

XII

REDEMPTION

SUFFERING AND DEATH

ONCE we have come to some understanding of who and what the Redeemer is, we are in a better condition to see into the meaning of redemption.

For the state from which humanity needed to be redeemed it would be well to reread the section on the Fall of Man. Here we may summarize briefly the principal element in it. Owing to the sin of the first man, the race had lost its union with God; a breach lay between. Where God and man had been at one, they were now at two: till at-one-ment, atone-ment, was made, heaven was closed to the race's members.

God could, of course, have simply written off the race as a failure. He could, as simply, have forgiven the sin. He did neither. He chose that in human nature the sin committed in human nature should be expiated.

For the act by which Christ redeemed us was a wholly human act. The life He offered as sacrifice was His human life; an offering of the divine life would have been meaningless. The suffering was in His soul and body; the death was the separation of His soul and body.

In Him, humanity gave its all, holding back nothing. Here was a total obedience as against the disobedience of man's sin, a total acceptance and self-surrender as against the thrust and self-assertion of man's sin. And all this was wholly in human nature.

But He who performed the act was God: actions, we have seen, are always in the nature, but the person does them: and the Person whose human nature this was, in whose human nature all this was done, was, is, God the Son. Because He was truly man, His sacrifice was truly human, so that it could be set against the sin of the race. But because He was God, His act had an infinite value, by which it compensated, outweighed, not only all the sin men ever had committed but all they ever could. That, in essence, is why it is redemptive.

Every act of Christ was infinite in value because He who performed it was God. Why then did He offer His death, and not some lesser act—the tears, for example, that He shed over Jerusalem? It is always perilous to think one knows why God does one thing and not another. His ways are unsearchable, our mind is not His.

But at least we can say that had He chosen some offering less than His life, there would have been a permanent feeling in the mind of man—not dissatisfaction exactly, but not total satisfaction either. We should have been left with the sense that in our redemption Christ's human nature had played only a token part, leaving the infinity of the divine Person to do the whole work. Whereas He chose that His human nature should give its all, leaving the Person to provide only the infinite value which human nature never could provide.

Observe the words "He chose". No man could inflict death upon Him against His will. He says again and again that He will "lay down" His life for His sheep. "I am laying down My life to take it up again afterwards. Nobody can rob Me of it; I lay it down of My own accord" (John x. 17-18). He did not choose that men should slay Him, of course. But since men willed to slay Him because He had fearlessly spoken the word of God against them, He chose to let them do the worst that was in them. Through love, He Himself

would be the victim offered in sacrifice: they would slay Him, He would offer His death for the sins of all men, including theirs.

It is essential at this point to reread what Matthew (Chapter XXVI), Mark (Chapter XIV) and Luke (Chapter XXII) have to tell us of the Agony in the Garden.

He would take upon Himself the sins of men that the offering He made of Himself might be real expiation. In Gethsemane we get some glimpse of what the taking meant to Him. For nothing He does is fiction or pretence. He could not make His own the guilt of other men's sins, for guilt can be only in the sinner. But He took the burden of them, the weight: above all, the weight of the sorrow that we, all men, should have felt for our sins and have not felt. It all but killed Him.

But His Father, answering His agonized prayer, sent an angel "to comfort Him". For that hour He lived. Death waited for Calvary.

PASSION, RESURRECTION AND ASCENSION

In the Ordinary of the Mass a grouping of words occurs twice which, unless we realize that in the Liturgy no word is wasted, we might simply take in our stride, not noticing the remarkable thing it is saying. (I for one thus took it in my stride for thirty years or thereabouts.)

Between the washing of the hands and the *Orate Fratres* the priest asks the Holy Trinity to receive "this oblation which we offer to Thee in memory of the passion, resurrection and ascension of Our Lord Jesus Christ."

After the consecration the priest says that we offer the sacrifice in memory, not of Christ's passion only, but also of His resurrection from the grave and, as well, of His glorious ascension into heaven.

The point of each is the same, but emphasized more strongly in the second: the sacrifice commemorates not only the suffering and death on Calvary, but the Resurrection and Ascension as well. The Resurrection is not simply a sign that one man has conquered death; the Ascension is not simply a way of letting the Apostles know that their Christ had really left this world. Both have their function, along with Calvary, in our redemption. Both belong to the completeness of the sacrifice by which the breach between the race and God was healed, grace was set flowing in a vast new abundance, heaven was opened to the members of the race.

Let us pause a moment upon this Sacrifice: for us it is of all actions the highest, since by it our race was redeemed. From the beginning men, though they did not know what ultimately would be wrought by it, still saw sacrifice as the highest act of religion. It was a public act, a ritual act, performed by one for the people; by it something was withdrawn from man's personal use, made sacred, offered to God in profession that all man had was God's.

Of course, that man should offer is not the whole story; unless God approves and accepts, all is vain. There were occasions in the Old Testament where God showed His approval publicly—as by sending fire from heaven upon the offering.

But only in the supreme sacrifice of our redemption does God show His approval and acceptance publicly, totally. In the Resurrection God gives the visible sign that the Priest who offered His own body and blood in sacrifice was wholly pleasing to Him. In the Ascension God shows visibly that He is actually taking to Himself that which has been offered to Him.

Christ ascends to His Father, to be with Him for ever, with the marks of His sacrifice still, but now glorious, in His body—the everlasting reminder that man's sin has been expiated, that the breach has been closed between God and man, that

they are again as they were in the beginning of man, at one. So the Epistle to the Hebrews (vii. 25) shows Christ in heaven, "ever living to make intercession for us".

At the Last Supper, Our Lord had told the Apostles that He must go; and, answering their anguish, He gives as the all-sufficient reason that if He does not go, the Holy Spirit will not come. For Christ, everything is in that. The order broken by Adam's sin has been re-established, or rather, a better order has been established: that was for the second Person. Now is the time for such a rich flowing of gifts as the souls of men have never known. And gifts are the fruit of love, and so are appropriated to the third Person, who within the Blessed Trinity is the uttered love of the first Person and the Second.

At the Last Supper Christ had promised His followers that when He went to the Father, He would send the Holy Spirit. At the Ascension, on the point of going to the Father, He told them to return to Jerusalem, and await the Holy Spirit's coming: who ten days later descended upon them—on Pentecost (the word means "Fiftieth," summing the forty days from Resurrection to Ascension, and the ten days from that).

Before proceeding to the great question of how we are to be made partakers of Christ's redemptive act, we may cast a brief glance at the vanquished in the great conflict fought upon Calvary, the one who had been victorious in that first conflict in the dawn of our history—Satan.

It has already been noted that as the Passion draws near, Our Lord is continually conscious of *the* Enemy, mentioning Satan again and again. Satan was conscious of Christ too, but he did not know Christ as Christ knew him. It is ironical that he rushed upon his defeat—for, we are told by St. Luke and St. John, it was he who moved Judas to betray the Lord to His slayers.

TRUTH, LIFE, UNION

At the Last Supper Our Lord uttered the words which are at once the formula of our redemption, and the charter of His Church. "I am the way and the truth and the life. No man cometh unto the Father but by Me."

It is possible to have known and loved the phrase all one's life, yet not have given much actual thought to what it contains; there is so much splendour in the saying that one may fail to grasp what is being said. To anyone whose experience this has so far been, it will be valuable to pause now and make his own examination of those superb words, before going on to read mine.

A first thought may be of wonder why, if Our Lord is the Way, there is need for more: why are truth and life added? If He is the Way, when you have found Him you have found all. But the two additional words are there to challenge us. With them we are face to face with a reality at once frightening and stimulating. It is the reality St. Paul expressed: "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. ii. 12).

Salvation is not handed to us on a platter: in no sense is it a labour-saving device. What Christ does for men is what men cannot do for themselves, not what they can: what they can, they should. To have found the way is not the end, it is the beginning. The way is not the goal. Only the goal is, for us, permanence: the way may be lost.

We might lose the way, as we might lose any way, either by wandering from it through error, or by lacking the strength for the effort—the "fear and trembling"—that following it to the end demands. As against the danger of losing the way we need truth. As against the danger of falling by the way-side we need life—Our Lord came that we might have life

“and more abundantly” (John x. 10)—the life of sanctifying grace.

And what in any event does Our Lord mean by calling Himself the Way? He tells us the answer Himself: “No man cometh unto the Father but by me.” It is in union with Him, and only so, that men come to that everlasting union with God which is their destiny.

Salvation then involves truth, life, union with the God-Man. How these are to be ours He tells in the words He utters on a mountain in Galilee between His rising from the dead and His rising into heaven to present before the throne of God the sacrifice of our salvation. To the Apostles—the eleven still with Him—He says: “Go and teach all nations; baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost; teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded. And behold I am with you all days even to the end of the world” (Matt. xxviii. 19-20).

Observe how closely this follows the great formula of the Last Supper—truth, life, union.

Truth first. They are to *teach*, and teach all things. He had told them earlier (Matt. xiii. 11) that whereas He had taught the rest in parables, to them He spoke plainly. He had promised them at the Last Supper (John xvi. 13) that when the Holy Ghost came He should lead them into all truth: how? by bringing to their mind all that Our Lord had told them. And now they were to teach this great mass of truth to all nations.

Next, life. They were to baptize: baptism means being born again of water and the Holy Ghost (John iii. 5). To be born means to enter into the life of this world. To be born again means to enter into a higher life. And these were the men to whom He had given other powers for the dispensing of life. They were to forgive sins (John xx. 23): that is, to give back the life of grace to those who had lost it by sin. And

they were to change bread and wine into His body and blood—the very food of our life: for He had said to the multitudes: “Unless you shall eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood you shall not have life in you” (John vi. 54).

What of union? Look again. “Behold *I am with you* all days even to the end of the world.”

Through the Apostles—and, since it was to be until the world should end, through their successors—we were to find the truth, the life, the union by which we shall be saved.