

LOUIS BOUYER, ORAT.

The Paschal Mystery

*Meditations on the Last Three Days of
Holy Week*

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HENRY REGNERY COMPANY

Chicago

1950

This translation was made from the second French edition of *Le Mystère pascal* (Paris, Les Editions du Cerf, 1947), which is Volume IV of the series LEX ORANDI

Nihil obstat

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Imprimatur

✦ SAMUEL CARDINAL STRITCH
Archiepiscopus Chicagiensis
10 December 1949



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the opposition he points out elsewhere between the letter and the spirit must be understood of the Old Testament, considered on one hand as sufficient in itself and self-explanatory, and on the other hand as implying Christ and as revealing its full meaning only in connection with Him.²¹

The use of this principle—that the Old Testament is divine instruction preparing man by figures for the revelation of the New Testament—can and must be illustrated, delicate as it is, by examples supplied thereof by the New Testament, provided that we do not forget that work's categorical affirmation that "no prophecy of scripture is made by private interpretation".²² What does that mean? The Old Testament is the prophecy of Christ, Head and Body, and the prophecy of the sacred action by which Christ in conflict had crushed the demoniacal powers that held the world in bondage. This prophecy then cannot be correctly interpreted except in the Spirit of Christ, and, consequently, only there where this Spirit presides—that is, in His Body, the Church.²³ But the Church itself has made this application nowhere so fully and completely as in its liturgy, where precisely the action of its Head is reproduced and unfolded in and for its members.²⁴

Provided that we do not indulge in subjective trifling and ascribe to the Church intentions that she evidently never had; that, in other words, we go straight to essentials (which the evidence of the New Testament itself and of the concordant tradition of the Fathers corroborates), we can seek in a general fashion in liturgical usage the most authoritative and convincing interpretation of the Scriptures. But that demands such a familiarity with the liturgy and its deep significance (and not only with the text) as will prevent one from attaching disproportionate value to a secondary allusion while perhaps losing sight of fundamentals.

II. The Psalms in the Liturgy

THE prayer of the Church in its vigils, we repeat, is essentially composed of the psalms. This is true also of the form of daily prayers, at terce, sext, and none: a form that, the Acts tell us, the apostles borrowed from the synagogue. The same origin is ascribed to the ancient evening prayer that corresponds to the sacrifice of incense, and finally to the two other prayers, without

doubt of monastic origin, by which the Church sought to bless man's work at the first hour of the day, and his repose at the day's end.²⁵

Commentators have sometimes expressed surprise that the Church has never devised a psalter for herself instead of providing her members almost exclusively with prayers that antedated Christ. This is to judge things superficially and to misunderstand the supernatural economy of the divine work we have sketched. The New Testament breathes the conviction that the psalms are essentially the prayer of Christ and of His Church. Ildefonso Cardinal Schuster of Milan has stated that the psalms appear as the sacerdotal book in which the great high priest of the new covenant had only to read the text, all prepared for the liturgy of His passion and His glorification.²⁶

The way in which Christ insisted upon correcting contemporary scriptural interpretation regarding Himself; the way in which the devil tried to tempt Him by stressing certain passages, never doubting that He applied them to Himself; and finally the fact that Jesus chose from the psalms the expression of His supreme sorrow, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" as well as the expression of His complete resignation, "Into Thy hands I commend My spirit"—all these evidences show clearly enough that the psalms were, during the days of His life, Christ's own habitual prayer.²⁷

New Testament writers are in accord on this matter. The first pages of the Epistle to the Hebrews, which comprise the most complete Christology to be found in the Scriptures, present it in the form of a canticle composed of a succession of verses of the psalms. Similarly, the Apocalyptic hymns concerned with heaven are woven with those of the Old Testament—either those of the Psalter properly so called, or those psalms not included there because they had already been preserved in other biblical books whence the Christian liturgy had gathered them.²⁸ The three canticles of the New Testament which St. Luke has transmitted to us are composed entirely of analogous reminiscences. The one in which these reminiscences are most striking—the *Magnificat*—permits us to get to the very heart of the transposition of prophetic themes by Christ and about Christ, illustrating thus the whole Christian allegory. The distance between the hopes of Anna, mother of the prophet Samuel, and the reality hailed by Mary, mother of Christ, is, as it were, highlighted by the similarity of their songs.²⁹ It would be easy to show, on the other hand, the

What was true of Christ remains true of those who await His coming and who fall asleep in Him, certain of reigning with Him after having suffered with Him. The only difference between them and Him is that the beatific vision begins for them only after death in any case, while for Him it was complete from the very moment of His incarnation. But cultivation of the gift of wisdom has prepared them for that vision here below with a thoroughness proportioned to their advance towards purification. Inversely, the vision may still be deferred after death if that purification, at the last hour of life, is not perfect. However long the vision is deferred, we are certain that Christ's victory will be ours if we die in the state of grace, which establishes us forever with Him. His victory is indeed already ours as much as it was for Him from the evening of that first Good Friday.

A second lesson completes the first in the Holy Saturday liturgy of *Tenebrae*. This lesson explains to us that God caused the Conqueror of death to wait three days for the Resurrection. During His absence from the inert body, asleep in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, where corruption will not have time to touch Him, His soul, Scripture tells us, manifested itself to the souls of those who had died in the dim anticipation of His victory. Thus by the descent into hell, the Word prolonged the movement of infinite generosity that had impelled Him to assume our condition as God's enemies, in order to lead us back to the Father.¹⁷ Although this descent takes place after His death on the cross, Christ's work is nevertheless consummated on the cross. Already as Conqueror the crucified One appears to those souls "seated in darkness and in the shadow of death". The responses of the first nocturn sang of the condemnation of the world and of unfaithful Jerusalem through the death of the Just One. The first response of the second nocturn pictures thus His descent into hell:

Our Shepherd, the fountain of living water, is gone, at whose departure the sun was darkened: for he in turn is taken captive, who held the first man captive: this day our Savior broke open both the bolts and the gates of death. He destroyed the dungeons of hell, and overthrew the powers of the devil.

Worthy of notice is this traditional combination of the term "Shepherd" applied to Christ, and the descent into hell, where principally He manifested Himself as the Good Shepherd. It is rather characteristic that St. Peter, the only author of the New Testament

who mentions the descent into hell, returns to it, in his first epistle, with obvious partiality to this title.¹⁸ Christ enters into history at a definite moment of time, but we must not forget that His work concerns all human history and all historic humanity. He recapitulates it in Himself. He is the Shepherd who does not let a single sheep be lost. He has sought and saved not only those who were living when He came to earth, not only those who would live afterwards, but even all those who had lived up to that time, since the fall. That is what the descent into hell recalls to us: God, "who brought back from the dead the great pastor [Shepherd] of the sheep",¹⁹ made Him descend first to them in order to bring them back with Him. A very beautiful iconographic tradition shows us Christ the Conqueror (*Christus Victor*) ascending to the light through terrestrial depths split asunder from side to side. He draws after Him by one hand the first Adam, symbol of fallen primitive humanity, and by the other St. John the Baptist, symbol of his salvation by faith in the One "who was to come".²⁰

We are here at the lowest point of descent from the divine Agape, but we are also already at the beginning of the return to God which the Agape is about to effect in being poured into the heart of man. The prophetic hope is realized. Not only has God rent the heavens and descended upon earth, but He has gone to the mysterious abodes where Satan had led those whom he had seduced. "The Stronger One" has broken for those who awaited Him "gates of brass and iron bars".²¹ He had descended alone, but He will not ascend alone; with Him will ascend "that which was lost".²² The Shepherd will emerge from the abyss, bearing on His shoulders the refound sheep.²³ The Son will regain the Father's house, but with that numerous progeny promised to the servant of Yahveh. "Unless the grain of wheat falling into the ground die, itself remaineth alone. But if it die it bringeth forth much fruit."²⁴

We must accept these mysterious truths very realistically, and understand that Christ actually raised up with Himself, if not all the humanity that preceded Him and died in the prophetic faith, at least its principal representatives.²⁵ In any case, those who had had the faith that He came to perfect by His "preaching" to the dead, and those in whom afterwards His word and the sacraments instilled and fostered the evangelical faith that immediately precedes seeing, are already united in His death and resurrection. Already they live in the risen One. They possess in His resurrection the seed of their own and the first fruits of their own and humanity's immortality. This seems to be the meaning of that white garment given in the

Apocalypse to souls awaiting the last judgment.²⁶ The whole Body of Christ, finally, will rise together after separation from the world condemned by the fire of judgment, when physical creation itself will be renewed by Him "that sat on the throne".²⁷ The Apocalypse, that book of Christian immortality, tells us elsewhere that, like the earth, the sea will give up its dead.²⁸ The Spouse of the Lamb, up to that time slowly formed in Him, in heaven, by souls individually arrived at perfection, will be revealed. She will descend from heaven where she is in the presence of God, "prepared as a bride adorned for her Bridegroom [husband]",²⁹ with the garment of immortality, the crown of glory, and the unction of gladness.³⁰

All will hasten to the nuptials of the Lamb.³¹ All will enter upon the great and final Sabbath whither He has preceded us.³² Labor and suffering will have ceased for the Body as for the Head. "God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes, and death shall be no more, nor crying, nor sorrow shall be any more: for the former things are passed away." The One seated upon the throne will say:

It is done. I am Alpha and Omega: the beginning and the end. To him that thirsteth, I will give of the fountain of the water of life, freely. He that shall overcome shall possess these things; I will be his God and he shall be my son.³³

NOTES

1. Heb. 4:9-11.
2. Luke 23:43.
3. John 19:30.
4. Luke 23:46.
5. I Cor. 15:26.
6. All the references to death in the Old Testament should be cited here. We mention only one text, especially explicit: Ps. 87:10-13.
7. Cf. only *On the Resurrection* of Methodius of Olympus, and his forceful argument against the ultra-spiritualism of Origen (ed. Bonwetsch, chap. 20 ff., pp. 242 ff.).
8. *Phaedo*, 66b-67b; *Gorgias*, 493a.
9. Cf. the whole I Cor. 15. According to this chapter, it is apparent that in the eyes of St. Paul the Hellenic notion of a disincarnate immortality is an uninteresting chimera. Cf. above, p. 112, n. 47.
10. I Cor. 15:12-14.
11. *Ibid.*, 20-26.
12. Paschal song of the Byzantine liturgy. Cf. Cyril of Alexandria, *Thesaurus*, P.G. 75:397c.

13. "The death of all was accomplished in the body of the Lord (literally, the dominical body), and death and corruption were annihilated by the Word which was united to the body" (St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 20, P.G. 25:132B).

14. "Those that sleep" is with St. Paul a theological term meaning the Christian dead (cf. I Cor. 15:18; I Thess. 4:13; and elsewhere).

15. Apoc. 6:10.

16. Cf. De Lubac, *Catholicisme*, pp. 75 ff., the chapter entitled "Vie éternelle".

17. Cf., among the Fathers, Hermas, *The Shepherd*, Sim. 9, xvi, 3-4; Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies*, VI, 6, Vol. 2, p. 454 (ed. Staehlin); St. John Damascene, *On the Orthodox Faith*, 4, P.G. 94:1101A. The so-called Gospel of Nicodemus, whose parts may go back to the second century, gives details that inspired the iconography to which we shall allude farther on.

18. I Pet. 3:19-4:6. Cf. 2:25, and 5:4.

19. Heb. 13:20.

20. Matt. 11:3.

21. Ps. 106:16.

22. Luke 19:10.

23. Cf. Luke 15:4-7.

24. John 12:24.

25. Cf. Matt. 27:52-53.

26. Apoc. 6:11.

27. *Ibid.* 21:5.

28. *Ibid.* 20:13.

29. *Ibid.* 21:2. Cf. 5:10.

30. Cf. Isa. 62:3-10.

31. Apoc. 19:7-9.

32. Heb. 4:10-11.

33. Apoc. 21:4-7.