

ONE

Redemption and Personal Sanctification



In St. John's Gospel, Christ generally makes a brief comment on all his actions: "Know you what I have done to you . . . being your Lord and Master?" (Jn 13:12–13)—for every action has a meaning. At Cana he refers to the hour when all "the signs" will be accomplished, when the true transformation of water into wine will take place: "My hour is not yet come" (Jn 2:4). After the multiplication of the loaves, he proclaims mankind's true bread come down from heaven. Before curing the man born blind, he declares that he is the light of the world. Before raising Lazarus, he speaks of the resurrection of eternal life.

So, when the hour is about to strike, when all Christ's life is to come to its fulfilment, he says a solemn prayer. We call it the High-Priestly Prayer. We might equally call it the commentary on Christ's Mass on Calvary, and on every other Mass, or the *Memento* listing the intentions for which this unique sacrifice, which the other Masses said every day merely make present to us, was offered.

The intentions of that Mass, of every Mass, were expressed by Christ in these words: "For them do I sanctify myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth" (Jn 17:19).

“I sanctify myself”

Was he not already holy? “That which shall be born of thee shall be Holy, Son of God” (Lk 1:35). He was, and in a sense, his holiness was so perfect that it could not be increased.

But our word “sanctify” does not give all the richness of the word Christ used. It would be better translated, “I consecrate myself to God.” And, as the phrase is used in the Bible, this would mean, “I consecrate myself to God in immolation; I vow myself to God by a total renunciation of myself.”

To give anything to God, that thing must be withdrawn from all profane use, taken out of this world far from God, and borne into the very sanctuary of divine holiness. The sanctification spoken of by Christ meant both immolation and giving to God. In the Old Testament, the word “sanctify” was a sacrificial word; a victim was sanctified by being taken out of its profane existence and placed in the sphere of God’s holiness.

“I sanctify myself,” said Christ; I die to myself that I may only be to God; I leave this earthly existence to enter the holy, immortal life of God.

Though he was consecrated from the beginning, he sought a more total consecration, a more complete union with God. He often repeated, “I go to my Father.” Between him and the Father there was a distance (though not of a spatial kind) that must be overcome; he must return to his Father, not by a movement in space, but by a sanctification, by dying to this world of sin and rising in God. And in this *Vade ad patrem*, this personal sanctification of Christ, the redemption of mankind took place.

Christ in the world of sin

In biblical thought, the unredeemed world is a world cut off from God and his life and given over to death. It is closed in upon itself in an autonomy of wretchedness, a kind of gaol (Gal 3:22; Rom 11:32), with sin, death, the law, and the powers of nature personified, in St. Paul’s dramatic thinking, as its warders. And

behind all these powers is the shadow of another, the “prince of this world” of despair.

Lacking the Spirit, who is the life-giving holiness of God, shut up in a universe of sin, man has no way out into life. Any movement must be along the way of all flesh—to damnation and death. No road could lead him away from damnation, because damnation was built into his very existence, in his flesh doomed to sin and death. “Unhappy man that I am, who shall deliver me from this body of death?” (Rom 7:24).

To save me from “this world” and its damnation, is it enough that Christ should die for me? How can anyone die in my place, when I bear sin and death within my very existence? He may shed his blood as a ransom for my sin, but this cannot save me from my hopeless condition. For it is not just a question of canceling a debt; condemnation is built into my nature, and the Redemption must be accomplished in a physical transformation, since man’s trouble is primarily in the physical sphere: “All do need the glory of God” (Rom 3:23), do need the Holy Spirit who is the life-giving holiness of God.

Christ began by entering into our wretchedness himself; he shared with man that existence which scripture calls existence according to the flesh. A natural existence not animated by the glorious holiness of God. A frail existence filled with mortal weakness, as far from God as the distance between us and God’s infinite power of life. The existence of the sinful Adam’s sons. He came into human existence with a body of “death” similar in every way to our “sinful flesh” (Rom 8:3), and appearing to be not the Son, but one of the descendants of Adam who sinned: “. . . taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of [other] men, and in habit found as a man” (Phil 2:7). Become sin for us (2 Cor 5:21), subject to death and to the law (Gal 4:4), made lower than the angels (Heb 2:9), Christ was, by his very existence, placed within the unredeemed world.

He was still Son of God. But there were within him quite considerable elements which God’s glorifying holiness did not enter; not only his body, but all the faculties which brought him

into contact with us, were so incompletely possessed by the life of God that Christ could suffer fear and anguish, that the Son of the immortal God could succumb to death.

The drama of man's redemption must be completely enacted in Christ's own person. He must cry out to his Father his anguish, and his own longing for the salvation that man can find only in the undying life of God: "Who in the days of his flesh, with a strong cry and tears, offering up prayers and supplications to him that was able to save him from death" (Heb 5:7). He must go to the Father, and in order to rejoin him in his life-giving holiness, must step in bloodshed out of the existence of sinful mankind: "I sanctify myself," I renounce my earthly being and dedicate myself to the holiness of God.

It was a total renunciation of everything which did not as yet live by God in the man Jesus. A radical impoverishment whereby he lost not merely the goods of this world but the life of this world. A fundamental purification, immolating not just the leanings of the flesh, but sinful flesh itself. An absolute obedience, which did not simply lay aside the desires of carnal nature, but actually immolated that nature in a desire to be totally possessed by God.

That is how Christ went to the Father, through dying to himself.

Christ in the Holiness of God

He went to the Father. He did not die for the sake of dying, but in order to live to his Father. "I sanctify myself" meant "I immolate myself," but first of all, "I pass into the possession of God." His death was a gift of love bearing him outside himself and this world into the embrace of God. "I lay down my life that I may take it up again," said our Lord (Jn 10:17); I die to rise again; not into a life of this world, that is immolated forever, but into the holiness of God: "His death was a death to sin once and for all his life is a life unto God" (Rom 6:10). In his death, he was caught up by the hand of God to whom he was abandoning himself, by

the glorifying hand of God which is the Holy Ghost: "He was enlivened in the spirit" (1 Pt 3:18) who is the power, the glory, and the life-giving holiness of God.

The Resurrection was for Christ the entry into the life of the Son, and Easter may be called a birthday. It was then, after all, that St. Paul thought of the Father as saying the solemn words, "Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee" (Acts 13:33). Once born, like us, into slavery, son of a man-doomed-to-death, henceforth "constituted the Son of God in power, according to the spirit of sanctification, by the resurrection from the dead" (Rom 1:4). This was a completely different kind of birth: he was born into divine life by entering into the bosom of the Father. Even the life of his body is now grace, is the life of that Spirit who so filled him that one can now say: The Lord is spirit, "a quickening spirit" (2 Cor 3:17; 1 Cor 15:45).

Christ is "sanctified" forever; he is consecrated to God in his death to himself and in the life-giving holiness of the Father. The Epistle to the Hebrews describes at some length what happened in this sacrifice, comparing it with that offered by the Jewish high priest who, once a year, left the profane world, and taking with him the blood of goats and bulls, went through the veil into the Holy of Holies; whereas Christ passed through the veil of his own flesh (Heb 10:20), that is through his damaged body, and entered with his own blood not into an earthly sanctuary, but into the very bosom of God (Heb 9:11–12).

Christ fixed forever in his redemptive act

Christ will never leave behind that immolation and that new life; his existence is fixed forever at the moment of the Redemption. The five wounds he showed his disciples are not merely the receipt for our ransom inscribed upon his body, but the wounds of a death from which he will never recover. He did not rise to the life he had had before, to this world, to this time; in that sense, he did not rise at all. He died once for all. The life of glory is a perpetuation of his death; the fire of the Spirit which consumes

him keeps him as an eternal holocaust. The Lamb of God stands in glory and is surrounded by hymns of triumph, but he is still slain (Rv 5:6).

He is fixed to his death and resurrection not as in that state that follows the redeeming act; he remains fixed in the act itself, in the unrepeatably moment of his death and glorification. Having come, at the moment of his death, to the high point of his movement toward the Father, of his gift of love, he is received at that same moment with the welcome of divine glorification: "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit" (Lk 23:46). And this glorifying embrace is eternal, an action without any sequel: "This day have I begotten thee," says the Father, as he extends to the soul and then to the body of the Savior the glory, formerly hidden, of the eternal generation of the Son. On one hand, the glorifying action of the Father, the eternal generation, is always happening; Christ remains forever fixed at the moment of his glorification. But on the other hand, that ever-actual glorifying action coincides with Christ's death, and thus keeps the Savior forever at the moment of his death to the world, at the high point of his giving of himself to the Father.

Death "to the world" takes place in Christ simultaneously with God's action in raising him divinely. The Redemption is in him as something happening now, in the moment of its taking place. From now on salvation, which is a dying to the world and a rising again, is at the disposal of all mankind in Christ: "And being consummated [in his death and glory], he became, to all that obey him, the cause of eternal salvation" (Heb 5:9).

He had entered the doomed world, taking flesh "in the likeness of sinful flesh" (Rom 8:3); then, with that same body, he made the breakthrough of our deliverance. He is "the beginning, the first-born from the dead" (Col 1:18), "the prince of life" (Acts 3:15) who has achieved the redemption of all things in his own person. It now remains for men to find this "redemption, that is in Christ Jesus" (Rom 3:24).

“That they also may be sanctified in truth”

Why did Christ first become one of us, sharing with us that existence of remoteness and weakness? Why did he consecrate himself to God by dying to himself? It was for us, answers St. Paul, that he died and rose again (2 Cor 5:15). Before he died Christ said, “I go away and I come” (Jn 14:28). He went not for the sake of leaving, not even in order to come again, but quite simply to “come.” His “coming” was now beginning, that coming to redeem which had so often been promised: “When the Son of Man shall come . . .” On earth he had been with men; but, like a grain of wheat remaining alone, he had been outside them, even outside his intimates, living as we do a life according to the flesh, closed in upon itself in the autonomy of its own weakness. Now he is dead to the flesh and its limitations, he lives in the Spirit who is the power of God; he is infinite openness and total outpouring; he communicates himself, enters within men’s hearts, draws them toward him, and contains them within him. The grain has become the laden ear of wheat, bending under its load; Christ has become the Church; the multitude of mankind has become the body of Christ, in which is salvation.

The Church as Christ’s body in the redemptive act

From the standpoint of purely juridical considerations, one could work out a theology of the Redemption in which man would not need to unite himself to Christ nor be sanctified in him in order to be saved. Christ would have “ransomed” us, cast onto the scales of justice the price of our pardon, his blood, his life; he would have died in our place. Once this price was paid, God would not need to raise Christ again for us (2 Cor 5:15); we should not need Christ any more. We should not need the Church, Christ’s visible presence on earth; nor the sacraments, which are our means of contact with him. It would be enough to believe in the pardon won for us and to accept it, to have the faith by which man could shelter behind the wall of merits that protects man from God.

Man would be pardoned and would have no need to be sanctified in Christ.

Yet St. Paul says, “If Christ be not risen again . . . you are yet in your sins” (1 Cor 15:17). Redemption is not, then, simply a question of expiation by death, of payment of ransom, of buying us back. It was a personal sanctifying of Christ whereby he passed from life according to sin into the holiness of God; a drama played, from first to last, in the single person of Christ. And if it was entirely a drama personal to Christ, men have no share in the Redemption unless his drama becomes theirs. His death on Calvary profited Christ alone; the object of that death, the complete and only object of its merits, was Christ’s resurrection; it sanctified no one, at first, except Christ himself. The Redemption is nothing but the pasch of Christ; it *is* the Redeemer himself in his death and resurrection: a “redemption, that is in Christ Jesus” (Rom 3:24).

To find this salvation that is no mere pardon but the life-giving holiness of God, man must identify himself with him in whom alone God has made that holiness blaze forth, must identify himself with Christ risen from the dead, must become the body of that Christ whom God raised from the dead.

The Church, identified with Christ, finds this salvation of the Resurrection because she is incorporated into the Savior, not in this or that moment of his life—Bethlehem, Nazareth, the roads of Palestine—nor yet in a heavenly existence subsequent to the act of redemption, but in the act of redemption itself. She is the body of Christ in one precise, and henceforth eternal, moment, in the moment when the Redemption takes place, in the moment of his death on the Cross, when Christ was glorified by the Father.¹ The Church’s union with Christ implies not simply a communion of being and of life, but a mysterious communion in his own death and glorification. The idea of the Mystical Body includes equally the identification with Christ in a single body, and the sharing in a single redemptive act; and it would be an incomplete theology of the Mystical Body that did not see the Church as the body of

paschal Christ, in other words, of Christ in the act of dying and being glorified.

Man's salvation results from his communion in both the death and glory of Christ simultaneously. It is the effect of the divine action which raises up the man Jesus and at the same time raises all those who are in him. But we only benefit from that raising in our communion in Christ's death, for God only glorified Christ in his death, in the total oblation by which he gave himself over to the action of his Father.

Christ's body, which is also the Church, is therefore not a static reality; Christian life is a movement, a never-ceasing activity. We are united to Christ in an action—in his total death to self which opened out into a divine life, in the heroism of his redemptive love. Only there, on this summit of charity, where he gives himself to the Father for mankind, does Christ unite himself to the Church and make her his own body.

St. Paul, indeed, calls the Church Christ's *pleroma*, the receptacle of his fullness; she adds nothing to the perfection of Christ, but simply receives it. Yet she is not passive. For Christ himself, who gives her that fullness, is in action, in the intense act of his redeeming charity; he is the Christ of the Pasch, whose existence is wholly a giving of himself. Could she be identified with him passively? The Church is the body of Christ in the redemptive act, one with him in that act.

Redeemed man is thus not simply man pardoned, not even man re-created, brought to life, but man giving himself, identified with Christ in total self-giving. Such is the grace of God: it gives man the power to give himself; it frees him from his sin, saves him and recreates him by making him a being wholly given. It makes him like God in charity—imperfectly in this world, until the day of the revelation of the sons of God (Rom 8:19) when all men, in Christ the Redeemer, will be like him who exists in a single act, like God who is love. That is how Christ himself attained to salvation²—how he was revealed as the Son of God, when he had sacrificed himself and glory had established him forever in the fullness of self-giving.