

THE CRUCIFIX

by
Thomas Howard

To look at the Crucifix and then to look at our own hearts; to test by the cross the quality of our love – if we do that honestly and unflinchingly, we don't need any other self-examination. The lash, the crown of thorns, the mockery, the stripping, the nails – life has equivalents of all these for us and God ask a love for himself and his children which can accept and survive all that in the particular way in which it is offered to us. It is no use to talk in a large vague way about the love of God; here is its point of insertion in the world. **EVELYN UNDERHILL**

THERE IS A POINT OF VIE. Widespread among non-Catholic Christians, that dismisses the Crucifix with the remark, "Oh – we worship a Risen Christ." This notion is not in itself wholly false, namely, that Good Friday was not the end of the story. Easter followed forthwith. Indeed – the Christ we invoke in our prayers and supplications is not dead.

However, what the eye of faith perceives in the Crucifix is a mystery of such fathomless depth that the sun itself darkens and the rocks split apart. This is not an event to be set to one side in the interest of doctrinal punctilio. The fact that the Resurrection followed this dark event and brought it to fruition and filled it, paradoxically, with light and glory does not suggest to us that our devotion and our prayer ought not unite themselves to this One in the very hour of his suffering when he most intimately bound himself to ours. It is a mistake to insist, with sprightly accuracy, that the One who thus suffered here is now risen, just as it is a mistake, with similar accuracy, to insist to the parents at the open grave of their child that we will all one day be raised. There is a time for everything under the sun.

We don't just have an empty cross with the work finished and done. Oh, to be sure, logic and chronology (and some rigorous theologies) will dictate that it is so. *Consumatum est*¹. Yes. We know that. We cling to that. But that which is thus "finished" remains present and actual in time – in the dimension, that is, under which we mortals must experience what is to belong to the race of Adam. The victory of Easter, with its empty tomb and mighty risen Prince, cancels sin, suffering, and death: but we experience that canceling, not as a mathematical point that has no longevity, so to speak, but rather as the condition for our salvation, that is the condition by which we brought to glory. Brought: this bringing take time. We live in time. We suffer in time. We see not yet all things put under Thee.

Sin, sorrow, and suffering, and death itself, were indeed taken away at the Cross, but we mortals must enter into the depths of this mystery in actual experience. The fact that the Savior bore all this for us does not

¹ Latin for "It is finished." Jesus' last words on the cross.

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mean that we invited into that place (the Cross) where suffering is transfigured. We (the Church) are his Body, says St. Paul. As such, we share in his suffering for the life of the world.

Jesus tells his followers that they will drink the cup of which he drank and be baptized (he was speaking specifically of imminent suffering in Jerusalem). Where, suddenly, is the theology that teaches that because the Savior did it all, we thereby are reduced to the status of inert bystanders/ Whether the sorrow of the moment is a lost glove or a lost spouse or a bombed city, I am invited by the Divine Mercy to unite this terrible loss (for the child, the loss of the glove may threaten the end of the world) with the suffering of the Savior at Calvary and thus to discover that my suffering is his suffering, and that – paradox of paradoxes – his is ours (again – we are his Body).

The pain is there. It has not suddenly evaporated. The Cross is the Cross, not a magician's wand. And on that Cross, we see the One whose self-offering transfigured all suffering. Stalingrad is still rubble: The Cross did not avert the Panzer howitzers. But insofar as I will bring my burden of sorrow and suffering (and sin: sins are indeed washed away here; this *corpus*² is the *Agnus Dei*³ who taketh away the sin of the world) – insofar as I will bring my burden here, fall on my knees, and cry out for help, to that extent I may know that the Savior is receiving what I offer up and making it one with his own offering here.

This is what the saints speak of when they speak of suffering. The Divine Mercy, like alchemy, transforms the leaden burden into precious substance. We cannot know just what the experience of martyrs was as the red-hot iron entered their flesh, but we know that they were enabled to bear the pain and even, incredibly, to sing and rejoice. It is all opaque – nonsense, even – to the squint of logic, but we hear the testimony of a thousand saints of logic, but hear the testimony of a thousand saints who have suffered, either physically or in the inner man, and who tell us, not merely of consolations, but by joy.

There is no guarantee of joy, of course: the darkness that shrouds Calvary is thick, and it is scarcely believable that the Son of God himself had

² A collection of written text, especially the entire work of a particular author or a body of writing on a particular subject

³ Latin for "Lamb of God"

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it all sunshine in his Passion. We go through that valley of the shadow of death with him.

But with him. With whom? Him – the Savior – the *Agnus Dei*⁴ – this figure on the Cross.

This figure assists us to gather our wayward thoughts and feelings. It focuses things. It may even come to our rescue if words fail: the corpus, bowed in agony but with arms stretched wide, says, not in sentences but in its very shape, “Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you.”

My burden of the moment may be sorrow: Warsaw, or son debauched by his own choice. It may be physical suffering paralysis, painful hospital test, or arthritis. Or it may be sin – my own, alas, or the evil that regales me wherever I look.

For this Crucifix bids me also to the place where my exasperation or ire over others’ sins must be forsworn in the name of the Mercy that God himself offers to the perpetrators of sin (1 being the chief among them). What is it that rouses my ire in the passing scene? Bloody-mindedness on the part of some driver on the freeway? Cretinous inefficiency on the part of committees, boards, and panels of experts in local, state, or federal government? Monumental waste of taxpayers’ money on all sides? Cruelty to children, animals, or the part of some old person being cared for? The list goes on and on.

And my ire seeths. Swift vengeance is what we want here, I say. Oh, for the power to set things right forthwith and finally. If I were in control. .

The words die on my tongue as the Crucifix looms. Ah, *Domine Deus*⁵. Depart from me, Lord: I am only a sinful man. Lord, I am not worthy. “With what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged” (Matt. 7:2).

The Judgement of my sins revealed itself at Calvary. Do I wish a separate, and stricter, judgement to come upon everyone else? Can I maintain such a wish as the figure on the Cross looks at me?

No. For in that look I am bidden to the region where all is forgiven and for which I have been invited to prepare myself every time I have been

⁴ A figure of a lamb bearing a cross or flag, as an emblem of Christ .. “Lamb of God”

⁵ Latin for “God wills it; depart from me.”

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invited to prepare myself every time I have said “and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. Not only have I not been asked to participate in Judging the sins of others: I have been offered the noble opportunity to join my voice with that of the Crucified as he cries out, “Father, forgive them.”