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Elizabeth Shaw, Editor

Teaching the Faith

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Did Christ Have to Suffer and Die?

By Rev. Brian Mullady, O.P., S.T.D.

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

February 9, 2014

Readings: Isaiah 58.7-10,

1 Corinthians 2.1-5, Matthew 5.13-16

Good taste and a zest for life come only from the divine life of grace. Adam and Eve enjoyed this greatly before the Fall. For them, every day was an adventure in grace because they were able to look at time from the perspective of eternity and walk and talk with God as an intimate in the Garden of Eden. They enjoyed a youth and innocence born of the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Spiritual zest for life comes from the peace of a right conscience and an integral spirit where one really enjoys doing good for others. This is born of the light of a divine knowledge of faith. Those who have the eternal God present in their souls always have something to share. Adam and Eve spent their days in the Garden giving and receiving the gift of themselves in communion of life.

The Effects of Original Sin

When sin entered the world, however, life became insipid and was filled with ignorance, because man no longer regarded the world from the supernatural point of view. This led to ennui in the inner life, expressed in things like the sin of acedia, the deliberate refusal to rejoice in the good and the beautiful. People also fell into the spiritual darkness in which they began to view life from a narrow, materialist perspective.

In turn, instead giving themselves in service to others, people began to look upon others as objects for exploitation and domination. Thus concupiscence, which is primarily a desire to dominate others, entered the world. The capstone of the punishments for Original Sin was the universal human experience of suffering and death.

To Remedy Sin

Fasting was one of the penances recommended in the Old Testament to remedy the spiritually dead perspective of materialism and the desire to exploit others.

Many people have thought the value of fasting comes from the amount of pain one endures. But Christ makes clear that those who fast are not to look glum. Fasting for Christ has a more significant spiritual purpose connected with charity: The value of fasting is not in the pain it inflicts but in the love it strengthens. This fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah that we read today: "Is not this the fast I choose. . . . Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?" (Is 58.6-7)

Fasting which is oriented to charity brings light back into the soul and into a world inflicted by spiritual darkness. "Then shall your light break forth like the dawn. . . . Then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday" (Is 58.8-10). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is at pains to explain that the practices of the Old Law, while good in themselves, do not give grace but merely point out the need for redemption. They are stimuli to look forward in faith to the coming of the Messiah.

The Original Sin which the Messiah was sent to cure had two punishments which the Messiah embraced to return humanity to grace. Original Sin entailed both the unloving disobedience of Adam and Eve and the corresponding penalties of ignorance, malice and concupiscence, as well as the punishment of suffering and death. Christ's atonement, consequently, entailed two fitting movements: loving obedience and the restoration of the Holy Spirit in the soul, and the just retribution caused by embracing some punishment for the sin.

Why Christ's Suffering?

True, God has the power to atone for our sin by just forgetting it. But since God's power is also rooted in his wisdom, atonement had to be accomplished by someone who was not liable for the punishment, someone who could obey in our place and also who could pay for an infinite offense against God. Atonement for human sin requires someone who is in person the Word and has both a divine and human nature. It is fitting for the Word in wisdom to assume a human nature, because only someone with a human intellect and will could lovingly obey and suffer just punishment for sin.

Christ therefore came to earth to reverse the unloving disobedience of Adam by loving God so much in the sheer goodness of his human will that he would obey, despite having to suffer some punishment which he did not deserve.

Though Christ is the prime truth and teacher of the human race – indeed, he is eternal wisdom itself – he is not just a philosopher, like Socrates or Buddha, who teaches the human race a simple doctrine of love and middle-class morals. He must be something more: a redeemer. As a faithful disciple of Christ, Saint Paul explains: “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” (1 Cor 2.1-2).

Christ’s suffering and death are the punishments he assumed for us. Though there were other punishments for Original Sin, including ignorance, weakness, and malice, it was not in accord with holy wisdom for Christ to assume any of these. For these would detract from his perfect and loving obedience; they would make his obedience less spontaneous and thus less a matter of choice.

Instead, Christ assumed only the non-moral punishments for Original Sin: suffering and death. He assumed the kinds of suffering which pertain to the human race in general, not the kinds of suffering that are borne only by some individuals. For example, he was hungry, thirsty, and experienced the discomforts of coldness and heat, and if his body was cut or bruised he experienced physical pain. He did not, however, experience special maladies like the flu or blindness, as this would not accord with the universal purpose of his mission.

No Suffering God Does Not Understand

It is true that Christ suffered intensely in his death. But he was not brought to his death against his will. “No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again” (John 10.18).

Crucifixion is one of the most terrible means of execution ever practiced. Christ added to this the torments of false accusation, rejection by his friends, unjust condemnation, the suffering of his mother, and a whole host of other exterior pains. He took all these on himself in order to destroy their power through his loving obedience. God in Christ wished to demonstrate to the human race that there is no suffering we can experience which God does not understand: Christ knows them all, and precisely as a human.

It might seem that Christ vacillated in the Garden of Gethsemane: “Father, if you are willing, remove this chalice from me; nevertheless not my will, but yours, be done” (Luke 22.42). He was so compromised by his suffering that he sweat blood. The general theological tradition of the Church maintains that he understood through his Beatific Knowledge every personal sin which would ever exist in the history of the human race.

He was terrified and greatly saddened by the specter of the human race denying God, as well as by the immediate suffering he would experience. On one level of his being (his passions and desire for survival) he shrank from this suffering. Yet in his will he made a firm choice to suffer, because he also knew about the resurrection.

In addition to this physical and social torment, on the cross Christ felt abandoned, for he cried out: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mt 27.46) Some have thought this was a cry of despair and existential angst, and they suggest that Christ had lost faith and thrown himself into the blackness of the unknown. This interpretation, however, is not well grounded and, indeed, must be false.

Recall that Christ’s statement on the cross is a verse from Psalm 22, and this psalm is very far from a cry of despair. It ends, in fact, with the supreme confidence of the intensely suffering psalmist. God’s love and wisdom are completed by his power. In the same vein, Saint Paul writes: “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 the demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God” (1 Cor 2.3-5).

Christ suffers by the power of God and is raised from the dead by the power of God. He merits our redemption in his human nature and completes his atonement by sending the Holy Spirit through the action of the Church into the hearts of the faithful. When each of the faithful receives that Spirit, they too allow the Spirit to return savor to life through the salt of wisdom, truth, and the light of grace. The practical charity that each of us exhibits, precisely by rooting out our faults and growing in grace, is our share in the cross of Christ.

The *Imitation of Christ* is clear that our primary cross is ourselves. But by dying to sin and living generously for others, we become the salt of the earth and the light of the world. “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Mt 5.16).

As Saint Thomas Aquinas used to pray:

*Crux mihi certa salus
Crux est quam semper adoro
Crux Domini mecum
Crux mihi refugium.*

The Cross is my sure salvation
The Cross I ever adore
The Cross of my Lord is with me
The Cross is my refuge.

About the Author

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FOR FURTHER READING

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Benedict XVI, "The Cross," in *God and the World: Believing and Living in Our Time* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002), available at: <http://catholiceducation.org/articles/religion/re0830.htm>

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- **God in Christ wished to demonstrate to the human race that there is no suffering we experience which God does not understand: Christ knows them all, and precisely as a human.**
- **On the cross Christ felt abandoned, as he cried out: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"**
- **But this statement on the cross is a verse from Psalm 22, which ends with the supreme confidence of the intensely suffering psalmist: God's love and wisdom are completed by his power.**
- **Our primary cross is ourselves; but by dying to sin and living generously for others, we become the salt of the earth and the light of the world.**