

love's free Yes is the only thing for which God must wait—the only worship or “sacrifice” that can have any meaning. But the Yes to God, in which man gives himself back to God, cannot be replaced or represented by the blood of bulls and goats. “For what can a man give in return for his life”, it says at one point in the Gospel (Mk 8:37). The answer can only be: There is nothing with which he could compensate for himself.

But as all pre-Christian cults were based on the idea of substitution, of representation, and tried to replace the irreplaceable, this worship was bound to remain vain. In the light of faith in Christ, the Letter to the Hebrews can dare to draw up this devastating balance sheet of the history of religion, although to express this view in a world seething with sacrifices must have seemed a tremendous outrage. It can dare to make this unqualified assertion that religions have run aground because it knows that in Christ the idea of the substitute, of the proxy, has acquired a new meaning. Christ, who in terms of the Law was a layman and held no office in Israel's worship services, was—so the text says—the one true priest in the world. His death, which from a purely historical angle represented a completely profane event—the execution of a man condemned to death as a political offender—was in reality the one and only liturgy of the world, a cosmic liturgy, in which Jesus stepped, not in the limited arena of the liturgical performance, the Temple, but publicly, before the eyes of the world, through the curtain of death into the real temple, that is, before the face of God himself, in order to offer, not things, the blood of animals, or anything like that, but himself (Heb 9:11ff.).

Let us note the fundamental reversal involved in the central idea of this letter; what from the earthly point of view was a secular happening is the true worship for mankind, for

he who performed it broke through the confines of the liturgical act and made truth: he gave himself. He took from man's hands the sacrificial offerings and put in their place his sacrificed personality, his own “I”. When our text says that Jesus accomplished the expiation through his *blood* (9:12), this blood is again not to be understood as a material gift, a quantitatively measurable means of expiation; it is simply the concrete expression of a love of which it is said that it extends “to the end” (Jn 13:1). It is the expression of the totality of his surrender and of his service; an embodiment of the fact that he offers no more and no less than himself. The gesture of the love that gives all—this, and this alone, according to the Letter to the Hebrews, was the real means by which the world was reconciled; therefore the hour of the Cross is the cosmic day of reconciliation, the true and definitive feast of reconciliation. There is no other kind of worship and no other priest but he who accomplished it: Jesus Christ.

c. *The nature of Christian worship*

Accordingly, the nature of Christian worship does not consist in the surrender of things or in any kind of destruction, an idea that has continually recurred since the sixteenth century in theories about the sacrifice of the Mass. According to these theories God's sovereignty over all had to be recognized in this fashion. All these laborious efforts of thought are simply overtaken by the event of Christ and its biblical explanation. Christian worship consists in the absoluteness of love, as it could only be poured out by the one in whom God's own love had become human love; and it consists in the new form of representation included in this love, namely, that he stood for us and that we let ourselves be taken over by him. So it means that we can put aside our own attempts

at justification, which at bottom are only excuses and range us against each other—just as Adam's attempt at justification was an excuse, a pushing of the guilt onto the other, indeed, in the last analysis, an attempt to accuse God himself: "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree" (Gen 3:12). It demands that, instead of indulging in the destructive rivalry of self-justification, we accept the gift of the love of Jesus Christ, who "stands in" for us, allow ourselves to be united in it, and thus become worshippers with him and in him. From this angle it should be possible to answer very briefly a few questions that still arise.

1. In view of the New Testament's message of love, there is more and more of a tendency today to resolve the Christian religion completely into brotherly love, "fellowship", and not to admit any direct love of God or adoration of God: only the horizontal is recognized; the vertical of immediate relationship to God is denied. It is not difficult to see, after what we have said, how this at first sight very attractive conception fails to grasp not only the substance of Christianity but also that of true humanity. Brotherly love that aimed at self-sufficiency would become for this very reason the extreme egoism of self-assertion. It refuses its last openness, tranquility, and selflessness if it does not also accept this love's need for redemption through him who alone loves sufficiently. And, for all its goodwill, in the last resort it does others and itself an injustice, for man cannot perfect himself in the reciprocity of human fellowship alone; he can do this only in the cooperation of that disinterested love which glorifies God himself. The disinterested character of simple adoration is man's highest possibility; it alone forms his true and final liberation.

2. Above all, the traditional Passionide devotions again and again raise the question of the real connection between

sacrifice (and thus worship) and pain. According to the conclusions we reached above, the Christian sacrifice is nothing other than the exodus of the "for" that abandons itself, a process perfected in the man who is all exodus, all self-superseding love. The fundamental principle of Christian worship is consequently this movement of exodus with its two-in-one direction toward God and fellowman. By carrying humanity to God, Christ incorporates it in his salvation. The reason why the happening on the Cross is the bread of life "for the many" (cf. Mt 26:28, Mk 14:24) is that he who was crucified has smelted the body of humanity into the Yes of worship. It is completely "anthropocentric", entirely related to man, because it was radical theocentricity, delivery of the "I" and therefore of the creature man to God. Now to the extent that this exodus of love is the ec-stasy of man outside himself, in which he is stretched out infinitely beyond himself, torn apart, as it were, far beyond his apparent capacity for being stretched, *to the same extent* worship (sacrifice) is always at the same time the Cross, the pain of being torn apart, the dying of the grain of wheat that can come to fruition only in death. But it is thus at the same time clear that this element of pain is a secondary one, resulting only from a preceding primary one, from which alone it draws its meaning. The fundamental principle of the sacrifice is not destruction but love. And even this principle only belongs to the sacrifice to the extent that love breaks down, opens up, crucifies, tears—as the form that love takes in a world characterized by death and self-seeking.

There is an important passage on this subject by Jean Daniélou. It really forms part of a different inquiry but it might well help to elucidate the idea we are striving to understand:

Between the heathen world and the threefold God there is only one link, and that is the Cross of Christ. Yet when we move into this no-man's land and try afresh to twich the threads that link the heathen world and the threefold God, should we still be surprised that we can only do it in the Cross of Christ? We must make ourselves resemble this Cross, bear it within ourselves, "always carrying in the body the death of Jesus", as St. Paul says of the preacher of the faith (2 Cor 4:10). This feeling of being torn asunder, which is a cross to us, this inability of our heart to carry within itself simultaneously love of the most holy Trinity and love of a world alienated from the Trinity, is precisely the death agony of the only begotten Son, an agony he calls on us to share. He who bore this division within himself in order to abolish it within himself, and who could only abolish it because he had previously borne it within himself—he reaches from one end to the other. Without leaving the bosom of the Trinity, he stretches out to the ultimate limit of human misery and fills the whole space in between. This stretching out of Christ, symbolized by the four directions of the Cross, is the mysterious expression of our own dismemberment and makes us like him.⁵

In the last analysis pain is the product and expression of Jesus Christ's being stretched out from being in God right down to the hell of "My God, why have you forsaken me?" Anyone who has stretched his existence so wide that he is simultaneously immersed in God and in the depths of the God-forsaken creature is bound to be torn asunder, as it were; such a one is truly "crucified". But this process of being torn apart is identical with love; it is its realization to the extreme (Jn 13:1) and the concrete expression of the breadth it creates.

⁵ J. Daniélou, *Essai sur le mystère de l'histoire* (Paris, 1953).

From this standpoint it should be possible to bring out clearly the true basis of meaningful devotion to the Passion; it should also become evident how devotion to the Passion and apostolic spirituality overlap. It should become evident that the apostolic element—service to man and in the world—is permeated with the very essence of Christian mysticism and of Christian devotion to the Cross. The two do not impede each other; at the deepest level, each lives on the other. Thus it should now also be plain that with the Cross it is not a matter of an accumulation of physical pain, as if its redemptive value consisted in its involving the largest possible amount of physical torture. Why should God take pleasure in the suffering of his creature, indeed his own Son, or even see in it the currency with which reconciliation has to be purchased from him? The Bible and right Christian belief are far removed from such ideas. It is not pain as such that counts but the breadth of the love that spans existence so completely that it unites the distant and the near, bringing God-forsaken man into relation with God. It alone gives the pain an aim and a meaning. Were it otherwise, then the executioners around the Cross would have been the real priests; they, who had caused the pain, would have offered the sacrifice. But this was not the point; the point was that inner center that bears and fulfills the pain, and therefore the executioners were not the priests; the priest was Jesus, who reunited the two separated ends of the world in his love (Eph 2:13f.).

Basically this also answers the question with which we started, whether it is not an unworthy concept of God to imagine for oneself a God who demands the slaughter of his Son to pacify his wrath. To such a question one can only reply, indeed, God must not be thought of in this way. But in any case such a concept of God has nothing to do with the idea of God to be found in the New Testament. The New Testament is the story of the God who of his own accord

wished to become, in Christ, the Omega—the last letter—in the alphabet of creation. It is the story of the God who is himself the act of love, the pure “for”, and who therefore necessarily puts on the disguise of the smallest worm (Ps 22:6 [21:7]). It is the story of the God who identifies himself with his creature and in this *contineri a minimo*, in being grasped and overpowered by the least of his creatures, displays that “excess” that identifies him as God.

The Cross is revelation. It reveals, not any particular thing, but God and man. It reveals who God is and in what way man is. There is a curious presentiment of this situation in Greek philosophy: Plato’s image of the crucified “just man”. In the *Republic* the great philosopher asks what is likely to be the position of a completely just man in this world. He comes to the conclusion that a man’s righteousness is only complete and guaranteed when he takes on the appearance of unrighteousness, for only then is it clear that he does not follow the opinion of men but pursues justice only for its own sake. So according to Plato the truly just man must be misunderstood and persecuted in this world; indeed, Plato goes so far as to write: “They will say that our just man will be scourged, racked, fettered, will have his eyes burned out, and at last, after all manner of suffering, will be crucified.”⁶ This passage, written four hundred years before Christ, is always bound to move a Christian deeply. Serious philosophical thinking here surmises that the completely just man in this world must be the crucified just man;

⁶ *Republic*, bk. 2, 361e–362a, in A. D. Lindsay’s translation. Cf. on this theme H. U. von Balthasar, *Heiligkeit III/1*, Einsiedeln, 1965, pp. 156–161 [English translation: *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 4: *The Realm of Metaphysics in Antiquity*, trans. Brian McNeil et al. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), pp. 170–75]; E. Benz, “Der gekreuzigte Gerechte bei Plato, im NT und in der alten Kirche”, *Abhandlungen der Mainzer Akademie* 1950, no. 12.

something is sensed of that revelation of man which comes to pass on the Cross.

The fact that when the perfectly just man appeared he was crucified, delivered up by justice to death, tells us pitilessly who man is: Thou art such, man, that thou canst not bear the just man—that he who simply loves becomes a fool, a scourged criminal, an outcast. Thou art such because, unjust thyself, thou dost always need the injustice of the next man in order to feel excused and thus canst not tolerate the just man who seems to rob thee of this excuse. Such art thou. St. John summarized all this in the *Ecce homo* (“Look, this is [the] man!”) of Pilate, which means quite fundamentally: This is how it is with man; this is man. The truth of man is his complete lack of truth. The saying in the Psalms that every man is a liar (Ps 116 [115]:11 [*Domay-Rheims*]) and lives in some way or other against the truth already reveals how it really is with man. The truth about man is that he is continually assailing truth; the just man crucified is thus a mirror held up to man in which he sees himself unadorned. But the Cross does not reveal only man; it also reveals God. God is such that he identifies himself with man right down into this abyss and that he judges him by saving him. In the abyss of human failure is revealed the still more inexhaustible abyss of divine love. The Cross is thus truly the center of revelation, a revelation that does not reveal any previously unknown principles but reveals us to ourselves by revealing us before God and God in our midst.

end

3. “DESCENDED INTO HELL”

Possibly no article of the Creed is so far from present-day attitudes of mind as this one. Together with the belief in the birth of Jesus from the Virgin Mary and that in the Ascension of the