* clearly the gravity of sin and suffers because of it. *He alone, who sees the Father* and rejoices fully in him, can understand completely what it means to resist the Father's love by sin. More than an experience of physical pain, his Passion is an agonizing suffering of the soul. Theological tradition has not failed to ask how Jesus could possibly experience at one and the same time his profound unity with the Father, by its very nature a source of joy and happiness, and an agony that goes all the way to his final cry of abandonment. The simultaneous presence of these two seemingly irreconcilable aspects is rooted in the fathomless depths of the hypostatic union. (my italics)

John Paul II here affirms that Christ continued to "see" the Father in His agony, and that this vision was not only not incompatible with His suffering, but made possible the deepest dimension of that suffering: agony over the horrific mass of human sin. For "He alone, who sees the Father and rejoices fully in him, can understand completely what it means to resist the Father's love by sin."

St. Thomas explains this simultaneous presence of contrary affective experiences—agony and the peace of God—through a distinction of objects. The vision of God is one act of knowing in the Word, but this act reveals many different objects. Consideration of God's glory in itself causes immense joy. However, consideration of God's glory offended through the sins and ingratitude of men is capable of causing the deepest sorrow.

The fact, therefore, that Christ possessed the absolute fullness of contemplation does not mean that He could not suffer! Quite the contrary! In our human experience, it

frequently happens that deeper knowledge makes possible a deeper level of suffering. For this reason, animals cannot suffer interiorly as humans can. Great contemplatives like St. Teresa of Avila frequently repeat that contemplatives must suffer greatly, and the closer they get to God, the more they must suffer!¹⁷ The reason for the connection between knowledge and the capacity to suffer is that interior suffering is brought about precisely by intimate and experiential *knowledge* of evil and injustice. The greater the knowledge of evil in its intrinsic disorder, the greater the capacity to suffer from it.

Through the vision of God, the full majesty, love, mercy, and goodness of God was present before Christ's interior eye. And in Gethsemane He saw this majesty offended by every human sin throughout all the centuries: from Adam's transgression and Cain's murder of Abel, through the genocides of the last century, all the way to the last sins of the last times.

The vision of God thus made it possible for Christ's agony in Gethsemane to have a superhuman and truly universal dimension, giving Him full knowledge of every single human sin. We can believe that Christ suffered interiorly with the pains of contrition for every human sin, as if it were His, for He took it on to atone for it. What would this be like? We cannot imagine it, for it is unfathomable. But we have to imagine our own most heartfelt act of contrition for our own sins, and magnify this in two ways: (1) through a perfect knowledge and love of the majesty of God offended by that sin¹⁸; and (2) by an extension of that contrition not just to the sins of one's own life, perfectly seen and understood, but for the sins of every single man who ever lived. He would have seen all human iniquity in all its concrete reality, and grasped in all its fullness the enormity of the offense it constitutes before the infinite majesty of God, seen in all His glory.¹⁹

As foretold in Isaiah, "Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows" (Is 53:4), not in the abstract, but *concretely known and embraced*. Such an act of contrition would evidently have been enough to kill Him, if God had

17 *Way of Perfection*, chap. 36, no. 8.

18 See *Novo millennio ineunte*, no. 26.

19 See Matthew Lamb, "Apokalyptische Unterbrechung und politische Theologie," in *Befristete Zeit* ed. Juergen Manemann (Munster: LIT Verlag, 1999), 239-240, cited in Matthew Levering, *Christ's Fulfillment of Torah and Temple: Salvation according to Thomas Aquinas* (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 2002), p. 175, note 39: "The more we love someone, the more our hearts are broken when they offend us. When Thomas Aquinas states that Jesus Christ in his human consciousness had not the light of faith, as we do, but the light of glory, that in no way dulled his pain or suffering. It did the opposite. The higher the created consciousness, the greater the suffering. Knowing and loving the Triune God both divinely and humanly, only such a human nature united hypostatically to the Word could take up into his human mind and heart each and every human being with all his and her sins and sufferings."

permitted it. Instead He limited its effects to the sweating of blood.

Thus the vision of the glory of God offended by His sinful rational creatures was such as to become the cause of the most momentous suffering that the world would ever know. Indeed, if we ask what was the greatest suffering experienced by Christ in the Passion, we would have to answer that it was precisely this suffering caused by what He chose to contemplate in the vision of the Word of God.

We Can Console Christ Now in His Past Agony

Let us mention one more consequence of Christ's vision of all the actual and potential members of His Mystical Body in the Word. Just as Christ saw our sins in His agony, so He saw our good efforts and little acts of love. Thus our good acts today contributed to console Him in the Garden of Gethsemane, as our sins made Him desolate. Pius XI teaches this in his encyclical on the devotion to the Sacred Heart, *Miserentissimus Redemptor*, no. 13:

Now if, because of our sins also which were as yet in the future, but were foreseen, the soul of Christ became sorrowful unto death, it cannot be doubted that then, too, already He derived somewhat of solace from our reparation, which was likewise foreseen, when "there appeared to Him an angel from heaven" (Lk 22:43), in order that His Heart, oppressed with weariness and anguish, might find consolation. And so even now, in a wondrous yet true manner, we can and ought to console that Most Sacred Heart which is continually wounded by the sins of thankless men.

Although Pius XI does not directly mention Christ's vision of God, this is clearly presupposed as the means by which all of mankind's future sins were "foreseen" simultaneously by Christ in the Garden, together with our good acts that were capable of consoling Him then.

In her *Life*, St. Teresa of Avila speaks of this realization as her decisive conversion after years of lukewarmness. She began to meditate on the Agony of Christ in Gethsemane:

My method of prayer was this. As I could not reason with my mind, I would try to make pictures of Christ inwardly; and I used to think I felt better when I dwelt on those parts of His life when He was most often alone. It seemed to me that His being alone and afflicted, like a person in need, made it possible for me to approach Him. I had many simple thoughts of this kind. I was particularly attached to the prayer in the Garden, where I would go to keep Him company.

We can literally keep Christ company in Gethsemane, if and only if He could see me then when He suffered there. Through His vision of the Mystical Body in the Word, we today can give Christ some relief as He suffered for us. St. Padre Pio developed this consideration in an early

meditation on the Agony in the Garden:

O Jesus, how many generous souls wounded by this complaint have kept Thee company in the Garden, sharing Thy bitterness and Thy mortal anguish ... How many hearts in the course of the centuries have responded generously to Thy invitation ... May this multitude of souls, then, in this supreme hour be a comfort to Thee, who, better than the disciples, share with Thee the distress of Thy heart, and cooperate with Thee for their own salvation and that of others. And grant that I also may be of their number, that I also may offer Thee some relief.²⁰

Conclusion

As it is true that "we are not an indistinct mass before God," it is no less true that we were not an indistinct mass to Christ's human soul, while He lived, suffered, and died for us. It is for this reason that the traditional doctrine that Christ's human soul had the vision of God throughout His earthly life has such importance in catechesis and evangelization. This is not a doctrine that can be safely abandoned without consequences for the life of the Church. On the contrary, the abandonment of this doctrine in contemporary theology has surely contributed to the emptying of the churches and the loss of faith among large sectors of society.

For if Christ did not have the vision of God during His earthly ministry, how could He have known me personally, and given Himself for me? How could He have loved me with a "mad and boundless love"? And if I do not believe that He knew me personally, loved me, and gave Himself for me in my concrete identity, then how can I be an effective witness of the Gospel, or love Him back with a "mad and boundless love"? How can I have a truly personal relationship with Him? As St. Paul's witness of the Gospel was based on the conviction he proclaimed in Gal 2:20, the same must be true of the Church at large. Her effort of evangelization has always been based on this conviction that each of her members has been personally loved by Christ in His human soul on earth, and that we can console—or grieve—Him in His agony. If that conviction is lacking or weakened, the proclamation of Christ will diminish accordingly and lose its vital impulse.

I would say that this point—loss of faith in Christ's vision of God and of His Mystical Body during His earthly life—lies at the very center of the widespread crisis of faith that we have witnessed in recent decades. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger concisely expressed this when he said that only "when we have learned to believe this again . . . [can] evangelization take place."²¹

²⁰ Padre Pio of Pietrelcina, O.F.M. Cap., *The Agony of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane* (Rockford, IL: Tan Books and Publishers, Inc., 1974), 22.

²¹ *Gospel, Catechesis, Catechism*, p. 71.