



5

Dying and Rising with Christ

“When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles with him... Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, ‘This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood’.”

— Luke 22:14, 19, 20.

a. “Who will separate us from the love of Christ?”

Jesus does not seek out and does not wish for suffering but, “*his hour*” having come and in the face of the inevitable, he approaches it with great lucidity. St. John expresses it in solemn terms at the beginning of his narrative of the Last Supper:

“...Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end... Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God...”

— John 13:1, 3

The solemnity of the tone and the seriousness of the moment underscore strongly the importance of the gestures Jesus was about to carry out and of the instruction he would give his disciples to repeat those gestures in memory of him: he washed their feet as a slave might, in order to illustrate his commandment that they serve one another¹; and he instituted the Eucharist, sacrament of the sacrifice of his Body and the pouring-out of his Blood, “*blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins*”.²

¹ John 13:1-20.

² Matthew 26:28.

From a purely human point of view, the death of Jesus is senseless: an appalling torture, endured in abandonment and mockery, following false accusations, an unfair trial, betrayal by one trusted associate and repudiation by another, and the scattering of friends... It is a chasm of suffering, one example among many of death in dreadful circumstances due to human cruelty and barbarism.

Jesus gives meaning, however, to this otherwise absurd death, through his words and gestures at his last supper. By the power of his Word and of the Holy Spirit, he transforms his death into a moment of salvation and a gift of life, into what we hear in the Eucharistic Prayer at every Mass: a death *“for you and for many”*.

Here we encounter the extraordinary depth of the Incarnation and of the Paschal mystery: not only is it the case that *“the Word became flesh”*³ but the Word became *this man* Jesus, who lived and suffered as one of us, who died as one of us, and who gives himself to us in the mystery of this death transformed into a gift of life.

At the heart of Christian life is the welcoming of this gift: a personal, spiritual, interior and intimate union with Christ crucified, died and risen again. This possibility of being so intimately united with Christ is God’s ultimate and definitive response to the question of the meaning of life, of suffering, and of death. Countless Christians from every walk of life have experienced this over the centuries: the deeply liberating experience of the Pascal Mystery.

*“Through Christ and in Christ, the riddles of sorrow and death grow meaningful. Apart from His Gospel, they overwhelm us.”*⁴

The dread of Holy Thursday and the sufferings of Good Friday are not avoided, but become a path to the Resurrection in the dazzling light of Easter, following the great silence of Holy Saturday. It is as though Christ were saying to each of us, in the secret of our deepest worries and sufferings: “Do not be afraid, come with me, I am going first to clear the path; I will hold you by the hand and I will be with you always.”

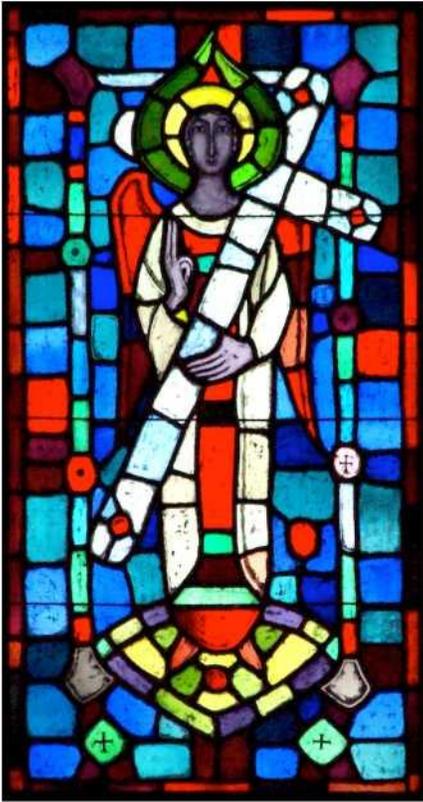
Thus like St. Paul we can say:

“Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?... I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

— Romans 8:35, 38-39

³ John 1:14

⁴ Second Vatican Council, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church on the Modern World (Gaudium et spes)*, 1965, para. 22(6).



“I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is 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.”

— Galatians 2:19-20

b. “It is Christ who lives in me.”

Can a profound union with Christ lead us as far as communion with his sufferings? Can a person who continues to suffer, despite all care, medication, or treatments, – suffer physically and (perhaps especially, as is sometimes the case) psychologically, emotionally and even spiritually – can such a person find meaning and even value in this suffering, by being with Christ and joined to Christ?

Trying to answer this question demands great prudence, for we know the exaggerations and distortions that this may have caused in the past. Finding meaning in suffering does not mean that one seeks out suffering or desires it, but that, faced with the inevitable, one is not limited merely to resignation or despair. There is another way.

From this point of view we can read a startling and, truth be told, rather mysterious passage from St. Paul’s letter to the Colossians, where he wrote, literally, *“Now I am rejoicing in the sufferings for you and I am completing what is lacking of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body which is the Church.”*⁵

Paul is no masochist. When he says *“I am rejoicing in my sufferings,”* it is not because he enjoys sufferings, but he sees in the unavoidable sufferings occasioned by his life and work a way to be even more deeply united to Christ by resembling him more closely. For St. Paul, these sufferings become a way of “completing what

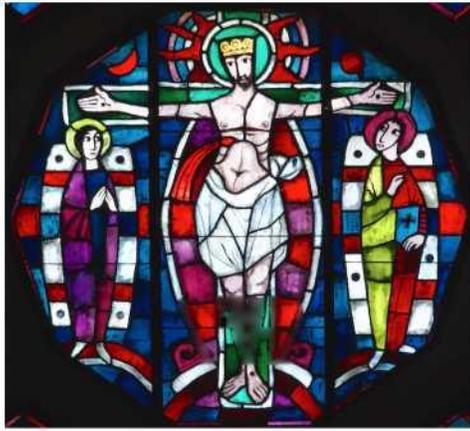
⁵ Word for word translation of Paul's original text (in ancient Greek) of *Colossians* 1:24.

is lacking of the afflictions of Christ in his own flesh” to perfect his union with and likeness of the suffering Christ. This is why he goes so far as to state that “*it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.*” No one can say how many people have taken a similar route in the secrecy of their own personal relationship with the Lord. However, what the Word of God suggests is that such a route is one possible path, and that the path can be spiritually fruitful.

The final testimony of Pope St. John Paul II comes to mind, of course. We know how much his life was marked by difficult trials and to what extent his final years involved suffering. At the end of his book *Memory and Identity*, published just a few weeks before his death in 2005, he confided the following, by all appearances revealing his own experience:

*“There is no evil from which God cannot draw forth a greater good. There is no suffering which he cannot transform into a path leading to him.”*⁶

c “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”



“It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, while the sun’s light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, ‘Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.’ Having said this, he breathed his last.”

— Luke 23:44-46

Jesus filial prayer includes the whole range of emotions that can be provoked by suffering and the approach of death: from a sense of extreme and ultimate loneliness – “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*”⁷ – to the Son’s trusting attitude: “*Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.*”

We have no better role model than Jesus to become fully human as God has conceived of us and willed us to be: his death reveals to us that the final step of life is, in a manner of speaking, the ultimate letting-go: not to seek to have total mastery, total control of one’s life and even one’s death, but to become able to place oneself entirely in God’s hands. From this point of view, weakness and the loss of resources can be approached as the final step in the growth of the human person, whereby even complete dependence on others, like that of a small child, becomes the path *par excellence* to the definitive achievement. “*Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*”⁸

⁶ John Paul II, *Memory and Identity*, (New York: Rizzoli, 2005), p. 167.

⁷ *Mark* 15:34, quoting *Psalm* 22:1.

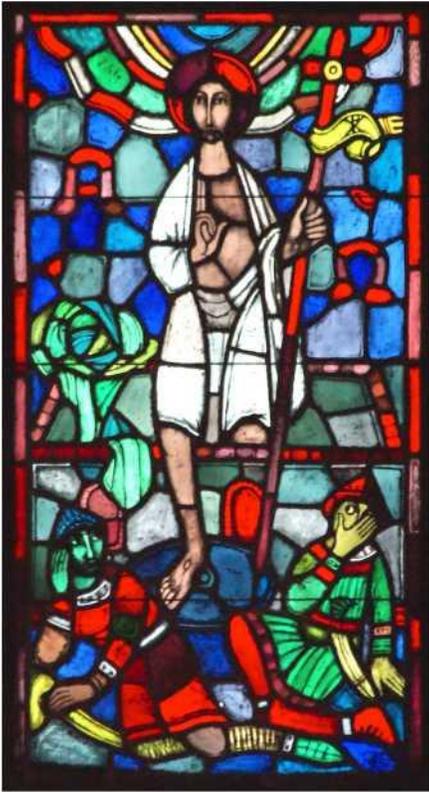
⁸ *Matthew* 18:3.

Dying along with Christ will be the final act of faith in a Christian life. For our loved ones, for those around us, it can also be received as the final witness of faith of the person who is leaving this life – whispering perhaps the prayer of aged Simeon at the moment when Jesus was presented in the Temple, a prayer that is taken up every night in the Church's liturgy, during the Divine Office for Compline:

“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word...”

– Luke 2:29





“God did not make death, and he does not delight in the death of the living. For he created all things so that they might exist.”

— Wisdom 1:13-14

“This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day.”

— John 6:40

“Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”

— John 11:25-26

d. “United with him in a resurrection like his.”

“Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live... I will raise them up on the last day... Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die...” Strengthened by such promises from the Lord, we can confess with the Church of every age, as we do in the funeral liturgy, that at death *“life is changed, not ended.”*⁹

Thus in reality we shall never truly be at the “end of life”. Eternal life has already begun.

“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.”

— Romans 6:3-5

This is an unprecedented revelation: through Christ and in him, death becomes a transition, not an end-point. The Paschal mystery – the death and resurrection of Christ – thus enters and transforms our concrete existence even now, imparting an eternal dimension and value to everything we live: our loves, our joys, our sorrows, our delights, as well as our trials and sufferings. One’s relationship with Christ becomes the foundation for everything.

⁹ From the liturgy of the Mass, taken from the first Preface for the Dead.

“If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God... But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being.”

— I Corinthians 15:13-15, 20-21.

In his book *Jesus of Nazareth*, Benedict XVI summarized in a few lines the essence of this fundamental Christian conviction:

*“ ‘Eternal life’ is thus a relational event. Man did not acquire it from himself or for himself alone... Man has found life when he adheres to him who is himself Life. Then much that pertains to him can be destroyed. Death may remove him from the biosphere, but the life that reaches beyond it – real life – remains... The relationship to God in Jesus Christ is the source of a life that no death can take away.”*¹⁰

In the end, is this not the primary source of that joy of which Pope Francis loves to speak, that joy which is, as he says, like a ray of light even in the most difficult of circumstances?

*“The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus... I realize of course that joy is not expressed the same way at all times in life, especially at moments of great difficulty. Joy adapts and changes, but it always endures, even as a flicker of light born of our personal certainty that, when everything is said and done, we are infinitely loved.”*¹¹



¹⁰ Joseph Ratzinger (Benedict XVI), *Jesus of Nazareth, Part Two - Holy Week: From the Entrance Into Jerusalem To The Resurrection*. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), p. 85.

¹¹ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *The Joy of the Gospel* (November 24, 2013), paras. 1 and 6.

To receive and meditate on the Word of God :

a. “Who will separate us from the love of Christ?”



What link does Jesus make between his looming death and his words over the bread and wine at his last supper? What does this tell me about the meaning of receiving the Eucharist? How can we say that an intimate union with the Lord is able to transform lives, even in our hardest moments?

b. “It is Christ who lives in me.”



How do I understand the link that St. Paul draws between his own life and the sufferings of Christ? What do his words mean for me: “*It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me*”?

c. “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”



What does Jesus teach us about death in these words? What does it mean to die?

d. “United with him in a resurrection like his.”



Why does St. Paul state that Christian faith is empty and void if Christ is not risen? What connection does he make between Baptism and resurrection?



To continue reflecting or to stimulate discussion:

- What touches me most about this step in the journey of reflection, entitled *Dying and Rising with Christ*? Which passage from God's Word speaks to me most?
 - What does the death of Jesus reveal to us about the real meaning of "dying with dignity"?
 - How is my relationship with Christ expressed in my daily life, especially in difficult moments and experiences of sorrow and suffering?
 - How can one prepare oneself or another person to face the end of this life, in a relationship with Christ and his Body, which is the Church?
 - What space might we give in personal and community prayer to intercession for persons who, while lacking or refusing a relationship with Christ, are nearing death?
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*To wrap up this journey of reflection
on end-of-life care in the light of God's Word :*

- To what kind of personal conversion, or even commitment, does this reflection lead me?
 - What is a genuine aid in dying, from the point of view of the Christian faith?
 - What challenges must be taken up by the Church, in our local and diocesan communities, in the context created by the *Act respecting end-of-life care*?
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*Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.
Worship the Lord with gladness;
come into his presence with singing.*

*Know that the Lord is God.
It is he that made us, and we are his;
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.*

*Enter his gates with thanksgiving,
and his courts with praise.
Give thanks to him, bless his name.*

*For the Lord is good;
his steadfast love endures forever,
and his faithfulness to all generations.*

*Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,
as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,
world without end. Amen.*

– Psalm 100





Notes

Assembly of Québec Catholics Bishops

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Step five of

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a journey of reflection in five steps***

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