

An Integral Spirituality of the Paschal Mystery

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Introduction: Two Catecheses

Why do Christians celebrate the Paschal Mystery again and again? "We did it last year," one might say, "Why do it again?" One reason, of course, is the need to deepen our understanding and appreciation of what is in fact the heart of the Christian religion; and from this point of view the Mystery unfolds in two distinct phases. The first phase is linked with the catechumenate (RCIA). The entire Christian community is invited to journey through Lent toward Easter in company with the candidates for Baptism, who are in the last stage of their preparation for sacramental initiation into the Body of Christ. Here the obvious intention is to promote in the community at large a progressively deeper spiritual plunge into the Mystery of Christ's Death and Rising. The second phase of the Mystery encompasses the fifty days following Easter, and culminates with Pentecost Sunday. During this period there is a cycle of readings from the Johannine gospel, which taken as a whole constitutes a second catechesis. Here the Catechist is the Risen Christ himself. The teaching unfolds in three stages. It begins with the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus on New Birth (Jn 3); then there is his discourse on the Bread of Life (Jn 6); and finally the words he spoke in the Upper Room, which reveal the Gift of the Spirit (Jn 14-17). Taken together these readings are a profound instruction on the Church's two-fold endowment of Sacrament and Spirit. The Fathers of the Church named it the *mystagogical catechesis*, and it is designed to lead us further into the heart of the mystery of the Risen Christ, who is present in both the sacramental and the charismatic dimensions of the Church's life.

Passage from Purification into the World of Divine Action

In the passage of the second (and even third!) half of life, I have become more attuned to a certain dynamic of the Lenten journey and its Easter sequel (the two catecheses). When I was still a young college

student, Conrad Pepler OP provided me with the initial clues, in a book entitled simply, *Lent*, by now rarely seen. He points out that the Lenten pilgrimage begins with a strong emphasis on our moral fitness (or lack thereof). The initial focus is on the three ascetic practices (works of mercy, prayer and fasting) that were given even the primitive Church's seal of approval (Mt 6). Then as the weeks go by there is a shift of attention, away from that insistence on self-denial to a quite different concern, namely, Jesus' own journey to Jerusalem, and eventually his suffering, death, and vindication. In other words, Lent begins with a not altogether unnecessary concern for self and then passes to a state of wonder at the great life-giving work of mercy, the celebration of which culminates in the Great Triduum. Finally, since Pepler's work ends with Easter, I sense a second transition to a more prolonged relishing of the Pentecostal gift of the Spirit.

Remarkably this dynamism seems to be governed by two spiritual laws, the first of which is derived from Jesus' self-sacrifice on Calvary and the second from his deliverance from death. These two laws emerge, so to speak, from the Paschal Mystery itself, to the effect that its fruitfulness is somehow measured by our living in conformity with them. The first of them goes by the already familiar name of the Law of the Cross. The second is less well known precisely as Law, but is none the less integral to this Mystery of Life through Death. I will call it simply the Law of the Resurrection.

On the surface it might appear that these two Laws represent the negative and the positive aspects, respectively, of the Paschal Mystery — death to self, life for God. In this view the Law of the Cross would be located at the negative pole, so to speak, of the life of the spirit, and the Law of the Resurrection at the positive end. The former would have to do with the way in which we meet and dispose of evil, whereas the latter would be concerned positively with how we move forward or grow in the Christian life. Whereas such a view has a certain weight, the fact is that each of the Laws has both a negative and a positive side. The Law of the Cross for its part does prescribe the way in which evil is to be dealt with, but precisely in order that a *greater good* may be harvested. On the other hand, the Law of the Resurrection, while oriented as we shall see toward progress, demands a *radical renunciation* of an altogether spontaneous concern, which is paradoxically ever present to be accounted for and put into order.

Law of the Cross: invitation to non-violence

What then is this Law of the Cross?¹ I should say that it can be stated in two ways. The first makes no mention of Jesus or the Cross on which he died, but sets forth the fundamental way — God’s way — of resolving the problem of evil in this universe. It states simply that God’s decision regarding evil is that it be overcome not by the exercise of naked power, but through suffering willingly, i.e., lovingly, undergone, to the effect that evil is converted into a greater good.² The second expression of the Law makes the explicit connection between the dismantling of evil and the Redemptive Incarnation. The Law of the Cross takes flesh in this mystery, which is “for us and for our salvation,” and is ultimately revealed in the suffering and death of the Incarnate Word, which the Christian community understood from the outset to be God’s concrete and definitive response to evil. Moreover, in this Law thus concretely understood several moments may be discerned:

- 1 First a general but universal principle, to the effect that evil really *is* to be overcome. In spite of all appearances, evil will not prevail and good shall have the victory! Thus the foundation of the Law of the Cross is *hope* in God’s dominion over evil, for there is much evidence to the contrary. In this connection we may think of the hero-victim of the film, *Shawshank Redemption* (jailed for life though not guilty), who speaks to a fellow-prisoner about a place in the human heart that is inviolable, where hope dwells even in circumstances in which one might very well despair (a *dangerous* hope on that account). Even without an expressly religious point of reference, this man implicitly affirms that, no matter what it looks like from the outside, the prevalence of injustice and sin generally is not final. God does hear the cry of the poor and is attentive to their cry.
- 2 This overcoming of evil is not and will not be the result of the exercise of naked power. This is not the way God works. Evil men and women may prosper without fear of being destroyed by some extraordinary divine intervention. Things run their course. Human efforts to destroy evil through the exercise of force, albeit in the name of justice and under the cover of God’s blessing, are bound to fail. For example, on the level of world politics Saddam Hussein, Slobodan Milosevic, or any other tyrant, may be bombed into submission, but that exercise of power will not bring about peace; rather it will breed more violence. We can be sure of this, and the fact that the combatants are deaf to any appeal to suspend

hostilities even in the course of a few holy days in the Christian calendar, when the whole Christian world commemorates Jesus' victory over sin and death through suffering, is a sign that the leaders of nations know in their heart of hearts that their method of resolving conflict is a dead end. They dare not stop the violence, for fear that the silence will reveal an alternative and they will be proved to be in the wrong.

- 3 Suffering lovingly undergone is the only adequate response to evil. This is a great mystery, of course, but it is indubitably the message of the Cross. It is the example that Jesus gave, and it is the Law that is in effect right down to the present moment of human history. The root problem then is not how to dispose or get rid of evil, but rather how to use our minds to discover how we can become non-violent persons. And this problem has to be faced first of all in our own hearts, that is, where we deal with our own sinfulness. Do we see that sinfulness as an enemy that needs to be destroyed or obliterated, or do we understand and treat our own sinful weakness as a burden (a cross) to be accepted lovingly, even to be treated with reverence, so to speak? This is a litmus test for our conformity to the Law of the Cross, i.e., how we deal with our own evil (violently or non-violently).
- 4 Suffering lovingly undergone has the effect of converting evil into a greater good. Our aim is not to create another world in which evil does not exist (or to make ourselves over into sinless persons who have to live as if walking on eggshells), but rather to transform a world in which sin is a fact that continues to be present and even prevalent (and that world, of course, includes our own sinful selves). Such transformation occurs especially through the presence in this world of ours of a community that is the Body of Christ, a community of people who find in the Cross their hope, and who are consecrated to making the Law of the Cross their rule of life.
- 5 Understood as the rule that governs the order of human history the Law of the Cross constitutes an implicit but inescapable invitation to non-violence. Jesus did not fight fire with fire. In fact he somehow gave symbolic and verbal expression to this invitation in the Garden, when one of his own disciples cut off the ear of the High Priest's servant: "Put your sword back in its place, for whoever uses the sword will perish by the sword" (Mt. 26:52). Now obviously not all combatants die in battle; nevertheless something within me does perish, when I willingly take a stand on the side of the resolution of conflict through violence. On this

account Jesus' own acceptance of the Cross is presented as a model. The Imitation of Christ involves fashioning one's life in conformity with the one who "was harshly treated, but unresisting and silent submitted, who like a lamb was led to the slaughter or a sheep before the shearer did not open his mouth" (Is 53:7). It is quite obvious, however, that learning how to respond effectively to this invitation is a life-long project.

Law of the Resurrection:

invitation to constant conversion into the present moment

My own discovery of the Law of the Resurrection dates from Easter, 1999. I don't know how I could have missed it before, but that's life! It came in the course of a kind of informal review of the various stories about Jesus' appearances, the sort of browsing a preacher does in the wake of the celebration of the Paschal Mystery, or rather in the light of that single "day" which the Church affirms the time of Easter to be. I had been aware for a long while, of course, that typically the Risen Christ greets his disciples with the words, 'Peace be with you!' Or something to that effect. What I had not noticed was that, even where that greeting is not part of the scenario, Jesus *never* speaks to those to whom he appears about the past, especially about the recent past. He never complains! Of course, there is an apparent exception, in the story about the disciples on the way to Emmaus, but in this regard one would have to say that they "asked for it." "Are you perhaps the only person in all of Jerusalem, who is not aware of the events that have taken place?" He was indeed aware; he had been at the centre of the storm.

Could there be a connection between Jesus' silence about the events of those last days, and what in fact stands at the centre of the Easter liturgy, namely, the baptism of the catechumens? Obviously this rite represents a kind of paradigm for that turning away from the past which is surely a component of every conversion. In reference to the baptismal font, the symbolism is twofold: entrance into it is a going down into the tomb, and coming out of it, an emergence from the womb. Death, therefore, to the past from the point of view of the descent, whereas for the newborn infant there is no past! So burying the past — a sinful past in any case — is integral to the ritual of initiation.

I felt that this was significant, and there followed naturally an insight on how we, whose baptism belongs itself to the past, are to share in this holy forgetfulness. That there should be a resonance in our lives of what transpires in a radical way in the lives of the

catechumens seems evident, especially from the fact that we are invited in the Easter liturgy to recall our baptism and to renew the promises of Christian initiation. This brings us very close to a statement of what I am calling the "Law of the Resurrection." It is to the effect that sharing in the mystery of the Resurrection in any case would involve a turning away from the past. In the first place there is the silence of the Risen Jesus regarding the past in the presence of those with whom he is to share the Spirit; secondly, there is the test case of Christian initiation, the paradigm of connection with the Resurrection.

Now let's see how it works in everyday life, for that is what we mean in speaking of it as a law. At first the language itself might seem problematic. Surely burying the past is integral to the Church's Easter ritual. But how is it to be put into practice as a principle of Christian spirituality, on an equal footing, one might say, with the Law of the Cross? In other words, how is it something to be done on a regular basis? Well, first an examination of our experience as persons who are trying to keep the law reveals that our success in this endeavour is partial. It is a "mixed bag" of success and failure, which is easy to recognize in the abstract, but not so easily accepted in the concrete. Moreover, biblical witness corroborates what is quite plain: "If we say, 'We have no sin,' we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us" (I Jn 1:8). Now the very fact that the sacred writer observes the proclivity to deny sin in our lives is significant. On the surface that denial appears effective, or it wouldn't be common; but it turns out not to be so, because our sins, especially our habitual sins, come back to haunt us. Still the common denial, which comes often in the form of a vague inattention, suggests that we don't know quite what to do about them. If we did there would be no need for the denial.

Now by the Law of Resurrection we are enjoined to forget our sins, i.e., to consign them to oblivion. And this is quite different from denial, though the difference involves an element that cannot to be neglected. Forgetfulness can look like denial, and it really amounts to the same thing, unless it is combined with the recognition that we have a right to forget, in virtue of the Risen Christ's victory over sin and death. Imagining ourselves in the situation of the disciples to whom Jesus appeared is helpful. Suddenly he is there! He knows very well about the past. We know that he knows, and he knows that we know that he knows! But he says, "Peace be with you!" What does that mean? It suggests that he does not hold a grudge. But does it mean that he has forgotten or at very least that he is not concerned

with what haunts us? That seems too good to be true! But it is the case; at least that is a legitimate interpretation of the situation. It means, therefore, that we also can disregard or forget that unsavoury past, even the past that forces itself upon us because it is so close — just yesterday, even just a moment ago!. But can I? That is, can I effectively let go of something about which I spontaneously feel that I should do something?

An Impossible Combination?

Precisely here it becomes evident that applying the Law of Resurrection is a schooling that goes with the application of the Law of the Cross. As we have to learn non-violence, so we have to learn to turn away from the spontaneous inclination to do something about the sin that imposes itself upon our consciousness. Moreover, both the one application and the other are in the first instance altogether interior. But whereas non-violence naturally extends itself into areas of external activity, holy forgetfulness remains a kind of hidden ground of an integral paschal spirituality. Thus, to take anger and its typical expressions as an example, by the Law of the Cross we are invited to transform the spontaneous desire for revenge into love for the offender and to make that transformation effective in our relationship with this person; while by the Law of Resurrection we are enjoined not to be bothered, even to be grateful for the presence in our lives of this moral flaw, which we should spontaneously want to be dismantled. *Grateful*, because this wounded apparatus is our special claim on the mercy of God manifested in the Risen Christ's greeting, "Peace be with you!"

Yet it might be asked, is the actual combination of the two laws is possible? How can a person, at one and the same time, be attempting to put to death, so to speak, the inclination to anger and be forgetful of that inclination? If you think of it, however, in terms of a two-fold dynamic, one moving into the future (not-yet), and the other having to do with what is already (not-to-be-undone), admittedly you have a challenge, but not an impossibility. By the Law of the Cross we are brought forward to confront what emerges as actual, from all the converging possibilities and probabilities. How will I deal with this new pattern of events, which may range from the totally unexpected to what I might consider as quite typical? Will I invoke power or benevolence? By the Law of Resurrection we fight a rear-guard action, so to speak, because it is the past that haunts us and is to be buried in mercy.

Conclusion: a medieval suggestion

In conclusion I should like to bring forward some elements of the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas on law in the *Summa theologiae*, which seem to confirm how these two Laws can be integrated. The context of what he has to say there concerning law is the notion that, underpinning human activity, there are both internal and external principles. Internally there are habitual dispositions (named virtues, when they are oriented to the good); while the external principle is God, “who both effectively teaches us through law and stands by us with the help of grace” (*ST*, I II, 90, intro.).

This would be quite simple: internally energy and external aid. The matter is complicated, however, by the way in which Judeo-Christian tradition has unfolded; so that when it comes to sorting out the Old and New Covenants (with their concomitant Laws), Thomas has this to say: “The whole force of the law of the New Covenant consists in this, namely, that its reality is the gift of the Holy Spirit which is communicated by faith in Christ. Thus the New Law is in fact that gift of the Holy Spirit” (*ibid.*, 106, 1, c.). His idea, therefore, is that the New Law is no longer an external principle, but a transformation of human interiority.

The force of this position is that the transcendent God, who as such is somehow external, i.e., beyond all that is, is also immanent and intimately present to us, not merely as the cause of our being, but as an *interior* principle, an internal law, if you will. By this presence we are healed and transformed. In virtue of this internal law, we who are natively incapable of consistent development are empowered to respond to the challenge of acting for the sake of genuine value. Consequently, although simultaneous attention to the Law of the Cross and the Law of Resurrection is typically “too much to handle”, the intimate presence in our lives of the Crucified-One-who-is-Risen lets loose, in a gentle but powerful way, the energy that turns our hearts and minds toward non-violence and dismantles within us the overwhelming power of the past.

- 1 I have available a set of notes which have been very helpful to me in conceiving what follows. They are described as ‘the first draft’ of an English translation of what seems to be a supplement to, or revision of Bernard Lonergan’s *De Verbo Incarnato*, particularly the last part, *Pars V De Redemptione*. The translation was done by Michael G. Shields, SJ in Toronto in 1987, and the copy I have was printed 20.6.90.
- 2 As Lonergan would have it, “evil is overcome by a victory of the will” (*op.cit.*, 73a).