SHORT WRITINGS FROM TAIZÉ
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Brother Pierre-Yves

Saved by the Cross of Christ?

Introduction

How can we make sense today of the relation between the death of Christ on the cross and the forgiveness of sins, the raising up of sinners – in short "salvation" in New Testament terms? Our plan is to offer a brief account of the subject, setting out the essential in concentrated form. We shall borrow from all kinds of sources. Our only originality will be in the approach, the successive stages in which the subject will be developed.

Let us start by being quite precise: the Cross of Christ is inseparable from his Resurrection. They are two aspects of one and the same event. If the Cross results in liberation, this is because of Easter. And Easter would be a myth if the Risen Lord were not the Crucified One. In any case it is from the Resurrection that faith must begin, then realize that it is a road that passes through the Cross, and then recognize that it is by identifying one's life with the Passion of the crucified Christ that one has access to his Resurrection. That is what St Paul teaches in his Epistle to the Philippians (3:10-11).

But we cannot say everything at the same time, and so it is on Christ's death on the cross that we shall focus our attention. For it is this death and its consequences for us that raises so many questions for so many people today. Why, throughout the New Testament, is it repeated again and again that Christ dies "for us", "for our sins" and to redeem us from them? And first of all, just what is this "sin" that can launch the whole drama of the Passion? But before reaching the heart of the subject, we must deal with four obstacles.

First obstacle: the term "salvation"

The proclamation of salvation, a term so frequent throughout the New Testament, does in fact appear to us today as strange and indeed foreign to our way

of thinking. Apart from those in danger of being lost at sea, who can cry out to be saved? In those days it was not just the Jews, nor only those pagans who were becoming Christians, but the whole collection of neighbouring populations who were looking for salvation. This presupposes a certain dramatic sense of existence. What was weighing on people's minds? The feeling of being in debt to some deity? Or the impression of being in quest of some kind of personal justice, with the fear of not reaching it? Or perhaps the ardent need of a life which could lead to liberty and happiness, while these remained always out of reach? In short, a more or less diffuse feeling of bad conscience, misfortune, failure, the feeling of having some burdensome duty to fulfil, in which one always lives in fear of failing? Indeed, rather a dramatic conception of life.

It is not that, in our existence, we are forcibly and morbidly impelled towards the dramatic. We are inclined rather to avoid it. Yet do we not inevitably encounter a certain dramatic dimension to existence as soon as we try to discover ourselves in truth, and to situate ourselves in relation to others in freedom and with an acute sense of our responsibilities? How many difficult human relations there are, how many conflicts impossible to settle, whose very motives escape us! Moreover, it seems that every interpersonal communion, however deep it may be, is incapable of crossing a certain threshold of opacity. A certain dramatic dimension of existence, therefore, which needs to be passed through, and if possible overcome and gone beyond.

In addition to the tribulations, ever-present or at least threatening every existence, how many personal and collective failures there are, how many abortive strivings, false hopes, from which we must rise up as best we can, in order to gain some hard-won profit from them! And moreover in every life that is even minimally self-aware and spiritually demanding, how many disappointments lie along the path of a perfection which constantly eludes us…!

In the face of all this, Christian faith is not at a loss. Salvation, for this faith, does not begin by eliminating the interior drama, but by situating it both psychologically and spiritually. The evolution of a small child can offer us a parable of this: an original self-centredness which refers everything to itself can lead, through many stages, to a call to enter into relationships with others that are less and less stifling, more and more unselfish, and to grow interiorly, to become more personalized, not in spite of others, but in conjunction with them. Not an easy programme, this, and indeed a never-ending one….

There is as well, in human beings, a desire for total self-sufficiency which distorts from the outset their desire for autonomy. The latter may be envisaged as something absolute, as if I were the unique centre and as if God and other people were at the service of this absolute, an absolute which wishes to be free of all dependence and obligations. To be "like gods", to be God in some sense (the God one imagines). This goes along with a rejection of any notion, imaginary as well, of a God who would subjugate me to his omnipotence. "Omnipotence", yet another unreal dream.

The reality is that human beings only become themselves on the condition that they receive themselves from others, and essentially from God. Their truth is to be in communion, to learn to love in a manner that tends to be self-denying. And in the first place their truth, their essential vocation, is to enter with God into the relationship of that covenant, that great Plan for the sake of which he created the world and brought humanity into being, and within it each one of us. In this covenant, we are ardently invited to know ourselves as happy partners, and to discover the God who affirms in the parable: "Everything that is mine is yours" (Luke 15:31).

God gives me to myself precisely in the very movement by which, in response, I offer myself to him. Such is the reciprocity of the covenant, a reciprocity called to become deeper and deeper, unceasingly. Thus salvation, if it evokes first of all the notion of God liberating me from the negative forces within, consists in reality of a new or renewed communion.

Second obstacle: What is "sin" and its relationship to death?

Here I shall speak in the first person, for in reflecting on what sin is, I can only think of myself. The salvation of other people, their sin and the degree of their responsibility all escape me, and in any case they are

not within my scope: that is God's secret. On this subject I cannot speculate; I can only pray.

In regard to sin, we must not immediately think of some moral fault, some failure. Sin is to be explained, at the spiritual level, as belonging to what we have just seen concerning that frenzied and egoistical self-seeking which is a fundamental inclination of human beings and to which I am constantly tempted to consent.

My self-centredness, therefore. Not that of a newborn child, totally irresponsible, but that which, knowingly and willingly, brings me back to myself, to where I close myself in with complacency, despite what I may know of God, of his covenant and what he expects of me for my supreme good. A means of conceiving and practising my own good pleasure to the detriment of others, of their rights and their legitimate expectations. A means of usurping surreptitiously in my life, at every moment, the first place – that of God and that of love.

In other words, sin is revealed, under many different forms, as a refusal of solidarity and communion, because at such moments I deliberately refuse to pay the price they require. In this sense it is important for me to remember that, for the Bible, sin consists in the first place of "missing the target", like a poor marksman – the target being to realize myself in communion. In relation to that one essential reality which is the covenant offered by God, my sin consists in missing the target of this covenant, in refusing the demands it makes, and at the same time in "missing" myself, "missing" my human truth, my true freedom,

and going away deliberately, getting lost far from God. What a curse!

This leads us directly to the topic of death. What is it for me, outside of the perspective of the covenant? Does not choosing God, for me, in the final analysis, mean choosing life? Does not loving, in a certain self-forgetfulness, mean discovering my human vocation and growing into my own most personal truth? Does not making my own the demands of love mean finding the source of my true freedom? So then, does not turning from God, hiding from love and its demands, mean making, inevitably and dramatically, the deliberate choice of death? It is, in the words of Saint Paul, the "wages of sin" (Romans 6:23). Let us understand the consequences that follow logically and necessarily from this: it sets a seal on the failure of self-centredness, this dream of human beings to depend on nothing but themselves and to be their own end. It is felt to be a penalty, a punishment, and of course an injustice, whereas we should realize that it is rather the final consequence of the choice that we have made.

In the final analysis, death is the curse of the person who, in full awareness, departs from God, like Judas, going out into the night, and with what a plan in mind…. And this despite the hand which Jesus had just held out to him. For God never imprisons the sinner in his perdition, and never rejoices in it. He continually makes appeals and offers chances to start all over again.

On the other hand, in the perspective of the covenant, death must be recognized as the final stage, on

earth, heading towards the victory of Christ, the final realization of the Passover of the one who was already walking in the steps of the risen Christ. Such a person knows Christ as one who gets up and comes to meet him and, as he dies, he cries out (or whispers) with Stephen; "Lord Jesus, receive my Spirit" (Acts 7:59). What remains dramatic in death, by reason of what must be left behind when one says farewell to everything that makes up our existence here below, is so to speak absorbed by the victory of Christ.

When faced with death, Jesus did not fail to confront its drama. Free par excellence with regard to both the Father and the rest of humanity, he made himself one with the latter even as regards the curse of the death of the sinner, to which he was condemned by his enemies. Was it God who inflicted that fate on him? The New Testament, essentially making a long story short, seems sometimes to say so. No, this Other than himself, the Father, hands over to his beloved Son, with confidence, this mission which he alone could bring about: to go as far as that to find his creature who has strayed off. But throughout his Passion and on his way towards the Cross, far from being subjected to death, Jesus turns it into the supreme way, for him, of receiving himself and giving himself to the Father and to humankind. Herein lies in fact the very 0meaning of human life – receiving oneself, giving oneself – and here is found the very being of the Son from all eternity. Thus human death, in Jesus, is revealed as what it should always have been: the full and definitive surrender of oneself to the Creator, in order to attain the new Creation.

Third obstacle: the term "justice"

There must be many of us who have heard in catechism class this explanation of the Cross as the judgement of condemnation levelled by God on sinful humanity. God's mercy is consequently seen to be a matter of making this ineluctable and necessary judgement fall on the innocent person of Christ in order to spare sinners. Justice could only be done at this price.

An Orthodox theologian, faced with this justification of the Cross, wondered how the West had been able to turn God in this way into a sadistic father. In fact, this deviant interpretation is purely Western. It was developed from the eleventh century onwards, perhaps under the influence on theology of German law. It was widely taken up and elaborated by both the Catholic and Protestant traditions.

It is difficult to know if there is any trace of such a theory in the New Testament. It would be a paradox, and there is never any profit in transforming a paradox into evidence. Indeed the Passion is a kind of trial – even if it is a botched trial – in which, through his Envoy, God is involved as an interested party. But it is a grave mistake, on hearing the word "justice", so frequent in both Testaments, to think in terms of punitive and distributive justice, paying back blow for blow.

Close as it is to terms such as mercy, grace and love, justice consists above and before everything, throughout the Bible, in a *"just-ness"* of relations, a harmony. The word can moreover be translated on occasion by

"salvation" or "victory". In his justice, God, in granting grace, in "justifying" the evil-doer, intends to re-establish a happy and harmonious relationship with him. And he expects from those pardoned an attitude of justice and sanctification, which involves bringing themselves into harmony with the project of life that God has for them – the project of the covenant. God hopes in humanity "against all hope".

If the law, or the principles of life, which abound in the New Testament, become a means of justifying ourselves before God, we divert them from their purpose and we take the place of God, who alone can justify. The aim of the law and these principles of life is to point out the way to us so that we can receive the justice of God, be pleasing to him and pleasing to ourselves in him.

Consequently, Christ on the Cross is shown to be truly and simultaneously the justice of God and our justice. He establishes that of God by justifying the repentant sinner. And he achieves that of humanity by drawing us into his perfect response of love and his entry into life.

Fourth obstacle: the representative nature of Jesus

Here again, what seemed to be self-evident in the Jewish tradition and in that of the New Testament creates a difficulty in these days of strong individualism. Contrary to the feeling of "each for himself", every human being was considered as representative of humanity, humanity envisaged as a unity, not abstractly but as a reality of a spiritual order. This is difficult for us to imagine today.

We do, however, have experiences of close human solidarity, of profound communion, in which we feel that all humanity is one and that every human being can offer a figure of this humanity. Think of how it affects us interiorly to learn that someone offers to die in the place of another, (as was the case of Fr. Kolbe). Think of so many men and women who do not hesitate to risk their lives for the sake of someone else, or even more simply who give their lives in service, as if that life belonged to others. Or think of examples when one person suffered and this suffering affected us as if it were our own. In such situations, one suspects that humanity is not restricted to just a random juxtaposition of individuals, but that it tends towards a unity of which each human person is a representative. It was in this sense that Brother Roger liked to talk about the "human family".

In this perspective, Jesus himself, in a unique and absolute manner, is to be confessed as the Man *par excellence,* as Pilate expressed better than he knew when he said; "Behold the Man". Such an expression, in St John's Gospel, must inevitably be understood at two levels of meaning: "Here is your man, the individual you have brought to me", and "Here is the very image of Man such as the Creator planned him from all Eter-

nity, the true representative of every human being in the eyes of God."

Indeed, in the manner in which God chooses to enter into relationship with humanity in the closest way possible, one cannot understand the reason for the Incarnation and the Passion of Christ unless we recognize in him the Son of God becoming the brother of each of us. Our brother and, even more, our representative before God – even better: the way I am almost personally present to God. We can say that Christ takes our place to live before God a human existence which responds perfectly to the love of his Father and that he faces in place of us the curse of death. But paradoxically, he takes our place without taking it from us but rather, by giving us our true place.

By his human birth, it is my life that he takes into himself in order to give me a share in his – in his earthly existence, lived in freedom and obedience; in his sorrowful and victorious Cross; in his eternal life. So great in him is the gift of his life, in the face of the curse of his death, that he turns it back into a blessing for himself and for us. This is what he is for me, for you, for us. This is why the Apostle speaks of baptism as the manner in which the Father, through the Holy Spirit, grafts us onto the human existence of the dead and risen Jesus.

One can say that God relies entirely on a double identification, not just psychological, but in the very order of being. On the one hand Christ truly identifies himself with all of us and each of us; he is one with our destiny to the point that St Paul dares to write: "Christ

has redeemed us from the curse of the law (of a law impossible to be put into practice), by becoming himself a *curse,* for it is written: Cursed be the one who is hung on a tree" (Galatians 3:13; Deuteronomy 21:23). And again "He who was unacquainted with sin, God made *sin* for us" (2 Corinthians 5:21). This is a shorthand way of speaking of the grand project of God to which Jesus adheres with his whole being – to free us from sin. Yes, he is me, he is us, even to that extent.

On the other hand, our identification with him is perhaps summed up in this affirmation of the Apostle: "Our life is henceforth hidden with Christ in God." (Colossians 3:3). An anticipation that is already real, even if veiled, whose unveiling the Christian waits to see. In other words, for faith and in hope, the risen Jesus is, can we say, the place?, no, rather the being in which our existence is situated, in which we seek to be truly integrated.

To look on Christ on the Cross is therefore for me, in truth and reality, the occasion of seeing myself before God, cursed sinner as I risk being to the extent of deserving the Cross, but a son (or daughter) liberated and blessed in the Son, by reason of his self-offering, in which all the dynamism of Easter is already expressed. This offering into which he draws me, as is expressed so powerfully in the Eucharist.

The four Evangelists

All four Evangelists know and state that the Passion and the Cross are "for us"; this is precisely what Jesus intends to affirm when he institutes the Eucharist, a prophecy of the events which are to follow. But this "for us" is so fraught with meaning that it cannot be exhausted when we try to give an account of it.

With *Mark,* the oldest, the essential seems to be expressed by the interplay between two quotations. First that of Jesus whom he reports as crying out: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" – the terrible cry of one who confronts the curse of the sinner. Then the other quotation, that of the officer charged with supervising the execution; "Truly, this man was Son of God!" – truly the way he faced death reveals in him the mystery of the Son and the closeness of the Father.

With *Matthew,* we find these same two quotations, but they stand out less. The Evangelist's idea is that the death of the Crucified is revealed as the judgement of the world and the unveiling of the most holy place. In other words the Last Judgement is anticipated in him. Jesus makes real, in his Passion, the Apocalyptic Event. It is as if history has come to an end and the Kingdom has burst in. History in fact continues, but in the eyes of God it has found its culmination: "it is finished – all is accomplished". This is so that, henceforth, the perspective for us (if we truly desire it) opens not on judgement, but on the light of the Kingdom.

With *Luke*, several sayings of Jesus are reported: his prayer for the forgiveness of those who are crucifying him (and who in one way or another is not involved in this?), his promise to the repentant thief that he will receive him that very day in Paradise, the prayer by which he hands himself over to his Father. This all heads in the same direction: Jesus makes his death not only a prayer for forgiveness but also the answer to this prayer, the very pardon of God.

With *John*, the accent is placed principally on the glorious and almost royal victory of love in Jesus, and this victory, although paradoxical, rises to the surface throughout the account of the Passion. Elsewhere, John envisages the Passion against the background of the Jewish Passover and the paschal lamb. The crucifixion of Jesus takes place at the hour when, that year, the Jews were sacrificing the lamb, that lamb whose bones will not be broken (John 19:33; Exodus 12:46) Thus the death of Christ signifies the definitive paschal sacrifice and the new covenant: the fulfilment of everything that the foundational event of the deliverance from Egypt signified for the Jews. In the same sense, St Paul writes: "Christ, our Passover, has been sacrificed" (1 Corinthians 5:7). And he draws from this the conclusion that Christian life, in holiness, is to be considered as the celebration of this Passover.

As for the *Epistle to the Hebrews,* it is completely dominated by a particular theme from the Old Testament: the "sacrifice for sin". This never had the meaning of a punishment which would fall on the sacrificed animal, but rather the positive one of a rediscovered

forgiveness, of a covenant sealed once more with God, through the offering of blood, in other words life, which belongs to God. To offer it, the high priest went once a year into the Holy of Holies in the Temple. Such is the figure, in this role of High Priest, which enables the epistle to celebrate the Cross as the definitive sacrifice for sin, in which the High Priest, once and for all, presents himself to God beyond the veil (in other words beyond the appearances of this world) with the offering of his own life. The Priest and the offered Lamb coincide perfectly in him for all eternity. The sacrifice is perfect.

Can one imagine the spiritual scandal, the terrible crisis, which this dramatic end of his ministry entailed for the friends of Jesus, his followers, believers? And the effort of faith and understanding that was required of them in order to give an account of it on the basis of their experience of faith in the resurrection? All this would have to be based on the Scriptures, which at that time could only mean the Old Testament. They had in some sense to justify God as well as their faith in Christ, both in their own eyes and in order to preach to others.

The meaning of the Cross

Having passed through these three obstacles and then mentioned the specific way in which each gospel-writer considers and justifies the death of Jesus, we

can now deal with the Cross in an approach which is intentionally both systematic and progressive, passing from what is more obvious to what is more mysterious, from what is simpler to what is more complex.

1. Jesus dies, condemned to a summary death as an evil-doer and a blasphemer, a shameful death reserved to slaves, to people of no account – he the one sent by God, the Messiah recognized as such by his disciples. It is thus that, in the name of God, he takes his place alongside so many men, women and children who are victims of injustice and violence, without any possible defence.

2. This death is the direct consequence of his message, and thus of his obedience to the mission which his Father entrusted to him. With respect to the Jewish authorities, what scandalizes them is the new understanding he brings of the Law – a God close to the poor and to sinners, a Messiah with no political power, a salvation open to all. There is also in the authority of his words, notably when he pardons in the name of God, a claim to speak and act in God's name. With respect to the Romans, he is felt to be a menace to public order and to the authority of the Emperor. In him, like Elijah or Jeremiah, the figure of the persecuted just man comes to fulfilment. It is truly his faithfulness to his human and divine mission which is sealed in his Passion and his Cross.

3. Jesus had prophesied his death by washing his disciples' feet, though he was their Lord and master. He thus gives tangible form to the figure of the Servant, the "man for others" (as it is popular to say

today); he goes to the extreme of solidarity with every human being. This death is now understood as not only *because of* human beings, but *for* them. "Crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, he suffered, died and was buried", says the Creed of Nicaea-Constantinople, while the first formulation of the apostolic faith, transmitted by St Paul, expresses itself thus: "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3).

4. From this denial of justice, this hatred, this infamy which is the Cross, only love, which can do all things by going to the very end of itself, was able to cause to well up from the heart of Jesus his prayer for those who were crucifying him, this prayer in which God's forgiveness is accomplished. This is the perspective proper to St Luke, and it is probably the most accessible, the most persuasive for many people today.

For we must remind ourselves, contrary to all the shorthand ways of speaking that were taken in the past, that what saves, what offers forgiveness, is not the blood of Jesus, nor his suffering, nor his death, but the love in whose name he goes to the point of taking on this tragic destiny, in order to turn it into mercy.

5. This gives rise to another question, a difficult and troubling one. Why was this whole drama necessary, if it is a question of forgiveness? Why does God's pardon have to be at this price, the Father handing over his beloved Son, and the latter handing himself over to those who crucify him? The question rebounds: what does this drama reveal concerning the forgiveness of

God in Jesus Christ? First of all, it illustrates how far God's love goes in its effort to reach us. Next, and at the same time, it shows how far sin goes, and what consequences it entails.

Would forgiveness be a matter of acting as if evil had never happened, the way one erases what is written on a blackboard? If sin, let us remember, means going off deliberately in the direction of a selfish attachment to ourselves, without reference to God or to our neighbour, how much evil has this attitude not allowed to pile up? What rights has it not ridden rough-shod over? What wrongs of all sorts has it not allowed to multiply? Can such responsibility simply be evaded or declared null and void?

That is the reason why Jesus, in confronting human sinfulness, also confronts its entire series of consequences: infamy, anguish, intense suffering, all leading to death. Here forgiveness cannot simply say: "Bah, it's nothing!" It is certainly offered without reserve. I have to accept it, however, and this presupposes a reversal of one's whole being, taking the opposite tack from self-centredness, making reparation, as far as possible, towards those I have wronged, painfully breaking with old habits, taking back everything negative. And doing this in order to redirect shame and suffering towards the very opposite of sin: a life offered. In short, the acceptance of forgiveness presupposes on my part conversion and a commitment to God as well as renewed attentiveness to my neighbour.

Is this not precisely what is accomplished through the Passion of Jesus? Taking on himself all the conse-

quences of sin, he turns them round: yes, in the terrible suffering and infamy of public agony on a gibbet, he turns them round into a victorious march towards a new life, the Resurrection.

Should we speak of punishment in this regard? It is possible. The New Testament hardly does do, but Isaiah affirms of the Servant: "The Lord laid upon him the iniquity of us all" (53:6). Here again we are dealing with a shorthand way of speaking, if this is to be applied to Jesus. God is not the one who punishes; by doing evil or refusing to do the good expected of me, I am doing harm to myself and am on the road to ruin. In this sense, sin is revealed as self-punishment. And Jesus takes this also on himself.

One theme appeared above: suffering linked to sin, such as Jesus confronts it. Now forgiveness does not abolish this. On the one hand, suffering is present in every human life: what is to be done about it? On the other hand it is increased two-fold, in everyone touched by the vision of the Crucified One, by an intense spiritual suffering. The heart is afflicted not only at seeing this, and by the price of this forgiveness, but it also confronts this question: how can I show myself worthy of this event? How can I live this forgiveness properly?

What role does suffering play – any suffering – in what we have called here a "reversal". Forgiveness also calls it to this "reversal". Whether it is sorrow, shame, disgust, awareness of failure that are consequences of sin, this suffering is invited to become participation in the sufferings of Christ and to "conform" ourselves

to his death, as St Paul audaciously says. Without ever being a good in itself, the "good" of physical suffering, or moral or spiritual suffering, will be – as far as possible – for it to be lived as a particularly close form of communion with Christ, a precious way of offering oneself with him in love.

Thus reconciliation with God has nothing easy or tame or automatic about it. It is through the sacraments, by means of faith and a life of holiness, that one welcomes forgiveness into one's life. Offered in total generosity, it expects of us generosity in return. Forgiveness, in the final analysis, is God coming towards me; my acceptance of this forgiveness means going towards God. Such is the covenant sealed in Jesus Christ.

6. We finally come to the subject of sacrifice. A term which many detest these days, because of the fact that this word, in our languages and our mentality, has totally changed its meaning. In current speech, it has become a synonym for a misfortune, an accident, smacking of punishment. Or else it may be an act one is obliged to accomplish, without love, with the idea that the more distasteful it is the more value it has. Or even more, it can mean what is cast aside as rubbish, as lacking in value. In addition, this term can convey for present-day minds an intolerable idea of violence, because of the shedding of blood and the death of an animal, which for many represents the essence of the sacrifices of the Old Testament.

Must we then give up the term and replace it by another one which has kept its beauty, and speak rather

of an offering? Or else change our outlook, working backwards up the links of the chain which brought about this degradation of the notion of sacrifice? For oneself one is free in this regard. But the New Testament is there, quoted over and again in the Eucharistic liturgies, and it speaks unhesitatingly of sacrifice, on the basis of the Old Testament.

Now in the Old Testament, the basic significance of sacrifice, closely related to the covenant, is to link me to God and to unite me to his grace. The blood is very precious because it stands for the life which comes from God and which is offered to him in a rite of thanksgiving. Even humanly speaking, it is a law of life that one must sometimes give up one thing in order to gain something else, in other words to grow on another level. With respect to God, to sacrifice means to set aside part of what one has received from God in order to present it to him in an act of thanksgiving. But in the final analysis it is oneself that one offers, and, by means of the sacrifice, it is oneself that one gets back in return. Is that not what happens in the Eucharist?

In the Old Testament, the narrative which best puts sacrifice in context as a rite of the covenant is where one sees the blood (the life) of immolated bulls collected in a basin. Moses then seals the covenant between God and his people by sprinkling in turn the altar, symbol of the presence of God, and the people with this blood. Sacramental words accompany the rite and explain its meaning: "This is the blood of the covenant" (Exodus 24:8). The same phrase is used by Jesus in the words

of institution at the Last Supper. Jesus, therefore, considers his person and the gift of his life, here on the eve of the Passion, as the covenant sealed definitively between the Father to whom he offers himself, and humanity for whom he offers himself.

Moreover, in this prophecy of Easter which the supper on Holy Thursday is, the whole Passover-event of the deliverance from Egypt, the Passover meal and the crossing of the Red Sea is portrayed. Jesus is the new and eternal fulfilment of this. He is, as we have seen, "our Passover", our deliverance, our crossing over to light.

Out of all the sacrifices of the Old Law, the first Christians retained only the "sacrifice of expiation" as a symbol of the Passion. Here again, with all notion of punishment absent, it is a matter of the covenant sealed anew by the offering of blood, of life, in which is expressed the reconciliation with God. But we shall not come back to this: it was what we already saw above, when we discussed the Epistle to the Hebrews.

7. It was in a very ancient hymn of the Church that St Paul found the strongest expression to evoke the humility represented by the Incarnation, and still more by the Cross: "He emptied himself (not as regards his person, but as regards his condition as Son of God), taking on the condition of a servant… He humbled himself still more, being obedient unto death, death on a Cross" (Philippians 2:7-8).

Thus the cross is the culminating moment of this movement of love, in which the humiliation and the exaltation of Jesus become one and the same reality.

For the resurrection is not a kind of revenge of life over death, of glory over humiliation. Not revenge, not the opposite, but the revelation of what the Passion really was. Such is God's daring, such is his power, his real power and his sovereignty: the death of Jesus on the cross is shown to be the victory of life, the triumph of the eternal plan of God, the supreme form taken by love to offer itself.

Thus the power of God, through the Passion, is revealed as his capacity to bring the best out of the worst, the greatest victory out of the greatest defeat, out of death the Resurrection. Yes: on the Cross. It is for us, then, to find ways for this to resonate in our own existence, if we wish to "know Christ with the power of the Resurrection and in communion with his sufferings" (Philippians 3:10).

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